ABSTRACT

This study focuses on inter-media agenda setting, in which the national media is purported to affect the local media. A content analysis of national and local newspaper coverage of H1N1 was conducted. It was found that number of H1N1 stories, length of H1N1 stories, and front page placement of H1N1 stories in local newspaper publications were influenced by national newspaper coverage. Empirical data from 7,110 articles are used to provide evidence of this relationship between national and local media. Flu-related headlines of national news stories were not predictive of flu headlines of local news stories, which could mean that local news headlines serve as a guide to national news headlines.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND RELEVANCE

As unattractive as coming down with the flu might be, most people never think twice about catching the flu and dying within a week. When H1N1 first came onto the scene in April 2009, it frightened the public because not only was it as contagious as the regular flu, it was hitting young and seemingly healthy adults the hardest. According to estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010), there were between 39 million and 80 million cases of 2009 H1N1 between April and December 12, 2009. The CDC also estimates that between 7,880 and 16,460 H1N1-related deaths occurred in 2009 (2010). H1N1 was largely thought to be a novel influenza, especially because the average age of people in the United States who died from H1N1 during the first four months of the epidemic was 40 years old (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010).

When a distinct, exigent risk threatens the lives of the public, the media quickly devote coverage to the issue at hand. As risk perception lessons, the media spend less time and space on the subject. Due to this life-span of a subject, H1N1 is an ideal topic to choose in examining media coverage and effects. A great deal of research supports the assertion that the media have a variety of effects on the public. These effects can be positive or negative, substantial or small. The media have the capacity to affect public opinion. While these effects have been researched, the effects of the media on media are often overlooked. That is, various news organizations have the capacity to affect other news organizations. This is significant, as the media then affect the public. Thus, the ways in which the media affect themselves hold serious implications for the effects the media has on the public.

In the current study, I examine the extent to which national media coverage of H1N1 influence local coverage of the topic. Through a comprehensive content analysis of 7,110

articles, I find that the number, length, and front page placement of H1N1 articles in national newspapers was influential on the number, length, and front page placement of H1N1 articles in local newspapers. Flu-related headlines in national newspapers were not indicative of flu-related headlines in local newspapers.

In this thesis, I will first provide a literature review of the relevant communication literature. Then, I will discuss my hypotheses. After detailing the methods I used, I will present the results, which show a relationship between national and local coverage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda setting

Agenda setting is the process by which issues garner the attention of media gate-keepers, members of the public, and policy-makers (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Agenda setting is often measured in terms of issue salience, that is, which issues are judged to be most important. The utility of agenda-setting theory lies in investigating the relationships between the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda, generally in terms of which issues appear to be most salient to which agendas (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). When two agendas agree in both issue and the perceived importance of that issue, it is reasonable to expect that agenda setting has occurred, though it requires empirical research to determine the ways in which each agenda was affected by the others.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) first coined the term agenda-setting with their famous study on the 1968 presidential campaign. They found a +.967 correlation between the main issues that fell under the media agenda and the issues that individual voters reported to be the most important. That finding supported their agenda-setting hypothesis, which stated that "the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues" (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). Since then, there have been more than 400 empirical studies researching different aspects and instances of agenda setting (McCombs, 2004).

However, there are more nuanced instances of agenda setting besides the interrelationships of the media, public, and policy-makers, such as media coverage affecting the coverage of other media. McCombs (2004) uses an onion metaphor to explain the relationships between the media agenda and the agendas that might affect it (see Figure 1). With the media

agenda in the center of the onion, it is surrounded by concentric circles demonstrating three

fundamental layers affecting the media agenda. These are, from closest to furthest, news norms,

other news media, and news sources. This metaphor suggests that news norms are more

influential on the media agenda than other news media, while other news media are more

influential on the media agenda than news sources. Looking more closely at the relationships

between these layers, McCombs (2004) also suggests that other news media "validate and

reinforce the social norms and traditions of journalism" (p. 99). For example, a television station

might validate and reinforce a newspaper's decision to publish more photographs with their

stories, as television news is a more visual form of news. Though the nuances of these

relationships have yet to be determined, media agenda is ultimately impacted by news norms,

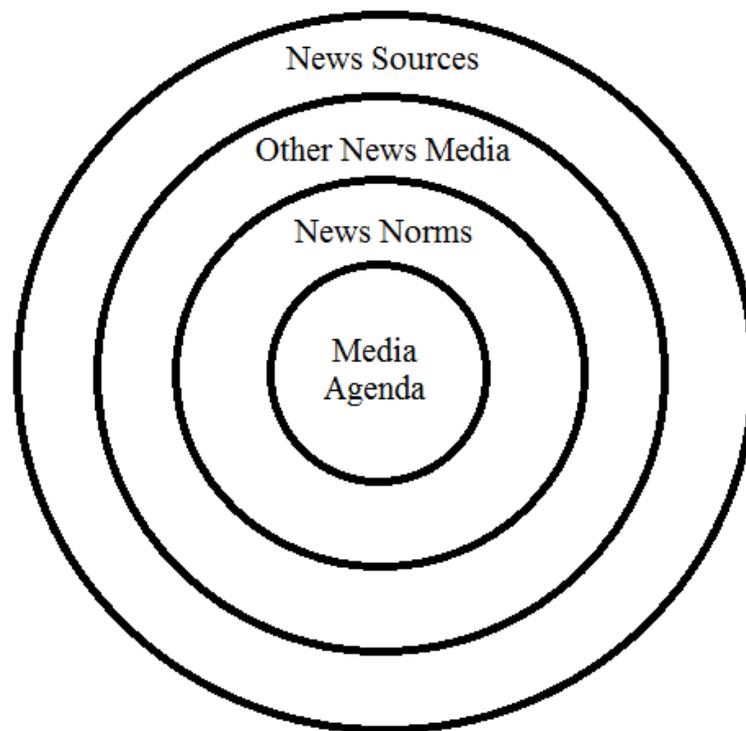other news media, and news sources.

