

The Next President is at the Front Door Again: An Analysis of Local Media Coverage of the 2012 Republican Iowa Caucus, New Hampshire Primary and South Carolina Primary

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Community newspapers in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina hold a front row seat to critical early presidential primary elections; they cover those elections, however, with an exclusive focus on coverage of candidate visits to local communities. Unlike national media, which focus primarily on “horse race” campaign coverage, community newspaper editors and publishers say they consider a candidate’s standing in state and national polls unimportant to their coverage; equally inconsequential are a candidate’s character, values, issues and policies. This survey of community newspaper editors and publishers supports gatekeeping theory but refutes its focus on normative, labeling and conscious deviance. It also helps develop literature on the “relentlessly local” focus of community journalism.

In 2008, Bill Tubbs had a question. The publisher of *The North Scott Press* in Eldridge, Iowa, asked the Scott County Democratic and Republican parties why their candidates for president were stumping in Davenport, a regional hub, but avoiding other nearby communities. They listened. By the time the Iowa Caucus was over, the *Press* had face-to-face interviews in Eldridge with the future president, vice president, and secretary of state, as well as a former senator and governor who would be embroiled in scandals within a year.

Eldridge, Iowa, is home to about 5,600 people. Tubbs’ newspaper publishes 5,000 copies every Wednesday. But during the Iowa caucus, Tubbs and journalists like him have more access to national politicians than Rupert Murdoch, Arianna Huffington or

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Rush Limbaugh – and, arguably, more influence over who will ultimately become president of the United States.

“Our rule: It has to be the CANDIDATE – not his/her sister, brother, husband/wife, or other surrogate. Only the candidate. If they come to our small towns and rural areas, we’ll be there,” Tubbs said.[†] “In Iowa, it’s about retail politics. The candidate who meets the most people and is the most authentic does the best.”

Local newspapers in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina play a unique role in the American political process. Every four years, men and women vying to be the next American president walk into the offices of community journalists and *ask* for local news coverage. Their visits are reported more or less verbatim; their speeches are quoted, local questions are asked and the visit itself becomes the news item.

Academic analyses have indicated that, on the whole, community newspapers are more locally focused, and more locally accountable, than larger publications (Hume, 2005; Lauterer, 2006; Reader, 2006; Smethers, Bressers, Willard, Harvey, & Freeland, 2007). There is also evidence that, under normal circumstances, smaller newspapers offer kinder coverage to visiting presidents than national media (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2008; Peake, 2007). Research on early presidential caucuses and primaries, however, has been surprisingly thin, and more focused on broad trends (Palser, 2004; Patterson, 1980; Tewksbury, 2006) and the New Hampshire primary (Freitag, 2000; Golan & Wanta, 2001; Kendall, 2005) than the Iowa caucus (Heim, 2013; Len-Rios, 2002; Schreurs, 1996) or South Carolina primary (Vinson & Moore, 2007). As the first three states in both the Republican and Democratic nomination process, these elections have incredible authority determining who will, and will not, be elected president of the United States. Often, they are decided by a thin margin of votes; in the 2012 GOP Iowa caucus, for example, only 34 votes ultimately separated former Sen. Rick Santorum (R-PA) from former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney.

There exists in these states a paramount opportunity to research the intersection between local newspapers and the most national of American politics. Conversing with community newspaper editors and publishers, rather than about them, allows researchers to better understand them. What motivates these journalists? What influences their coverage? What do they think of the job they are doing? And, what might their answers illustrate about gatekeeping theory and its focus on deviance?

This study offers scholars an illustrative look at perhaps the most influential community newspapers in the country, as well as an opportunity to test Gatekeeping theory (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; White, 1950) in a unique environment. Additionally, for professional journalists, this study offers insights, ideas and perhaps inspiration to community newspapers in other states. And, given the surprising length of presidential primaries in 2008 and 2012, it is also possible that party elections in states like Florida, Nevada, Minnesota and Missouri will continue to grow in importance; if so, community journalists in those states could benefit from learning the coverage practices of their colleagues in earlier states.

[†] Tubbs made this comment in his survey response. The mention of Tubbs and *The North Scott Press* in the introduction was included only after Mr. Tubbs previewed and approved the segment.

Literature Review

News Coverage of Presidential Primaries

While scholarly research has scrutinized general elections in remarkable detail (Brubaker, 2011; Davisson, 2011; Delavande & Manski, 2010; Hardy & Jamieson, 2011; Hill, Pitts, Smith, & Smith, 2010; Johnson & Perlmutter, 2009; Ragas & Kiouisis, 2010; Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010), considerably less attention has been devoted to crucial early contests in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina. Published research offers interesting direction for the current study, but does not offer a comparable analysis of community journalism.

