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**“A Slow-Moving Disaster:”
Early Coverage of the Coronavirus Pandemic
at US Local Newspapers**

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Abstract:

The outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic provides an opportunity to investigate several aspects of the work of local newspapers in the United States, including their ability to create original reporting, gatekeeping, the influence of chain ownership, and the possible effect of political polarization on hard news coverage. This study examines the early coverage of COVID-19 in a selection of American local newspapers in 28 states—15 Republican-dominated (“red”) and 13 Democrat-dominated (“blue”)—during January and February 2020. The local papers produced a fraction of the coverage of large, national newspapers, as their lower resource levels and local focus limited their ability to cover the initial COVID-19 outbreak. The blue-state papers had more coverage on average and got to the coronavirus story earlier on average than the red-state papers, yet the red-state papers were quicker to warn that a pandemic was possible.

Keywords: newspapers, COVID-19, news, pandemic, health news

Full text:

A June 2020 study by the Pew Research Center found that nearly half of American adults said that local news outlets were a major source for COVID-19 news, “more than the share who named several other groups, including President Donald Trump and the coronavirus task force (31%)” (Shearer, 2020). Indeed, the outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic provides an opportunity to investigate several aspects of local newspaper coverage in the United States. This study focuses on the initial coverage of the novel coronavirus outbreak at a selection of American local newspapers during the months of January and February 2020, when the outbreak was just beginning to affect the United States and its seriousness was not

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yet fully known. The goal of the research is to gauge how local newspapers, with their limited resources and community orientation, covered a quickly evolving story that engulfed the globe.

Many critics who study the American newspaper industry have argued, as Garber (2020) puts it, that “the disappearance of local news is a slow-moving disaster.” The novel coronavirus outbreak exposes a different kind of “disaster” related to local news coverage—that local papers may inadvertently harm readers by excluding important international and national stories. Many local newspapers in the US have chosen not to cover national or international news anymore, because they lack the resources to do so well or have simply decided their readers can find their non-local news elsewhere. Because of this, some local papers totally missed the coronavirus story in January and February 2020, only starting coverage when COVID-19 became a direct threat to their own backyards in March 2020. Someone reading only a local paper in the outbreak’s early weeks might have been blindsided when the virus actually did start to cause sickness, death, shutdowns and layoffs in the United States. International and national news is arguably not always relevant to someone living in America, but in this case, ignoring COVID-19 might have been deadly.

This research therefore uses the extraordinary case study of COVID-19 to investigate several of local journalism’s most basic functions: its ability to produce original reporting, its role as a gatekeeper, and the effects of ownership and political partisanship on its work. The first area of investigation in this study is the ability of local papers to cover national and international stories of importance to their communities compared with larger and better-financed nationally focused newspapers. A study of coronavirus coverage can help suggest the extent to which local newspapers are able to create original content related to important stories, even ones taking place nationally or internationally. Some local newspapers rose to the challenge of covering the COVID-19 outbreak with high amounts of insightful reporting,

drawn from their own staffs—though nothing like the blanket coverage that large, national newspapers like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* were able to generate. A second group combined its own reporting with that of news wires and news syndication services. A third group of local papers relied almost entirely on outside sources like the Associated Press (AP) or the New York Times syndication service for early coronavirus coverage. And a fourth group completely ignored or all but ignored the start of the outbreak.

Ultimately, none of the local papers studied can hold a candle to the coverage provided by the three large national newspapers: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*. These three newspapers have resources far beyond those of any local paper, with hundreds of reporters and numerous bureaus around the globe. It would be unreasonable to expect smaller papers to create the same amount of reporting as these newspaper behemoths, but the coronavirus case study provides insight into how far ahead the *Times*, *Post* and *Journal* have moved on national and international news. The data collected imply that an American must have a second source of news beyond their local newspaper if they are to be well informed about important national and international events.

The second area of investigation is the gatekeeping function of the local press, whereby “information about events flows to sources and the media and is transformed into news” (Shoemaker, Johnson & Riccio, 2017, p. 4). A study of early COVID-19 coverage, as the story migrated from China to the entire world, illuminates how local newspapers opened their proverbial gates to a quickly evolving news story that at first did not necessarily seem relevant to their communities. While none of the newspapers studied jumped onto the story quickly, all are members of the Associated Press, which started its reporting on the novel virus in China in early January. The large national papers started their own reporting about

the virus a few days after the AP, giving another gatekeeping signal to local American newspapers editors that this virus was newsworthy.

Third, this study provides insights into how chain ownership affects the news reporting at US local papers at a time when media ownership in the newspaper business is becoming more concentrated than ever (see Doctor, 2019). Coronavirus coverage provides a useful case study to assess how chain ownership may affect individual newspapers' coverage. The study also seeks to ascertain how newspapers owned by large national chains like Gannett, Tribune, and MNG Enterprises (which is controlled by Alden Capital Management and does business as Digital First Media and MediaNews Group) differed in the way they covered the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak compared with those papers that were independent or owned by small, local newspaper groups. The large-chain papers generally had more coverage and earlier coverage about the virus than the small-chain/independent papers.

Fourth, this study of coronavirus coverage provides insights into the effect of political polarization on hard news coverage at American newspapers. While much has been written about the effect of the politically charged coverage of cable news channels (Prior, 2007; Feldman, 2011; Levendusky, 2013; Clinton & Enamorado, 2014; Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017), and on how newspaper editorials affect readers (Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Casas, Fawaz & Trindade, 2016), little research has attempted to measure differences in the hard news coverage at American newspapers based in Republican-dominated or Democrat-dominated areas. The terms 'red' for Republican-dominated states and 'blue' for Democrat-dominated states have become shorthand for this ideological leaning, harkening back to the color scheme of the television news graphics that became standardized during the election of 2000 (Brooks, 2001), and this paper uses them as shorthand for Republican-dominated or Democrat-dominated states. While hard news coverage should in theory be neutral and

apolitical according to standard journalistic practice (Cohen, 1963; Donsbach, 1983; Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Hanitzsch et. al., 2011), it is important to test whether news coverage by papers in conservative and liberal areas have in actuality begun to reflect the political polarization currently present in the United States. This matters because research suggests that “citizens exposed to more politicized newspapers have more extreme political preferences” (Melki & Sekeris, 2019, p.1). This examination aspires to provide data on whether hard news coverage at local papers has begun to reflect the dominant political sentiments of their communities. While one recent national survey found only about 7 percent of journalists were registered Republicans and about 13 percent of journalists leaned right politically (Weaver, Willnat & Wilhoit, 2019), “identifying gatekeeping bias in news coverage, however, has proven to be incredibly difficult” (Hassell, Holbein & Miles, 2020). Gatekeeping bias might lead newspapers to emphasize or downplay certain politically charged stories to match the prevailing political tilt in their area, including COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a global health issue, it has become highly politicized due to disagreement over the way federal and state authorities are handling the outbreak (Bump, 2020; Halon, 2020). To this end, this study examines the early coverage of COVID-19 at a selection of American local newspapers in 28 states—15 of which are in Republican-dominated states and 13 of which are in Democrat-dominated ones. The data collection identified that the papers in Democratic-leaning states produced more coverage of the early coronavirus outbreak and started coverage earlier than the Republican-leaning state group, but were slower to suggest that the outbreak could become a pandemic.

