

## **Non-Profit News: Assessing a New Landscape in Journalism**

A new phenomenon has emerged in journalism in recent years—the era of non-profit news.

As traditional newsrooms have shrunk, a group of institutions and funders motivated by something other than profit are entering the journalism arena. This distinguishes them from the commercial news institutions that dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose primary sources of revenue—advertising and circulation—were self-evident.

Who are these new players in journalism? Are these sites delivering, as they generally purport to be, independent and disinterested news reporting? Or are some of them more political and ideological in their reporting? How can audiences assess this for themselves? In short, what role are these operations playing in the changing ecosystem of news?

A new study by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism offers a detailed look at a portion of this new cohort of news providers—sites that cover state and national news. The study examines some four dozen sites across the country, all of them launched in 2005 or later, that offer coverage beyond the local level to state and national news. That group includes national news sites such as Pulitzer Prize-winning ProPublica, which receives money from more than a dozen foundations and has a staff of more than 30.<sup>1</sup> It also includes lesser-known news sites such as Missouri News Horizon, whose funding is less clear and covers Missouri state government with a staff of three journalists. The study analyzes the funding, transparency and organizational structure of these sites, and also the nature of their news coverage.<sup>2</sup>

(There is a larger universe of community-level non-profit news operations perhaps even more diverse in nature. That group is beyond the scope of this analysis, but does bear further study.)

The 46 national- and state-level news sites examined—a group that included seven new commercial sites with similar missions—offered a wide range of styles and approaches, but roughly half, the study found, produced news coverage that was clearly ideological in nature.

In general, the more ideological sites tended to be funded mostly or entirely by one parent organization—though that parent group may have various contributors. They tended to be less transparent about who they are and where their funding comes from. And they tended to produce less content—in some cases generating one or two stories per week produced by a single staffer.

Sites that offered a mixed or balanced political perspective, on the other hand, tended to have multiple funders, more revenue streams, more transparency and more content with a deeper bench of reporters. The six most transparent sites studied, for instance, were among the most balanced in the news they produced.

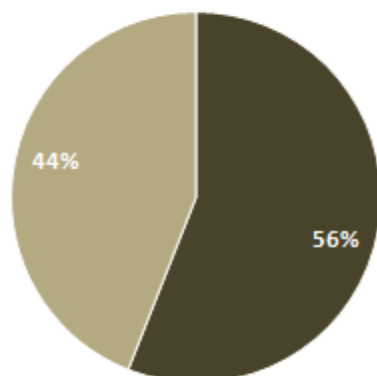
In terms of reach, the most popular site in the study, The Daily Caller, is a commercial enterprise with a clear ideological orientation. Of the non-profit sites, it is harder to generalize. One of the most popular sites in the study was the Washington Independent, a liberal site, but it has since ceased publication.<sup>3</sup> In

many other cases, sites with more balanced coverage, such as ProPublica and the Texas Tribune, are among the most trafficked in the sample.

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## Ideology in the Non-Profit Newsroom

■ Non-ideological sites   ■ Ideological sites



**Note:** Non-ideological sites are those that scored 50 or below on the 100-pt. ideology scale. Ideological sites are those that scored higher than 50 on the 100-pt. ideology scale. PEJ analysis is based on original home-page news content sampled from the month of September, 2010.

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These are among the findings of the study, which examined 46 news websites and an additional 68 institutions and individuals that provide the primary financial support for those sites. Researchers analyzed a total of 1,203 stories sampled from the month of September 2010 and conducted an audit of the sites and their chief supporters between the months of May 2010 and September 2010.

The non-profit sites studied, 39 in all, fell naturally into three basic types based on the nature of their funding and the level of independence of their organizations. There were **Group Sites**, those that were part of formal families organized by a single parent or funder. There were **Associated Sites**, those that shared content with each other but otherwise operated independently and for the most part had different funders from one another. There were **Individual Multi-Funder Sites**, which each had multiple funding sources and revenue streams and operated entirely independently. In addition, there were seven **Commercial Sites** that fit all the other criteria of the study except that they operated as for-profit concerns, and as such offered a basis of comparison. (There were also two sites that were **Outliers** in that they were independent sites but had a few funders, and thus did not fit the categories above.)

Among the findings:

- The most ideological sites were Group Sites, those that belonged to one of two families organized by a sole or primary funder. One was a family of nine liberal sites that all have the word "Independent" in their names, funded chiefly by the American Independent News Network, which itself is funded by a variety of individuals and foundations, including the Open

Society Foundations founded and chaired by George Soros. The other was a group of 12 conservative sites that share the name “Watchdog” and are funded chiefly by the Franklin Center for Government & Public Integrity, which was launched in part by a libertarian group called the Sam Adams Alliance.

- The least ideological in their content were sites that operated entirely on their own and had multiple funding sources and revenue streams, sites such as The Texas Tribune (which lists 12 foundations among its dozens of “founding investors,” as well as 64 corporate sponsors and hundreds of individual donors, and generates revenue from events and other revenue devices) and Connecticut Mirror (which lists 10 supporting foundations). These sites also tended to be more transparent and generate a relatively high volume of content.
- One striking feature across many of the news sites studied was that while they may have been forthcoming about who their funders were, often the funders themselves were much less clear about their own sources of income. This effectively made the first level of transparency incomplete and shielded the actual financing behind the news site. The chief funders listed for nearly two-thirds of the sites studied—28 in all—did not disclose where their money came from.
- Reporting resources in this emerging category of news operations tended to be quite limited. All the sites in the study had some staff and all produced original content at least weekly. The median was eight stories per week, but some averaged as few as one or two. And, of the 46 sites studied, the median reporting and editorial staff numbered just three people. At 18 sites—more than a third of those studied—just one or two people authored all of the stories analyzed.
- Whether by design or due to resource limitations, the majority of news stories on these sites presented a narrow range of perspectives on the topics covered. Overall, half of the news stories studied (50%) offered just a single point of view on controversial issues. Just 2% of stories contained more than two points of view.
- The topics covered on these sites often correlated with the political orientation of the sites and their backers. The more liberal-oriented American Independent News sites, for instance, heavily favored stories about the environment and organized labor, topics that did not appear among the most-covered for other groups of sites. The more conservative Watchdog.org sites, on the other hand, often set their focus on the government system itself, drawing attention to stories of inefficiency and waste.

This study is a first attempt to empirically evaluate a new sphere in journalism, but it is only a beginning and only a part of that sphere. Inevitably, studies such as these are snapshots in time. Two of the sites studied have folded since our research took place: the Washington Independent and North Carolina Independent News. Others may have emerged since the audit was conducted. In addition, some of the sites included in this analysis, as they develop and try to achieve more credibility, may become more transparent about their patrons and perhaps more even-handed in their coverage. Some sites may have adopted new sources of funding or shed old ones.

The information gleaned by researchers about these news organizations and their funders was limited to information that was available on their websites—the same information that typical news consumers are limited to. The researchers often went further than the average citizen might—several layers deeper to find out about parent organizations and their funding.

The study finds that the fact that a news site is a non-profit does not define what kind of news it produces. Some fit squarely into the traditions of independent news gathering, which dictates offering a wide range of perspectives and ideas about current events. Others fall more closely toward what might be considered partisan news or even political activism.

Certainly consumers can find partisan content in traditional commercial media as well, increasingly so as the range of outlets has grown in the digital age. But those commercial sites, usually national in scope, often have gotten more scrutiny than many of the news operations in this study, particularly those sites offering content at the state level. Many of the sites examined here, moreover, purport that they were started precisely to fill the gap left at the state level from cutbacks in traditional media, especially newspapers, and thus present themselves as functioning much as traditional media once did.

Given that the financing of non-profit news is not self evident in the same way it is in commercial media, however, it is not so obvious where the financing for these sites comes from and what the motivations behind the financing are. This study also offers some guidance for consumers about how they can assess the nature of non-profit news sites content and the level of transparency the site has about its mission and funding.

## **Assessing the Field of Non-Profit News**

Identifying and defining an emerging category of news organizations is no simple task. With no proven model yet standard, the landscape is diverse. First, over a period of four months, researchers conducted an audit of the landscape of hundreds of new non-profit websites across the United States that offer news. Researchers then filtered that group to include only sites that portrayed themselves as news operations rather than advocates; sites at which the majority of content offered was original news reporting rather than aggregation or opinion; and sites that were active, publishing new material at least weekly.

That universe was still quite broad. There are hundreds of sites that cover hyperlocal news, even down to the neighborhood level, and others that focus on just one subject area, such as education or health.<sup>4</sup> To examine a comparable set of sites, researchers filtered the list further to those that were either state-wide or national in scope and that covered a range of subjects.

In addition to the non-profit sites, researchers found seven commercial sites (those registered as limited liability companies and that depend primarily on advertising for their ongoing operations) that fit these criteria. Some of these, such as Progress Illinois, had ties to financial backers with political interests. These sites were included in the study to allow researchers to assess whether their commercial status might correlate in any way to the nature of content they produced. Thus the total sample made for a universe of 46 sites.

Researchers then analyzed the sites at two levels. First they performed an audit of the sites and the organizations behind them—staffing, revenue streams and how much each site said about itself, its funding, its mission and its backers. Second, researchers conducted a content analysis sampled from a month's worth of news stories on each site to assess productivity of the sites and whether there was a discernible ideological flavor to the news reporting.

(For a complete methodology, including more detailed explanations of how variables and scales were constructed, click here.)

## **Ideology**

To assess ideology, researchers measured three different elements of a site's news content. They examined the **range of viewpoints** represented in each story in which the subject involved some matter of disagreement, conflict or controversy. They looked at the narrative frame of the story to see if it reflected one of a detailed list of **story themes**. Finally, for those stories that were investigative exposes, researchers identified the **target** of the expose—the subject whose actions were being portrayed as suggestive of controversy or wrongdoing—and noted whether that target was affiliated with a political party or institution.

Researchers then combined these three indicators into a scale in order to create a summary measure of ideology that would be more reliable than any of the individual indicators alone. Sites whose stories tended to lean toward one end of the ideological spectrum and reflected fewer viewpoints scored higher on the 0-100 scale. Sites with content that offered more viewpoints, reflected non-partisan or more evenly divided themes, and whose exposes targeted organizations and people from both sides of the aisle scored lower on the scale.

Using this method, the study found that the ideological character of the 46 sites ranged widely. Some sites evinced no discernible ideological pattern in the balance of viewpoints conveyed, the themes of stories or the targets of exposes. Others showed a clearer ideological hue. All of the sites contained some reporting, in some cases a good deal, that was straightforward accounting of events.

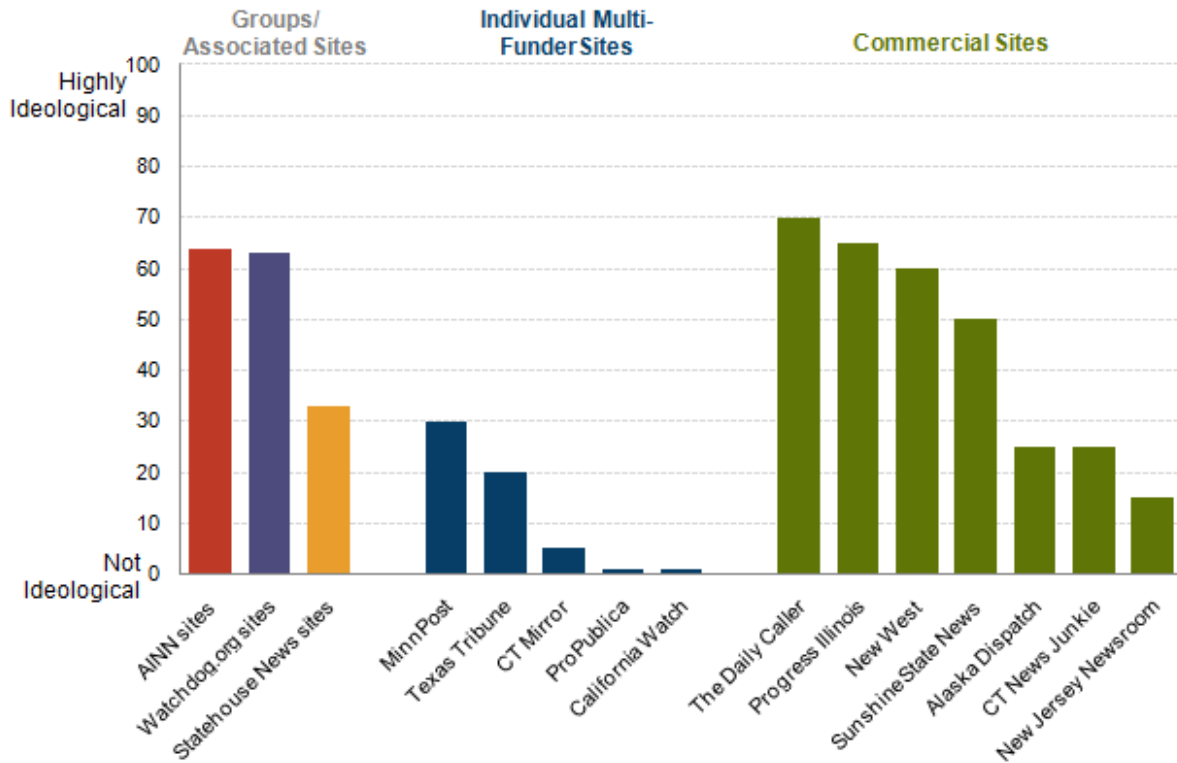
The study also reveals that both liberal and conservative actors have seized the opportunity to enter the news space.

The most consistently ideological content appeared in the two formally organized families of sites—the American Independent News Network sites and the Watchdog.org operations.

The two families of sites scored almost identically on the scale for ideological content. The free-market oriented Watchdog.org sites as a group averaged a 63 on the 100-point scale the study devised to measure ideology. The liberally oriented American Independent News Network together averaged 64.

Some of the commercial sites backed by political sponsors scored even higher on the ideological scale. The site that statistically was most ideological in its content was The Daily Caller, the operation fronted by former cable talk show host and conservative Tucker Carlson. It scored 70. The second highest on the ideological scale was Progress Illinois, a news site with ties to a union group. It scored 65.

## Ideological Scores for News Sites Studied



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on original home-page news content sampled from the month of September, 2010.

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In the group of sites that were more loosely associated with one another, the Statehouse News network, no consistent level of ideology emerged. This group, which describes its mission as providing in-depth coverage of state government, included 11 sites in the sample studied. It is made up of independently operated and funded news sites that share content with each other through a system organized by the Franklin Center, the parent of the Watchdog.org sites. Overall, the Statehouse group (at 33) scored lower by about half compared with the Watchdog.org or American Independent News sites, but the individual scores ranged from 0-70. Each of the sites that scored higher on the ideological scale leaned in a conservative direction.

