REFRAMING LOCAL NEWS: THE EFFECTS OF POPULATION DENSITY ON LOCAL TV NEWS IN NEBRASKA

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ABSTRACT

This study used three designated market areas in Nebraska as a case study for the Great Plains and their local news structure. Using three strategically chosen DMA’s, North Platte, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, and Omaha, a range of programming formulas were analyzed. Each is a different size and has a different population density, ranging from the second smallest DMA in the country to the 76-ranked market area.

A content analysis was used to assess what types of stories and content specifics exist in the local news of Nebraska, resulting in the Nebraska Local News Content Study dataset (NLSCS). The NLSCS dataset includes 726 different cases across 48 different variables. The statistical analysis of this data uncovered three trends in newscasts of the Great Plains. First, the lead of local news programs does not differ based on the DMA in question. Rather, there seems to be tested formulas in place for what types of stories catch the audience’s attention. However, the size of a community’s population did matter when analyzing the overall programming formula for the 22-minute newscast. A statistically significant difference between newscasts was found between North Platte and Omaha. The programs of Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings and Omaha, however, had the same baseline programming. The mixture of the two findings suggest that the largest and smallest DMA’s broadcast different information to their constituents.
This study relied on the economic model of the television as the backbone of the research. The triangular relationship that the market creates empowers both advertisers and audiences to affect the content that makes it to air. The pressure put on programmers to please is the greatest during sweeps, when advertising rates are up for consideration. This study produced the finding that programming becomes increasingly local during this period. While this may be due to the congruent nature of the 2010 midterm elections, the analysis suggests that what is the most enticing to audiences during these key periods is local information.

This study suggests that a new layer in the analysis of local news needs to be implemented, that one programming formula does not fit all. Smaller stations in the heart of the Midwest and the Great Plains desire different news than the coastal cities. Information about these booming hubs of industry are already portrayed in the national news, leaving a large void in information about what use to be the “wild west.” Frameworks used to analyze the overall state of news need to take the differing news structures into consideration to correctly portray the news media.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For the past sixty years, it has been the habit of millions of people across the United States to turn on the television, after a long day of work, to see their local news. Greeted by “Good Evening, New York” or a version of that salutation, Americans have traditionally have “tuned in” to be informed about the happenings of the day based on the point of view of their local broadcast media. However, a common sentiment is apparent in almost every article related to local news in today’s society. “Evening news is where they begin with ‘Good evening,’ and then proceed to tell you why it isn’t” (Prerit). The traditional comfort and reliability that the evening news has provided to viewers has morphed into a common joke begging for some explanation. If the news is so depressing and out of touch with the daily lives of its constituents, why do people watch it? This is the exact question that every television programmer aims to answer. Understanding why Americans watch television day in and day out is at the forefront of any programming decision. Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to this quandary and the true understanding of an audience’s makeup and viewing habits is an art form that takes both time and money to discover. These two resources, if available, are translated into research conducted on what specifically catches the attention of viewers, and what entices them to return for every new installment of programming. What character, plotline, or visual cue results in an increase of viewership, and as a result ratings, when it is included in the telecast? The explanations of these patterns that are produced by research studies are key to the success of a station’s programming and ultimately their economic viability. Such research findings give programmers the data to match their population’s proclivities with the content and entertainment they shown on-air.
This project aims to explain the relationship between population density and the make-up of local newscasts. With Nebraska as the case study, three different *Designated Market Areas* (DMA’s) give a window into a population less frequently included in academic literature, specifically in studies of the broadcast media. Middle America, the landlocked center portion of the United States, seems different than the coastal cities that appear more often then not as the settings for broadcast and motion picture productions (Dominick 1977; Brooker-Gross 1983). Cities in the Midwest are more rural in nature and their populations have different needs, interests, and desires then regions on the coast. This project highlights the culture and communities of Nebraska as a case study of the overall state of local news in the Midwest, and more specifically in the Great Plains. The inclusion of varying sized market areas shed light on how newscasts differ due to constituent needs. In addition, the evaluation of both the sweeps period and the 2010 midterm election provide insight into the types of stories presented in local 30-minutes news programs.

**Broadcast Media Market Structure**

To truly understand and evaluate the local broadcast news of Nebraska, or of any region for that matter, it is essential to emphasize that the television media is a business; the ultimate goal of both the advertisers and the station executives is to make a profit. As such, it is important to recognize the connection between each party of interest. The relationship cycle includes three different groups: the television studio, the advertisers, and the audience. For television executives, the end goal is to create enticing programming that draws a large audience base that can then be sold to advertisers in 30-second commercial spots. Advertisers have to decide where their advertising budget is going to be spent based on a program’s ratings in a desired
demographic. For the purpose of this project, the third leg of the relationship triangle is key—that audiences decide which programs to watch, which in turn effects which advertisements they will see. While their role, watching television programming, is not necessary financially motivated, the viewers are key to the stability of this market scheme and determine the success of the other two parties involved. As such, the role of audiences cannot be ignored when analyzing the state of local television news.

Creating the News Schedule

It is crucial for programmers and advertisers to be able to evaluate and understand exactly who is watching particular programming and at what time. One set of statistics that are used to evaluate these questions, and arguably the most important, is the Nielsen ratings system (Rocha 2004). Ratings are a ratio of viewing audience to total television households (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011). When these statistics are considered they can provide insight into which station is the most successful with a certain viewing demographic. During the Nielsen sweeps, key periods when the ratings are used to determine advertising budgets, local programs and networks alike are put to the test, and are proven to be either successes or failures based on their viewing statistics (Rocha 2004). As such, these four periods, in November, March, May, and July respectively, are the most important times of the year to air enticing programming. It is during these times that the most money is spent on content and special features are aired in order to draw the greatest number of audience members possible. Throughout the years, the selection and choice of various types of shows with a range of plot lines have become a science, a formula for success (Brooker-Gross 1983: 800). The idea of sticking to a standard of more time intensive and multipart stories during the sweeps is a method
used by local programmers across the country (Ehrlich 1995: 38). As such, it isn’t surprising that
many local newscasts look the same to those traveling throughout the United States. The
elements in the shows themselves seem to be formulaic in nature. Story types like personal
interest pieces or hard-hitting investigation stories are saved and used during the sweeps to
increase viewership (Ehrlich 1995: 38). This trick of the trade is both time-intensive and costly to
produce, but these multi-part stories catch the viewing audience’s attention and bring them back
to the channel for updates throughout the week. The habitual viewing that results translates into
high ratings, which is the key to enticing advertisers to invest in the station and their
programming.

But, since the whole goal of creating a successful news program by using a formula of
segments is to get the greatest number of viewers possible, the audience itself should play a part
in exactly what aired. The make up of a region’s population should, in fact, influence the
schedule and content of stories that are aired and thought of as profitable, even if the type
(investigation, hard news, soft news, etc.) stays constant throughout the nation. Differences in a
region’s ethnicity, gender make-up, population density, average age, political lean, average
income and education level should in theory all create a unique population different from others
across the country. These differences in population make-up, as small as they might, should
change the content desired by viewers and as such the stories broadcast by the local stations and
their overall programming formula.

**Research Questions**

This project aims to examine the connection between an area’s population density in the
Great Plains of the United States and the construction of local news during a period of
heightened attention and focus on these sorts of television programs (i.e. elections and sweeps). Specifically, this project asks a set of research questions. Does the size of a DMA effect the types of stories broadcasted on local news? How does this affect the content of stories presented? Is there a single cost effective method to programming news or do the formulas vary depending on the area in question? Does local news reflect its population more during the election cycle then at other periods during the year? The analysis of these research questions will shed light on the current framework by which local news is evaluated and suggest new additions or changes that need to be made to this structure of thinking.

**Literature Review Overview**

This project depends on the idea that viewers have the ability to choose what they watch, call it personal power or choice, and that their own values have an effect on this decision. In their 1993 study, MacCarty and Schrum discussed the connection between values, demographics, and behavior in television viewing. While many of their results are not statistically significant due to the possibility of confounding variables, their research shows how demographics are highly correlated with viewing habits (MacCarty and Shrum 1993: 91). Their finding is important for this study because advertisers want to reach the best demographics for their products. In order for a program to be watched it has to be relatable to the desired audience. As such, the newscasts themselves should reflect this phenomenon, especially during sweeps when audience makeup is under the microscope. Waldfogel et al. bring this research a step further, looking at how media preference change due to the demographic skew of a city (Waldfogel et al. 2004: 258). While their main interest was in the role race and gender plays on viewershship decisions, they show that other elements and characteristics of society may be a cause of varied viewing. The finding that
populations (be it designated by its race, gender and so on) will have different screening habits based on the city in question, supports my hypothesis (i.e., that local television news programming, which is regional by nature, will mold to the characteristics of the society it is serving.) Waldfogel et al. even stated that local programming is more susceptible to catering to local preferences than national programs (Waldfogel et al. 2004: 271). National network news traditionally incorporates news from the two coasts of the United States. This is due to the location of the national government, the stock market, the dotcom industry, and Hollywood’s entertainment industry. Such stories comprise over half of the news shown on the air nationally (Dominick 1977; Brooker-Gross 1983). As such, the local sphere becomes a key outlet to incorporate stories of local interest and thus molds to match its viewers.

Early television literature classified the audience as a passive spectator with no effect on the subjects portrayed on programs. In 1972, the role of viewers evolved with the introduction of the agenda setting theory. It hypothesizes that the media’s role in the public sphere is to set the topics for society to think and talk about (McCombs and Shaw 1972: 2). More current literature on the subject further advanced the role of the audience into an active agent of media consumption (Mosco and Kaye 2000: 85). This study relies on the charactercher of the viewer in this light, as a “selective media consumer” who helps to define the news and information presented to them (Mosco and Kaye 2000: 85).

While the intrinsic connection between the audience and their desired content is key, the foundation of this project is based on the idea that a programming formula is used to maximize audience share. Rust and Eechambadi looked at how various schedules have an effect on an audience’s size (Rust and Eechambadi 1989: 17). They developed five different tips for
programmers which included placing the best content early and targeting segments of viewers not reached by other stations (Rust and Eechambadi 1989: 17). While their findings are for national network line-ups, the suggestions they discovered might have a similar effect in local news. Rust and Eechambadi suggest that the best content should always be placed at the start of a program, which, in terms of a local broadcast, means the beginning headlines and the first few stories aired in a newscast. Evaluating the content of stories based on their place in the lineup should thus provide insight into what programmers perceive as the topics most cherished by their viewing constituents.

A great deal of research has been conducted on television and its dependence on sweeps to entice advertisers. Since they are a party of financial interest, this makes sense. Yet, there is not much research which gives insight into the effects of a designated market area’s population density on the programming of local news, specifically when advertising budgets are up for reallocation. The research that exists comes in the form of TV ratings, which programmers use to manipulate their newscasts to match their intended audience. The results of a station’s efforts to evaluate these statistics are seen in the shows and story types that make it to the air. This study draws from a range of academic studies in journalism, economics and marketing. In addition to academic studies, much of the background information comes from trade publications that provide increased focus and information on what the “business” considers important in their programming decisions.

**News as a Source Political Commentary**

It is always important in any study to recognize the context of society during the time period in question. The November 2010 sweeps period, which occurred during the time frame for
this study, took place in congruent with the national election cycle. While a midterm election might not normally stir the media to report heavily on every minute detail of the campaign, this election season proved to be asymmetrical and brought both national and local issues to the attention of readers and viewers on a range of different issues. According to the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, roughly ten percent of all stories in 2010 were about the midterm elections (2011). The large skew in the amount of election coverage needs to be considered especially when assessing the state of the local broadcast media. While the main focus of this study is the role of population density on the creation of local news, it will be a prime opportunity to also assess how a region’s make-up helps to determine what the broadcast media thinks is profitable news, as well as desired by its consumers.

**Hypotheses**

This study looks at the structure of newscasts in local Nebraskan markets through a content analysis of their story types. As such, two distinct types of variables are created: general stories types and specialized topics. The reason behind this procedure is two-fold. The separation of stories into two categories allows for an analysis of news types that can be generalized to DMA’s across the country, such as stories about crime, health, sports, business, and so on. The analysis of specialized content within stories allows for the evaluation of specific topics such as education, the environment, and due to the timing of this study, political polls. A single story is a mixture of general story types and specialized content cues. The inclusion of both variable types aid in defining the patterns and formulas used in newscasts across DMA’s.
Based on current academic literature and statements made in trade publications, it is logical to assume that the general “programming formula” stays relatively the same no matter the geographic region in question.

H₁: The types of stories used in the opening segments of the local broadcasts will be consistent across the three DMA’s under study.

This hypothesis assumes that the age-old mantra that is popular in newspapers, “blood leads,” is also pertinent to the creation of local broadcast news. This type of programming is the most time sensitive and as such tempts the audience to stay and watch the rest of the newscast to learn more about happenings in crime and consumer news. While not the most positive spin on daily life, it causes the audience to tune in day in and day out; and it would reflect the sentiments made on main blogs and trade articles. So while a common joke is that news starts with good evening and then states all the reasons why it is not, this focus is the profitable answer to the formula of stories and an effective use of the lead.

While the type of stories may stay constant throughout each of the designated market areas, I hypothesize that the content delivered in the stories will change. The information portrayed in the newscast will be closely associated with the intended audience of the market area. If the hypothesis is correct, the newscasts will put greater focus on the economic and cultural factors unique to each of the populations under study, like education reform or taxes.

H₂: Story content will be different in each of the DMA’s under study.
Since, this study takes place during both an election cycle and a sweeps period simultaneously, it will be possible to look at how the programming formula changes during these key times in American society and for the broadcasters and television advertisers.

H₃: More stories during the week of November 1-5 will be locally focused than nationally focused.

**Brief Overview of Methodology**

This study uses the early evening local news in three varying sized designated market areas in the Midwest, including North Platte, NEⁱ, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastingsⁱⁱ, NE, and Omaha, NEⁱⁱⁱ to evaluate the relationship between population density and programming formulas. Since the role of the election cycle and the sweeps period is of interest, three weeks of 6 p.m. newscasts were evaluated, including a week of broadcasts on month prior to the election and sweeps periods, a week of shows during the time of interest, and one week a month following the November sweeps and election. The range in time helps to shed light on the differences in programming formulas, while providing a large number of cases for the evaluation of the overall state of local news in Middle America, and more specifically Nebraska.

**Summary of the Thesis**

Chapter Four will place this work in the context of the current theoretical trends and provide a basis of academic works that are pertinent to development of this case. Research, although key in the communication field, seems to be lacking in the academic realm. Much of the literature is dependent on cultural studies rather than economic principles that are such a core element of the broadcast media. As such, this study draws from a wide range of disciplines
including marketing, advertising, economics, and traditional communication studies and sources range from academic journals to trade publications including *Broadcasting and Cable* and *Variety*.

The two initial chapters place this study in contexts of the Midwestern society and television industry. Chapter Two includes a brief history of Nebraskan politics, how the state’s government developed, and the struggles the society has had with land ownership, an agriculturally based economy, the influx of the railroads and several other controversial issues. It provides insight into the three DMA’s under study, including their population demographics, their main industries, and their political leanings. Chapter Three switches gears and puts the television industry under the microscope, explaining both economic and political factors shaping the industry today. The hope is that these chapters will inform and interest the reader, and will provide additional information to strengthen the findings in both the analysis and discussion sections of the study.

Chapter Four delves into the context of the current theoretical trends, while providing a basis of academic works that are pertinent to development of this case. Research, although key in the communication field, seems to be lacking in the academic realm. Much of the literature is dependent on cultural studies rather than economic principles that are such a core element of the broadcast media. As a result, this study draws from a wide range of disciplines including marketing, advertising, economics, and traditional communication studies and sources range from academic journals to trade publications including *Broadcasting and Cable* and *Variety*.

Chapter Five is a description of the methodology used to evaluate the relationship between local newscast formulas and their constituents. Conducting a content analysis of three
DMA’s located in Nebraska throughout a three-month period allows for the wide range of systematic formulas that the research questions require for an effective evaluation of the state of local news. Also included in this chapter are explanations of basic terms and concepts used throughout the study.

The analysis employing the statistical methods is provided in Chapter Six. The general formula for “sweeps time” newscasts as well as patterns in the content of stories will be presented in greater detail to provide insight into the role population density plays in the construction of local news.

