



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION

*Media Ownership Working Group*

**Viewpoint Diversity in Cross-Owned  
Newspapers and Television Stations:  
A Study of News Coverage of the  
2000 Presidential Campaign**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regulations adopted by the Federal Communications Commission in 1975 prohibit the grant of a license for a broadcast station to a company that owns a newspaper in the same community. One purpose of the rule was to preserve a diversity of viewpoints in local media. Some of the cross-owned broadcast stations and newspapers were grandfathered, while others were required to divest one of the two cross-owned outlets. Since 1975, the Commission also has granted a handful of waivers of the rule.

As part of its review of its ownership rules, the FCC commissioned the present study of news coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign by cross-owned newspapers and television stations in several American communities. The study addresses the following research question: To what extent do commonly owned newspapers and television stations in a community speak with a single voice about important political matters?

Data about the news coverage of 10 cross-owned newspaper-television combinations were analyzed. The results show that, in five of the 10 newspaper-television combinations studied, the overall slant of the coverage broadcast by a company's television station was noticeably different from the overall slant of the coverage provided by the same company's newspaper.

In the other five combinations under study, the overall slant of newspaper coverage of the 2000 campaign was not significantly different from the overall slant of the local television coverage. The data do not enable us to ascertain why the overall slants in those cases were similar.

The limited number of observations in this study prevents us from drawing firm or sweeping conclusions about the implications of our findings. However, for the markets studied, the data suggest that common ownership of a newspaper and a television station in a community does not result in a predictable pattern of news coverage and commentary about important political events in the commonly owned outlets.

# Viewpoint Diversity in Cross-Owned Newspapers and Television Stations: A Study of News Coverage of the 2000 Presidential Campaign

## INTRODUCTION

In 1975 the Federal Communications Commission adopted a rule prohibiting a company that owned a newspaper in a community from obtaining a license for a broadcast station in the same community.<sup>1</sup> When it adopted the rule, the Commission said that “it is unrealistic to expect true diversity from a commonly-owned station-newspaper combination.” The concern was not only that local cross-ownership might result in a reduction of viewpoint diversity in the community's media, but also that a single owner might actively manipulate the news disseminated by its newspaper and broadcast properties in an attempt to influence local public opinion. The Commission offered no systematic evidence to support its view that cross-ownership has a negative impact on the range of viewpoints circulating within a community.<sup>2</sup>

In light of its concern about viewpoint diversity, the Commission required some of the then-existing broadcast-newspaper combinations to divest one of the two properties while grandfathering certain other broadcast-newspaper combinations. The Commission also has granted waivers to the rule for a small number of combinations created since 1975.<sup>3</sup> By our count, there were 17 cross-owned newspaper-television combinations and 10 other newspaper-radio-television combinations in communities throughout the United States in mid-2002.

The existing combinations provide a rare opportunity to assess the validity of an assumption that provided an important part of the foundation for the 1975 rule: That commonly owned news media in a community tend to present similar views of important political issues.

## **CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH**

In late 2001, I published the results of an empirical study about diversity of information and viewpoints in news and opinion regarding the 2000 presidential campaign within cross-owned newspaper-broadcast combinations in Chicago, Dallas, and Milwaukee.<sup>4</sup> Earlier this year, the Federal Communications Commission asked me to conduct a similar study in additional communities. This document reports the results of the research in the additional communities as well as incorporating results from the study published in 2001.

The central research issue for the present study, as for the study published in 2001, was whether information and opinion about the 2000 presidential campaign in cross-owned media had a coordinated or consistent slant in favor of one major-party candidate or the other, and if so, did the slant reflect the interest of the media corporation that owned the newspaper-television combination? In other words, the research looked for evidence of whether the news and opinion disseminated by commonly owned news organizations in a community appears to be slanted, consciously or unconsciously, toward the interests of the corporations that own the news organizations.<sup>5</sup>

If ever media corporations wished to slant news about a national political campaign, the 2000 presidential campaign – and especially the increasingly suspenseful final few weeks before November 7, Election Day – offered an excellent set of conditions for such influence. The presidential race was neck-and-neck in at least a dozen important states as the campaign neared its end. A coordinated slant in the campaign coverage of a powerful news organization in any of these states might have influenced a relatively small number of swing voters whose choices can

make a significant difference in whether a state's electoral votes go to the Republican or the Democratic candidate.