Among the multi-funder sites, which operate independently, none scored higher than 30 for ideology; the average was 11.

To get a better sense of the way content may be colored by partisan sentiment it is useful to break down some of the variables individually.

### *Range of Viewpoints*

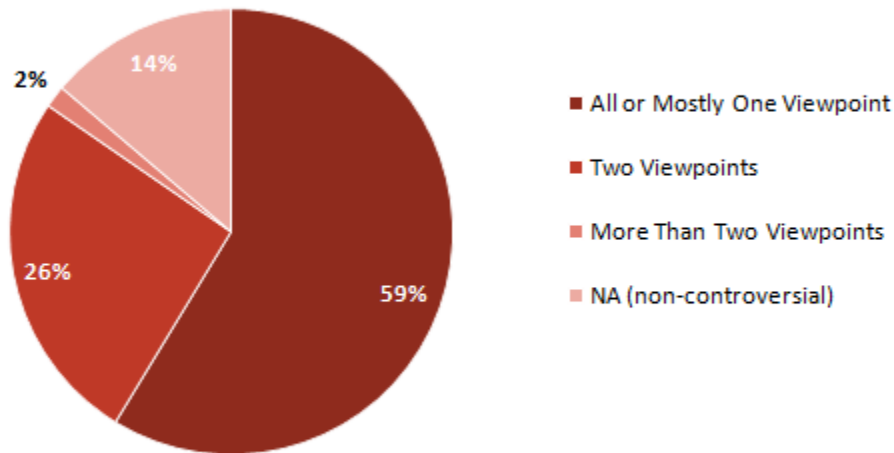
One metric that offers a sense of the content is the range of viewpoints offered by sources quoted in stories. How many different points of view on controversial issues did the reporter seek out?<sup>5</sup>

Overall, across the 46 sites, a lack of diverse viewpoints emerged. Indeed, a large majority—nearly two-thirds of stories involving some controversy—contained only a single point of view.

A Colorado Independent story from Oct. 1 was a case in point. It detailed the possible negative impact on libraries if a tax cut measure were to pass in the state. The story quoted four different people, each representing the same pro-library point of view. But it did not include any opposing view in support of the ballot measure.

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### Range of Viewpoints in American Independent News Sites



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on original home-page news content sampled from the month of September, 2010.

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Some sites commonly offered multiple points of view. A Sept. 16 synopsis of a gubernatorial candidates' debate in MinnPost, for instance, featured three candidates from three different parties—a Republican, a Democrat and a member of the Independence Party, and gave roughly equal space to each of the three candidates and their differing points of view.

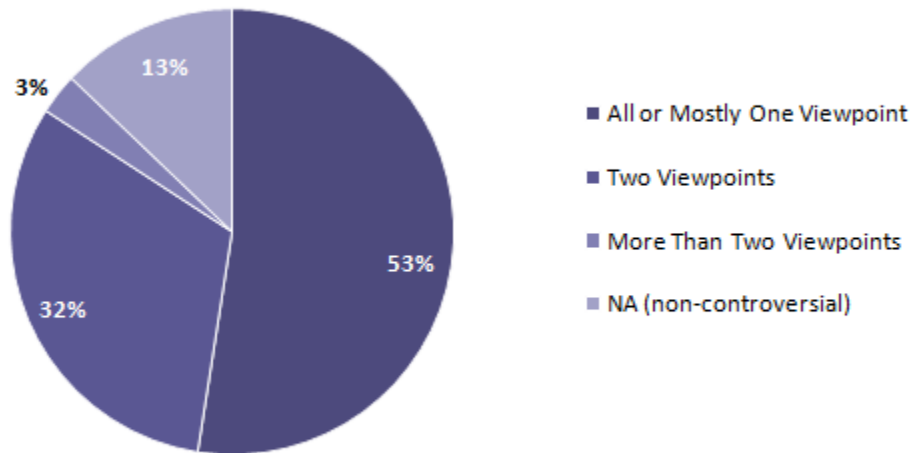
Most often, however, the news sites examined tended to reflect one or mostly one side of the story.

The sites that made up the American Independent News Network were the most likely to offer just one perspective on a story. Fully 59% of the articles studied offered all or mostly one point of view, more than double the percentage of stories with two points of view (26%).

Among the other family of sites, the Watchdog.org outlets, the numbers were similar, though slightly less one-sided. The percentage of single-viewpoint stories was 53% while about a third, 32%, included two viewpoints.

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## Range of Viewpoints in Watchdog.org Sites



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on original home-page news content sampled from the month of September, 2010.

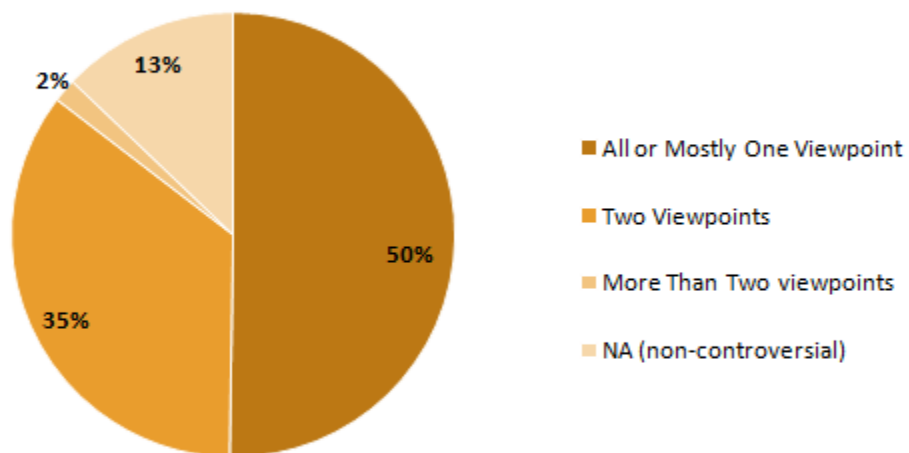
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Among the Statehouse News network of sites, the share of stories with a single point of view was 50%, compared with 35% that presented two viewpoints.

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## Range of Viewpoints in Statehouse News Sites



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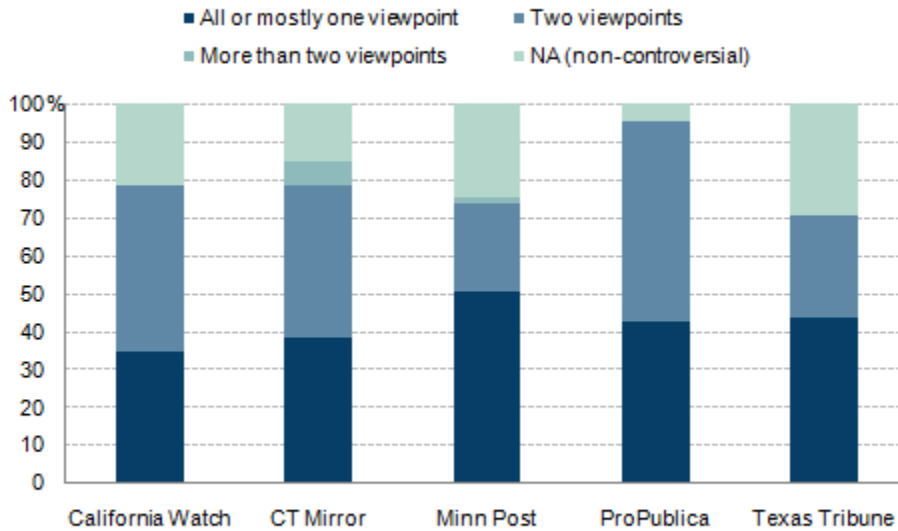
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The individual multi-funder sites tended to present a more diverse range of viewpoints. Of the stories studied, 43% carried one point of view, while 34% carried two. On ProPublica’s site, a majority of stories—52%—featured two viewpoints.

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### Range of Viewpoints in Individual Multi-Funder Sites



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on original home-page news content sampled from the month of September, 2010.

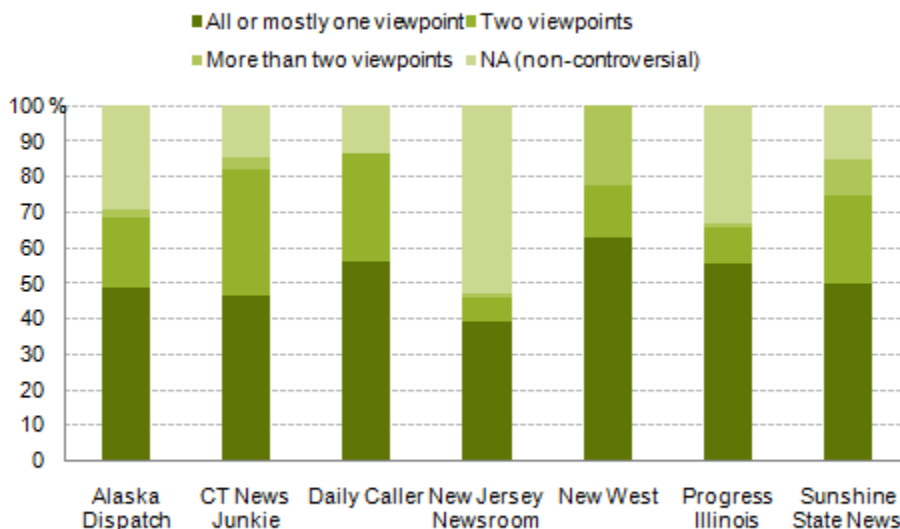
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The commercial sites varied in their representation of multiple points of view. They ranged from New West, a news site for the Rocky Mountain region, where 63% of stories had one point of view, to CT News Junkie, a news site specializing in state politics from Hartford, where 46% of stories had one point of view and 36% had two.

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## Range of Viewpoints in Commercial Sites



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### Story Theme

Another element of the ideological nature of the reporting is the underlying theme that the story is presenting. Does it evoke an idea associated with a liberal or Democratic point of view, a conservative or Republican point of view, or was there no partisan implication to the overall sense of the story? Researchers examined every assertion in the story, whether from a source being quoted or from the journalist writing the narrative, and checked the ideas present against a detailed list of thematic ideas.

For a story to reflect a partisan or ideological theme, the number of assertions presenting the theme had to outnumber those of any other in the story by ratio of at least 2-to-1.<sup>6</sup> If the assertions did not contain ideas with a clear partisan view, or if the mix of assertions did not reach this 2-to-1 threshold, the story was deemed to be non-partisan. For most of the sites studied, the bulk of stories did not meet the 2-to-1 threshold on either side. But of the stories that did, some clear partisan tendencies emerged.

One theme common in the coverage on sites that leaned in a conservative direction was the idea that government regulation hurts economic growth. An example is a Sept. 2 story in the Nevada News Bureau about a group of Nevada business leaders opposed to federal labor legislation they thought would stifle job growth. While supporters of the legislation were quoted in the piece, most of the article gave voice to opponents of the bill. "Adding burdens, expenses and red tape onto Nevada's job producers is the fastest way to destroy jobs, not create them," declared business leader Clara Andriola. Assertions and quotes echoing ideas such as Andriola's outnumbered those on the other side in the story by a ratio of five-to-two, and the story was deemed to reflect primarily a conservative idea.

Conversely, the idea that government helps improve society and quality of life was a theme often found in stories deemed to reflect a liberal perspective. In a Sept. 20 story, for instance, The Michigan Messenger, which is part of the American Independent News Network family, presented a story that

unemployment benefits kept millions out of poverty in 2009. “When those benefits expire,” the author of the story wrote, “expect the numbers to get dramatically worse.” The story, though brief, contained no assertions to counter the idea that government is a force for good in society.

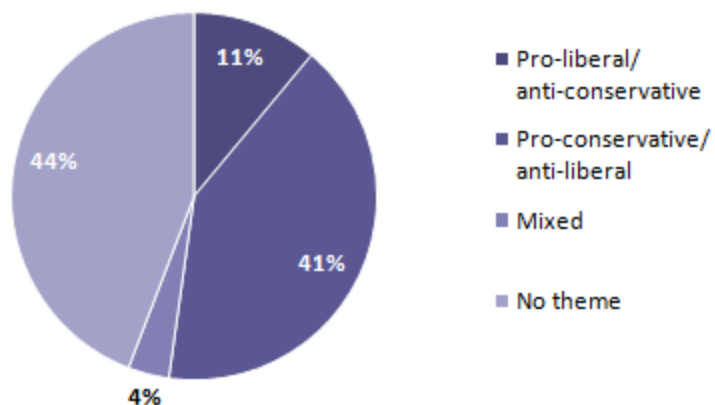
Stories with clear partisan themes were most prevalent in the two families of sites.

At the Watchdog.org sites, 41% were crafted in such a way as to support a conservative theme, while 11% reflected pro-liberal themes—a ratio of nearly 4-to-1. (At the same time, 49% reflected a mix of views, or reflected ideas that had no particular ideological theme.)

The overall numbers at the American Independent News Network sites were similar, nearly 4-to-1 liberal to conservative: 37% of the stories carried a pro-liberal theme, either attacking conservative figures, praising liberal ones, or espousing a liberal idea on an issue; 11% heavily reflected conservative ideas; 53% were mixed or non-partisan.

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### Story Themes in Watchdog.org Sites



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on original home-page news content sampled from the month of September, 2010.

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A Sept. 7 story in the Montana Watchdog, a Watchdog.org site that is supported by a think tank called the Montana Policy Institute, exemplified the theme that government regulation hindered economic growth.

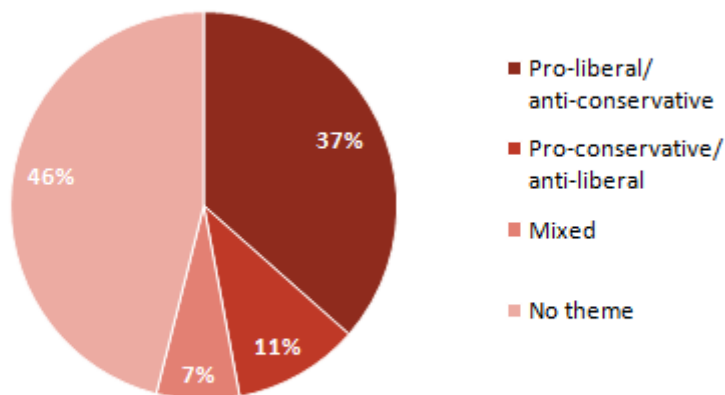
The article repeated the idea that the Environmental Protection Agency would kill an emerging new industry, the biomass business, if it succeeded with a proposal to classify plant material as a fossil fuel when it was used to create energy.