Chapter Seven is a discussion of how the trends and patterns discovered in the analysis come together to create the overall state of local news in Middle America. It places the research in the context of other studies and suggests that an overhaul is needed of the current theoretical framework used to analyze local news in the academic and industry realms. Also included in this chapter is a conclusion with a summary of exactly what this study aimed to discover and information on whether the goals were met with any certainty.

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i North Platte, NE is ranked 209 out of the 210 DMA’s in the US. These rankings are measure to mean that 1 is the largest population and 210 is the smallest region (The Nielsen Company 2010).

ii The Lincoln & Hastings-Kearney DMA is ranked 106 out of 210 DMA’s in the United States (The Nielsen Company 2010).

iii Omaha, NE is ranked 76 out of 210 DMA’s in the United States (The Nielsen Company 2010).
CHAPTER 2: NEBRASKA AND THE GREAT PLAINS

The content of local broadcast news is a mixture of stories that are of interest to viewers in the intended designated market area and news that attracts the right audience for paying advertisers. The pressures from the two interested parties of the local television industry turn programming into both a puzzle and a judgment game. Producers and their employees are charged with finding just the right mixture to please all involved. As such, a full analysis of the local news industry must acknowledge and understand both the audience, who they are and where they come from, and the media business, how it works and the reasons that advertisers have a stake in controlling content. This chapter looks into the first of these demands on programming decisions, specifically it delves into what life is like on the Great Plains.

Nebraska is a storied state located in the Midwest portion of America. The Great Plains stretch through the majority of the region, which help to define Nebraska’s past and present, especially experiences of financial fortune and hardship unique to the citizens of this land. Its history is recounted by American households in the form of stories about Buffalo Bill and the “wild west.” The land has seen great migrations of western settlers, embraced the cross continental railroad, and in more recent history become the hub for NCAA baseball. Before understanding the media culture within North Platte, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, and Omaha it is important to get an idea about its people, their history and life on the Great Plains. Each of the designated market areas has differences in their population make-up and daily life of that populace, so after a brief history about the founding of the state, individual focus will be placed on each of the DMA’s which will stress the community culture and government organization.
Understanding these various elements aid in evaluating how the general story types and their specialized content come together to create the local news landscape of Nebraska.

**The State History of Nebraska**

**Early Beginnings**

The Great Plains take up a large portion of the central United States, stretching from Canada to Mexico (Wilson 2009: 2). The treeless land accounts for the majority of Nebraska topography, as seen in Figure 1 below.
Figure 2.1

Map of the Great Plains of the United States

Source: Center for Great Plains Studies: Map of the Great Plains (2009)
Its environment is characterized by three distinguishing facts:

1. It exhibits a comparatively level surface of great extent.
2. It is a treeless land, an unforested area.
3. It is a region where rainfall is insufficient for the ordinary agriculture of common to the lands of a humid climate. The climate is sub-humid.

(Webb, 1959: 3)

While the attributes above may not sound enticing, the Nebraskan plains became an area of great interest and intrigue during the western expansion of the United States. Great droves of adventurers set out to live in Oregon and Santa Fe and thus passed through the Nebraska territory. Explorers, including Lewis and Clark, carried out US sponsored expeditions to gain insight and information about the west and its Indians (Webb 1959: 143). The stories and descriptions that the explorers produced led to the definition and belief in the “Great American Dessert” (Webb 1959: 147). From the time of exploration to the establishment of the Nebraska territory, the expansion into the west relied on two different routes, one ending in Oregon and one in Santa Fe through to California. The promise of gold and of land rich in natural resources inspired only the most adventurous of populations to attempt the long and torturous trip to the Pacific. “If it is borne in mind that the objective of most of these exploring parties was the Pacific coast or the Rocky Mountains, it is easy to understand how the Plains themselves, with their aridity and their nomadic Indians, assumed at once the character of an obstacle blocking the path of the explorer intent on what lay beyond” (Webb 1959: 141). The barrier that the plains became only reinforced the idea of the “American Dessert,” of a land that was a wild and lawless frontier.

As more people took the trip and told stories of profit and life on the west coast, public pressure to open the region to settlement and provide an eased transportation method hit the boiling point. The northern area of the Great Plains contained the trails that settlers had been
using for the previous two decades to reach the Pacific Coast. In addition, this northern segment of the Wild West provided the only possible route for a railroad stretching from the central US to the Pacific (Gittenger 1917: 443). Stimulated by these needs, among others, then Secretary of War William Wilkins supported the idea of creating two new territories in the western frontier. He suggested that the area on both sides of the Platte River should be organized as an effort to open the doors to the Pacific (Gittenger 1917: 444). This proposal was brought to the United States House of Representatives on December 17, 1844. A month later, an additional bill came to the floor, one that would help to ensure the safety of the two new territories through the creation of a number of military posts placed on their land (Gittenger 1917: 444). These trading posts became the beginnings of towns and cities on the Nebraskan landscape, some of which as still in existence today. It took five years to stir enough interest in the need for a safe transcontinental path to the Pacific to create the Nebraska Territory.

The two greatest problems that stood in the way of Nebraska’s territorial status was the issue of slavery in the newly incorporated western frontier and the promises previously made with the Indian settlements of the area (Gittenger 1917: 453). While these two points of debate were being worked out on the floor of Congress, nonpartisan life in the Midwest took on the challenge of heightened railroad expansion. In just four years, what would become the Nebraska territory jumped from 8,600 miles to 21,300 miles of track (Gittenger 1917: 447). Despite the fact that decisions couldn’t be made about how to govern and rule the territories, they did move legislation through both Congressional Houses that began giving land grants to aid the dramatic extension in transportation (Gittenger 1917: 447).
The Movement to Statehood

After years of work, discussion, and effort by Stephan Douglas among others, Nebraska became an established territory in 1854. The Kansas-Nebraska Act gave the territory its first ruling document (Breckenridge 1984: 16). “The act provided for presidential appointment—with senatorial approval—of the governor, secretary, chief and associate justices of the supreme court, territorial attorney and a marshal” (Breckenridge 1984: 16). With a form of law and order in place, the region became prepared to grow and welcome the great influxes of settlers and travelers that both passed through and stayed in the Nebraska territory. By 1867, the combination of a legal structure and a sizable population led to campaign efforts for the promotion to statehood. However, while there was a popular agreement that the area should become part of the America as a state, constructing a constitution that worked for both the framers and the constituents was not easy. As such, Nebraska struggled with the documents preparation for eight years and in several constitutional congresses before being elevated to statehood (Breckenridge 1984: 18-19).

As the ruling class debated about the construct of a constitution, waves of people flowed into the vast territory. Like other areas in the plains, Nebraska is appropriate for certain types of agriculture. “Considering that the territory had been untried by the pioneer farmer, the backbone of westward expansion, that much of it was believed unsuited to agriculture, and that thousands of vacant acres remained in Iowa, where agricultural possibilities had been demonstrated, Nebraska’s territorial growth is remarkable” (Olson and Naugle 1997: 87). Surprisingly, farmers were not the largest group to relocate to the area, rather it was the cattle herders that became the prime candidate for relocation to the territory. The plains provided for an endless amount of land for steer to graze upon (Rising and Radford 1992: 408). The other key to the remarkable growth
was the locomotive. As the railroads expanded their millage, businesses developed along the routes leading to a 400% growth in population from 1860 to 1870 (Rising and Radford 1992: 408). Train stops became a stimulator of local communities. However, the fast growth led to negative repercussions. Life on the plains was not easy, poor living conditions, inflation, and low profits from an influx of crops made the life of a Nebraskan resident hard (Rising and Radford 1992: 408).

Images of the Midwest bring to mind a picturesque farmland rich in corn and wheat. However, the land was not always thought of in this way. The soil in Nebraska is tough and not suitable for many crops. It takes both a great deal of work, the right crops, and climate luck to produce a bountiful harvest. As a result, most residents were drawn to industries in the cities where making a profit was easier. Financially the second half of the 19th century saw inflation across the country, and specifically in Nebraska an influx in banks and paper money led to a market bust in the late summer of 1857 (Olson and Naugle 1997: 93). Towns were sprouting up and growing all over the Nebraskan landscape, hiding many of the tell tail signs that the market was about to go “belly up.” Once it did, the land, as an agricultural entity, became a prime opportunity for financial stability. As such residents experimented with which crops worked in the plains soil. Innovation also played a role in stabilizing the economy with the introduction of “mechanized commercial farming” (Olson and Naugle 1997: 143). It was at this time that the Nebraska landscape became much of what the rural parts of the state are today—acres of corn and wheat (Olson and Naugle 1997: 94-95). Issues followed the new farmers such as increased taxation, temperamental weather, and low profits led to an unhappy populous, one that still struggles with these issues in the 21st century.
From the time of the shift to an agriculturally focused society up until the present, the press has been an important part of the Nebraskan experience. “Circumstances may have dictated the choice of farming as an economic activity, but Nebraska’s early newspaper editors helped to develop it as a way of life” (Olson and Naugle 1997: 96). The ways of farming, from self-help topics to political decisions with implications on the agriculturally focused community, became core elements of newspapers in all areas of the region, including the more industrial cities like Omaha. The writers of these editorials and stories reinforced and cemented the devotion to farming as a part of the Nebraskan experience. Hence, the media has always been a central resource for its people providing information and guidance.

The media helped to define the culture and personality of the Nebraskan population. It stressed the importance of agriculture to this region of the Wild West. The role of the farm became ingrained in the nature of the state as a whole, and as such played a large role in the creation of the state and local governments. The individual experiences, the hardships of an agriculturally focused society, and the booms of wealth due to the railroad, led to a government different then any other in the United States.

**Current Political Realm**

**National Government**

Nebraska became the 37th state to join the Union on March 1, 1867. As the years have gone by, its ruling document has stayed relatively intact so that the current state government relies on a constitution drafted in 1875 (Breckenridge 1984: 16). As of the 2010 census, Nebraskans have the responsibility to elect two senators and three representatives to the United
States Congress (United States Census 2010). While interesting, what makes the state unique is its ability to split electoral votes between their congressional districts (Curry 2008). Nebraska is one of only two states that allow electoral votes to be split among candidates. “If a candidate wins the most votes in one of Nebraska’s three congressional districts, then he would get one of the state’s five electoral votes, even if he gets fewer votes statewide than his opponent” (Curry 2008). Not only does this practice make the redistricting of the state important, but puts Nebraska in the national spotlight. In the 2008 election, Obama won the electoral votes of the 2nd Congressional district, which includes Omaha, splitting the Nebraskan vote between the Democratic and Republican parties for the first time since 1964 (CBS News, 2008).

For the purposes of this study (while not during an election cycle that uses the electoral college) each of the three DMA’s are in a different congressional district. So the evaluation of their news might show differences in their reporting methods and interests as the cities are used to voting as a region instead of as a state. This could make the national debate more like a civil or regional election. Also key to understanding Nebraskan politics is that as long as 60 years ago, the state had six congressional districts that were taken away in 1933, 1943, and 1963 (Funk 2010). While, Nebraska has not lost any more ground in Congress since the 1960’s, the population has been on a gradual trend of moving eastward, leaving a sparse population on the once bustling western frontier (Funk 2010). It is believed that the 2010 Census data will cause a redistricting of the state to enlarge the third district, which contains the North Platte market area (Funk 2010). The news during the election might show some nuances of the eastern shift, possibly varying the news coverage necessary to fit the needs of the various constituents.
State Government

By far, the most interesting and unique element of the Nebraskan state government is in their legislative branch. Since 1937, a unicameral legislature has been in place with no formal party organization (Breckenridge 1984: 4-5). The idea took root in the United States back in the days of the colonies, when colonial assemblies met to discuss and decide on issues plaguing the community (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 327). Nebraska began statehood with the traditionally American bicameral legislature (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 327). However issues of stalemate and lack of productively, as well as decision-making based on special interests, led to the idea and eventual move to a single legislative house. “As Senator Norris put it: ‘It has been the stock argument that in a two house legislature one branch serves as a check upon the other in the ultimate molding of good and wholesome legislation. As a matter of practice, it has developed frequently that, through the Conference Committee, the politicians have the checks, and the special interests in balances’” (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 327). The issue of a unicameral legislature was brought to light multiple times between 1915 and its first sitting body in 1937. The idea gained support in both the legislature and at the constitutional convention of 1919-1920 (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 328-329). Through the efforts of Senator Norris and many others, the measure finally passed and the hope for less stalemate and special-interest deal making was put into place. As the Nebraska state legislature states in their historical account of their transition to this new form of governing body, “In a one-house legislature, Norris said, no actions could be concealed as was commonly done in the conference committee of bicameral legislatures” (Nebraska Legislature).
While the 1875 constitution remains mostly intact today, the change to a unicameral legislature may be the most dramatic departure from the original document. The new amendment required a membership between thirty and fifty senators and a total of 43 equally populated districts that did not draw lines split existing counties (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 329-330). But more than cutting excess bodies and as such the costs of running the government, the new order of Nebraska turned the legislature nonpartisan. This meant that no political parties would be included on ballots (Nebraska Legislature). “Norris, who advocated nonpartisanship said that such a body would allow senators to concentrate on local interests without being influenced by national party lines. National party lines, he argued, often have little to do with local government” (Nebraska Legislature). By eliminating ties to the national political parties, the theory is that voters will vote based on the issues that they see as the most important to their own lives, rather then simply going along with national agendas that have a lesser affect on local and state issues.

This departure from the American norm will have an effect on the reporting of state races. Different content and methods may be used to describe a candidate or issue because the topics important in one district might not be given the same precedence in another region. Also, the difference between a national partisan government and a state ruling body with a nonpartisan unicameral legislature might alter the way that national election topics are reported.

**Communities of Interest**

Nebraska’s political structure is vastly different then any other state in the United States. Its past is inherently tangled in the stories and experiences of the Wild West as well as the repercussions of a transcontinental railroad crossing directly through the center of the state. As a
result, its communities vary in population demographics and history. The differences and stories of each locality provide a window into the communities that now exist in each of the DMA’s under study.

**North Platte, Nebraska**

There are four counties in the North Platte DMA, including McPherson Co., Lincoln Co., Logan Co., and Thomas Co. Located in the western region of Nebraska, the four counties together have a population of 38,327 people (United States Census 2010; Ellis 2007: 19). However, the largest of the three Lincoln Co., contains 95% of that number.\(^vi\) The population was and has always been very homogenous, including a large majority of white citizens, possibly due to early marketing efforts by communities in Europe (United States Census 2010). Author Mark Ellis commented that Lincoln Country and its surrounding communities are “connected to many of the images, icons, and events commonly associated with the nineteenth-century Great Plains frontier” (Ellis 2007: 19). Its history includes buffalos roaming the prairie land, the Pony Express, the home of William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, vigilantes, and saloons (Ellis 2007: 19-20). The railroad made the townships into a bustling community, bringing with it jobs and financial security. “Because the Union Pacific made North Platte the primary division point between Omaha and Cheyenne, the town quickly became western Nebraska’s commercial and population center” (Ellis 2007: 22). Its location made the population transient in nature and the city wealthy due to the influx of profits from travelers. The result of this was two fold. Due to the economic strength of North Platte and Lincoln County, the area was able to establish a police and judicial force to keep order over the growing populace. However, a traveling population brought criminals that would only be in the area for a short time. “The criminal class, or at least those
who found themselves before a Lincoln County judge, primarily came from outside the
community—cowboys, transients, and tramps” (Ellis 2007: 28).

The negative connotations that went along with the North Platte activities continued
through the first half of the 20th century. Adorning the name “Little Chicago,” the city became a
place of filthiness. Illegal businesses ran in plain sight including “bootlegging, gambling,
prostitution, blackmail and even murder” (North Platte Bulletin Staff 2008b). Cops were paid off
and dirty politics ensued. The rampant violations were finally curtailed with the election of 1951.
However, even in an area of bootlegging and prostitution, North Platte became know for its good
deeds. It has been called the “Miracle of the North Platte Canteen,” and for soldiers who were
lucky enough to have a ten minute stop on their way to war the warm greetings by residents of
North Platte were exactly that, a miracle (Greene 2002). “The canteen was open day and night
for 51 months, frequently serving as many as 23 trains -- up to 8,000 service men -- in 24 hours”
(Yost 2005). The friendliness that Midwesterners are typically characterized for showed through
specifically in this history-making act.