The broadest analyses have indicated a general shift toward “horse race” coverage among national newspapers and television media during the primaries. Freitag (2000) found that themes of “campaigning,” or news concerning strategy, style, strengths and weaknesses, occupied a total of 47 percent of news coverage of the New Hampshire primary between 1952 and 1996 in *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*; news on issues and qualifications occupied only 12 percent of the coverage. Similarly, Benoit, Hemmer and Stein (2010) found that “horse race” coverage was the most common overall topic (66 percent) among *New York Times* articles on primaries between 1952 and 2004. The bulk of that coverage focused on campaign strategy (45 percent), polls (11 percent) and campaign events (nine percent). Coverage of the “game,” including “horse race” coverage, also accounted for nearly two thirds of major media coverage of the 1976 primaries (Patterson, 1980). The consequences of an election are also considered factors in media consumption of political news surrounding a primary; high-stake elections see more reader interest than low-consequence ones (Tewksbury, 2006).

A study of the 2000 New Hampshire primary by Golan and Wanta (2001) found that generally, Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) was treated more favorably in regional media than Texas Governor George W. Bush; McCain was positively associated with reform, leadership and patriotism, while Bush was considered more electable with the best chance to win. An intermedia agenda-setting analysis of the 2008 Iowa caucus found that neutral and liberal political blogs tended to follow the mainstream media’s agenda, while conservative blogs remained independent; agenda setting effects were also present between the media and Sen. Hillary Clinton’s (D-NY) campaign agenda (Heim, 2013). Farnsworth and Lichter (2006) found strong “network news effects” concerning relationships between “horse race” news coverage and poll changes in New Hampshire. Kendall (2005) found a close interaction between media and candidates on the campaign trail over many election cycles, but argued that online and social media are making that interaction less logistically co-dependent.

More specific scholarship has been devoted to political advertising in New Hampshire, which skyrocketed to more than \$4.8 million in 2004 – up from \$3 million during the 2000 campaign, and even more so from previous election cycles (Devlin, 1994; 2005). A number of studies have investigated the gendered (and arguably sexist) coverage of Sen. Hillary Clinton’s (D-NY) emotional speech during a campaign stop in Portsmouth, New Hampshire (Bligh, Merolla, Schroedel, & Gonzalez, 2010; Falk, 2009; Shepard, 2009), and one analysis argues that Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) reshaped the

media narrative surrounding national security and “national insecurity” throughout the primary season (Ivie & Giner, 2009).

Perhaps most interesting for professional journalists is the innovative success of the Iowa Caucus Research Guide, a state-run program designed to piggyback news coverage of local economic development among the deluge of political reporting of the Iowa caucus. The promotion was designed to funnel news coverage, and subsequent revenue, from the caucus to local businesses and programs; estimates valued the program’s benefits at \$1.4 million (Schreurs, 1996). Also noteworthy is research by political scientists Vinson and Moore (2007), who argued that local media in South Carolina had greater “local flavor” and tended to be more accurate than national media concerning the importance of “crossover voters,” negative campaigning and veteran’s issues. Coverage of character was also an important issue for local papers; it was less of an issue for national media.

“From our vantage point as scholars living in South Carolina and researching campaign spending in the 2000 presidential primary, we often wondered if the national media were covering the same event we were watching” (Vinson & Moore, 2007, p393).

Outside the election season, there is evidence that metropolitan newspapers are kinder to visiting presidents than the traveling White House press corps. President George W. Bush, in particular, was fond of shopping his policies to voters in their own backyards; Eshbaugh-Soha (2008; 2010) and Peake (2008) and found that, generally speaking, metropolitan newspapers covered presidential visits more positively than the national media. That support fluctuated based upon a newspaper’s resources, corporate ownership and local support for the president, as did support for the Iraq War. The pair also found most (73 percent) of the coverage of the president’s visits tended to be descriptive of the event itself – not a fundamental discussion of policy (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008; 2010). There is also evidence that coverage of congressional representatives is highly related to geographic overlap between the congressional district and a newspaper’s circulation area (Schaffner & Sellers, 2003), and that local demographics and ideologies can shift metropolitan newspaper coverage in specific directions (Pollock, 2007).