Rep. Chas Vincent, head of Montana’s Environmental Quality Council, called the EPA’s proposed change “a quagmire to prohibit (biomass) from being developed...We have some big players at the table looking at getting fiber out of the forest as cost effectively as possible. Then we have another scud missile fly in from a regulatory agency who says if you can get it done, have good luck getting it permitted.”

In all, 10 assertions in the story echoed Vincent’s anti-regulatory sentiments, while only one offered a different viewpoint.

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### Story Themes in American Independent News Sites



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A Sept. 28 story in the Texas Independent, meanwhile, was heavily critical of attempts by the State Board of Education to weed out public school curriculum that it saw as anti-Christian. After the board voted by a margin of 7-to-6 to pass a non-binding resolution against a “pro-Islam, anti-Christian” bias in textbooks, the story quoted Democrat Mary Helen Berlanga—who was unable to attend the vote due to family obligations, about what she called the fanaticism of her opponents. “We are the State Board of Education, not the State Board of Religion,” Berlanga said. “So why are we trying to tie up religion with education? It’s absolutely insane and a waste of time. We should be concentrating on the important issues, like core curriculum or whether or not kids can graduate high school. One of the board’s fanatics wants to make sure he does as much damage as he can before he leaves,” said Berlanga, pointing in the direction of former chair Don McLeroy (R-Bryan).

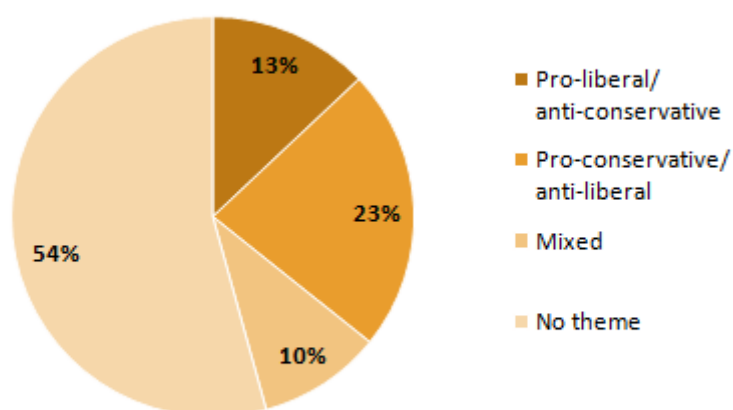
All of the assertions made in this story reflected this viewpoint; none supported an opposing idea.

Sites with multiple funders, and sites that belonged to only informal networks or none at all, tended to be more balanced in their reporting.

The more loosely connected Statehouse News consortium reflected some pro-conservative orientation, but the ratio was much less than at the Watchdog.org or American Independent sites. Nearly a quarter of the stories (23%) reflected clearly conservative themes, while 13% reflected liberal themes, a ratio of less than 2-to-1. Most of the stories produced by sites affiliated with Statehouse News Online (64%) were mixed or contained no discernable theme.

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## Story Themes in Statehouse News Sites



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Many of the stories that reflected no particular partisan tilt (two-thirds of all Statehouse News Online stories studied) reported on state affairs in a way that simply shed light on complex procedural and political matters, according to the research. A Sept. 23 Illinois Statehouse News story, for instance, interviewed two experts to clarify the confusing timeline of events in the Senate race in which candidates had to campaign in two separate but simultaneous contests: one, for the regular six-year senate term (once held by Barack Obama), the other to replace the controversially appointed Roland Burris, who was being forced to step down after a federal court ruled it was unconstitutional for him to finish out Obama's full term.

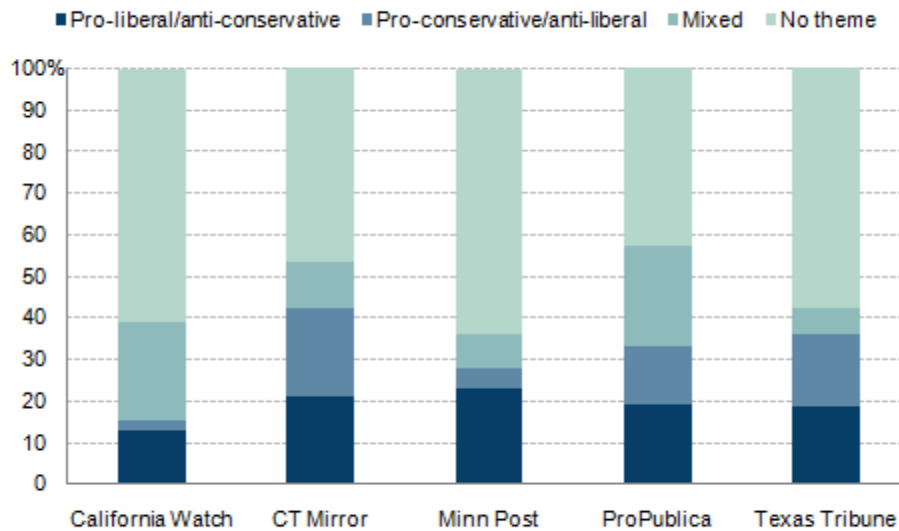
The individual multi-funder sites were even more likely to be primarily mixed or balanced in the themes reflected in their stories.

At ProPublica, the national investigative news operation, for instance, 67% of the stories reflected either a mix of ideas or no theme at all. Of those that did evoke partisan themes, 14% reflected primarily conservative ideas while 19% reflected primarily liberal. At California Watch, a state-oriented investigative site in San Francisco that is a project of the Center for Investigative Reporting, more than 80% of the stories reflected a mix of ideas or themes that were not partisan in nature.

The Connecticut Mirror, a site founded in 2010 and staffed with a number of veterans of the Hartford Courant, included more ideologically themed coverage but in equal proportions. In the time period studied, 21% of the stories projected largely pro-liberal themes, and 21% contained pro-conservative themes.

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## Story Themes in Individual Multi-Funder Sites



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on original home-page news content sampled from the month of September, 2010.

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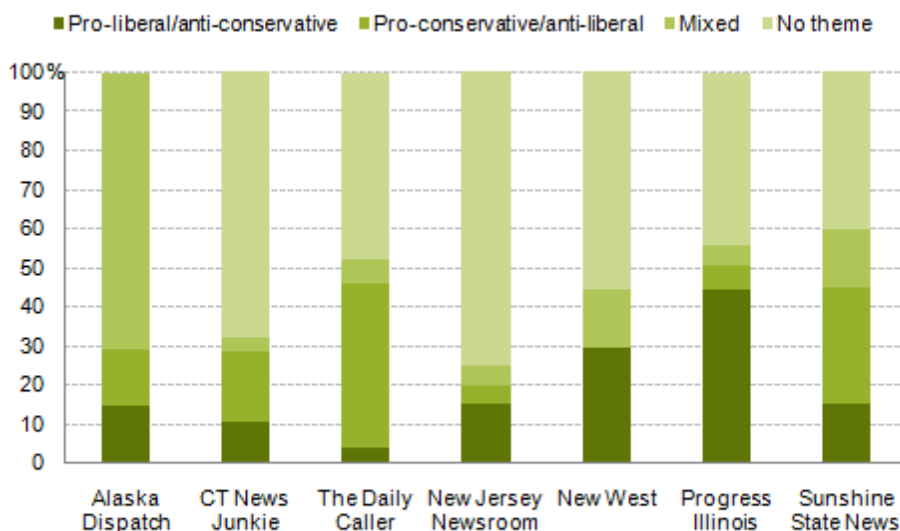
A typical example of Connecticut Mirror's reporting, from a Sept. 23 story, was a guide to the federal health care reform law. The lengthy piece billed itself as a primer to help "decode" the various aspects of the legislation, including changes that affect all health insurance plans, changes that affect only some plans, what it means for a plan to be 'grandfathered,' and the impact on rates. The story included information provided by a health insurance company, Anthem, but also included a quote by Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius "blasting" some insurers for misinforming enrollees.

At MinnPost, nearly two-thirds of the coverage, 64%, contained no discernable theme. In the smaller pool of stories that did, more pro-liberal ideas came through: 23% of the stories studied presented a pro-liberal theme while 5% were conservative.

There was somewhat less balance among the seven commercial sites studied. At Progress Illinois, a commercial site launched with a founding sponsorship from the SEIU Illinois State Council, 44% of the stories reflected liberal ideas. Another site, New West, tilted more than 3-to-1 liberal in its themed content.

By contrast, at The Daily Caller, the commercial site started by conservative television personality Tucker Carlson, 42% of the stories were pro-conservative, while just 4% were pro-liberal in nature. And at the Sunshine State News, 30% of stories were clearly conservative while 15% reflected liberal themes and 55% were either mixed or contained no discernable theme.

## Story Themes in Commercial Sites



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On Sept. 30, The Sunshine State News, whose seed investors are unknown to the public, published one of a number of pieces during the month critical of Democratic House candidate Alan Grayson, trying to tie him to Obama. This passage, which comes from the journalist authoring the piece rather than any source cited, was typical: “The one constant between 2008 and 2010 is ‘change.’ Barack Obama and Grayson ran successfully on that theme in 2008. But ‘change’ is on the Republicans’ side this year, and Grayson’s rhetorical fusillades are sputtering.”

### *Target of Exposés*

A third way to assess the ideology of news reports is to identify the target, or alleged culprit, in any exposés the news site published. When a site was trying to reveal something untoward, in other words, who was the journalist targeting for misconduct?

Here it is important to note that the vast majority of stories studied—usually more than 80%—were not exposés. But among those that were, the study found differences in who was put under the microscope.

Among Watchdog.org sites, most stories studied (85%) did not target any individual or organization for wrong-doing. But 15% were exposés. And most of those targeted a Democrat, a Democratic program, a Democratic-led state or the federal government (11% of all stories studied). A smaller amount, 2% of all stories studied, targeted Republicans.

On nine of the 12 Watchdog.org sites, only Democrats or government agencies were the subject of investigative exposés.

The American Independent News Network, whose content and mission lean liberal, were more likely than any group to target businesses for wrong-doing; 7% of the stories studied fit this category, while 1% of all stories targeted Democrats or the federal government.

Sites belonging to the Statehouse News consortium were slightly less likely than most to publish work aimed at exposing wrongdoing. Only 11% of their combined stories fit this category. Democrats and the federal government made up slightly more of the targets in these expose pieces than Republicans and business interests did, but there were too few of each to indicate a trend.

When it came to the individual multi-funder news sites, researchers found a range of results. Some sites clearly prioritized these kinds of targeted exposes more than others. The Connecticut Mirror, for instance, produced such pieces only 6% of the time during the sample month studied. But at ProPublica, 34% of the stories studied were investigations that clearly targeted a partisan program or person. In most cases, neither Democrats nor Republicans were spared. ProPublica targeted government agencies just as often as it targeted business interests. Similarly, the Texas Tribune, at which 20% were exposes, targeted Democratic lawmakers just as often as it did Republican ones.

For the most part, the commercial sites that were studied did not produce a high volume of investigative stories. The two sites that published the highest percentage were Alaska Dispatch and Sunshine State News. At Alaska Dispatch, where 15% of the stories were exposes, half targeted Republicans, and none targeted Democrats. At Sunshine State News, where 12% of stories were exposes, the majority of these kinds of stories targeted either Democrats or moderate independent candidates for office.

### **Story Topic**

The study also tracked the topic of each story to assess whether there was any connection between the financial backing of a site and the topics it considered newsworthy.

Across the spectrum, while certain topics tended to get more coverage than others, researchers found a relationship between the values and mission of the funder and the topics, or news agenda, covered by sites with more political orientation.

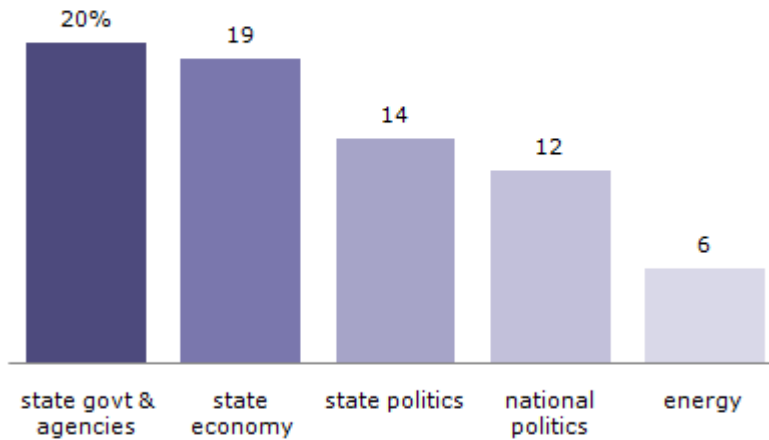
At the Watchdog.org family of sites, for instance, stories that examined the efficacy and institution of state government (as opposed to looking at any specific policies) made up nearly a quarter of the stories, followed by stories about the state economy and state politics. Indeed, those three state-oriented topics alone—economy, the institution of government and politics—accounted for more than half of all the stories studied at the Watchdog.org sites.



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## Top Five Story Topics in Watchdog.org Sites

Percent of stories



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on original home-page news content sampled from the month of September, 2010.

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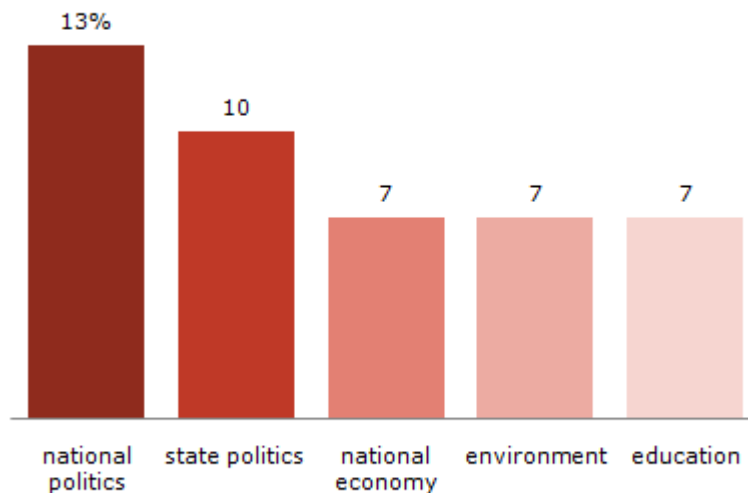
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The American Independent News sites, by contrast, were more likely to cover a range of issues that are traditional priority concerns for liberals, including the environment (tied as the No. 3 topic at 7% of their stories), labor (tied as the No. 4 topic at 5%), and gay and lesbian issues (also tied for No. 4 at 5%). The economy, tied as the No. 3 topic, received half the attention it did at Watchdog.org sites. The workings of state government and state agencies did not make the top 10 list during the period studied.