Figure 1: An illustration of McCombs' onion metaphor demonstrating his hypothesized relationship between the media agenda and news norms, other news media, and news sources.

The cause of inter-media agenda setting might be the way in which journalists conceptualize their roles. Donsbach (2004) suggests that journalists rely on each other to validate their shared realities in order to have confidence they are reporting what they should be. This is achieved through communication with one another on the job or in casual settings, as well as by seeing what each other has covered and how. Donsbach's assertion that journalists "observe what other news media report and how they report their stories" is directly supportive of inter-media agenda setting (2004, p. 140). About 25% of health reporters involved in a recent survey said that they received most of their story ideas from newspaper articles or ads or the wire service (Tanner, 2004). It is possible that journalists writing about health verify story ideas with other journalists and publications because they are concerned that inadequate or excessive coverage could hold negative implications for their audience.

Another possible explanation of inter-media agenda setting is the simple fact that national, or elite, newspapers have more resources than smaller, local publications. It is expected that more resources will lead to not only a greater amount of information, but also a more detailed understanding of issues (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008). If a smaller publication lacks the resources of a more elite newspaper, it is likely that reporters and editors at the smaller publication might look to the larger one for cues on what to cover, as the larger publication could be expected to have a better understanding on current issues. In this sense, national newspapers might set the agenda for local newspapers because they naturally have more resources to determine what the issues are and how one might interpret them.

An application of the agenda setting process on the issue of global warming found "considerable evidence of inter-media agenda setting" (Trumbo, 1995, p. 36). Initially, newspapers and the science press led coverage, with newspapers having a stronger influence on

television coverage (Trumbo, 1995). Additional research supports that the newspaper agenda can influence the television news agenda (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998; Roberts & McCombs, 1994; Reese & Danielian, 1989). Weblogs and modern campaign tools (e.g., blogs and political advertisements) have also been found to influence the news agenda (Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008). These findings all provide support for inter-media agenda setting, with most research focusing on the correlation between newspaper and television agendas.

More relevant to this study is the relationship between national media and local media of the same type. Limited research has found that the local newspaper coverage is greatly influenced by wire editors, who are typically located in regions other than the local newspaper itself (Whitney & Becker, 1982).

While all news organizations are inherently able to affect each other, limited research has shown that *The Times* is a leader in terms of what issues to cover (McCombs, 2004; Reese & Danielian, 1989). For example, *The New York Times* led coverage on the issue of drugs in 1985 and 1986 (Reese & Danielian, 1989). After *The New York Times* built the foundation for the issue, *The Washington Post* picked it up, followed by *The Los Angeles Times* (Reese & Danielian, 1989).

This effect can be traced back to at least 1978, in looking at news coverage of a toxic dumpsite in the Love Canal neighborhood of Niagara Falls, New York (Ploughman, 1984). Referred to as an "industrial horror story" in 1976 by the Niagara Gazette, Love Canal coverage did not reach *The New York Times* until August 1978 (Ploughman, 1984, p. 1-2). Even though the topic was considered a "horror" by reporters in the area, the issue was not brought to the nation's attention through media until two years later when *The New York Times* picked up the

story (Ploughman, 1984). Ploughman asserts that *The New York Times'* coverage "legitimated" the story as a "nationally newsworthy event" (1984, p. 2).

More importantly, it is the elite news media in general that hold the power to influence the rest of the media (McCombs, 2004). In studying the relationship of elite, or national, news media to local news media, it is fitting to begin with newspapers, as newspaper coverage has more of an effect on TV than the other way around (Trumbo, 1995; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998; Roberts & McCombs, 1994; Reese & Danielian, 1989; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008).

Number, Length, and Placement

There is a finite amount of stories that can be published in a newspaper each day, with only so much space to contain them. Editors are forced to choose what stories to publish (and how many on any given issue), how long of a story to publish, and where to place each story. Only so many stories can be published on any given day, with additional constraints on length and the few stories chosen to run on the front page. In making these decisions, editors are inevitably communicating to readers which issues and corresponding stories should receive the most attention. Thus, the amount of stories, the length of the stories, and the placement of the stories devoted to an issue is significant.

The amount of news coverage has an influence on audience attention, with more news coverage positively correlated with more attention (Lee, 2009). The prominence a news organization gives an issue leads to more attention from its audience, and this can be communicated to readers via the amount of stories on any given topic or issue (Lee, 2009).

While several content analyses have measured amount of newspaper coverage in terms of amount of stories, it is also valuable to measure amount of coverage in terms of length of each

story. For instance, one newspaper might publish five stories of 500 words each on H1N1 while another newspaper publishes three stories of 2000 words each. Even though the latter newspaper only published three stories, one might argue that that publication devoted a greater amount of coverage to the topic than the former newspaper. Therefore, this study will measure amount of coverage by both quantity and length of stories.

The front page is the most influential location for newspaper stories. Having about twice the readership of stories that appear inside the newspaper, issues covered on the front page gain salience because they are given the most attention (McCombs, 2004). According to media informants in 2004 and 2006, publishing front page articles is the most effective strategy to impact policy (Gardner, Geierstanger, Brindis, & McConnel, 2010).

Research grouping stories by news values (proximity, timeliness, prominence, impact, magnitude, conflict, and oddity) found that timely stories were allotted the most space on the front page (Bridges & Bridges, 1997). Stories considered to be prominent, or of "known principal," received the second-most amount of front page coverage while stories concerning "people, events, or institutions in the immediate coverage area" received the third-most (Bridges & Bridges, 1997, p. 830-831). The rank order of the average proportion of news values on the front page was identical to a study performed using the same method 7 years prior (Bridges & Bridges, 1997). In addition to favoring coverage with such news values as timeliness, prominence, and proximity, editors tend to favor stories from previous front-page story lines over other coverage (Reisner, 1992).

