

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN NEW JERSEY'S 2005 AND 2009
GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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During the first decade of the 21st Century, two developments affected the manner in which New Jersey residents obtained news and information about their state. The size of newsroom staffs at the newspapers covering the state was reduced substantially through buyouts, layoffs, cutbacks and consolidations, and the growth of the Internet altered the manner in which news was gathered, reported and disseminated, placing new demands on depleted news staffs. Although neither development was unique to New Jersey, there is a value in exploring their effects on the Garden State because of the role the media play in ensuring a healthy democracy, namely keeping citizens informed and serving as a watchdog over government and other powerful entities. If the media's ability to fulfill this responsibility is compromised, there could be significant consequences.

A content analysis of the coverage of New Jersey's 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial elections, coupled with three sets of interviews with individuals involved in both campaigns, showed that the quality of news coverage declined during this four-year period. Stories were reported in less depth, with less context and with more emphasis on personalities and horserace issues than on substantive public policy matters. The reasons for the decrease in the quality of the reporting were directly related to the staff reductions and growth of the Internet. Individuals involved with the two elections indicated that the New Jersey media's ability to ensure a healthy democracy declined between 2005 and 2009, leaving citizens less informed and government less accountable.

DEDICATION

During the course of my doctoral studies, I was fortunate to have the support of a large extended family and a dedicated group of my dearest and closest friends. Among those who showed the greatest interest in my work was my cousin Mary Rose (Sudano) Cassidy. Her enthusiasm for my research and writing was a constant source of encouragement to complete the long journey on which I had embarked. She approached all aspects of her life the same way, whether she was at work teaching grade school in New York City, at home conversing with her husband and children, or out and about enjoying a concert. She loved to talk with people – and was always interested in what they had to say. She often was the last one to leave a party, enjoying a cup of tea with her hosts long after the others had gone home. She laughed easily, even at herself.

Like so many others, Mary Rose battled cancer during her lifetime. She survived breast cancer, but ultimately lost her battle with ovarian cancer and passed away in March of 2009. During her final days, I struggled to find the words to send her a message. I had earned my living as a writer for more than 30 years. I had written book chapters, speeches for governors, op-ed articles for *The New York Times* and hundreds of news and feature stories. Yet, when the task was to write the last words a loved one would ever read from me, the challenge was indeed a daunting one. Eventually, I found the words and sent Mary Rose my letter by FedEx in the hope it would arrive before she completed her own journey.

I was glad to learn that, yes, she did receive my message and found some comfort in my words. For the most part, the contents of that letter will remain private, but I did promise that, when I completed my doctorate, I would dedicate my dissertation to her. In

her dying moments, Mary Rose provided one final piece of encouragement to me. Having found the right words to write to a dying loved one, I was confident I also could find the right words to complete a doctoral dissertation.

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As the author of this dissertation, I am deeply grateful to a large group of family, friends and colleagues who not only contributed to this project, but also have been critical to my success in the doctoral program at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University.

At the top of this list is my wife Anne, a talented journalist who has edited my writing since we worked together on our college newspaper in the 1970s. Anne's brilliance as an editor is surpassed only by the love and support she provides every day as my soul mate in life.

The list also includes numerous individuals with whom I worked during my years in journalism, government and politics in New Jersey. Many of their names appear in the pages that follow since they were kind enough to take time from their demanding schedules to share their thoughts and insight on the questions I raised in my research.

In addition, I was honored to work with the four exceptional individuals who comprised my dissertation committee. I have great admiration for my chair, Montague Kern, and the other committee members - David Greenberg, John Pavlik and Brigid Harrison. I thank each of them for their support and guidance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

At the start of the 21st Century, New Jersey journalism stands at a pivotal juncture. As has been the case nationally, economic factors have reduced resources and personnel, making it difficult for professional news organizations to produce quality news stories. At the same time, the growth of the Internet and social networks have radically changed the manner in which news is gathered, reported and disseminated, placing increased demands and responsibilities on journalists and news organizations.

The economic woes the industry is experiencing in New Jersey are part of national trends that can be traced back to the 1990s when the drive to turn a profit became a higher priority for media companies and their corporate owners. To produce news at the lowest possible cost, news entities were merged, consolidated or eliminated, resulting in reductions of resources and personnel. Between 1992 and 2009, the number of newspaper journalist jobs dropped from 60,000 to 40,000 (Bennett, 2012). Through mergers and acquisitions, a few large conglomerates now own about 90 percent of the nation's news companies. "A century ago, 689 cities in the United States had competing daily newspapers; by 2008, only 15 did, and today that number has fallen to 11," Sam Schulhofer-Wohl and Miguel Garrido wrote in a 2009 study on the effects of newspaper closings.

Major news magazines such as *Time* have explored the impact of newspaper closings. When *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* ceased publishing its print edition and became the first major U.S. daily to become a solely online publication, it made national headlines, as did legislation introduced by a U.S. senator to allow newspapers to restructure as nonprofits and take advantage of a variety of tax breaks. Popular comedy

shows such as *The Colbert Report* and *Saturday Night Live* have done segments on the state of the industry. Even President Obama acknowledged the issue in humorous remarks at the 2009 White House Correspondents Club dinner and in a more somber tone at a memorial service for retired CBS anchor Walter Cronkite.

In the past few years, several metropolitan dailies have gone out of business. Many others have merged, reduced the number of days of the week on which they publish, and/or made substantial staff cuts to survive (Gillin). “America’s newspapers got smaller in just about every way,” the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) concluded in its *2009 State of the Media Report*. “One estimate shows 5,900 full-time newsroom jobs were cut, or about 11%, in 2008. By the end of 2009, the newsrooms of American daily newspapers may employ roughly 25 percent fewer people than in 2001 – and the losses are higher at big-city metros.”

There are numerous reasons for the fiscal problems the newspaper industry is experiencing. Even before the advent of the Internet, the print media were losing parts of their audiences to radio and television, which provide news stories that are more current and obtained with less effort than reading a newspaper or magazine. In the 21st century, as Eric Alterman indicated in a 2008 *New Yorker* piece, news is even more readily available online and more up-to-date. Perhaps, more importantly, even with the limited emergence of paywalls, almost all of the news that costs consumers money (albeit nominal sums) in print newspapers is available for free online – and usually there is more of it since there are no constraints on space. According to PEJ’s *2009 State of the Media Report*:

People are relying more heavily – both during peak moments and in general – on platforms that can deliver news when audiences want it rather than at appointed times, a sign of a growing ‘on demand’ news culture. People increasingly want the news they want when they want it.

Given the barebones state of the industry, downturns in the economy during the first decade of the 21st Century exacerbated the problem. “The recession has intensified these difficulties, plunging newspapers into a tailspin from which some may not recover and others will emerge only as a shadow of their former selves. The devastation is already substantial,” Princeton University Professor Paul Starr wrote about the state of the industry in a March 2009 *New Republic* article. The rise of the Internet during this period also reduced the media industry’s profits by cutting into advertising revenue, which supports the industry’s news operations. “When the Internet suddenly offered cheaper and more precise means of targeting ads to audiences, both advertisers and audiences began to drift away from traditional media formats, leaving news itself as an odd piece out of the media picture,” W. Lance Bennett explained in his book, *News: The Politics of Illusion*.

The Internet also reshaped the news side of the business. The technology has made it possible to share information instantaneously and around the clock. It also has provided audiences with a myriad of choices for the types of information they receive. Even more significant than its speed and countless information options, the Internet has altered the traditional model of how news flows from newsmakers to the public. For years, the news media – be they print, radio, television or even the early days on the Internet – were necessary intermediaries that gathered information and packaged it in

formats that could be delivered – in print, over the airwaves or online – to the public. Now citizens take a more pro-active role in selecting – from an unprecedented number of sources – the news and information they want, as well as from whom to obtain it. The Internet also has given newsmakers the ability to bypass the scrutiny of the news media and provide information directly to the public. In addition, the popularity of social networks has made it possible for individuals to easily and quickly share information. Against this backdrop, a number of online news entities such as *Politico*, the *Drudge Report* and the *Huffington Post* have become popular and influential.

These national developments in the industry are being mirrored in New Jersey and in states across the nation. New Jersey's news organizations have experienced significant cutbacks over the past 25 years, making it increasingly difficult to produce quality news coverage. Meanwhile, the Internet has become a popular source for news and information about the Garden State.

The state had 33 daily newspapers in 1970, most of them independently owned (New Jersey Media Watch, 1998). Today, there are 18, and 12 of them are owned by two of the nation's largest chains – the Gannett Company and Advance Publications (Fitzgerald's Legislative Manual, 2009). The impact of these changes has been especially great because newspapers play a somewhat unique role in New Jersey. Since the state has no major television stations, New Jerseyans turn to the print media for news and information about their state at a higher rate than the national average.

Total daily circulation for New Jersey's 18 daily newspapers dropped by 36 percent between 1993 and 1999, and then fell another 26 percent over the next 10 years. The decline was slightly higher – 37 percent and 28 percent– for Sunday circulation. Not

surprisingly, the decreases in circulation were accompanied by large reductions in newsroom staffs. None was more significant than the reduction that took place at *The Star-Ledger*, the state's largest newspaper, in 2008. The paper decreased its newsroom staff by 45 percent when 151 of its 334 newsroom employees agreed to accept buyout offers. Elsewhere, Gannett, which owns six New Jersey dailies, eliminated 469 jobs in 2008 and 2009, although not all of the positions were in newsrooms. At *The Record* (commonly known as *The Bergen Record* or *The Record of Hackensack*), the total number of newsroom jobs dropped by 54 in 2008, from 274 to 220. *The Times of Trenton* reduced its newsroom staff from approximately 90 to 30 between 2007 and 2009. The paper, located in the state capital, also closed its State House Bureau. Gannett cut its State House staff from six to two. *The Star-Ledger* and *The Record*, even though they are competing newspapers, merged their State House bureaus in 2009. In addition, *The New York Times* closed its New Jersey State House bureau and sharply curtailed its coverage of the Garden State in 2008, wrote Scott Weingart in "Less News is Bad News: The Media Crisis and New Jersey's News Deficit," a 2009 report for New Jersey Policy Perspective.

These reductions in the number of reporters assigned to cover state government came after the size of the State House press corps already had dropped dramatically. "Press Row (in 1979) was home to more than 45 full-time reporters from 24 daily newspapers and wire services owned by 22 different media companies, and every newspaper would write its own localized story on the major issue of the day because just about every newspaper had real competition in its principal market," Mark J. Magyar wrote in the January 2004 issue of *New Jersey Reporter*. At the time the issue was

published, Magyar said newspaper closings, acquisitions and mergers had reduced the State House press corps to 10 newspapers and wire service bureaus, some of which were not staffed on a full-time basis.

In a January 2009 *New Jersey Monthly* article, Joe Strupp wrote:

Many in the business – especially those whose jobs have evaporated – question whether these decimated newspapers can continue to fill the Garden State’s information needs. For the skeptics, it just does not add up. How, they ask, can fewer people cover the ongoing scuffles in state and local government at a time of increasing economic pressures and growing concerns about education, health care, and many other crucial issues?

Strupp’s question aside, in terms of technology, New Jersey’s experience is typical of national trends. The Internet has become a significant source for news in the Garden State. In polls conducted by the Monmouth University Polling Institute during the state’s 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial elections, the percentage of individuals who preferred the Internet as a source for news about the state rose from 6 percent in 2005 to 19 percent in 2009. The figure increased to 28 percent in a 2013 Monmouth poll. Two New Jersey Press Association surveys showed similar patterns. The association’s 2006 survey showed the Internet to be the preferred news source of just 8 percent of the respondents. The newspaper association’s 2009 study was designed to illustrate the benefits of advertising on the websites of New Jersey newspapers. Although the study did not contain comparable figures for audience preferences, the results did show that New Jerseyans are “tech savvy” and visit newspaper websites frequently. In addition, the NJPA’s decision to conduct a marketing study that highlighted the popularity of New

Jersey newspaper websites suggested a significant increase in the use of the Internet as a source for news and information in the Garden State.

Although newspaper (and radio and television) websites provide online options for news about the state, several news entities with no affiliation with existing news organizations have emerged online and in other formats. Perhaps the most significant is *PolitickerNJ* (formerly *PoliticsNJ*), an inside politics site started in 2000. According to its media kit, *PolitickerNJ* attracts more than 100,000 unique visitors each day, and as a sign of its influence, over a third of its readers visit the site before 10 a.m. *Politifax*, another inside politics publication, is distributed weekly as a four-page pdf file (and still in fax form to subscribers who prefer its original format). *Politifax* has been in operation since 1997 and is widely read by elected officials, journalists, pundits, lobbyists, consultants and other decision makers. (The publication does not disclose its circulation total.) subscribers. *NewJerseyNewsroom*, an online news sites started by longtime *Star-Ledger* employees who accepted buyouts in 2008, attracts 250,000 unique visitors each month. Hyperlocal news sites, which provide extensive online coverage of individual communities, have grown in popularity. *The Alternative Press*, a hyperlocal started in 2008 by attorney Michael Shapiro, has expanded to cover 16 towns. Shapiro has begun licensing the site to individuals to start their own hyperlocals, using his operation as a business model.

At the State House, while most news organizations are downsizing, Bloomberg News has expanded and is filling the gap with a new type of reporting. “According to Stacie Sherman, Bloomberg’s Trenton bureau chief:

I think our place in the media landscape has gotten more important over the past few years, as other news organizations have closed or fired workers. We've expanded our State House bureaus, seeing an area that wasn't being covered intensely by other organizations, one that should be covered as intensely as stocks and bonds. Governments – who represents us, how they spend their money, how they raise their money, what their priorities are – are a huge focus for Bloomberg (personal communication).

NJ Spotlight, a grant-supported online news service, has been experiencing success since its inception in 2010. “We try to complement what others are covering; we don’t try to replace it,” explained John Mooney, a veteran *Star-Ledger* reporter who started the site after accepting a buyout offer and leaving the paper. The site, which provides insight and analysis on state issues, attracts about 100,000 unique visitors per month. “The credo I use is rather than cover what’s happening today, either cover what got us here or where we’re going,” Mooney said. “Either look back or look forward. Those are things we can do.”

Another innovative journalism effort is under way at Montclair State University, which has established a Center for Cooperative Media at its School of Media and Communication. The center provides office space and production facilities for New Jersey news outlets, among them *NJTV Public Media New Jersey*, *New Jersey Public Radio*, *NJ Spotlight* and the North Jersey Media group, which includes *The Record* (Schaffer).

Clearly, New Jersey is an appropriate place to study the past, present and future of American journalism. “In a microcosm, the daily and community newspapers in the

Garden State present a wonderful opportunity to examine in vivid detail the rich history, the past challenges and the future transformations confronting the newspaper industry both in New Jersey and throughout the United States,” Jerome Aumente, a Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University, wrote in *From Ink on Paper to the Internet*, a book chronicling the history of New Jersey newspapers. Referring to Starr’s 2009 *New Republic* article, Mark Lisheron observed in “Reloading at the Statehouse,” a September 2010 *American Journalism Review* article, that “New Jersey is just a more extreme version of almost every other state in the union.”

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Why does it matter that economic conditions and the growth of the Internet have affected the manner in which news organizations operate in New Jersey and elsewhere? The answer is it is important because news media play an important role in democratic societies. News organizations keep citizens informed and serve as watchdogs over government and other powerful entities. Their ability to perform these functions is critical to a healthy democracy. Therefore, it is important to learn how the changes brought about by the economy and the Internet have affected the media's role in the health of our democracy. Have they strengthened or weakened the news media's ability to fulfill their important responsibilities?

Relationship between Media and Democracy

Concern about the future of the industry is not surprising. Newspapers have been an important part of American life since James Franklin first published the *New England Courant* in 1721. Over nearly four centuries, American newspapers have chronicled wars, natural disasters and historic elections, as well as items of lesser significance that nevertheless are of great interest to readers – baseball scores, theater reviews and comic strips. “Newspaper reading ... is a morning routine for some Americans – the almost unthinking walk to the door to retrieve the paper, followed by the almost unthinking opening of the paper to the preferred section,” Thomas Patterson wrote in a report for the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy (2007, p. 22).

Indeed, when the idea of democracy developed thousands of years ago in ancient Greece, philosophers thought a democratic system would not endure with more than 30,000 people because that was the number of people who could climb on a hill in

Athens to see and hear one speaker at a time (Swerdlow, 1988). Americans live today in a democracy of more than 300 million people. It is not perfect, but it has endured. And among the many reasons for democracy's survival in America and other democratic nations are the media, which keep citizens informed by providing news and information through newspapers, radio, television and the Internet – none of which were available in ancient Greece when people gathered on hills to obtain information.

Over the years, with each successive advance in technology, it became possible not only to reach more and more people, but also to reach them more quickly. James Carey (1989), a communications theorist, media critic and journalism professor, wrote that the telegraph was able to collapse the constraints of time and space by allowing people from one side of the world to communicate almost instantaneously with someone on the other side of the world. What Carey articulated about the telegraph is applicable to other technological advances such as radio, television and the Internet. Telegraph communication was primitive by today's standards, but it marked a revolutionary change in how people communicated across distances and over time. This revolutionary change became greater with radio and television and now has reached remarkable levels with the advent and proliferation of the Internet. Although technology has changed significantly, the value of the news media in a democratic society has remained relatively constant – to ensure an informed citizenry.