As the Nebraskan population continues to move east, North Platte is becoming a town of
the past. The historic railroad has ceased stopping in this once bustling town and has been
replaced with Amtrak, whose line doesn’t come within the boundaries of the city. However, the
railway business still has a hold on this community. Bailey’s Yard is the “largest railroad
classification yard in the world” (Union Pacific). It employs roughly 2,600 of the cities
population (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2010b). The community’s major employers are the
railroad, the Wal-Mart store, and the Wal-Mart distribution center. Former mayor Marc Kaschke
described the unique set up of the city as a challenge. “Still, North Platte faces unique
challenges; one is the concentration of so many workers in so few businesses. To counteract that,
the city is focusing on building a business-friendly environment so it can attract businesses (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2010b). With the aging and eastward moving population, this development will be a challenge but one that the city is taking on bullishly. In July of 2009, the city was focusing on building better roads, a new hotel, a new truck stop, and a county jail and sheriff’s office (Lauby 2009).

Lincoln and Kearney-Hastings, Nebraska

The Lincoln and Kearney-Hastings DMA stretches from South Dakota to Kansas and encompasses 16 different counties. Its main cities, which are included in the title of the market area, have varied pasts that have influenced the role in the current landscape of Nebraska. The DMA has a total population of 671,567 people within this large region, leading to a population density of 18.8 people per square mile. However, almost half of the population (42.5%) lives in Lancaster County, the area belonging to the state capital of Lincoln.

Lincoln

Lincoln is the capital of Nebraska and the home to the University of Nebraska’s main campus. While it is now a world-class city, it began as nothing more than a few dozen residents (Zimmer 2005). It won the title of capital due to a few politicians that wanted the home of state governance to be south of the Platte River. At the time, the river had become a dividing line between northern and southern beliefs and intentions, straining the soon to be state in two directions. While the site of the capital was being decided, a motion was made by a citizen from north of the Platte River to rename the city of Lancaster as Lincoln (Zimmer 2005). The belief
was that the southern politicians would not go for such a thing. However both legislations passed and Lincoln became the state capital of Nebraska.

Starting in 1870, Lincoln got its first railroad connection as part of the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad. Within the next two decades, all the major locomotive companies had a stop in the state’s capital (Zimmer 2005). As an enthusiastic contemporary writer put it: “Day by day it [Lincoln] has grown and thriven, adding some new industry or social element until the winter of 1886-1887, when like a mountain stream, bounding free from its frozen embrace, and leaping mad delight to meet the warm sunshine, has this capital city sprung into national fame and great prosperity” (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 207). When the national depression hit the country in the 1890s, the community was bolstered as a result of the immigration of Germans coming from Russia, bringing with them traditions and culture that are still influential in the 21st century (Zimmer 2005). It also survived on the beginnings of wholesale house and retail stores, which sustained communities surrounding the capital city (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 252). In this period, the mixture of government, education, industry, and agriculture began to form and cement as the culture of Lincoln. “It was not only the capital but the site of other state institutions as well. With these firmly establish, the university flourishing, and small communities developing north, east, and south, Lincoln’s prospects looked good” (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 252).

Lincoln in the 21st century is still this puzzle of industries, academia, government, and farming. A report comparing the economies of Lincoln, NE and Merced, CA showed the strength of the capital city’s economy and Nebraska’s livelihood in general.
The metro area — built on the edge of the Great Plains — has the good fortune of being at the convergence of several positive trends in a dangerously weak national economy. Lincoln is:

- A college town, home to 24,000 students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Nine of the 10 metro areas with the lowest unemployment rates have major universities.
- A state capital, benefiting from a stable workforce of government jobs.
- Part of a farm economy at a time when farm income has been at or near record highs.

Just as important, Lincoln missed the real estate bubble, so it's not suffering withdrawal from a construction boom caused by too-easy credit.

(Cauchon and Welch, 2010)

While the city is surviving the economic downturn of the 21st century with remarkable ease, it interests are still entangled with the challenges of the rest of Nebraska and around the country.

Kearney

The city of Kearney sits in the center of Nebraska on the border of the Platte River. It is also the geographic center of the United States, 1733 miles from both Boston and San Francisco (Howell 2005). The community that would become the “Midway City of the Nation” began in 1872 as one of first cattle towns in Nebraska (Ellis 2007: 24). Like other plain communities, Kearney’s early history was plagued with gunfights and the dangers associated with the cattle farmers. While the cattle moved quickly on to another berg, Kearney enjoyed the most “spectacular growth of any of the smaller cities” (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 207). Nearby, Fort Kearney was built to protect settlers on their way to the west coast. With the intersection in various forms of transportation in their own backyard, Kearney took on an overall air of optimism for the years to come (Howell 2005). Through hardships they found solutions, such as when a drought hit the area in the 1870s that drove innovation in canals and water transfer. In what seems like a cycle of positive forward movement, the use and incorporation of water
technology led to the quick development of electricity in the 1890s (Howell 2005). Kearney became the second city west of the Mississippi to have all electric streetcars (Howell 2005).

Kearney, like the rest of the country, found itself struggling during the economic downturn of 1890s. There was a great loss of investors and residents, which affected the progress in manufacturing and expansion as a whole. When the market began to turn around Kearney seemed to get a few lucky opportunities. The city was chosen for a new state normal school, which now goes by the name of University of Nebraska at Kearney (Howell 2005). Also, the large boom of population years earlier had given Kearney the role of the county seat. When taken together, this meant that there would be a guaranteed influx of population each year.

Kearney’s economy in the 21st century is dependent on many of the same industries that the town was originally built upon: wholesale and retail sales, manufacturing, tourism, farming, and cattle feeding (Howell 2005). The University of Nebraska put on a talk called the *Strategic Decisions for Nebraska* in Kearney that brought together members of academia, government, and the general community. The write up, entitled “Education, Leadership, Attitude Central to Kearney’s Energy,” describes the finding that the innovative energy that existed in the days of the Wild West till exists and is part of the reason for the success of this prairie town (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2010a). Its people encourage leadership throughout the generations and even offer classes in leadership once a month (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2010a). Dr. Douglas Kristensen, Chancellor of the University of Nebraska in Kearney, believes that the community is able to keep a key group of people that come to the city to learn and then never leave. "These people have fresh ideas that bring vitality to the town" (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2010a). The open attitude to newer generations that the conversation and the chancellor
convey might be an area for the media to pick up on and show the successful news of new technologies, education, and community activity.

**Hastings**

The city of Hastings is an authentic outcome of the railroads and the media. English settlers started building the community in 1871 when they responded to ads about a homestead south of the Platte River (Renschler 2005). The true spark that brought the small groups of civilians to the doors of the town was the intersection of St. Joseph and Denver Railroad (Renschler 2005). The 1870s and 1880s were years of population growth and society development. “Hastings, trying to outdo Grand Island, manufactured a short-lived but exciting boom” (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 207). However drought led to the destitution of this small town in the 1890s. Nearly half of the population moved away, disseminating businesses in all industries (Renschler 2005). The turn of the century gave Hastings an air of new opportunity and growth, starting from nothing and building into a bustling society. The society that reinvented itself made history when the radio station in the area, KFKX, became a re-broadcast entity with locally produced programming (Renschler 2005). Its media aptitude showed again in 1955 when a television studio opened its doors and the airwaves. This station is now known as KHAS and is the NBC affiliate of the Lincoln and Kearney-Hastings designated market area—on of the three stations under study.

Today, Hasting relies on agriculture and the production of ethanol, which creates a unique mixture of industry and agrarian focused workers. Through the creation of the Hastings Economic Development Corporation, efforts have been made to diversify the economy. Ethanol plays a huge role in the community and produces more gallons of the fuel then anywhere else in
the state (Hastings Area Chamber of Commerce 2011). The inclusion of Hastings in the Lincoln DMA should thus result in greater agricultural and ethanol focused media stories, balancing the government and city media bend of the DMA as a whole.

**Omaha, Nebraska**

The DMA of Omaha is one of the top 100 largest DMA’s in the country. The market area includes 17 different counties and a population density of 143.4 people per square mile. Omaha is the largest city in Nebraska with a county population of 285,407 (United States Census 2010). It has a diverse population and is home to the one congressional district that voted for the Obama campaign in 2008 (CBS News 2008). It is continually growing and is getting one of the few, if not only, positive affects from the eastern shift of the Nebraskan population. Set on the shore of the Missouri River, the town has been a part of the landscape since before Nebraska became a state or even a territory. Its early population was made up of Indians, traders, and members of the Mormon religion (Reeves 2005). Due to its location, transportation has always been key to its cultural identity and growth.

Omaha City, as it was originally founded, was built due to the efforts of the neighboring burg of Council Bluffs and the Nebraska Ferry Company (Reeves 2005). An account of the history of the early settlement described Omaha as, “The most successful of the early towns… “ (Olsen and Naugle 1997: 79). In 1865 the railroad paved the way for more immigrants to move to this city-like berg in the Wild West (Reeves 2005). As the population grew, industries and a unique lifestyle emerged. While the city did not receive the award of the Capital, the large mass of population and their motivation and energy helped it to grow into a city of the world. Research conducted by the University of Nebraska at Lincoln found that the key to the economy in the 20th
century was Omaha’s ability to diversify. Companies stationed in the Nebraskan city include manufacturing companies, processing plants, service industries, and industries that are agriculturally related (Reeves 2005). With a more diverse population and industry structure, Omaha’s media should reflect a large range of story types and content focuses. The news will have to appeal to a much larger population base, more like the multicultural cities on the coasts of the United States.

**Conclusion**

Nearly a quarter-century since their centennial celebration, Nebraskans continue to struggle with many of the same issues. Their society is still heavily dependent on agriculture yet is seeking a broader economic diversity through the expansion of industry. The out-migration of Nebraskans remains a concern; the fairness of the tax system is still being debated; urban residents clamor for sales and income tax relief and farmers demand property tax relief.

(Olsen and Naugle 1997: 398).

It seems that the issues that challenged the Great Plains at the time of Nebraska’s incorporation and early statehood still exist today. The news and political information that the community itself is curious about keep to the issues listed above as it did in the early decades of society in Nebraska. The press was instrumental in defining the population in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. It helped to organize and refine the culture of the state as a whole. As each of the DMA’s in question has grown and changed with the times, each society developed their own personality based on the area’s history and current economic and societal positions. The Nebraskan population seems to be in a continual eastern shift, to cities on the boarder of Iowa and beyond. As such the wide range of varying sized regions become even more important, as governments and institutions grapple to figure out new patterns of living. The news in the three
DMA’s of different population sizes, as described in Chapter 7, is still a defining element of the Nebraskan landscape. It highlights the trends and issues of the Great Plains. As shown later in the study, the local news programming in each DMA is following its people, changing as they do.

iv The Platte River runs through the center of Nebraska from the east and breaks into two in North Platte to create the North Platte River and the South Platte River.

v The two states that allow for the split of electoral votes are Nebraska and Maine (Curry 2008).

vi The percentage of the population is based on the 2010 census (United States Census 2010).

vii KFKX is now the student run station at the University of Nebraska- Hastings (Hastings College).
CHAPTER 3 – THE TELEVISION INDUSTRY

Local news in the Great Plains has a similar business structure to other television market areas across the country. The NBC stations in Nebraska are part of an industry web woven by national networks and local affiliates. Each of the stations in the DMA’s of North Platte, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, and Omaha each are under the same stress as other networks: demands from the advertisers who want content aired to produce a certain desired audiences and expectations from constituents who want material broadcast that matches their interest and values. Issues arise when these two players’ needs are different from one another. Advertisers and audiences do not always agree on the stories and content that should be broadcasted on the local news. The previous chapter of this study gave an overview was given about the audience of interest for this study. Information about the daily lives and history of constituents in the three Nebraskan market areas present the background for the analysis on news content from the perspective of the audience. But, the interests of advertisers and the role of the programmer are key too. Like the audience, these two corners of the business triangle need explanation based on their history and the structure of the television industry as a whole, from key words to ownership rules.

In order to fully understand the argument that demographic features of an audience should have a roll in determining the local news formula, it is essential to start with the basics; specifically: What is television? And, how does the industry work? An explanation of the industry’s history, an overview of the business structure, and the organization of a typical newscast will clarify the theories used to create the hypotheses of the study. Important concepts
that are presented include the nature of sweeps, the reasoning behind leads, and the preferential and formulistic nature of a full newscast.

**The Early Television Industry: The Emergence of Regulation and DMA’s**

The television industry and its regulation are based in early technological struggles that broadcasting encountered long before cable or satellite came on the scene as a competitor to broadcast news. Technically speaking, the ability to transmit a broadcast signal is determined by the use of a radio tower and an open place on a frequency. A frequency is what is commonly thought of as a channel and carries bits of information from a radio tower to the homes of constituents (McDowell 2006: 9). This information is then compiled by television sets to create a full moving picture. While the arrangement is more complicated then just explained, this basic understanding that tiny bits of information are sent over the airwaves to people’s homes is key.

Early on in the history of television, broadcasters realized that the free use and flow of information over the airwaves was not going to work. The same issues occurred similar to challenges in the radio industry earlier in the 1920’s.

… interference between broadcasters on the same wavelength became so bad at many points on the dial that the listener might suppose instead of receiving set he had a peanut roaster with assorted whistles. Indeed every human ingenuity and selfish impulse seemed to have been exerted to complicate the tangle in the ether.

(McDowell 2006: 9)
This early account of the chaos, confusion, disorder the radio frequencies became as a result of interference led to a form of regulation of the airwaves. The justification used to place laws over a media industry was based in the idea that the frequency spectrum is a scarce resource and as such requires proper management and rules (McDowell 2006: 9). Through the 1927 Radio Act and the 1934 Communications Act, a regulatory framework was established that provided the government the right to control broadcasters use of the frequencies as well as their tower height, which effects the distance a channel travels and can be picked up by television receivers (McDowell 2006: 9). Thus the federal government had the ability to license stations to local communities.

The technology behind broadcasting led to the formation of market areas, or DMA’s, which as of 2010, split the country up into 210 different regions. Since frequencies are a scarce resource, there are only so many combinations of radio tower heights and channels that can be put together before loud interference occurs. As such, there is a set amount of channels that can be used and licensed. Hence, due to the local nature of the technology (i.e. that stations broadcast from an unique location and the single travels only as far as the power the radio tower allows), radio towers could be built certain distances away from each other and broadcast over the same channels with out interference (McDowell 2006: 10). These places, where clusters of tower’s transmitting on unique frequencies were built across the country, became the local markets for news. With that, the designated market area was created (McDowell 2006: 10). While newer technology is now in place, the regulation and local nature of the television station goes back to these early days of the industry.
The Business Structure: National Networks vs. Local Stations

The broadcast television industry is broken up into national networks and local stations. The ABC’s, NBC’s, and CBS’s that most people talk about are actually the local stations that have partnership agreements to air network owned programming. National networks don’t themselves broadcast shows into the media landscape. Instead, they use locally owned stations as the carrier of their programs and messages. Affiliates, as they are called by industry members, are actually the stations that have the rights to broadcast information over the air. The early make-up of broadcasting set into motion the distinctly local nature of the current television industry. Since it was only feasible to broadcast to a set geographic region surrounding radio tours, there was no possibility for a single national station to emerge. Instead national networks began creating exactly what their name implies, a group of stations owned by the national network which runs the same programming at roughly the same time. However fears of ownership monopolies emerged, and in the 1940s, the FCC established a rule that a network could own only a limited number of stations across the country (McDowell 2006: 114). While these stations, called owned and operated or O & O’s, still exist, the importance of this law came in the backlash—the idea of affiliation.

The initial design of the agreement was a win-win situation for all involved. Roughly speaking, the local stations received free content in return for “providing national distribution for network commercials” (McDowell 2006: 116). National networks earned large sums of money from advertisers who wanted to get their message out in cities across the country. Local stations also had the opportunity to make money from local commercials, called adjacencies, which could be intermixed in certain designated spots during the commercial break (McDowell 2006: 116). While the partnerships are not permanent, rather the average duration of agreement only
lasts from three to ten years, the prestige of affiliation with a national network may mean the
difference between success and failure in the television industry (McDowell 2006: 116;
Surmanek 1996: 115). Today, local stations receive much of their daytime and primetime content
from their network affiliates. However, the production of local news remains in the hands of the
local stations.