Risk perception

Media coverage is also affected by perceived severity of risk. Disasters that have a human impact receive more coverage, as readers have more of a vested interest in those than in

disasters without a human impact (Van Belle, 2000). Distance is correlated with the amount of

disaster coverage as well, with disasters occurring closer to the site of *The New York Times*

covered more than disasters farther away (Van Belle, 2000). The more implications a disaster

holds for people living in close proximity to the publication, the more coverage the newspaper

will have related to the disaster.

These findings are in line with what survey results indicate attracts the attention of

viewers of TV health or safety stories: "being important to me personally; affecting someone that

I care about; relating to my job or interests; affecting me now" (Cooper & Roter, 2000, p. 335).

Both national and local health reporters and editors said that the "potential for public impact"

and "new information or development" were the two most influential criteria when determining

newsworthiness (Viswanath, Blake, Meissner, Saiontz, Mull, Freeman, Hesse & Croyle, 2008, p.

770). One could draw the conclusion that viewers and journalists value stories covering a public

health issue that has the opportunity to have a significant influence over any other sort of health

coverage.

Several researchers suggest that reporters are preoccupied with audience-resonance due

to the importance of health-related coverage, and thus utilize inter-media agenda setting to verify

their stories with other health journalists also adjusting coverage to their readers (Len-Rios,

Hinnant, Park, Cameron, Frisby, & Lee, 2009). In this sense, inter-media agenda setting occurs

because journalists recognize that which health risks they report on matters, as well as how they

are covered. Arguably, health journalists are aware of the implications their stories hold for risk

perception and as such, rely on other reporters for validation.

In addition to heightened news coverage influencing the perceived salience of an issue,

the amount of news coverage of a national health issue can impact perceived severity of risk.

One study found that when issues had high media coverage, they were seen as more severe than low media coverage (Young, Norman, & Humphreys, 2008). However, the researchers also had participants rate the relative severity of diseases without giving the name of the disease, that is, descriptions of each disease were label-free (Young, Norman, & Humphreys, 2008). In this segment of their experiment, the diseases with low media coverage were perceived as "worse" than those with high media coverage, indicating that issues receiving more media coverage are not objectively worse than those receiving less coverage (Young, Norman, & Humphreys, 2008). This provides support for the influence of news coverage on perceived risk.

It is possible that the words used to describe a national health issue might also have an effect. When an elite publication uses words that increase the perceived risk severity, it is likely that a local publication will increase their coverage of the issue. When a medicalese, or medical labels, are used to describe a recently medicalized disorder, people report that their judgments of the seriousness of the disorder become stronger (Young, Norman, & Humphreys, 2008). Medicalese might include terms such as "gastroesophageal reflux disease" for "chronic heartburn" and "androgenic alopecia" for "male pattern baldness" (Young, Norman, & Humphreys, 2008, p. 3). However, when lay labels, such as chronic heartburn or male pattern baldness, are used, participants' judgments of the seriousness of the recently medicalized disorder decrease (Young, Norman, & Humpreys, 2008). Research supports that using more familiar, or simpler, terms to describe unfamiliar medical issues decreases perceptions of risk severity.

In keeping with these findings, it has been suggested that news organizations use words such as "flu" instead of "influenza" and "outbreak" instead of "pandemic" to keep their language "simple" for readers (Wilson, Thomson, & Mansoor, 2004). Use of the terms "swine flu" and

"pandemic" in H1N1 coverage influenced risk perception. However, the case of swine flu is different, as using the term "swine" caused more upset than merely using the word "influenza" might have (Reuters, 2009).

Influenza A (H1N1) virus was originally referred to as "swine flu," which held different implications for public reaction. While "flu" is simpler than "influenza," the term "swine" may have led some to mistakenly believe one could become infected with H1N1 influenza through contact with pigs. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention acting director Richard Bessler said that the term "swine flu" was "leading to the misapprehension that people can catch the disease from pork" (Reuters, 2009). This was demonstrated in an extreme instance by Egypt's decision to kill its approximately 300,000 pigs (Kluger, 2009).

Department of Agriculture's Secretary Tom Vilsack pointed out the difference in risk severity between using the term "swine flu" and "H1N1," in saying that, "This really isn't swine flu. It's H1N1 virus. That's very, very important. And it is significant because there are a lot of hard-working families whose livelihood depends on us conveying this message of safety" (Department of Homeland Security, 2009). Clearly, there is reason to believe that using the term "swine flu" led to an increased perception of risk severity, while the term "H1N1" was seen as less of a risk.

Dr. Christine Jenkins explains that media coverage of swine flu led to the public's severe risk perceptions (Waterer, Hui, & Jenkins, 2010). Jenkins explained, "Initial media focus on the WHO Pandemic Phase step up to Level 6 led the public to believe we were on the brink of a catastrophic and devastating pandemic, rather than by way of explanation informing them that this is a predictable, natural evolution of spread of disease" (Waterer, Hui, & Jenkins, 2010, p. 54). As time went on, H1N1 was seen as less of a risk. "People's anxiety about swine flu and the

preventative actions they took to avoid infection declined as the perceived gravity of the novel outbreak waned" (Jones & Salathé, 2009, p. 5). Media coverage holds serious implications for the perception of risk which has real effects on the public.

This is especially evident in coverage of mortality. Media coverage does not reflect actual data, but public opinion does reflect media coverage (Combs & Slovic, 1979). Research has found that there is a disproportion between actual mortality and amount of published text devoted to mortality (Front, Frank, & Maibach, 1997). As long as the public is obtaining their information from media, rather than published statistics, such lopsided coverage can dangerously alter their perceptions.