Hypotheses:

The research will test nine hypotheses, comparing the work and gatekeeping of the local papers with national newspapers, assessing the effect of chain ownership on the output, and determining whether there was a red/blue divide in coverage:

QUANTITY OF COVERAGE

- H1: Local newspapers printed far fewer stories on average about coronavirus during the study period than the nationally focused major newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*).
- H2: Local newspapers owned by large chains like Gannett, Tribune and MNG Enterprises printed more stories on COVID-19 on average than independent newspapers or those owned by small, local chains during the study period.
- H3: Newspapers located in “red” states printed fewer stories about the start of the COVID-19 outbreak than newspapers in “blue” states.

DATE OF FIRST COVERAGE OF OUTBREAK

- H4: Local newspapers were slower to report about the outbreak of COVID-19 than the nationally focused major newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*).
- H5: Local newspapers owned by large chains were faster to report on COVID-19 on average than independent newspapers or those owned by small, local chains.
- H6: Newspapers located in “blue” states were faster to report news about the start of the COVID-19 outbreak than newspapers in “red” states.

THE POSSIBILITY OF A PANDEMIC

- H7: Local newspapers were slower to report that the outbreak of COVID-19 could become a pandemic than the nationally focused major newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*).
- H8: Local newspapers owned by large chains were faster on average to report that the outbreak of COVID-19 could become a pandemic than independent newspapers or those owned by small, local chains.
- H9: Newspapers in “blue” states were quicker to label the outbreak as a pandemic than the “red” state papers.

Methodology

States studied:

The author first needed to determine which US states could be considered Republican-dominated and Democratic-dominated. To do so, for each of the 50 states, the author examined the 2016 Presidential vote, the current makeup of the top state government “trifecta” (the governorship, State Senate majority, and State House majority), and the current makeup of each state’s Congressional delegation. Only when all six were controlled

by one party was a state classified as Republican-dominated or Democrat-dominated (see Wikipedia 2020 for clear chart summarizing the data). The author concedes that this excludes some states that are traditionally thought of as being red or blue, including Alabama (which currently has a Democratic US Senator though is otherwise Republican-dominated) and Maryland (which has a Republican governor though is otherwise Democrat-dominated).

Using data for April 2020, when this study was started, these are the 15 Republican-dominated (red) states:

- Arkansas
- Florida
- Georgia
- Idaho
- Indiana
- Mississippi
- Missouri
- North Dakota
- Oklahoma
- South Carolina
- South Dakota
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Utah
- Wyoming

These are the 13 Democrat-dominated (blue) states:

- California
- Connecticut
- Delaware
- Hawaii
- Illinois
- Nevada
- New Jersey
- New Mexico
- New York
- Oregon
- Rhode Island
- Virginia
- Washington

Newspapers examined:

The author then had to determine which newspapers to examine for each state to create a representative sample that in the best of all possible worlds would include local newspapers of different sizes, owned by a wide selection of companies, in different kinds of communities (urban, suburban, and rural). Due to time and resource restraints, the author was limited to studying one representative newspaper per state. To create the study sample, the author first eliminated the largest newspapers in the United States such as the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, to focus this research on smaller local papers. The author also eliminated newspapers that did not publish daily, for reasons of consistency.² The author then created a master list of daily newspapers in the 28 study states, pulling from a wide range of sources including databases like ProQuest's USNewsstream, lists of newspapers owned by major chains, the front pages curated by the Newseum in Washington, DC, and a number of websites that present listings of American newspaper titles. The author then used a random number generating program to randomly select one newspaper to study from the population of daily newspapers in each study state. However, a true random sample was not possible because some newspaper websites lack the advanced search-by-date features needed to facilitate the research protocol. The author coded one newspaper without this functionality, *The State* newspaper of Columbia, South Carolina, and it was extremely time-consuming. Because of the cumbersome nature of a search that could not be limited by date and the limited time in which this research needed to be completed, the author excluded additional newspapers that lacked search-by-date functionality. If a newspaper that was randomly selected lacked search-by-date capability on a database like US Newsstream allowing the research protocol to be completed in a timely manner, it was dropped and another paper was chosen for the study, again through random sampling.

² One paper studied, the Wyoming Tribune Eagle, eliminated its Tuesday print edition starting in June 2020, after the study period for this research.

Thus, the newspapers listed below (noted with their owners and website URLs) were chosen for study through this systematic methodology. Although recent circulation data is not publicly available for most of the papers, the information that can be found shows the sample group ranges from some fairly large papers with over 100,000 in daily circulation (*Orlando Sentinel*, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*) to some extremely small ones with circulation of just a few thousand (*East Oregonian*, *Woonsocket (RI) Call*). Both the red- and blue-state comparison groups are made up of large, medium and small newspapers, as are the chain-owned and independent/small chain-owned comparison groups. The asterisk (*) notes the newspaper websites that lack search-by-date functionality but where stories are available in one of the databases in the collection of the author's university.