The media landscape and the way people watch news is very different from the early
days of the industry. At the start of 2009, only 10.9% of audiences still received traditional
“over-the-air” television, whereas 89.1% watched their favorite shows through cable or satellite
subscriptions (Nielsenwire 2009). While, traditional broadcasting is less frequent in the 21st
century, the cable and satellite companies are required by law to carry the local broadcast
stations that constituents would receive if they were using “bunny ears.” This law is known as
the “must carry rule.” The Federal Communications Commission enacted the 1992 Cable Act
legislation stating that, “Under these rules, each local commercial television broadcast station
was given the option of selecting mandatory carriage ("must-carry") or retransmission consent
("may carry") for each cable system serving the same market as the commercial television
station” (Federal Communications Commission 2000). The legislation protected local stations
and content from becoming forgotten as viewers subscribed to cable and satellite for their large
assortment of programming.

The Triangular Business Structure of Television

Television is an advertising-based medium. Stations and networks produce revenue
through the sale of advertising spots in their programming (Bumstead et al. 2008: 39). Both
national and local campaigns fill the commercial breaks of local programming with creative 30-
second ads. As described in the overview of the relationship between local affiliates and national networks, the national media conglomerates provide content to local stations in return for advertising time. That being said, the local stations also have the opportunity to sell advertising spots. In order for a program to be popular with advertisers, the program must come along with an audience that they think is profitable. Essentially, television is in the business of selling audiences to advertisers along with their role of creating shows in order to gain and maintain viewership (McDowell 2006: 46). The pressure on a station to produce valuable audiences is high. As such, shows like local news have to balance the wants of each party involved. Chart 3.1 below shows this triangular business model.

**Chart 3.1**
The Triangular Business Model of Local Television

![Chart 3.1: The Triangular Business Model of Local Television](chart.png)
The triangular cycle involves three interested parties: the television studio, the advertisers, and the audience. As shown above, each member of the business model relies on the other parties for a variety of reasons. For television executives, the goal is to produce programming that will draw a large and profitable audience when sold to advertisers. Advertisers have to decide which station produces an audience best suited for their product or service. The audience’s role in the business relationship is to decide which programs to watch, which affects the ads they see. Each of the three parts is essential to the television industry, without the support of each member of the puzzle the business model would fall flat.

**Attention to Detail: The Role of Ratings and Sweeps**

With the pressure coming from both advertisers and audiences, a system developed to assess the effectiveness of a program. While there are a number of different research methods for assessing the success of a station and their programming, the Nielsen ratings are the system that the television industry considers their “gold standard” (McDowell 2006: 83). The statistics presented in the Nielsen books are called ratings. “A program’s rating is the size of an audience expressed as a percentage of the total population of the market under study” (McDowell 2006: 86). These statistics show who was watching what channel at what time; and this data is useful to both programmers and advertisers alike. Both rely on these numbers to figure out how to strategically position themselves in the market. Programmers can adjust certain elements of a show to see if a spike in viewership results. More importantly, the stations use these to create advertising rates. Advertisers want their information to reach the largest and best possible audience possible. Since ratings can be broken down across simple demographic elements, like
gender and age, marketers can use this information to strategically hit a specific niche in population.

The reliance on rating only puts more pressure on the programmer to perform. Through the numbers, a station’s success or failure is known to all involved, especially advertisers who will drop commercials if the station fails to provide the audience a product requires. The Nielsen sweeps, four times during the calendar year when ratings are collected and reported, become the intense periods for programmers to produce the best shows possible.

**The Structure of Local News**

Across the nation, local news is structured in a semi-predictable pattern. Every newscast has the element of a lead and stories broken up between commercial breaks. The standard for what Craig M. Allen called the “people’s newscast” developed during a four year period in the early 1960’s (Allen 2001: 69). “The ‘people’s newscast’ was a news broadcast that mixed news, sports and weather; was headlined by a two-person usually male-female anchor team and had weather and sports anchors in dominant supporting roles” (Allen 2001: 69). While the trend has changed in the last 50 years, the idea that the local news is a place for a mixture of both hard and soft news still exists today. Allen remarks that, when put together, “the people’s newscast was an electronic extension of a viewer’s family; its binding symbol, the smile” (Allen 2001: 69).

The formulaic nature of this sort of local news developed due to a trend of the 1960’s—the use of specialists. Pressure to perform in the Nielsen ratings led programmers to try a variety of different strategies in order to entice viewers to watch their programs. In local news, a good deal of the 22 minutes of air time was given to investigative reports and special segments that
were proven techniques to increase audience levels (Allen 2001: 225). “Because so many specialists had their hands in it, Harmon [a researcher from Texas Tech] speculated, news selection had turned into a science, one organized by forces far from the news desk” (Allen 2001: 224). In the past decade or so, decreases in budget have reduced the use of this trend to the key times in the broadcasting industry to perform—sweeps. Sometimes stories that have been successful in the past will even be used again with a few updates. “Veteran producers anguished when they kept seeing the same special reports every couple of years” (Allen 2001: 225).

However, some of the less expensive methods like the lead still exist in local news throughout the country. This short segment that comes before the opening credits announcing the anchors provides audiences with a snap shot of what is to come. When constructed effectively, this short open becomes a hook to keep audiences from the previous show and catch the attention of channel surfers. Understandably, the stories programmers feel are the most enticing to viewers will be aired in this spot.

**Conclusion**

The structure of the television industry and its reliance on the three parties of interest creates an interesting dynamic when evaluating the state of the media. Each factor in the decision making process needs to be incorporated in the analysis, since both the advertisers and the audience have a role in determining content that makes it to air. Local stations from New York to San Francisco, including those in Nebraska that are under study for the purpose of this research, are affected by the television industry’s structure and profit motivation. This chapter is the second of two background sections and thus completes the business triangle, as all parts of the local television industry have been explained with some detail. Chapter 4 is a literature review
that provides insight into the studies and research that have already been conducted on the intricate mixture of audiences, advertisers, and content. The ideas presented in each of these chapters come together to support the hypotheses that television news molds to the society it is serve due to the structure of the television industry; and, thus, population density must have an effect on the programming formulas used in each DMA.
CHAPTER 4: LITERATURE REVIEW

There seems to be some disconnect between the academic realm and the business world, especially in communication studies. Academicians conduct thousands of analyses, which examine how the news, its newscasters, and the topics presented affect a station’s constituents. On the other hand, television executives spend large amounts of money on the newest Nielsen ratings books and then pay researchers to analyze them, and then use those results to make their shows and programs more appealing to viewers. While the motivation behind the information gathering efforts may be different, one for increasing general knowledge and the other for strict profits, the processes are the same and the information discovered are inherently intertwined with one another. At times, studies in the two realms of society might even be looking at the same cause and effects.

This study relies on the practices of both realms, on the economic factors that dictate the news and at the classic communication theories that have ruled the academic arena for decades. Each element of the television business is a core part of the market structure. Audiences are valued for their “eyes” by television executives who want to sell their viewers to advertisers for a profit. As such, audiences have an ability to dictate what they desire in their programming by devoting their time to watching shows. Viewers show their disapproval of programming by switching channels, or worse, shutting off the television. As such, the conception of an active audience is relevant.

However, the business is multisided and it is necessary to consider the programming arm of the triangle. Channels want to maximize their potential for audiences by using certain tested techniques. Studies have shown that the majority of national news that makes it to air comes
from cities located on the two coasts of the United States (Dominick 1977; Brooker-Gross 1983).

As such, local newscasts become essential for the daily information required by constituents of the center land-locked portion of the United States. This study looks at the Great Plains and its local television news, assessing how this “forgotten” region in communication literature structures its news content and uses a variety of programming techniques to match its constituents.

**Television as a Business**

The first and arguably the most important part of the television industry is that the business is exactly that, a market where goods are sold to customers in a variety of ways (Hamilton 2004, 9). It is an advertisement driven media that depends on advertisers to buy space for their commercials, which in turn funds the shows that viewers tune into everyday. However, in order for this transaction to be beneficial to the marketers, a show or network must have one essential element, an attractive audience for their commercials. It is no surprise that ad price and audience size are highly correlated. The larger the audience, the more desirable the ad time will be—sparking a market based on competitive pricing (Wilbur 2008: 357; Rust and Eechambadi 1989: 11). These two-sided markets create a triangular relationship between the audience, advertisers and the network itself (Wilbur 2008: 357). The relationship between the three parties involved makes decision making for television executives complicated based on their desire to please the audience so that they return, but also draw the largest and “right” viewers to entice advertisers. These two parties may not always be the same two demographic groups.

It is questionable, and heavily debated, whether the advertisers or the audience have a greater influence on the programming that makes it on the air. Wilbur suggested that since
content most beneficial to advertisers (shows including reality and comedy that brings with them 
a very attractive audience) is aired for 47% of network program hours, while audience preference 
of news and action only account for 16% of total hours, that the advertisers have greater control 
over the television schedule (Wilbur 2008: 357). However, I argue that since the television 
business is multi-sided, like Wilbur suggested, the third leg of the tripod cannot be forgotten 
(Wilbur 2008: 357). Audience members do have a control over the television station’s schedules 
due to their ability to choose whether or not to watch.

As described in the industry overview, the time period in which the networks and their 
affiliates are measured for their ability to attract and maintain audiences are the sweeps. While 
overnight research, day-to-day assessments of the previous nights performance, do exist and 
happen frequently, it is the sweeps when the stations, especially local ones, are up for evaluation 
(Bogart 1956: 349; Consoli 2008). In 2008, Kelly Kahl, Senior Executive Vice President for 
CBS Primetime, mentioned a change of strategy in the CBS programming. “We realize sweeps 
are important to our affiliates, and we are not abandoning them,’ Kahl said. ‘But our focus has 
shifted to building assets year-round, not just for 28 days” (Consoli 2008). While the new goal 
may be to be strong throughout the entire year, Kahl mentioned the fact that affiliate stations and 
their advertisers may or may not have the budget to run overnights after every night of 
programming. As such, these local areas still need the sweeps to show their popularity and set 
advertising rates. Rocha even goes so far to say that sweeps are only for setting commercial rates 
at the local level (Rocha 2004). Even if the attention has moved year round on the local scale, the 
sweeps are still an important time of the year and will still have the strongest and most targeted 
programming during this period.
Role of Local News

The local news is different from other parts of the television industry. It is essentially focused on a locality and produced with those constituents’ interests in mind. While local stations do have control of the grand majority of their schedule, the cost benefits of using syndicated shows that are created for a national market don’t allow for specific tailoring to a community population. Local news, however, is truly an art in which the programmer, director, and producer have the ability to construct a schedule of stories that they think are important for people in their community to know about. However, that power to decide what to air does come with the same economic pressures existing in the overall news industry. It is still essential for the local news to have viewers that advertisers think are an important demographic to reach. Studies have shown, as well as research done individually by advertisers and stations, that the population of greatest interest to general advertisers is females 18-34 or 35-49 (Hamilton 2004: 71). Females in these age groups are the ones making large purchasing decisions, which makes them very valuable to advertisers looking to influence their purchasing decisions. Hence, programmers aim to produce stories that would be of interest to these populations in order to get the largest number of “best” audience members possible.

Unlike the web, where there are infinite places to relay information to others, the local news runs in 30-minute programs. That means there is only 22 minutes for stories (Rocha 2004). The stories that fit into the show need to attract the largest and best quality audience possible, as seen in the business methods of the overall industry. With interest in women 18-34 for ad purposes, there may be unequal opportunities for other segments of society to have stories of interest to them on the news (Hamilton 2004: 29). “Programs that appeal to smaller groups of readers or viewers may be less likely to be produced, since other factors being equal, a media
firm will be interested in selling larger audiences to advertisers” (Hamilton 2004: 29). Whether a
csmaller segment of the population or a less attractive demographic, the existence of a hole in
news stories appealing to the whole audience appears to the economic concerns of the advertised
based industry. As Ehrlich in 1995 stated about the use and reliance of ratings, “They do not
necessarily mean that the newscast is serving the public interest by upholding the journalistic
principles of truth-telling, acting independently, and minimizing harm” (Ehrlich 1995: 44).

The trend of catering to a specific segment of a DMA’s population is also evident on the
larger scale of national news. In the late 1970s—early 1980s, several studies were conducted on
the content of stories and their specific region of focus. Both Dominick and Brooker-Gross saw a
similar pattern developing: the northeast dominates the national news (Dominick 1977; Brooker-
Gross 1983). Out of nine geographic areas divvying up the United States, the two major coastal
areas, the Northeast and Pacific, comprised between 47.2-45.9 per cent of the news stories
broadcast to the entire country. With nearly half of the stories coming from these areas, it forces
the rest of the country to search out other outlets for information about issues and events closer
to their regions. It should be stated, however, that both studies found that the Midwest made up
between 23.2 and 18.5 per cent of the national news (Dominick 1977; Brooker-Gross 1983).

For the purposes of this study, Nebraska was a part of the Plains category that on average
totaled 0.4 to 3.2 of the national news. Attempts have been made to answer exactly why the skew
in regional content exists. Epstein in 1974 suggested that “geographic bias” is due to network
reporters and networks already established in areas like New York and Los Angeles (Whitney et
al 1989: 160). Also, many of the owned and operated stations exist in the larger metropolitan
cities on the coastal boundaries of the United States (Whitney et al 1989: 160). These areas are
centers of financial interest, technological development, and the United States federal government. Ease and the realities that news is a market driven medium, make local news even more important for the constituents of smaller, less represented geographic regions such as Nebraska.

Profit motivation also comes into play when producers craft a strategic mixture of stories. Segments of the news cost money to produce. Time, personnel, software, hardware, and talent all come together to produce a final piece. These elements are costly. As such, the trend in television is to save money by leaning towards cheaper programming (Hamilton 2004: 29). “If a programmer can attract x viewers with a low-cost program or a high-cost program, the programmer will choose the low-cost program even if the high-cost program is more highly valued by consumers” (Hamilton 2004: 29-30). This means that while a story might be of prime interest to the constituents of a DMA, the concept might not be expanded to cover all the necessary pieces of the story or it may not be investigated to its full extent due to the station’s financial constraints. An even worse outcome is that the story might not make it on the air altogether. It is in these programming decisions that the personal choices of the high-ranking personnel of a station come into play. “These owners may identify with the communities their outlets are published in and try to encourage civic participation through information provision. This is one of the ideas behind public polities that encourage local control of media outlets” (Hamilton 2004: 24). Their devotion to the public good might outweigh a possible loss in revenue. However television is a market, so that cheaper options will always be weighed and in many cases be chosen. One of these cheaper options is to buy product off of the market. News aggregation and production companies exist that sell their products, stories and segments, to news organizations to use on their daily broadcasts. Rosenstiel et al. found that in 2000 24
percent of content at local stations is from feeds (Kurpius 2003: 77). “When news outlets are deciding whether to make their own versions of a story or buy a version in the market, the large fixed costs involved in creating a story mean that news organizations will often simply buy information on the market rather than make their own versions” (Hamilton 2004: 26). The benefit of these stories is that they are already fully produced, edited, and researched thus saving a station time and money in the long run. However these stories are created for a large audience, targeting no specific demographic (Hamilton 2004: 26). Certain stories, however, lend themselves to this type of production including national events, national politics, and entertainment (Hamilton 2006: 24). These factors of audience, price, and type of story are considered when deciding which stories to outsource. Owned and operated stations have an advantage in this arena in that they don’t have to necessarily go to a third party to get their content. Since the national corporation owns them, they can get stories from their parent company and share with other owned and operated stations, thus splitting up the costs between a large number of entities.