Due to the seriousness of the topic and immediate prevalence throughout media, H1N1 was selected as the news issue for this study. Arguably, the ways in which national coverage affects local coverage are most considerable when the story topics themselves are of utmost national importance.

HYPOTHESES

Based on limited inter-media agenda setting research, which predicts that the media agenda is affected by a variety of factors, this study predicts that national news influences local news stories about national health issues. Specifically, I hypothesize that:

H1: The number of H1N1 stories in national news will influence the number of H1N1 stories in local news.

H2: The length of H1N1 stories in national news will influence the length of H1N1 stories in local news, with longer stories being more influential than shorter.

H3. The front page placement of H1N1 stories in national news will influence the front page placement of H1N1 stories in local news, with front page stories being more influential than others.

H4. The headlines of H1N1 stories in national news will influence the headlines of H1N1 stories in local news, with headlines mentioning "flu," influenza," "H1N1," or "swine flu" being more influential than others.

METHODS

The sample for this study is comprised of six national newspapers and 12 local newspapers. The six elite newspaper publications sampled are the six newspapers with the highest circulation in the United States: *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Washington Post* (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2010).

The 12 local newspaper publications were chosen to be representative of four Census regions and divisions, with three publications from each of those regions: the Northeast, the Midwest, the South, and the West (U.S. Census Bureau). The Pacific region, comprised of Alaska and Hawaii, was excluded from this study. From each region, a publication that has a circulation between 200,000 and 300,000, a publication that has a circulation between 100,000 and 200,000, and a publication that has a circulation between 50,000 and 100,000. These are: *The Buffalo News*, *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, and *The York Dispatch* from the Northeast; *The St. Paul Pioneer Press*, *The Dayton Daily News*, and *The Lincoln Journal Star* from the Midwest; *The St. Petersburg Times*, *The Birmingham News*, and *The El Paso Times* from the South; and *The Oregonian*, *The Las Vegas Review-Journal*, and *The Spokesman Review* from the West (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2010).

A census of articles that contained the word(s) "swine flu" or "H1N1" or "flu" or "influenza" were collected from a period of 38 weeks, beginning with April 5, 2009—ten days before the first detection of a "swine origin influenza A virus" in the United States—and ending with December 26, 2009 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Of the 7,362 articles collected, 3,723 articles were from the national publications and 3,639 articles were from

the local publications. Duplicated stories were removed before analysis resulting in a collection of 7,110 articles.

Each article was coded for date, word count, story type, front page, and headline. For both date and word count, the coder used the numbers provided by LexisNexis. If a word count was not listed, as was the case with Access World News, the word count was totaled by using Microsoft Word's blocking function. All clear continuations of the document-text were included in the word count, but anything listed after the break was not (e.g., the author's email address).

Story type consisted of article, editorial, correction, story abstracts, snippet, and other. An article was a basic news story; an editorial: opinion columns, letters to the editor, commentary; correction: notes changes to a previous story; story abstracts: provide a short summary of an article with a page number directing the reader to the full text; snippet: short version of a news story, often a part of a potpourri of stories; other: Q & A, TV listings, photo captions, obituaries, play reviews, police blotter—anything that could not be defined as one of the other story types.

Front page was defined as an article that ran on page A1 or section 1 page 1. The headline was considered to be whatever the database listed as the headline of the document text. The headlines were coded for any mention of the words, "flu," influenza," "H1N1," and "swine flu." If one or more of the words were a part of the headline, the article was coded for a flu mention in the headline.

All variables used in this study achieve acceptable reliability thresholds among five coders. Coding of local news coverage also achieved acceptable reliability thresholds with the two coders assigned to this coverage.

The unit of analysis was the day for the amount of stories and the word counts. The unit of analysis was the week for the front page placement and flu mentions in headlines. I

aggregated the amount of stories and word counts per day, and the front page placements and flu

mentions in headlines per week. These aggregates were then standardized using SPSS Statistics.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the number of H1N1 stories in national news influences the

number of H1N1 stories in local news. Figure 2 shows the standardized aggregates of the number

of flu stories published in national and local publications from April 5, 2009 to December 26,

2009. The highest peak in H1N1 coverage occurred on April 28, 2009. Figure 3, a closer view of

the standardized aggregates around that data point, allows one to see that national H1N1

coverage dropped a day before local H1N1 coverage did (April 28 to April 29) and began to rise

again a day before local H1N1 coverage as well (April 29 to April 30). This indicates that

Hypothesis 1 is supported, the number of H1N1 stories in national news influenced the number