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## Top Five Story Topics in American Independent Sites

Percent of stories



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on original home-page news content sampled from the month of September, 2010.

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Among the consortium of Statehouse News sites, the topic priorities in some ways resembled those of the Watchdog.org sites. The workings and efficacy of state government made up one in five of the stories studied—about the same as that of the Watchdog.org sites. The third biggest topic covered was education, at 13%, a reflection of the heavy emphasis placed on this subject by the Idaho Reporter and the South-Carolina based site, The Nerve—two relatively high-output sites that made education their No. 1 topic.

If there was some regionality in the Statehouse sites, researchers saw even more of it in the individual multi-funder sites. At California Watch, for instance, immigration was a priority (its No. 5 topic at 8% of the stories studied). Texas Tribune focused somewhat heavily on drug trafficking, a border-related topic (No. 2, 11% of stories studied). And ProPublica, a national news outlet, addressed federal government in 25% of stories.

Finally, among the commercial sites studied, there were no unifying patterns in which topics the sites chose to emphasize. Out of the seven sites studied, six different topics were No. 1. These ranged from national politics (32% of stories at Sunshine State News) to celebrity scandals (12% of stories at Alaska Dispatch).

## Transparency

In the traditional commercial news model, the source of revenue is self-evident. Advertising and circulation pay the bills. If one wants to know who is providing financial backing for the operation, one can simply examine the ads. In a non-profit model, however, even when there is advertising revenue, the source of the lion's share of the money may or may not be so obvious. That brings in the question of how transparent a site is about who is providing funding. In the more familiar non-profit media model, public broadcasting, there are rules about disclosure.

How transparent were the sites and their benefactors about where their money comes from? How explicit were they about the overall mission of those charitable organizations that might shed light on why they had financed the site? How simple is it to contact one of these sites?

The study examined each of the sites for all three of these elements—**transparency about funding sources** and **mission** and also **the accessibility of the staff**. In addition, the study examined how transparent any parent organizations or major funders were about their finances and mission. Researchers then combined these three indicators into a scale.

Researchers found that the level of transparency varied from site to site and from group to group. In general, however, the more transparent sites tended to be more balanced in their content. Sites that disclosed less about their mission and funding tended to be more ideological in their content. Liberal-leaning sites, however, were somewhat more transparent than conservative ones.

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## Sites with Lower Transparency Tended to be more Ideological



**Note:** Transparency scores were calculated using a 0-100 point rating scale. Slightly transparent sites scored 20-46, somewhat transparent sites scored 47-75, and transparent sites scored 76-100. PEJ analysis is based on site audits conducted during May-September, 2010.

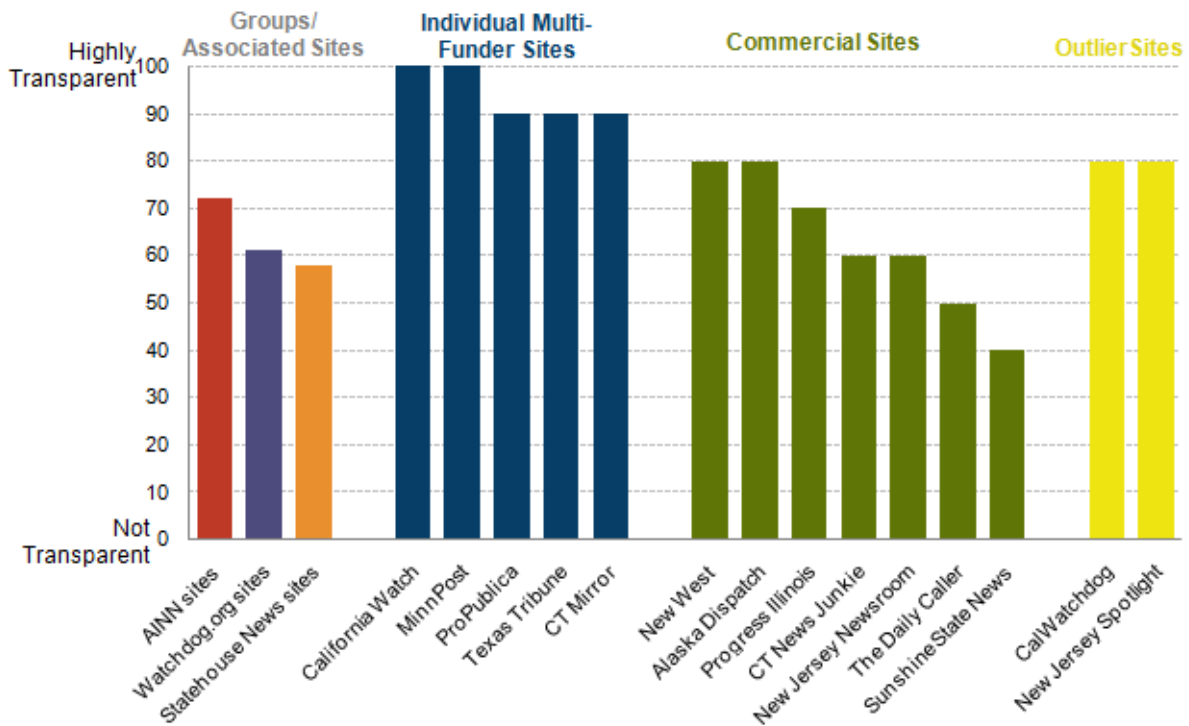
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Among the most transparent sites was Texas Tribune. A visit to the site's "about us" section provides an overview, in more than 500 words, about its mission, biographical information on its founders, and a summary of its makeup and revenue streams (elsewhere on the site, one can access a recent Texas Tribune 990 form). The site's "Support us" section introduces visitors to another set of pages—the donors & members page, listing every donor who have given at least \$10, and the corporate sponsors page, listing more than 60 founding sponsors. And a contact page at the Texas Tribune website provides phone numbers and e-mail addresses for its entire staff.

Among the least transparent sites was the Alaska Watchdog of the Watchdog.org family. The site had no "about us" section; nor was there any description of the site's funding sources. One clue appears on the "contribute" page, which has a link to the Alaska Policy Forum, a conservative think tank. The Alaska Watchdog's connection to the Franklin Center seems clear from the web layout and the name. But no mention of the relationship is made on the site (a fellow Watchdog.org outlet refers to the Alaska Watchdog as a "bureau" of the Franklin Center.)<sup>7</sup> Neither the Alaska Policy Forum nor the Franklin Center reveals information about their own sources of funding.

## Transparency Scores for News Sites Studied



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on site audits conducted during May-September, 2010.

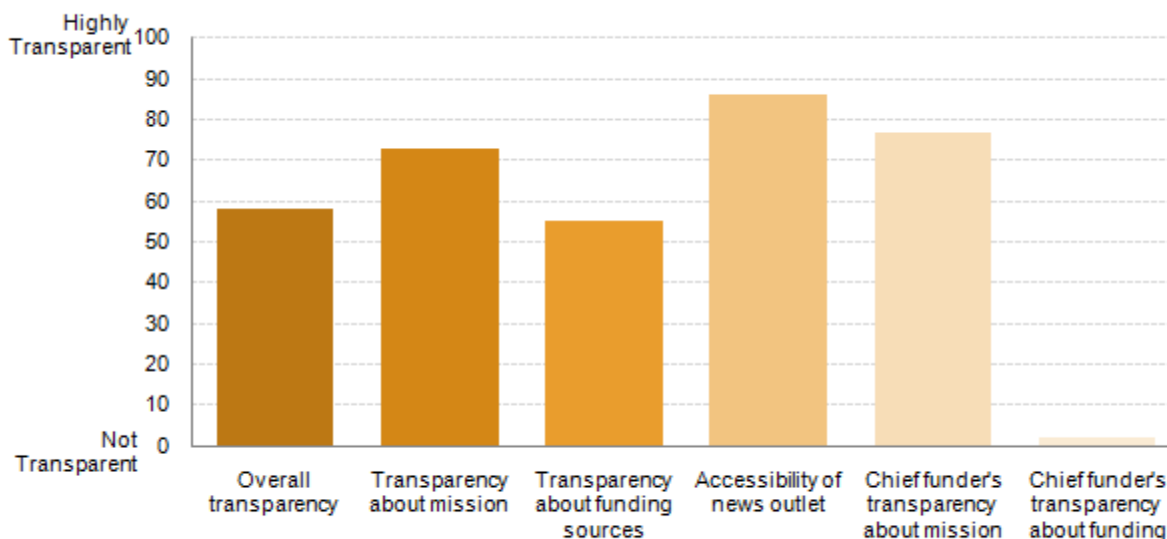
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All sites had at least some information about one of the elements. Thus, no site scored zero—only one scored below 40. The majority of sites scored above 60.

The sites that make up the Statehouse News consortium were, by a narrow margin, the least transparent group in the study scoring 58 on the overall transparency scale (a score of 100 would indicate the highest level of transparency). Individual Statehouse sites themselves, however, ranged some in their transparency. Maryland Reporter, for instance, scored 80; the Tennessee Report scored 20.

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## Transparency Scores for Statehouse News Sites



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on site audits conducted during May-September, 2010.

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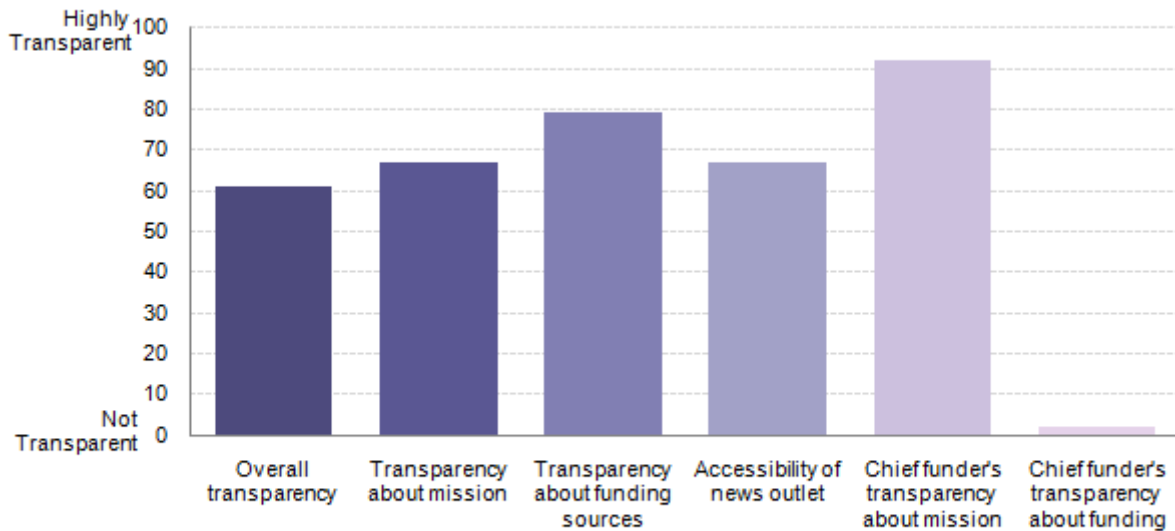
The lack of transparency related mostly to what the Statehouse sites or their parent organizations said about their funding. Two of the Statehouse group, Missouri News Horizon and Tennessee Report, did not indicate anywhere on their websites who funds their work. And only three of the 11 sites—Maryland Reporter, Texas Watchdog and Pennsylvania Independent—provide comprehensive information about their funders.

When it came to the funders themselves of the Statehouse sites, not a single one provided any information about where their money came from. Instead, with phrases such as being funded by “individuals, foundations and corporations” (Idaho Freedom Foundation) or “donors like you” (Tennessee Report), in every case, the foundations and non-profits that fund the Statehouse News sites included a variation on the following statement: We protect the anonymity of our supporters.

The Watchdog.org family of sites was the second-least transparent in the sample, scoring 61 on the 100-point transparency scale.

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## Transparency Scores for Watchdog.org Sites



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on site audits conducted during May-September, 2010.

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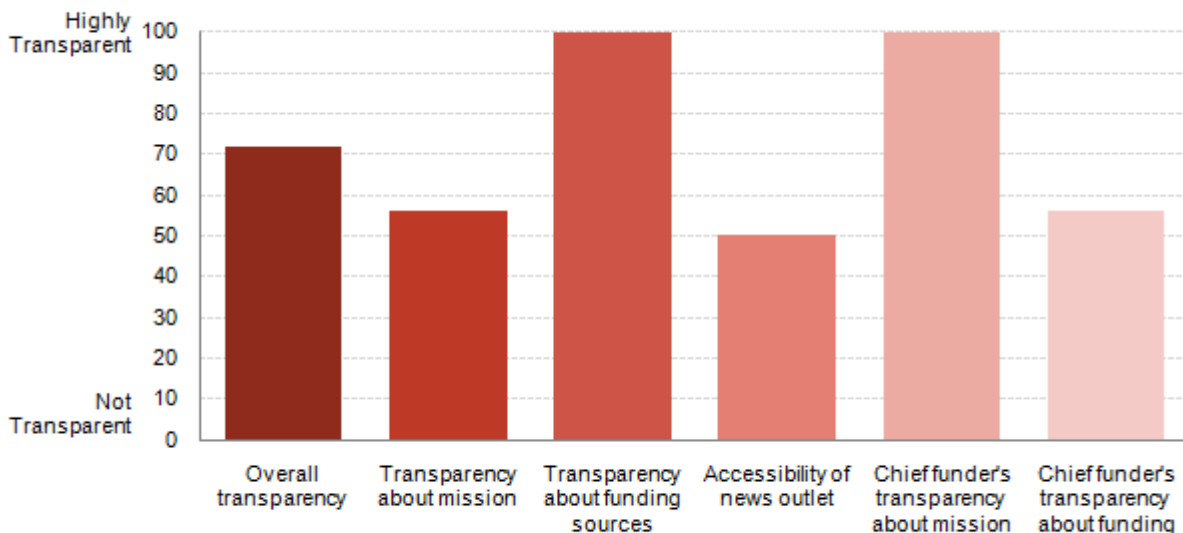
Generally the Watchdog.org sites described themselves as being interested in investigative reporting and cited their parent organization, usually the Franklin Center for Government & Public Integrity, as their funder. The Franklin Center itself doesn't offer much sense of an ideological orientation to its mission, saying it was designed to "promote journalism and the education of the public about corruption, incompetence, fraud or taxpayer abuse by elected officials." The Franklin Center and the other groups backing these sites offered nothing about the sources of their own funding, scoring a 0 on the funding transparency scale of 0-100. The Franklin Center, according to its website, "protects the identification of its generous donors and ensures anonymity of all contributions."