The media, as Walter Lippmann explained in *Public Opinion* (1922), serve as links between decision-makers and citizenry. Journalists obtain information from the leaders of a democracy and provide it to citizens so they can make informed decisions. John Dewey, in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), argued that the media's role was not

simply to provide the citizenry with information, but to also help them to better comprehend the news and information they were receiving. “‘News’ signifies something which has just happened, and which is new just because it deviates from the old and regular,” he wrote, “but its meaning depends upon relation to what it imports, to what its social consequences are” (pp. 179-180).

Dewey’s theory remains popular among media scholars. An informed citizenry is an essential component of successful self-government systems, Robert McChesney, an author and communication professor, observed in *The Problem of the Media* (2004). This is why it is important to identify the impact of the economic and technological changes have had on the industry. If as a result of these changes, the news media are failing to fulfill their responsibility to keep citizens informed and serve as a watchdog over government and other powerful entities, democracy may become flawed and fail to operate effectively.

At the same time, however, it is important to keep in mind that media are not the public’s sole source of information. Voters do not absorb information as if it were injected into their brains with hypodermic needles, as scholars at the Frankfurt School theorized during the first half of the 20th Century. According to political scientist Samuel Popkin, the information people use to decide how to vote is obtained as byproducts of their daily activities. In his 1994 book *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*, Popkin wrote that voters have little incentive to proactively seek the information they need. Instead, they obtain it as byproducts of their daily activities. They do not need the media to learn that unemployment, crime and health care are issues that must be addressed because they are likely to deal with these issues

personally. What citizens do need the media for is tell them what government is doing about these issues. The five authors of *Crosstalk* (1996) viewed the information-gathering process more as a set of interactions among citizens, candidates and the media.

“Candidates can give speeches, broadcast advertisements, and stage media events that can give journalists something to cover and can provide citizens with insights into the candidates’ persons, priorities, issue stances, and future promise,” *Crosstalk* authors Marion Just, Ann Crigler, Dean Alger, Timothy Cook and Montague Kern wrote. (pp. 2-3).

The Drive for Profit and the Rise of the Internet

Although the economic downturn that began near the turn of the century led to large numbers of layoffs and cutbacks at news organizations, the industry’s need to turn a profit had been weakening its ability to provide quality news for more than 25 years. Media scholars cite consolidation – a process that maximizes corporate profits – as a major cause for the news industry’s failure to fulfill its democratic role. In *Leaving Readers Behind* (2001), veteran journalist Gene Roberts wrote:

In the newspaper industry, consolidation – in tandem with the chains’ desperation to maintain unrealistic profit levels (most of these big companies now being publicly traded) – is actually reducing the amount of real news being gathered and disseminated, most conspicuously at the local and state levels where consumers need it most. This is because consolidation has resulted in far fewer news outlets, and the economic pressures have resulted in fewer reporters with fewer inches in the paper to say anything.” (p. 6)

A handful of large transnational conglomerates now own the majority of the companies providing news in the United States. Because these conglomerates operate several types of businesses besides news outlets, the production of quality news is not their sole priority. In fact, news operations often become low priorities because they generate far less revenue than other businesses owned by their parent companies. For example, from a strictly business perspective, a corporation such as the Walt Disney Company has more incentive to allocate funds and resources to its movies and theme parks than to the news operations at ABC, which it owns. A movie such as *The Lion King*, which was released in 1994, has been making money for Disney for nearly 20 years through VHS, DVD and Blu-ray sales, sequels, soundtrack recordings, theme park attractions, games, stuffed animals and more. A nightly newscast on ABC has a much shorter shelf-life and generates far less revenue. “Media fare is ever more closely linked to the needs and concerns of a handful of enormous and powerful corporations, with annual revenues approaching the GDP of a small nation,” McChesney wrote in *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (1999, pp. 29-30).

Consolidation also leads to homogenization of the news. When an event takes place, the same news story is likely to appear in all of the news entities a corporation owns. In the past, each of those news entities might have published its own individual report tailored toward its readers, providing them with the information that is most important to their daily lives. In New Jersey for example, when the state passes its budget, the same budget story will appear in all six of the Gannett papers. It will be a broad, general story about the budget that will contain all of the relevant facts and figures: total revenue and expenditures, how they compare with last year’s numbers, tax

rates, etc. However, it will not contain specific information of interest and importance to the readers of those six individual newspapers – nothing about funding for Shore protection in *The Asbury Park Press*, or urban renewal in *The Courier-Post*, or cuts to higher education in *The Home News Tribune*.

Some scholars such as journalist and author Ben Bagdikian (2004) contend that – largely due to the focus on maximizing profits – the U.S. media industry is not meeting its responsibility to inform the public. In “A Propaganda Model,” a chapter in the 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent*, economist and media analyst Edward Herman and political critic and activist Noam Chomsky argue that the news passes through filters – all of which have a negative impact on its quality and balance – before it reaches the public. The filters are related to economic factors: The need to produce news as inexpensively as possible results in an over-reliance on government. In addition, to attract advertisers with buying power, news content is geared toward an affluent demographic; reporting on issues for working-class citizens is minimal at best.

Another potential problem for democracy that could result from the media industry’s focus on profit is that a weaker press could result in citizens feeling disconnected from government. As sociologist Leo Bogart warned in *Press and Public* (1989, p. 2): “Perhaps the greatest danger to a democratic system is the public’s feeling that things are beyond control, that the individual is powerless to affect the march of history.” News organizations, Bogart added, have a “unique ability” to “connect the individual with the world,” but in *Democracy and the News* (2003), sociologist Herbert Gans (2003) argued that the connection is not being made. Citizens view journalists as “outsiders” who report on “the world of money and power” (p. 84), Gans wrote. As long

ago as 1927, Walter Lippmann observed in *The Phantom Public*, the average citizen is much like a deaf spectator sitting in the back row of a sporting event: “He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen; he lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct” (p. 3).

Qualitative Research in Journalism (2004), a collection of essays compiled by Sharon Hartin Iorio, dean of the Wichita State University’s College of Education, includes two relevant examples of the disconnect between journalists and their audiences. In one case, *The San Francisco Examiner* asked Max Kirkeberg, an urban geographer at San Francisco State University, to provide insight about demographic changes in the city. Kirkeberg took a group of *Examiner* journalists to neighborhoods they had not visited and learned that they were unaware of major changes taking in place in the business structure and ethnic makeup of the areas. In the other case, the *Savannah Morning News* sponsored a series of barbecues throughout the city to determine citizens’ priorities in a local election. Although the candidates had been focusing on – and the paper had been covering – housing issues, conversations with citizens at the barbecues revealed that drainage problems – a topic receiving minimal coverage – were a top concern for residents.

The Impact on Democracy

The issues raised by the downturn in the economy and the rise of the Internet are not new ones. Fiscal and technological developments have long influenced the process of gathering and reporting the news, and the dangers for a healthy democracy were articulated nearly 90 years ago by Lippmann. Those dangers have been exacerbated in the 21st Century by the economic and technological climate. Starr (2009) warned that the

media's ability to continue their function as a watchdog is in doubt because of the changes that have occurred in the industry:

Along with other new technology, the Internet was supposed to bring us a cornucopia of information, and in many respects it has done so. But if one of its effects is to shrink the production of professionally reported news, perhaps we need to understand the emerging framework of post-industrial society and politics somewhat differently.” (p. 29)

Three years earlier, in 2006, longtime newspaper editor John Carroll foresaw a problem emerging from the growing popularity of the Internet as a source for news and information. He contended that the majority of original news reporting is conducted by print journalists, then followed up by radio and television and aggregated onto Internet news sites. At the time, Carroll acknowledged there was no definitive study showing how much of the content on Internet news sites originated in newspaper reports, but he estimated the figure at 80 percent. Four years later, in 2010, a definitive study was conducted, and it showed that Carroll's estimate actually was too low. The study, conducted by the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, showed that 95 percent of the online news content on 53 sites covering Baltimore came from newspapers, primarily *The Baltimore Sun* (Bennett). Such trends, according to Carroll, could weaken democracy because newspapers, which provide the bulk of original reporting, are closing and/or cutting back on personnel and resources:

If, then, in the worst case, newspapers fade away, and if nobody else steps forward to provide a new army of rock-turners, what will the American public

know in the future? What stories will go untold? What issues unraised? What will serious-minded people have to talk about? (p. 7).

Starr (2009) took things a step further when he warned about the implications of the decline of newspapers. Starr argued that reduced news coverage jeopardizes the integrity of government and the future of American democracy. He also suggested that corruption is more likely to flourish when those in power have less reason to fear exposure. “More than any other medium, newspapers have been our eyes on the state, our check on private abuses, our civic alarm systems,” he wrote (p. 28).

The 2009 case study by Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido supports Starr’s theory. The two authors examined communities affected by the closing of *The Cincinnati Post* at the end of 2007 and found that the closing of the paper had weakened the democratic process in the region. “Its absence appears to have made local elections less competitive along several dimensions: incumbent advantage, voter turnout, campaign spending, and the number of candidates for office. The effect on voter turnout persisted for several years after the newspaper closed,” they wrote.

Although concerns regarding the health of the news are valid, there is evidence that the Internet is starting to fill that gap and is possibly strengthening the media’s role in our democratic society. In its 2011 “State of the Media” report, the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that “some of the biggest new media institutions began to develop original newsgathering in a significant way.” According to the report, Yahoo, AOL, Bloomberg and News Corp. all increased staff and resources dedicated to online reporting. “Together these hires come close to matching the jobs in 2010 we estimate

were lost in newspapers, the first time we have seen this kind of substitution,” the report said.

Moreover, online-only news sites such as the non-profit *ProPublica* are finding ways to produce quality news. In 2010, *ProPublica*, which has a staff of about 40 journalists, became the first online news site to win a Pulitzer Prize. It won another in 2011. However, smaller news entities also are making their mark in journalism. *InsideClimate News*, which has just seven newsroom employees, won a Pulitzer in 2013 for its reporting on the potential dangers posed by oil pipelines. “*InsideClimate News* may be the leanest news start-up ever to be presented with a Pulitzer, journalism’s highest honor, a prize that is typically awarded to regional and national newspapers,” Brian Stelter wrote in *The New York Times*. Stelter noted that *InsideClimate News* won the award over 50 other entrants and two finalists, *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post*.

In addition, as newspapers have developed more sophisticated web versions, the line between print and online news has become blurred. Today’s newspapers are read online and in print, and the online versions generally are updated frequently throughout the day.

Existing Research on the Media in New Jersey

For a topic as narrow as media trends in New Jersey, a sizable amount of data is available. Because the data had been collected for a variety of purposes in different formats, it may at first appear difficult to compare “apples with apples.” When studied collectively, however, the data do provide useful information about how New Jerseyans obtain their news. As a whole, this collective group of studies and reports paints a bleak

picture of New Jersey's media landscape. They detail the substantial reductions in newsroom personnel and resources and explain the likely results, namely a decrease in quality reporting, which in turn will lead to a less-informed citizenry and a government and political system operating with less media scrutiny.

New Jersey Policy Perspective (NJPP), an organization that conducts research and analysis on New Jersey issues, has published two studies on the state's media. The first, Weingart's 2009 "Less News Is Bad News: The Media Crisis and New Jersey's News Deficit," provided an overview of the media landscape in the state at the time it was written. The report explained how the shortage of television news coverage of the state had made New Jerseyans reliant on the print media for information on state issues. Because of cutbacks in personnel and resources at New Jersey newspapers, the study concluded that New Jersey was facing "a growing crisis" that not only would leave citizens less informed about their state, but could ultimately foster political corruption. The study noted:

The evidence indicates that as a result of the state's chronic news deficit, the people of New Jersey know less about their state than people elsewhere in the country know about theirs. Lower levels of knowledge about politics have distorted campaigns and elections in the state and may be a factor in the endemic problem of political corruption.

NJPP's second study, "A Future for Public Media in New Jersey: How to Create a New Basis for Public Radio, TV, and Online Media in One of American Journalism's Worst Covered States," focused on the state's public television system and contained several suggestions for improvement, among them community ownership of a public

television system and establishment of an independent public corporation to operate the system. The report found an increased need for a strong public affairs television station in New Jersey because of the state's shrinking newspaper industry.

In a 2006 study conducted for the Eagleton Institute of Politics, Matthew Hale, a political science professor at Seton Hall University, specifically explored a range of issues related to television coverage of New Jersey's 2005 gubernatorial election. Hale concluded that the network affiliates in New York and Philadelphia failed to provide significant coverage of the race, a finding that supports the NJPP's point about the importance of newspapers as an information source in the Garden State. To illustrate the dearth of television coverage on the 2005 New Jersey governor's campaign, Hale noted that "... all of the New York-based stations chose to focus more of their overall election coverage on uncompetitive races in New York City than they did on the highly competitive New Jersey gubernatorial race" (p. 23).

A 2010 Eagleton study explored, among other topics, news coverage of the state's 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial elections. The report, "Study of Selected Newspaper Coverage of 2005 and 2009 New Jersey Gubernatorial and Legislative Races: Generous for Governor, Meager for Legislature," found that newspapers did "a relatively good job" of covering the state's 2005 and 2009 campaigns for governor, but failed to provide ample coverage to the legislative races on the ballot in both years. The study, based on news reports in five New Jersey newspapers in the 30 days prior to both elections, concluded that the coverage "was focused on the day-to-day activities and strategies of the candidates and the campaigns with little coverage devoted to analyzing ads, debates or comparisons of candidate positions."

Between 2005 and 2011, in my role as Communications Director of the Hall Institute of Public Policy – New Jersey, I explored New Jersey media issues in several research studies and weekly blog posts, as well as in series of podcasts and webcasts with journalists and newsmakers. Topics varied widely, ranging from the media’s influence on the development of the state’s transportation infrastructure to coverage of women in the state legislature. Several of the studies, podcasts and webcasts explored the changing role of New Jersey’s media. Most relevant to this study are:

- “The Impact of Media Consolidation on Local News Coverage in NJ” compared local news coverage in *The Times of Trenton* before and after a major reduction in staff that resulted from a consolidation of newsroom operations with *The Star-Ledger*. Despite the many factors that suggested a decrease in local news stories, a content analysis did not show a reduction in local news coverage.
- A follow-up study, “Local News Coverage Revisited,” yielded similar results.
- “The Propaganda Model Is Alive and Well in New Jersey” used the New Jersey examples to illustrate that the theory set forth by Edward Hermann and Noam Chomsky in “The Propaganda Model,” namely that the news and information pass through five filters before reaching the public.
- “New Jersey’s Media Landscape: A Hall Institute Roundtable,” a series of video interviews with journalists, examined how the technological advances provided by the Internet have altered the manner in which news is reported and consumed.

The New Jersey Press Association, a trade association for the state's newspapers, conducted a market study for its members in 2006 that showed 44 percent of New Jersey adults preferred to obtain news about state politics from newspapers, followed by 37 percent who preferred television, 9 percent who preferred radio, 8 percent who preferred the Internet, and 2 percent who preferred other sources. The newspaper association conducted another study in 2009, but that one was designed to illustrate the benefits of advertising on the websites of New Jersey newspapers and did not contain comparable figures for audience preferences. However, the results did show that a large number of New Jerseyans (83 percent) visited local websites for news and information.

In addition to academic and industry research, the state's media have been the topic of several stories in popular newspapers and magazines. Many were written in 2009 and 2010 in the aftermath of multiple reductions at news entities covering the state. In general, they recounted the specifics of those cuts and predicted they would result in dire consequences, weakening the quality of New Jersey journalism and, in turn, the health of the state's democracy.

For example, Starr (2009) relied heavily on New Jersey examples to argue that reduced news coverage jeopardizes the integrity of government and the future of American democracy because corruption is more likely to flourish when those in power have less reason to fear exposure. Lisher on took similar approach in his 2010 piece for *The American Journalism Review*, using numerous examples and anecdotes from New Jersey to demonstrate the danger resulting from fewer reporters covering state government. "Many worry that with fewer trained eyes watching, those working in state government will be emboldened to make their own rules at citizen expense," he wrote. In

an earlier *American Journalism Review* article, “The Jersey Giant” (2000), Mary Walton followed the activities of members of *The Star-Ledger*’s State House Bureau for a day. Like Star and Lisheron, she used her New Jersey observations as part of a larger discussion about the state of the industry.

In 2008, John Koblin wrote a lengthy piece about declining news coverage in the Garden State, “Welcome to New Jersey, Media Wasteland” for *The New York Observer*. At the time, *The New York Times* had closed its bureaus in Trenton and Newark; *The Record* was mulling the idea of closing its headquarters and having its news staff work remotely, and *The Star-Ledger* was about to cut a third of its newsroom personnel. “It’s becoming reasonable to wonder if, at this rate, there will be anyone left to cover the state soon,” Koblin pondered in the article.