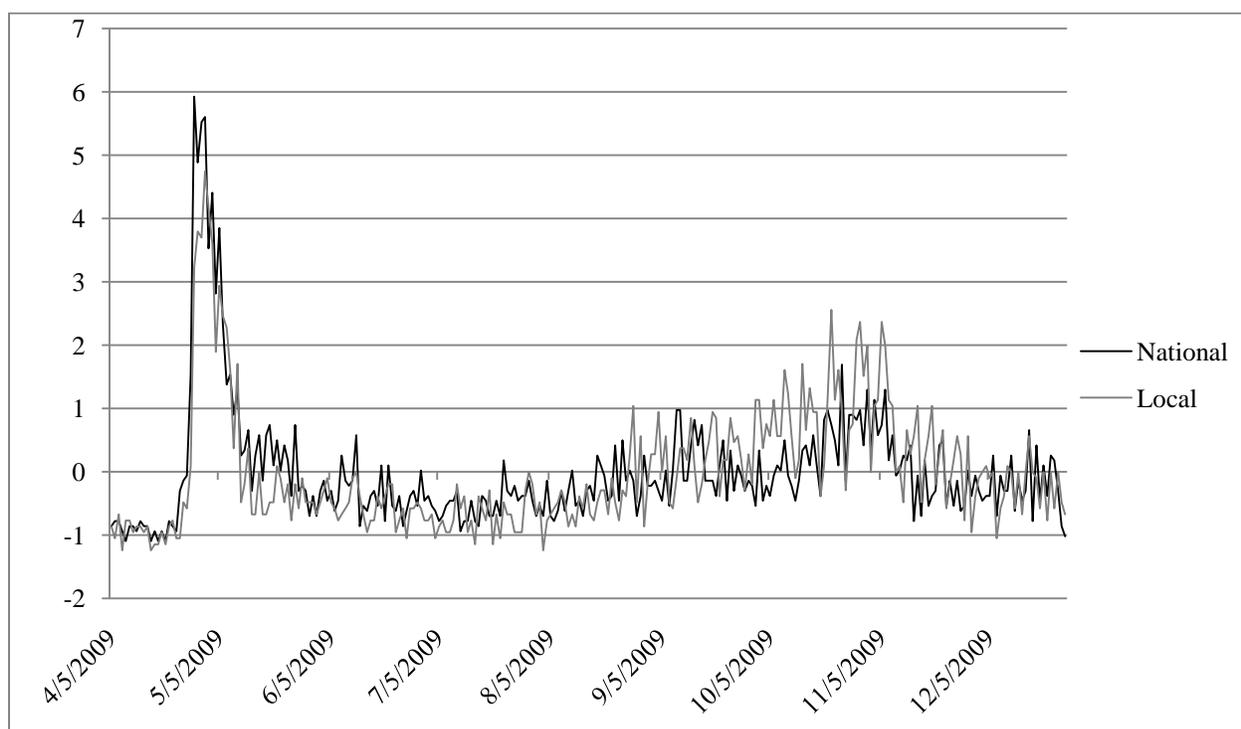of H1N1 stories in local news.

Figure 2: An illustration of the standardized aggregate number of flu articles published per day in national and local publications from April 5, 2009 to December 26, 2009
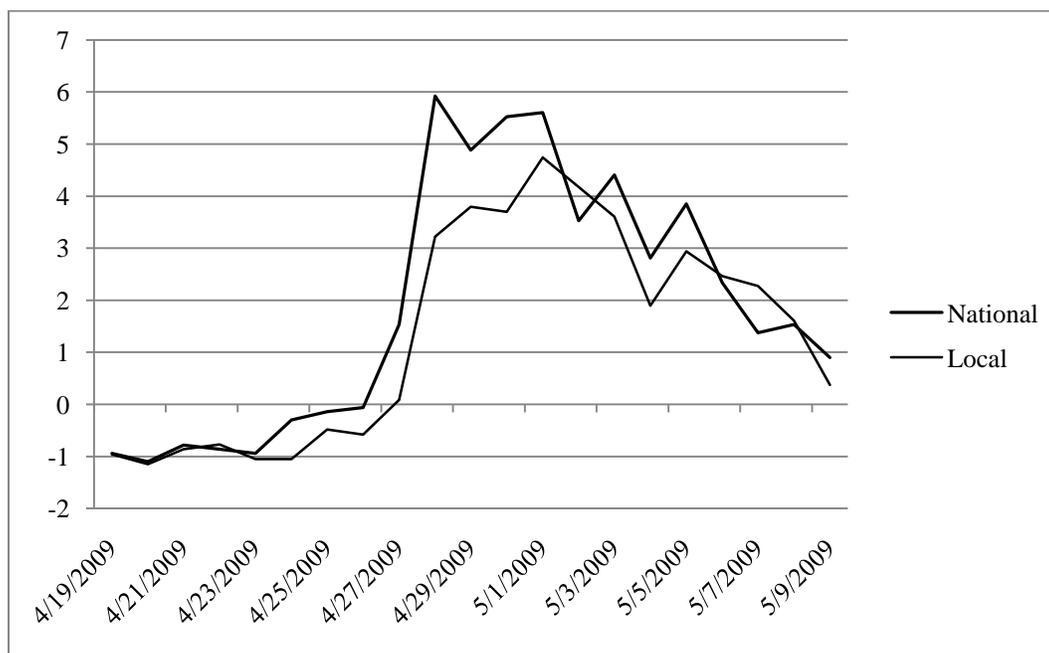

Figure 3: An illustration of the standardized aggregate number of flu articles published per day in national and local publications from April 19, 2009 to May 9, 2009