Red state newspapers (15):

- **Baxter Bulletin*, Mountain Home, AK–Gannett <https://www.arkansasonline.com/>
- **Orlando Sentinel* – Orlando, FL–Tribune Co. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/>
- *Griffin Daily News*, Griffin GA–Paxton Media Group <https://griffindailynews.com/>
- *Lewiston Tribune*, Lewiston ID–TPC Holdings <https://lmtribune.com/>
- *Tribune-Star*, Terre Haute, IN–CNHI <https://www.tribstar.com/>
- **Hattiesburg American*–Hattiesburg, MS.- Gannett <https://www.hattiesburgamerican.com/>
- **St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, St. Louis MO–Lee BHM Co. <https://www.stltoday.com/>
- **Bismarck Tribune*, Bismarck, ND–Lee BHM Co. <https://bismarcktribune.com/>
- *Journal Record*, Oklahoma City, OK–BridgeTower Media Holding Co. <https://journalrecord.com/>
- *The State*, Columbia SC—McClatchy <https://www.thestate.com/>
- *Black Hills Pioneer*, Spearfish, SD–Seaton Publishing Company <https://www.bhpioneer.com/>
- **The Tennessean*, Nashville, TN–Gannett <https://www.tennessean.com/>
- *Denton Record-Chronicle*, Denton TX–Denton Media Company <https://dentonrc.com/>
- *Standard-Examiner*, Ogden, UT–Ogden Media <https://www.standard.net>
- *Wyoming Tribune-Eagle*, Cheyenne, WY–Adams Publishing Group <https://www.wyomingnews.com/>

Blue state newspapers (13):

- *Whittier Daily News*, Whittier CA– MNG Enterprises <https://www.whittierdailynews.com/>
- **New Haven Register*, New Haven, CT–Tribune <https://www.nhregister.com/>

- **The News Journal*, Wilmington, DE—Gannett <https://www.delawareonline.com/>
- **Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, Honolulu, HI—Oahu Publications Inc. <https://www.staradvertiser.com/>
- *The Southern Illinoisan*, Carbondale, IL—Lee BHM Co. <https://thesouthern.com/>
- **Reno Gazette-Journal*, Reno, NV—Gannett <https://www.rgj.com/>
- *The Trentonian*, Trenton, NJ—MNG Enterprises <https://www.trentonian.com>
- *Taos News*, Taos, NM—Taos News <https://www.taosnews.com/>
- **The Journal News*, White Plains, NY—Gannett <https://www.lohud.com/>
- *East Oregonian*, Pendleton OR—EO Media Group <https://www.eastoregonian.com/>
- *Woonsocket Call*, Woonsocket, RI—RISN (Rhode Island Suburban Newspapers) <https://www.woonsocketcall.com/>
- **Daily Press*, Newport News, VA—Tribune <https://www.dailypress.com/>
- *Yakima Herald-Republic*, Yakima, WA—Seattle Times Company, <https://www.yakimaherald.com/>

Time period to be studied:

The author then needed to define the time period to be studied. Although the date on which COVID-19 first started to infect humans cannot be ascertained with certainty, the existence of the novel coronavirus was first reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) by Chinese officials on December 31, 2019 (World Health Organization, 2020). This suggested a logical start for the study period. Additionally, the author could locate no mention of the disease that would later be dubbed COVID-19 in an American newspaper until after the start of 2020. The US Newsstream database of over 1,100 news sources contains only one report mentioning this coronavirus from before 2020: a report by the Mexican state news agency Notimex on Dec. 31, 2019 indicating that a worrying new virus was spreading in China (Notimex 2019). In terms of the end of the study period, there were several possibilities. A feasible and logical endpoint for the study period was Feb. 29, 2020, when Washington state officials announced what was then believed to be the first American coronavirus death (Brownstone et. al., 2020). Therefore the reporting examined in this study stretches from Jan. 1 to Feb. 29, 2020 to focus on the early coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak. These two months are when the virus first became noticed by the American press

and when the outbreak developed into a direct threat to the health of the American population.

Methods of Analysis:

The author and an undergraduate research assistant then created a list of all stories mentioning the COVID-19 outbreak in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the 28 local newspapers being examined for the two-month study period. The author and research assistant used the search terms “China,” “virus,” “COVID,” “coronavirus” “viral,” “viruses,” “Wuhan,” and “illness” to ensure that all articles related to the COVID-19 epidemic were located for each newspaper studied. Letters to the editor, articles made up of headlines rather than meaningful text, and corrections were omitted. So were stories about topics other than the outbreak that only touched upon COVID-19 in a peripheral way. For example, a Feb. 10, 2020 story about the film *Parasite* winning several Academy Awards, which made a passing reference to the coronavirus, was excluded (Associated Press, 2020b, found in the *Griffin Daily News*).

The data collected for each of the 31 newspapers studied was as follows:

- Date of first coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak published from any source.
- Date of first original content written on the COVID-19 outbreak by the newspaper, not from wire or syndicate, if any, in study period.
- Total number of articles on the COVID-19 outbreak in study period.
- First mention that the outbreak was or could be a pandemic.
- Other sources of information for print articles (AP, Reuters, Bloomberg and other wire services, major news syndication services like *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, Tribune News Service, McClatchy News Service, etc.)

Findings:

VOLUME OF COVERAGE

Although some online news organizations and blogs reported on the virus in late December 2019 (Fahri, 2020), the Associated Press was the first major American news

organization to cover the outbreak, according to the US Newsstream database. The first AP article was written on Jan 3, 2020 and printed in some members' Jan. 4, 2020 newspapers, without a byline and with a Beijing dateline (Associated Press, 2020a). None of the 31 newspapers studied picked up this particular report, but it seems likely that all of them received it because all are AP members. The three large comparison group newspapers, all of which had bureaus in China, soon began to cover the outbreak themselves. The first reports about the new coronavirus in the *New York Times* (Sui-Lee & Wang, 2020) and *Wall Street Journal* (Wang, Khan & Yeo, 2020) appeared in their print editions on the same day, Jan. 7, 2020. *The Washington Post*, which surely monitors its main competitors' coverage, published its first report on the virus two days later (Shih & Sun, 2020). Once these three newspapers started reporting on the virus, their output in the first two months of the outbreak was voluminous. Table 1 shows the breakdown in coverage for each newspaper in January and February 2020:

—Table 1 approximately here—

The Wall Street Journal had the highest number of stories of the three large newspapers during the two-month study period, 437 (an average of over 8.2 per day), primarily because so many of its articles were about companies and sectors of the economy that could potentially be impacted by the coronavirus. *The New York Times* had copious amounts of coverage as well, 389 stories through Feb. 29th, or an average of 7.3 per day. *The Washington Post* had 280—the least of the three, but still around 5.5 articles per day on average. At all three newspapers, Table 1 shows how the frequency of stories grew steadily over the two-month study period as the gravity of the coronavirus situation increased.

This blanket coverage was far from the case for the local newspapers studied. None of the papers ran anywhere near as many stories as the large national newspapers. In fact, as illustrated by Table 2, the total amount of Jan.-Feb. 2020 coverage in all 28 local newspapers

put together (611 stories) was less than the coronavirus output of just the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* for the two months studied (669 articles).