A visitor to the Franklin Center site also would not learn that it was launched in part by another group called the Sam Adams Alliance. The Sam Adams Alliance site, in turn, offers little about its purposes. Some of the press releases archived on the site contain some language that offers a sense of mission: "The Sam Adams Alliance is a non-profit organization that works to raise awareness of free market principles and policies, and build capacity in marketing and public relations for individuals and organizations who support free-market ideas." One of the press releases archived there also notes that "Previously, Sam Adams Alliance also helped launch... [the] Franklin Center for Government and Public Accountability."<sup>8</sup>

The sites making up the American Independent News Network overall were more transparent than the Watchdog group but only somewhat. On average, the group scored 72 out of 100, placing them somewhere between the least and most transparent sites in the study.

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## Transparency Scores for American Independent Sites



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on site audits conducted during May-September, 2010.

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The individual news sites generally do not offer much about their own objectives. Instead they refer visitors to their parent publisher, who is also their funder, the American Independent News Network (formerly the Center for Independent Media). The parent organization does offer some information about funders, listing major donors by name, though not linking or describing them.

One would have to conduct a web search of the funders themselves to learn, for instance, that the Open Society Foundations, a supporter of the American Independent News Network, works “to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens” (Soros’ foundation also supports other non-profit news efforts, including The Texas Tribune and ProPublica). A separate search is also required to learn that the Tides Foundation is a “values based, social change platform” that works with people to “confront issues like global warming, AIDS treatment and prevention, and economic disparity.”

The most transparent sites studied were generally the individual multi-funder sites. While all operated separately of one another, the sites in this category shared a common approach to providing information about themselves and their funding sources. None of the five sites scored below 90 on the overall transparency scale.

When it came to describing mission, each scored a full 100 on this element of the transparency scale.

The individual multi-funder sites were also highly transparent about their funding. The Texas Tribune, for instance, lists the name of every supporter who has given at least \$10.<sup>9</sup> MinnPost released a year-end report on its site listing its major philanthropic supporters and the dollar amounts they have contributed. And all of the sites provide financial documents and reveal the names of the foundations that provide support, most with links to those foundations’ websites.

In general, the foundations that support these individual multi-funder sites also tended to be highly transparent about their mission and their finances, though there were exceptions. Most notably, the Sandler Foundation—a chief supporter of ProPublica—does not have its own website, thus limiting what news consumers can know about the foundation and its finances. But otherwise the foundations that funded these sites’ work were, on the whole, detailed and methodical about revealing their financial dealings to the public. Many of them provide a history of the foundation on their website. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which supports each of these independent sites, offers a page that tells the story of the Knight brothers and the assets that provided the basis of the foundation’s wealth. In addition, nearly all the foundations provide some combination of an annual report, list of grantees and tax filings from recent years.<sup>10</sup>

The commercial sites tended to vary widely in terms of transparency. There were those like New West that were scored as highly transparent (80), but also those like Sunshine State News that were not (score of 40).

On the whole, though, the commercial sites tended to be open about their mission. Six out of the seven sites provided detailed descriptions of their purpose. The exception was The Daily Caller, whose relatively sparse “about us” section mentions the two founders of the site and provides a brief several-line description of itself as a 24-hour news site providing original reporting.

There was somewhat less information about the investors and institutions behind these commercial sites. One site, Progress Illinois, was launched by the SEIU, a service workers union, which provides a detailed description of its mission online. Other sites, launched with the financial backing of one or two individuals, provided less information about those persons. The Alaska Dispatch’s description of its patrons was more detailed than the typical commercial sites studied. It mentions its founders “Alaska journalists (and husband and wife) Tony Hopfinger and Amanda Coyne” and then “Alice Rogoff, a longtime supporter of journalism and a former chief financial officer of U.S. News and World Report” who became the majority owner in 2009.

But the commercial sites were not particularly clear as a group about their financial backers. Most of the sites mentioned the individuals or entities that launched the site, but few described them in detail. An exception was New West, which provided in-depth information on its initial investors and where their own income originally came from (the site was founded by Courtney Lowery and Jonathan Weber, both journalists).<sup>11</sup>

## **Productivity**

To get a full sense of the breadth of this new field, it was also useful to measure how much coverage these sites were offering. How much original reporting do they provide? What are their capacities, their resources for reporting the news of the day? How much could a person learn if they were to rely on this site?

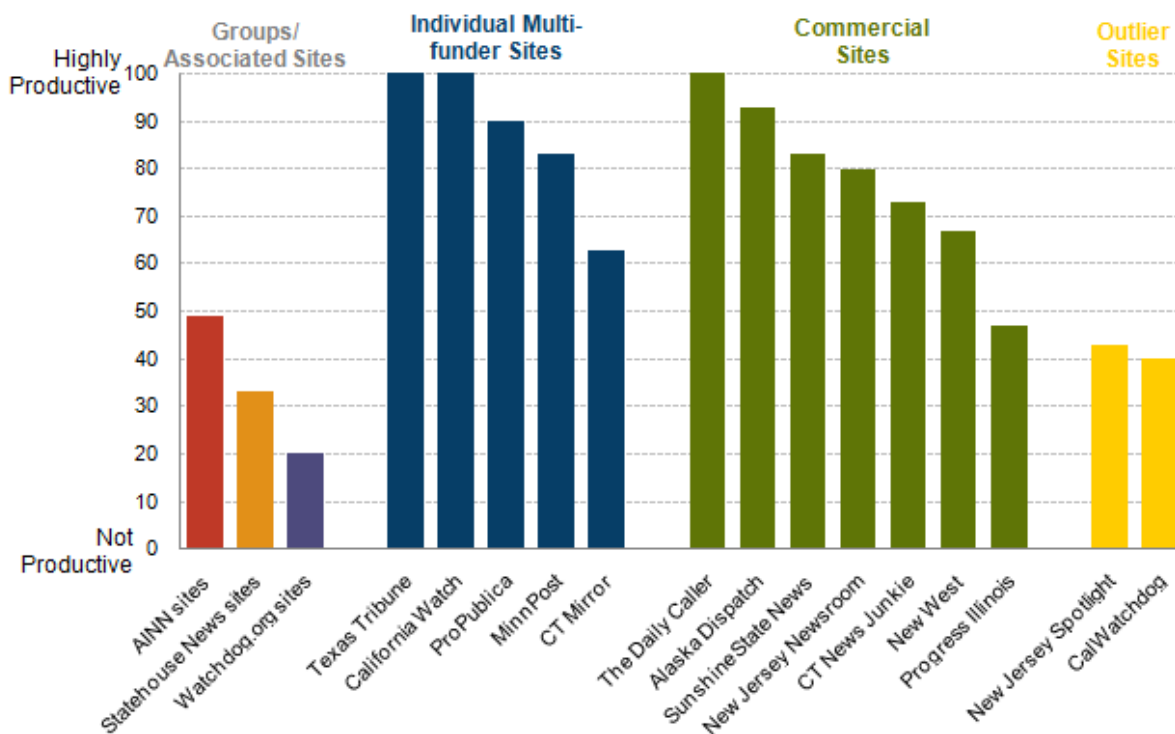
To analyze this, PEJ accounted for three different levels of productivity: One was **staffing**, or the number of reporting and editorial personnel listed on the site. The second was the **volume of original reporting**,



or the average number of stories each site produced in the course of a week. The third was whether a site contains a **blog for opinion-based content**, in addition to its news reports, and if so, roughly how often new blog posts appeared. As with ideology and productivity, researchers combined these related variables into one scale, ranging from 0-100.

Looking across all 46 sites, the productivity was strikingly low, especially as contrasted to the daily productivity of most local newspaper or television web sites, which produce dozens of new stories a day. On average the sites studied produced just eight new stories a week, but there was a wide variety on this score. The most productive sites produced around 50 stories a week. The least productive, just one. On average, the sites maintained a staff size of only three reporters and/or editors. The majority of sites did offer a blog, with 20—nearly half—typically posting more than five entries per week.

### Productivity Scores for News Sites Studied



**Note:** PEJ analysis is based on site audits conducted during May-September, 2010.

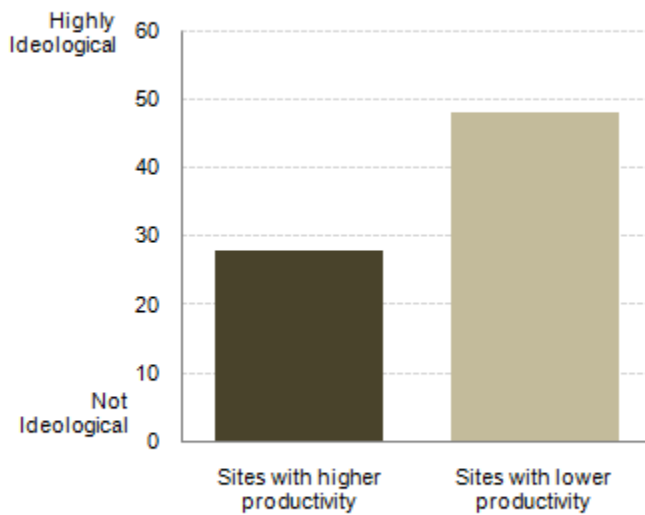
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The sites with higher levels of productivity also tended to be the least ideological in their content.

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## Less Productive Sites Tended to be More Ideological

*Outlets with larger staffs and more frequent output scored lower on the ideology scale*



**Note:** Sites with high productivity scored 61-100 on the 100-pt. productivity scale. Sites with lower productivity scored 0-60 on the 100-pt. productivity scale. PEJ analysis is based on site audits conducted during May-September, 2010.

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The individual multi-funder sites studied tended to rank among the highest for productivity according to all measures. The most prolific, Texas Tribune, averaged 34 stories per week. MinnPost averaged 31. ProPublica, known for its long and time-consuming investigative reports, averaged 11 stories a week during the month studied.

The staff sizes of these individual multi-grant sites were larger too—PEJ counted 28 editorial and reporting staff at ProPublica and 14 at California Watch.<sup>12</sup> No site listed less than five.

This productivity was evident not just in what could be measured quantitatively, the volume of content or the staff size, but also in the scope of the reporting as well, which ranged from data-driven and interactive elements to more traditional narrative stories. The Texas Tribune launched an interactive map of lottery sales in Texas, which visualized sales by zip code against a background of income characteristics. ProPublica, prior to the expiration of the federal bailout fund, provided a “Bailout tracker” to report on who did well and poorly under the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP).

The sites that ranked lowest in productivity were the members of the Watchdog.org family. Across these 12 sites, the average staff size was 1.3; they produced an average of four stories per week. What’s more, on seven of the sites, all of the news stories studied came from a single reporter. Another five sites had just two different bylined reporters for the month. And half of the sites had listed just a single staff person who seemed to play multiple roles. The small amount of content one would receive from these sites often comes from the same person.

The nine American Independent News sites reflected greater productivity in all categories measured than did the Watchdog family of sites. Those American Independent News sites averaged three staffers and 11 stories per week. The sites also displayed a wider range of bylines. Except for one site (North

Carolina Independent News), each had at least six authors bylining their news stories during the month studied. (North Carolina Independent News had three authors penning their 33 stories.)

Another element that stood out in this family of sites was the sharing of reporters and content amongst themselves. While the Watchdog.org sites did not share content at all—no story ever appeared on more than one Watchdog.org site during the course of the study—all nine American Independent sites shared—to some extent—reporters, and in some cases stories.

For example, a Sept. 16 piece by Andy Kopsa entitled “Federal faith-based grant agency lacks oversight, transparency” was carried by the New Mexico Independent, the Iowa Independent and the Washington Independent. A Sept. 13 article by Andrew Restuccia, “Gulf Coast Residents in Financial Dire Straits, Waiting for BP Claims,” was carried in both the Florida Independent and the Washington Independent. A Sept. 14 story entitled “Who Would the Tax Increases Hurt?” by Anne Lowery ran in the Washington Independent, Michigan Messenger and the Minnesota Independent.

Sites that were part of the Statehouse News consortium fell somewhere in the middle of all those studied when it came to productivity. They were closer to the American Independent sites in staffing (an average of three reporters/editors) and story count (an average of eight stories in a given week). But half of the sites, six in all, offered content produced by only one or two people.

The commercial sites, though unrelated to each other and ranging fairly widely in productivity, as a rule, tended to have higher output. The sites ranged from an average of 14 stories per week during the time studied (New West) to 49 stories per week (The Daily Caller). Staff size ranged from two to 15.

## **What is the Impact?**

How widespread is the reach of these sites? Who is getting the information they report?

These are difficult questions to answer for several reasons. First, news is passed around today through many different means that elude standard measuring systems. Second, in some cases, having a smaller audience does not necessarily mean the news site is not reaching an influential one. Reaching a small but select group of decision makers can carry more weight than a large, but general, audience. Third, some news producers aim not as much at attracting a direct audience to their websites, but instead look to place their content in well-established outlets. Fourth, some of the sites here cover national affairs and thus have a wider potential audience, while others are statewide and have a smaller pool of potential users, which limits the extent to which the sites can be compared fairly. Fifth, there is no consensus method on measuring web traffic. Different analytics tools use different approaches and thus offer different results.

But a basic level of measure, web traffic, can help begin to understand the impact sites may be having on the public debate and their significance in the system of news in each state. To do this, researchers have used data from Compete.com because it makes all of its basic traffic data for all major websites available, allowing a baseline comparison of web traffic across all the sites in the study. Compete’s overall numbers tend to be lower than some others because it takes steps to correct for what it considers over counting when users clear their browser “cookies.”

While traditional news outlets still seem to dominate—in one state the top newspaper drew 40 times more web visitors than the local non-profit startup—size of audience is not always the single most important thing. And some of the sites studied still managed to generate substantial numbers, averaging hundreds of thousands of unique visitors per month, while other sites' audiences numbered in the low thousands.

The group of commercial sites as a whole attracted the highest web traffic, according to audience measures from Compete.com, a web audience measurement company and the only available source of data on the majority of sites in this study.<sup>13</sup> At the high end was The Daily Caller—a site covering national news—which averaged 553,000 unique visitors per month during the three-month period of August-October 2010. At the low end was CT News Junkie—a site covering news in a state and a small one at that—averaging about 12,000 visitors per month.

The individual multi-funder sites, though unrelated to one another in any formal sense, shared a common characteristic of relatively high web traffic—as a group, second to the commercial sites in volume. Together they averaged 95,000 unique visitors per month during the August-October period. At the high end was ProPublica, a national site, averaging 214,000 visitors, and at the low end was CT Mirror, a state-level site with a smaller potential pool of visitors, (it averaged 12,000 per month during the time period).

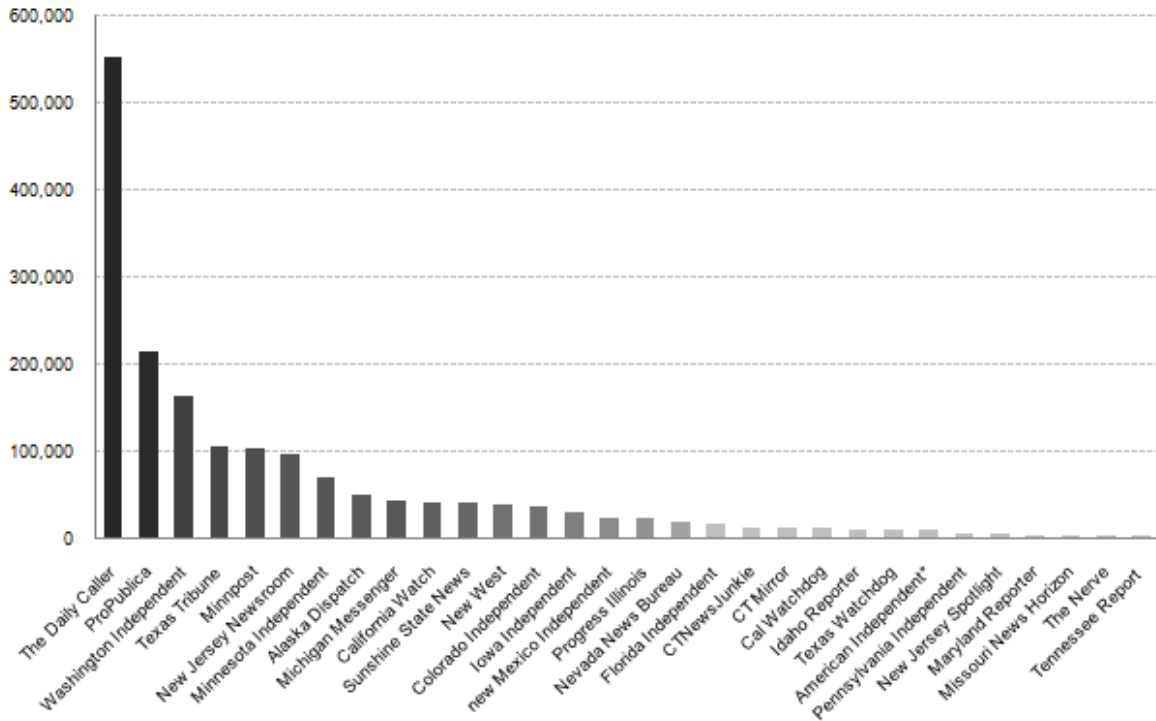
The American Independent News Network sites averaged an audience about half the size of multi-funder sites with an average of 49,000 unique visitors per month, according to the data from Compete. Leading among this group of sites was the Washington Independent at 162,000.

Web traffic to the Watchdog.org sites was somewhat more difficult to measure because each of the sites falls under the Watchdog.org domain, making it difficult using Compete.com's metrics to analyze traffic to any one Watchdog.org site. Compete.com finds that all sites under Watchdog.org averaged slightly more than 35,000 unique visitors per month from August 2010 through October 2010. Another web measurement company, Alexa.com, breaks down the traffic further showing that Nebraska's Watchdog site is responsible for nearly 20% of the traffic to Watchdog.org, followed by the main site, the New Hampshire site and the Missouri site. All other sites account for less than 10 percent of the traffic each. The URL Watchdog.org is registered to the Franklin Center for Government & Public Integrity in Alexandria, Va.

The group of sites that on the whole drew the smallest amount of traffic was the Statehouse News consortium. Together these sites averaged 6,000 unique visitors per month over the three-month period.

## Average Unique Visitors (Per Month)

August-October 2010



**Note:** Sites for whom traffic info was unavailable: Illinois Statehouse News, Virginia Statehouse News, Colorado News Agency, and each of the individual Watchdog.org sites in the study. \*American Independent includes Texas and North Carolina, which do not have unique URLs. Compete.com data analyzed by PEJ.

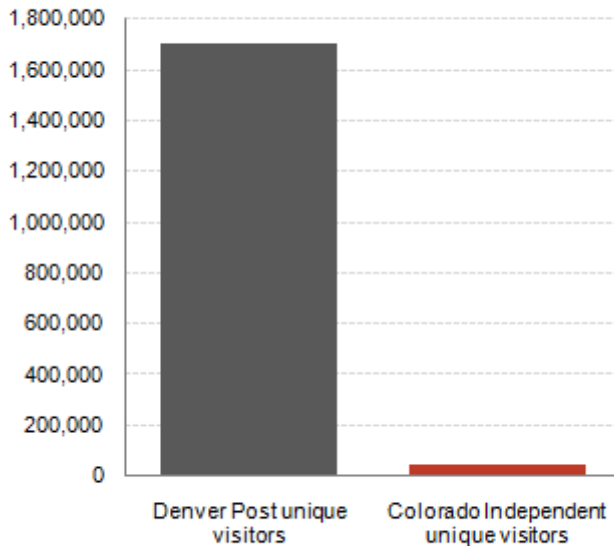
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Researchers also compared unique visitors for the largest newspaper sites in states with sites in the sample. The audiences for these new non-profit and even commercial news sites were dwarfed by those of traditional media.

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## Colorado News Audiences

August-October 2010 (Average per month)



**Note:** Compete.com data analyzed by PEJ.

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For instance, the Colorado Independent drew 43,000 visitors per month between August and October 2010; the Denver Post drew 1.7 million. However, in some states, the outlets in the sample showed year over year gains in traffic (August-October 2010 vs. August-October 2009), while established news outlets experienced drops. In 2010, the Texas Watchdog (61% increase) and Colorado Independent (40% increase) experienced double-digit gains in traffic over 2009 levels. By the same token, the Dallas Morning News (17% drop) and the Denver Post (14% drop) experienced double-digit declines.

Traffic alone is not a measure of influence, however. ProPublica and California Watch, for example, have each partnered with more than 70 news outlets, including the New York Times and the Washington Post, to distribute their content. Smaller operations that were part of the study also saw their content carried by other outlets, such as when an Iowa Independent story on illegal immigration was picked up by several other papers and immigration advocacy sites.

In other cases, a non-profit site was the only outlet covering an event. Indeed, many of the sites in this study claim as part of their mission a mandate to fill the void where traditional newsrooms—with their cutbacks—have had to reduce their reporting. Some have earned recognized awards for their investigative journalism. The smaller sites, staffed often by a single reporter, have gained attention too. In 2010, the New Mexico Watchdog discovered the appearance of “phantom” districts on the federal government’s economic stimulus website, [recovery.gov](http://recovery.gov). The outlet reported that nonexistent congressional districts were receiving stimulus money, and soon thereafter, other Watchdog.org sites in other states began reporting similar findings. The story went national, even becoming a subject on Stephen Colbert’s Comedy Central program, *The Colbert Report*.

## **Navigating the News Consumer Through New Terrain**

The following offers some possible ways for consumers to adapt the method used in this study to take stock of a news site they encounter.

### **Consumer Check #1: Transparency**

Examine the website. Find and read through the “About” section. Look at what it says about its mission, the background of the staff and the source of funding. A site that explains these items in detail, provides links to its funders, lists its individual donors and reports its financials is more transparent. This study suggests that this transparency tends to be associated with sites that also offer more balanced and diverse reporting.

### **Consumer Check #2: Range of Viewpoints**

While reading a story, readers can check how much effort a story makes to include relevant and competing viewpoints. First, look for stories that involve a clear controversy in which competing viewpoints would be expected. Then assess, from the quotes in the story, whether differing viewpoints on the issue are present and the extent to which they are given space. Then check other stories. If a lot of the stories have mostly one viewpoint, that suggests a narrowness in perspective.

### **Consumer Check #3: Story Theme**

The story theme can help consumers get a sense of whether the site has a particular point of view underlying its reporting and story selection. Evaluating this also involves reading through a number of stories. After reading several, ask what the main theme of each story was. If the themes tend to tilt solidly in one political direction over another, this amounts to a point of view in coverage. Do those themes also correlate with the viewpoints in check No. 2? The findings in this study suggest that often this is the case.

### **Consumer Check #4: Reporting Capacity**

This study suggests that the non-profit news outlets that have the most robust news operations tend also to offer more balanced and diverse reporting. Information on the news staff can usually be found in the “About” section of the site. Look for the number of listed staff and contributors. How many are full time? And do some work on a volunteer basis? (You can also scan their bios for their journalistic experience). Take note of the number of new, originally reported news stories over the previous week. How many new stories were posted? Finally, look at the bylines that appear at the top of the stories. How many different names appear? If all stories are reported by one or two individuals, this suggests a low capacity for reporting. The study finds that larger staffs and more dispersed bylines tend to be associated with more diverse and balanced reporting.

## **Profiles: The Types of Sites Found in the Study**

The sites in the study fell into four basic types. One consisted of sites that were organized into groups or families. These tended to share a common name and have a single primary parent organization. The study found two such groups: The Watchdog.org sites and the American Independent News Network. The second type of news site was a looser consortium of sites that shared content but not necessarily the same parent. The study found one such group, the Statehouse News sites. A third type of site

consisted of those that operated wholly independently and draw funding from a variety of private foundations (we call this group the “individual multi-funder”). Finally, the study identified a collection of sites that fit the criteria of study in every way except they were commercial in nature in that they relied on advertising for their chief source of revenue and were designated as for-profit companies (usually limited liability companies). As a basis of comparison, they were included in the study as well.

### [Watchdog.org](http://Watchdog.org)

The Watchdog.org sites are widespread, with either a presence, or the groundwork for a future presence, in every state. They are sponsored by the Franklin Center for Government & Public Integrity, though a number of sites draw support from other think tanks as well. Though it is not disclosed on its own site, The Franklin Center itself was launched with the help of the Sam Adams Alliance, which says little about its own motivations, though press releases archived on its website include the sentence that the group seeks to “increase public awareness of free-market principles and policies.”

The Franklin Center website says its goal is to “promote social welfare and civil betterment by undertaking programs that promote journalism and the education of the public about corruption, incompetence, fraud, or taxpayer abuse by elected officials at all levels of government.” The president of the Franklin Center, Jason Stverak, is a former executive director of the North Dakota Republican Party.<sup>14</sup>

In an article published on the Franklin Center’s website, Stverak explained that he sees a void in quality statehouse investigative reporting and wants to fill that gap. “State by state and at the national level, these reporters are having an impact on the daily debate,” Stverak said in an interview with Robert Bluey of the Heritage Foundation. “We needed investigative reporters 50 years ago, 100 years ago, and we’ll need them into the future. There needs to be an aggressive watchdog on government.”<sup>15</sup>

The Watchdog.org sites studied—12 in all—share a number of common traits:<sup>16</sup> The Franklin Center constructs their websites, provides training, tools and support, and, for the majority, provides funding.<sup>17</sup> They consider each of the individual websites as “bureaus,” part of a family of state-level news operations.<sup>18</sup>

Among the key findings on the Watchdog.org family:

- The sites scored a 63 on the 100-point scale PEJ devised to measure ideology, making its journalism the second-most ideologically oriented in the study.
- 41% of stories presented a primarily conservative theme, while 11% contained pro-liberal themes. (49% contained no particular theme or a mixture.)
- On nine of the sites, only Democrats or government agencies were the subject of investigative exposes.
- The majority of Watchdog stories (53%) contained only one—or mostly one—point of view. About one third (34%) contained two or more.
- The sites scored 61 on a 100-point transparency scale, ranking them among the least transparent of all sites studied.



- The sites as a whole scored 20 on a 100-point scale for productivity, which measures volume of original reporting and opinion blogging, as well as the number of editorial and reporting staff listed. As a group, they were the lowest in productivity.

Not all Watchdog.org sites fit the group pattern. The Virginia Watchdog, for instance, scored a 30 on the ideology scale, half of the average. Two others, Nebraska Watchdog (35) and New Mexico Watchdog (40) also scored on the lower end of the ideology scale as well.

### [American Independent News Network](#)

The American Independent News Network functions in a similar way to the Watchdog family of sites. It consists of nine sites, each operating at the state level, to produce, according to the central website, “impact journalism in the public interest.”<sup>19</sup>

The sites themselves have a uniform design and receive their funding through the American Independent News Network, known previously as the Center for Independent media, whose goals are explicitly liberal in nature. According to the parent group’s website, “Our reporting emphasizes the positive role of democratically elected government in securing the common good and social welfare, and the continuing benefits of our founding culture of egalitarian government by the people, for the people.”

A tightly knit network, the American Independent sites syndicate their stories, sharing them among their partners. For example, a Sept. 16 piece by Andy Kopsa entitled “Federal faith-based grant agency lacks oversight, transparency” was carried by The New Mexico Independent, The Iowa Independent and The Washington Independent. A Sept. 13 article by Andrew Restuccia, “Gulf Coast Residents in Financial Dire Straits, Waiting for BP Claims,” was carried in both The Florida Independent and the Washington Independent. A Sept. 14 story entitled “Who Would the Tax Increases Hurt?” by Anne Lowery ran in The Washington Independent, The Michigan Messenger and The Minnesota Independent.

The American Independent News Network is funded by a variety of foundations and individual donors, among them the Open Society Institute and the Tides Foundation.

According to the study results:

- American Independent network scored a 64 on the 100-point ideology scale, similar to the Watchdog sites (63).
- In the time period studied, 37% of stories carried a pro-liberal theme, while 11% were pro-conservative.
- On six out of the nine sites, only Republicans or businesses were the subject of investigative exposes.
- The group offered the narrowest range of viewpoints in its reporting in the study. Across the group, 59% of stories contained only or mostly one point of view, while 28% contained two or more points of view.

- The American Independent News sites as a group scored 72 on the 100 point scale for transparency, making them more transparent than the Watchdog.org sites but less transparent than the individual multi-funder sites.
- The American Independent News sites scored a 49 on the productivity scale—placing the sites on average in the middle of the pack when it came to volume of reporting and staff size.

As with Watchdog.org sites, not every member of the family fit the pattern. The Florida Independent, for instance, scored a 40 on the ideology scale—50% lower than the group average and lower than many other sites in the study.

### [Statehouse News Online](#)

Statehouse News Online is a website and aggregator launched in fall 2010 by the Franklin Center. According to a press release, “News from MarylandReporter.com, Virginia Statehouse News, Illinois Statehouse News, the Nevada News Bureau and other online news operations that were established with the Franklin Center’s help will be posted on the site every day.”

The site does not provide a list of the sites that belong to the consortium or specific criteria that might put one on the list. Many seem to be tied in some way to the Franklin Center, though the ties vary, and not all sites mention the Franklin Center directly.