Local Newspapers

However, the definition of “local” media in these studies refers more to *metropolitan* journalism than community journalism. Studies that specify local newspapers have referred to metropolitan publications like *The Charleston Post and Courier* and *New Hampshire Union-Leader* (Devlin, 1994; Freitag, 2000; Golan & Wanta, 2001; Vinson & Moore, 2007). While there is certainly a considerable gap between *The New York Times* and *The Des Moines Register*, there is arguably a larger gulf between the *Times* and the weekly *Hampton Chronicle* in Hampton, Iowa.

How might the *Chronicle* cover the caucus? Here, scholarship is blank. The researcher found no scholarship that has explicitly explored the role of community newspapers in the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary or South Carolina primary. While there is considerable evidence that community newspapers are more locally focused and locally accountable to local audiences, both offline (Burmester, 2011; Funk, 2010; Hume, 2005; Lauterer, 2006; Reader, 2006; Smethers et al., 2007) and online (Anderson & DeVault, 2009; Gilligan, 2011; Greer & Yan, 2010; Mersey, 2009), less

scholarship is concerned with community newspapers and elections (Shaker, 2011). Community newspapers in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina potentially influence major elections; how would they characterize the effectiveness of their coverage, and what influences that coverage?

Gatekeeping theory

Here, Gatekeeping theory has clear utility. The theory is based upon studies of a Cold War-era wire editor at a major newspaper who documented his reasons for accepting, or rejecting, wire articles for publication. Some reasons were entirely practical, like not having enough space or feeling the topic had been fully covered already, but others like “He’s too red” (communist) were entirely subjective (White, 1950). The foundation expanded the World War I persuasion techniques documented by Kurt Lewin (1947), who argued that any number of deliberate or accidental forces could influence what food reaches the domestic dinner table, and what food does not. It has since been considered an individual- and organizational-level influence in Shoemaker and Reese’s Hierarchy of Influences model (1996) and has been expanded into a variety of news formats and environments (Cassidy, 2006; Cheesman & Nohl, 2011; Cuillier, 2012; Haiqing, 2011; Hardin, 2005; Hun Shik, 2010; Minic, 2008). That homogenization of media content has been abundantly illustrated by framing theory (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001), which considers media content (and, in turn, media homogenization) more specifically than media production, which tends to be the realm of gatekeeping theory.

The national media’s preference for “horse race” coverage, often considered as a news frame, can also be considered a Gatekeeping effect. Journalists and editors crafting that coverage are mindful of an artificial industry standard, effectively, of the link between “horse race” coverage and professional newspapers. In a similar way, community newspapers writ large adopt a clear priority on their local communities. If community newspapers behave in unison concerning their communities, and national media homogenously focus on “horse race” campaigns, it seems logical that community newspapers might structure their approach to primary election coverage in similar ways.

Generally, gatekeeping theory can be considered relatively shallow. In their formative work on the subject, Shoemaker & Vos (2009) acknowledge that, “Regrettably, theorizing about gatekeeping has not been in large supply” (p11); the theory can even be considered primarily a tactic of the news-making process. While it dovetails with media sociology (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) and framing (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001) nicely, it arguably lacks the same rigor. There are two reasons, however, why it is a strong choice for this study.

First, although the theory is relatively shallow, that lack of depth makes it highly tangible. Studies that directly address practical news-making decisions, like this one, are better suited using a highly practical theoretical framework such as gatekeeping theory. Of critical interest here are an editor’s practical decisions; those decisions are best considered using practical theory.

Second, a highly theoretical consideration of news as deviance has evolved from that practical focus (Arpan & Tuzunkan, 2011; Boyle & Armstrong, 2009; Breen, 1997; Jong Hyuk, 2008; Shoemaker, 1984; Shoemaker & Danielian, 1991; Shoemaker, 1996). On a sociological level, news is like the canary in the coal mine – a barometer for

potential threats, both real and imagined, meant to satisfy a basic human need for awareness and security. That focus on deviance, according to the theory, is derived from a lack of interaction between journalists and audiences (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009):

People routinely survey their environments for things that are deviant or unusual because they pose potential threats. These can be as common as a car darting in front of someone on a busy street to less frequent threats like invading armies. ... The difference between professional information gatherers such as journalists and the rest of us is that journalists' surveillance is institutionalized and sanctioned, whereas we generally survey the environment for our more informal and personal purposes. Journalists fulfill people's innate desire to detect threats in the environment, keep informed about the world, and devise methods of dealing with those threats, whether real or potential (Shoemaker, 1996, p32).