—Table 2 approximately here—

A few of the local papers covered the story well. *The Whittier (CA) Daily News* published more than 100 articles about the coronavirus during the study period. *The Griffin (GA) Daily News*, *The State* (Columbia, SC) and the *Honolulu (HI) Star-Advertiser* published between 55 and 70 stories in January and February of 2020, rounding out the top performers in the study group. Just seven of the 28 newspapers surveyed ran more than 25 stories on the coronavirus during the first two months of 2020. Another eight newspapers had very minimal coverage, defined as 5-10 stories during the two-month study period. Notably, these included some relatively large newspapers, including the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *The Trentonian*, the main newspaper in the New Jersey state capital. Some of the smallest papers ignored or almost ignored COVID-19 at the start of 2020. Two of the newspaper studied, Rhode Island's *Woonsocket Call* and South Dakota's *Black Hills Pioneer*, had no coverage whatsoever of COVID-19 in Jan.-Feb. 2020. Another three newspapers—those in Arkansas, Mississippi and New Mexico—ran just two stories apiece during the entire two months studied.

There are four likely reasons why the local newspapers studied may not have covered COVID-19 right away. One is geography. None of the five states where there was no or minimal initial coverage of COVID-19 (AR, MI, NM, SD, or RI) nor their neighbors had any early outbreaks, like those in California or Washington. The papers that did not cover the novel coronavirus early cannot really be blamed for their choices, given how remote the chance seemed at the time that the illness would affect their communities. The second reason for low amounts of COVID-19 coverage is that many local newspapers have ceased to cover national or international news entirely. For years, limitations on staff and other resources—as well as the ease with which consumers can access other news sources on the internet—have

increasingly been leading many American newspaper to jettison national and international coverage. Instead, most small papers have been choosing to focus only on their core mission, local coverage—creating the original content that would not appear otherwise, to help keep readers (see Ali & Radcliffe, 2017). Of the 28 local papers examined, only five have a dropdown menu for national or international news on their website’s home page. This seems not to be a function of size, as two of the smallest papers in the sample, South Dakota’s *Black Hills Pioneer* and Rhode Island’s *Woonsocket Call*, have such dropdown menus on their home pages. Because of this local focus, many of the newspapers studied missed the COVID-19 outbreak in its early weeks, when it was considered, first, an international story and then a national one. Third, the assurances from many top US government officials that the virus posed no threat to the United States also helped drive down the level of coverage.

Throughout January and February 2020, President Donald J. Trump and members of his administration were maintaining that the coronavirus outbreak was under control and that it would not spread to the United States. Even such widely-respected figures as Dr. Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, initially said that the risk to the American public from the novel coronavirus was “low” (Miller & Hauck, 2020). Officials from the US Centers for Disease Control declared only on February 21 that the outbreak would likely reach into communities all around the United States (Stanglin & O’Donnell, 2020). In underestimating the seriousness of the virus’ spread, US officials discouraged news coverage. The message coming from the Trump administration was, “Americans don’t have to worry about this.” Larger papers like the three in the comparison group displayed skepticism and doggedly continued to dig out information on the outbreak, protecting the public interest as they continued to perform the watchdog role. But these huge papers had ample resources and political clout to do so. The local papers studied did not. The likely fourth factor driving down coverage was that many small newspapers (and many large

ones as well) lack expertise in public health and epidemiology. Without that specialized knowledge, a newspaper reporter may not have had the expertise to do high quality reporting on the looming pandemic. Reporters without deep knowledge of health subjects also risk accepting statements from important sources on the outbreak that are misleading or even incorrect, as happened here. *H1, that local newspapers printed far fewer stories on average about coronavirus during the study period than the nationally focused major newspapers (New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal), is true.*

Breaking out the quantity of stories according to newspaper ownership shows that newspapers owned by large chains gave about 60 percent more coverage on average to the coronavirus outbreak in its early months than independent and small company newspapers. For the sake of this study, newspapers were classified as belonging to the independent/small category if their owner held fewer than 10 properties. As illustrated by Table 3, the large-chain newspapers averaged 24.5 articles each on coronavirus in January and February, 2020, whereas the independent and small company newspapers averaged just over 15. Averages were used for comparison because the large-chain group is larger than the small/independent newspaper one.

—**Table 3 approximately here**—

Table 3 shows the small-chain and independent newspapers shaded; they make up just two of the top 10 producers of coronavirus coverage in the sample. It makes intuitive sense that the chain-owned papers would do more coverage of the coronavirus, in that they have far more resources than those in the independent/small group. Many of the chains (Tribune, Gannett, McClatchy, CNHI) have central news services or other mechanisms for sharing content among their newspapers. My impression from having read the papers being studied is that the large-chain group also has more coverage of international and national news, which in this case would have spurred early coverage of the coronavirus. *H2, that local newspapers owned*

by large chains printed more stories on COVID-19 on average than independent newspapers or those owned by small, local chains, is true.

In terms of breakdown by political leanings, there was slightly more coverage on average in the blue-state newspapers than the red state ones. As detailed in Table 4, the 13 blue-state newspapers had about 10 percent more coverage of COVID-19 in January and February than the 15 red-state papers.

—Table 4 approximately here—

The red-state group averaged 20.8 stories per paper during the study period, while the blue-state papers averaged 23. Averages were used for comparison because the two groups are not the same size. It is important to note that the blue-state newspapers had more coverage even though a lower percentage of the blue-state newspapers are part of large chains—which had a higher average number of stories per paper in the study group than in the small newspapers. In the red-paper group, 80 percent of the newspaper are owned by large chains. In the blue group, only 61 percent of the newspapers have large chain ownership. Therefore the higher coverage level at blue state papers was not attributable only to ownership. *H3, that newspapers located in “red” states printed fewer stories about the start of the COVID-19 outbreak than newspapers in “blue” states, is true.*

DATE OF INITIAL COVERAGE OF OUTBREAK

The Associated Press and the large national newspapers jumped onto the COVID story quickly and with full force, perhaps in part because all of these outlets have bureaus in China. The local newspapers studied for this article, by comparison, took longer than the large national newspapers to pick up on the virus. The results are detailed in Table 5.

