Introduction

Though journalism is entering a new age, with the rise of the Internet and digital markets and the fall of print, some things remain the same. Regardless of the format, grabbing the reader's attention is ingrained in journalism's DNA, with sensational headlines, enticing topics, and catching leads. Newspapers are deliberately constructed to attract potential readers by putting the most significant and momentous article of the day on the front page with a big, bolded letter headline. This is to immediately grab the potential reader and entice them into picking up the day's newspaper. In the digital age of journalism, the same can be said about a news outlet's home webpage. Studies say that the average person only stays on a webpage for 15 seconds, and a news outlet's home webpage must immediately grab the potential reader's attention before they move on to another website.[1] Headlines on the home webpage of a news outlet must be as enticing and momentous as the front-page headlines on a physical newspaper.

The reader now has far more choice in how they consume their news, with an incredible number of news outlets and blogs. In a highly competitive market-based system, a news outlet must create an individual identity and produce unique content that showcases why a news outlet is better than its competitors. As an act of putting their best foot forward, there is no better place to demonstrate the strength and individuality of publication than on their home webpage. If a news outlet's home webpage had very similar news stories to other outlets, the reader would have no reason to visit that news outlet in particular. Unique articles showcase individuality, which is why unique articles are often found on the home webpage, where the article has the highest chance of being

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[1] "What You Think You Know About the Web Is Wrong." Time. Accessed March 13, 2015. http://time.com/12933/what-you-think-you-know-about-the-web-is-wrong/

seen.

A news outlet must create a home webpage that not only immediately grab the attention of the fleeting potential reader through important and attractive news headlines, but also showcase the outlet's individuality. These market pressures make the concepts of pack journalism and agenda setting void. Pack journalism suggests that news outlets will follow the market leader and report on similar issues. Because readers now have access to a vast amount of news websites and blogs, becoming uniform with other outlets by reporting on the same topics is a grave disadvantage in today's market. The pressure to produce unique content also lessens news outlet's ability to set the public agenda. When news outlets were all reporting the on the same issues, certain issues would become widespread among the public sphere. Now that uniformity is once again a disadvantage, no particular issue is heavily reported on and widespread, stripping journalism's ability to do agenda setting. There have been many studies on the rise of soft news, and this should mean that home webpages generally have more soft news than hard news. Examining what topics news outlets choose to showcase on the home webpage also gives great into that outlets ideology, such as what they think it is important for the public to know and what they think the public would be most attracted to.

This content analysis will evaluate the claims made thus far by studying the headlines on the home webpages of five news outlets: New York Times, USA Today, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. How often news outlets produce unique content and how often outlets report on similar topics will be examined. The theories of pack journalism and agenda setting will be tested to see if they are still relevant to modern day journalism. Whether the market leader has the most unique content, the place of hard and soft news

in both unique and non-unique content, whether there is a difference in partisan and non-partisan outlets, and what topics are most widely reported on will be studied.

Hypothesis

Modern journalism is centered about creating a unique product. The concepts of pack journalism and agenda setting are no longer relevant because of this. Each outlet studied will carve out a unique identity for themselves, with the New York Times being the market leader and having the most unique content, the two partisan papers using their political inclinations to create an identity, and USA Today, known to be cover more soft news, will be identified in such a way.

Method

The first 11 headlines of the New York Times, USA Today, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC were recorded for five consecutive days. Headlines began to be recorded at the same time each day, 7pm from 2/24 to 2/28. The initial intention was to record the first 10 headlines instead of 11, but more data was recorded than was needed and will still be used. This should not have any detrimental effects, as more data is generally better. To determine the "first" 11 headlines, recording began from the top of the webpage and moved downwards. Opinion articles, videos, daily recaps, or articles that redirected to other websites were not considered and did not count. Articles that were listed and categorized under subcategories were also not counted. All of the headlines recorded were either uncategorized, as the 11 headlines were already recorded before a subcategory was reached, or deemed "top stories," which this study does not consider a subcategory, as it is not specific to a topic, but a general catch-all for important news.

After the headlines were recorded, each headline was then tagged with two or

three keywords that identified the topic of the article. News regarding ISIS was tagged as "ISIS." An article detailing comments from a CEO on Hillary Clinton was tagged differently than speculation on Clinton's presidential campaign, because even though they both include Clinton, they are entirely different topics and events. This is unlike ISIS, where each ISIS article was regarding the war. When a headline's tag appeared only once in the study, it was deemed a unique headline and article, as no other outlet reported on that topic.