New Jersey Monthly has published two articles on the growth of the state’s hyperlocal news sites and regularly features the work of Joe Strupp, a former senior editor for *Editor & Publisher*, who delves into a variety of New Jersey media issues. In A 2009 article titled “Who’s Covering New Jersey?” Strupp recounted the reductions in New Jersey newsroom personnel and resources and examined some of the efforts under way to fill the gap left by the state’s shrinking media system, among them newspaper websites and niche online publications such as *Politickernj*. The now-defunct *New Jersey Reporter* also explored the state’s media system regularly. Most relevant to this study is the magazine’s January 2004 edition, which included articles about newspaper consolidation in the Garden State, the relationship between New Jersey politicians and journalists, and the state’s then-new Open Public Records Act.

Lastly, several books have been authored about the New Jersey news industry. Among the most recent and most comprehensive is *From Ink on Paper to the Internet: Past Challenges and Future Transformations for New Jersey's Newspapers* by retired Rutgers professor Aumente. Written in conjunction with the 150th anniversary of the New Jersey Press Association, Aumente's book primarily is a history of the state's newspapers, with each chapter devoted to a different publication. Aumente does offer some thoughts on the future of the media industry (and New Jersey's role in it) at the start and close of the book. Other books written about New Jersey media over the years also have focused on telling the stories of various newspapers rather than analyzing industry trends. Among these publications are *The Press and the Suburbs: The Daily Newspapers of New Jersey*; *Journalism and Politics in Jacksonian New Jersey: The Career of Stacy G. Potts*; *A Story of New Jersey Journalism*, and *On and Off The Record*, which detailed the history of *The Record of Hackensack*. A number of books about New Jersey politics also touch on the state's media but not as their primary focus. This group includes *New Jersey Politics and Government: The Suburbs Come of Age*, the highly regarded overview of the state authored by Barbara and Stephen Salmore, as well as books about corruption and scandal written by reporters covering New Jersey. Among them are *The Sopranos State* by Gannett reporters Bob Ingle and Sandy McClure and *The Jersey Sting: A True Story of Crooked Pols, Money-Laundering Rabbis, Black Market Kidneys, and the Informant Who Brought It All Down* by *Star-Ledger* reporters Josh Margolin and Ted Sherman.

Chapter 3: New Jersey as a Case Study

Rationale for Study

Each of the various studies and reports conducted on New Jersey media serves a specific purpose. Some are public policy documents designed to serve as resources for decision makers. Others are industry publications aimed at target audiences, and several are non-academic articles published in popular newspapers and magazines. While the studies suggest that fiscal cutbacks and the influence of the Internet will result in dire consequences for the New Jersey news industry and the state's citizens, the research – for the most part – lacks empirical evidence to support this theory. In fact, one of the few studies based on such data, my “Media Consolidation on Local News Coverage in NJ” paper on the Hall Institute website, did not show a nexus between media consolidation and reductions in local coverage, even though much of the literature on media consolidation suggested local coverage would suffer.

The two Eagleton reports did include hard data, but each was limited in scope. Hale's study of television coverage of the 2005 election focused only on that topic and contained items such as total broadcasts during the campaign season, total number of election stories and average length and placement of those stories. While these data were relevant and valuable to his particular study, it does not address the basic question of my research, namely how the role of the New Jersey media changed between the state's 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial elections. The second Eagleton study did include a breakdown of the topics covered by the New Jersey media during the two elections, but did not break down or analyze the differences. Rather, the study more closely examined items such as

story placement, length and photographs – for both the gubernatorial and legislative contests in each year.

Given the absence of empirical data in much of the existing research on New Jersey media – a closer look at the state’s media landscape is warranted, especially in light of the substantial changes that have occurred due to fiscal factors (consolidation, layoffs, buyouts, reductions in resources, etc.) and the increased use and popularity of the Internet and social networks. Exploring the changes in the media’s role between the state’s 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial elections is a rational approach to such a study. New Jersey newspapers – like their counterparts across the nation – experienced sizeable reductions in newsroom personnel during this period. At the same time, popularity of the Internet and social media grew immensely. In 2005, *YouTube* was in its infancy, the majority of people on *Facebook* were students, and *Twitter* did not yet exist. By 2009, all three were essential tools being utilized by political candidates, including those running for governor in New Jersey.

On a broader scale, studies of campaigns and elections can provide insight into the dynamics and relationships among citizens, the media and government/politics. As the authors of *Crosstalk* noted, elections are not just about winners and losers. They serve a legitimizing function in the democratic process. “Elections constitute critical moments in democracy, when citizens have an opportunity to talk back to political elites,” the authors wrote. The press plays a critical role in the election process through its coverage of the candidates and the campaigns. “Elections are one of those things where mainstream media counts,” said John Mooney, founding editor of *NJ Spotlight* (personal

communication, July 12, 2013). In addition, campaigns and elections generate interest from individuals who normally would have little or no interest in politics (Popkin, 1994).

Beyond the general importance of examining elections, using New Jersey as a subject for the study provides an added value for several reasons. The experiences of the state's media system mirrored the national picture in terms of newsroom reductions and the impact of the Internet. In addition, the fact that New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the nation means that public policy issues often emerge there before they affect the rest of the country.

Likewise, New Jersey is among the first to react and respond to them. For example, a 2007 Hall Institute of Public Policy – New Jersey study (Lee) found when the automobile became affordable in the 1920s, thousands of New Jerseyans purchased cars, leading to the construction of the state's basic roadwork years before other parts of the nation had the traffic volume to necessitate such actions. Similarly, in the mid-1980s New Jersey began running out of landfill space for its garbage while states in the Midwest and elsewhere still had plenty of room. New Jersey responded with mandatory recycling – long before similar initiatives took place in other parts of the country. Another example was given by former New Jersey Governor Thomas H. Kean in his 1988 book *The Politics of Inclusion*. Kean recalled that the state's large number of pollution and contamination problems eventually resulted in New Jersey becoming a national leader in identifying and cleaning up toxic sites. And in 2008, New Jersey enacted health care reform containing many of the same provisions included in the national health care reform bill that President Obama signed into law nearly two years later.

When it comes to changes in the news industry, New Jersey could once again be the first state to experience – and react to – changes in the media landscape. This is because the downturn in the economy and the rise of the Internet have hit the print media particularly hard. New Jersey is a state without a major television station, so its residents have long relied on newspapers for news about their home state (Aumente, 2007). Fifty-four percent of the New Jerseyans responding to a May 2003 poll said newspapers were their primary source for information about the state, 15 percentage points higher than the national average of 39 percent (Weingart, 2009). As a result, declining circulation and cutbacks at newspapers are likely to have a greater effect on New Jerseyans than residents of other states.

Another important reason to study New Jersey is the fact that demographics in the Garden State mirror those of the nation. For this very reason, Cherry Hill, N.J., has become one of the nation's most popular and useful sites for focus groups (M. Kern, personal communication). New Jersey also resonates with national audiences, according to *The New York Times*. In "Going to New Jersey to Find America," an April 30, 2010, article on the state's popularity, Stuart Elliott wrote, "The characters, culture and couture of New Jersey are being embraced by television networks, advertisers, magazine publishers and other shapers and reflectors of the popular culture" (p. B3).

Perhaps the most compelling reason for focusing on New Jersey is the possibility that its current media landscape may be indicative of the industry's future throughout the nation. What has evolved in New Jersey over the past few years is a wide variety of platforms in many different shapes and sizes, which cumulatively disseminate the information citizens need. Whether the impact of this development has been positive or

negative is a separate issue that can be argued back and forth. What is clear, however, is the fact that the media landscape in New Jersey has changed substantially, perhaps at a more rapid pace than elsewhere.

Although traditional news entities such as newspapers continue to play a role in New Jersey, they are much different than they were five, ten, or fifteen years ago. Today, newspapers also exist as online entities that no longer merely replicate their print versions. The online versions are updated regularly and feature audio, video and interactive elements. Radio and television – despite the dominance of the New York and Philadelphia markets – also remain a part of the state’s media landscape. Talk radio, most notably NJ101.5, reaches and influences large numbers of New Jersey listeners. The station, which is part of the Millennium Radio Group, expanded its presence in the New Jersey media landscape in June 2010 by starting State House Steps, an Internet news site devoted to politics in the Garden State.

Beyond the traditional entities, New Jerseyans are finding news in many other places. Topic-specific websites provide news and information on subjects of particular interest to different audiences. For example, political junkies who need to keep tabs on breaking news and analysis are likely to visit sites such as *PolitickerNJ* and *In The Lobby*, and to subscribe to electronic newsletters such as *Politifax*. Similar topic-specific sites and newsletters cater to sports fans, educators, environmentalists and more.

Online-only news sites are becoming increasingly popular. *NewJerseyNewsroom* has attracted as many as 78,000 unique visitors in a week – a figure about equal to the circulation of a midsize daily newspaper. Following the success of *NewJerseyNewsroom*, three private foundations provided funds to support *NJ Spotlight*, a similar endeavor

launched by former *Star-Ledger* reporter Mooney in May 2010. In its short history, the online news site has won two major journalism awards.

Hyperlocal news sites, such as *The Alternative Press*, also are attracting large numbers of readers by offering news on community activities, civic affairs and scholastic sports. “What is going to happen is that sites like ours will play a greater role because you are not going to have an in-depth coverage as people are accustomed to, and I think that people are going to be looking for that kind of coverage,” said *Alternative Press* editor Michael S. Shapiro (2009).

As is occurring nationwide, social networks are being used by politicians, businesses and all types of New Jersey organizations to bypass traditional media outlets and bring their messages directly to the public. By their very nature, Facebook and Twitter also have become vehicles for members to share, spread and even break news stories about developments in the Garden State and beyond. “There are more opportunities for individuals to get messages out through Facebook, Twitter and email,” said New Jersey State Sen. Joseph Kyrillos, who served as chair of Christie’s 2009 election campaign. Kyrillos, who ran for U.S. Senate in 2012, said he was disappointed by the lack of media coverage the Senate campaign received, but his campaign was able to reach voters because it had an 80,000-person email list (personal communication, July 12, 2013).

College newspapers also are displaying the potential to play a significant role in New Jersey’s media landscape. A news story first reported in *The College Voice*, the student newspaper at Mercer County Community College, later was followed by state and national media. The story recounted an incident in which the sheriff responded to a

professor's statements about him by showing up in the professor's class to confront him. Likewise, news stories in student newspapers at The College of New Jersey (Mike Huckabee's comments on same-sex marriage) and Rutgers University (increases in administrative salaries at the university) have attracted attention outside of their respective college campuses.

New Jersey is home to a large number of public policy organizations and academic institutions, each of which provides citizens with news and information in its own unique manner, whether it be the virtual debates sponsored by the Hall Institute, the public opinion polls conducted by the Monmouth University Polling Institute, or the seminars and lectures presented by the Eagleton Institute of Politics. While such institutions traditionally relied upon the news media as a vehicle to share their findings with the public, they now are using the Internet and social networks to communicate directly with citizens.

Moreover, these entities are working collaboratively to pool their resources and produce valuable information for New Jerseyans. For example, *NJBIZ*, the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University, and the Kaufman Zita Group created *Capitol Insights*, a monthly survey of about 100 experts who offer their thoughts about news and developments in the Garden State. In 2009, a coalition of groups organized by Leadership New Jersey not only sponsored the state's first Lieutenant Governor debate, but also presented a daylong forum on the new office.

Between the rise of the Internet and the downturn in the economy, the news industry has been in a state of flux, searching for new models and platforms to meet the demands of today's 24/7 news cycle while generating enough revenue to survive

financially. In all likelihood, there is no single perfect model that will surface to meet the needs of the media and the public in the 21st Century. Instead, news and information will be delivered and digested through a variety of platforms that will include traditional news outlets, social networks, and entities and organizations not previously considered to have a role in the field of journalism. New Jerseyans already are receiving their news from a multitude of platforms – traditional news sources, websites, social networks, the think tanks and other entities. Since New Jersey has a history of identifying and addressing public policy issues before the rest of the nation, an exploration of the state’s experience with – and response to – changes in its media landscape merits exploration.

Research Questions:

- R1: How has news coverage in New Jersey been affected by fiscal factors that have diminished newsroom personnel and resources?
- R2: How has news coverage in New Jersey been affected by the growth of the Internet, which has radically changed the manner in which news is gathered, reported and disseminated?
- R3: How have the changes in news coverage in New Jersey affected the ability of the media and the citizenry to fulfill their roles in the democratic process?

New Jersey Snapshot

Located in the northeastern part of the United States, New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the nation. In terms of physical size, it is the fourth smallest state, but it is the eleventh most populous. The 2010 decennial census showed New Jersey to have a population of 8.8 million. Census figures also showed New Jersey to have the second highest median household income in the nation. The state has 565 municipalities, an unusually high number.

New Jersey is rich in culture, education and business advantages, yet it lives in the shadow of New York City and – to a lesser extent – Philadelphia. As far back as 1776, Benjamin Franklin described New Jersey as “a beer barrel, tapped at both ends, with all the live beer running into Philadelphia and New York” (Fairall, 1885, p. 225). The dominance of the New York and Philadelphia markets is especially visible in terms of broadcast media. Because New Jersey does not have a major television station of its own, citizens rely on network affiliates in New York and Philadelphia for television news. However, these stations provide scant coverage of the Garden State; newspapers have been the primary source for news and information about the state.

Ideologically, the state leans toward the progressive side. In recent years, New Jersey abolished the death penalty, legalized medicinal marijuana and – two years prior to the passage of President Obama’s Affordable Care Act – enacted its own progressive health care legislation containing many provisions similar to the national bill. Democratic registered voters outnumber Republicans by about 700,000. In 2013, there are 1.8 million registered Democrats and 1.1 million Republicans (and an even larger number of unaffiliated voters – 2.6 million), according to the New Jersey Division of Election.

Given the progressive nature of the state, it is not surprising that New Jersey has voted Democratic in every presidential election since 1992. New Jersey voters have not elected a Republican to the U.S. Senate since 1972.

In state elections, however, voting patterns vary. Over the last 50 years, voters have sent five Democrats and four Republicans to the Governor's Office. New Jersey is not unique in this regard. Because gubernatorial candidates are scrutinized more closely than candidates for federal offices, voting patterns in state elections do not always adhere to political composition. "Voters know governors better but like them less than they do their senators. Governors are routine news in the papers. The activities of senators are covered much less frequently," Peverill Squire and Christina Fastnow wrote in a *Political Research Quarterly* article (2004, p. 718). News organizations also tend to cover gubernatorial races in greater depth than federal contests, in part because governors are powerful executive branch leaders, but also because governors' campaigns are geographically closer than the nation's capital in Washington, D.C., where national issues are addressed (Fico, Freedman and Durisin, 2011).

Louis Jacobson, who regularly writes about governors for *Governing* magazine, offered several theories for the "ticket-splitting" pattern. "One intriguing possibility," he wrote, "is that voters are sophisticated enough to understand that state officials have a certain set of duties and federal officeholders have a different set, and that voting ought to take into account which politician is the best one to handle one set of responsibilities as opposed to the other" (2012). Jacobson noted that personality, political skills and a willingness to buck one's own party also account for the ability for gubernatorial candidates to win elections in states where voters from their party are outnumbered.

Regardless of political party, whoever serves as New Jersey's governor holds more power than most of the nation's governors. Other than the position of Lieutenant Governor, which was created in 2005 and first added to the ballot in 2009, the New Jersey governor appoints his or her entire cabinet, as well as a host of other state officials, including judges and prosecutors. In addition, the New Jersey governor has line-item veto power, which allows him or her to strike fiscal allocations from legislation such as the state budget before signing it into law.

Summary of 2005 and 2009 New Jersey Gubernatorial Elections¹

In New Jersey's 2005 gubernatorial election Democrat Jon Corzine, one of the state's U.S. senators, ran against Republican Douglas Forrester, a New Jersey businessman who had waged an unsuccessful campaign for U.S. Senate in 2002. The circumstances surrounding the 2005 election were somewhat unusual because Democratic Governor James McGreevey had resigned in November 2004, making state Senate President Richard Codey acting governor for the balance of the term. Codey enjoyed great popularity in his time as the state's chief executive and toyed with the idea of running for Governor in 2005, but ultimately opted not to enter the race after Corzine gained endorsements from a majority of the party's powerful county chairs. Corzine, who had amassed several hundred million dollars in resources while working in the private sector, demonstrated the ability to far outspend Codey and gained support from key party leaders.

Both Corzine and Forrester were personally wealthy and opted not to take part in the state's public campaign financing program, which limits spending. As a result, the

¹ Content in this section was based upon my own personal recollections of the 2005 and 2009 campaigns, which I followed closely in my role at the Hall Institute of Public Policy – New Jersey. I used New Jersey Division of Election figures and news reports to confirm numbers and refresh my memory when needed.

election was the most expensive in New Jersey history. Corzine spent \$38 million of his own money during the general election; Forrester used \$19 million of his personal funds.