The theory is focused on journalism and media studies, and has its roots in older analyses of social control (Lauderdale & Estep, 1980; Miliband, 1969). The general idea is broadly applied, however. Put another way, in a popular self-help book on anxiety:

The shape on the horizon was either a bear or a blueberry bush, and the only way to find out was to go and see for yourself. If you go off toward the vague shape often enough, eventually it turns out to be a bear, and that day you're the bear's lunch. ... We're the children of the children of the children (and so forth) of the ones that played it safe and went back to the cave" (Wilson & Dufrene, 2010, p30).

In journalism studies, deviance has been operationalized under three definitions: normative deviance, labeling deviance, and conscious deviance (Shoemaker, 1984; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Shoemaker & Vos' (2009) operationalizations are used here:

Normative Deviance: Behavior, ideas, groups, or events are deviant when they break social rules or norms.

Labeling Deviance: Behavior, ideas, groups, or events are deviant when an individual or group calls them deviant.

Conscious Deviance: A person or group is deviant when aware that their behavior is in some sense wrong or disapproved.

Gatekeeping theory offers fertile ground to study deviance because it is primarily concerned with editorial decisions – deviant or otherwise – and less concerned with the effects or implications generated by the final editorial product. This study on community newspaper coverage of early presidential primaries offers an intriguing window into the study of deviance as well. For most community newspapers, a visiting presidential

candidate would be considered *extremely* deviant – an out of the ordinary event by any measure, if not a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. In Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina, however, such visits are regular and routine. How might community newspaper editors’ editorial decisions surrounding those visits clarify or complicate the academic understanding of news as deviance?

Research Questions

This study focuses on the motivations and influences on community newspaper editors covering the 2012 Republican Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary. Relatively little research has been done on American primary elections; much current scholarship has been devoted to the “horse race” focus of national media. As such, this study pursues five research questions.

RQ1: How important are a candidate’s visits to a community to community newspapers covering the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary?

RQ2: How important are state or national polls to community newspapers covering the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary?

RQ3: How important are a candidate’s character, values, issues and policies to community newspapers covering the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary?

RQ4: How do community newspaper editors characterize the value, strengths and weaknesses of their coverage of the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary?

RQ5: Does community newspaper coverage of the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary reflect Shoemaker and Vos’ (2009) concepts of normative, labeling, or conscious deviance?

Methodology

To measure these research questions, this study utilized a 10-question survey of a sample of weekly and bi-weekly community newspaper editors in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina. The survey was conducted online via Qualtrics, a detailed and highly customizable web survey platform. Technically, different surveys were conducted for newspapers in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina; in each, the names of the state and caucus / primary were changed as appropriate, but otherwise the survey content was identical.

Originally, the sample was designed to be generated randomly among 40 community newspapers each from Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina. Email addresses of newsrooms and newspaper editors were collected from online databases from the Iowa Newspaper Association, the New England Newspaper and Press

Association, and the South Carolina Press Association. Forty community newspapers were randomly selected from databases in Iowa and South Carolina; however, given the small number of newspapers in New Hampshire, a large random sample was infeasible. Instead, a sample of 20 newspapers was chosen, which effectively represented a census of all independently operated weekly and bi-weekly newspapers in the state; several weekly publications are operated by the same editors and staff, which limited the potential dataset. Furthermore, while there are more than 40 independently operated community newspapers in Iowa and South Carolina, there are not *many* more. Given the small sizes of these states, too, this dataset represents the lion's share of community newspapers in Iowa and South Carolina; as such, this sample can only barely be considered randomly generated.

The survey was emailed four times in March and April of 2012, and participants reached a 16 percent response rate. Fifteen completed surveys and one partially completed survey were returned. Although a higher response rate would obviously be preferable, it is important to note the small size of the potential dataset. Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina are all relatively small states; indeed, that's part of their value as early primary states. This sample reached the majority of community newspaper editors in these states, and the dataset cannot be significantly expanded; also, as Lewis and Reese noted, journalists in the digital era are busy professionals who are "simply hard to pin down for an interview" (Lewis & Reese, 2009, p.89).

Responses and response information was kept entirely confidential. For each quantitative question, identical 10-question Likert-type scales were used, with one being "rarely" and ten being "very often." To conserve space, similar questions were combined into matrixes on the Qualtrics survey.[‡]

To answer RQ1, respondents were asked "Roughly how often did your newspaper write about presidential candidates who were ..." followed by "Visiting your community?" and "Not visiting your community?" Respondents were then asked how often the newspapers ran Associated Press or other wire service articles concerning the presidential candidates. An additional question asked, "If you had unlimited resources, how many articles would your newspaper write about presidential candidates who were ..." followed by 10-point scales for "Visiting your community?" and "Not visiting your community?"

