

Running head: THE CHOICE GAP

The Choice Gap:

The Softening of News and the Divergent Preferences of Journalists and Consumers

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## Abstract

This study examines the softening of news supplied by media organizations and its consequences in terms of a gap between this supply and the demand patterns of consumers. More precisely, it looks at the top news selected by journalists on four Web sites on the hard-soft content dimension and determines whether there is a gap between these choices and the top choices made by the consumers of these sites. It does so by adopting an approach that helps to overcome three shortcomings of most existing scholarship on these topics: it uses the story as the unit of analysis, distinguishes between softening in terms of what stories are told and how they are told, and tries to disentangle the influence of journalists' and consumers' choices on each other. Results of the analysis show that (a) journalists' supply of news is markedly "soft" in terms of what stories are told but not regarding how they are told; and, (b) there is a gap between journalists' and consumers' choices that is uniform and relatively strong in terms of what news are covered but localized and comparatively weaker regarding how they are reported. In addition, the approach adopted contributes granularity, precision, and heuristic power to the inquiry.

### The Choice Gap:

#### The Softening of News and the Divergent Preferences of Journalists and Consumers

There has been growing agreement among media scholars about a trend towards the “softening of news,” for lack of a better phrase (Baum, 2002; Bennett, 2003a; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 1998; Patterson, 2000; Schudson, 2003; Zaller, 2003). Research has often identified market forces as a critical driver of this trend (Baum, 2003; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Hamilton, 2004; Kalb, 1998; Prior, 2007). The relatively little competition enjoyed by American media organizations during most of the twentieth century allowed them to combine strong economic performance with a news supply marked by journalistic preferences for public affairs stories. This situation persisted for decades, despite perception of a gap between the supply of this type of news and consumption patterns that expressed lower interest in it. With recent increase in competition, companies have been paying more attention to consumers’ preferences and softening their supply of news accordingly (Klinenberg, 2005; McManus, 1994; Mindich, 2005; Underwood, 1993). However, scholars have disagreed about the consequences of this softening trend. Some have argued that it might narrow the gap with consumers by better satisfying demand, but others have suggested that it might create a new gap by underserving what could be seen as the main public for news—those highly interested in public affairs stories (Baum, 2002; Hamilton, 2004; Patterson, 2000, 2003; Prior, 2002).

A settlement of this disagreement has been limited by three shortcomings in the existing literature. First, although consumer choices are increasingly disaggregated at the story level, most research still relies on survey, circulation, and ratings data that measure more aggregate choices. Second, although there is consensus that the news has gone soft, scholars disagree on the nature of the trend. Some focus on what stories are told, others on how they are told, and a

third group on a combination of these two foci. Third, studies have suffered from confounding factors related to the influence of journalists' and consumers' choices on each other.

This paper contributes to scholarship on the softening of news and its consequences by examining the character of the top news choices of journalists on four web sites on the hard-soft content dimension and by determining whether there is a gap between these choices and the top choices made by the consumers of these sites. Online news sites provide a fertile terrain to look at these issues because the Web is a highly competitive information market that will likely have increased influence on the future of the industry. Furthermore, this paper presents results of a study designed to help overcome the three shortcomings identified above. First, the story is used as the unit of analysis to have a more granular picture of consumers' choices. Second, the analysis discriminates between what stories are chosen and how they are told to have a more precise characterization of the object of study. Third, it contrasts all the stories collected with a subset of stories in which the mutual influence of journalists' and consumers' choices is likely to be less pronounced. This subset includes stories that journalists display prominently even though they have low levels of demand among consumers, and stories with high levels of demand among consumers despite the fact that journalists do not display them prominently.

The study draws from a content analysis of the top news stories selected by journalists and the stories most clicked on by consumers on prestigious and successful news sites. Results show a softened news supply regarding what news stories are reported but not about how they are covered. They also show a uniform and stronger gap between journalists' and consumers' choices when the subject of news is concerned, but a localized and weaker gap regarding the storytelling format. The paper will situate the study within the relevant literature, describe the research design, analyze the findings, and reflect on their broader implications.

### Theoretical Considerations

There is growing consensus among media scholars and analysts that the news has “gone soft.” There were already signs of this trend in studies that were published decades ago. For instance, the report, *The age of indifference* (Times Mirror Center, 1990), maintains that “even some more traditional media have adopted a softer news focus in response to diminishing levels of interest in hard news” (p. 2). In their study of television news from 1972 to 1987, Scott and Gobetz (1992) argued that “there has been a slight tendency for television network news programs to increase the amount of soft news presented mostly during the last one-third of the newscast” (p. 406). The trend seems to have intensified recently, affecting both news products and how journalists experience their production. Thus, to Bennett (2003b), “what has happened to the news in the past twenty years is that it has shifted in the direction of soft news and sensationalism” (p. 131). Moreover, in the preface to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Deciding what’s news*, Gans (2004) reflected on that quarter century and concluded that “the change in news content that exercises journalists the most is a decrease in hard... news” (p. xiv).