—Table 5 approximately here—

The earliest coverage of the novel coronavirus in the local papers studied appeared 10 days after the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. Two of the newspapers studied published articles about COVID-19 on Jan. 17, 2020—*The State* (Columbia, SC) and the *Whittier* (CA) *Daily News*. Two Tribune newspapers, the *Daily Press* of Newport News, VA and the *Orlando Sentinel*, followed with their first reports on the coronavirus the next day (although another Tribune paper studied, the *New Haven Register*, did not report its first story on the new coronavirus until Jan. 25). All four of these early adopters were owned by large chains, and none of those four early reports were original to the papers where they were published. *The State*, part of the McClatchy chain, published content created by McClatchy’s central “Real-Time News” service and shared with all the McClatchy newspapers (Lin 2020). *The Whittier Daily News*, owned by MNG Enterprises, published a story written and syndicated by the *New York Times* (New York Times 2020). *The Daily Press* and *Orlando Sentinel*, owned by Tribune Publishing, both published part of a larger story written by the *Los Angeles Times* as a news brief, without a byline, attribution to the *LA Times* or dateline (Daily Press, 2020; Orlando Sentinel, 2020a). The first coverage of the epidemic in the other newspapers studied rolled out over the next few weeks. Of the local newspapers studied, the last to begin its coverage of the outbreak was the *Black Hills Pioneer* of South Dakota, which ran its first story on the coronavirus on March 7th. The average date on which the entire 28-newspaper group ran its first story on COVID-19 was January 28th, 2020, about three weeks after the large national papers.

Yet the first date of coverage alone does not tell the whole story, because many of the newspapers studied relied heavily on content not original to their papers for coverage of the coronavirus outbreak in its first two months. Ten of the 28 newspapers studied began their coverage with stories on the outbreak that were created elsewhere—either by the Associated Press or another content partner (the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Seattle Times*, or

the McClatchy Real-Time News Service). In fact, some of the newspapers relied heavily on stories written by others, particularly the AP, for their COVID-19 coverage during the entire months of January and February 2020. *The Southern Illinoisan*, for instance, outsourced all of its news content on the novel coronavirus, except for one weekly health column, to wires and syndicated content from other newspapers. *The Griffin (GA) Daily News* took all its early coronavirus coverage from the Associated Press, beginning its own reports only in March 2020. Looking just at the original content created by each newspaper studied, omitting stories written by a wire service, a syndication service, an in-chain content creation service, or other news organization, Table 5 shows that the average date for first coverage by the study group moves back to February 3rd. This is almost an entire month later than the comparison group of large national newspapers. *H4, that local newspapers were slower to report about the outbreak of COVID-19 than the nationally focused major newspapers (New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal), is true.*

The newspapers owned by large chains not only had more coverage of the outbreak than the independent and small chain ones on average, the data show the chain papers also got to the coronavirus story much faster. In the large chain group of 20 local newspapers, the average date of the first coronavirus coverage from any source was Jan. 25. For the eight independent/small chain papers, the average date on which COVID-19 coverage began was Feb. 5, a week and a half later. Looking at original content only, the independent/small chain newspaper group appears even further behind the chain papers. The average date on which the chain papers published their first original stories mentioning the coronavirus outbreak was Jan. 28th; but for the small independents, it was Feb. 11—nearly two weeks later. Much of the reason that the small/independent group seems so far behind is because two members of that group, Rhode Island's *Woonsocket Call* and South Dakota's *Black Hills Pioneer*, did not start running stories about the outbreak until March. *H5, that local newspapers owned by*

large chains were faster to report on COVID-19 on average than independent newspapers or those owned by small, local chains, is true.

The dates of first coverage in Table 5 show that that both red- and blue-state newspapers jumped into coronavirus coverage at about the same time in mid-January. Both red and blue newspapers gave either no coverage or minimal coverage to the virus story during the first two months of 2020. But stratifying the newspapers into red and blue groups, the data show that the blue-state newspapers as a group were quicker to get to the coronavirus story than their red state counterparts. The average day of first coverage was January 27 for the blue-state papers and January 29th for the red-state papers. This is not a very large difference. However if one looks at the average date on which the newspapers printed their own original coverage—rather than using content from AP, a news syndicate, or other news source—the blue state group goes from two days ahead of the red-state group to about a week earlier. The average date for first original story was January 30th for the blue state papers and February 5th for the red state papers. One might have expected the blue-state group to be more aggressive in its coverage if it had a high concentration of large chain newspapers, which reported the virus faster than the independent and small chain newspapers in the sample. But in fact the red-state group of newspapers had the higher percentage of chain-held papers, suggesting something besides ownership was behind the differences between red- and blue-state coverage. *H6, that newspapers located in blue states were faster to report news about the start of the COVID-19 outbreak than newspapers in red states, is true.*

THE POSSIBILITY OF A PANDEMIC

During the third week of January, the large national newspapers started to report that a COVID-19 pandemic was a possibility, because the virus was spreading from person to person, rather than just from animals to people. Although the novel coronavirus outbreak was only officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11,

(McNeil, 2020), news organizations reported far earlier about concerns that the novel coronavirus could spread amongst the population of the world. *The New York Times* was the first of the newspapers studied to do so, warning on January 20, 2020 that the virus “is capable of spreading from person to person...adding to fears of a broader epidemic” (Hernandez & Ramzy, 2020). *The Wall Street Journal* followed two days later with its first mention of pandemic fears (Russolillo & Chilkoti, 2020) and the *Washington Post*, two days after that. (Lynch, 2020) The local newspapers studied did not follow with coverage of such a pronouncement immediately, even though several of the studied newspapers receive the *Times*’ syndicated news service and their editors could all easily see the three large papers’ websites were reporting on the outbreak. As shown in Table 6, only two of the 28 local papers studied raised worries over a possible pandemic in January 2020.

—Table 6 approximately here—

The Orlando Sentinel was the first, on Jan. 26, reporting that a pandemic would deliver a “monumental shellacking” to the tourism industry on which Florida depends (Orlando Sentinel, 2020b). Interestingly, the other Tribune papers in the study group, Virginia’s *Daily Press* and Connecticut’s *New Haven Register* waited until late February, after Italy went into lockdown, to report that there were worries of a pandemic (Savage, 2020; Lambert, 2020). The average date on which the 28-paper study group declared that a pandemic could hit the globe was Feb. 21, the day on which the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) first declared that a pandemic was likely (Stanglin & O’Donnell, 2020). The same two small papers studied that failed to cover COVID in the months of January and February, 2020, the *Black Hills Pioneer* of South Dakota and the *Woonsocket Call* of Rhode Island, were the last to report a pandemic was possible. They both reported this on March 12—following the WHO’s official pronouncement of a pandemic on March 11 (Shannon, 2020). *H7, that local*

newspapers were slower to report that the outbreak of COVID-19 could become a pandemic than the nationally focused major newspapers, is true.