To answer RQ2 and RQ3, a three-item matrix question utilized the same 10-point Likert scale. The question read, "Before the (Iowa Caucus / New Hampshire Primary / South Carolina Primary) in January, how much did you consider the following when planning your coverage of a particular candidate?" Three queries followed: "State or national polls?" "A candidate's character or values?" and "A candidate's issues or policies?"

A pair of open-ended questions was used to measure RQ4. Editors were asked "How important a role do you think local newspapers play in the (Iowa Caucus / New Hampshire Primary / South Carolina Primary)?" And "In general, what do you think about the way local newspapers covered the (Iowa Caucus / New Hampshire Primary / South Carolina Primary)?" Responses were analyzed qualitatively to determine majority

[‡] See Appendix 1 for full version of the survey as it appeared on the Qualtrics web site.

and minority opinions. Samples culled from the responses and presented here are intended to reflect the majority opinion unless otherwise noted.

RQ5 was also determined qualitatively. Analysis of the open-ended survey questions, as well as qualitative results for RQ4, determined if editor's perspectives and editorial philosophies were consistent or at odds with Shoemaker & Vos' (2009) operationalizations of normative, labeling, and conscious deviance; operationalizations are also consistent with a bevy of literature on deviance (Arpan & Tuzunkan, 2011; Boyle & Armstrong, 2009; Jong Hyuk, 2008; Shoemaker, 1984; Shoemaker & Danielian, 1991).

Results

Community newspapers in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina treated the 2012 Republican caucus and primaries as local news. Community newspaper editors and publishers bucked previous research on national media, which emphasized "horse race" campaign coverage; editors and publishers also argued that their coverage serves an important function in key elections.

RQ1: How important are a candidate's visits to a community to community newspapers covering the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary?

Survey results indicated that candidate visits to a community are quite important to community newspaper editors. On a scale of one to 10, with one being rarely and 10 being very often, community newspaper editors in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina reported an average 7.69 level of coverage of candidates visiting a local community (N = 16, SD = 3.05); conversely, editors and publishers said they reported on candidates who did not visit a local community with an average 1.44 level (N = 16, SD = 0.81). Respondents were also asked, given unlimited resources, how much coverage would be given to candidates who were visiting, and not visiting, a local community; editors and publishers responded with an ideal 8.31 for visiting candidates (N = 16, SD = 2.5), and 2.25 for non-visiting candidates (N = 16, SD = 2.27).

Community newspapers also reported a 1.13 (out of 10) regarding use of Associated Press or wire articles on the caucus and primaries (N = 15, SD = 0.52).

RQ2: How important are state or national polls to community newspapers covering the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary?

State and national polls were not important to community newspaper editors and publishers covering the Iowa Caucus, New Hampshire Primary and South Carolina Primary. On a scale of one to 10, with one being rarely and 10 being very often, respondents reported an average of 2.00 (N = 15, SD = 2.07).

RQ3: How important are a candidate's character, values, issues and policies to community newspapers covering the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary?

Community newspaper editors and publishers did not consider a candidate's character, values, issues or policies important when determining news coverage. On a

scale of one to 10, responses placed “Character or Values” at 2.20 (N = 15, SD = 1.97) and “Issues or Policies” at 2.80 (N = 15, SD = 2.91).

RQ4: How do community newspaper editors and publishers characterize the value, strengths and weaknesses of their coverage of the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary?

Generally speaking, community newspaper editors and publishers considered their coverage an important part of the early caucus and primaries; they also routinely emphasized their local focus on, and value to, their local communities. That local focus effectively meant that if a candidate did not step into a community newspaper’s footprint, they would be ignored entirely. Representative comments include the following:

“We do not do any stories on candidates who do not visit our area. Simple reason is we only cover local events. If you are not physically in the area, you don't exist.” (New Hampshire)

“We all do it differently. I don't understand why a *local* newspaper would send a reporter far afield of its own coverage area to chase candidates. Our policy is they get coverage only if they step foot in our coverage area, period.” (New Hampshire)

“We know the communities, i.e., the voters, and they know us. I believe the community places more trust in my reporting than what other, larger media outlets say.” (Iowa)

“Small local newspapers are not likely to spend a lot of space on a candidate who doesn't appear in our community or at least send representatives to our community. Only when we can localize the information do we do that in [our newspaper]. We leave it to larger media outlets to print a candidate's campaign promises, etc., unless we can relate them to something that directly affects our readers.” (South Carolina)