Researchers have often regarded market dynamics as central in the evolution of this trend. During most of the twentieth century, American news organizations enjoyed relatively low levels of competition in their respective markets. This led to the coexistence of companies with strong economic performance, journalists with professional values marked by a preference for public affairs content, a style focused on issues and a disdain for their audiences (in Darnton’s [1975, p. 176] apt formulation, journalists “really wrote for one another”), and a separation between the editorial and commercial logics of the enterprise. Lack of market competition allowed this mode of production to survive despite the perception of a gap between the interests of journalists and consumers. As Park wrote in the introduction to Hughes’ *News and the human*

*interest story*, the news that “most of us would like to publish are not the things that most of us want to read. We may be eager to get into print what is, or seems to be, edifying, but we want to read what is interesting” (1981, n.p.). However, a growth in competition during recent decades, accelerated by the emergence of 24-hour cable television in the 1980s and the Web in the 1990s, has been eroding the market position of traditional players. In turn, this has led to a stronger impact of a commercial logic on editorial pursuits and more attention to the audience’s interests. Issue-based, public affairs news is more expensive to produce and seemingly less commercially appealing than its personality-based, nonpublic affairs counterpart. Thus, the trend towards the softening of news has been seen as an attempt by media firms to counter their market decline and narrow the perceived gap between what they produce and what their audience seems to want.

In the scholarly literature, there has been some recent debate about whether the softening of news trend might have been narrowing the perceived gap between supply and demand in today’s more competitive market place or has actually created a new gap by alienating an audience yearning for “harder” content. Regarding political communication studies—although it applies more broadly to research on hard and soft news—Baum and Jamison (2006) have pointed out that “scholars have focused more on the supply of political information than on the nature of citizens’ *demands*” (p. 947, emphasis in the original). However, some scholarship has used surveys of consumers’ preferences, print circulation, broadcast ratings, and online-traffic data to ascertain whether the softening of news supply helps to satisfy demand or actually drives it away (Baum, 2002; Hamilton, 2004; Patterson, 2000; Prior, 2002; Rosenstiel, Just, Belt, Pertilla, Dean & Chinni, 2007). Two positions have emerged from these studies. One camp maintains that consumers want “softer” news, therefore the softening trend should help narrow the gap between supply and demand. For instance, commenting on his findings on web site usage, Hamilton

(2004) suggested that “the relative demand expressed for information on the Web shows patterns familiar from other media. Soft news and ‘news you can use’ often generate more interest than hard news” (p. 194). The opposing side contends that demand for “harder” content is paramount among consumers, thus the shift towards the softening of news has created a new gap that undermines the market position of media firms. After reviewing the findings of his own studies and those of others on this subject, Patterson (2003) concluded that “if we are to employ a standard based on the news that most consumers want and that most outlets provide, we would not want to have soft news in mind. We should be thinking in terms of hard news” (p. 140).

The attempt to determine whether the softening of news trend might have narrowed a gap between the news choices of journalists and consumers or created one where none existed has been further complicated by a lack of agreement among scholars about the nature of this trend. At least three positions can be distinguished in the literature. First, to scholars such as Hamilton (2004), the trend entails a transformation in *what* news is reported: “I... use the term ‘soft news’ to refer to programs with low levels of public affairs information and ‘hard news’ to refer to shows with high levels of public affairs information” (p. 15). Second, to researchers such as Baum (2007), it is about *how* the news is covered instead of what its subject is, so even public affairs stories can be softened: “Soft news outlets emphasize different aspects of political issues than do their hard news counterparts. In war, for instance... where hard news focuses on geopolitics, soft news focuses on body bags” (p. 107). Finally, to analysts such as Gans (2003), the trend involves a change in the mix of *what* and *how*.

The change in the hard/soft news ratio has taken on several forms... [It] can be seen clearly by the expansion of the "back of the book" sections... about subjects as varied as science and gardening... Another version of this change has come in program formats...

For example, the historic one-hour or half-hour news documentary series... which was often devoted to investigative reporting about a single subject has been replaced by the semiweekly... “news magazines” that supply a mix of hard and soft news. (p. 29)

The literature reviewed so far has advanced our understanding of the trend towards the softening of news and its consequences in terms of a possible gap between the choices of journalists and consumers. But it also has suffered from at least three limitations: (a) a relative mismatch between demand-side data aggregated at the outlet or program level and consumer behavior that is increasingly disaggregated at the story level; (b) a lack of precision in the definition of the object of study; and, (c) the negative effects of confounding factors in ascertaining the news choices made by journalists and consumers.