Each headline was then identified as hard news or soft news. This binary method left no room for gray area, which creates some edge cases. While news regarding the homeland security bill is clearly hard news, an article about the second execution of a woman in the history of Georgia was also considered hard news, as it related to policy, the death penalty, in at least some way. While news regarding the weather is clearly soft news, an article about a sex scandal involving a police chief is still soft news. The content of each article was examined to ensure the tag and hard/soft news identification was accurate.

To ensure inter-coder reliability, another coder was used to ensure the consistency and validity of the coding scheme. For one day, another coder also tagged headlines and designated if they were hard or soft news. The tagging descriptions were generally very consistent, and after the hard/soft news distinction was the explained, the designation was also consistent.

Results

Of the 275 headlines gathered, a total of 96 articles, 35%, where unique, and 179 articles were not. A breakdown of how many unique and non-unique articles each outlet

published is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1
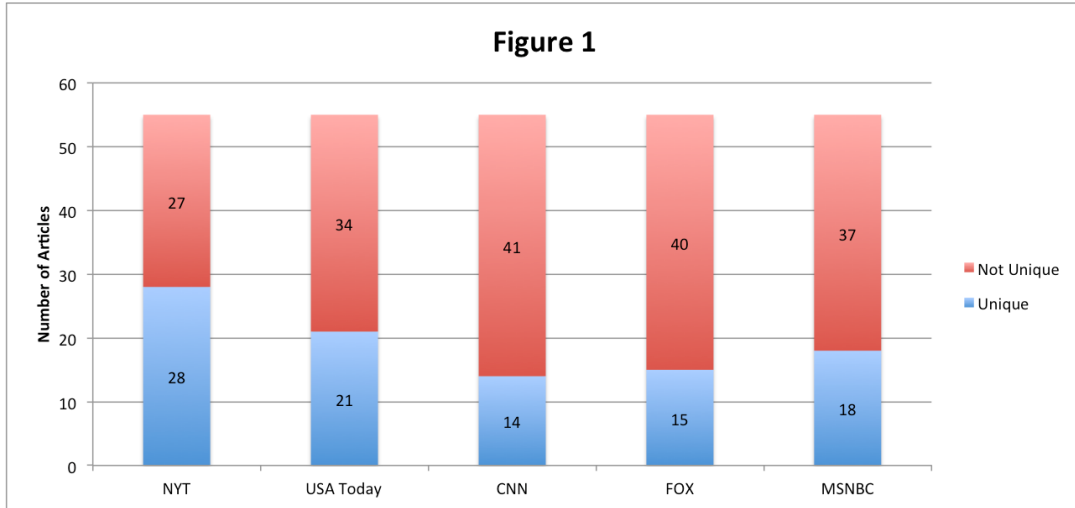
The New York Times lead with 28 unique articles, far ahead of the other four outlets, which combined to averaged 17 unique articles. The New York Times is a very illustrious and decorated news outlet in the modern era, and it can be said that the New York Times is the market leader. Because the New York Times has the largest amount of unique articles, this proves that pack journalism is no longer in place. When the New York Times would report on a story, such as the deportation of 150 Bosnians for war crimes, if pack journalism was in place, the other outlets would follow the market leader and also report on that story, making it not unique. This means that the New York Times would have a lower number of unique articles, as other outlet's would follow them and report on similar issues, but this is not the case. The Bosnian war crime story was a unique article for the New York Times, and other outlets chose to not follow the New York Times and report on it as well. Because over half of New York Time's articles were unique, this shows that other outlets were not following the market leader, disproving the theory of pack journalism.

Some could argue that CNN is the market leader and pack journalism is in fact in

place, as CNN has the lowest number of unique articles, but this is also not the case. CNN's lower number of unique articles is not attributed to other news outlets following them, but rather CNN reporting on the same topics, such as CNN having the highest amount of articles on ISIS.