New Jersey property taxes, which are among the highest in the nation, were the primary issue during the campaign. Both candidates laid out proposals to provide New Jerseyans with property tax relief. Corzine promised to fully restore – and eventually increase – property tax rebates, which had been curtailed in the two previous state budget cycles. Funding for the program would come from anticipated growth in state revenue. Forrester proposed a “30-in-3” plan that would reduce property taxes by 30 percent over three years. The reductions would come from eliminating waste, fraud, and abuse in the state budget. Polls showed citizens had little confidence in either candidate’s ability to lower property taxes, but Corzine’s proposal ultimately won over more voters – in part, because he had been a leader in the financial sector, serving as Chief Executive Officer of Goldman Sachs before entering politics. He consistently out-pollled Forrester throughout the campaign and easily defeated Forrester in the general election on Nov. 8 with 54 percent of the vote. Forrester finished with 43 percent. Eight third-party candidates shared the remaining votes (New Jersey Division of Elections).

In 2009, Corzine, then the Democratic incumbent, was challenged by Republican Chris Christie, who had served as U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey from 2002 to 2008. Corzine’s popularity had decreased steadily during his term as governor – in part because of poor national and state economies but also from policy decisions, which included a failed plan to raise road tolls and use the revenue for the state’s underfunded pension system. Conversely, Christie enjoyed increasing popularity as U.S. Attorney,

largely because of his successful prosecutions of political corruption cases, several of which involved powerful, high-profile figures.

In addition, the national political climate changed substantially between 2005 and 2009. In 2005, Republican President George W. Bush, who had attained record high approval ratings in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, was experiencing a steady decline in popularity, largely due to a struggling national economy and the public's concern with U.S. military involvement in Iraq. A year later, in the 2006 midterm elections, Democrats gained control of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate and fared well in gubernatorial and state legislative contests. In the final two years of his presidency, Bush's approval numbers continued to plummet, setting the stage for Democrat Barack Obama's historic victory in the 2008 presidential campaign. Obama, the nation's first president of African descent, won both the electoral and popular votes by wide margins. However, the strong emotions he evoked among opponents during the campaign carried over into his presidency, fueling an anti-government sentiment that spawned the Tea Party movement and gained traction throughout the nation, including New Jersey. "Politics changed; we got a lot angrier after the 2008 general election," *NJ Spotlight's* John Mooney said. "There is tension everywhere; we fight over everything now, and the media contributes to it."

When Corzine and Christie squared off in New Jersey's 2009 gubernatorial campaign, the nation still was feeling the effects of the 2008 economic collapse. Throughout the nation, angry voters held incumbent office-holders such as Corzine responsible for the poor economy. The impact of the economic collapse was especially heavy in New Jersey since the state receives "an inordinate amount of income from Wall

Street,” according to Josh Margolin, a senior investigative reporter at ABC News who covered both elections for *The Star-Ledger* (personal communication, June 21, 2013).

As a result, Corzine experienced little, if any, benefit from his incumbency. He trailed Christie in nearly every poll conducted during the campaign. As his chances of gaining re-election dwindled, his support among Democratic powerbrokers eroded. Although he carried traditional Democratic strongholds, such as Hudson, Union and Middlesex counties, on Election Day his margins of victories in those counties were far lower than those typically enjoyed by Democratic candidates. He also lost by unusually high margins in Monmouth and Ocean counties, which historically have been swing counties; the disparity resulted from a statement he made late in the campaign, suggesting that tolls on the Garden State Parkway, which runs through both counties, might be increased.

Corzine’s re-election chances had previously suffered a major blow with the FBI’s July 2009 arrests of 44 individuals, including several public officials, on corruption charges. The arrests not only bolstered claims that Corzine’s administration had not been aggressive in prosecuting political corruption; they aided Christie, who had made cleaning up corruption the cornerstone of his tenure as U.S. Attorney.

As in 2005, property taxes, and in a broader sense, the economy were the primary issues during the race. Without offering a detailed economic plan of his own, Christie continually blamed Corzine for New Jersey’s fiscal woes and garnered strong support throughout the state. On Election Day, Nov. 3, 2009, he received 49 percent of the vote to defeat Corzine who had 45 percent. Chris Daggett, a third-party candidate, garnered 6 percent (New Jersey Division of Elections). Despite speculation that Daggett, a former

Republican who had headed state and federal environmental agencies, would pull enough votes away from Christie to swing the election to Corzine, his candidacy had no significant impact on the outcome of the race. Exit polls showed that he pulled more votes away from Corzine than Christie.

Chapter 4: Methodology

A multi-part content analysis of news reports was conducted to identify trends and patterns to determine how the New Jersey media's role had shifted between the state's 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial elections. Following an initial analysis and coding of more than 900 news articles, four sub-categories of stories were identified and explored in greater detail. The results then were used as the foundation for a series of interviews with individuals involved in each of the elections. Interviews that had been conducted earlier in the research process also were used to help illustrate the results of the content analysis.

Content Analysis

The news reports in the content analysis were all articles written about New Jersey's 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial campaigns in the state's three largest newspapers during September, October and November of each the two election years. These publications were *The Star-Ledger* of Newark, *The Record* of Hackensack and the *Asbury Park Press*. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, *The Star-Ledger* has a daily circulation of 279,000 and a Sunday circulation of 413,000. The totals at *The Record* are 155,000 daily and 178,000 Sunday. At the *Asbury Park Press*, the numbers are 98,000 daily and 151,000 Sunday. This represents 62 percent of the state's entire daily newspaper circulation and 80 percent of the Sunday circulation.

In addition, the news stories in *The Star-Ledger* and the *Asbury Park Press* reach thousands of other New Jerseyans because they are the New Jersey flagship publications of chains that share news reports. *The Star-Ledger* is one of six New Jersey dailies owned by Advance Publications, the others being the *Bridgeton Evening News*, *Gloucester County Times*, *Jersey Journal*, *Today's Sunbeam* and the *Trenton Times*. Likewise, the *Asbury Park Press* is one of six New Jersey dailies owned by Gannett, the others being *Courier-News*, *Courier-Post*, *Daily Record*, *Home News Tribune* and the *Vineland Daily Journal*. To a lesser extent, stories in *The Record* reach additional readers because its parent company, Macromedia, owns one other New Jersey daily, *The Herald and News*. When these other publications are included, the total daily circulation is 723,740 or 83 percent of the statewide total. The three chains have a combined Sunday circulation of 943,200 or 87 percent of the statewide total.

The decision to select newspapers for the content analysis was based upon the fact that New Jersey does not have a major commercial television station providing coverage of state issues. As a result, New Jerseyans tend to obtain their television news from network affiliates based in New York and Philadelphia, which provide minimal coverage of the Garden State. Therefore, print media are the primary means through which voters learn about gubernatorial elections. Indeed, a 2005 Monmouth University Polling Institute poll found that newspapers were the most popular source for information about the state's gubernatorial race, with 48 percent of the respondents citing newspapers as their preferred source for information on the campaign, followed by television with 31 percent. Voters who relied on television for information on the 2005 campaign were likely to obtain only a superficial view of the candidates and the issues, according to an

Eagleton Institute of Politics study of television coverage of the election. The study found that “Philadelphia based stations ignored the New Jersey elections,” and that “all of the New York based stations chose to focus more of their overall election coverage on uncompetitive races in New York City than they did on the highly competitive New Jersey gubernatorial race” (Hale).

During the 2009 campaign for governor, the Monmouth University Polling Institute conducted a poll similar to its 2005 survey and the results at the top of the survey flipped. In 2009, television, with 41 percent of the respondents, was the most popular source for news about the election. Newspapers were second with 28 percent, a drop of 20 percentage points from 2005. Despite the preference for television news, the poll found that 42 percent of the respondents read newspapers every day and relied on them for state and local information. As Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, explained in a news release accompanying the poll:

Like most Americans, New Jerseyans have become accustomed to turning on the television for news updates. However, the focus of TV coverage tends to be national or the city where those media outlets are located, while newspapers are favored for their local news coverage. Since we lack a home-grown broadcast media market, this leaves a gap for state-level news exposure in New Jersey.

Accordingly, the content analysis for this study remains focused on newspapers. Not only does this focus provide for an apples-to-apples comparison of 2005 and 2009 coverage, it also reflects the fact that television coverage of New Jersey issues is superficial and that newspapers provide voters with more substantive information about the state.

Access World News, a database that includes full-text content of more than 2,000 North American newspapers, over 1,000 international newspapers, 300 wire services and over 200 broadcast news transcripts, was used as a source for news articles on New Jersey's 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial campaigns. A coder searched the database for articles about the race that were published in *The Star-Ledger*, *The Record* and *The Asbury Park Press*, using the last names of the candidates as search terms. The search was restricted to the months of September, October and November of each of the two election years. These months were selected because election campaigns typically shift into high gear in September following Labor Day. Though Election Day takes place at the start of November, the entire month of articles was included in the content analysis because of election analyses pieces that follow campaigns, as well as coverage of the transition to a new administration.

Using the last names of 2005 gubernatorial candidates Jon Corzine and Doug Forrester, the Access World News database yielded 385 news stories containing both search terms for the months of September, October and November 2005. For 2009, the database contained 519 articles with the last names of both candidates – Chris Christie and Jon Corzine. A coder entered details of each story into Excel spreadsheets, including the publication name, date, author and headline. Based upon the headlines, the coder then added a new column to the spreadsheets indicating the topic of each story. The topics were corruption/government ethics; crime/public safety; government spending/state government; education/schools; health care/drug costs; immigration; jobs/economy; politics/campaign issues; property taxes/other taxes, and social issues. With the exception of the politics/campaign issues category, the topics were the same as those used by the

Monmouth University Polling Institute in polls conducted during the 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial campaigns in which voters were asked what issues they considered to be most important for New Jersey. By using the same topics, it was possible to compare and contrast the subjects covered by the news media with the subjects voters considered most important. The politics/campaign issues topic was included in the newspaper coding because of the large percentages (44 percent in 2005 and 42 percent in 2009) of stories that focused on politics and horserace issues rather than substantive matters. A second coder reviewed 10 percent of the stories from each election year, reading content as well as headlines, and made no changes in the original coding.

Content Analysis Findings

The content analysis revealed five findings regarding the coverage of New Jersey's 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial elections that merit further exploration:

1. No substantial changes were found in the topics the media covered in 2005 and 2009.
2. No substantial changes were found in voters' priorities in 2005 and 2009.
3. In each year, there was a substantial gap between what the media covered and what voters identified as priorities.
4. A minimal amount of voter comments (15 percent of all comments contained in the stories) was included in each year. Fewer voter comments on poll stories were included in 2009. The percentage dropped from 39 percent in 2005 to 24 percent in 2009.
5. In 2009, the media were more likely to publish stories on negative attacks and personal issues.

Together, the news stories and the polls provided a mechanism to compare what voters regarded as important with what the press reported. The data show that – despite the significant changes occurring in the media industry between 2005 and 2009 – little changed in terms of what was covered or in what the public considered important. In New Jersey, the media focused on political stories during both gubernatorial campaigns while voters put taxes on the tops of their lists. The other topics, which included health, education, social issues and more, fluctuated slightly – with the fluctuations following nearly identical patterns in both years.

In both 2005 and 2009, the largest percentage of stories was on politics – 44 percent in 2005 and 42 percent in 2009. No other topic registered in double digits in either year. By contrast, voters were most interested in taxes. Thirty-four percent of the respondents identified taxes as their top issue in 2005, and the number rose to 43 percent in 2009. Taxes, however, received minimal coverage from the media – one percent of the 2005 stories and four percent in 2009. Each year also contained a large number of stories that did not fall into any of the pre-defined topics. There were 108 unclassified articles in 2005 and 172 in 2009. The vast majority of these articles were letters to the editor containing the candidates' names, not reporting that the media provided. Newspaper editorials, columns and op-ed articles also accounted for some of the unclassified articles. Because these by their nature provide opinion and commentary, as opposed to objective reporting, they were not included.