First, in an increasingly competitive market where consumers have a growing array of unbundling techniques at their disposal—from remote controls to Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds—surveys of preferences or ratings and circulation data at the outlet or program level are too aggregate to assess the effectiveness of news supply on demand-side choices often made at the story level.<sup>1</sup> Second, the lack of agreement about what the trend consists of has made it difficult to have a fine-grained portrait of the phenomenon. Is it about what stories are covered, how they are covered or both? Because different studies have defined the trend differently, this has also complicated a comparison of findings across them and subsequent theory development efforts. Third, in addition to issues of newsworthiness that derive from professional judgment, the choices that journalists make have also been increasingly influenced by value signals conveyed by consumers in their demand patterns. Today’s journalists are more inclined to write for their audiences than Darnton and his colleagues did decades ago.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, research on traditional (Graber 1988) and new media (Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, and Hastall 2007) has

shown that consumers' choices are partly influenced by value signals embedded in the supply of stories. For instance, all else being equal, an item displayed on a newspaper's front page has a higher probability of being noticed and consumed than an item buried inside one of its sections.

Situated within this literature on the softening of news, the goal of this paper is to analyze the supply of top news by journalists in four online sites on the hard-soft content dimension and to determine whether there is a gap between this supply and the demand patterns expressed in the stories most often chosen by consumers on these respective sites. Moreover, the research approach adopted here aims to help solve, at least in part, the limitations depicted above.

### Methodology

#### *Sample*

Data were collected from four well-regarded, English language, online news sites: *chicagotribune.com* (Chicago), *seattlepi.newsource.com* (Seattle), *cnn.com* (CNN), and *news.yahoo.com* (Yahoo). Chicago and Seattle are two of the most visited web sites of print newspapers in the United States, with almost 3 million and 3.3 million unique users for November 2006, respectively (Newspaper Association of America, 2006).<sup>3</sup> These sites are the online counterparts of the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, well-established media in their respective local markets with an average daily circulation of about 567,000 and 128,000, respectively, for the period ending in September 2006 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2007). CNN is the third most visited online news site, with a 2006 monthly average of almost 25 million monthly unique users, according to Nielsen measurements (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007). It is the online counterpart of the all-news pioneer *Cable News Network*, which had a median prime time audience of 710,00 viewers during 2006 (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007). Yahoo is the most visited online news site, with a 2006 monthly average of

over 28 million unique users, according to Nielsen measurements (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007). It is the news operation of online giant Yahoo!, which runs the second largest web search engine with over 20% of market share for July 2007 (Nielsen//NetRatings, 2007).

These sites were also selected because they exhibit variance along two important dimensions: type of parent media company and geographic scope. Research has shown that the behavior of the parent media company can influence the behavior of its online news counterpart (Boczkowski, 2004; Chan-Olmstead & Ha, 2003; Paulussen, 2004; Singer, 2004), thus we chose cases that represent print—*Chicago* and *Seattle*, broadcast—*CNN*, and online—*Yahoo*, firms. Because scholars have shown that geographic matters affect media production in a number of ways (Baisnee & Marchetti, 2006; Hannerz, 2004; Kaniss, 1991; MacGregor, 1997; Picard, 2002), we selected two cases with a national-global reach—*CNN* and *Yahoo*—and two local-metropolitan cases—*Chicago* and *Seattle*.

We collected data on twenty-one randomly selected days—three for each day of the week—between April and June of 2007, for a total of three composite weeks. On each coding day, research assistants collected data at 10 a.m., 4 p.m., and 10 p.m. Central Time, yielding 63 distinct data collection shifts—21 days x 3 times per day—for each site. At each data collection shift, at each site, we identified the top ten stories selected by journalists and the top ten stories selected by consumers. We focused on the top choices of journalists and consumers rather than on a wider distribution of choices because, from the universe of possible stories, these are the ones that are deemed most relevant by journalists and also garner most attention from consumers. Thus they represent a suitable approximation of each group's key news preferences.

Online stories were defined as text-based packages that included a headline; a story might, but need not, have multi-media features—such as video or graphics—or links to related

stories. The top ten stories selected by journalists were the ten most prominently displayed stories on the home page; depending on the page's format, these were either listed in vertical order or were identified by counting from left to right and from the top down in a grid-like manner. The top ten stories selected by consumers were identified by examining the ten most-clicked stories on each site—as indicated, variously, by sites' "most viewed," "most read," or "most popular" lists; this information was publicly available on each site during our study.<sup>4</sup> Thus across the 63 data collection shifts, each site yielded 1,260 stories: 630 journalist-selected top stories and 630 consumer-selected top stories. Across the four sites, 5,040 stories were analyzed.