Of the 179 articles that were not unique, 84% of them were hard news. The most widely reported topics were hard news, and of the 9 tags that were reported on at least 5 times, 8 of them were hard news, with weather being the exception. This data is demonstrated in figure 2.
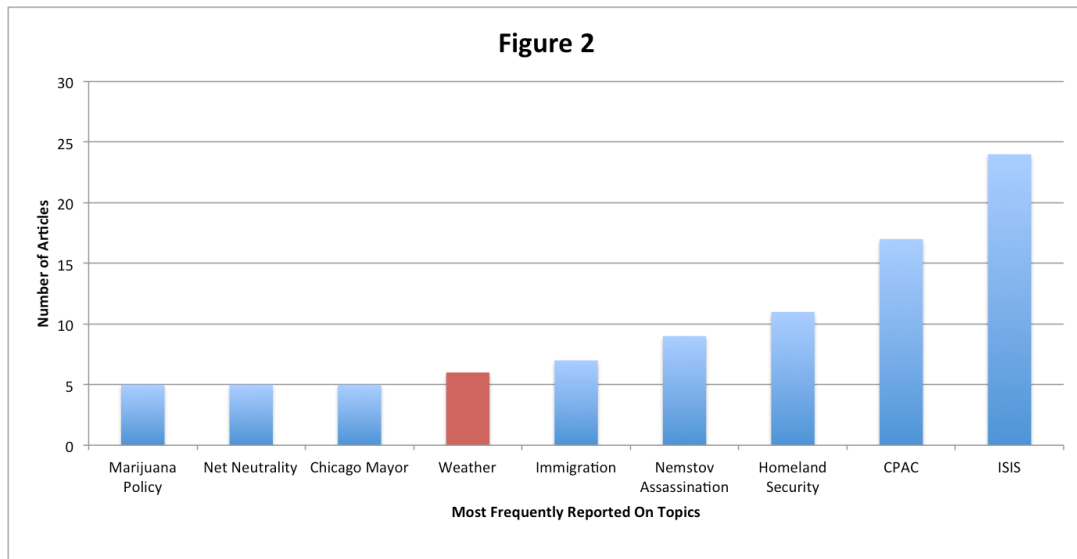
The most widely reported soft news topics were the weather and cultural events, such as the missing Oscars dress and the passing of Leonard Nimoy, but there was not a soft news topic that all five outlets covered, while each outlet covered hard news topics such as ISIS, CPAC, Homeland Security, and the Nemstov assassination. This shows that every outlet considers certain hard news issues important to the reader, as each outlet covered and showcase them on the home webpage, while there is no consensus among the outlets of what soft news issues are important. This suggests that modern journalism

still has the ability to set the public agenda, disproving the hypothesis. When every news outlet is reporting on the same issue, that issue becomes widespread and well known among the public sphere. The pressure to be unique was thought to stop the mass reporting of a singular issue, but modern journalism still has the ability to do agenda setting.

Of the 96 unique articles, only 24 articles, 25%, were hard news. This data is shown in figure 3.
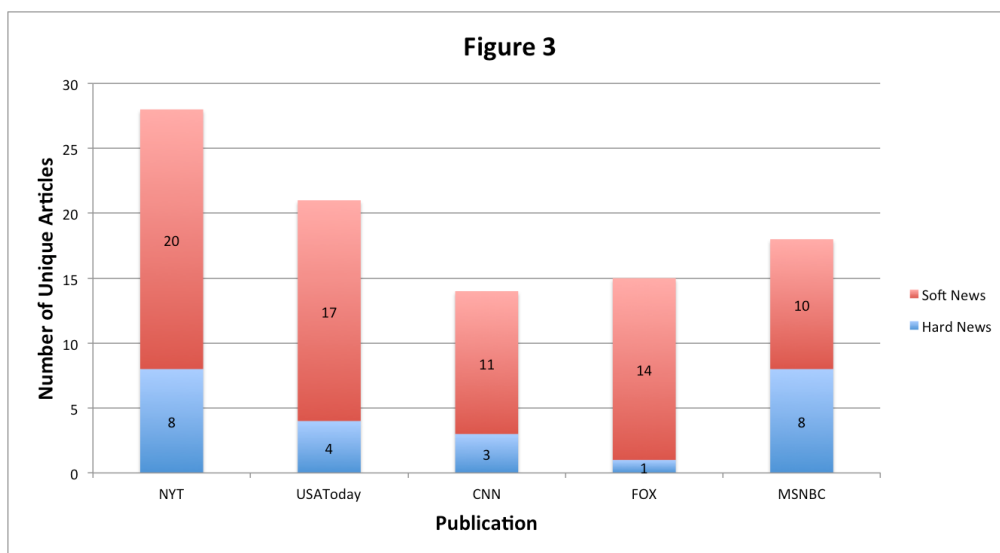
The majority of unique news is soft news. Instead of differentiating themselves through investigative hard news, news outlets instead create an identity through soft news. No news outlet published an investigative, breaking hard news story, showing the decline of investigative journalism. Creating unique soft news content requires less work and does not cost as much as doing an investigative hard news story. The New York Times's soft news is not centered on celebrity news, but instead on retrospectives and human-interest stories, and as reflections on the Attica prison and the mysteries of an unsolved heist. Even though it is soft news, as it does not relate to policy, this content is unique and still requires investigative work. This different from celebrity news, such as

Lindsey Lohan having to redo her community service, as this did not require any investigative work and is only unique because no other publications considered it important enough show on the home webpage.