The correlation between the number of flu stories published in national newspapers and the number of flu stories published in local newspapers on the same day is 0.8045, which is to be expected, as the news coverage on any given day should be similar across the country. The correlation between the number of flu stories published in national newspapers a day before the number of flu stories published in local newspapers is 0.7495, which supports Hypothesis 1. Additionally, the correlation between the number of flu stories published in national newspapers and local newspapers on the same day, during the initial spike in coverage between April 19 and May 9, is 0.9467. The correlation between the number of flu stories published in national newspapers a day before the number of flu stories published in local newspapers, between April 19 and May 9, is 0.9241, which strongly supports Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the length of H1N1 stories in national news influences the length of H1N1 stories in local news, with longer stories being more influential than shorter. Figure 4 illustrates that, with the exception of the seasonal flu season between mid-October to mid-November, the length of national H1N1 newspaper stories drove the length of local H1N1 newspaper stories. This is especially apparent during the first major increase in coverage, as the length of national newspaper stories dropped shortly before the length of local newspaper stories dropped, as well as in examining several other peaks in coverage. A comparison of these standardized aggregates of the length of H1N1 stories per day supports Hypothesis 2.
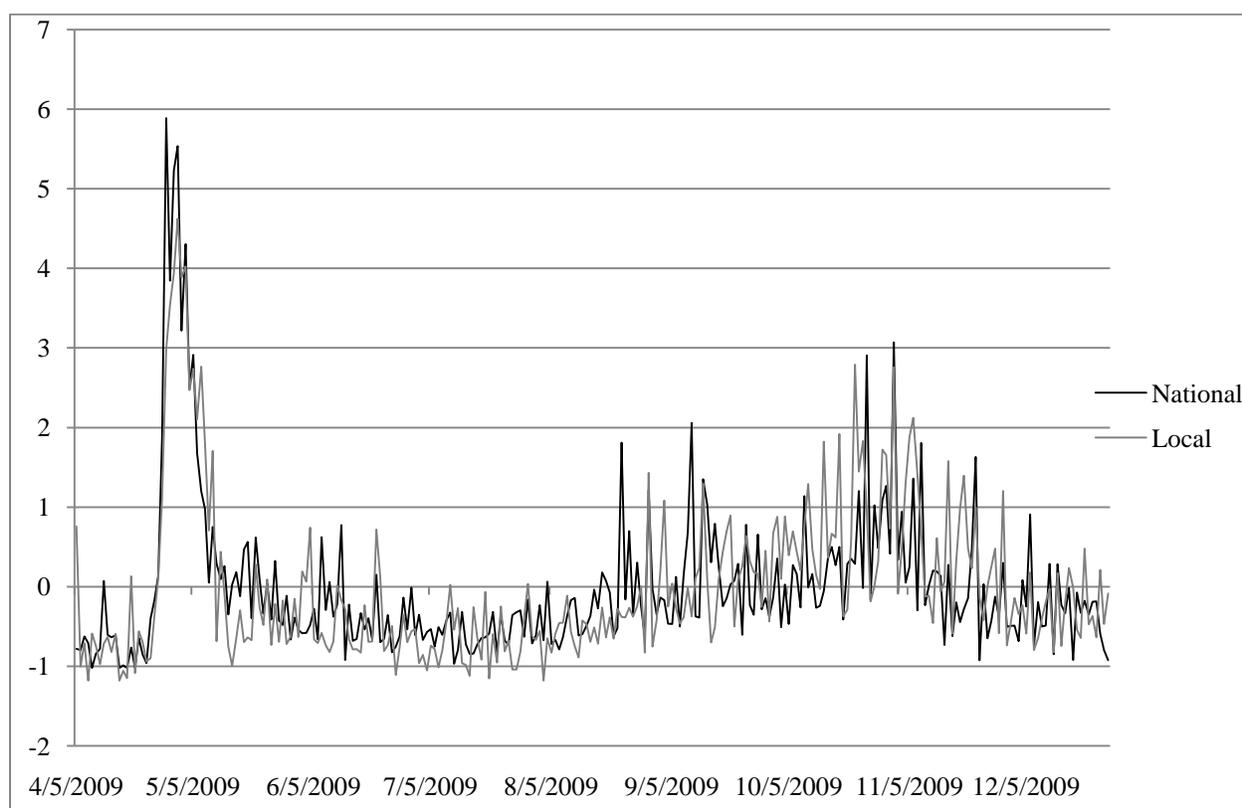

Figure 4: An illustration of the standardized aggregate lengths of flu articles published per day in national and local publications from April 19, 2009 to May 9, 2009

The correlation between the length of flu stories published per day in national newspapers and local newspapers on the same day is 0.7638, which is to be expected, as the

length of news coverage on any given day should be similar across the country. The correlation

between the length of flu stories published per day in national newspapers a day before the

length of flu stories published per day in local newspapers is 0.6455, where national day 1

corresponds to local day 2. This correlation supports Hypothesis 2, the length of H1N1 stories in

national newspapers influences the length of H1N1 stories in local newspapers, with longer

stories having a greater influence.

Hypothesis 3 posited that the length of H1N1 stories in national news influences the front

page placement of H1N1 stories in local news, with front page stories being more influential than

shorter stories. Figure 5 illustrates flu articles of the front pages of national and local publications

from April 5, 2009 to December 26, 2009. The way in which national front page flu coverage

influenced local front page flu coverage is most apparent at the end of August. After a peak in

national front page flu coverage, there was an immediate peak in local front page flu coverage.

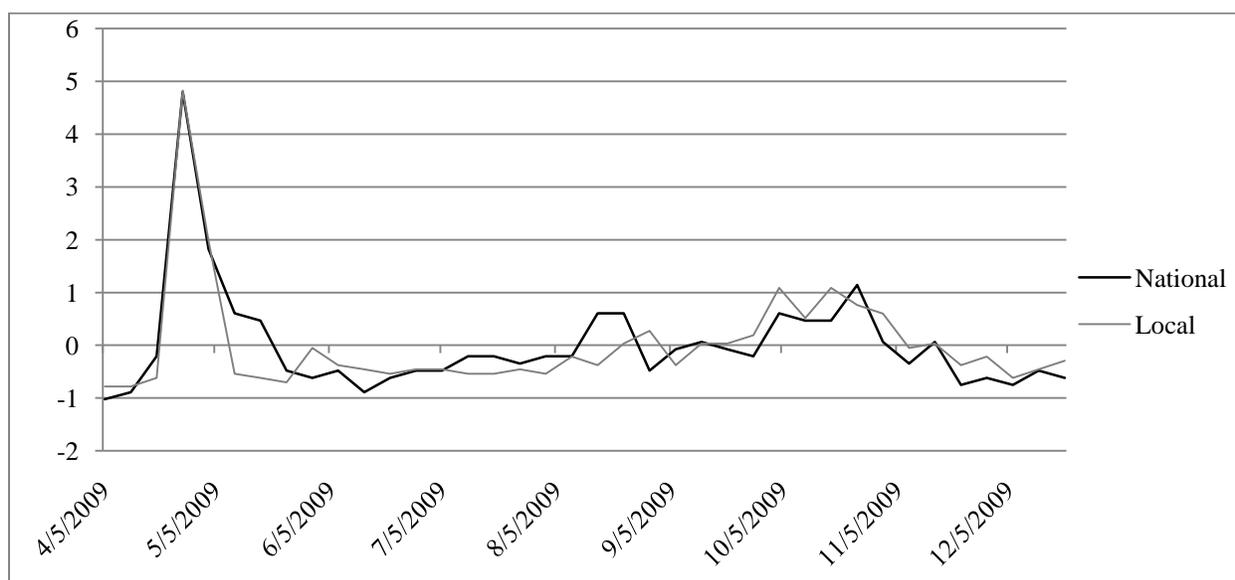This provides support for Hypothesis 3.