Table 1

Media Coverage vs. Voter Priorities 2005 and 2009

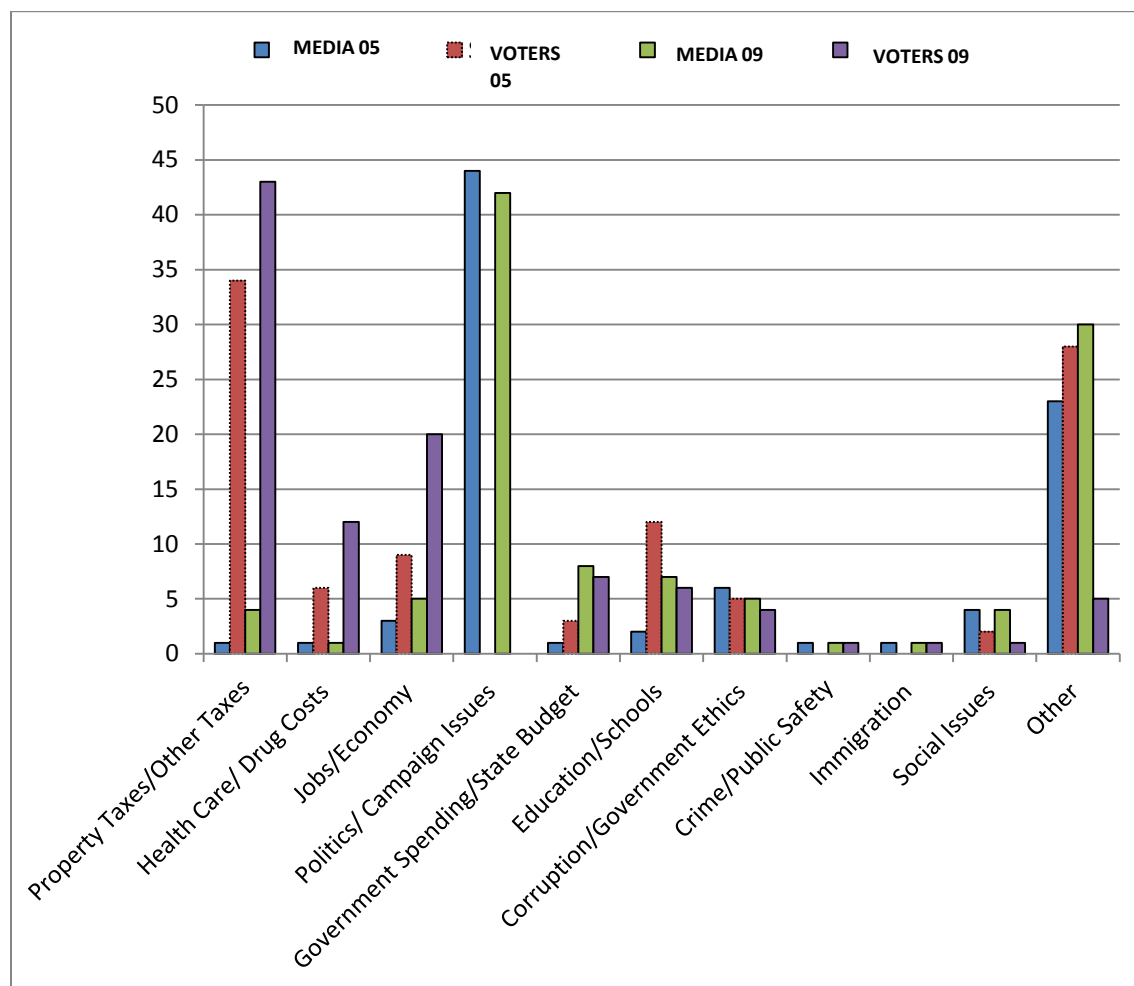


Table 2

Media Coverage 2005 and 2009

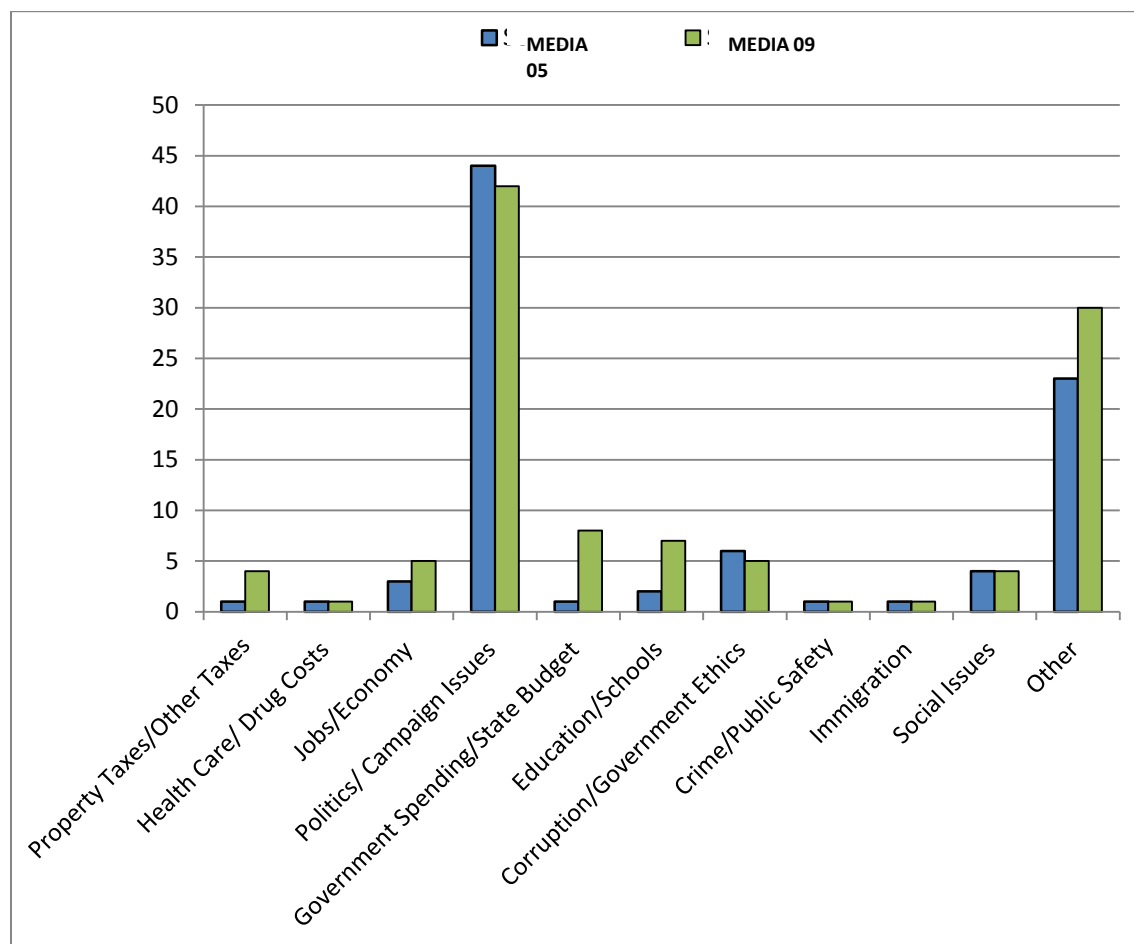


Table 3

Voter Priorities 2005 and 2009

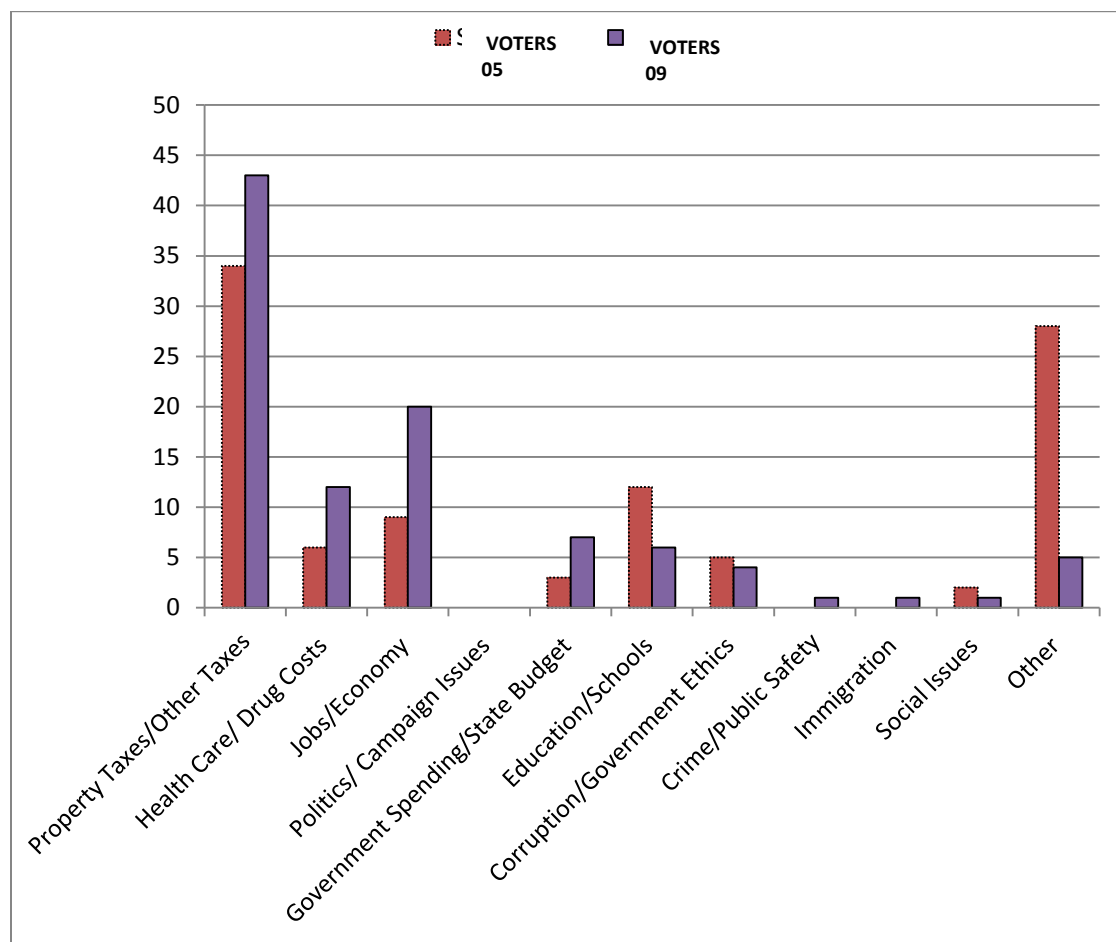


Table 4

Media Coverage vs. Voter Priorities 2005

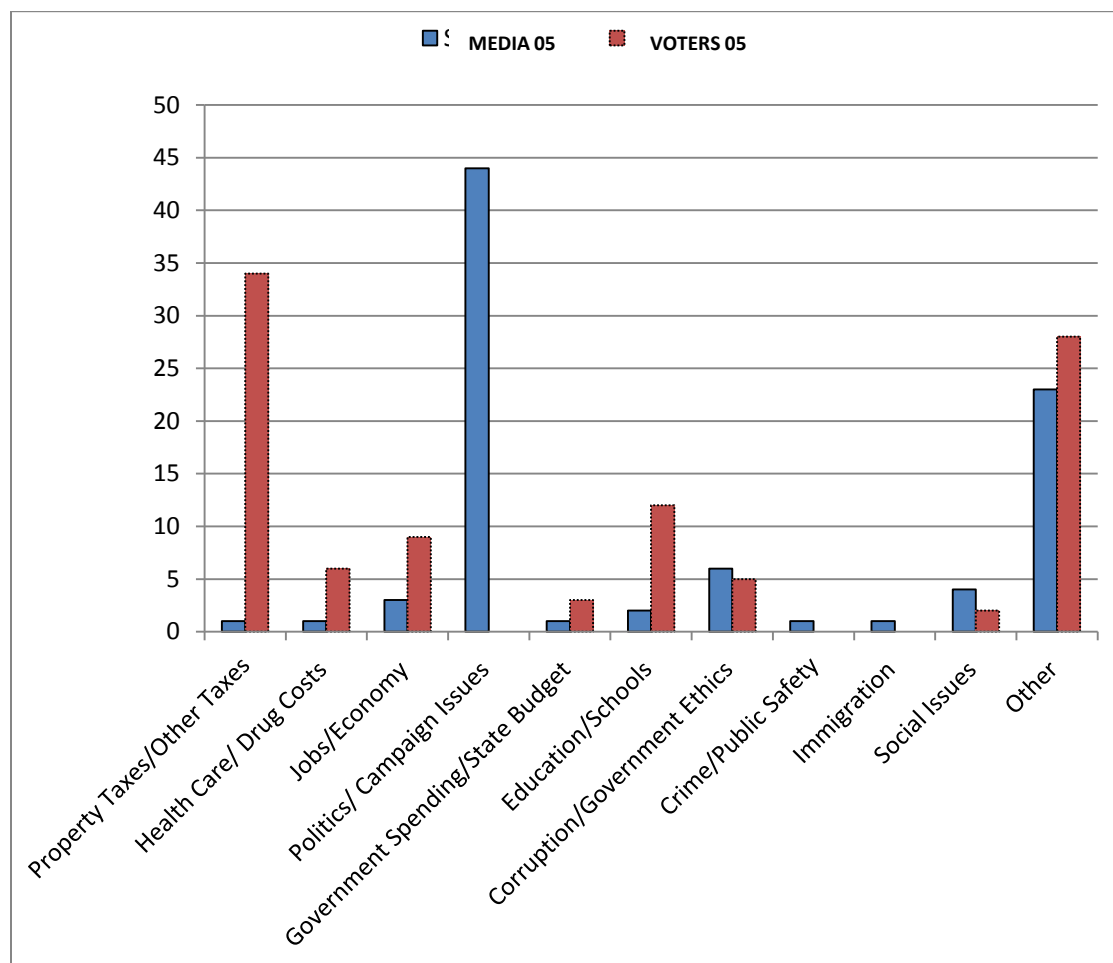
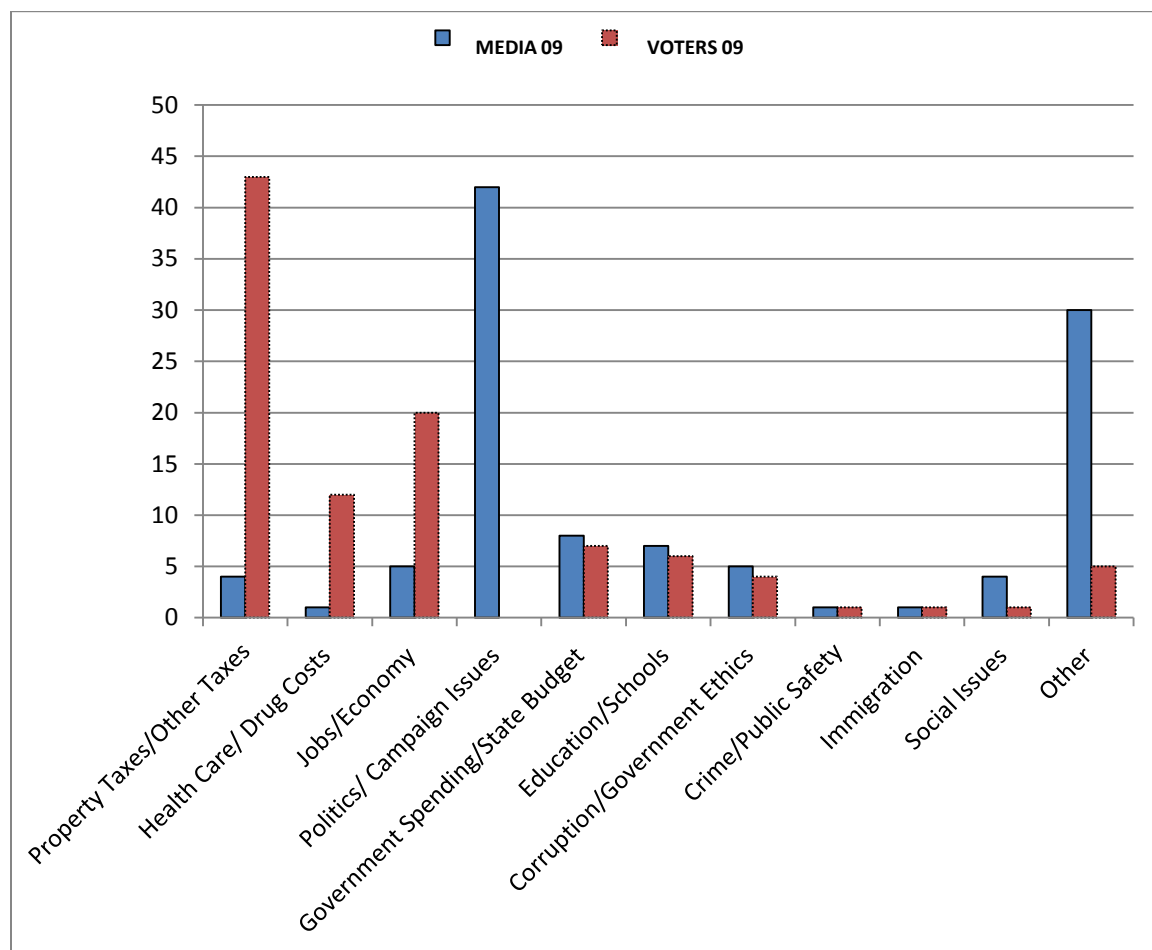


Table 5

Media Coverage vs. Voter Priorities 2009



Because of the large number of news articles that fell into the politics/campaign issues category, a more-detailed analysis was conducted of these stories. This second part of the coding process was aimed at identifying – and then comparing – stories on common topics from the two election years. A coder reviewed all of the headlines of the stories that had been coded politics/campaign issues and then further coded them by the nature of the content as suggested by the headlines. This process produced four sub-categories that were common to both election years: personal attacks/negative campaigning, polls and debates, taxes/economic issues and surrogates (national figures who campaigned for the candidates). Each story was then read in its entirety to determine what changes, in any, had occurred in the reporting between the two elections.

In two categories, taxes and surrogates, there was no noticeable change. The stories on the surrogates were straightforward news reports in both years. Reporters covered the surrogate visits as events, reporting on the comments the surrogates made in public appearances. Most stories included a comment or response from the opposing campaign. The nature of news stories on taxes and the economy also varied little from 2005 to 2009. Each of the three newspapers ran at least one story in both years on each candidate's fiscal plans, but the bulk of the reporting on economic issues contained minimum amounts of substance. Instead, the articles focused on charges between the two campaigns over which candidate would be the more effective fiscal leader.

A change in reporting was observed in the articles on horserace issues, such as polls and debates, primarily in the poll stories. The 2005 poll stories often included not only the poll results, but also quotes from New Jersey voters who had been interviewed

by reporters about the topics in the polls. In 2009, most of the poll stories contained the results of the polls and few if any additional details to place the results into context.

In 2005, 14 stories on polls were published in the *Star-Ledger*, *Record* and *Asbury Park Press*. They contained 56 quotes, 34 from candidates, campaign officials and pundits, and 22 from voters. In 2009, 15 poll stories were published in the three newspapers with a total of 51 quotes. The breakdown was 39 quotes from candidates, campaign officials and pundits, and 12 from voters. The percentage of voter comments included in the poll stories decreased 15 points, from 39 percent in 2005 to 24 percent in 2009. No voter comments were included in any of the *Star-Ledger* or *Record* stories.

This change may be due in part to reductions in personnel and resources at the three newspapers, which made it difficult to do the extra reporting that interviews require. It also could be attributed to *The Star-Ledger's* decision to end its affiliation with the Eagleton Institute of Politics, which regularly conducts polls on state issues in New Jersey. In 2005, when the partnership was in effect, *The Star-Ledger* reported the Eagleton polls prominently, conducted focus groups with voters and included voter interviews in its reports. The affiliation ended in November 2005 after the gubernatorial election, and in 2009, there were no voter interviews in stories on the Eagleton polls. The results of the organization's polls were reported in smaller stories and sometimes merely as a few paragraphs in stories about related issues. The Ledger's decision to end its involvement with polling and focus groups was made to save money, according to Deborah Howlett, who covered the 2005 race for *The Star-Ledger*.

The absence of voter comments in *The Record* during the 2009 race can be attributed to an unusual partnership that *The Record* and *The Star-Ledger* began during

the first part of 2009. The two competing news organizations merged their State House bureaus. Therefore, identical article on state issues – including the gubernatorial campaign and poll stories – appeared in both publications. The voter comments in *The Asbury Park Press* were fueled by an affiliation between Gannett, the paper’s parent company, and the Monmouth University Polling Institute, which regularly conducted polls. Before Monmouth made its polls public, it provided Gannett reporters with contact information of certain respondents from the poll sample whose views illustrated key findings from the poll (Murray, personal communication).

Table 6

Distribution of Quotes

Election Year	Poll Stories	Total Quotes	Campaign and Pundit Quotes	Voter Quotes	Percent of Voter Quotes
2005	14	56	34	22	39%
2009	15	51	39	12	24%

To determine if the decrease in voter comments in the poll stories was representative of a larger trend, a sample of 100 articles from the 2005 campaign was compared with a similar sample from 2009. The results showed no statistically significant change, although they did underscore the small percentage of voter comments included in overall campaign coverage. In fact, the percentage of voter comments in these two larger samples (15 percent in both years) was significantly lower than the percentages in the poll stories (39 percent in 2005 and 24 percent in 2009). In the 2005 sample, 318 people were quoted, 269 quotes from candidates, campaign officials and pundits, and 49 from voters. In 2009, the breakdown of the 297 quotes was 251 from candidates, campaign

officials and pundits, and 46 from voters. Percentagewise, the numbers, when rounded to the nearest tenth of a percent, were identical: 85 percent from candidates, campaign officials and pundits, and 15 percent from voters in both years.