The two partisan news outlets, Fox News and MSNBC, generally covered more hard news than the non-partisan outlets, averaging 31 hard news articles compared to the non-partisan 27 hard news articles. On more political issues, the partisan news outlets covered such issues 34 times, way more than non-partisan outlets, which only covered these issues 12 times. A breakdown of how often partisan and non-partisan outlets would cover certain issues is shown in figure 4.
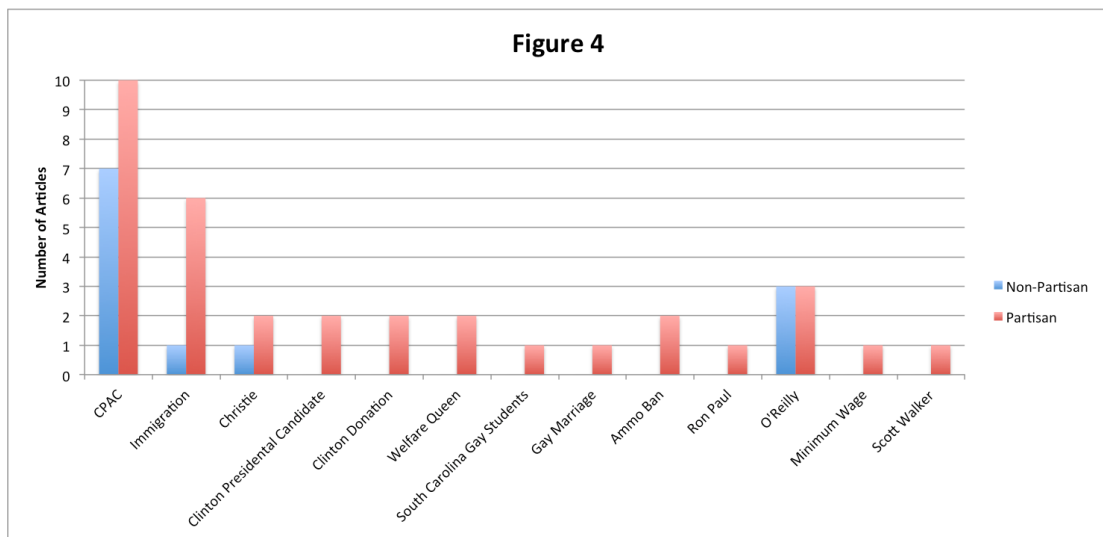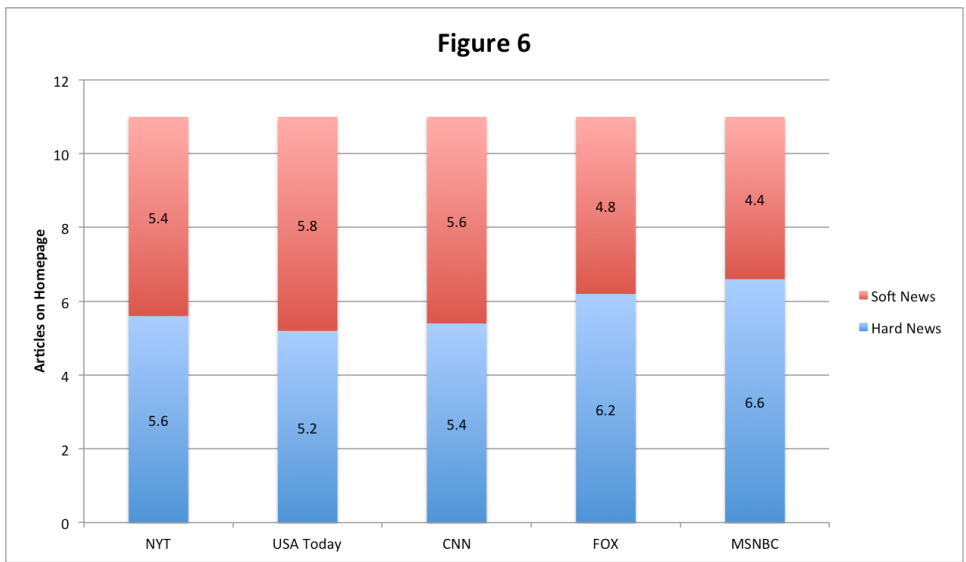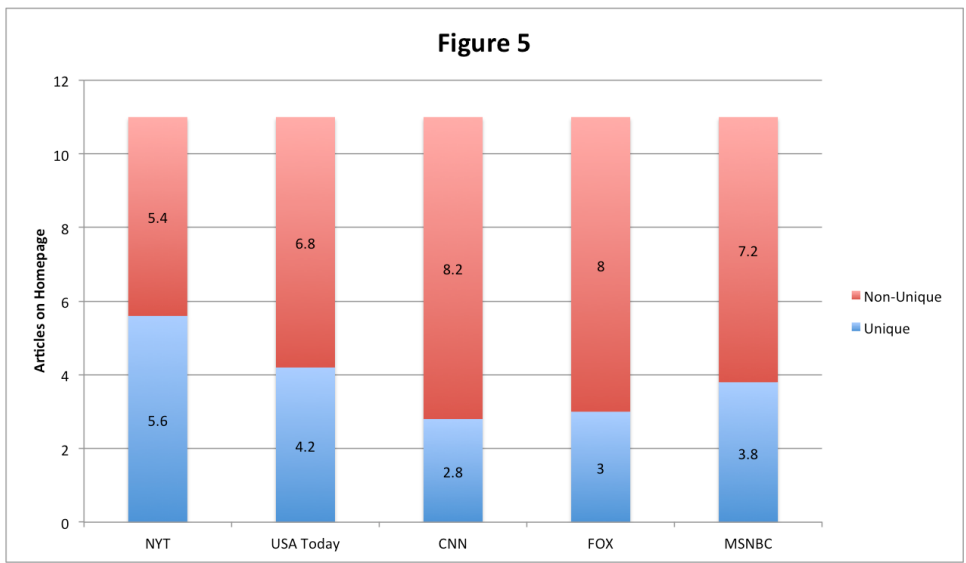