### *Measures*

The unit of analysis is the story. For this study, the following variables were coded:<sup>5</sup>

1. Intrasite news choice. There were two categories:
  - (a) Journalists, the top ten stories that appeared on the home page of each site in each data collection shift.
  - (b) Consumers, the top ten stories in the “most viewed,” “most read,” or “most popular” lists of each site in each data collection shift.
2. Intrasite news choice overlap. There were three categories:
  - (a) Overlap, stories that appear in both categories (a) and (b) of variable 1 in the same site during the same data collection shift. A story classified in this category was one of the top journalist stories and one of the top consumer stories on a given site in the same data collection shift.
  - (b) No overlap-journalists, stories that appear in category (a) of variable 1 but not in category (a) of variable 2, in the same site during the same data collection shift. A story classified in this category was one of the top journalist stories but not one of the

- top consumer stories on a given site in the same data collection shift.
- (c) No overlap—consumers, stories that appear in category (b) of variable 1 but not in category (a) of variable 2, in the same site during the same data collection shift. A story classified in this category was one of the top consumer stories but not one of the top journalist stories on a given site in the same data collection shift.
3. Intersite convergent news choice. There were three categories:
- (a) Journalists, stories about the same event that are included in category (a) of variable 1 in more than one site in a given data collection shift. A top journalist story was classified in this category if it reported on an event that was also the subject of a story in at least one other site’s list of top journalist choices in the same data collection shift.
- (b) Consumers, stories about the same event that are included in category (b) of variable 1 in more than one site in a given data collection shift. A top consumer story was classified in this category if it reported on an event that was also the subject of a story in at least one other site’s list of top consumer choices in the same data collection shift.
- (c) No convergent choice, stories that do not fall under categories (a) or (b).
4. Intersite convergent news choice overlap. Only stories that displayed convergence among either journalists or consumers—i.e., only stories classified as (a) or (b) in variable 3—were coded for this variable. There were three categories:
- (a) Overlap, stories included in either category (a) or (b) of variable 3 that are about an event that is also reported in a story appearing in the opposite category of variable 1 in at least one of the convergent choice sites in the same data collection shift. That

is, stories were classified in this category on one of two conditions. First, if an event was the subject of a story in more than one site's list of top journalist choices *and* was also covered in a story selected by consumers on at least one of these sites, all in the same data collection shift. Second, if an event was the subject of a story in more than one site's list of top consumer choices *and* was also covered in a story selected by journalists on at least one of these sites, all in the same data collection shift.

(b) No overlap-journalists, stories included in category (a) of variable 3 that are about an event that is not reported in a story appearing in category (b) of variable 1 in any of the convergent choice sites in the same data collection shift. A top journalist story classified in this category reported on an event that was also the subject of a story in at least one other site's list of top journalist choices but was *not* chosen by consumers as a top story on any one of these sites, all in the same data collection shift.

(c) No overlap-consumers, stories included in category (b) of variable 3 that are about an event that is not reported in a story appearing in category (a) of variable 1 in any of the convergent choice sites in the same data collection shift. A top consumer story classified in this category reported on an event that was also the subject of a story in at least one other site's list of top consumer choices but was *not* selected by journalists as a top story on any one of these sites, all in the same data collection shift.

5. What. The main topic addressed in the story. There are two categories:

(a) Public affairs stories, including news about politics, government, economics, business, international affairs, and "war on terror".

(b) Nonpublic affairs stories, including news about such issues as sports, crime, entertainment, technology, and weather.

6. How. The main story-telling technique. There are four categories:
- (a) Straight news, which refers to a writing style that emphasizes the important facts and often told in a nonpersonal, detached way.
  - (b) Feature-style, alluding to stories that employ narrative or other literary devices and can include a more personal tone.
  - (c) Commentary, which includes all stories with a pronounced point of view about a topic or a product, such as columns, “op-eds,” and reviews.
  - (d) Alternative formats, consisting of all other formats not mentioned above.

### *Analysis*

Our analysis examines and compares news choices by journalists and consumers at two levels of analysis: within site (intrasite) and across sites (intersite). Within each site, we examined 630 stories selected by journalists and 630 chosen by consumers—that is, stories that were categorized as journalists or consumers in the intrasite news choice variable, respectively. Across sites, we examined stories that covered the same event and were selected by journalists or consumers in more than one site in the same data collection shift—that is, stories categorized as convergent for journalists or for consumers (in the intersite convergent news choice variable). This analysis focused on 539 such stories selected by journalists and 485 by consumers, and enabled us to detect whether patterns of choice within one or more sites were also present across sites.

Based on the issues identified in the Theoretical Considerations section, to help tease out the potential influence of stories that might have been chosen by journalists because they were generating substantive site traffic among consumers, or by consumers because they were saliently displayed by journalists, we conducted two separate analyses at each level of analysis.

The first analysis examined the top choices of journalists and consumers—all the stories included in the journalists and consumers categories of the intrasite news choice variable. It also looked at the convergent choices of journalists and consumers—all the stories included in the journalists and consumers categories of the intersite convergent news choice variable. This analysis provided a general view of the choices made by journalists and consumers. The second analysis looked at the stories exclusively chosen by journalists and consumers—only the stories categorized as no overlap-journalists and no overlap-consumers in the intrasite news choice overlap variable. It also examined the convergent choices of journalists that were not shared by consumers and vice-versa—only the stories categorized as no overlap-journalists and no overlap-consumers in the intersite convergent news choice overlap variable. This analysis affords a distilled picture of these news choices by focusing on the subset of stories that were selected by one group but not by the other. Regarding the intrasite data, this second analysis examined 26% of the stories on *CNN*, 46% on *Chicago*, 60% on *Seattle*, and 67% on *Yahoo*. Concerning the intersite data, the second analysis looked at 58% of the convergent choices on the journalists' side that were not selected by consumers, and 53% of the convergent choices on the consumers' side that were not chosen by journalists.