The newspapers owned by large chains were much faster to raise the specter of a pandemic than the independent and small chain newspapers studied. Table 6 has the independent/small chain papers shaded. The 20 newspapers owned by large chains reported on Feb 17th on average that a pandemic was possible. For the eight independent/small chain newspapers studied, that date was Feb 29—nearly two weeks later—but still almost two weeks before the official pronouncement by the WHO that the outbreak had become pandemic. The difference between the groups could be due to many factors, including increased sophistication made possible by the large chains’ shared resources. And yet newspapers in the same chain varied wildly in terms of content. The Gannett-owned papers, for instance, reported at very different times that a pandemic was possible:

- Feb. 7 for Arkansas’ *Baxter Bulletin* and (Westchester County) New York’s *Journal-News*
- Feb. 23 for the Delaware’s *Wilmington News Journal*
- Feb. 27 for Nevada’s *Reno Gazette-Journal*
- March 1 for *The Tennessean*

Four of the chain papers and three of the non-chain papers did not report at all during the study period that COVID-19 had the potential to become pandemic. This shows that *H8, that the local newspapers owned by large chains were faster on average to report that the outbreak of COVID-19 could become a pandemic than independent newspapers or those owned by small, local chains, is true.*

The only hypothesis that appears not to be true is that the blue-state papers were quicker to raise the possibility of a pandemic than their red-state counterparts. In fact, the red-state newspapers reported about a week before the blue-state papers that a pandemic was possible (Feb. 18. versus Feb. 24 on average). The data are summarized in Table 7.

—Table 7 approximately here—

Four of the 15 red-state papers and three of the 13 blue-state papers did not raise the possibility during the study period at all that COVID-19 could turn into a pandemic. This again illustrates how readers may be poorly informed about public health trends and important national and international stories if they only get news from a local newspaper.

H9, that local newspapers in “blue” states were quicker to label the outbreak as a pandemic than the “red” state papers, is false.

Conclusion:

With American newspapers having lost more than half their staff since 2008 (Sullivan, 2020), local papers have little choice but to “stick to the knitting” and focus their limited resources on their local communities. This study suggests that most small American newspapers have been forced to become so locally focused that they face massive challenges in trying to cover important international and national stories such as the novel coronavirus outbreak. This research suggests that newspapers that were part of large national chains were faster to pick up on the coronavirus outbreak and had more coverage of the virus in its early weeks than papers that were independent or in small chains. Large chain ownership is frequently criticized, and for many legitimate reasons including that it driven by the search for high profits and therefore too quick to close underperforming newspapers (see Abernethy, 2016). But this research also suggests that there is a silver lining to chain ownership, in that the larger pool of resources can lead to better coverage of some important issues.

It is difficult to explain all the results without more research. One possibility is that there is a strong correlation between newspaper staff size and plentiful and aggressive early COVID-19 coverage. As neither staff size nor its stand-in circulation size was readily available, this would be a logical area for follow-up research. However, the random sampling methods used provided groups of newspapers of varying sizing in both the red- and

blue-state groups, and the two ownership groups. This implies that size here is not the only factor that explains the variances found in the research. The differences in the red- and blue-state groups are the most curious to this author, and the most in need of explanation. There is no reason to think that the training or work norms of the red-state newspaper personnel is any different than that of the blue-state reporters/editors. Nor does this author see any evidence for outright political bias by the editors of the red-state papers studied (as in “Trump says this virus is not a threat to the nation, so let’s ignore the outbreak”). Yet the results suggests that it is possible there is a more subtle kind of political bias at work in early coronavirus coverage. It could be that editors at red-state papers were more accepting of assurances from the Trump administration that the novel coronavirus was not going to affect the United States because their typical reader was likely to feel that way. Or it could be that staff at red-state newspapers are somewhat more conservative than their blue-state counterparts and their politics have inadvertently started to seep into their editorial choices. It could also be that the red-state papers were more focused on other issues as the coronavirus was starting to spread, such as local economic development, which may seem like a more pressing issue in the Republican states than the Democratic ones. In order to explain the reasons for the results found by this study, follow-up research is needed with the reporters and editors involved to ask more questions about their work routines and attitudes with relation to COVID-19 news.

While this particular study has focused on speed, intensity, and volume of initial COVID-19 coverage by American newspapers, this research suggests there is further valuable qualitative work to do on this subject as well. Although the study did not focus deeply on the content of the early reports about the coronavirus outbreak, I could not help but notice that much of the early coverage was simply incorrect. Reports in both large and local newspapers were filled with misinformation and poor predictions about what was going to happen as the coronavirus spread across the globe. My initial pass through the content

suggests that journalists mostly got the story wrong because their sources got it wrong. For example, the incorrect information repeatedly communicated by the President of the United States, who made such inaccurate declarations during those early weeks as, “We have it under control. It's going to be just fine” (Belvedere, 2020) and that the virus would simply die out on its own “as the weather starts to warm & the virus hopefully becomes weaker, and then gone” (Trump, 2020). The content of the early COVID-19 coverage is ripe for further investigation, research which could help newspapers learn to wrangle with other complex global stories in the future. While the disappearance of local news is surely a slow-moving disaster for many reasons, this research suggests that disappearance of national and international stories from local newspapers has significant negative implications for its readers. It is important to remember that there are times like this one where international and national coverage actually has the potential to save lives.

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Tables

Table 1
Number of Coronavirus Stories
Control Group of Large National Newspapers
January & February 2020

Newspaper	First story date	Stories Jan. 7-31	Stories Feb. 1-15	Stories Feb. 16-29	Total Stories
<i>New York Times</i>	Jan. 7, 2020	71	135	183	389
<i>Washington Post</i>	Jan. 9, 2020	66	96	118	280
<i>Wall St. Journal</i>	Jan. 7, 2020	89	160	188	437
TOTALS		226	391	489	1,106

Table 2
Number of Coronavirus Stories
28 Local US Newspapers, Sorted Most to Least
With Independent/Small Chain Newspapers Shaded
January & February 2020