There were few meaningful legal restrictions on how the news media covered the 2000 presidential campaign. In fact, broadcasters had more legal freedom to cover the 2000 campaign than any other campaign in recent memory. Early in the fall of 2000, the FCC announced that it would suspend, on a trial basis, two long-standing rules that broadcasters claimed inhibited robust journalism.<sup>6</sup> The first rule, the Personal Attack Rule, required broadcasters to notify and provide free reply time to anyone whose honesty, character, or integrity had been attacked during non-news programming.<sup>7</sup> The second rule, the Political Editorial Rule, required broadcasters to notify and provide free reply time to opponents of any political candidate the station endorsed as well as to any candidate the station opposed in an editorial.<sup>8</sup> Soon after the FCC action, and less than four weeks before Election Day, the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled that both the Personal Attack Rule and the Political Editorial Rule, which had been in effect since 1967, violated the First Amendment.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, two key assumptions underlie the way we have interpreted the data. The first is that the two major party candidates for president had different views on the desirability of retaining the FCC's newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership rule. Then-Governor George Bush was thought to support relaxation or elimination of the rule, and then-Vice President Albert Gore was thought to favor retention of the rule. The second assumption is that the companies owning broadcast-newspaper combinations themselves favored repeal of the rule. There is evidence that the future of the ban on cross-ownership of newspapers and television stations was an issue of

central importance to major American media corporations during the 2000 presidential campaign.<sup>10</sup>

Taken together, these factors – the apparent corporate interest in the election of George W. Bush, the intense uncertainty about the outcome of the election, and removal of legal restrictions on broadcast comment about political candidates – created favorable conditions for the owners of cross-owned media to attempt to influence news content, if they wished to do so.

## **METHOD**

The study published in 2001 focused on cross-owned media in three major cities: Chicago, Milwaukee, and Dallas.<sup>11</sup> The current investigation added seven cross-owned newspaper-television combinations in six communities to the data set. News and comment about the presidential campaign disseminated by the newspapers and television stations during the last fifteen days of the campaign (*i.e.*, from Monday, October 23, 2000, through Monday, November 6, 2000) were coded and analyzed. Table 1 lists the news organizations included in this study.

**Table 1.** Newspaper-television combinations in the study.

<b><u>Community</u></b>	<b><u>TV station</u></b>	<b><u>Newspaper</u></b>	<b><u>Owner</u></b>
Chicago IL	WGN	<i>Tribune</i>	Tribune Company
Dallas TX	WFAA	<i>Morning News</i>	A. H. Belo Corporation
Fargo ND	WDAY	<i>Forum</i>	Forum Communications
Hartford CT	WTIC	<i>Courant</i>	Tribune Company
Los Angeles CA	KTLA	<i>Times</i>	Tribune Company
Milwaukee WI	WTMJ	<i>Journal Sentinel</i>	Journal Communications
New York NY	WNYW	<i>Post</i>	News Corp. Ltd.
New York NY	WPIX	<i>Newsday</i>	Tribune Company
Phoenix AZ	KPNX	<i>Arizona Republic</i>	Gannett
Tampa FL	WFLA	<i>Tribune</i>	Media General Inc.

The study's research question had to do with whether information and opinion about the 2000 presidential campaign in cross-owned media had a coordinated or consistent slant in favor of one major-party candidate or the other. An initial challenge, accordingly, was to devise a measurable definition of “slant.”

We defined the “slant” of a published or broadcast item about the presidential campaign from the point of view of a hypothetical interested but undecided voter. If the coders judged an item to be likely to make such a voter more inclined to vote for Gore than for Bush (or more likely to vote for Gore than for a third-party candidate), then the item was coded as “favorable to

Gore.” The “favorable to Gore” category included items that were pro-Gore as well as items that were anti-Bush. Similarly, if an item was likely to make a voter more inclined to vote for Bush, then it was coded as “favorable to Bush,” a category that included anti-Gore as well as pro-Bush items. Items that favored third-party candidates, items that were equally flattering or unflattering to Bush and Gore, and items about polls and campaign strategy were coded as “neutral.”

Slant was not a judgment about whether a candidate or his staff would have been happy with publication or broadcast of the item, about whether an item was somehow biased, or about a journalist's intent. Many items that would meet ordinary standards of journalistic objectivity were uncritical reports of what a candidate had done the previous day. If, as often was the case, the items depicted the candidate in a positive light, they were coded as favoring the candidate (whichever one he was) without any implication that the journalist who produced the story was biased. Slant was simply an assessment of whether an item would have made a typical undecided voter more likely to vote for Bush, more likely to vote for Gore, or whether it would have had minimal effect on a typical undecided voter.

The study coded all available non-advertising content about the presidential campaign in the newspapers and late-evening local newscasts of the media organizations under study.<sup>12</sup> In other words, in addition to evaluating the slant of traditional news stories and editorials, the study also evaluated the slant of items such as editorial cartoons, staff-written opinion columns other than editorials, syndicated opinion columns, guest opinion essays, letters submitted by readers, and free-standing photographs. Each item was coded by two members of a team of research assistants who had been selected and trained by the author of this report. If the research assistants initially disagreed or were uncertain about the slant of any given item, they brought the

item to the author for review and discussion.<sup>13</sup> After discussion, all parties agreed in all cases about the appropriate slant of an item.

For each news organization's coverage, a coefficient of “slant” was computed.<sup>14</sup> The slant coefficient could vary from –100 (which would indicate that all items in a given category favored Gore, none were neutral, and none favored Bush) to +100 (which would indicate that all items in a given category favored Bush, none were neutral, and none favored Gore). Perfectly balanced coverage would have a slant coefficient of 0. It is important to note, however, that slant coefficients different from 0 should not be construed as evidence of bias on the part of a news organization. Objective news organizations respond to the tenor of events, and the last two weeks of the campaign featured a certain amount of news that was almost inevitably anti-Bush (e.g., the revelations of the decades-old drunk-driving arrests of both Bush and his vice-presidential candidate, Dick Cheney) or pro-Gore (e.g., outgoing President Clinton's late-campaign efforts to mobilize African American voters to vote for Gore).

The results reveal the direction and magnitude of “slant” for each news organization under study during the crucial final two weeks of the campaign. The greater the distance between the two “slants” of a commonly owned newspaper and television station in a community, the stronger the evidence that cross-owned newspapers and television stations provided different views of the 2000 presidential campaign. Whether a slant coefficient was positive (i.e., pro-Bush) or negative (i.e., pro-Gore) is not important to the analysis. Rather, it was the magnitude of the difference between the slant coefficients of a commonly owned newspaper and television station in a given community that provided evidence for distinct views of the campaign.<sup>15</sup>

We also ascertained which presidential candidate, if any, received the endorsement of the newspaper in a cross-owned combination so that we could compare the endorsement with the slant of the news coverage provided by the company's newspaper and television station.

## RESULTS

The analysis showed that, in five of the 10 newspaper-television combinations studied, the overall slant of the coverage broadcast by a company's television station was noticeably different from the overall slant of the coverage provided by the same company's newspaper, and often contradicted the newspaper's endorsement of a candidate. In the other five combinations under study, the overall slant of newspaper coverage of the 2000 campaign was not significantly different from the overall slant of the local television coverage. Table 2 shows the results, with the newspaper-broadcast combinations ordered from greatest to smallest difference in slant.

**Table 2.** Editorial endorsements and slant of coverage.

<b><u>Community</u></b>	<b><u>TV station Slant</u></b>	<b><u>Newspaper Slant</u></b>	<b><u>Newspaper Endorsement</u></b>
Phoenix AZ	- 30.43	- 4.69	Bush
NY (News Corp.)	- 3.70	+ 20.49	Bush
Fargo ND	+ 2.33	- 11.94	Bush
Milwaukee WI	+ 5.05	- 8.15	None
Tampa FL	+ 3.45	+ 13.73	Bush
Los Angeles CA	- 7.84	- 15.70	None

Dallas TX	- 0.03	+ 6.55	Bush
NY (Tribune Co.)	- 8.33	- 14.66	Gore
Hartford CT	- 13.16	- 8.67	Bush
Chicago IL	+ 0.01	- 3.57	Bush

One fact not related to individual communities is apparent from Table 2: The Tribune Company did not require its newspapers to coordinate their endorsements for president. Of the four Tribune Company newspapers in the study, two endorsed Bush (Chicago, Hartford), one endorsed Gore (Newsday), and one made no endorsement (*Los Angeles Times*).

Of the seven television stations in cross-owned combinations where the newspaper endorsed Bush, two (WTIC in Hartford and KPNX in Phoenix) provided coverage of the presidential campaign that had a clear pro-Gore slant. In five of the newspaper-television combinations (Fargo, Milwaukee, the News Corporation's New York combination, Phoenix, and Tampa), the overall slant of the newspaper coverage was noticeably different from the overall slant of the coverage of the television owned by the same company.

Nowhere was this tendency more apparent than in Gannett's Phoenix properties. The slant of 192 items from the *Arizona Republic* (which endorsed Bush) was -4.69, fairly close to neutrality. The slant of the 23 items from KPNX-TV, however, was -30.43, the strongest pro-Gore slant coefficient in the study.