## Results

### *Patterns of Choices within the Sites*

We first examine choices regarding what stories are about and then move to analyze issues concerning how they are told.

When all the stories are analyzed, in three of the four sites the majority of the stories selected by journalists are about nonpublic affairs matters: 54% on *CNN* and 62% on *Chicago* and *Seattle*. *Yahoo* is the exception, but the proportion of nonpublic affairs stories is still quite

high at 43% (see Table 1). When only the stories with no overlap are considered, public affairs stories are the majority on *CNN*, *Chicago*, and *Yahoo*, but the share of nonpublic affairs stories remains substantial on these three sites—36%, 44%, and 48%, respectively—and is still dominant on *Seattle* at 59%.

A comparison of the choices made by journalists and consumers shows that when all stories are included in the analysis, on each one of the sites, journalists chose more public affairs stories than consumers and, conversely, consumers chose more nonpublic affairs stories than journalists (see Table 1). The difference between the choices of journalists and consumers is 13 percentage points on *Seattle* and *Yahoo*, 14 percentage points on *CNN*, and 17 percentage points on *Chicago*. Chi squares tests of homogeneity show that the distribution of public affairs and nonpublic affairs stories is not the same for journalists and consumers ( $\chi^2 = 21.349$  to  $46.298$ , all significant at  $p = .000$ ).

When we look at the stories chosen exclusively by either journalists or consumers—excluding stories with overlap within the respective sites—differences between journalists' and consumers' share of public affairs stories increase on all sites: from 14 to 51 percentage points on *CNN*, from 17 to 38 percentage points on *Chicago*, from 13 to 23 percentage points on *Seattle*, and from 13 to 19 percentage points on *Yahoo* (see Table 1). This widening of the gap in the choices of journalists and consumers is accompanied by increased  $\chi^2$  values and remains significant ( $p = .000$ ) on each one of the sites. On *CNN*, *Chicago*, and *Seattle*, this widening arises from a dual movement, i.e., an increase in journalists' share of public affairs stories and in consumers' share of nonpublic affairs news. In *Yahoo* the share of public affairs stories decreases for both journalists and consumers, with a more pronounced drop for the latter. Furthermore, looking across the sites, the widening of the gap between journalists and consumers is inversely

correlated to the degree of overlap between journalists' and consumers' choices on each site. As the number of stories chosen exclusively by journalists and consumers decreased, the gap between them increased. For example, the number of stories chosen exclusively by journalists was 165 on *CNN* and 424 on *Yahoo*, and the growth in their respective gaps with consumer choices was 37 percentage points in the first but only 6 in the second.

An analysis of the journalists' choices alone, either including all stories or only those without overlap with the respective consumers' choices, shows that straight news is a strong dominant option on all the sites. It ranges from 64% to 83% in the first approach and from 63% to 75% in the second one (see Table 2). When all the stories are analyzed in a comparison of the choices of journalists and consumers, *Chicago* and *Seattle* exhibit significant differences ( $p = .000$  and  $p = .034$ , respectively) between the choices of the two groups (see Table 2). On both sites, journalists chose more straight news than consumers: 77% and 64% on *Chicago* and 64% and 58% on *Seattle*. There are no significant differences on *CNN* and *Yahoo*. When only the stories without overlap are analyzed, the differences between journalists and consumers in the share of straight news on *Chicago* and *Seattle* increased from 13 to 30 percentage points and from 6 to 11 percentage points, respectively. The decrease in the share of straight news among consumers was compensated by an increase in commentary on *Chicago* and *Seattle*—from 15% to 29% and from 11% to 16%, respectively. Additional analysis shows that most of these commentary stories are about movies on *Chicago* and about sports on *Seattle*.

#### *Patterns of Choices across the Sites*

When the convergence of choices among journalists is examined, public affairs stories occupy the majority position, but their nonpublic affairs counterparts still draw an important share of interest, both when all stories are analyzed and when those with overlap are excluded—

44% and 37%, respectively (see Table 3). The picture is different in terms of how the news gets told: straight news overshadow the other options in stories with and without overlap with an 83% and 82% share, respectively.