State	Newspaper	Stories Jan. 7-31	Stories Feb. 1-15	Stories Feb. 16-29	Total Stories
CA	<i>Whittier Daily News</i>	29	49	32	110
GA	<i>Griffin Daily News</i>	12	18	40	70
SC	<i>The State</i> (Columbia)	25	12	26	63
HI	<i>Honolulu Star-Advertiser</i>	6	20	29	55
OK	<i>Journal Record</i> (Oklahoma City)	10	18	19	47
VA	<i>Daily Press</i> (Newport News)	5	15	14	34
ID	<i>Lewiston Tribune</i>	2	12	11	25
FL	<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	5	10	9	24
IN	<i>Tribune-Star</i> (Terre Haute)	5	5	13	23
CT	<i>New Haven Register</i>	9	3	10	22
DE	<i>The News Journal</i> (Wilmington)	4	8	5	17
WA	<i>Yakima Herald-Republic</i>	5	5	5	15
TX	<i>Denton Record-Chronicle</i>	1	4	9	14
NY	<i>The Journal News</i> (White Plains)	2	2	8	12
TN	<i>The Tennessean</i> (Nashville)	2	3	6	11
OR	<i>East Oregonian</i> (Pendleton)	5	2	3	10
UT	<i>Standard-Examiner</i> (Ogden)	0	6	4	10
IL	<i>News-Gazette</i> (Champaign)	6	1	2	9
MO	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	1	2	6	9
ND	<i>Bismarck Tribune</i>	0	4	3	7
NV	<i>Reno Gazette-Journal</i>	2	2	3	7
NJ	<i>The Trentonian</i>	1	1	4	6
WY	<i>Wyoming Tribune-Eagle</i> (Cheyenne)	1	2	2	5
AK	<i>Baxter Bulletin</i> (Mountain Home)	0	1	1	2
MS	<i>Hattiesburg American</i>	0	1	1	2
NM	<i>Taos News</i>	0	1	1	2
RI	<i>Woonsocket Call</i>	0	0	0	0
SD	<i>Black Hills Pioneer</i> (Spearfish)	0	0	0	0
	TOTALS	138	207	266	611

Table 3
Number of Coronavirus Stories
28 Local US Newspapers, By Ownership Group
January & February 2020

State	Newspaper	Total Stories	Ownership
	LARGE-CHAIN NEWSPAPERS:		
AK	<i>Baxter Bulletin</i> (Mountain Home)	2	Gannett
CA	<i>Whittier Daily News</i>	110	MNG Enterprises
CT	<i>New Haven Register</i>	22	Tribune
DE	<i>The News Journal</i> (Wilmington)	17	Gannett
FL	<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	24	Tribune
GA	<i>Griffin Daily News</i>	70	Paxton
IN	<i>Tribune-Star</i> (Terre Haute)	23	CNHI
IL	<i>News-Gazette</i> (Champaign)	9	Community Media Group
MO	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	9	Lee BMH
MS	<i>Hattiesburg American</i>	2	Gannett
ND	<i>Bismarck Tribune</i>	7	Lee BMH
NJ	<i>The Trentonian</i>	6	MNG Enterprises
NV	<i>Reno Gazette-Journal</i>	7	Gannett
NY	<i>The Journal News</i> (White Plains)	12	Gannett
OK	<i>Journal Record</i> (Oklahoma City)	47	BridgeTower Media
SC	<i>The State</i> (Columbia)	63	McClatchy
TN	<i>The Tennessean</i> (Nashville)	11	Gannett
UT	<i>Standard-Examiner</i> (Ogden)	10	Ogden Media
VA	<i>Daily Press</i> (Newport News)	34	Tribune
WY	<i>Wyoming Tribune-Eagle</i> (Cheyenne)	5	Adams Publishing Group
	AVERAGE:	24.50	
	INDEPENDENT/SMALL-COMPANY NEWSPAPERS		
HI	<i>Honolulu Star-Advertiser</i>	55	Oahu Publications
ID	<i>Lewiston Tribune</i>	25	TPC Holdings
NM	<i>Taos News</i>	2	Taos News
OR	<i>East Oregonian</i> (Pendleton)	10	EO Media Group
RI	<i>Woonsocket Call</i>	0	Rhode Island Suburban Newspapers
SD	<i>Black Hills Pioneer</i> (Spearfish)	0	Seaton Publishing Company
TX	<i>Denton Record-Chronicle</i>	14	Denton Media Company
WA	<i>Yakima Herald-Republic</i>	15	Seattle Times Company
	AVERAGE:	15.13	

Table 4
Number of Coronavirus Stories
28 Local US Newspapers, By Blue/Red State Designation
With Independent/Small Chain Newspapers Shaded
January & February 2020

State	Newspaper	Total Stories
	RED-STATE NEWSPAPERS:	
AK	<i>Baxter Bulletin</i> (Mountain Home)	2
FL	<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	24
GA	<i>Griffin Daily News</i>	70
ID	<i>Lewiston Tribune</i>	25
IN	<i>Tribune-Star</i> (Terre Haute)	23
MS	<i>Hattiesburg American</i>	2
MO	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	9
ND	<i>Bismarck Tribune</i>	7
OK	<i>Journal Record</i> (Oklahoma City)	47
SC	<i>The State</i> (Columbia)	63
SD	<i>Black Hills Pioneer</i> (Spearfish)	0
TN	<i>The Tennessean</i> (Nashville)	11
TX	<i>Denton Record-Chronicle</i>	14
UT	<i>Standard-Examiner</i> (Ogden)	10
WY	<i>Wyoming Tribune-Eagle</i> (Cheyenne)	5
	AVERAGE STORIES PER PAPER:	20.80
	BLUE-STATE NEWSPAPERS:	
CA	<i>Whittier Daily News</i>	110
CT	<i>New Haven Register</i>	22
DE	<i>The News Journal</i> (Wilmington)	17
HI	<i>Honolulu Star-Advertiser</i>	55
IL	<i>News-Gazette</i> (Champaign)	9
NV	<i>Reno Gazette-Journal</i>	7
NJ	<i>The Trentonian</i>	6
NM	<i>Taos News</i>	2
NY	<i>The Journal News</i> (White Plains)	12
OR	<i>East Oregonian</i> (Pendleton)	10
RI	<i>Woonsocket Call</i>	0
VA	<i>Daily Press</i> (Newport News)	34
WA	<i>Yakima Herald-Republic</i>	15
	AVERAGE STORIES PER PAPER:	23.00

Table 5
First Dates for Coronavirus Coverage
In Chronological Order
28 Local US Newspapers
With Independent/Small Chain Newspapers Shaded
January - March 2020