Another change was observed in the coverage of stories on personal issues and negative attacks. In 2005, almost all of these articles were pegged to news events. For example, there were some ethical and legal issues involving a company that Republican candidate Doug Forrester ran, but the stories on them ran after state agencies issued rulings about the company. Even the personal charge that was perhaps the most egregious of the campaign – an allegation that Forrester had engaged in an extra-marital affairs – was not reported until after *The New York Daily News* (in a gossip column) suggested that the GOP candidate was having an affair. When New Jersey reporters followed up with their own stories, their stories in the New Jersey indicated that Democratic operatives had been spreading rumors about an alleged Forrester affair throughout the campaign and trying – unsuccessfully – to get New Jersey reporters to write about it.

In 2009, the negative, personal stories were published with less vetting and often without a current news angle. For example, Chris Christie's seven-year-old driving tickets became a news story for no apparent reason other than the fact that a reporter found out about them (presumably from a Democratic operative).

A more detailed review of the stories on personal issues and negative attacks confirmed this pattern. These stories were defined as articles that had little or no relevance to the public policy issues confronting the state. Several stories were published during the 2005 campaign about allegations that Forrester, who owned an insurance company, had violated a 1911 law that prohibited campaign contributions by insurance

companies and their owners. Each story was written about official action taken by the State of New Jersey in connection with the allegations – when the Attorney General referred the charges to the Division of Criminal Justice (DCJ) for review, when the DCJ began its review and when the agency dismissed the charges.

Corzine's personal relationship with Carla Katz, who then was president of Communications Workers of America Local 1034, also was the subject of numerous stories during the campaign. Corzine and Katz had dated while he was a United States senator. Although their romantic relationship ended in August 2004, more than a year before the 2005 gubernatorial election, journalists and political opponents had raised questions about whether their past relationship would influence the state's contract negotiations with Local 1034, a union that represented more than 16,000 state employees. This question itself represented a legitimate news angle, and many of the subsequent stories about the Corzine-Katz relationship were triggered by actual news developments. In August, *The Star-Ledger* reported that Corzine had lent Katz \$470,000 while they were dating and later told her she did not have to repay the loan. Again, this was a legitimate news angle in that revelation of the loan raised new questions about the impact of the Corzine-Katz relationship on negotiations between the state and the labor union. Subsequent stories also were triggered by news developments, such as a lawsuit filed against Corzine, alleging that he broke U.S. Senate ethics rules and federal criminal law by failing to report the loan to the head of the largest state workers union. The relationship was mentioned in several roundup stories about the campaign and its tone. Other times, it was included in articles on campaign ads that referenced the Corzine-Katz relationship. In fact, much of the personal negative coverage on both candidates was done

in stories about negative ads and personal attacks launched by one campaign against the other. The one negative story that appeared without an apparent news peg was a September 2004 report in *The Record* that Corzine had a conflict of interest when he cast a Senate committee vote in March of that year on a tax treaty with Japan. The article suggested that Corzine would benefit personally from the bill because it would result in tax breaks for individuals like him who had invested in a failing Japanese bank. The Corzine campaign denied the charges that there was a conflict of interest, and subsequent coverage of the issue was triggered by new developments such as a lawsuit filed by two public interest lawyers alleging an ethics violation and a Corzine campaign announcement that he had divested his shares in Goldman Sachs (where he had served as chairman and chief executive officer) and all other interests that could raise ethical and legal questions.

Four years later, the criteria for publishing a story on negative, personal issues had shifted. Christie's seven-year-old driving tickets became a news story in August 2009 for no apparent reason other than the fact that a reporter found out about them. Likewise, Corzine's investments in a hedge fund related to New Jersey casinos also was the subject of a news report during the campaign, even though there were no new developments to warrant a story. Similarly, Christie's decision to hire the son of one of his friends and mentors as an assistant U.S. attorney emerged as a new story in October 2009, nearly a year after the individual had been hired.

No personal issue generated more controversy during the campaign than Christie's weight. Christie, by his own admission, has struggled with his weight throughout his lifetime. In fact, he had weight loss surgery in early 2013. Christie's

weight became the subject of news reports when *The New York Times* ran a story about a Corzine television ad that included a slow motion unflattering video of Christie exiting an SUV while the narrator suggested the candidate “threw his weight around” to avoid penalties for driving violations. The story, however, was not breaking news. It ran several weeks after the ad had begun airing at a time when the Corzine campaign had already moved on to a new advertising campaign, according to Brad Lawrence, who was the media consultant for the 2005 and 2009 Corzine campaigns. Lawrence said:

The controversy over that ad happened after it was off the air, so it had run its course. We brought it down just because it had naturally had run its course... It was only after there was an article in *The New York Times* that it reached anything close to a controversy. That spot ran for weeks and nobody said a word.

In general, the more detailed analyses of the news stories on polls and personal issues did not show dramatic quantitative changes between 2005 and 2009, even when allowing for subjective judgments on what constitutes a legitimate news angle. However, the value in addressing these topics became apparent during interviews conducted with individuals involved with the two campaigns. The simple step of initiating discussions on the propriety of personal stories and the worth of voter comments produced a wealth of valuable insight.

Chapter 5: Methodology (Interviews)

A series of interviews conducted between April 2009 and June 2013 places the results of the content analysis into context and illustrates the significance of those findings for the New Jersey citizenry. The interviewees included journalists who covered the state's 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial elections, consultants and staffers who worked on the campaigns, political officials, academics and public policy professionals. In all, 45 interviews were conducted in a variety of formats – in-person, via phone and email and as parts of webcasts and podcasts for the Hall Institute of Public Policy – New Jersey.

The interviews took place in three phases. In 2009, individuals directly involved with the campaign were interviewed between April and September. Among other questions, they were asked how the media's role had changed since the 2005 election. The second set of interviews was conducted between November 2010 and July 2011 with a variety of journalists, including retired reporters who had covered the New Jersey State House as far back as the early 1970s, current State House reporters who made frequent use of social media in their work, and individuals who provided news and information on the state through non-traditional means. The final cycle of interviews took place in June 2013 after results of the content analysis had been compiled and analyzed. These interviewees included journalists, consultants and staffers, political officials, academics and public policy professionals. They were asked to comment on findings of content analysis – specifically to offer their opinions as to why the changes in coverage had taken place and to indicate how those changes affected citizens and the campaigns. The interviewees were given similar questions about the absence of change in the topics the media covered and the priorities identified by voters, as well as the gap in both election

years between voter priorities and the news stories published during the campaigns. Each individual also had an opportunity to indicate whether his or her personal experiences with the campaigns differed from the findings of the content analysis and, if so, to explain what those differences were. Five of the individuals interviewed for this part of the research asked to remain anonymous. In the narrative that follows, they are identified by the roles they played in the campaigns.

Summary of Interviews

As a whole, the interviews paint a bleak picture. With few exceptions, the interviewees – regardless of their roles – agreed that the quality of coverage declined between the 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial elections. In 2009, the coverage was more shallow and focused more on personalities than issues, leaving voters less informed on the public policy issues confronting the state and which candidate might be best to address them. The interviewees attributed the decline of quality journalism to the two major developments laid out at the start of this dissertation – the struggle for news organizations to turn a profit (or just keep afloat) in the current economic environment and the growth of the Internet and social networks.

The fiscal factors have resulted in reduced personnel and resources in New Jersey newsrooms. Staffs not only are smaller; they are younger, less experienced and unable to provide in-depth reporting of the critical issues facing New Jersey. Meanwhile, the Internet has placed increased demands on journalists, requiring more frequent posting and updating of stories – primarily designed to draw traffic to their organizations' websites, not to educate voters. The cumulative result was a sharp decrease in the role of the New Jersey media.

Interviewees generally agreed that the media in 2009 had little, if any, effect at setting the agenda for public policy discussion and decisions. The coverage was reactive, not proactive.

Interviews Set 1 (2009)

Joseph Cryan, who was New Jersey State Democratic Chairman from 2006 to 2010, noted the news cycle in 2009 was much shorter than in 2005, when gubernatorial campaigns focused on print newspapers. “People read the newspapers now as much during the day on-line as they did when they got them in the old days with their morning cup of coffee,” he said. “It is completely a new perspective.”

Jay Webber, who served as New Jersey State Republican Chairman during the campaign, said social networks such as Facebook and Twitter provided a different element for communicating campaign messages. “I think it’s exciting to have the opportunity to communicate directly with voters,” he said. “It allows candidates to communicate ideas in a more thoughtful and extended way without the filter and limitations of the media.” In a sign that a substantial number of New Jerseyans had begun turning to the Internet for news and information, Webber noted that Republican candidate Chris Christie used *YouTube* to announce his choice for his Lieutenant Governor running mate. In addition, since the Christie campaign did not have the financial resources of its Democratic opponent, the campaign posted video ads on the Internet as a means of getting reporters to write about them, without having to spend money to put them on television in the New York and Philadelphia media markets, according to Michael DuHaime, who was the lead strategist for Christie’s 2009 campaign.

Although Webber regarded the changes as “good for democracy,” others voiced concerns about the media’s role. Montclair State University Political Science Professor Brigid Harrison (2009) said that by 2009, cutbacks at New Jersey news organizations had resulted in “a real absence of a critical eye on state government,” particularly since many of those who lost jobs were older, more experienced reporters with far more institutional knowledge and contacts than the younger reporters left to fill the void. She also said incumbent Governor Jon S. Corzine’s frequent appearances on national cable television programs during the early stages of the 2009 campaign were a reflection of the downsizing of newspapers in New Jersey, as well as the continued absence of a major television presence.

Table 7

Interviewees Set 1 (2009)

FIRST NAME	LAST NAME	ORGANIZATION (During Campaign)	TITLE	DATE
Joe	Cryan	NJ State Democratic Party	Chair	9/8/2009
Chris	Daggett	(none)	Governor Candidate 2009 General Election	6/16/2009
Tom	Dallessio	Leadership NJ	Executive Director	6/23/2009
Ben	Dworkin	Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics	Director	5/5/2009
Brigid	Harrison	Montclair State University	Professor of Political Science and Law	6/2/2009
Joshua	Leinsdorf	(none)	Governor Candidate General Election	7/14/2009
Joe	Marbach	Seton Hall University	Dean of Arts and Sciences	6/9/2009
Rick	Merkt	Republican Party	Governor Candidate 2009 Primary	5/12/2009
Patrick	Murray	Monmouth University Polling Institute	Director	4/21/2009
Ingrid	Reed	Eagleton Institute of Politics	Policy Analyst	5/19/2009
Murray	Sabrin	Ramapo College	Professor (and 1997 Governor Candidate)	8/25/2009
Michael	Shapiro	Alternative Press	CEO and Publisher	5/26/2009
Jay	Webber	NJ State GOP Party	Chair	7/21/2009

(Podcasts of all interviews are available at http://www.blogtalkradio.com/hall_institute)

Interviews Set 2 (2010-11)

The interviews with the journalists were conducted for the Hall Institute of Public Policy – New Jersey as part of a series of webcasts titled New Jersey's Media Landscape: A Hall Institute Roundtable. The series was designed to examine the changing roles of the media, government and the citizenry in the 21st Century. The interviews, which were streamed live on the Internet, covered a variety of topics, among them current issues before the state and breaking news. However, each interviewee was asked to respond to the same set of three questions directly related to this dissertation:

- Are New Jersey voters better or worse informed in the current media environment?
- Are politicians and government being held more or less accountable in the current media environment?
- Who is setting the agenda for public policy in the current media environment?
Citizens? The media? Government/politicians?

For the most part, the interviewees felt conditions had worsened over the years. They said today's voters are less informed; government and politicians are less accountable, and the media has little if any role in setting the agenda for public policy. Not surprisingly, these opinions were voiced most strongly by the veteran and retired journalists participating in the interviews. Likewise, the few optimistic comments generally came from younger journalists, as well as from individuals working for new entities that provide news and information in non-traditional formats.

Among those lamenting the current state of journalism in New Jersey were retired reporters Harvey Fisher and Dan Weissman who covered the State House for *The Record*

and *The Star-Ledger*, respectively, from the early 1970s through the 1990s. Both noted that the size of the State House press corps in 2009 was less than half of what it was when they covered state government. As a result, today's news entities cover fewer stories and cover them in less depth. "The big difference is most of the papers provided depth on the best stories of the day" Fisher recalled. "Nowadays in most cases you're not even getting depth on the major stories. So there has been a tremendous diminishing of reporting at the State House, and it's very, very different." Accordingly, Fisher believes citizens are less informed today than they were in the past. Nick Acocella, a veteran journalist who operates *Politifax*, agreed that the reduced size of the State House press corps has negatively affected the quality of coverage. "When there were twice as many State House reporters, we knew a lot more about individual bills, who was pushing what and why," he said. "We don't get that anymore."

Darryl Isherwood, editor of *Politickernj*, confirmed the observations of the three longtime journalists by making it clear the priority of his online news site is to post news first, not in-depth. Speaking on the day a highly anticipated New Jersey Supreme Court decision was released, Isherwood said:

I want everybody who comes to *Politickernj* every day, all of our regular readers, to find out about this decision from us first. That was my goal. And so we were up this morning at 10:01. Decision came out at 10, we had our headline and our lead up at 10:01 and, to me, that's a victory. You know, we get that up fast, we get an alert out, and all of the people who, our loyal readership let's say, can read about it first on our site.

Isherwood acknowledged, however, that being first and posting regular updates on breaking news may not be the best way to keep readers informed because the information lacks context.:

It gets hard to create a big picture because you've got all of these details, but you don't have an overview of whatever's happening. And so, particularly with those Twitter feeds, but also with the kind of coverage we'll do, which is a couple of sentences, a paragraph, it gets hard to put all that together and get some kind of idea of what the big picture is. And so we've actually heard that complaint.

Acocella expressed a similar opinion and noted that his publication, because it is a weekly, makes it possible to provide some of the context readers miss when obtaining news through social networks and sites such as *politickernj*. "Being weekly allows you to get some distance on things and to understand or explore, at least, the context of what has happened," he said. "One of the problems of immediacy is there's no reflection. It's just out there boom, boom, boom."

Acocella is not the only individual who has achieved success without always being first to break the news. "It's my belief that you should put out the best story that you can, and if that means that the story doesn't necessarily come out first, that's okay," said Shapiro of *The Alternative Press*, which provides online-only hyperlocal coverage for several New Jersey communities. Shapiro said readers have told him they value receiving credible, well-reported news on his website, even if it means waiting an extra day or two until all facts are gathered and confirmed.

Several interviewees noted that, even though there are more sources for obtaining news and information today, citizens still are less informed. "There's more people

providing information. I don't know if they're getting more information though," said Herb Jackson, a reporter with *The Record* who has covered New Jersey government and politics for several newspapers since the 1980s. The new platforms may actually have had a negative effect on educating voters, Jackson said, explaining that cable television and the Internet have fostered sharp partisan exchanges that turn citizens off. "A less interested person like the vast majority of people in the country who have other lives and don't have time to spend their lives paying attention to government, just look at it as lunacy and they get turned off from it." The end result, Jackson said, is voter turnout has decreased and small groups of core followers have become more influential in swaying elections.

Jackson was one of several interviewees who said the press does not set the agenda for public policy. "They go with what the story is of the day," he said. "They're pretty easily led, in fact, toward the stories." Jackson and Politickernj's Isherwood noted Christie does not rely on the State House press corps to get news and information to New Jerseyans as much as his predecessors did. For example, Acocella and Isherwood said Christie's numerous Town Hall meetings allow him to bypass the scrutiny of the mainstream media. "He's definitely getting his message out there and without us, which, from a press standpoint, is a bit disconcerting," Isherwood said. "He does them, they're on the governor's webpage within hours and everybody can watch them," Acocella agreed.

Isherwood said Christie also makes effective use of press releases to reach the public. "There's an edge to them," he explained. "They're critical of the Democrats. It's

not just this happened today and here's the governor's quote on it. They're almost attack pieces in some cases and all of that bypasses the media."

It is ironic that press releases would become a means for bypassing the media because, prior to the Internet, the media were the only audience for press releases. This development also demonstrates how the agenda-setting role has shifted. Prior to the Internet, individuals and organizations would submit them to news organization in the hope of obtaining coverage. Now, in addition to going to the media, news releases are posted online where anyone can view them, so it no longer is as important that journalists report on them. "It seems that Gov. Christie has succeeded in setting much of the agenda because he is aggressive and has proposed pretty historic legislation," said Matt Katz, who covers the New Jersey State House for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. "We've covered it because it's important and that's what's actually happening."

Although Katz acknowledges that the media's agenda-setting role has declined, he and others feel the press still is holding government accountable. Lisa Fleisher, who covered New Jersey for *The Wall Street Journal*, said the Internet is making government officials more accountable. "There's actually more recording of what is said so you can go back and pull a clip and say, 'Well you said this on this date, so what now?'," she said.

Others, however, said government is being held less accountable because of the reductions in personnel and resources at news organizations.

"The resources aren't out there to cover and do investigative reporting," said Shapiro. "I think that that used to be a mainstay of the newspaper business and now it's not." Isherwood said reporters still break stories, but because staffs are smaller, they no

longer have the time to research and write longer, investigative pieces. “When there were twice as many State House reporters, we knew a lot more about individual bills, who was pushing what and why. We don’t get that anymore,” said Acocella of *Politifax*.