For candidates who *did* visit, however, that local emphasis brought with it three important attributes: specificity, accountability, and availability. Coverage was specifically tailored to particular communities, editors and publishers said, rather than the broad-spectrum approach used by the national media. Because community newspapers are already more accountable to local audiences, editors and publishers said, their coverage seemed more genuine to local readers as well. Representative comments include:

“[The Iowa Caucus is] very important. Candidates tend to speak more specifically to small-town audiences, and must answer questions that address smaller portions of Americans. When speaking to a national audience, candidates must speak more broadly. Both specific and broad answers help us get a better picture of each candidate.” (Iowa)

“Local newspapers are in a better position to show how a candidate's stances affect that community.” (South Carolina)

“I truly enjoy grassroots campaigning, so I enjoy the caucus. Our readership pays attention and appreciates the unbiased, complete and honest reports we provide regarding visits by the candidates.” (Iowa)

“Local newspapers play a critical role in educating voters in New Hampshire. As a small (7,000 circ bi-weekly), we are not able to cover candidates to the extent dailies can, but we cover all visits to the region and look for local angles of national campaigns.” (New Hampshire)

That local focus and accountability was particularly important for rural readers. Many editors and publishers acknowledged the authority national media and metropolitan newspapers carried when covering the caucus and primaries, but in isolated communities, local media adopted increased importance.

“Large dailies.... [the Iowa Caucus] is vital. Rural weeklies like ours, not much. They look to us for local unbiased coverage.” (Iowa)

“With the electronic media leaning to the left or right, the importance of local newspapers ranks very high.” (South Carolina)

“In rural towns, where the local newspaper is people's first source of information, very important. But the cities have the numbers so that may be a non-factor.” (New Hampshire)

Most community newspaper editors and publishers also felt their coverage of the early caucus and primaries was generally well done. There was a small undercurrent of cynicism, and an acknowledgement that national politics are not the forte of community newspapers, but confidence was generally standard.

“[Community newspaper coverage is important] somewhat. The papers are still the best delivery system to let voters know about appearances by candidates. However, I think this time around most voters were already leaning to Gingrich since he was the lone Southerner in the race.” (South Carolina)

“Studies should be done of the work candidates do to become acquainted with the voters of small towns. Other than the local fans of individual candidates, there is a deep skepticism of the process.” (Iowa)

“Local newspapers give way too much credit to the caucus and the candidates. It's a giant advertising campaign for both the candidates and the state, with very little substance to it.” (Iowa)

RQ5: Does community newspaper coverage of the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary reflect Shoemaker and Vos' (2009) concepts of normative, labeling, or conscious deviance?

This question was also assessed qualitatively. It considered editors' philosophies and choices concerning three types of news deviance common in gatekeeping literature: normative deviance, labeling deviance and conscious deviance. Each is based on the notion that news effectively serves as a sociological alarm bell for potential threats, and that news is based on events which are out of the ordinary of day-to-day life – and thus, potentially threatening (Breen, 1997; Shoemaker, 1984; Shoemaker & Danielian, 1991; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Shoemaker, 1996).

Results consistently rebuked all three forms of deviance.

Normative Deviance: In most communities, particularly small towns, a visit by the American presidential candidate would unequivocally qualify as normative deviance. In Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, however, such visits are routine and commonplace – so much so that community newspaper editors *expect* them, and deny coverage to candidates who do not visit the local community. These visits do not break social norms; instead, they clearly are the norm.

Labeling Deviance: Similarly, in most communities, the coverage of an unusual or rare visit by a presidential candidate would be openly acknowledged as unusual or rare, and thus deviant; literature indicates this is true of sitting presidents as well (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2008; Peake, 2007). This is not the case in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, however, where newspaper editors and their readers are both accustomed to being visited early and often by aspiring presidents. No labeling deviance is present because community newspaper editors do not consider the visits unusual or out of the ordinary; in fact, quite the opposite is true.

Conscious Deviance: Qualitative analysis also indicates that conscious deviance is not present in community newspaper coverage of the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary. Editors are aware of the importance of their coverage, and the early primaries as a whole, and generally take the elections seriously; however, there is no sense that these states' privilege, or the primary system in general, is in some sense wrong or disapproved. Conscious deviance does not apply.

Discussion

Practical Implications

Community newspapers in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina serve an important function in American politics. They cover among the most critical national elections, the nation's first Republican and Democratic primaries, and arguably have considerable emphasis over who will, and will not, be president of the United States.

