

A Content Analysis of Letters to the Editor

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Abstract

This study analyzed the content of 624 letters to the editor in two newspapers—one published in a city of over 500,000, the other in a city of about 15,000—in order to explore the relationship between community size and subject matter of letters. A researcher read all of the letters printed in the newspapers on the weekdays of three nonconsecutive months in late 1987 and early 1988 and then classified them according to whether they dealt with local or national issues and recorded the findings on a category sheet. Results indicate a significant difference: letters in the smaller community concentrated almost entirely on local issues, whereas those in the larger community concentrated more frequently on national issues.

A Content Analysis of Letters to the Editor

Research has indicated that the average person who writes letters to an American newspaper tends to be a conservative, well-adjusted white male who is middle-aged or older and a longtime resident of his community (Singletary & Cowling, 1979). One study concluded that 71.4% of the letters printed were written by people who wished to inform or persuade by writing their letters. Most of the remainder, 27%, wished only to use the letter as a means of self-expression; the other 1.6% wished to arouse readers to action (Lemert & Larkin, 1979).

Problem

But what are the major concerns of these letter writers? Are they more concerned about events in their local communities or about national issues? It is said that papers in smaller communities "tend to live by the mantra 'local, local, local'" (Seaton, 1999). But does this mandate actually reflect the interests of small-town residents? Does the size of the community have some influence on the subjects of letters its members write? These questions led to the following hypothesis: people living in a small community (with a population of about 15,000) tend to be concerned more with local than with national issues. People living in a large community (with a population over 500,000) show more concern for national than local issues.

Method

Newspapers

The two newspapers that served as data sources, the *Mount Vernon News* and the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, were chosen mainly for convenience and availability.

Cleveland has a population of 573,822 and a weekly distribution of the *Plain Dealer* of 482,564. Mount Vernon has a population of 14,380 and a weekly distribution of the *Mount Vernon News* of 10,936 (*1985 IMS/Ayer Directory*, 1985). Each newspaper's letters were read for the weekdays of October 1987, December 1987, and February 1988. Sunday issues were not taken into account.

A category sheet of possible subjects for the letters to the editor was adapted from the coding sheet of Donohew's study on Medicare (Budd, Thorp, & Donohew, 1967, p. 41). One column recorded national issues, and a second, local issues. The sheet was constructed with a space for the newspaper's abbreviation, the date, and the letter number(s). The *Mount Vernon News* was given the abbreviation MVN, and the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, the abbreviation CPD.

Procedure

After the category sheet was finished and approved, observation began. The letters were read and marked for content in a library setting. Each letter was then classified on the category sheet that had been titled with the proper abbreviations, date, and letter number. As observation progressed, constraints of time demanded a change from filling out a separate sheet for each letter to recording each day's letters on the same category sheet. The space left for recording the letter number was used to record the total number of letters for each particular day. After all observation was finished, the counts for each of the newspapers were totaled for each month and overall.

Results

During the three months, 60 letters were read from the *Mount Vernon News*.

Fifty-three pertained to local issues, and seven pertained to national issues. A chi-square test with an adjustment for continuity was used on these data to find whether there was a statistically significant difference between concern with local issues and concern with national issues. Results showed an overwhelming difference between

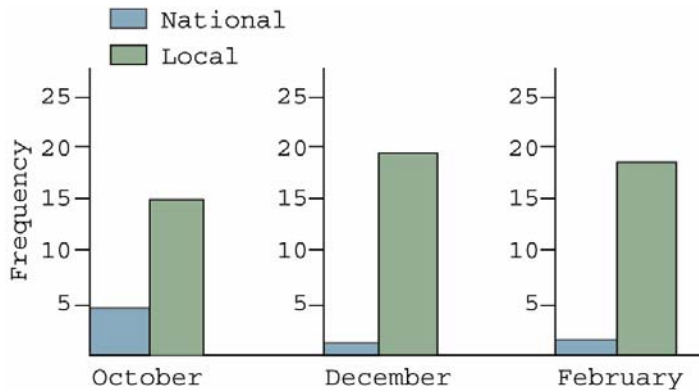


Figure 1. Frequency of national and local issues for the MVN

issues, even at the .01 probability level. A graph (Figure 1) was also constructed to show the number of national and local issues for each month for the MVN.

Of a total of 564 letters read from the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, 248 pertained to local

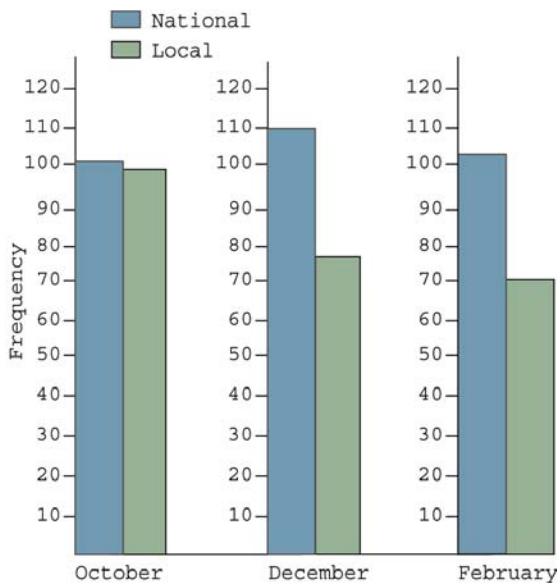


Figure 2. Frequency of national and local issues for the CPD

issues and 316 to national issues. A chi-square test with an adjustment for continuity was also used on these data and, once again, showed a statistically significant difference. A graph (Figure 2) was constructed to show the frequency of national and local issues for each month for the CPD.

One interesting side note is that 21.6% of the letters from the *Plain Dealer* expressed grievances or

appreciation, compared with 36% of the letters from the *Mount Vernon News*. These findings differ considerably from those of Lister (1985), who found that only 5% of letters to the editor were of this particular type.

Discussion

The findings of this study generally supported the hypothesis, especially in the smaller community, where letters concentrated overwhelmingly on local issues. Perhaps residents of such a community do not see themselves as strongly affected by national politics and events. For the larger community, the findings were not as clear; one possibility is that many of the letters were not from the larger community itself but from smaller communities surrounding it.

If more time had been available for the study an entire year's letters could have been categorized, perhaps yielding more representative information. In addition, use of a second reader could have reduced bias on the part of a single reader in the categorization of letters. It was found as the study progressed that a few categories could have been added, such as religion and local and state elections; the lack of these categories, however, did not severely affect the study. Another bias that would be difficult to account for is editorial bias: one study has found that only 68% of letters received by editors were published (Renfro, 1979). The only way to eliminate this bias would be to read all the letters received instead of only those that are printed.

Conclusion

This study raises some interesting questions that further study would probably help to answer. Does gender or age influence whether people are interested

in local or national issues? What is the causal relationship between residence in small towns and apparent greater interest in local affairs? Future studies may answer such questions, building on the information here.

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