Figure 5: An illustration of the standardized aggregate number of flu articles on the front pages per week in national and local publications from April 5, 2009 to December 26, 2009

Additionally, the correlation between the number of flu stories on the front page of national newspapers and the number of flu stories on the front page of local newspapers during the same time period is 0.9007. The correlation between the number of flu stories on the front page of national newspapers and the number of flu stories on the front page of local newspapers a week later is 0.3662. This correlation supports Hypothesis 3, indicating that the front page placement of H1N1 stories in national news influences the front page placement of H1N1 stories in local news.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the headlines of H1N1 stories in national news influence the headlines of H1N1 stories in local news, with headlines mentioning "flu," "influenza," "H1N1," or "swine flu" being more influential than others. Figure 5 illustrates the standardized aggregate number of flu headlines per week in national and local publications from April 5, 2009 to December 26, 2009. Each spike in flu headlines occurred in local publications before national publications. Thus, I reject Hypothesis 4, as this does not support an influence of national flu headlines on local flu headlines.
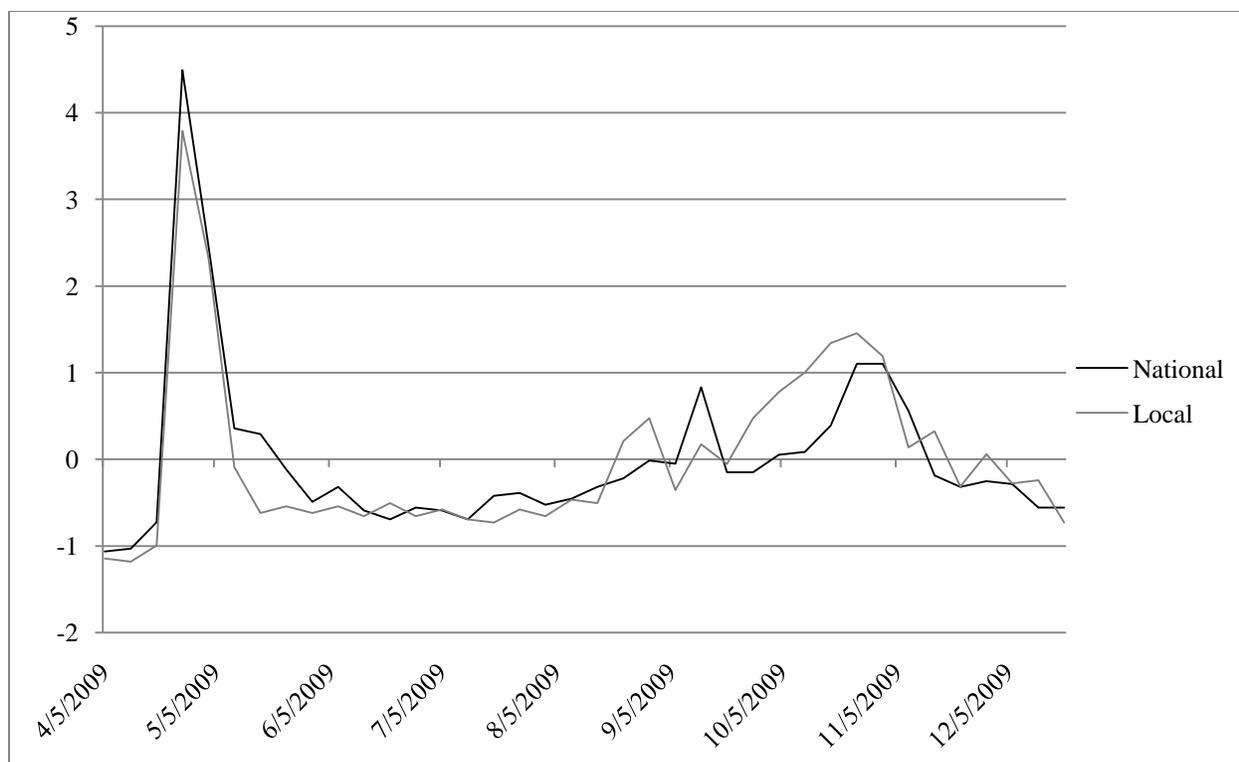
Figure 5: An illustration of the standardized aggregate number of flu headlines per week in national and local publications from April 5, 2009 to December 26, 2009

The correlation between the standardized aggregate number of flu headlines per week in national and local publications during the same week is 0.9117. The correlation between the standardized aggregate number of flu headlines per week when national week 1 corresponds to local week 2 is 0.4262. However, Figure 5 illustrates that though there is a relationship between the aggregate number of flu headlines in national publications a week before the aggregate number of flu headlines in local headlines, it does not seem as though national newspapers influence local newspapers' headlines. The data suggest an alternative explanation of the relationship between national and local flu coverage, in which national news may take cues from local rather than national news serving as a guide for local. I must reject Hypothesis 4, as this study lacks adequate support to assert that the headlines of H1N1 stories in national news will influence the headlines of H1N1 stories in local news.