Most of the sites that belong to Statehouse News Online are each supported by think tanks which belong to yet another group—the State Policy Network (two exceptions are Tennessee Report and Missouri News Horizon, which do not identify their source of funding). The State Policy Network is a group “dedicated solely to improving the practical effectiveness of independent, non-profit, market-oriented, state-focused think tanks.” The group calls itself a capacity builder, organizing free-market think tanks around the country. Many of those think tanks have produced online news outlets—news outlets that make up the membership of Statehouse News Online.

Among the findings of the quantitative study:

- The Statehouse sites on average scored relatively low on the ideology scale (together, 33 out of 100). Some sites, like Illinois Statehouse News (which scored a 0) and Colorado News Agency (15) produced little ideologically oriented content during the time period studied. Others, such as Idaho Reporter (70 on the ideology scale), consistently presented news through a free-market and conservative lens.
- Together, the sites’ content offered pro-conservative ideas 23% of the time and pro-liberal themes 13%, with the majority of content studied (54%) containing no dominant theme at all.
- Little of the Statehouse News site content studied (11%) consisted of investigative pieces targeting wrongdoers. Of those targeted pieces, there was no discernable ideological pattern.
- The Statehouse News sites were more diverse than the two major families of sites in their representation of viewpoints. About half of the stories studied in this group (50%) represented only one viewpoint, while 35% of the stories contained two points of view.
- The Statehouse News consortium as a whole contained some of the least transparent sites in the study. Together they scored 58 on the 100-point transparency scale, lower than either the Watchdog.org sites or the American Independent News sites.

- The sites as a group were somewhat more productive, scoring 33, than the Watchdog.org sites (20) but less so than the American Independent News Network (49).

### Individual Multi-Funder Sites

Five sites in the study fell into a category of being independent, non-profit sites with multiple funders. In general, these sites were underwritten by a handful of charitable foundations. Some of these foundations are widely recognized for their work in promoting journalism, such as the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Of the five sites studied here, the Knight Foundation was listed as a supporter for each one.

The sites themselves tended to be among the most ambitious in their goals and have the financial backing to make them serious entrants into the changing news ecosystem.

Two of the more ambitious of these sites are ProPublica and Texas Tribune. ProPublica, launched in 2008 by former Wall Street Journal managing editor Paul Steiger and with a major financial commitment by the Sandler Foundation, operates on a nearly \$10 million budget. Its sizable reporting staff of 34 (a current figure, published by the website since PEJ's audit was conducted) won a Pulitzer Prize in 2010 for their reporting on Hurricane Katrina and another in 2011 for their reporting on questionable Wall Street practices.

The study's site audit and content analysis revealed that ProPublica was among the most mixed or balanced in the focus of its coverage and the targets of its exposes. It also made substantial effort to be transparent about its operations. In 2010, ProPublica published on its site a tax form revealing the salaries of its news and executive staff. It is also explicit about its mission and who its funders are. One noticeable omission is detailed information about the Sandler Foundation, which does not provide a website.

The Texas Tribune was launched in 2009 in part by Austin venture capitalist John Thornton, formerly a well-known donor to Democratic candidates and causes. The Tribune aims to be a "nonpartisan, nonprofit media organization that promotes civic engagement and discourse on public policy, politics, government, and other matters of statewide concern."

As it develops its several revenue streams, the site aims to break even on \$3 million in revenue by 2013.

Other sites in this category include MinnPost, California Watch and CT Mirror. In general, each of these can boast the same high level of neutral reporting, transparent operations and a robust staffing operation, though MinnPost and California Watch tended to lean slightly leftward in the ideological tone of the stories that were studied by PEJ.

### Commercial Sites

Seven of the sites in the study fit all of the criteria (new, statewide, general interest news, relatively productive) but were organized as for-profit enterprises. As a group, the sites derive much of their revenue from advertising. Like all the other sites in the study, however, these organizations were

organized to fill a void in the current journalistic landscape by providing original reporting on state and national public affairs issues on the web.

If these sites have anything in common, it is that they tend to produce more original content on a weekly basis than most other sites in the study. But they vary widely when it comes to the question of whether the coverage reflects an ideological orientation. The Daily Caller, for instance, run by cable news pundit Tucker Carlson, scored a 70 on the 100-point ideology scale (higher than all but four sites in the study). Another site, Progress Illinois—the voice of organized labor in that state, and as liberal in its content as The Daily Caller is conservative—scored a 65 on the ideology scale.

Yet others, such as the Alaska Dispatch, presented a much more balanced approach. The Dispatch made national news when one of its reporters was roughed up by one of Senate candidate Joe Miller’s staff members during the 2010 mid-term elections. The site scored a 25 on the ideology scale, one of the lowest or most balanced in the study. Another site, founded by a number of former Star Ledger employees, is New Jersey Newsroom. It scored only 15 in terms of ideology, lower than all but four sites in the study.

The commercial sites also varied widely in their level of transparency. New West and Alaska Dispatch, for instance, disclosed a great deal of information about their agenda and their investors. Sunshine State News, by contrast, scored a low 40 on the transparency scale, which ranked it less transparent than all but two sites in the entire study.

Many of the commercial sites produce more content than most of the other sites studied. Two of the most productive sites were Alaska Dispatch (93 out of 100 on the scale) and The Daily Caller (100). The Alaska Dispatch averaged 21 stories per week during the time period studied, averaged 3-5 additional blog posts per week, and maintained an editorial and reporting staff of about 15. The Daily Caller averaged 49 stories per week during the period of study, a greater volume of content than all but one other site. Its bloggers churned out additional entries at least daily. (Its staff size was unavailable).

### Outlier Sites

Two other sites fit all the criteria for inclusion in the study, yet did not fall naturally into any of the various types or categories. They did not belong to any of the families or networks of sites. Yet while they were independent, they differed from the individual multi-funder sites because they drew funding from a limited pool of sponsors.

One of these, Cal Watchdog, is a non-profit outlet that derives funding from a think tank called the Pacific Research Institute, which works to advance free-market policy solutions. Cal Watchdog scored 80 on the 100-point transparency scale—clear in its statement of mission and purpose, but less forthright when it came to its ultimate funding sources. With its editorial staff of four and an average of seven stories per week plus a relatively robust blogging operation, Cal Watchdog scored 40 on the productivity scale—placing it right around the middle of the pack.

NJ Spotlight is a non-profit outlet supported by three foundations, including the Knight Foundation. Though the site was brief in its description of its mission, it was somewhat easier to trace the money trail from New Jersey Spotlight to its major donors and the wealth behind those donors. It scored 80 on the transparency scale. When it came to productivity, the site scored 43. It listed four editorial staff,

produced on average 14 stories per week and produced content for an additional opinion platform on its site.

Neither of the two sites produced enough content during the sample period to depict, with a suitable degree of methodological soundness, their ideological scores.

Watchdog.org Sites	American Independent News Network	Statehouse News Sites	Individual Multi-Funders	Commercial Sites
<p>Family of sites sponsored by the Franklin Center for Government &amp; Public Integrity</p>	<p>Family of sites published by the American Independent News Network</p>	<p>Sites share content but operate independently</p>	<p>Receive funding from many organizations, often from private foundations</p>	<p>For-profit sites</p>
<p>Stories tend to lean more conservative</p>	<p>Stories tend to lean liberal</p>	<p>Receive funding from the Franklin Center and other think tanks</p>	<p>Independently operated</p>	<p>Operate independently from each other</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alaska Watchdog</li> <li>• New Hampshire Watchdog</li> <li>• Kansas Watchdog</li> <li>• Missouri Watchdog</li> <li>• Nebraska Watchdog</li> <li>• New Mexico Watchdog</li> <li>• Oklahoma Watchdog</li> <li>• Tennessee Watchdog</li> <li>• Virginia Watchdog</li> <li>• West Virginia Watchdog</li> <li>• Maine Watchdog</li> <li>• Montana Watchdog</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Iowa Independent</li> <li>• The Colorado Independent</li> <li>• The Minnesota Independent</li> <li>• The New Mexico Independent</li> <li>• The Washington Independent</li> <li>• The Michigan Messenger</li> <li>• The Florida Independent</li> <li>• The North Carolina Independent News</li> <li>• The Texas Independent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illinois Statehouse News</li> <li>• Nevada News Bureau</li> <li>• Virginia Statehouse News</li> <li>• Maryland Reporter</li> <li>• Missouri News Horizon</li> <li>• Idaho Reporter</li> <li>• Texas Watchdog</li> <li>• Pennsylvania Independent</li> <li>• The Nerve</li> <li>• Tennessee Report</li> <li>• Colorado News Agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ProPublica</li> <li>• Texas Tribune</li> <li>• California Watch</li> <li>• CT Mirror</li> <li>• MinnPost</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress Illinois</li> <li>• Alaska Dispatch</li> <li>• Sunshine State News</li> <li>• The Daily Caller</li> <li>• CT News Junkie</li> <li>• New Jersey Newsroom</li> <li>• New West</li> </ul>

# **Non-Profit News: Assessing a New Landscape in Journalism**

## **About the study**

The study, Non-Profit News: Assessing a New Landscape in Journalism, involved several phases, all of which were performed in-house by PEJ researchers.

The primary PEJ staff members conducting the research, analysis and writing included: Tricia Sartor, Weekly News Index manager; Kevin Caldwell, researcher/coder; Nancy Vogt, researcher/coder; Jesse Holcomb, research associate; Amy Mitchell, deputy director; Tom Rosenstiel, director.

Other staff members who made substantial contributions to the report were: Christine Bhutta, research associate; Paul Hitlin, senior researcher; Dana Page, communications and creative design manager.

Copy-editing was done by Molly Rohal, communications coordinator for Pew Research Center. Number-checking was done by Steve Adams, researcher/coder.

The following Pew Research Center staff provided design assistance on the interactive tool: Russell Heimlich, web developer; Michael Piccorossi, director of digital strategy and IT; Michael Keegan, graphics director for Pew Social & Demographic Trends and Pew Hispanic Center; Carrie Madigan, informational graphic designer for Pew Social & Demographic Trends and Pew Hispanic Center.

The first phase of research was to identify the media universe. This occurred in May-June 2010. The second phase was conducting audits of the online sites (June-August 2010). The third phase was the content capture and analysis (September 2010–January 2011). Finally, once the coding was complete, several scales were developed as a means of presenting the specific findings on ideology, transparency and productivity.

Details of each of these phases follow.

### *Defining the Media Universe*

Researchers took several steps to define the universe of non-profit news organizations.

Researchers compiled the universe of sites by using three different techniques. First, researchers consulted lists of such news outlets that had already been compiled by academics and journalists who monitor this emerging field. These sources include:

Michele McClellan's (Reynolds Journalism Institute) list of [promising community news sites](#)  
Brant Houston's (University of Illinois) list of investigative news consortia, discussed in the 2010 report ["Ethics for the New Investigative Newsroom."](#)  
[Knight Digital Media Center](#)  
The [Poynter Institute](#) (including David Sheddon's Transformation Tracker/Josh Stearns Groundswell)  
[Newseum](#)/Online News Association's Online Journalism Awards lists  
[Online Journalism Review](#)

[Online News Association](#)  
[Nieman Journalism Lab](#)

Second, Researchers searched the web for news organizations by using the following terms:

“[state]” and “News organization”  
“[state]” and “News” and “Privately Funded”  
“[state]” and “News” and “Non-profit”  
“[state]” and “News” and “Independent”  
“privately funded news”  
“privately funded media”  
“general interest journalism online /sites”  
“new online site”

Third, researchers identified and contacted each state’s press association and asked for a list of credentialed online media outlets. In addition, researchers asked the associations if they were aware of any additional online journalism startups in their state.

The field was narrowed according to the following criteria:

Outlets must produce at least one original story per week  
Outlets must exist entirely online  
Outlets must have launched no earlier than 2005  
Outlets must list editorial/reportorial staff  
Content must consist primarily of reported news, as opposed to opinion and analysis  
Outlets may not be the creation of a larger, established media company (i.e., The Nation Institute)  
The mission of the outlet must be primarily to produce content, as opposed to treating content creation as an ancillary item, subservient to a different mission.  
Outlets must be based in the U.S.  
Outlets must focus on news at the state or national level, not the local or hyperlocal level  
Outlets must not be dedicated to niche topic areas such as health or finance news, but instead must focus on a broader range of subjects

While the focus of the study is non-profit news outlets, researchers did not limit their searchers to non-profit sites alone; commercial or for-profit sites that met all the criteria above were included in the study to serve as a point of comparison.

The final universe for the study consisted of the following 46 online news outlets (in alphabetical order):

Alaska Dispatch  
Alaska Watchdog  
Cal Watchdog  
California Watch  
Colorado Independent  
Colorado News Agency  
Connecticut Mirror  
CT News Junkie  
Idaho Reporter  
Illinois State house News

Iowa Independent  
Kansas Watchdog  
Maine Watchdog  
Maryland Reporter  
Michigan Messenger  
MinnPost  
Missouri News Horizon  
Missouri Watchdog  
Montana Watchdog  
Nebraska Watchdog  
Nevada News Bureau  
New Hampshire Watchdog  
New Jersey Newsroom  
New Jersey Spotlight  
New Mexico Watchdog  
New West  
Oklahoma Watchdog  
Pennsylvania Independent  
Progress Illinois  
ProPublica  
Sunshine State News  
Tennessee Report  
Tennessee Watchdog  
Texas Tribune  
Texas Watchdog  
The Daily Caller  
The Florida Independent  
The Minnesota Independent  
The Nerve  
The New Mexico Independent  
The North Carolina Independent News (now closed)  
The Texas Independent  
The Washington Independent (now closed)  
Virginia Statehouse News  
Virginia Watchdog (Old Dominion Watchdog)  
West Virginia Watchdog

### *Site Audits*

Once the online news sites were selected, researchers conducted an audit of each site and the primary funding or underwriting organizations behind it, using a codebook specifically developed for this phase of the study. Researchers primarily limited themselves to the information that was readily available on the site, so if particular pieces of information could not be found, this was noted. In some instances—particularly relating to underwriters—researchers reached beyond the site to try to obtain the missing information by conducting additional web searches and consulting other investigative news reports about the sites.



The audit assessed the following variables:

Name of outlet  
Year launched  
Does the outlet contain editorial/reporting staff (yes/no)  
Staff makeup  
Number of editorial/reporting staff listed  
Intended geographic scope  
Stated general focus  
Frequency of original reporting  
Frequency of blog updates  
Tax status  
Revenue streams  
Transparency of news site:  
    How transparent is the outlet in describing its mission?  
    Does the outlet provide full contact information?  
    Do stories include bylines?  
    How transparent is the outlet in revealing its funding sources?  
Underwriting structure  
About the primary funder(s):  
    If foundation/non-profit (describe)  
    If private company/firm (describe)  
    If individual/family (describe)  
Transparency of funder(s):  
    How transparent is the funder in describing its mission?  
    How transparent is the funder regarding its own financial information?

### *Capture and Content Retrieval*

For one full month (September 7-October 5, 2010), researchers captured and archived all relevant news content (text and audio/video) appearing Monday through Friday on home pages of the sites. All news stories—including the occasional interview and analysis piece—were captured. If a story continued beyond the home page, the entire story was captured. Content clearly identified as blog posts or opinion pieces were not captured. News roundups and/or stories originating from other outlets were not captured.

For the majority of sites, capturing was done the day following publication. In other words, coders captured all of Monday's stories on Tuesday morning. The exception was a select group of sites that regularly published a high volume of content. In order to ensure that none of these sites' content disappeared by the time researchers were scheduled to capture, one staff member was designated to capture stories around 4 p.m. on the day of publication.

### *Determining the Coding Sample and Content Analysis*

The capture and content retrieval phase of the project resulted in a total of 2325 stories. The chronological lists of stories contained in each of the individual subfolders were printed out, and the actual coding sample was determined by selecting every other story captured for each of the sites. Thus, 50% of all stories captured were coded, resulting in a sample of 1122 stories.<sup>20</sup>

A team of five experienced PEJ coders conducted a content analysis on the universe of stories using a codebook specifically designed for the study. Coders went through an extensive training procedure, and achieved an inter-coder reliability of 82% across all variables. Coders achieved a reliability of 80% across the three variables which together measured the presence of ideology in the content—story theme, range of viewpoints, and target of exposes.

In addition to several ‘housekeeping’ variables (date coded, source, story date) the content analysis included the following key variables:

- Story Descriptor – a short description of the content of the story
- Story Topic – determines the broad topic categories addressed by a story, such as government, crime, education, labor, economy, immigration etc.
- Range of Viewpoints – a measure of the effort of the news organization to present a balanced story by presenting multiple viewpoints on a topic or issue that involves some level of possible controversy
- Presence of Journalist Opinion – a simple yes-or-no variable that indicates presence of journalist’s opinion
- Target of Wrongdoing – identification of the focus of an investigation or evaluation of specific allegations of malfeasance, corruption, improper behavior, ethical breaches, etc.
- Story Themes – an assessment of whether the total number of assertions in a story drive home a political or partisan message. The following themes were studied:
  - “The hand of government can make society fairer, better, and can bring benefits”
  - “Government regulations, oversight and taxes tend to interfere with progress and the power of the market.”
  - Democratic/liberal figure(s)- Positive steps/signs/actions
  - Democratic/liberal figure (s)- negative steps/signs/actions
  - Democratic/liberal figure (s)- is corrupt
  - Republican/conservative figure(s)- Positive steps/signs/actions
  - Republican/conservative figure(s)- negative steps/signs/actions
  - Republican/conservative figure(s)- is corrupt
  - Dem./liberal AND Repub./conservative figures- Pos. steps/signs actions
  - Dem./liberal AND Repub./conservative figures- neg. steps/signs actions
  - Dem./liberal AND Repub./conservative figures- is corrupt
  - Other figure(s)- Positive steps/signs/actions
  - Other figure(s)- negative steps/signs/actions
  - Other figure(s)- is corrupt
  - Wedge issue- liberal point of view
  - Wedge issue- conservative point of view

### *Data Analysis*

When it came to analyzing the content of the sites, several variables were observed in conjunction to indicate the ideological orientation of an outlet or group of outlets.<sup>21</sup> These included the Range of Viewpoints variable, the Target of Exposes variable, and the Story Theme variable.

Researchers combined the results of these three variables into a scale in order to create a summary measure of ideology that would be more reliable than any of the individual indicators alone.

The same was done for the five key transparency indicators that were measured in the audit: transparency about a site's mission and funding sources; the site's accessibility; and the transparency of the site's primary funders about their mission and their own funding sources.

A third scale was created to measure the various indicators of a site's productivity, including the size of a site's editorial/reporting staff; its volume of news articles per week; and the amount of blog or opinion content produced by the site in a typical week.

The sites were given scores on the three 0-100 point rating scales in the following ways.

### **Ideology scale**

#### Story theme

- Very partisan: 50% or more of site's stories tilted to one ideological point of view, and by a ratio of at least 2-to-1. (Score is 100).
- Somewhat partisan: 40%-49% of a site's stories tilted to one ideological POV, with at least 2-to-1 ratio. (Score is 66.7).
- Slightly partisan: 25%-39% of a site's stories tilted to one ideological POV, with at least 3-to-2 ratio. (Score is 33.3).
- Non-partisan: 0%-24% of a site's stories tilted to one ideological POV, AND there is less than a 2-to-1 ratio of one POV over another. (Score is 0).
- Non-thematic: At least 60% of stories had no theme, and less than 25% leaned in any one direction. (Score is 0).

#### Target of exposes

- Very partisan: Site targets only liberal actors or conservative actors. (Score is 100).
- Somewhat partisan: Site targets both liberal and conservative actors, but targets one of these more often, by a ratio of at least 2-to-1. (Score is 50).
- Non-partisan: Site does not target any liberal or conservative actors, or, site targets liberal and conservative actors in equal measure. (Score is 0).

#### Range of viewpoints

- Highly one-sided: 60% or more of a site's stories featured a single POV. (Score is 100).
- Somewhat one-sided: A majority, but less than 60%, of a site's stories featured a single POV. (Score is 66.7).
- Slightly one-sided: A plurality of the site's stories featured a single POV, but not a majority. (Score is 33.3).
- Even-handed: A plurality or majority of the site's stories featured two or more POVs. (Score is 0).

In addition to a content analysis, researchers evaluated the sites on transparency and productivity. Each of those items consisted of several related variables that were scaled together as follows.

### **Transparency scale**

## Transparency of mission

### Mission statement

- Very transparent: Site contains detailed 'about us' section, including description of mission, reason for launch, and what its objectives are. (Score is 100).
- Somewhat transparent: Site contains brief 'about us' section that hints at mission. (Score is 50).
- Not transparent: No 'about us' statement. (Score is 0).

### Primary funder(s) mission statement

- Very transparent: Funder provides detailed 'about us' section, including description of mission, reason for launch, and what its objectives are. (Score is 100).
- Somewhat transparent: Funder provides brief 'about us' section that hints at mission. (Score is 50).
- Not transparent: No 'about us' statement. (Score is 0).

## Site availability

- Very transparent: complete contact information (address, e-mail, phone number). (Score is 100).
- Somewhat transparent: limited contact information (one or two of the above). (Score is 50).
- Not transparent: no contact information. (Score is 0).

## Transparency of funding

### Site's funding transparency

- Very transparent: Site is very clear about its funding source(s). Provides a list of key funders and/or individual donors, as well as links to foundations. Outlets that provide financial documents on their sites and provide dollar amounts in connection with supporters are considered highly transparent. (Score is 100).
- Somewhat transparent: Site is somewhat clear about its funding source(s), and provides a name but either no link or no description of those sources. (Score is 50).
- Not transparent: no mention of where the site's funding comes from. (Score is 0).

### Primary underwriter's funding transparency

- Very transparent: Underwriter is very clear about its funding source(s). Provides a list of funders or a description of the source of its own financial resources, with names if applicable, as well as links to foundations and descriptions of them. (Score is 100).
- Somewhat transparent: Underwriter is somewhat clear about its funding source(s), and provides a name but either no link or no description of those sources. (Score is 50).
- Not transparent: no mention of where the underwriter's funding comes from. (Score is 0).

## **Productivity scale**

### Stories per week

- High volume: 20 or more stories per week. (Score is 100).
- Moderate volume: 10-19.9 stories per week. (Score is 66.7)
- Low volume: 5-9.9 stories per week. (Score is 33.3).
- Very low volume: 0-4.9 stories per week. (Score is 0).

### Blogging frequency

- High volume: more than 5 posts/week (Score is 100).
- Moderate volume: 3-5 posts/week (score is 66.7).
- Low volume: 1-2 posts/week (Score is 33.3).
- Very low volume: 0 posts/week (Score is 0).

#### Staffing size

- Very large: 11 or more (Score is 100).
- Large: 5-10 (Score is 66.7)
- Small: 2-4 (Score is 33.3)
- Very small: 1 (Score is 0).

#### *Presentation of Data in Interactive Tool*

Ideological scores were only presented for outlets and groups whose number of stories studied exceeded 20. Transparency and productivity scores were presented for all outlets.

Outlets and groups were labeled as highly ideological, somewhat ideological, or non-ideological, depending on their scale scores. The placement of a site or group into one of these categories was determined by evenly dividing the scores into three equal ranges between the lowest ideology score achieved (0) and the highest score achieved (70). The ranges were as follows:

0-23: non-ideological

24-47: somewhat ideological

48-70: highly ideological

Likewise outlets and groups were labeled as transparent, somewhat transparent, or slightly transparent, depending on their scale scores. Once again, the placement of a site or group into one of these categories was determined by evenly dividing the scores into three equal ranges between the lowest transparency score achieved (20) and the highest (100). The ranges were as follows:

20-46: slightly transparent

47-75: somewhat transparent

76-100: transparent

Finally, outlets and groups were labeled as having high productivity, medium productivity, or low productivity, depending on their scale scores. As with the other measures, the placement of a site or group into one of these categories was determined by evenly dividing the scores into three equal ranges between the lowest productivity score (0) and the highest (100). The ranges were as follows:

0-33: low productivity

34-67: medium productivity

68-100: high productivity

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<sup>1</sup> Among ProPublica’s funders is The Pew Charitable Trusts, which provided the group with a two-year grant of \$1 million in June 2010. The Pew Charitable Trusts is also the primary funder of the Pew Research Center and the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

<sup>2</sup> Sites formed around a single issue, like the Hechinger Report, or those comprised primarily of opinion or aggregation, such as Arkansas News, were excluded from this study. So were sites that were fundamentally local in nature, covering one community, such as Voice of San Diego, the St. Louis Beacon, or the Bay Citizen. Also excluded were sites that produce on average less than one original story per week. See About the Study for more on the parameters of the sample.

<sup>3</sup> In a November 2010 note to readers, editor Aaron Wiener explained that as foundation support began to dry up in the midst of economic recession, The Washington Independent’s expenses were unsustainable, and its parent, the American Independent News Network, ended publication.

<sup>4</sup> Journalist Michael Fancher highlighted dozens of these kinds of sites in Seattle alone in a [special report](#) for PEJ. Another journalist, Michele McLellan, counts many more local sites in a [series of lists](#) she updates at the University of Missouri’s Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute.

<sup>5</sup> This is more than simply a count of the number of sources quoted. A story could quote many sources all saying essentially the same thing. Rather, this variable tallied the number of differing points of view, or sides to the story, in stories that involved some degree of controversy. (Some stories, 20% of all those studied here, such as an announcement of a meeting, the discussion of procedural matters or a weather report, are non-controversial in their nature.)

<sup>6</sup> To do this, trained coders counted assertions in each story, coding them for any themes that PEJ had identified. In order for a story to be considered to have a partisan or ideological theme, a high threshold was set, with a 2-to-1 ratio. In other words, a story had to have twice the number of pro-liberal to pro-conservative assertions, or twice the number of pro-conservative to pro-liberal assertions, to be considered “themed.”

<sup>7</sup> [“WatchBlog: Thanks Franklin Center!”](#) Steven Allen Adams, West Virginia Watchdog, November 26, 2010

<sup>8</sup> In practice, tracing the trail of money from a Watchdog.org site to its ultimate sources can be a challenge for a typical news consumer. A visitor to the Nebraska Watchdog, for instance, would click on the “about” section of the site to find that it received funding from the Franklin Center. But to learn more about the Franklin Center, the visitor would have to do a separate web search, as no link is provided on that page. Once on the Franklin Center’s website, the only information provided about its donors is that their anonymity is protected. The only way to learn about the Sam Adams Alliance connection would be to stumble upon it serendipitously through a web search or to read about the relationship in other investigative journalism looking at the Franklin Center family of sites. On its own site, redesigned in 2011, The Sam Adams Alliance says nothing about its funding.

<sup>9</sup> Three members were an exception, choosing to remain anonymous.

<sup>10</sup> The Knight Foundation, which provides financial support to a number of sites in this study, has also provided support for the Pew Research Center and the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

<sup>11</sup> Even journalists have had some difficulty parsing out details about Sunshine State News, one of the commercial sites in the study. The St. Petersburg Times [reported](#) that one of the people originally listed as among the owners of Sunshine State News in papers filed with the Florida Department of State was Justin Sayfie, a former

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communications director for Republican Governor Jeb Bush and founder of Sayfie Review, a news service. (Sayfie later told the Times he was no longer involved in Sunshine State News.) Managing editor John Wark told the Times that the site is privately owned by a group of investors. Little else is known about who is backing the site.

<sup>12</sup> These staffing figures were tallied in late 2010; since then, the numbers may have changed. ProPublica, for instance, states that it is staffed by 34 journalists today.

<sup>13</sup> Compete.com monitors the clicks and browsing habits of two million member consumers, which is approximately one percent of the internet browser population. That data is extrapolated to rank the top million websites used by consumers. Its complete methodology can be found [here](#).

<sup>14</sup> Rebekah Metzler, "['Watchdog' website puts a new spin on politics](#)," The Portland Press Herald, October 2, 2010

<sup>15</sup> Robert B. Bluey, "[The New Watchdogs](#)," Center for Media and Public Policy, February 7, 2011

<sup>16</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of Watchdog.org sites. Seven other Watchdog sites were not included because they posted no content during the sample time period. And soon, the number of Watchdog sites may increase; Watchdog.org domain names are registered in every single state.

<sup>17</sup> Not all Watchdog sites list the Franklin Center as a source of support: These include Watchdog sites in Alaska, and Montana.

<sup>18</sup> Steven Allen Adams, "Watchblog: Thanks Franklin Center!" Westvirginiawatchdog.org, November 26, 2010

<sup>19</sup> In November 2010, The Washington Independent and New Mexico Independent ceased to publish their own content. Their sites continued to be maintained as additional platforms for other AINN content.

<sup>20</sup> Because the sum of Watchdog.org stories was somewhat small, an exception was made for this group, and every Watchdog.org story that was captured was coded (this was done to ensure valid statistical analysis). This brought the sample of stories analyzed in the study up to 1,203.

<sup>21</sup> Because many sites contained small samples of stories, statistical analysis could not be conducted on their content alone. Therefore, the Watchdog.org and American Independent News Network families of sites, plus the Statehouse News Online consortium, were each analyzed as a unit (as opposed to deriving statistics from the individual sites that make up those groups). The rest of the sites in the study were analyzed individually.