Regarding what news are told, the comparison of journalists' and consumers' choices shows that when all stories are taken into account, there is a significant ( $p = .000$ ) 21 percentage point difference between the choices made by journalists and consumers. The choices of the former converge more on public affairs news and those of the latter more on nonpublic affairs stories (see Table 3). That is, whereas 56% of stories on the journalists' side are about public affairs, only 35% of this kind of stories is chosen by consumers on more than one site. After removing the stories with intersite overlap, the gap between the convergent choices of journalists and consumers increases from 21 to 28 percentage points. This gain results from changes on the journalists' side only. The share of public affairs stories increases from 56% to 63% for journalists, whereas it remains unchanged for consumers. The reason for this increased gap is that overlapped stories were concerned mostly with nonpublic affairs subjects. Thus, removing them from the analysis alters the thematic distribution of journalists' convergent choices but not of consumers. Concerning how news are reported, there are no significant differences between stories that converged on the journalists' side and those that converged on the consumers' side, either before or after removing stories chosen by both.

### Discussion

This study has aimed to ascertain the character of the top news choices made by journalists of online sites on the hard-soft dimension and to determine whether there is a gap between these choices and the top choices made by the consumers of these sites. The analysis has shown that (a) journalists' choices on these sites are substantively "soft" in terms of what

stories are told but not in how they are told; and, (b) there is a gap between these choices and consumers' choices that is uniform and relatively strong in terms of the what variable but localized and comparatively weaker in terms of the how variable. Furthermore, the research approach contributed granularity, precision, and heuristic power to the inquiry.

Although there is no established threshold after which the proportion of a particular type of content or format allows the analyst to decree the existence of a softened news supply, two indicators were relied on to suggest that top journalistic choices on these sites were marked by an important presence of soft subject matters and hard storytelling techniques. First, nonpublic affairs stories made up the majority on three of the four sites in the intrasite analysis of all stories, and reached a 55% combined average among all sites. After removal of the stories with overlap, these stories still constituted the majority on one site and a sizeable minority on the remaining three and reached a 47% combined average among all sites. Moreover, the share of nonpublic affairs stories in the case of journalists' convergent choices across sites was a minority but still quite high considering that the focus was on the top news of the day. Second, the preeminence of content over format while measuring the "softening" of news supply also becomes evident if we consider that in each case—both intrasite and intersite and before and after removal of overlapped stories—the highest share of public affairs subjects was lower than the lowest share of straight news formats.

An examination of the contrast between journalists' and consumers' choices shows a sizeable and uniform gap in terms of what stories are selected—which is consistent with studies that have shown reduced interest in public affairs among online news consumers (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Hamilton, 2004; Tewksbury, 2003; Schoenbach, de Waal & Lauf, 2005; Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000)—and a more variable situation in the case of how stories are told.

In the analysis of what stories are told, three trends emerged after the removal of overlapped stories that shed light on the gap between the choices made by journalists and consumers. First, in the intrasite analysis, on three of the four sites, journalists' choices moved in the direction of more public affairs stories, and, on all sites, consumers' choices moved toward nonpublic affairs ones. Second and in relation to intrasite data, the smaller a post-overlapped, subsample became, the larger the gap became. This suggests that perhaps these stories reflect more intensely the preferences of journalists and how divergent they are from those of consumers—that is, when journalists have fewer stories to choose regardless of consumers' demand patterns they lean towards public affairs news. Third, in the intersite analysis, the post-overlapped subsample of journalists' convergent choices moved in the direction of more public affairs stories, whereas the consumers' choices remained unchanged. This suggests that journalists' penchant for public affairs news might not cross over to consumers and that consumers' preference of nonpublic affairs news might be less dependent on journalists' choices.

Regarding how stories are told, there was a significant gap on two sites and none in the intersite comparison. This signals greater variance in this dimension and contrasts with the uniformity of choices about what stories are reported. Furthermore, differences between the what and how variables emerge not only when contrasting the uniformity of the former with the variability of the latter, but also when assessing their relative strengths. In all cases in which both what and how gaps were significant on a single site, the size of the gap in the first case was larger than in the second. Additional analyses of the interactions between the what and how variables revealed no significant evidence of major levels of consumers' choices that mixed public affairs subject matters with nonstraight news formats.

Concerning issues of geographic scope, the analysis yielded no major variance in terms

of what stories are told. The two global-national sites were at the two extremes of the gap continuum. However, there were differences in how the stories were told. The two local-metropolitan sites exhibited significant gaps in the how variable, partly driven by a lower prevalence of straight news chosen by consumers. In addition, the study also revealed a surprising finding concerning the type of media company. *Yahoo* featured the highest share of public affairs news in the sample of all stories, the smallest gap in the what variable, and a strong hold of straight news. This last finding reinforces the value of conducting empirical research of emerging fields to dispel common myths that often accompany their development, such as that the supply and demand of public affairs content is markedly lower on the site of an online aggregator than on sites of traditional media companies.

The analytical approach adopted contributed greatly to the inquiry. Using the story as the unit of analysis permitted a fine-grained depiction of the character of journalists' and consumers' choices. For instance, this study challenged potential inferences based on the popular images associated with the traditional media counterparts of *CNN*, *Chicago*, and *Seattle*—that there is a weaker presence of straight news in the journalists' choices on the first than on the other two. Although dominant in all cases, straight news has a larger share of stories on the site of a broadcast company than on the sites of print newspapers. Moreover, discriminating between the content and form of news has allowed us to simultaneously address the multiple definitions of what softening the news means and help settle empirical disputes regarding its consequences for the gap between journalists and consumers. At least for the cases studied, the softening in the supply and the gap with the demand are strongly marked by the subjects covered in the news. Issues of storytelling format are either absent or take a back seat. Finally, that patterns existing when all stories were included in the analysis became magnified after removing stories with

overlap underscores the heuristic power of this strategy to disentangle the influences of journalists' and consumer's choices on each other.

Because this study examines online news, it is important to consider two medium-specific factors and their potential effects on the generalizability of the findings to other media. First, although some initial studies have indicated a higher prevalence of public affairs stories in the consumption of traditional over online news, the more recent research has shown that topical preferences are stable across media (D'Haenens, Jankowski & Heuvelman, 2004; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Nguyen & Western, 2006; Pew, 2007; Tewksbury, 2003, 2005). Second, there has also been disagreement about whether the public availability of information about popularity levels of news stories on online sites affects consumption patterns and, if so, how important this effect actually is (Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen & Alter, 2005; Sundar & Nass, 2001). If such an effect existed and was strong, it could contribute to making the choice gap greater in online sites than in traditional media.

It is worth considering three limitations of the research design. Information about consumers' choices that each of these sites made publicly available was utilized, but researchers did not have access to their respective measurement processes and tools. If these processes and tools differed markedly, it might have affected the data in a way that could have altered the results. But another interpretation is also feasible. If, indeed, there was major variance in processes and tools, that intra- and intersite patterns moved in similar directions could further strengthen the robustness of the findings.<sup>6</sup> Second, headlines and leads on a homepage convey more detailed and clear information about the content of a story than about its format. Although this discrepancy might have also affected the results, preliminary findings from a parallel ethnographic study of online news consumption conducted by the first author has also shown a

preference for a straight news style (Author A, 2007). Nevertheless, future studies should distinguish stories with various levels of information on the homepage about their storytelling mode. Third, although the sample had variance in two important dimensions, it was comprised of only four sites, all of which had a reputation for relatively serious journalism and were based in the same country. Future research might benefit from expanding the comparative focus—for instance, more sites of varying reputations and based in different countries.

This study raises implications for understanding at least three sets of developments in the media industry and its broader contributions to society: namely, potential consequences for the provision of news content, the growth of consumers' role as producers of widely circulated news and information, and the future of media's watchdog function in liberal democracies.

As for the evolution of large companies, such as those examined here, the growth in market competition, the greater attention paid to consumers' interests, and greater predisposition to cater to them than when the industry was dominated by a few organizations with monopoly or oligopoly power, provide a reasonable basis to believe that the supply of news might move towards decreasing the share of public affairs stories in an attempt to close the choice gap. Because this gap is only one factor that shapes the behavior of news organizations, it is crucial to realize that this hypothetical scenario is contingent on an array of additional possible factors, including shifts in technology, ownership structure, regulatory environment, and public culture.

Consumers' growing involvement with the production of news and information has been recently expressed in developments such as citizen media, citizen journalism, and civic media. The pervasiveness and strength of consumers' preferences for nonpublic affairs stories on the four sites examined for this study fly in the face of notions about a well-informed citizenry that often accompany the discourse about these developments. They also raise concerns about what

might happen if consumers' choices determined a large share of media's content make-up. One alternative is that consumers of these sites chose a large proportion of nonpublic affairs stories partly because these sites already furnished a sizeable share of public affairs stories. Thus their behavior might have been different if their choices had been made in the absence of a substantive dose of news about public affairs. Future research should aim to elucidate the character of consumers' news choices in different circumstances of consumer-authored media.

Finally, one way in which media organizations contribute to the quality of democratic life is by playing a watchdog role over other powerful actors in society. They do so mostly through public affairs stories. Moreover, their ability to be effective is largely dependent on spending considerable resources to gather information about wrongdoing and then communicating it to the public. The softening of news in terms of what stories get covered, the possibility that this trend might intensify in the direction of closing the gap with consumer demand, and the different ways in which consumer involvement in the production of news could materialize raise important questions about the ability of media companies to play a strong watchdog role in the future and about the likelihood that consumers might or might not be able to compensate for a hypothetical decrease in media's performance of this role. Ultimately, they also raise questions about how the different possible scenarios might affect the overall balance of power in society.