Partisan outlets are much more interested in covering policy issues, especially ones that the associated party has a direct interest in. Fox News was the only outlet to cover the ammo ban and welfare queen issues, and MSNBC was the only outlet to cover gay marriage. Surprisingly, MSNBC covered the CPAC more than Fox News did.

There were only 47 articles about international affairs, 17% of the overall 275. The majority of this number was made up by stories on ISIS and the Nemstov assassination. News outlets generally segregate international news to a separate webpage and rarely

show international news on the home webpage, and further study can done to see if international papers do the same. Sports and celebrity related stories also were rarely reported, combining to only 16 articles. The five news outlets simply do not consider these topics very important.

The general home webpage for each outlet will now be examined. The average number of unique vs non-unique articles for any given day is shown on figure 5. The average number of hard news vs soft news for any given day is shown on figure 6.

Figure 5

Outlet	Non-Unique	Unique
NYT	5.4	5.6
USA Today	6.8	4.2
CNN	8.2	2.8
FOX	8	3
MSNBC	7.2	3.8

Figure 6

Outlet	Soft News	Hard News
NYT	5.4	5.6
USA Today	5.8	5.2
CNN	5.6	5.4
FOX	4.8	6.2
MSNBC	4.4	6.6

In terms of unique content on the home webpage, the contrast is stark. The New York Times has double the amount on unique content on the home webpage than CNN. The sheer amount of unique content is what separates the New York Times from its competitors. While the partisan outlets generally cover more hard news, this is not really shown in the home webpage, averaging only one more hard news article than non-partisan outlets. Covering more policy related hard news is how partisan news outlets differentiate themselves. USA Today is the leader in terms of soft news, but by only a small margin, and they also produce a good number of unique news. CNN is the only outlet to have not carved out an identity in this study. With the least amount of unique content, CNN instead works in depth, covering ISIS more than any other outlet, but not to an extent that it is CNN identity. CNN may simply rely on their broadcast product instead of their digital product.

Conclusion

News outlets use unique content to create an identity and differentiate themselves from other news outlets. The hypothesis was correct in that pack journalism is no longer relevant, as becoming uniform with other publications would be a disadvantage in today's market. The hypothesis was incorrect in believing agenda setting would also no longer be relevant, as certain hard news issues are heavily reported enough to be able to influence the public sphere. The majority of unique content is soft news, and no outlet did an investigative, breaking hard news story, showing that investigative journalism is on the decline. Most outlets showcased their identity in this study, with the New York Times relying on the sheer amount of unique content, partisan outlets relying policy news, and USA Today producing a good number of unique content and soft news, and CNN's

identity was not made apparent.