**Audience Theories**

This study depends on the idea that viewers have the ability to choose what they watch, call it personal power or choice. Early literature on media audiences called them “a passive mass easily swayed by powerful media message[s]” (Mosco and Kaye 2000: 83). This research showed that audiences have no ability to decipher their feelings about subjects, topics, and personalities on the news. With no personal power comes the lack of decision-making, which in turn allows the media to determine what topics are important enough to be shown on air.
The idea of the passive audience gave way to the next set of theorists who perceived the audience as an active agent in media consumption. This shift gave rise to the full effects school of media influence. An important switch happens with this line of reasoning—the viewer becomes part of the decision making process about what content will make it to air. This new role, an audience who is in control of the media that helps define them, has been described as “aggregates or clusters of taste segments” or “selective media consumers” (Mosco and Kaye 2000: 85). The active agent view of audience participation in news production is the definition that will be used and relied on for this study.

In 1972, a now well-documented theory was created to clarify the roles the media and their audience play in the production of content and thought (Mosco and Kaye 2000: 85). The theory of agenda setting states that the media do not necessarily tell the audience what to think, but what to think about (Cohen 1963: 81). Specifically, the press “sets the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues” (McCombs and Shaw 1972: 2). In this theory, audiences have the ability to think about what they are presented and then act on the topics in a variety of ways. The media and its “talking heads” help to guide audiences and tell them what topics to think about, although not necessarily what feelings they should experience. While originally used in relation to politics and government stories, this idea can apply to other areas of the broadcast media.

More recently, there has been a drive to evaluate whether the media is really the agenda setter (Weaver et al. 2004: 268-269). These efforts move away from the traditional definition of agenda setting, which gives all the power to the media to decide the important issue of the day. Weaver et al. suggest that the media has to consider a range of pressures that can alter the media’s intended story, giving power to an outside source. For example, journalists have to
evaluate and decide whether a news source or interested agency is purposely bending the content of a story in their favor (Weaver et al. 2004: 268). If a story is manipulated by an outside source, the media becomes the mode of transportation for a separate thought leader, such as a lobbyist. This new agenda-setting theory puts more power in the hands of the public, who can take on these roles of spinning the news in their favor to include stories important to them.

Using the active audience definition to define today’s media viewer, the next logical step is to look at how their choices of which programs to watch are altered by personal preferences and demographics. In their 1993 study, McCarty and Schrum discussed the connection between values, demographics, and behavior in television viewing (McCarty and Schrum 1993: 77). While many of their results are not statistically significant, as a result of the possibility of confounding variables, their research shows how demographics (gender, age, income, and education) are highly correlated with viewing habits (McCarty and Schrum 1993: 91). Their finding is important for this study because advertisers want to reach the most profitable demographics for their products; so in order for a program to be watched it has to be relatable to the desired audience. While their study focused on television as a whole, not specifically local news programs, the newscasts themselves should reflect the same pattern. News formulas should be impacted by differing demographics on viewership trends, especially during sweeps when audience make-up is under the microscope.

Since advertisers desire audience members for their buying decisions, which are greatly impacted by gender and age (Wilbur 2008: 362), many of the studies never reach beyond these variables. However, Waldfogel et al. brought this research a step further, looking at how media preference changes due to the demographic skew of a city (Waldfogel et al. 2004: 258). The study focused on the racial break down of a city and how skews in various directions had large
effects on the content of local news. For example, localities with higher fractions of traditionally considered minorities will have more “substantially more black- or Hispanic- targeted programming outside of programming” (Waldfogel et al. 2004: 274). The research shows that the audience make-up of a society alters programming efforts by local stations. Content is made specifically to match the demographics of the area. While this study looks at the issue of race and its effects on television programming, it suggests that television content conforms to its viewers. Waldfogel et al. found that local programming is more susceptible to catering to local preferences than national programs (Waldfogel et al. 2004: 271). These findings suggest that population density might fall in this trend and change with the DMA under study.

**Conclusion**

This study picks up where the research on the effects of audience demographics on television consumption left off, evaluating how population density effects local news construction. The only consideration of population size in academic research, looks at its relationship with the national news sphere. While Dominick and Brooker-Gross’s research brought to light the gap in the national news coverage of the Great Plains and the Midwest as a whole, there is still much left to discover (Dominick 1977; Brooker-Gross 1983). In these areas outside the spotlight of national coverage what story types and content will be the most frequently incorporated into the news program and most popular with the viewers? Does the programming formula change to match the city of interest or will a trend of “one-fits-all” appear? Does a city’s population density play a role on local news construction? Using Nebraska as a case study provides greater insight on the role of the audience as an active participant in the construction of local news, which is emphasized when both the political arena and the television
industry are up for evaluation simultaneously. The results suggest that a revaluation of the current thinking about local news needs to be completed.

viii According to the 2010 State of the News Media published by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, the amount of news produced and broadcasted actually grew in 2010 (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism).

ix Dominick and Brooker-Gross’s study broke the country up into nine geographic regions including: New England (ME, NH, VT, MA, CT, RI), Northeast (NY, PA, NJ, DE, MD), Middle Atlantic (WV, VA, NC, SC), South (GA, FL, AL, MS, TN, KY), Midwest (OH, MI, IN, IL, WI, MN, IA, MO), Plains (ND, SD, NE, KS), Southwest (TX, OK, AR, LA), Mountain (MT, ID, WY, CO, NM, AZ, UT, NV), and Pacific (WA, OR, CA, AK, HI) (Dominick 1977; Brooker-Gross 1983).

x Whitney et al describe a geographic bias to mean “a disproportionate share of US news emanates from a handful of US cities” (Whitney et al 1989, 160).
CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the structure of the local news and the population density of the city to which it broadcasts. While hundreds of thousands of dollars have been pumped into research addressing consumers’ age and gender, there is limited information about how the size of a city changes the consumption of news; more specifically how these changes effect the programming formulas in the demographic market areas of the Great Plains. Relying on “personal choice” theories and business economics, as discussed in Chapter Four, an audience has the ability to affect the programming that makes it to air. As such, each newscast should manipulate its show structure and informational topics to match the population to which it is broadcasting. The purpose of this study is to determine if differing news structures are linked to the size of a demographic market area.

In order to investigate this relationship, the study evaluates the local news of three different-sized DMA’s in Nebraska throughout a three-month period, from October to December. The range of population densities in the three market areas include the smallest city in the western region of the state, the mid-sized state capital, and the largest municipality in the area. These markets allow examination of a variety of programming formulas and story types. The three cities of interest include North Platte (ranked 209 of 2010 DMA’s), Lincoln & Hastings-Kearney (106), and Omaha (76). Since one of the DMA’s in question is small enough to only contain one broadcast station, NBC-KNOP in North Platte, this study only looks at the NBC broadcasts in each of the other two localities. In addition to the overall purpose of the study, the consistency in affiliation allows for the opportunity to evaluate the trends in NBC affiliated station broadcasting in addition to the overall purpose of the project to assess how
population density manipulates the stories aired on television during a key period of the year for both the advertisers and broadcasters, as well as the country’s political structure.

**The Study’s Time Frame**

**Sweeps**

The choice to place the timeframe for this study during the sweep’s period recognizes the tradition and history of the television ratings system. While national networks are starting to rely more heavily on overnights, local programmers still need to demonstrate their strength and hold on audiences during these times in order to entice advertisers to spend their budget on the station’s audiences. Out of the eight minutes of commercials in every local newscast, two minutes are given to the local stations to sell (Rocha 2004). It is the four periodic sweeps in November, February, May, and July that set the prices for the upcoming quarter’s ads that fit into these two minutes of local ads. The result of the added pressure of sweeps is that every station will be broadcasting its best pieces, since all stations in competition with each other will be vying for the viewer’s eyes. Interestingly, the final quarter of the calendar year is the most popular with advertisers (McDowell 2006: 57). As such, October, November and December, the months under study, are periods in which competition is at its highest point, thus its content will be the best and most relatable to its audience.

**The November Sweeps—Midterm Elections**

During an election period, the local news programs become increasingly important as a channel for disseminating information about the issues, the politicians, and their positions in our democratic process. Hence, it is logical that broadcasters focus on the topics and legislations key
to the demographic area their material reaches. The November 2010 sweeps should be reflective of this phenomenon, focusing on the issues of greatest interest to the residents of the various DMA’s.

The State of the News Media in Q4 of 2010

The local news is a staple in demographic market areas throughout the country. The programming content itself is local in nature, produced with a specific audience in mind. “In some cases, among large-market stations, up to 50 percent of all sales revenue can be attributed to commercials airing just in local newscasts” (McDowell 2006: 24). With financial sums at stake, even in smaller stations like North Platte, the business can become very competitive as stations both within and bordering a DMA fight for the attention of viewers. The battle to fill ad spots becomes especially heightened during the all-important sweeps period. Due to its business structure and large economies of scale, down markets seem to result in less local news. “During economic hard times, when advertising budgets decline dramatically, poorly performing stations often will cut back or eliminate local news programming altogether in favor of less expensive syndicated programming” (McDowell 2006: 25). For the purpose of this study, 2010 was actually a year of positive gains in both time and money for the local news business (Pew Research Center’s Project for the Excellence in Journalism). The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism annual report states that audience decline slowed and the number of hours devoted to local news programs rose to include many non-traditional news hours, like 4:30 AM. The positive rise in local broadcasts sets the stage for this project, as a great year might have reduced the potential for budget friendly stories and possibly the sharing of syndicated stories from other stations owned by the same company. As such, the best efforts will be put
forward in an attempt to gain a large audience bases. Examples of these expensive efforts, if “in line” with my hypotheses, will have a role in the broadcast news of the November sweeps and the specific efforts will differ in content based on the DMA in question.

**Content Analysis**

As described in Chapter 3, the local news is split up into segments that contain stories. These segments are delineated by commercial breaks, allowing marketers to deliver their message to their key population. Each segment of the news contains particular elements to grab the viewer’s attention, “winning the hearts and minds of audiences” (McDowell 2006: 23). Each story is strategically put in the line up to do just that: keep the audience on a channel’s programming throughout the broadcast’s entirety and all commercial breaks. Due to this construction of the program, it seemed most effective to make the unit of analysis a story.

The materials used in the evaluation are a mixture of script rundowns and actual 30-minute footage of the newscasts. The NBC stations in North Platte, KNOP, and Lincoln & Kearney-Nebraska, KHAS, provided full scripts of the 30-minute newscasts for each day in the three weeks under study. Each of the written transcripts includes story titles, which delineates one story from the next. This aspect makes the intentions of the director clear, indicating both the order of stories and the lead-ins used to catch the audience’s attention. Due to channel constraints, WOWT in Omaha requires all transcript requests to be processed by a third party media company. Universal Information Systems was able to provide the video footage of the 30-minute newscasts. While they are not the written transcripts, the videos provide indications about the start and end of each of the stories. Every story in the newscast has a title broadcasted over the bottom line in order to provide the audience with a short synopsis of what is taking place on
the screen. A story is considered a full piece as long as the same bottom line title is running on the screen. These headlines in essence match the titles that are on the written transcripts of KNOP and KHAS. The stories range in length and can have either one or multiple journalists commenting on the happenings. While there might be more than one topic within a segment, the ability to assess the news director’s intentional beginning and ending of each topic allowed for an in-depth analysis of the order of stories, the types of stories used, as well as the content shared by the various news pieces.

With the story classified as the unit of analysis, the next step was to identify specific variables that needed to be defined in order to fully develop the procedure and method of this study. Key to the evaluation of the research question was the definitions of types of news stories and the content of those stories, as well as the reasoning behind the choice of cities included. For full variable definitions, please see Appendix A.

What is News? What is Political News?

As described above, a story is determined by using the news script and video broadcast produced by the director itself due to the inclusion of story breaks that show the intended order and topic of each segment. The length of a story can range from a fifteen second anchor plug or a full package with interviews and other visual elements, but the key remains that it can only focus on a main news element. When determining the categories of news for this project, James T. Hamilton’s topics seem to be the most comprehensive, while also being parsimonious (Hamilton 2004: 83). In All the News that is Fit to Sell, he uses the following news categories: Political Figures/Events in D.C., Local Government, Religion, Sports, International Affairs, Business/Finance, People/Events in Local Community, Crime, Health, Entertainment, Consumer
News, Science and Technology, and Culture/Arts (Hamilton 2004: 83). However, since this evaluation takes place during an election cycle, I think it is important to further clarify “Local Government” and “National Government,” splitting “region in question” into its own variable. In addition, this act allows for the clarification of all news stories, not just politically themed ones, by examining their level of focus (i.e. Global, National, State, or Local). The other category that was added was “weather,” which is a staple in any local newscast. It may also provide added information about a community, especially in a region that is dependent on agriculture.

In order to further specify and account for the differences in news schedules, another variable needs to be explained and tallied, the content within the story. Again, a set of Hamilton’s definition will be used that focus on the content of stories (Hamilton 2004: 98). Hamilton split the variable into groups, and I further condensed and generalized these into: the educational system, the economy, crime problems, the Social Security system, the Medicare system, the health care system, the environment, the homeless problem, taxes, issues of families and children, moral breakdowns in America, racial issues, gun laws, the national debt, global trade issues, and campaign finance issues (Hamilton 2004: 98). For the purpose of this project the political themes are of prime interest. Using the mixture of types and content categories gives a wide array of possible story mixtures that allows for detailed insight into the news formula at the local station level.

**Intercoder Reliability**

Due to the extensive nature of the content analysis, it was important to include multiple coders to insure the quality of the results. To assess the reliability of the coding by the three coders involved including the researcher, the Krippendorff’s alpha test was employed.
Commonly used in communication studies, the test is a bit more flexible with the minimum level of reliability for the index. For this reliability test, the level was set at .70 with the expectation that the variables would come in way above that mark. The separate sample included one week of news from KNOP, KHAS, and WOWT. After about 30 minutes of training, each person coded each one of the weeks, which included a mixture of transcripts and videos. These weeks resulted in 140 different cases to be analyzed, roughly 20% of all cases involved in the study. The outcomes of the intercoder reliability test are below in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Lead in</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>.9180</td>
<td>Political Figure/Event</td>
<td>.7925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/Event (Non Political)</td>
<td>.7143</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Financial</td>
<td>.9556</td>
<td>Consumer News</td>
<td>.8913</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.7925</td>
<td>Economy</td>
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<td>Environment</td>
<td>.7870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; Technology</td>
<td>.7925</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to the week chosen for the intercoder reliability test, many of the variables did not appear in the sample. In the full analysis, many of these variables only had one or two cases falling into them. Since the reliability of all the other variables passed the test, it was assumed that the rest of the variables would be reliable as well. Any questions that the coders had resulted in a conversation discussing the traits and definition of the variable, which finally resulted in a decision. Copies of the variable definitions and the actual coding form can be found in Appendix C. Additional information can be provided by the researcher.

**Choice of Cities**

Nebraska is at the heart of the Midwest, landlocked by Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Within its borders exist nine different DMA’s. However, the majority of the market areas stretch into other states and in some cases, like in the case of the Denver DMA, come from far away cities. Only three of the nine markets are strictly contained in Nebraska: North Platte, Lincoln & Hastings-Kearney, and Omaha. These three designated areas are in contrast with each other when it comes to population density. North Platte is the second smallest DMA in the nation, ranking 209 out of 210, and according to the 2000 census data the region only has 5.17 people per square mile (Nebraska Databook 2001). The other two are large cosmopolitan areas, but differ in importance as one is the capital of Nebraska and the other is the largest city in the area. Omaha, in contrast to North Platte, is 143.4 people per square mile; while Lincoln and Hastings-Kearney have a population density of 18.8 people per square mile (Nebraska Databook 2001). The vast differences between these Midwestern burgs create a prime area to conduct this study on the role of population density on the local broadcast news structure.
Another benefit of using these three areas is their correspondence with the electoral districts. Since 1991, Nebraska has been different than the rest of the country (except Maine) in its decision to split up the electoral votes based on geographic regions. The 2008 election showed the affect of this regional-like voting, as Barrack Obama won the district including Omaha giving him one extra electoral vote (Hendee 2011). In a traditionally red state, this one vote made huge waves in the political discussion and state Republicans even presented a bill to repeal the act in February 2011. At the time of this study, no action has been taken about this constitutional right. However, when the ability to decide national government is placed at a regional level, it allows the news to further cater to the population. The electoral districts are empowered to decide where their vote should go. The DMA’s in question in this study all fall into different electoral districts and as such have the potential to further differentiate their news structure and topics based on the issues of interest to their particular regions. The broadcasts may as such have differing national news formats due to this feature of the Nebraska government.