State	Newspaper	Red or Blue State	Date of First Coronavirus Story, any source	Date of First Coronavirus Story, original to paper
CA	<i>Whittier Daily News</i>	Blue	17-Jan	24-Jan
SC	<i>The State</i> (Columbia)	Red	17-Jan	28-Jan
FL	<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	Red	18-Jan	25-Jan
VA	<i>Daily Press</i> (Newport News)	Blue	18-Jan	28-Jan
GA	<i>Griffin Daily News</i>	Red	21-Jan	4-Mar
IL	<i>News-Gazette</i> (Champaign)	Blue	21-Jan	21-Jan
OK	<i>Journal Record</i> (Oklahoma City)	Red	21-Jan	10-Feb
WA	<i>Yakima Herald-Republic</i>	Blue	21-Jan	29-Jan
HI	<i>Honolulu Star-Advertiser</i>	Blue	22-Jan	22-Jan
ID	<i>Lewiston Tribune</i>	Red	22-Jan	15-Feb
OR	<i>East Oregonian</i> (Pendleton)	Blue	22-Jan	31-Jan
CT	<i>New Haven Register</i>	Blue	25-Jan	25-Jan
NY	<i>The Journal News</i> (White Plains)	Blue	25-Jan	25-Jan
TN	<i>The Tennessean</i> (Nashville)	Red	25-Jan	25-Jan
WY	<i>Wyoming Tribune-Eagle</i> (Cheyenne)	Red	27-Jan	27-Jan
DE	<i>The News Journal</i> (Wilmington)	Blue	28-Jan	28-Jan
NJ	<i>The Trentonian</i>	Blue	28-Jan	28-Jan
TX	<i>Denton Record-Chronicle</i>	Red	28-Jan	28-Jan
IN	<i>Tribune-Star</i> (Terre Haute)	Red	30-Jan	31-Jan
NV	<i>Reno Gazette-Journal</i>	Blue	30-Jan	30-Jan
MO	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	Red	31-Jan	31-Jan
ND	<i>Bismarck Tribune</i>	Red	1-Feb	1-Feb
MS	<i>Hattiesburg American</i>	Red	2-Feb	2-Feb
UT	<i>Standard-Examiner</i> (Ogden)	Red	5-Feb	5-Feb
AK	<i>Baxter Bulletin</i> (Mountain Home)	Red	7-Feb	7-Feb
NM	<i>Taos News</i>	Blue	10-Feb	10-Feb
RI	<i>Woonsocket Call</i>	Blue	2-Mar	2-Mar
SD	<i>Black Hills Pioneer</i> (Spearfish)	Red	7-Mar	7-Mar
	AVERAGE:		28-Jan	3-Feb

Table 6
First Dates for Suggestion of a Pandemic
In Chronological Order
With Independent/Small Chain Newspapers Shaded
28 Local US Newspapers
January - March 2020

State	Newspaper	Date of First Story, indicating a pandemic was possible
FL	<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	26-Jan
CA	<i>Whittier Daily News</i>	29-Jan
HI	Honolulu Star-Advertiser	4-Feb
SC	<i>The State</i> (Columbia)	4-Feb
TX	<i>Denton Record-Chronicle</i>	6-Feb
AK	<i>Baxter Bulletin</i> (Mountain Home)	7-Feb
ID	<i>Lewiston Tribune</i>	7-Feb
NY	<i>The Journal News</i> (White Plains)	7-Feb
UT	<i>Standard-Examiner</i> (Ogden)	8-Feb
OK	<i>Journal Record</i> (Oklahoma City)	11-Feb
DE	<i>The News Journal</i> (Wilmington)	23-Feb
VA	<i>Daily Press</i> (Newport News)	23-Feb
MO	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	24-Feb
NJ	<i>The Trentonian</i>	25-Feb
CT	<i>New Haven Register</i>	26-Feb
GA	<i>Griffin Daily News</i>	26-Feb
IN	<i>Tribune-Star</i> (Terre Haute)	26-Feb
NV	<i>Reno Gazette-Journal</i>	27-Feb
ND	<i>Bismarck Tribune</i>	28-Feb
OR	<i>East Oregonian</i> (Pendleton)	28-Feb
WA	<i>Yakima Herald-Republic</i>	29-Feb
MS	<i>Hattiesburg American</i>	1-Mar
TN	<i>The Tennessean</i> (Nashville)	1-Mar
WY	<i>Wyoming Tribune-Eagle</i> (Cheyenne)	1-Mar
IL	<i>News-Gazette</i> (Champaign)	4-Mar
NM	<i>Taos News</i>	10-Mar
RI	<i>Woonsocket Call</i>	12-Mar
SD	<i>Black Hills Pioneer</i> (Spearfish)	12-Mar
	AVERAGE:	21-Feb

Table 7
First Dates for Suggestion of a Pandemic
28 Local US Newspapers, By Blue/Red State Designation
With Independent/Small Chain Newspapers Shaded
January - March 2020

State	Newspaper	Total Stories
	RED-STATE NEWSPAPERS:	
FL	<i>Orlando Sentinel</i>	26-Jan
SC	<i>The State</i> (Columbia)	4-Feb
TX	<i>Denton Record-Chronicle</i>	6-Feb
AK	<i>Baxter Bulletin</i> (Mountain Home)	7-Feb
ID	<i>Lewiston Tribune</i>	7-Feb
UT	<i>Standard-Examiner</i> (Ogden)	8-Feb
OK	<i>Journal Record</i> (Oklahoma City)	11-Feb
MO	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	24-Feb
GA	<i>Griffin Daily News</i>	26-Feb
IN	<i>Tribune-Star</i> (Terre Haute)	26-Feb
ND	<i>Bismarck Tribune</i>	28-Feb
MS	<i>Hattiesburg American</i>	1-Mar
TN	<i>The Tennessean</i> (Nashville)	1-Mar
WY	<i>Wyoming Tribune-Eagle</i> (Cheyenne)	1-Mar
SD	<i>Black Hills Pioneer</i> (Spearfish)	12-Mar
	AVERAGE DATE:	Feb. 18
	BLUE-STATE NEWSPAPERS:	
CA	<i>Whittier Daily News</i>	29-Jan
HI	Honolulu Star-Advertiser	4-Feb
NY	<i>The Journal News</i> (White Plains)	7-Feb
DE	<i>The News Journal</i> (Wilmington)	23-Feb
VA	<i>Daily Press</i> (Newport News)	23-Feb
NJ	<i>The Trentonian</i>	25-Feb
CT	<i>New Haven Register</i>	26-Feb
NV	<i>Reno Gazette-Journal</i>	27-Feb
OR	<i>East Oregonian</i> (Pendleton)	28-Feb
WA	<i>Yakima Herald-Republic</i>	29-Feb
IL	<i>News-Gazette</i> (Champaign)	4-Mar
NM	<i>Taos News</i>	10-Mar
RI	<i>Woonsocket Call</i>	12-Mar
	AVERAGE DATE:	Feb. 24