It is intriguing, then, that community newspapers do not give these key elections special weight or unique coverage. Editors and publishers take the caucus and primaries seriously, but only as they impact their local audience and communities. In a sense, community newspapers cover these important elections in the same way they would cover *any* important election – with an exclusive emphasis on local ideas, audiences and individuals.

It's almost as if these newspapers provide a window, or an intermediary of some sort, between a local community and a national election. National figures step up to that window to speak with the local community, but only in this one-on-one context does the nation writ large exist. For audience or political science research, this is oversimplified; community newspaper readers have ample access to state, national and international media, and it's safe to say that voters in these states fully appreciate the national implications of their ballots. However, for the particular study of community journalism, it is interesting to note that the predominant emphasis on local communities trumps the paramount non-local importance of the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire primary and South Carolina primary.

Community newspaper editors and publishers were unswayed by state or national polls, a candidate's character or values, or their issues or policies. Front-runners and also-rans, as well as mavericks and partisan whips, were given equal consideration provided they were present and available in the community newspaper's local coverage area. This places community newspaper coverage in stark contrast with national media, which tend to focus on "horse race" campaign coverage; it also speaks to the well-documented local focus of community journalism, and adds scholarship to the study of gatekeeping theory. Indeed, at least in these instances, media do allow some objective forces (local availability) to influence their coverage while ignoring others (character, values, issues and policies). This is entirely consistent with the notion of gatekeeping.

This study speaks, too, to political science and the American electorate. Community newspapers in these states cover the early caucus and primaries much as any community newspaper might cover a statewide election; this is worth noting given that legislatures in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina invest a great deal of effort to remain at the front of the national primary schedule. These three states occupy a privileged position in American politics; their community newspapers, however, do not treat these elections any differently than any other non-local election. What might that say about the importance and function of the Iowa Caucus, New Hampshire Primary and South Carolina Primary? Further research specifically aimed at political science would be required to explore these questions, but they are certainly intriguing.

Theoretical Implications

As an academic theory, gatekeeping is relatively shallow and perhaps lacking in theoretical development (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). This study argues that its shallow focus is a highly tangible boon – by retaining a practical focus on editorial decisions, the theory empowers practical discussion of extant news coverage and clear editorial decisions. This paper is one such example. Gatekeeping theory allows a salient, practical discussion of the logic and motivations behind community newspaper coverage of the three most critical elections in the American political cycle.

However, there is certainly room for theoretical development and consideration. One of gatekeeping theory's most intriguing theoretical concepts is the notion of deviance, which has evolved out of classic studies of social control (Lauderdale & Estep, 1980; Miliband, 1969) and stems from a sociological need for humans to recognize and address potential threats of all shapes and sizes (Shoemaker, 1984; Shoemaker & Danielian, 1991; Shoemaker, 1996). News media accomplish that threat watching efficiently and expediently (Arpan & Tuzunkan, 2011; Boyle & Armstrong, 2009; Breen, 1997; Jong Hyuk, 2008). Concerning community newspaper coverage of these crucial elections, however, the concept simply fails to apply.

Three prominent perspectives on deviance – normative deviance, labeling deviance and conscious deviance – are plainly inconsistent with community newspaper editors' reported perspectives and policies. News in this case is not about threats, or unusual events; instead, editorial decisions reflect an important but highly routine ritual of candidate visits, speeches, and politicking. In Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, such visits are highly commonplace, and get covered as routine events – even despite the power and authority that one candidate will ultimately assume.

This complicates the notion of gatekeeping as deviance. Perhaps deviance is not as essential to the newsmaking process as previous literature has argued (Shoemaker, 1984; Shoemaker & Danielian, 1991; Shoemaker, 1996); or, perhaps it is inconsistent with the “relentlessly local” (Lauterer, 2006) orientation of community journalism (Pollock, 2007; Reader, 2006; Shaker, 2011; Smethers, Bressers, Willard, Harvey, & Freeland, 2007). Further research will be required to explore the relationship between deviance and community newspapers.

Conclusion

This study investigates a curious intersection in American media and politics. At the start of the presidential election process lie the Iowa caucus, the New Hampshire primary and the South Carolina primary; these elections are generally treated as important but highly routine events by community newspaper editors in those states. These editors have the unusual privilege of meeting and covering presidential contenders and, through their coverage, potentially exerting heavy influence over who will, and will not, ultimately become president of the United States.