Time and Station of Broadcast

Due to the inclusion of North Platte, which only has one broadcast station dedicated in its DMA, it became important to select stations and times that are relatable to their programs. The NBC stations in both Lincoln & Kearny-Hastings and Omaha were chosen with the idea that the network affiliation becomes a constant. As such, it may be possible to discern on trends that seem to exist throughout all three of the NBC broadcasts. However, while station affiliation is a constant, the ownership is not. KNOP in North Platte and KHAS in Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings are both owned by the Hoak Media Company based out of Dallas, TX. Gray Television in Atlanta, GA owns the NBC affiliate in Omaha. These two large communication companies both
own local broadcasting stations in other regions of the United States. As such, there is a possibility that the stations might share material to fill the airspace cheaply, thus giving a boost to stories about events and people in the national arena.

The limitation of affiliation also has another effect, which is choosing what broadcast time to use. Since North Platte only has a 6 PM broadcast, which runs from 6:00 PM to 6:30 PM, this news half hour must be used. Fortunately, Omaha and Lincoln & Hastings-Kearney both have this early evening broadcast. Using a single time will help to evaluate the difference in news structures, as breaking news will hit the transmitters at the same time in each of the three DMA’s. Similarly, and for the same reason, the national and global stories have an equal chance of making it to the air.

**Limitations of the Study**

In order to fully understand the state of the news media in Nebraska and assess the role population density plays on the local broadcast news, a more wide spread study would have to be conducted. The broadcasts chosen to analyze the hypothesis of this study, look at a specific part of the media industry: Nebraskan 6:00 PM evening news from the NBC affiliates in the three DMA’s exclusive to the state. Since it is a case study, the information presented and the conclusions reached should be considered as findings. But since it is a case study, the implications discovered about the role population density plays on the construction of a local news programs should be used as a “jumping off point” for further research.
Conclusion

This project uses the content analysis described above to evaluate the roll of population density on local news structure. Looking at three different DMA’s in Nebraska over a three-month period provided 726 cases for the analysis to determine the state of news media in the Great Plains, as included in the Nebraska Local News Content Study (NLNCS) dataset. Separating the idea of a story into two different categories, general type of a story and specific content of a story, allowed for a in depth evaluation of the types of news programming that makes it to air in North Platte, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, and Omaha. This detailed assessment becomes particularly useful when appraising political stories. The placement of this study during an election period helps to explain how localities receive political news about their community, state, nation, and world; what issues are important to them; and how their local news includes information about other regions of interest. The subsequent chapters provide a statistical analysis of the NLNCS dataset. The findings produced suggest that the current framework that news is evaluated by, one in which the majority of stories come from the coasts of the United States, needs revamping. Local news, as shown in Chapter 6, becomes the outlet for information about events, community, and general information not normally part of the national news landscape.
CHAPTER 6: ANALYSIS

This study uses the strategies and techniques of programming local news to assess how story structures change to match the population to which they broadcast. Specifically what types of stories are included? What is their content? And, which topics show up in the lead? Each of these questions describes a different element of local news programming. When taken together, these pieces provide an overall picture about the state of local media in Nebraska. Focusing on three DMA’s of different sizes provides an additional layer to study, which allows for the analysis of how population density effects the programming formulas used on local news.

Information about current events and stories in the Great Plains, and the Midwest in general, do not appear in the national news as frequently as stories that focus on cities located in the coastal regions of the United States. As such, the local news becomes the primary television outlet for information about the local community. Even cable news doesn’t provide this regional focus. Thus, the stories should match the population to which it is broadcasting.

The content analysis of stories, which included three weeks of shows in each month of the last quarter of 2010, allowed for a statistical analysis to assess which story types and content fit each of the DMA’s, the structure of a lead, and programming during sweeps. The range in time not only produced an array in the types of stories that were aired, but included a month that is key in producing station revenue. November 2010 was a unique sweeps period that intersected with the United States midterm election. These two influential factors in programming decisions should, based on the theories presented in Chapter 4, impact the stories that made it to air—content should be the best and most valuable to audiences. These stories should not only give viewers information about the key changes to their country due to the election, but also include
content that is of the highest interest to keep audiences coming back for more. These stories provide an informative basis to analyze how the content that makes it to air changes based on the population density within a DMA.

**The Lead: What stories hook an audience?**

The first research question of the study examines the role of the lead. Leads are the stories that are used by producers to catch the eyes and minds of viewers before the program begins. These teasers are aired prior to the opening credits in the hope that audience members will “stick around” to watch the rest of the evening news. Studies suggest that more important stories are aired earlier on in the broadcast (Rust and Eechambadi 1989: 17). By nature, the lead is suppose to contain previews of the most enticing stories in order to persuade audiences to stay throughout the entire show. If stations manipulate their stories to match their constituents, the topics of the lead should change too. However, the types of stories that are proven to retain audiences should be similar throughout every DMA. The basis for this hypothesis resonates with the age-old newspaper practice of “if it bleeds, it leads.” Therefore the first hypothesis is:

\[ H_1: \text{The types of stories used in the opening segments of the local broadcasts will be consistent across the three DMA’s under study.} \]

\[ H_0: \text{The types of stories used in the lead in of local broadcasts will vary across the three DMA’s under study.} \]

An appropriate method for examining the lead formula is logistic regression. The dependent variable of this model, the “lead in,” is dichotomous and is coded as follows:
1 = Story included in the lead

0 = Story not included in the lead

Binary logistic regression designates if a case will fall into either value of the dependent variable. This model predicts if a story type is likely to be a part of the lead. It also assess if population density has an effect on the lead formula. Since DMA is a covariate with three categories, it is necessary to separate it into dummy variables. The binary logistic regression model used in this analysis is as follows:

$$\text{Lead} = \alpha + B_1(\text{Government}) + B_2(\text{North Platte}) + B_3(\text{Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings}) + B_4(\text{Crime}) + B_5(\text{Consumer News}) + B_6(\text{Families and Children})$$

The overall model Wald statistics shows that the equation above is statistically significant (p = .000). The Chi Square statistics for the omnibus model also show this same trend, that the equation for a lead is statistically significant (p = .000). The Hosmer and Lemeshow statistic is not statistically significant (p = .413), which means that the model can be trusted and that the null hypothesis can be rejected. While the pseudo $R^2$ coefficients need to be looked at with a discerning eye, the Nagelkerke $R$ Square statistic suggests that the formula helps to predict 23% of the variance. The Wald statistic, which tells the statistical significance of each variable in the equation, including both the coefficients and the statistical significance levels, are included in Table 5.1 and 5.2.
Table 5.1

Model Covariates: Statistical Significance and Coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-4.216</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer News</td>
<td>1.742</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>1.452</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMA 1 (North Platte)</td>
<td>1.255</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMA 2 (Lincoln &amp; Kearney-Hastings)</td>
<td>2.014</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gov</td>
<td>1.980</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families Children</td>
<td>.995</td>
<td>.031</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NLNCS dataset (2011)

Each of the covariates discern between being a part of the lead and not being included. There seems to be a trend that certain types of packages are more often then not a part of the lead. These stories include: Consumer News, Crime, Government, as well as Families and Children. All these stories all have the similar ability to be manipulated into a pressing issue that might draw an audience into the rest of the newscast. For example, stories about crime or consumer news can be important for the safety of constituents in the local area and hence would entice viewers to watch the rest of the newscast for updates and information about these topics. While these stories can be predicted as part of the lead, the binary logistic regression suggests that there is some variance between the stories of Omaha (the reference category) and the DMA’s of North Platte and Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings. Thus, it is possible to suggest based on the H1 model, that certain types of stories are placed in the lead to gain viewers. However the certain types of stories and their content are contingent upon the location in question. Surprisingly, region of story and sweeps are not a predictor of cases being a part of the lead of a newscast.
DMA’s: Do Programming Formulas Differ Across DMA’s?

The second research question posits the types of stories included in each designated market area under study. Specifically, do the subjects of stories change based on the location in question? And, does the size of a city matter in the construction of local news? Based on prior research, presented in Chapters Three and Four, I hypothesized that:

H₂: Story content will be different in each of the DMA’s under study.
H₀: Story content will be similar in each of the three DMA’s under study.

Previous academic inquires suggest that populations desire different content based on demographic qualities, such as gender and average age of viewers. (McCarty and Schrum 1993, Waldfogel et al. 2004) It would make sense that other characteristics of a population would follow this trend; that the size of a city will effect the programming of local news.

For this hypothesis, the dependent variable is DMA, which is a nominal level variable consisting of three categories. The evaluation of H₂ uses multinomial logistic regression to assess a covariate’s ability to predict the placement of a case (news story) into one of the three DMA’s under study. These three areas include: the North Platte DMA, the Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings DMA, and the Omaha DMA. Multinomial logistic regression analysis runs on a k-1 model (Owen 2011). This means that one of the categories in the dependent variable must become the reference category, or the baseline for comparison of the other two dependant variable options. For the purposes of this model, Omaha will become the reference category. The Omaha DMA is the largest of the market areas in question, which allows for the comparison between areas with large and small population densities. Second, Omaha, ranked 76 out 210 DMA’s, would have the
most resources to produce the greatest amount of news from all regions (local to global). Therefore, it is a good baseline of what larger and more profitable stations might decide to air.

The multinomial logistic regression models used in the analysis of the second research question are as follows:

North Platte/Omaha = a + B₁(Lead In) + B₂(Consumer News) + B₃(Crime) +
+ B₄(Non-Political) + B₅(Education) + B₆(Government)

Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings/Omaha = a + B₁(Lead In) + B₂(Consumer News) + +
B₃(Crime) + B₄(Non-Political) + B₅(Education) + B₆(Government)

The two equations compare each of the DMA’s, North Platte and Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, to Omaha to see if the covariates have good predictive abilities to discern which area in question a story is from. The method used all 726 cases included in the NLNCS dataset, breaking them up into 32 different sub-populations. In this model, 8 sub-populations (25%) only have one value observed of the dependent variable. These constants can alter the overall quality of the analysis if there are too many populations with no variance. As such, all Chi-Square computations must be evaluated with the understanding that they might be inflated.

The Likelihood Ratio Test Chi Square for the overall model system shows that it is statistically significant (p = .000). As such, it can be assumed that at least one of the coefficients included in the model is different from zero. While the Chi-Square statistic needs to be evaluated with some caution, the model receives a score of 120.36, which is a large enough statistic to trust the model. Both goodness of fit tests, including the Pearson’s Chi Square Test and the Deviance Chi Square test, suggest that the omnibus model is statistically significant at p = .000 and p =
.009 respectively. The Wald statistic provides the statistical significance of individual covariates included in the omnibus model. Their statistical significances are shown in Table 5.2 below.

Table 5.2
Likelihood Ratio Tests: Statistical Significance of Covariates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer News</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Political</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gov</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead In</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NLNCS dataset (2011)

The likelihood ratio tests for each of the individual covariates in the model allow for the rejection of the null hypothesis, since that the parameter estimates associated with a particular variable are zero.

As mentioned above, the multinomial logistic regression model uses a reference category as a baseline for comparison to the remaining categories within the dependent variable. As such the covariates have different predictive values for each of the areas under study. Covariate significance levels and regression coefficients for each of the DMA specific equations can be found in Table 5.2 and Table 5.3 below.
Table 5.3
Parameter Estimates for North Platte with Omaha as the Reference Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.562</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer News</td>
<td>-2.074</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>-.939</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Political</td>
<td>-.911</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1.187</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gov</td>
<td>-.699</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead In</td>
<td>1.214</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NLNCS dataset (2011)

Looking at the Wald statistic, all of the covariates are statistically significant \((p \leq .05)\) when comparing the North Platte DMA to the Omaha DMA. Thus, it is possible to differentiate a story’s audience using the content types above. At a basic level, the multinomial logistic regression suggests that the news does vary between North Platte and Omaha. The statistically significant intercept also suggests that the two city’s newscasts start at different points, and thus use different content in their newscasts. Individual predictors, however, vary in their incorporation into the local news. Content types including consumer news, crime, non-politically focused people/events, and government stories all are good predictors of a story that will occur in Omaha. Education packages, however, are more likely to appear in the smaller DMA. Therefore, the regression suggests that news programming does differ between North Platte and Omaha, as based on their story types. Not surprisingly, knowing that a story is included in the lead helps to discern that its placement should be in the North Platte newscast. This finding supports the model used to evaluate the first research question, which assess the nature of the lead.
Table 5.4
Parameter Estimates for Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings with Omaha the Reference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer News</td>
<td>.1.933</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>-1.166</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Political</td>
<td>-.102</td>
<td>.652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>.826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gov</td>
<td>-.739</td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead In</td>
<td>2.006</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NLNCS dataset (2011)

The relationship between Omaha and Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings is very different than the first association between the capital city and North Platte. While the overall model is statistically significant, as suggested by the omnibus tests, many of the indicators are not good at discerning between the two city’s news. The Wald statistic shows that the intercept (p = .764), non-political events (p = .652), and education stories (p = .826) are not statistically significant. Most importantly, since the intercept is not statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval, it means that Omaha and Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings have the same baseline for news stories and as such have similar newscasts in general. The four indicators that do help to predict a story’s placement are consumer news, government topics, and its inclusion in the lead. The Wald coefficient suggests that the lead covariate and the consumer news covariate have a positive relationship with the Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings dependent variable. This means that the city and surrounding areas of Lincoln have more consumer news stories than does Omaha. Ironically, the negative B value that is associated with the government variable predicts that Omaha will have a larger amount of these types of stories than its state’s capital. Crime also has an inverse relationship with Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, suggesting that Omaha focuses more on crime as one of its major story topics.
The multinomial logistic regression model used to assess the relationship between
newscasts of the three varying sized DMA’s aids in figuring out which story goes to which city. Using the six covariates in the formula allows a researcher to correctly classify 47.3% (+16%) of North Platte stories, 19.2% (+8.2%) of Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings stories, and 74.6% (+16.9%) of Omaha stories. The model is best used when attempting to predict if a story is related to Omaha or North Platte. The difference between the larger DMA’s newscasts, as suggested by the non-statistically significant intercept of that model, suggests that population density does have an effect on the news topics presented to the public audience.

**Sweeps: What Stories Make the Cut?**

The four periods throughout the television year, in which the size of an audience is more important than ever, are the sweeps. These month-long periods influence advertiser rates and tell the story of the overall success of programs and stations. Programmers will use certain tricks to gather more audience members than usual. The November 2010 sweeps, which is the included within the time frame of this study, happened to take place at the same time as the United States midterm elections. As such, the month became a mixture of politics and techniques to provide local citizens with the best and most popular information available. From this belief came the third hypothesis:

H₃: More stories during the week of November 1-5 (Sweeps) will be locally focused than nationally focused.

H₀: More stories during the week of November 1-5 (Sweeps) will be nationally focused than locally focused.
An appropriate method for examining sweeps programming is binary logistic regression. The dependent variable of this model, the “Sweeps,” is dichotomous and is coded as follows:

1 = A Story During Sweeps

0 = A Story Not During Sweeps

The binary logistic regression model used designates if the covariate is helpful in predicting a case as either a sweeps story or not a sweeps story. Since Region, a covariate of interest, contains three categories, it is necessary to separate it into dummy variables. For the purpose of this model, local stories became the reference category. The omnibus model used to evaluate the state of sweeps news is below:

\[
\text{Sweeps} = b_1 (\text{Government}) + b_2 (\text{Region-State}) + b_3 (\text{Region-Local}) + \\
+ b_4 (\text{Polls}) + b_5 (\text{Polling Places})
\]

The overall model Wald statistics shows that the equation above is statistically significant (p = .000). The Chi Square statistics for the omnibus model also show this same trend, that the equation for a lead is statistically significant (p = .000). The Hosmer and Lemeshow statistic is not statistically significant (p = .967), which means that the model can be trusted and that the null hypothesis can be rejected. While the pseudo $R^2$ coefficients are rough estimates of the variance explained, as stated in the analysis of H1, the mixture above accounts for about 1% of the variance as shown with the Nagelkerke R Square coefficient. The statistical significance of the individual covariates are told by the Wald statistic. The individual covariate’s coefficients and statistical significance are shown in Table 5.5.
Table 5.5

Wald Statistics for H₃ Covariates: Coefficients and Statistical Significance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-0.758</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gov</td>
<td>0.512</td>
<td>.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td></td>
<td>.141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region (National)</td>
<td>-0.479</td>
<td>.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region (State)</td>
<td>-0.241</td>
<td>.193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polls</td>
<td>3.004</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PollPlaces</td>
<td>2.471</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NLNCS dataset (2011)

The individual covariates tell the majority of the story for the third hypothesis. Story types, such as government stories, poll results, and experiences at polling places, are all good indicators of topics that take place during the sweeps period. This is understandable due to the congruent timing of both the sweeps and the midterm election. The third research question, looking at the relationship of stories during sweeps and the region they describe, comes into consideration when looking at the “Region” covariate. With local stories as the reference category, the Wald statistics for the individual covariates show that national stories are approaching significance (p = .076). The inverse relationship of national interests and the sweeps period suggest that more national stories take place during non-sweeps periods. While, not statistically significant, Region-State (p=.193) also has in inverse relationship with sweeps and follow the trend, suggesting that local stories are the majority of focuses at this time period.

**Conclusion**

The statistical analysis of the three research questions provided interesting information about how story types and their content change based on the factors of the lead, the DMA’s, and the sweeps period. Each of the models presented suggested statistical significant relationships.
between these variables of interest and certain story and content types. The role of the lead, as described in the binary logistic model $H_1$, suggests that the lead remains consistent throughout all the DMA’s involved and doesn’t change during the sweeps period. Issues of personal interest, like crime in the community, consumer news, and health stories, are framed with a sense of urgency and thus account for much of the lead. The DMA’s come into play when considering the role of the programming formula for the entire 22-minute newscast. The multinomial logistic regression shown in the analysis of $H_s$ suggests that local evening news in the smallest of DMA’s differs from what information is presented in the larger cities. However, this is not the case with the two cities closer in population densities, Omaha and Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings. The third research question evaluates the newscasts aired during sweeps. The most important finding from this binary logistic regression is that during November, stories became increasingly local. While this is due to a mixture of both techniques to gain audiences during sweeps and the occurrence of the 2010 midterm election, the local focus of the news follows earlier studies that show a lag in stories about the Great Plains in the national press. During these key times, audiences must resort to their local news media for information of greatest interest and impact to their lives.

Each of these findings suggests one part of the formula used in local news. When analyzed in congruency with each other, statements can be made about the overall state of local news in Nebraska. The in depth understanding of the market calls for a discussion about the state’s position in the national media landscape. Chapter Seven delves into this discussion and suggests that the role Nebraska takes in the national spotlight is rather a call for a reevaluation of the study of local news.
The analysis of the three different sized Nebraskan designated market areas (North Platte, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, and Omaha) provides insight into the societies of the Great Plains, into their news structure, and the important issues plaguing their communities. Each locality has unique interests and populations, which are interested in different topics. Before conducting the analysis, I hypothesized that local news formulas would differ across the DMA’s under study because of the distinct populations in each market area. The statistics, as shown in Chapter 6, reveal an interesting trend, that while the news formulas in Omaha and North Platte differ, the pattern of content in Omaha and Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings is very similar. With these trends in mind, how do the stories presented at the beginning of the newscast differ in order to maintain local audiences throughout the entirety of the program? While the overall newscasts show unique relationships to each other, I hypothesized that the lead of the news, the highlights of the stories to come, which are shown prior to the opening credits, would be similar within each of the markets. The age-old news mantra of “if it bleeds it leads” shows a trend in news structures that certain story topics will be more eye-catching and enticing to audiences. While the characters might differ, the types of stories, such as crime or consumer news, should stay the same no matter the DMA in question; and as shown in the analysis, they do. The last research question posed by this study called into consideration the idea of sweeps. What happens to newscasts during these four periods each year when advertising rates are set based on the size of a program’s audience? Do the trends in the full newscast formulas and in the leads still appear? November 2010 was a mixture of this key period in the television landscape and the United States midterm elections. The time frame under study allows for an analysis and comparison of
the three DMA’s and their news structure during this period of interest for both the political and business spheres. The analysis shows that there are fewer stories focused on state and national interests during the month of November then at other times during the fourth quarter of 2010. Interestingly, DMA is not a statistically significant covariate for predicting whether a story is a part of the sweeps month or not and as such, suggests that news formulas stay relatively consistent in these key periods.

There is something to be said about the use of programming formulas. Why change “tricks of the trade” that seem to work for a broad audience base? This study’s research questions and resulting analysis provides insight into news formulas and into the viewer landscape of the Great Plains. The results of this research aims to answer the following questions. How do local news programs alter their programming in areas that don’t get nationwide attention in the national news programs? Is the audience a factor in this decision? What does this mean for the health of local news? The findings of this study suggest that there needs to be a new framework in the analysis of local news of the Great Plains, as well as for the rest of the country. Research aimed at understanding news’ structure must evaluate designated market areas with the awareness that cities in the Midwest have different needs and the size of a city’s population is a good indicator of those news requirements.

**Discussion—DMA’s and Local News Programming**

In an ideal world, news should conform to its constituents, to their interests and the needs of their society. However, business interests don’t always favor the most local of information or the stories that are of utmost interest to viewers. This is due to the price of production and the time-intensive nature of information gathering. The first research question of this study asked whether
local news differ in story types and content within various designated market areas. If news is supposed to cater to its constituents, for their own good and for the benefit of increasing audience levels on the business side, then the news formulas should differ. The analysis of North Platte, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, and Omaha suggest that in this case study there is some manipulation of stories based on the location in question. The largest of the Nebraskan DMA’s and the smallest of the DMA’s varied in their baseline, showing an initial separation between news types. Consumer news, crime accounts, interest pieces on non-political people or events, and stories about government all are good predictors of a story that will occur in Omaha. While this is a broad range of stories that are more frequently in the state’s largest city, this creates some type of void in North Platte news. With fewer of these kinds of stories included in the programming formula, what takes up the rest of the 22 minutes of content? There must be story types and variations of them that are filling the gap; stories that are inherently a part of the North Platte landscape uniquely. For example, one story type that does appear more often in the smallest DMA in Nebraska is packages about education, so the variations that might appear could include agriculturally focused education, art education, lessons on local history and so on.

While there is a difference in news programs in the largest and smallest DMA’s, where there is a large variation in population densities, the local news programs in Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings and Omaha do not differ in such a way. Instead, the two cities have the same baseline for their programming formula. While the rankings are closer between these two larger demographic market areas, with only 30 DMA’s separating the two, the cities have very different business focuses. One is the largest city in Nebraska with a broad range of economic factors encouraging a growing economy. The other is a mixture of a college town, a bustling city, and the state capital. As such, it is surprising that the newscasts are similar in nature. The only
variation that this study discovered was in their use of consumer news, crime reports, and stories that involve the government in some way. Surprisingly, the indicator of local news in Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings DMA was not government stories, but rather consumer news. This story type by nature is a broad reaching and suits a very diverse audience. Its inclusion may point to the need to encompass a large area of the state, which includes both city centers and agriculturally focused communities. While most of the population of the DMA is centered in Lincoln, the news has to be appropriate for the greater region as well who relies on the nightly programs for daily information. But this reasoning needs to be taken with a “grain of salt” since advertisers would most likely want to sell their products to wealthy city inhabitants. This demographic group may in fact be very similar to Omaha, which would support the finding that Omaha and Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings news is at its baseline the same.

The similarities and differences between the three DMA’s newscasts provide an interesting argument for the role of the news formula. In cities that remain an agricultural hub, newscasts are being manipulated to encompass the audience’s interests. It seems as if newscasters in these areas don’t rely on the formulas that larger market areas have found work well with urban dwellers. The differences in news format could also be a result of fewer resources, as many of these smaller stations have “one-man band” news reporters, who write, shoot, and edit their pieces by themselves. In larger DMA’s teams are assembled to make a story into a full piece. In North Platte, there are only 10 people on the news team, supervised by one news director. In Omaha, however, there are 20 different reporters and anchors with a variety of news concentrations. I would have thought before the analysis that the smallest stations would rely on outside help from other company owned station throughout out the country and as such would mirror the newscasts of larger markets. Instead, it seems, that the similarity in news
structure comes into play when cities have similar make-ups. I would propose that the difference in local news in the smallest and the largest DMA’s is a sign that the news is still concerned with the interests and wants of the people in the viewing areas.

**Discussion—The Lead**

The changing news structure in the biggest and smallest of markets suggests that programmers do manipulate their stories to appeal to the audiences within their DMA. Even in Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings and Omaha, there is an argument that can be made that their news structures fit the needs of their constituents, the majority of whom live in similar urban areas. While these programming formulas for full newscasts seem to be altered based on the DMA in question, what about the lead, or the introduction to the news that is an attempt to get audiences hooked for the rest of the program? The analysis in Chapter 6 suggests that it is possible to differentiate between stories included in the lead based on the covariate of DMA. This suggests that each of the leads is specific to an individual locality. This is a departure from the full newscast formulas, in which North Platte is the only outlier of the three Nebraska stations.

With the finding that the lead does differ depending on which station is under review, the stories that appear more often as teasers suggest interesting ideas about what is of utmost interest to communities, and which stories seem to garner the best advertising base to stay for the remainder of the program. The analysis showed that consumer news, crime accounts, stories about government activities, and issues plaguing families and children all are positive indicators of a lead. The connection between three (consumer news, crime and government happenings) of these story types would seem to be the air of urgency. These are topics that people want to know about now. These stories could include information about a food recall, a crime spree in the
middle of the community, or an interest piece on a government leader who is pushing legislation. They are topics that citizens need the full story about in order to make a decision about how it will impact their individual lives, and as such they will want to wait to see the full story in the newscast. It is interesting, but not surprising, that a content type was a positive indicator of the lead. Any story about families, and more specifically children, will beg for more explanation. While the story could be anything from children programs at the local art museum, to schools teaching children the values of agriculture, society has a need for information and commentary about the health and livelihood of the family unit. These stories provide information about what needs to be done and is being done to strengthen the institution, if even through community events. Like the other three indicators, stories about families and children also have a type of urgency associated with them. Constituents want to know now what the latest happenings are and how their schools and communities are dealing with families and youth.

The analysis of the lead provided interesting insight into the stories that frequent this eye-catching position, but what of the story types that are not great indicators of this position in the newscast? Surprisingly, region of story and sweeps are not accurate predictors of whether a story will be included in the lead. Before running the analysis, I would have thought that stories of the utmost important to constituents of a community would be the ones that affect them the most, changes and happenings in their local culture. Instead, the analysis shows that there is a mixture of local, state, and national stories included suggesting that people are drawn to issues about different layers of national society. This comes as a surprise since the local newscasts are one of the few places that residents of the Great Plains can find out what is happening within the community.
Also of interest is that the leads do not change during the sweeps period. This finding is surprising since stations use more resources during this period to create more intricate stories with the intent that they will draw the viewers in. It would have been presumed that these packages would be highlighted in the lead in order to tell people to “stick around” for the unique and interesting piece. Since sweeps came at the same time period as the 2010-midterm elections, it makes the unchanged unaltered nature of the lead during November even more interesting. During the election cycle, it could be assumed that stories would be about the race, its candidates, and the legislation of most interest to that populace. While information about the government is a good predictor of a lead story, some sort of spike in the amount of their use would be expected. However, the analysis shows that the lead didn’t change during the month of November.

**Discussion—Sweeps**

There is a sort of disconnect between the formulas used for the newscast arrangement and the stories used for the leads. The first two research questions point to this disparity. The finding that sweeps is not a good predictor of stories in the lead, calls into question if the sweeps have any sort of effect on the news structure. Current trade literature suggests that programmers are starting to emphasize a practice of making all programming year round as enticing as it can be, rather then just during four periods a year (Consoli 2008). The finding about the lead suggests that this may be coming true in the local news of the Great Plains. While not in and of itself a precise predictor of stories fitting into the different DMA’s, this research question asks if there are certain characteristics that point to stories during this key period in the television and political landscape.
The analysis in Chapter 6, suggests that story types, such as government happenings, poll results, and experiences at polling places, are all good indicators of topics that take place during the sweeps period. These topics are all a part of the campaign and election process. As such, it is understandable that they are a part of the November news, since polls in any other time period about a government official would be a lot less frequent. While providing answers about the sweeps/election period that can be easily assumed without such analysis, the model did provide one core finding: that news during the election and during sweeps is inherently local. The method suggested that during this month, stories about the nation and the state are far less frequent than local stories.

The inclusion of a majority of locally based stories, specifically about issues highlighted in the election, provide insight into what is both the most interesting to constituents during this time period and what is profitable. Since designated market area was not a statistically significant factor in sweeps, the model suggests that the national focus stretches across the different populations of interest. The need for information about local races and politicians falls into line with the reasoning that since the Great Plains gets little national focus, local stations must make up for the gap in information. In turn, citizens will be eager to watch this type of programming because of the fact that it just doesn’t exist anywhere else. It should be noted that the desire for content about the local issues may be a construction of the midterm elections. The lack of a presidential election in 2010, may be a reason for a dearth of information about the state and national politics. State races in Nebraska are the election of senators and representatives to the United States Congress. Residents of this state may be more interested in electing their local leaders to the state congress, where the actions of these officials have the potential to have more practical effect on the constituents’ lives.
National vs. Nebraskan News Landscape: Differences in Story Content

When taken as a whole, this analysis suggests interesting findings about the state of the local news media in the Great Plains. The case study, including North Platte, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, and Omaha displays how the local news caters to the specific population of a demographic market area. There is a change across the media landscape, including the Great Plains, that programmers are manipulating its newscasts to be as interesting and as enticing as possible throughout the entire year. The stories that were once reserved for sweeps, now are shown from January to December. While stories during the November sweeps do become more local in nature, this may be due to the content needs of constituents during an election cycle that does not include the presidential election. However, the inclusion of local stories does suggest that original reporting is taking place, which means budgets are being spent and that programmers and producers see the time used to do the reporting as an important investment for long term benefits of high advertising rates.

The roles of the lead and of the programming formula each have different effects on the creation of newscasts. In this study, the combination of the two helped to provide a window into the news of the Great Plains. Each helps to manipulate the 22 minutes of airtime to strategically match the population to which it is broadcast. However, what does this mean for the content of the news? What stories make it to the air and do they match the trend with the rest of the country? Every year, the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism publishes its annual report about the state of the news media. In their 2011 report, which retroactively looks at the past year, they examine different aspects of the news media, including story patterns in national and local evening news. According to their research, the economy was the top story in
2010 (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011). The study found that, “in the final three months of the year, negotiations over the Bush-era tax cuts took center stage” (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011). So in the period under study, the economy should be a significant factor in the news formula. However, economy only showed up in 4.7% of stories broadcasted to the three Nebraskan DMA’s. Unlike the rest of the country, Nebraska’s economy is relatively well off. Viewers across the nation can relate to stories about economic hardships, however in Nebraska this may not be the case. Table 7.1 below compares the findings of the State of the News Media with the media landscape of Nebraska.
Table 7.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Types and their Impact on the Media Landscape</th>
<th>% of National Landscape</th>
<th>% of Nebraskan Landscape</th>
<th>Count in North Platte</th>
<th>Count in Lincoln</th>
<th>Count in Omaha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campaigns</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>15**</td>
<td>14**</td>
<td>18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>18**</td>
<td>7**</td>
<td>9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>8**</td>
<td>9**</td>
<td>22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>24**</td>
<td>26**</td>
<td>61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Based on Chi Square Statistics

** Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

The large difference between the topics in the national media arena and their hold in the media landscape in Nebraska is striking. Only stories about business, crime and the environment occurred more frequently in the Great Plains then in the national news cycle. While it should be taken into consideration that the national statistics are for the entire calendar year and include all media outlets across a variety of platforms, the differences in the stories cannot be brushed away. The story topics presented in the Great Plains do differ from those in the national news cycle.
The vast differences in news stories between the Great Plains and the nation as a whole is also prominent when looking specifically at the 2010 campaign. The analysis of North Platte, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, and Omaha suggested that the 2010 campaign, along with the sweeps period, produced news that was local in nature and with story types including government officials and events in general, experiences at polling locations, and poll results. Nationwide, information about the election accounted for 10% of the media landscape in 2010 (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011). In the time frame that this study analyzes, Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism find that stories about the election makes up 30% of the news broadcasted at this time. Table 7.2 shows a variety of campaign topics and their percentage hold on the news landscape both nationally and in Nebraska during the months proceeding the 2010 midterm elections.