Diversity of views about the presidential campaign also was evident in the News Corporation's New York media. The slant of 122 coded items from the *New York Post*, which had endorsed Bush, was a robustly pro-Bush +20.49.<sup>16</sup> WNYW-TV's coverage, however, was

rigorously neutral; the television slant coefficient of  $-3.70$  was the result of 1 pro-Gore item out of 27 coded. The other 26 televised items were neutral.

In Milwaukee, the *Journal Sentinel's* coverage was a mildly pro-Gore  $-8.15$ , while WTMJ-TV, also owned by Journal Communications, provided coverage that was somewhat pro-Bush ( $+5.05$ ). It is worth noting that a separate analysis of Journal Communications' Milwaukee radio station showed its coverage of the presidential campaign to be powerfully pro-Bush.<sup>17</sup> In Fargo, Forum Communications newspaper, which endorsed Bush, provided pro-Gore coverage of the presidential campaign ( $-11.94$ ). The associated television station, WDAY-TV, provided very balanced coverage ( $+2.33$ ).

A similar trend was apparent in the Tampa/St. Petersburg market. The overall slant coefficient of Media General's Tampa *Tribune*, which endorsed Bush, was a clear pro-Bush  $+13.73$ . Almost all of WFLA-TV's coverage, on the other hand, was neutral (56 of the 58 televised items were coded neutral).

In the other newspaper-television combinations under study, there was no meaningful difference between the overall slants of the newspaper and television coverage of the campaign. There was, to be sure, coverage whose slant contrasted with the newspaper's editorial endorsement (e.g., the newspaper-television combinations in Hartford and Phoenix) as well as a wide diversity of viewpoints in the pages of monopoly newspapers.<sup>18</sup>

## **DISCUSSION**

Given the limited number of observations in this study, we cannot draw firm or sweeping conclusions about the implications of our findings. However, for the ten markets studied, our

analysis of the coverage of last two weeks of the 2000 presidential campaign suggests that common ownership of a newspaper and a television station in a community does not result in a predictable pattern of news coverage and commentary on important political events between the commonly-owned outlets. This is not to say that the news organizations under study presented a vast range of viewpoints or that their news coverage was helpful in enabling citizens to make informed choices on Election Day. It is to say, however, that we found no generalized evidence of ownership manipulation of the news in the situations of local cross-ownership we studied.

Different news organizations owned by the same company tended to do things differently, sometimes favoring Bush, sometimes favoring Gore, and often favoring neither. As our previous study showed, editorial pages carried not only management's opinion but also many other opinions, including a substantial number of letters, guest columns, and syndicated columns that offered readers a range of viewpoints. The slant of campaign coverage broadcast by a company's radio and television stations sometimes differed from the slant of news published by the company's newspaper.

It is important to note that we did not assess the quality of campaign coverage in cross-owned media; we simply examined the extent to which commonly owned media took a common slant on the campaign. In five of the combinations, the results enable us to say with some confidence that the slant of the newspaper's coverage of the last two weeks of the 2000 campaign was meaningfully different from the slant of the television station's coverage. For the other five combinations, the newspaper and television slants were not meaningfully different.

The data do not enable us to ascertain why both commonly owned news organizations in these five combinations might have taken a similar slant on the campaign. One possibility is that

an unseen hand of ownership control operated to harmonize the coverage. Another possibility is that the news judgments of professional journalists in a community sometimes tend to converge without any influence from ownership.

Overall, the range of viewpoints in the campaign coverage of the cross-owned media under study tended to reflect the range of viewpoints discussed by the leading candidates for the presidency. In other words, cross-owned newspapers and broadcast stations covered the campaign in the way that mainstream American news organizations typically cover political campaigns.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>. Amendment of Sections 73.34, 73.240, and 73.636 Comm'n Rules Relating to Multiple Ownership of Std., FM, and TV Brdcast. Stations, Second Report and Order, 50 F.C.C.2d 1046, 32 Rad. Reg.2d (P & F) 954 (1975) [hereinafter Second Report & Order].

<sup>2</sup>. Second Report & Order, supra note 1, para. 97.

<sup>3</sup>. Kortes Commun., Inc., Memorandum Opinion & Order, 15 F.C.C.R. 11846 (2000) (allowing co-ownership of newspaper and AM station, based on the fact that the station was financially troubled and might go off the air, and was a small participant in the market); Columbia Montour Brdcast. Co., Memorandum Opinion & Order, 13 F.C.C.R. 13007 (1998) (allowing co-ownership of newspaper and small AM station, based on the fact that the station was financially troubled and could not be sold, and was a small participant in a competitive, diverse market); Fox TV Stations, Inc., Declaratory Ruling, 9 F.C.C.R. 5341 (1993) (allowing co-ownership of newspaper and TV station in large market, based on the fact that the station was reacquiring the newspaper such that the combination did not constitute a new ownership pattern, and the newspaper might not be financially viable on its own), *aff'd sub nom.* Metropolitan Council of NAACP Branches v. FCC, 46 F.3d 1154 (D.C. Cir. 1995); Field Commun. Corp., 65 F.C.C.2d 959 (1977) (allowing co-ownership of two newspapers and a TV station, based on the fact that the newspapers were reacquiring the TV station such that the combination did not constitute a new ownership pattern, and the TV station had only recently become financially viable).