As these findings indicate, these editors consider these critical elections with national consequences purely within a hyperlocal lens. The news is not about the nation as a whole; it is about a visit to a particular local community, and indeed a routine and expected visit. It is not curious that local newspapers focus exhaustively on local news – that is highly consistent with their editorial mission, and with a range of academic literature (Brewer & McCombs, 1996; Hume, 2005; Lauterer, 2006; Shaker, 2011; Smethers, et al., 2007). However, if ever there were an opportunity for a community newspaper to depart from its “relentlessly local” (Lauterer, 2006) focus, it would be for news coverage of a critical and prominent election like the Iowa caucus. That local newspaper editors stay true to their business model, even here, is highly noteworthy.

Findings presented here overlap also into a number of other theoretical avenues. Although not explicitly explored here, there is clear utility for Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined community (2006); how community newspaper editors and their

coverage imagine their hyper-local readership within the context of major elections with national consequences deserves more direct consideration. Similarly, community newspaper coverage of these early primaries deserves explicit consideration concerning media sociology and the hierarchy of influences model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), classic analyses of newsmaking (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978), and the structural pluralism model (McCombs & Funk, 2011; Pollock, 2007; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1973, 1980). Given the significance of these editors' coverage of these elections, it would be highly fruitful to consider them from a variety of deeper theoretical perspectives.

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Appendix 1: Full Survey

7/23/13

Qualtrics Survey Software

Default Question Block

Dear South Carolina Newspaper Editor,

You are invited to participate in a 10-minute survey on local news coverage of the 2012 Republican South Carolina Primary. Many newspapers in South Carolina cover the primary through coverage of candidate visits to local communities, giving newspaper staff and their readers a unique opportunity to engage national figures with local questions and concerns. When those national figures enter the local arena, national news becomes local news in critical ways not seen in most American states.

This survey focuses on how, and why, local newspaper editors craft their coverage during those visits. It is gathering responses from small and community-based newspapers. The findings will likely be of use to a curious newspaper industry; they will also build upon academic research of the South Carolina Primary, which has historically been neglected in favor of more general politics.

Identical surveys are also under way in Iowa and New Hampshire. The study is titled "The Next President is at the Front Door Again: An Analysis of Local Media Coverage of the 2012 Republican Iowa Caucus, New Hampshire Primary and South Carolina Primary." It is conducted by Marcus Funk, a former government reporter and PhD student in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. His contact information is below.

The risk of this survey is minimal, and the survey is free. No personal data will be collected, and results will be kept anonymous. Participation is voluntary, and you may decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time.

The survey has only 10 questions, and should take less than 15 minutes. It has been processed by the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board; if you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact -- anonymously, if you wish -- the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or e-mail at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu. The study number is 2012-03-0027.

Thank you for your time,

Marcus Funk
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The University of Texas at Austin
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Austin, Texas, 78712

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Marcus.jfunk@utexas.edu

Before the South Carolina Primary in January, roughly how often did your newspaper write about presidential candidates who were ...

(On a scale of 1 – 10, with one being rarely and 10 being very often.)

<https://s.qualtrics.com/ControlPanel/Ajax.php?action=GetSurveyPrintPreview&T=3vTPtq>

1/3

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Visiting your community?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Not visiting your community?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Before the South Carolina Primary in January, roughly how often did your newspaper run Associated Press or other wire services articles about presidential candidates?

(On a scale of 1 – 10, with one being rarely and 10 being very often.)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
AP & Wire Content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Before the South Carolina Primary in January, how much did you consider the following when planning your coverage of a particular candidate?

(On a scale of 1 – 10, with one being rarely and 10 being very often.)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
State or national polls?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A candidate's character or values?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A candidate's issues or policies?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If you had unlimited resources, how many articles would your newspaper write about presidential candidates who were ...

(On a scale of 1 – 10, with one being rarely and 10 being very often.)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Visiting your community?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Not visiting your community?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How important a role do you think local newspapers play in the South Carolina Primary?

In general, what do you think about the way local newspapers cover the South Carolina Primary?

What is the regular circulation of your newspaper?

- Small weekly newspaper (<50,000 circulation)
- Small bi-weekly newspaper (<50,000 circulation)
- Small daily newspaper (<50,000 circulation)

What is the name of your newspaper?

Is there anything else you'd like to add, or that you think the researcher should know?

Thank you for participating in this survey! Your response will be kept anonymous and confidential. If you would like to receive updates on the project once it reaches conclusion and publication, please enter your email below.

What is your email? (optional)