**Table 7.2**

**Election Story Types and their Impact on the Media Landscape**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of National Landscape</th>
<th>% of Nebraskan Landscape</th>
<th>Count in North Platte</th>
<th>Count in Lincoln</th>
<th>Count in Omaha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tea Party</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polls</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>12***</td>
<td>3***</td>
<td>7***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011;\(^{31}\) NLNCS dataset (2011)

Based on Chi Square Statistics

** Statistically significant at \( p \leq .05 \)

*** Statistically significant at \( p \leq .10 \)
Like the assessment of general story types above, the comparison between campaign coverage nationally and regionally is striking. The only story content that was similar in frequency was the economy, both averaging about 5% of the news landscape during the months preceding the election. By far the most interesting finding is the role of the tea party in news programming in Nebraska. Only one story had any mention of the political movement. In addition, the mention was in the DMA that is most relatable to the coastal cities to which much of the national media focuses upon. *The State of the News Media 2011* report stated that, “During the last two months of the campaign, the tea party accounted for twice the campaign coverage (13%) as the impact of the economy and health care on the election combined” (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011).

**The Framework of Local News: Change is Needed**

The analysis of local television news in Nebraska points to a disparity in the structure that is currently in place for the analysis of the news media. The current framework that local television news is evaluated by is not appropriate for all regions and designated market areas. Instead, a new perspective needs to be put in place that differentiates cities by their population densities and locations in the country. No longer should the grandiose term of “the media” be used to describe the national news arena. DMA rankings help to point at this fact and it should be understood that each locality has interests different from each other. As such, any analysis of content needs to be done with the understanding in mind that local news caters to their unique populations. Currently, research is conducted using a framework which doesn’t consider that the majority of national news stories focus on coastal cities due to their role as influential city centers of the national government, Hollywood, the stock market, and the technology .com
revolution. While Domnick and Brooker-Gross looked at this phenomenon in 1977 and 1983 respectively, there has been little research attempted since those efforts looking at areas, which don’t receive the national spotlight (Dominick 1977; Brooker-Gross 1983). This study aims to fill that gap and suggest a new framework for the analysis of local news in the Great Plains and the country as a whole. Local news in these regions must fill the void for stories that are of interest and urgency to the populations in the Great Plains. While traditional techniques, like the lead in stay the same by teasing similar news content, the rest of the news formula should include stories about the local community.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

The need for a new framework for evaluating local news, specifically in the Midwest, opens the door for further research in this area. While it is a bit of a Utopian dream that national news will begin including more information about the Midwest, due to audience’s having higher interest in the coastal leaders of industry, it is curious whether all local television news programs becomes a supplement for what is not included in the national news. This analysis of local news in Nebraska was a case study and as such didn’t encompass as many stations of localities as it could to producer a better picture into the media landscape of the Great Plains or the nation as a whole. There are stations in the surrounding regions, stretching into Colorado, Iowa, South Dakota, and Kansas that are a mixture of the Midwestern city centers and agriculturally based societies. By broadening the study to include these areas the need for a new framework for assessing local news might become more convincing, possibly answering the question of why people are drawn to the news and for what information. It would be useful to include cities on
the coasts, including varying sized DMA’s, to see how local news these cities of industry differ from national reports.

The local news business is structured around the ability for local stations to become national network affiliates. This analysis looked at the NBC affiliates of North Platte, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, and Omaha. While providing insight into programming formulas, the addition of the other two major network players, ABC and CBS, would provide additional techniques for matching stories to their audiences. The addition would also allow for comparisons between DMA’s as well as network affiliations. This might suggest that formulas are similar due to their localities or to their relationship with national networks.

Lastly, one of the more interesting findings of this study was that political content is a good predictor of stories in Omaha. This is surprising due to the fact it is not the state capital, but rather the largest city in the area. It would be interesting to see if this trend holds steady for other state capitals in the Midwest as well as the rest of the country.

**Summary**

This study used three designated market areas in Nebraska as a case study for the Great Plains and their local news structure. Using three strategically chosen DMA’s, North Platte, Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings, and Omaha, a range of programming formulas were analyzed. Key to the research was the traits of each of the DMA’s under study. Each is a different size and has a different population density, ranging from the second smallest DMA in the country to the 76-ranked market area.

A content analysis was used to assess what types of stories and content specifics exist in the local news of Nebraska. The statistical analyses that resulted, uncovered interesting trends in
newscasts of the Great Plains. For example, the lead of local news does not differ based on the DMA in question. Rather, there seems to be tested formulas in place for what catches the audience’s attention. However, population did matter when analyzing the overall programming formula for the 22-minute newscast. A statistically significant difference between newscasts was found between North Platte and Omaha. The programs of Lincoln & Kearney-Hastings and Omaha, however, had the same baseline programming. The mixture of the two findings suggest that the largest and smallest DMA’s broadcast different information to their constituents. This study relied on the economic model of the television as the backbone of the research. The triangular relationship that the market creates empowers both advertisers and audiences to affect the content that makes it to air. As such, programmers have to decide which entity to please. The pressure to perform is the greatest during sweeps, when advertising rates are up for consideration. The evaluation of the sweeps in this study produced the finding that programming becomes increasingly local during this period. While this may be due to the congruent nature of the 2010 midterm elections, the analysis suggests that what is the most enticing to audiences during these key periods is local information.

This study suggests that a new layer in the analysis of local news needs to be implemented, that one programming formula does not fit all. Smaller stations in the heart of the Midwest and the Great Plains desire different news than the coastal cities. Information about these booming hubs of industry are already portrayed in the national news, leaving a large void in information about what use to be the “wild west.” Frameworks used to analyze the overall state of local news need to take the differing news structures into consideration to correctly portray the news media.
The election findings from Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism covers the election news hole from September 13 – November 2, 2010. Results from this analysis include all stories from the weeks understudy in October and November.
APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

Reference Sheet: Operational and Conceptual Definitions

Story #:
Conceptual: Story # ranks each story in the order they are broadcasted in each newscast.
Operational: Story # should be coded as a numerical value from 1 to the total number of stories in the broadcast

Lead in:
Conceptual: Lead in is the variable that assess if a story was included in the lead (the initial hook) of the program.
Operational: The variable is coded as the story is part of the lead (1) or the story is not a part of the lead (0).

Region:
Conceptual: Region is the region that a story is about. If a story has more than one focus, then the story should be coded for the region that a story’s headline or main focus is about.
Operational: The Region variable was coded as global (1), National (2), State (3), or Local Community (4).

Political Figures/Events:
Conceptual: The Political Figures/Events variable is the indicator of a story that is about a political event or a person with attachments to the government on any level.
Operational: If a story is about a political figure or event, the story was coded 1, and if not, it is coded 0.

People/Events (Non-Political):

Conceptual: The people or event (non-political) variable assess if a story was about a person or an event not associated with the government in any way.

Operational: The variable is coded such that if a story is about a non-political person or event it is coded 1, and if it is not, the story is coded 0.

Religion:

Conceptual: Religion addresses if a story is about a religion or is tied to a religion, specifically or in general.

Operational: Religion is coded such that a story addressing religion in some way is coded a 1; otherwise a story is coded 0.

Sports:

Conceptual: The sports variable indicates if a story is about a sports team, player, or any topic that is related to a specific sport or the playing of a sport.

Operational: Sports is coded such that a story addressing sports in some way is coded a 1; otherwise a story is coded 0.
Business/Finance:

*Conceptual:* Business/Finance is a variable that discerns between stories that involve the business world, including the stock market, the economy, purchasing power and so on.

*Operational:* Business/Finance is coded such that a story possessing Information about the business world or the market is 1; and a story that does not provide information of this sort to users is 0.

Crime:

*Conceptual:* The Crime variable addresses if a story is about a crime.

*Operational:* Crime is coded such that a 1 is a story that is about a crime and a story that doesn’t have crime elements is a 0.

Health:

*Conceptual:* Health is a variable assessing if a story involves a topic about the health field, such as a disease, a new drug, a procedure, the risks of smoking and so on.

*Operational:* Health is coded such that a story that is about topics concerning the health industry will receive a 1, and those that do not have a connection to the topic will be coded 0.

Entertainment:

*Conceptual:* Entertainment is a variable that addresses if a story is about the entertainment industry, such as Hollywood, movies, television, or stars.

*Operational:* Entertainment is coded such that 1 is a story that involves an entertainment topic and 0 is one that does not.
**Consumer News:**

*Conceptual:* Consumer News is information that is beneficial for consumers, those buying, and using products. It includes stories that citizens should know about (i.e. an area they are living in, a restaurant they eat at, a product they buy, a surgery that is popular, and so on.)

*Operational:* Consumer news is coded such that if a story provides any of the useful information above it will be given a 1, otherwise the story receives a 0.

**Science & Technology:**

*Conceptual:* The variable of Science and Technology addresses if a story’s topic is about the realms of science or technology. Topics could include: computers, the internet, cloning, a science center, and so on.

*Operational:* The Science and Technology variable is coded such that a story that contains the topics above is a 1 and stories that are not about this industry are a zero.

**Culture/Arts:**

*Conceptual:* Culture and Art is a variable that discerns for a story about culture and the arts. These could include performances, new art installments, the construction of a historical monument, and so on.

*Operational:* Culture/Arts is coded such that 1 is a story that is about culture and arts in some way and a story is a 0 when it contains no of these topics.
Weather:

_Conceptual:_ Weather is a story that involves the weather in some way, including either a weathercast or a natural disaster such as a tornado or hurricane.

_Operational:_ Weather is coded such that the existence of a weather topic makes a story a 1, the lack of these topics is coded as a zero.

Campaign:

_Conceptual:_ Campaign is a variable that addresses stories that have connections to the 2010 midterm election. Does a story involve any aspect of the campaign or election?

_Operational:_ Campaign is coded such that a story that includes information about the campaign receives a 1; and one that does not is coded as a 0.

Educational System:

_Conceptual:_ Educational System is a variable that discerns between stories that involve the school systems (problems, experiences, and so on) and those that do not.

_Operational:_ Educational System is coded such that a story with information about the educational system is a 1 and stories that aren’t about an educational story is coded a 0.

Economy:

_Conceptual:_ Economy is a story that involves information about the state of the economy. It can be at any regional level.

_Operational:_ Economy is coded as a dichotomy so that stories containing information about the economy is coded as a 1 and one that is not is coded as a 0.
Crime Problems:

*Conceptual:* Crime Problem is a variable that addresses if a story is about the issue of crime, such that it is a trend that is developing or a long established problem within an area.

*Operational:* Crime Problem is coded such that stories with a focus on the crime issues of an area are 1 and those with out this topic are a 0.

Social Security System:

*Conceptual:* Social Security System is a variable that recognizes if a story involves the social security system.

*Operational:* Social Security System is coded such that a story that involves the government system is a 1, and a story without information about the social security system is a 0.

Medicare System:

*Conceptual:* Medicare is a story that includes information about the government’s Medicare system.

*Operational:* Medicare system is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about the Medicare system and a 0 is a story that does not.

Health Care System:

*Conceptual:* Health Care System is a story that includes information about the government’s Health Care system.

*Operational:* Health Care system is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about the Health Care system and a 0 is a story that does not.
Environment:

Conceptual: Environment is a story that includes information about the environment. This could include topics such as water, land, pesticides, and so on.

Operational: Environment is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about the environment and a 0 is a story that does not.

Homeless Problem:

Conceptual: Homeless Problem is a variable that addresses if a story that includes information about an area’s homeless problem.

Operational: Homeless Problem is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about a homeless problem and a 0 is a story that does not.

Taxes:

Conceptual: Taxes discerns if a story includes information about taxes.

Operational: Taxes is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about taxes and a 0 is a story that does not.

Issues of Families and Children:

Conceptual: Issues of Families and Children is a variable that addresses if a story includes information about the lives and happenings of families and children. It also addresses issues that have an effect on the livelihood of these groups.

Operational: Issues of Families and Children is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information concerning families and children; and a 0 is a story that does not.
Moral Breakdown:

*Conceptual:* Moral Breakdown is a variable that addresses a story that includes information about the moral breakdown of an area. It includes any story that has ties to moral issues.

*Operational:* Moral Breakdown is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about moral issues and a 0 is a story that does not.

Racial Issues:

*Conceptual:* Racial Issues is a variable that discerns if a story includes information about issues of race and ethnicity.

*Operational:* Racial Issues is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about issues of race and a 0 is a story that does not.

Gun Laws:

*Conceptual:* Health Care System is a story that includes information about the government’s Health Care system.

*Operational:* Health Care system is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about the Health Care system and a 0 is a story that does not.

Debt:

*Conceptual:* Debt is a variable that addresses stories that include information about a government’s debt, either nationally or regionally.

*Operational:* Debt is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about debt and a 0 is a story that does not.
**Trade Issues:** Is the story about trade issues? 1=Yes,

*Conceptual:* Trade Issues is any story that includes information about trade issues between states or nations.

*Operational:* Trade Issues is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about trade issues and a 0 is a story that does not.

**Polls:**

*Conceptual:* Polls is a variable that discerns if a story includes information about the polls of the midterm election (i.e. trying to predict who/what will win).

*Operational:* Polls is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about the election polls and a 0 is a story that does not.

**Budget:**

*Conceptual:* Budget is a story that includes information about a government’s budget.

*Operational:* Budget is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about a government’s budget and a 0 is a story that does not.

**Tea Party:**

*Conceptual:* Tea Party is a variable that addresses if a story includes information about the Tea Party. The Tea Party became a hot topic in 2010 for their views and organizing abilities.

*Operational:* Tea Party is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about the Tea Party and a 0 is a story that does not.
Anti-Obama Administration:

*Conceptual:* Anti-Obama Administration is a variable that discerns whether a story includes information that is against the Obama administration in either their policy or the presidency itself.

*Operational:* Anti-Obama Administration is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information that disagrees with the ways of the Obama administration and a 0 is a story that does not.

New Media:

*Conceptual:* New Media is a story that includes information about new media, including Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, and others of this sort.

*Operational:* New Media is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about New Media and a 0 is a story that does not.

Youth Vote:

*Conceptual:* Youth Vote is a story that includes information about the youth vote in the 2010 midterm election.

*Operational:* Youth Vote is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about the youth vote and a 0 is a story that does not.
Polling Places:

*Conceptual:* Polling Places is a story that includes information about polling places in the 2010 midterm election. This can include stories about experiences at these places, basic information about where and how to get there, and problems encountered.

*Operational:* Polling Places is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about polling places and a 0 is a story that does not.

Enthusiasm Events:

*Conceptual:* Enthusiasm Events is a story that includes information about an enthusiasm event in support of a candidate or an issue on the 2010 midterm election.

*Operational:* Enthusiasm Events is a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes information about an enthusiasm event and 0 if there is not information of the sort.

Campaign Finance:

*Conceptual:* Profiles of Supporters is a story that includes information about a supporter of a certain candidate or issue in the 2010 midterm election.

*Operational:* Profiles of Supporters is a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes a profile about a supporter of a candidate and 0 if there is not information of the sort.

Profiles of Supporters:

*Conceptual:* Profiles of Supporters is a story that includes information about a supporter of a certain candidate or issue in the 2010 midterm election.
Operational: Profiles of Supporters is a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes a profile about a supporter of a candidate and 0 if there is not information of the sort.

Weather of the Campaign:

Conceptual: Weather of the Campaign is a story that includes information the state of the campaign and whether it is more negative or positive in general. This is not a variable that looks at whether the story is positive or negative.

Operational: Weather of the Campaign is a dichotomy such that 1 is a story that includes a statement about the weather of the campaign and 0 if there is not information of the sort.

Voter Fraud:

Conceptual: Voter Fraud is a variable that discerns if a story includes information about voter fraud in the 2010 midterm election or not.

Operational: Voter Fraud is coded as a dichotomy such that 1 is the presence of voter fraud information and 0 is the lack of this information.
## Frequency of Variables

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