The Record’s Jackson offered a different perspective, suggesting that government still is being held accountable, but that much of the accountability is the result of new media platforms that have emerged with the growth of the Internet. “I think that there’s a lot of people keeping an eye on what the government is doing and probably more than they were when it was just the mainstream media,” he said.

An incident involving Gov. Christie’s use of a state helicopter to attend one of his son’s high school baseball games illustrates Jackson’s point. The story, which eventually became national news, was broken by a local AOL Patch site. In addition, reporters writing follow-up stories on the incident were able to do better, more in-depth reporting because of the Internet. Fleisher said she was able to quickly compile information on previous governors’ use of state helicopters to place the Christie story into better context.

Table 8

Interviewees Set 2 (2010-11)

FIRST NAME	LAST NAME	ORGANIZATION (at time of interview)	TITLE	DATE
Nick	Acocella	Politifax	Editor and Publisher	7/19/2011
Maurice	Carroll	Quinnipiac Polling Institute	Director	10/8/2010
Jerome	Aumente*	Rutgers University	Professor Emeritus	10/18/2008
Sid	Dorfman	Dorf Feature Service	Owner and President	11/8/2010
Harvey	Fisher	The Record	Retired Reporter	3/3/2011
Lisa	Fleisher	Wall Street Journal	Reporter	7/18/2011
Darryl	Isherwood	politickernj	Editor	5/24/2011
Herb	Jackson**	The Record	Reporter	8/9/2011
Matt	Katz	Philadelphia Inquirer	Reporter	7/18/2011
Joshua	McMahon	NJ Newsroom	Columnist	3/11/2010
Michael	Shapiro	Alternative Press	CEO and Publisher	7/18/2011
Dan	Weissman	Star-Ledger	Retired Reporter	3/3/2011

*(Webcasts of all interviews [other than Herb Jackson] are available at
<http://www.youtube.com/user/hallInstitute> and
<http://richleeonline.wordpress.com/video/#landscape>)*

** The interview with Jerome Aumente interview conducted in 2008, but was edited in 2011 and incorporated into the Hall Institute's New Jersey's Media Landscape webcast series.*

*** The interview with Herb Jackson was conducted by Amit Jani, who assisted with this project.*

Interviews Set 3 (2013)

The final set of interviews was conducted after both parts of the content analysis were complete so that the interviewees could comment on the findings. The interviews took place in June 2013 in-person and via phone and email with individuals who were directly involved with the campaigns.

Findings on News Coverage, Voter Priorities

Interviewees offered a number of explanations for the results of part 1 of the content analysis, which showed a gap between what was reported during the 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial campaigns and what voters identified as priorities, as well as little change in press coverage and voter priorities between the two elections. Several said political stories are easier to report than issue stories and that voter interests were the same because their top priority – taxes – had not been addressed. Some said there were fewer issue stories because a candidate's stand on an issue usually does not change during a campaign, so there is no new news to report. Others blamed voters, arguing that even though they may have identified taxes and other policy issues as priorities, they really are more interested in coverage of horserace and personal issues.

Regardless of the explanations, the interviewees agreed that the gap resulted in a less informed electorate. The gap left voters ill-informed about the issues that concerned them most, according to La Salle University Provost Joseph Marbach, who was Dean of Arts and Sciences at Seton Hall University and a frequent political commentator and analyst during both elections. "It certainly didn't help voters make an informed decision," said an executive with a statewide trade association, who briefed the major candidates on

policy issues in both 2005 and 2009. “It means that voters are getting shortchanged,” added Lawrence, the Corzine campaign’s media consultant in 2005 and 2009.

Even reporters who covered the campaigns acknowledged the shortcomings of the coverage. “I think the primary effect of this gap is that voters are fed a steady diet of inside baseball political stories with not enough information about how candidates feel about the issues that are important to them,” said NJ101.5’s McArdle. Deborah Howlett, who covered the 2005 election for *The Star-Ledger* and was Jon Corzine’s communication director in 2009, described the coverage as superficial with more focus on “who would be better to have a beer with rather than who will do a better job on the economy.” Two journalists who covered both races and requested anonymity expressed similar sentiments. “Voters are left to decide whose rhetoric sounds more appealing rather than having a full examination of the candidates’ plans themselves,” said one. “If it is true that we’re doing a bad job of covering policy issues, then it is bad to have an uninformed public in both elections, and it’s a problem that we in the news media have not learned from our own failings,” said the other.

Many of the journalists said that, even though policy issues are important, stories with a political tinge are more interesting and more likely to attract readers. “What a boring campaign it would be if every news article were only about the policy positions of the candidates,” said Michael Aron, a longtime New Jersey political reporter who covered both races for *New Jersey Network*. “Voters may not know the positions on issues of the candidates as well as they might, but, again, who wants a steady diet of position papers?”

Findings on Personal Issues in News Coverage

As with the gap between what the press covered and what voters identified as priorities, interviewees offered a number of explanations for why negative, personal stories found their way into the media with greater ease in 2009, but once again agreed the trend was detrimental. Some interviewees explained that the campaigns spent less time discussing substantive issues in 2009, so reporters wrote more stories on the candidates' personalities.

Howlett said the 2009 campaign was personality driven, whereas the 2005 race was driven by issues. "The 2009 race, in my recollection, was largely devoid of substance," said a reporter who covered both campaigns. "The two candidates locked onto messages early in the race and did little to come up with new ideas. That left more room for such personal stories. In 2005 there was a much broader debate."

Several interviewees attributed the change to the economy, which left news staffs with fewer reporters. "This was a period when a significant number of reporters left to take positions in government or nonprofits," Marbach said. "They were replaced with less experienced reporters, who may have been more likely to write the personal stories."

Campaign officials said it was easier to persuade journalists to write stories about personal issues in 2009 because there were fewer reporters. "The press corps had dwindled significantly from 2005 to 2009," said an official who worked on both campaigns. "The journalists left were shorthanded, but they still had to do their daily stories to make sure their editors were satisfied."

Lawrence said advances in opposition research also played a role by giving campaigns more negative material on their opponents, which they then leak to the media.

“Reporters like to get inside scoop from the campaigns,” he said. “Reporters are stretched thin. This ‘oppo dump’ does some of the basic work for them and allows them to write with less original work.” Lawrence’s counterpart in the 2009 campaign agreed that the media picked up on several negative stories that the Corzine campaign had planted about Christie. “Stories about traffic tickets became much bigger deals because Gov. Corzine’s campaign put millions of dollars in negative television ads to push those stories,” said Michael DuHaime, Christie’s lead strategist in 2009. *NJ Spotlight’s* Mooney said campaign tactics were more aggressive in 2009, resulting in more stories about negative and personal issues.

Reporters acknowledged that they sometimes are more likely to write a story about a personal issue than one on public policy. “It’s far easier to do an interesting story about an interesting personal peccadillo than policy,” said Josh Margolin, who covered both campaigns for *The Star-Ledger*.

Several journalists said the change in coverage of personal stories was largely a result of the Internet. In 2005, websites were less prevalent and Twitter did not exist. “In 2005, we were able to take more time to vet allegations without having to worry about another outlet beating us to the punch,” said NJ101.5’s McArdle. The proliferation of media and the speed of the news cycle has left reporters looking for more stories and headlines, according to a reporter who covered both races. “We are no longer limited by just what fits in print,” said a reporter who covered both races. “Since Twitter and the Web, there is more space for more stories, and more demand to keep things fresh. Stories reported in the morning are stale by afternoon.”

Others noted that not only does the Internet require journalists to post more frequent stories, it often demands stories designed to attract web traffic. “More and more it's becoming all about eyeballs - the more clicks, the more ad revenue,” explained Alternative Press CEO Michael Shapiro. “Once well-respected publications are putting out more and more personal attack stories because they get more clicks, irrespective of their news value.” Between 2005 and 2009, online journalism gained a foothold, forcing the New Jersey media to seek website hits to impress advertisers, the executive with the statewide trade association noted. “This promoted a need to fill a cybernews hole, and a need to encourage website visits,” he said. “The former lends itself to quick stories rather than studied analyses; the latter is fulfilled more easily through sensationalism than issues-oriented coverage.”

Several reporters disagreed with the premise that personal stories about the candidate were more likely to be published, posted or aired in 2009. They provided information from their personal experiences to explain why they disagreed with the premise. In all cases, the information they provided was not apparent from reading the articles. For example, some reporters noted that they had been pitched personal stories about the candidates in 2009, but did not write them because they were unable to confirm the information they received. Others said not all of the personal stories in 2005 were driven by legitimate news angles, arguing that political operatives drove those stories too. A few defended the 2009 stories on Christie's driving tickets because the incidents ran counter to his image as the law-abiding U.S. Attorney for New Jersey. “As the reporter who broke the story about then-candidate Christie's driving tickets I can tell you the reason that was news was simply because I was told he showed his credentials to the

officer who let him go and most people do not get that kind of treatment,” said NJ101.5’s McArdle.

The reporters, however, acknowledged that personal stories were more prevalent in 2009 and that voters received less valuable information than in 2005, attributing the change to the economic condition of the industry and the growth of the Internet. “I do think there were big differences between 2005 and 2009 coverage,” said one of the reporters. “For one thing, there were more reporters working in 2005.” Another journalist who covered both races echoed those sentiments: “In general, my sense is that the proliferation of media and the new speed of the news cycle has left reporters looking for more stories and headlines.”

Analysis of Findings on Voter Comments in Poll Stories

The decline in voter comments in poll stories had similar explanations, again attributed to fiscal factors and the Internet. Several interviewees noted that, because there were fewer reporters, it was more difficult to find time to interview citizens for reactions to polls in 2009. “In 2009, there were fewer journalists working in New Jersey and it was harder to free up journalists for the citizen interviews,” said a reporter who covered both races. Howlett said there were fewer voter comments in the *Star-Ledger*’s 2009 stories because the Ledger - for cost reasons - ended its affiliation with the Eagleton Polling Institute and stopped conducting focus groups on the polls before the 2009 campaign. The situation was exacerbated by the merger of the *Star-Ledger* and *Record* State House bureaus. Rather than provide its own reporting in 2009, most of the *Record*’s coverage of the campaign consisted of the *Star-Ledger* stories that included fewer voter comments than 2005.

Howlett was one of many interviewees who said new responsibilities resulting from the growth of the Internet cut into time that could have been used to interview citizens in 2009. “Reporters were pressed to deal with other obligations beyond writing stories, including filing online during the day, as well as tweeting during events,” she said. “I think clearly that the reporting in 2009 was much shallower than in 2005. Fewer reporters with more obligations and responsibilities always equals less depth of reporting.” Marbach said deadlines were tighter in 2009 because, unlike in 2005, stories were posted online before they were printed or aired, leaving reporters with no time to obtain voter reaction.

Reporters who covered the campaigns said the new responsibilities were a strong factor in the decrease in voter comments on poll stories. Reporters now cannot just cover the campaign,” said one journalist. “They have to do other stuff, and when they are covering it, they have to do tweets and videos. All that erodes the time you can devote to a story.” Another reporter noted, “For me, I know the demands on time and coverage - to blog and write online with fewer staffers - require me to dispense with routine stories faster. The added value of seeking out respondents does not always match the time that we have to invest in getting such comments. That time, to me, is often better spent on other stories, since we can still report the general results of the poll.”

A few interviewees suggested that pundits made more aggressive efforts to get quoted in 2009. “It might be easier for reporters to contact the go-to people in college political science departments than to come up with a representative sampling of voters,” said the trade association executive. An individual who worked for the Democratic candidates in 2005 and 2009 agreed that reporters quoted pundits more frequently in

2009 because they are easier to reach than citizens. “Oftentimes they will call through to journalists to opine when a poll is released and, with a depleted press corps, it is simply easier for a journalist to grab one of the people they have on speed dial and fill in the blanks before moving on to the next story,” he said. Lawrence said some colleges use their polls for marketing and push to have their faculty members quoted. “It was more convenient (in 2009) to talk to pundits who were always available to toot their own horn,” said Weissman.

Aron, who now is Chief Political Correspondent for NJTV, said he found analysis from pundits more valuable than voter comments. “Voter quotes -like man-in-the-street soundbites on television - never particularly interest me, unless they are unusual,” he said. “To simply support a poll finding, the quote doesn't really add much. I would rather hear from an analyst as to what he thinks is going on.” Aron was not the only individual who said voter comments add little value to stories on polls. “Quotes from voters are not particularly meaningful unless they are backed up by deeper reporting about why voters feel the way they do,” said one of the reporters who covered both races. “Reporting voter comments seems to merely round out stories, but does not really contribute to the content,” added Marbach.

Others said individual interviews with citizens no affect on campaigns, candidates and voters. “It is the poll that people are clicking to see and passing around, not what Joe Smith thinks of the poll results,” explained Shapiro. One journalist, John Mooney of *NJ Spotlight*, did see a value in including voter comments. “I think they are useful,” he said. “I get a lot out of them. The hard numbers only say so much.”

Campaign officials offered different opinions on how polls affect strategy. On the Democratic side, Lawrence said campaigns sometimes take actions simply to move numbers in polls. “The public polls that come out during a gubernatorial are exhausting,” said another strategist who worked on the 2005 and 2009 Corzine campaigns. “Each one creates a panic or a wave of euphoria among your supporters and detractors. Public polls can make it more difficult to raise money, making the public polls essentially a self-fulfilling prophecy.” DuHaime, the Republicans’ lead strategist in 2009, said polls had little effect on the GOP campaign. “The campaigns are not driven by stories about polls,” he said. “They will try to get a message into the story, but poll stories have little effect on the campaigns, unless they can be used for fundraising or momentum-building.”

Table 9

Interviewees Set 3 (2013)

FIRST NAME	LAST NAME	ORGANIZATION (During Campaigns)	TITLE	DATE
Michael	Aron	New Jersey Network	Senior Political Correspondent	7/9/2013
Marie	DeNoia Aronsohn	New Jersey Network	Senior Correspondent	7/15/2013
Michael	DuHaime	Christie Campaign	Lead Strategist	7/1/2013
Joseph	Kyrillos	Christie Campaign	Chair	7/10/2013
Brad	Lawrence	Corzine Campaign (05) Corzine Campaign (09)	Media Consultant Media Consultant	6/28/2013
Joe	Marbach	Seton Hall University	Dean of Arts and Sciences	6/8/2013
Joshua	Margolin	Star-Ledger	Reporter	6/21/2013
Kevin	McArdle	NJ 101.5	Reporter	6/19/2013
John	Moooney	NJ Spotlight	Founding Editor	7/10/2013
Bill	Pallutuci	Christie Campaign	Strategist	6/25/2013
Michael	Riccards	Hall Institute of Public Policy	Executive Director	6/21/2013
Michael	Shapiro	Alternative Press	CEO and Publisher	6/24/2013
Stacie	Sherman	Bloomberg News	Trenton Bureau Chief	6/27/2013
John	Weingart	Eagleton Institute of Politics	Associate Director	6/26/2013
Dan	Weissman	(none)	Retired Reporter	6/11/2013
	Anonymous	Corzine Campaign (05) Corzine Campaign (09)	Volunteer Senior Staff	6/3/2013
	Anonymous	News organization	Reporter	6/11/2013
	Anonymous	News organization	Reporter	6/24/2013
	Anonymous	News organization	Reporter	6/24/2013
	Anonymous	Statewide Trade Association	Assistant Executive Dir.	6/24/2013

Chapter 6: Discussion

What do 904 news articles and 45 interviews about New Jersey gubernatorial campaigns tell us about how the state's media changed from 2004 to 2009? The research shows the influence of traditional news outlets in New Jersey has decreased and that these entities are not providing citizens with the information they need to make intelligent, educated decisions on how to vote. It also shows a gap between what the media cover and what voters identify as their top priorities.

The changes are a result of the two major developments affecting the news industry in New Jersey and throughout the country at the start of the 21st Century. Dwindling fiscal resources have forced news organizations to reduce personnel. Those journalists who keep their jobs are stretched thin. They have more stories to cover and less time to cover them in-depth. The fiscal crunch also took its toll on news quality because *The Star-Ledger* and *The Record*, even though they are competing news organizations, consolidated their State House bureaus in early 2009. As a result, almost all of the 2009 campaign coverage that appeared in *The Record* was written by *Star-Ledger* reporters and identical to what appeared in *The Star-Ledger*. *Record* reporters such as Herb Jackson who had years of experience covering state government and politics in New Jersey, did not cover the race. Josh Margolin, who covered both elections for *The Star-Ledger*, said overall quality of the 2009 coverage suffered because of *The Record's* absence. "We lost a really important editorial voice that had devoted space to policy and politics," he said.

At the same time the economy was putting pressure on New Jersey news entities, the Internet was placing new demands on the media. Today's audiences expect to receive

news and information as it occurs. The cumulative effect of these developments is evident when the coverage of New Jersey's 2005 gubernatorial election is compared with the reporting from the 2009 campaign. In 2009, there was more focus on personalities and less on substance.