<sup>4</sup>. David Pritchard, A Tale of Three Cities: "Diverse and Antagonistic" Information in Situations of Local Newspaper/Broadcast Cross-Ownership, 54 Fed. Comm. L.J. 31 (2001). [Hereinafter, Pritchard, A Tale of Three Cities].

<sup>5</sup>. See, e.g., Chris Powell, The Courant's Curious Endorsement, Providence Journal-Bulletin, Nov. 2, 2000, at B6.

<sup>6</sup>. Stephen Labaton, In Test, FCC Lifts Requirement on Broadcasting Political Replies, N.Y. Times, Oct. 5, 2000, at A1.

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<sup>7</sup>. 47 C.F.R. § 73.123 (1967).

<sup>8</sup>. 47 C.F.R. § 73.123(c) (1967).

<sup>9</sup>. Radio-TV News Dirs. Assoc. v. FCC, 229 F.3d 269 (D.C. Cir. 2000).

<sup>10</sup>. Stephen Labaton, Presidential Election Could Alter Shape of Tribune-Times Mirror Deal, N.Y. Times, Mar. 19, 2000, at C1.

<sup>11</sup>. Although the initial study analyzed the content of news and public affairs programming from cross-owned radio stations in Chicago and Milwaukee as well as from newspapers and television, only the newspaper and television data will be presented in this report.

<sup>12</sup>. Media coverage from Chicago, Dallas, and Milwaukee, which provided the data analyzed in the study published in 2001, was collected as it was published or broadcast in fall 2000. The seven combinations that are analyzed for the first time in this study represent all newspaper-television combinations for which useable tapes or transcripts of local newscasts for the period under study (October 23 through November 6, 2000) could be obtained during the summer of 2002. The stations provided tapes of late-evening newscasts, except in the cases of WTIC in Hartford (which could supply only a full script) and KPNX in Phoenix (which supplied a log sheet and tape of reporter packages). Data for the other seven newspapers analyzed for the first time here was not sought until summer 2002, long after the newspaper organizations had discarded old copies. Content of five of the seven newspapers is available on Lexis-Nexis (Hartford Courant, Los Angeles Times, New York Post, Newsday, and Tampa Tribune). The other two newspapers (Fargo Forum, Arizona Republic) supplied photocopies of their political coverage for the dates under study.

<sup>13</sup>. In the initial examination of the data, coders agreed on the slant of an item in more than 92% of the cases, indicating a high degree of reliability.

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<sup>14</sup>. The slant coefficients were transformations of the mean value of the variable “slant” for each news organization to create a more intuitively understandable metric.

15. We determined what constituted a meaningful difference between commonly owned newspapers and television stations via two-tailed, independent-samples T-tests which compared the slant of coverage by a cross-owned TV station with the slant of the coverage of the newspaper in the same combination. T-tests are typically used to compare the means of two groups randomly chosen from two populations, enabling inferences about the differences between the population means. Such tests also can be used to help assess the likelihood that the difference between two population means (e.g., the slants of all newspaper and television coverage of a political campaign in a defined period) is a meaningful difference rather than a difference caused by chance fluctuation in the data. In the present study, the tests suggested that there was an 83% chance that a difference of the type we found with the Fargo combination was a meaningful difference. For Milwaukee and Tampa, the statistic was 89%. For Phoenix, the statistic was 96%. For the News Corporations New York combination, the statistic was 99%. None of the other combinations under study had percentages higher than 65%, which we judged not adequate to support a finding of a meaningful difference.

<sup>16</sup>. Although more than three-quarters of the items in the *Post* were coded as neutral, of the non-neutral items pro-Bush pieces outnumbered pro-Gore pieces by 27 to 2.

- <sup>17</sup>. See Pritchard, *A Tale of Three Cities*, supra note 4 at 48-49.

<sup>18</sup>. Pritchard discusses this issue in depth with respect to cross-owned newspapers in Chicago, Dallas, and Milwaukee. See *A Tale of Three Cities*, supra note 4, at 42-49.