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Table 1

*Intrasite Comparison of “What” of News Choices*

	Intrasite news choice overlap			
	Intrasite news choice		(stories with no overlap)	
	Journalists (%)	Consumers (%)	Journalists (%)	Consumers (%)
<i>CNN</i>	n=630	n=629	n=165	n=165
Public affairs	46	32	64	13
Nonpublic affairs	54	68	36	87
	$\chi^2=23.866, df=1, p=.000$		$\chi^2=88.180, df=1, p=.000$	
<i>Chicago</i>	n=630	n=630	n=291	n=290
Public affairs	38	21	56	18
Nonpublic affairs	62	79	44	82
	$\chi^2=46.298, df=1, p=.000$		$\chi^2=90.019, df=1, p=.000$	
<i>Seattle</i>	n=630	n=630	n=381	n=381
Public affairs	38	25	41	18
Nonpublic affairs	62	75	59	82
	$\chi^2=27.237, df=1, p=.000$		$\chi^2=47.984, df=1, p=.000$	
<i>Yahoo</i>	n=630	n=630	n=424	n=424
Public affairs	57	44	52	33
Nonpublic affairs	43	56	48	67
	$\chi^2=21.349, df=1, p=.000$		$\chi^2=32.410, df=1, p=.000$	

Table 2

*Intrasite Comparison of “How” of News Choices*

	Intrasite news choice overlap			
	Intrasite news choice		(stories with no overlap)	
	Journalists (%)	Consumers (%)	Journalists (%)	Consumers (%)
<i>CNN</i>	n=630	n=630	n=165	n=165
Straight news	83	80	75	65
Feature style	14	17	17	30
Commentary	4	2	7	3
Alternative	0	1	1	2
	$\chi^2=1.536, df=1, n.s.^a$		$\chi^2=3.673, df=1, n.s.^a$	
<i>Chicago</i>	n=630	n=630	n=291	n=290
Straight news	77	64	75	45
Feature style	18	20	20	24
Commentary	4	15	5	29
Alternative	0	1	0	1
	$\chi^2=28.116, df=1, p=.000^a$		$\chi^2=52.260, df=1, p=.000^a$	

Table 2 (cont'd)

*Intrasite Comparison of "How" of News Choices*

	Intrasite news choice overlap			
	Intrasite news Choice		(stories with no overlap)	
	Journalists (%)	Consumers (%)	Journalists (%)	Consumers (%)
<i>Seattle</i>	n=630	n=630	n=381	n=381
Straight news	64	58	63	52
Feature style	26	29	25	30
Commentary	7	11	9	16
Alternative	2	2	3	2
	$\chi^2=8.652, df=3, p=.034$		$\chi^2=12.727, df=3, p=.005$	
<i>Yahoo</i>	n=630	n=630	n=424	n=424
Straight news	75	78	68	73
Feature style	23	18	29	22
Commentary	1	2	2	2
Alternative	1	2	2	3
	$\chi^2=4.548, df=3, n.s.$		$\chi^2=5.449, df=3, n.s.$	

<sup>a</sup> To apply the  $\chi^2$  test and eliminate expected cell frequencies <5, categories were collapsed to Straight News and Nonstraight News.

Table 3

*Intersite Comparison of “What” and “How” of News Choices*

	Intersite convergent news choice overlap			
	Intersite convergent news choice		(stories with no overlap)	
	Journalists (%)	Consumers (%)	Journalists (%)	Consumers (%)
What	n=539	n=485	n=311	n=255
Public affairs	56	35	63	35
Nonpublic affairs	44	65	37	65
	$\chi^2=42.622, df=1, p=.000$		$\chi^2=43.312, df=1, p=.000$	
How	n=539	n=485	n=311	n=255
Straight news	83	80	82	78
Feature style	14	16	16	16
Commentary	2	4	2	5
Alternative	0	0	0	0
	$\chi^2=2.097, df=1, n.s.^a$		$\chi^2=1.350, df=1, n.s.^a$	

<sup>a</sup> To apply the  $\chi^2$  test and eliminate expected cell frequencies <5, categories were collapsed to Straight News and Nonstraight News.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> We partly build on Tewksbury's (2003) strategy of using Nielsen//NetRatings page view consumption data, but we also extend it. Although his strategy moved towards analyzing stories, it did not examine them directly, but inferred their content from the information provided in their respective URLs—which also limited his sample selection.

<sup>2</sup> This predisposition seems to have intensified with the availability of data on sites' traffic in their respective newsrooms—including, for instance, at *Yahoo News* (Rosmarin 2007).

<sup>3</sup> The Newspaper Association of America data combine the *Seattle Times* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* figures because the two companies have a joint operating agreement. Their web operations, however, are independent. The *Chicago Tribune* is one of the largest newspapers in the United States, whereas the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* is much smaller.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas some news sites make available information on other measures of consumer choices, such as “most e-mailed” and “most recommended,” we focused on the most clicked stories because they seemed the most straightforward expression of consumers' preferences.

<sup>5</sup> Four trained research assistants coded a number of variables in the 5,040 stories. Intercoder agreement was assessed using an additional sample coding day. Regular intercoder agreement levels averaged 93% and ranged from 87% to 97%. Doubts that arose were subsequently consulted with the authors and resolved consensually.

<sup>6</sup> Having access to all the relevant measurement information would, of course, resolve these conjectures, but the realities of corporate practices make this a complicated matter.