There also were fewer comments from voters and a greater reliance on pundits. While the pundits' commentary and analyses of issues were valuable, the small number of voter quotes underscored the disconnect between the media and the citizenry that was apparent from the disparity between voter priorities and what the press covered. The disconnect also was evident from the reasons reporters gave to explain why voter comments were seldom included in their stories. Although most attributed the lack of voter comments to time constraints, many bluntly stated that they saw little value in including citizen quotes in their reports.

The content analysis showed that the topics the media covered – and the attention given to each of them -- during New Jersey's 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial campaigns were nearly identical. There are several possible implications for these. On one hand, the similarities might suggest that the changes in the economy and the growth of the Internet had no impact on press coverage and voter behavior, so there was no change in the dynamics among media, the public, government and democracy. On the other hand, the fact that three major newspapers covered New Jersey's 2009 gubernatorial campaign almost exactly as they did in 2005 could offer a clue as to why citizens are turning away from print media and other traditional news entities. Interviewees attributed the lack of change to the state's failure to fully address the issues voters cited as priorities. "Those issues still have not been adequately addressed so they remain on the top of the list for

voters,” explained Shapiro of *The Alternative Press*. Others noted that taxes are always a priority for voters because tax rates are high in New Jersey. “For decades, New Jersey has had the highest-in-the-nation property taxes on average,” said Kevin McArdle, who covered the 2005 and 2009 campaigns for NJ101.5 radio. “It should come as no surprise that taxes are always at or near the top of issues.”

The absence of change in news content is consistent with Georgetown University Associate Professor Diana Owen’s observations about the Internet’s impact on news content during the 2008 presidential campaign. Owen contended that the Internet did not produce a significant change in actual news content, but rather that it “amplified the coverage of mainstream media” in “newfangled and sometimes more elaborate” formats, adding:

Audience preferences for particular types of delivery systems for news have changed, as people are abandoning hard-copy newspapers in favor of online sites. However, these sites contain much of the same core content that is produced by professional print journalists. (2009a, pp.19, 23)

The content analysis showed that the media had little role in setting the agenda for voters during either campaign year. Voters remained focused on taxes even though the media concentrated on politics. Likewise, the interviews also suggested that the New Jersey media’s impact on public policy is minimal at best. It was not surprising that veteran and retired journalists felt the media exerted greater influence over decision-makers in days gone by. Nor was it surprising that campaign officials – who generally have tense relationships with the media – said their decisions were not affected by news reports. What was telling, however, were the comments from the journalists themselves.

The journalists felt it was the role of government and politicians to set the agenda – and that it was then their responsibility to report those activities. This runs counter to Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw’s 1972 study, *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*, in which they found that the media set the agenda for citizens and policymakers by deciding what topics to cover. McCombs and Shaw’s agenda-setting theory has been supported by the results of more than 300 hundred published studies since 1972.

Agenda setting by the media also has been evident in New Jersey. For example, NJ101.5’s focus on state government’s decision to raise \$2.8 billion in taxes in 1990 fueled a “tax revolt” that led to the defeat of a record number of Democratic legislators and eventually resulted in the rollback of some of those taxes. The station also played a major role in the enactment of Megan’s Law, advocating protecting children from sexual predators by airing numerous news reports and talk show programs in the immediate aftermath of the rape and murder of 7-year-old Megan Kanka in 1994. A 2008 study (Lee) on the New Jersey news media’s impact on the development of the state’s transportation infrastructure study provided several examples of the media’s influence in the area of transportation, including the construction of Route 280 and the creation of a monorail at Newark Liberty Airport.

Of greater significance than the media’s diminished agenda-setting role are the observations by individuals involved in New Jersey’s 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial elections. They generally agreed that changes in media coverage have left the electorate ill informed. For example, the interviewees said the trend toward more personal stories will leave voters less informed and more cynical. “Obviously, this focus on the personal

feeds voters' cynicism and frankly leaves them less informed,” said Lawrence, the media consultant for Corzine’s 2005 and 2009 campaigns. “It creates a cycle of negativity where each campaign has to respond and up the ante on these stories.” Indeed, as this study is being written, New Jersey’s 2013 gubernatorial is under way and media coverage once again is leaning more heavily on personal issues than substance, including a new round of exchanges between the campaigns over statements made about Christie’s weight. During the same campaign cycle, coverage of a special election for one of New Jersey’s U.S. Senate seats has included stories about sexual identity, cigars, pedicures and Scotch whiskey.

The Alternative Press’ Shapiro said increased reporting on negative, personal issues has diminished voters’ confidence in the media and left them ill informed. “Candidates and their campaigns are focused on the salacious rather than the serious issues of the day and the voter is left out of the process and more uninformed and uninvolved than ever before,” he said. Shapiro contends that the repercussions of ill-informed voters are significant. “Officials are elected who do not truly serve the voters’ best interests and are not as interested in the issues of concern to the voters,” he explained. “There’s a great deal of frustration on the part of voters. They do not see change. They do not see elected officials taking their concerns seriously.” Kyrillos, the New Jersey state senator who chaired Christie’s 2009 campaign, said that when citizens are not fully informed, they are unaware of the need to address public policy problems, such as the economy on the national level and property tax reform on the state level. “It worries me that people don’t fully understand and appreciate the situation we’re in,” he said.

In addition, the media's tendency to use more stories that focus on personal issues rather than substantive matters creates a danger that voters will rely more heavily on a candidate's personality than his or record when deciding who to support. "Because we generate narratives about kinds of people, it is easier to take personal data and fill in the political facts and policies than to start with political facts and fill in the personal data," Popkin wrote in *The Reasoning Voter* (1994, p. 78). "This has an important political implication in decision making and evaluation: campaign behavior can dominate political history."

On the other hand, voters can benefit from learning more about the personalities of candidates. "I don't think personal stories are irrelevant; they speak to how people are going to handle situations," said John Mooney of *NJ Spotlight* (personal communication, July 12, 2013). Mooney said coverage of Christie's personality during the 2009 campaign provided voters with a sense of how he would handle crises, such as the devastation New Jersey experienced from Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Similarly, the authors of *Crosstalk* (1996) found that candidate personalities are intertwined with the more substantive factors upon which voters base their decisions.

Regardless of the role personal stories played with voters, the ease with which they now are published, posted and aired also has made political operatives more powerful and influential. McArdle noted that candidates and their campaigns use social media just as well, if not better, than the media. "The candidates and their campaigns and independent groups, which are becoming a much bigger force, all have more power to influence voters today than ten years ago," said a veteran State House reporter. "The fact-checking articles help, but they still do not make up for more comprehensive coverage of

the candidates and the issues. Voters are getting less comprehensive feedback from the media, and that surely has to weaken the ability of voters to independently appraise the candidates and their platforms.”

Not all of information emerging from the interviews was negative. Although the research showed that traditional media outlets are not fully informing citizens, other entities are filling the void. Several interviewees noted that more information than ever is available to citizens; it is just not coming from traditional media outlets. Instead, campaigns are posting detailed policy position papers, albeit with partisan tinges, online. New news platforms such as *NJ Spotlight* are conducting detailed analyses of public policy issues and posting them online in a news format. Some of those interviewed for this project noted that the Internet not only makes information more readily available, but also holds political officials and other powerful individuals and organizations more accountable. Herb Jackson of the record said more people now are keeping an eye on government, and Lisa Fleisher pointed to the increased recording of public statements as a development that strengthens accountability. The Internet should not be viewed as a threat; it is “an added product,” according to Sid Dorfman, an individual who has spent more than 75 years working in New Jersey journalism and who has experienced the effects the development of radio and television had on the media industry. “What we all hope is that we can live together and that each of us (media platforms) has certain qualities which the rest of us don’t have.”

Another optimistic sign for the future emerged from a 2009 study published in the *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*. The authors, Michael L. Best and Keegan W.

Wade, examined the relationship between the Internet and democracy from 1992 to 2002 and found the relationship to be much stronger in the final two years of the study.

If citizens are less informed, as the majority of interviewees indicated, traditional media deserve some of the blame. But the citizenry also is partially responsible. In many ways, the Internet has made our lives more convenient, but it also requires that we work a little harder. We can make airline and hotel reservations ourselves, but it means that we have to research prices, availability and other items that once were provided to us by travel agents and hotel call centers. There is a parallel in how we obtain news and information today. All of the information we need no longer arrives on our doorstep in one convenient package every morning. Instead, it has become our responsibility to search through the vast array of information sources available today and pull out the facts we need to make informed, educated decisions. Whether the average citizen will undertake such comprehensive research, however, is doubtful.

We are indeed at a watershed moment for journalism and democracy. Hypothetically, if citizens do opt to educate themselves with the vast amounts of information now available online, the public's perception of journalism's role in society could be further diminished. As this study found, the New Jersey's media's agenda-setting role has decreased, and there is a strong sense that the state's news organizations are leaving citizens less informed. Increased reliance on sources outside of the world of professional journalism will only further increase this perception. Although the media would still retain its important watchdog function, that function is increasingly being filled by individuals and organizations that do not fit the traditional definition of journalist. For example, a bartender at a private fundraiser for Republican presidential

candidate Mitt Romney secretly recorded comments from the candidate which, after they were leaked to the press, negatively affected his campaign. Likewise, government contractor Edward Snowden's 2013 decision to leak top-secret government documents has had major repercussions on the nation's mass surveillance programs and policies.

Lastly, it should be noted that several interviewees were skeptical of the responses voters gave on the two Monmouth polls, suggesting that even though the respondents said they were interested in public policy issues, they are more apt to read stories on personalities. Survey respondents often answer questions untruthfully to avoid negative perceptions about themselves (Krumpel).

The theory that citizens are more interested in the sensational than policy is bolstered by the fact that news organizations (with few exceptions) are in the business of making money. A news organization's revenue is directly related to the size of its audience, so it stands to reason that stories that attract the largest audiences will be reported and highlighted. With search engine optimization, news entities now have an unprecedented ability to track audience reading habits. If policy stories were drawing the most readers, there would be more of them. This is why the policy stories tend to show up in reports by news outlets that are not under pressure to turn a profit. For example, Marie DeNoia Aronsohn, who covered both campaigns for *New Jersey Network*, recalled:

Our mandate was to cover issues. As public TV we were not driven by ratings, and we covered the campaigns every weekday. Each day, I recall, being very conscious of fulfilling our role as New Jersey's 'serious' TV news program of record. That is especially true of the 2005 campaign.

Answers to the three research questions

The answers to the three research questions are contained in the body of this article – in the content analysis, the interviews and the narratives that followed. To summarize, the answers to R1 (How has news coverage in New Jersey been affected by fiscal factors that have diminished newsroom personnel and resources?) and R2 (How has news coverage in New Jersey been affected by the growth of the Internet, which has radically changed the manner in which news is gathered, reported and disseminated?) are similar.

The fiscal crunch experienced by New Jersey news entities, along with the growth of the Internet, have resulted in more shallow coverage. Stories are covered in less depth because there are fewer reporters to write them, and due to buyouts and layoffs, many of the reporters on the job today are younger and less experienced and have less institutional knowledge than the journalists they replaced. The Internet has had a similar impact on the quality of news. Reporters must post stories and updates quickly throughout the day, leaving less time for delving deeper into issues, placing issues in context and basic fact checking.

On the other hand, the Internet has had a positive effect by providing an inexpensive means for the launching of online-only news sites such as *The Alternative Press*, *NJ Spotlight* and *NJ Newsroom* that are providing New Jersey citizens with new sources for information about their state.

The answer to R3 (How have the changes in news coverage in New Jersey affected the ability of the media and the citizenry to fulfill their roles in the democratic process?) depends in part on the manner in which media are defined. If they are defined

as traditional media, it is clear that the changes have made it more difficult for news entities to fulfill their democratic responsibility because of the reasons described above. If defined in broader terms to include blogs, social networks and other new information platforms, the changes have the potential to help news entities better fulfill their responsibility to inform the citizenry.

On an even more basic level, the answer could vary depending on how one defines the media's role in the democratic process. Is it merely to provide citizens with a mirror to view what is happening in the world? Is the role of the media, as Lippmann suggested, to shine a searchlight on activities and events so that informed decisions can be made? Or as Dewey suggested, does the press have a greater responsibility to help the citizenry better comprehend news and information? Taken a step further, is the media's role to set the agenda for public policy as McCombs and Shaw demonstrated with their landmark 1972 study?

Defining the role of the media in democracy is a topic for a separate and assuredly lively debate and discussion. However, regardless of the definition, the content analysis and the interviews showed that the traditional media were not fulfilling their democratic responsibility.

As for the impact on the citizenry, again the answer can vary. The research showed that citizens are receiving less valuable information from traditional news entities, but it also showed that more information than ever is available online for citizens who choose to educate themselves on the candidates and the issues. Again, this leads to a more fundamental question. Do the media fulfill their responsibility merely by making information available? Or do they also have a responsibility to ensure that the citizenry

consumes that information and uses it to make informed decisions? In *Democracy and the News*, Gans noted that even if the media provide the information citizens need, there is no guarantee they will use it. To ensure that citizens do digest the material the media provide, he suggested an additional responsibility for journalists, namely incorporating motivational, rhetorical and educational techniques into their work. “Journalists are not very curious about how the news audience becomes an informed citizenry, but merely supplying them with information does not make them into informed citizens,” he wrote (p. 56). Gans’s suggestions sound good in theory, but given the dismal fiscal condition of the news industry, now is not an opportune time to take on new educational responsibilities, even if they are critical to the American democratic system of governance. To survive in the 21st Century economy, news organizations are relying more heavily on attracting audiences rather than taking pro-active steps to educate them.

Suggestions for future research

This study was based on an important, but small, sample of New Jersey news coverage. A larger sample over a larger period of time could yield stronger results. A more longitudinal study in particular would be useful. Although the 2005-2009 period was a time of significant change in the media industry in New Jersey and elsewhere, those changes did not begin in 2005 and end in 2009. Signs that the economy and the Internet were altering the media landscape already were evident in 2005 and those two factors continue to alter the landscape as New Jersey’s 2013 gubernatorial election approaches. “The whole of communications has changed from 2005 to 2009 and changed again in 2013,” said Bill Palatucci, a close Christie associate who served as a strategist during the 2009 campaign (personal communication).

Additionally, a more longitudinal study might produce a clearer picture by countering the effects of many factors that change from election to election. While no two elections are identical, several of the individuals involved in both the 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial campaigns, noted that there were differences between the two races that may have attributed to the changes in the media's coverage. In 2005, the race was for an open seat; in 2009, an incumbent had to defend his record. In 2009, the economy was a greater factor than it was in 2005 because of global fiscal crisis that had taken place in 2005. Also, according to some interviewees, the increased focus on personality in 2009 might have been a result – at least in part of Christie's personality, which was much more colorful than Forrester's.

Another topic that merits future study is the oft-repeated statement that news quality suffers when veteran reporters are replaced by younger, less experienced journalists. The point sounds logical. A reporter who has been covering a beat for 20 years or more is likely to have institutional knowledge and sources that individuals new to the beat would lack. But new reporters can bring new approaches to the job. They may be more adept at Twitter, blogging and computer-assisted reporting. They also may be less cozy with the institutions and individuals they cover – and this could lead to better reporting. Along with these issues, a quantitative analysis also could add value by showing how many veteran reporters have been supplanted by newcomers. Again, the generalization that this practice is widespread sounds logical, but it needs to be proven or disproven to ensure the validity of future research on this topic.

Conclusion

Based on the research, findings and observations about the news coverage of New Jersey's 2005 and 2009 gubernatorial campaigns, it would be easy to conclude that the process by which the state's citizens obtain information and make important decisions is dysfunctional. The topics the media cover are different from the topics citizens say are most important to them. But the media contend they actually are giving citizens the type of stories they are more likely read. Meanwhile, decision-makers claim that the media have little or no impact on public policy. And diverse groups of people, including government and political officials, journalists, pundits and campaign consultants, agree that New Jersey voters were less informed in 2009 than 2005 (and several claim they are even less informed as the 2013 gubernatorial election approaches).

Thomas Patterson's 1994 book *Out of Order* helps explain the dysfunction. Patterson said election campaigns in the United States are organized around the media, an arrangement that is unworkable. "Democracy cannot operate successfully without a free press that is acting effectively within its sphere. The problem arises when the press is expected to perform the job of political institutions as well," he wrote (p. 29). The press, according to Walter Lippmann, is no substitute for institutions.

"Outdated," however, may be a more appropriate label than "dysfunctional." The impact of downturns in the economy, coupled with the growth of the Internet, have rendered obsolete the longstanding manner in which citizens obtained news and information. News entities no longer are able to regularly provide in-depth stories by experienced reporters unpacking the major issues confronting the state. Fortunately, new news platforms are emerging in New Jersey and elsewhere to fill this void. However, the

new media landscape requires a greater commitment from citizens. Becoming an informed and educated citizen in the 21st Century is not a passive activity. To fulfill their roles in the democratic process, citizens can no longer rely on the media to provide them with the information they need. Instead, they must seek it out from the plethora of material available online and decide what is credible and what is not, what is valuable and what is not, so they can participate in the democratic process as informed citizens and keep democracy strong and healthy.

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