ANALYSIS/CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the prevalence of inter-media agenda setting between national and local newspaper publications. Based on limited research, it was assumed that national H1N1 coverage would influence local H1N1 coverage in terms of number of stories; length of stories; front page placement of stories; and headlines mentioning "flu," "influenza," "H1N1," or "swine flu."

This study extends research in the field of agenda setting by further examining inter-media agenda setting and finding that national H1N1 coverage influenced local H1N1 coverage. Heightened national newspaper coverage led to an increase in local newspaper coverage in terms of the amount and length of stories, as well as the placement of such stories. However, this study lacked support for the influence national flu headlines might have on local flu headlines.

The implications of the national media influence are twofold. Media effects on the public have been thoroughly researched, and there is a strongly supported belief that the media do have real effects on people. For instance, people reading H1N1 coverage that exposes the risk to the illness might be more likely to vaccinate themselves against H1N1 or go to the hospital when they believe they are ill with swine flu. The other effect that the national media have is on other, specifically local, media. One might conclude that if national newspapers are affecting the coverage of local newspapers, national newspapers are the ones that hold the most importance for the public. This study provides support for the influence of national newspaper coverage on local newspaper coverage in the subject area of H1N1.

Even so, there are several limitations that must be addressed in the future. Primarily, research must expand to include a variety of subject areas and a wider selection of newspapers. It is possible that the way national and local newspapers covered H1N1 swine flu varies from other

topics, especially due to the severe risk perceived with H1N1. Not to mention, the six national newspaper publications and twelve local newspaper publications chosen for this study might not be representative of all national and local newspaper publications. Future research should cover a broader scope and examine the coverage of a variety of topics in a multitude of newspaper publications. Such newspaper publications should be subdivided by region and size, as these factors might also have an effect on the relationship between national and local newspaper coverage.

Additionally, a time series analysis would be beneficial to take into account any usual rises or falls in the amount of coverage. For example, flu season undoubtedly had an influence on the data collected for the fall of 2009. A time series analysis would account for such seasonal changes and allow one to better study the relationship between national and local coverage of H1N1. This analysis must be conducted in looking at the influence of national newspapers on local newspapers, as well as the influence of local newspapers on national newspapers, as it is quite possible that local newspaper headlines serve as a guide for national newspaper headlines. This thesis did not provide evidence to support the assertion that national flu-related headlines influence local flu-related headlines, which could be because local headlines impact national headlines.

Future studies must expand research on inter-media agenda setting by taking a broader approach. A content analysis of a variety of news topics covered in several publications, varying in region, size, and type, would yield data to provide further evidence of the relationship between national and local media. A more comprehensive data set and more advanced statistical measures, such as a time series analysis, are necessary to better understand inter-media agenda setting.

The idea of agenda setting has been supported by a great deal of research. It is understood that the news agenda, public agenda, and the policy agenda affect each other. However, there is a lack of research in the field examining the relationships that exist within agendas. This study provides support for inter-media agenda setting, in which national media influence local media, specifically national H1N1 newspaper coverage influences local H1N1 newspaper coverage. The amount of H1N1 stories, length of H1N1 stories, and front-page placement of H1N1 stories in national newspapers were shown to have an influence on the amount, length, and front-page placement of H1N1 stories in local newspapers. Data did not provide a clear explanation of the relationship between national flu-related headlines and local flu-related headlines. It is possible that local headlines have a greater impact on national headlines than national headlines have on local headlines. More research is necessary to better understand inter-media agenda setting, but this study provides empirical evidence of the relationship between national H1N1 newspaper coverage and local H1N1 newspaper coverage.

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APPENDIX

Publication Name	Frequency	Circulation Type	Total Circulation*	Census Size
Wall Street Journal	Average M (M-F)	Daily	2,061,142	528 articles
Wall Street Journal	Weekend	Daily	1,839,029	--
USA Today	Average M (M-F)	Daily	1,830,594	346 articles
New York Times	Sunday	Daily	1,352,358	783 articles
New York Times	Saturday M	Daily	915,865	--
Los Angeles Times	Sunday	Daily	901,119	603 articles
New York Times	Average M (M-F)	Daily	876,638	--
Chicago Tribune	Sunday	Daily	768,073	631 articles
Washington Post	Sunday	Daily	764,666	832 articles
Los Angeles Times	Saturday M	Daily	695,717	--

*Total Circulation = Total Average Paid Circulation for the six months ended: 9/30/2010

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

Region	Publication Name	Frequency	Circulation Type	Total Circulation*	Census Size
Northeast	Buffalo News (NY)	Sunday	Daily	242,293	287 articles
Northeast	Providence Journal-Bulletin (RI)	Sunday	Daily	137,339	272 articles
Northeast	Patriot News (Harrisburg, PA)	Average M (M-f)	Daily	71,019	208 articles
Midwest	Chicago Sun Times (IL)	Average M (M-F)	Daily	250,747	325 articles
Midwest	Dayton Daily News (OH)	Sunday	Daily	138,528	296 articles
Midwest	Lincoln Journal Star (NE)	Sunday	Daily	72,939	188 articles
South	St. Petersburg Times (FL)	Saturday M	Daily	242,390	536 articles
South	Birmingham News (AL)	Sunday	Daily	150,311	270 articles
South	Chattanooga Times Free Press (TN)	Average M (M-F)	Daily	73,177	567 articles
West	San Diego Union-Tribune (CA)	Saturday M	Daily	266,785	325 articles
West	Las Vegas Review-Journal (NV)	Saturday M	Daily	150,168	205 articles
West	Spokesman-Review (WA)	Average M (M-F)	Daily	74,386	160 articles

*Total Circulation = Total Average Paid Circulation for the six months ended: 9/30/2010

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations