



PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

How News Happens: A Study of the News Ecosystem of One American City

Where does the news come from in today's changing media?

Who really reports the news that most people get about their communities? What role do new media, blogs and specialty news sites now play?

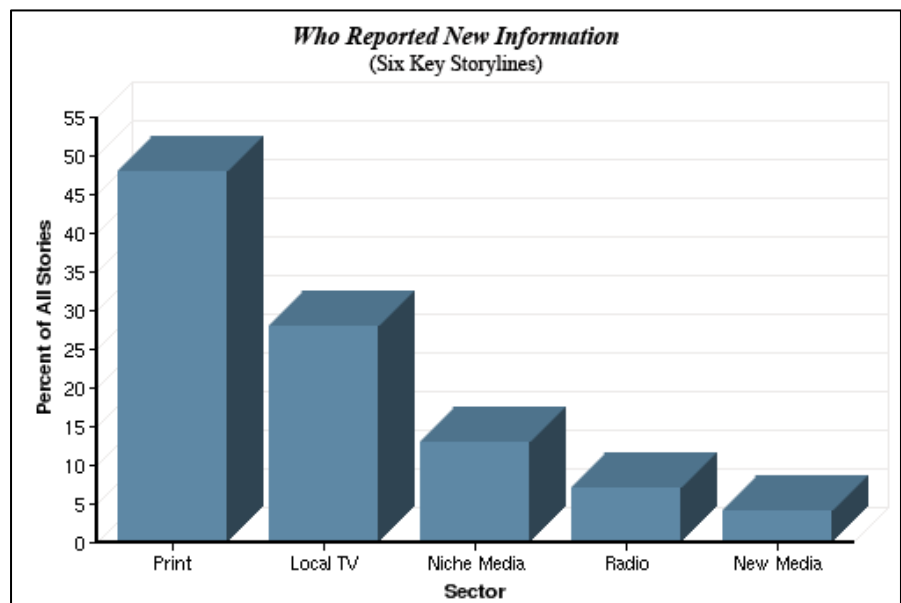
How, in other words, does the modern news “ecosystem” of a large American city work? And if newspapers were to die—to the extent that we can infer from the current landscape—what would that imply for what citizens would know and not know about where they live?

The questions are becoming increasingly urgent. As the economic model that has subsidized professional journalism collapses, the number of people gathering news in traditional television,

print and radio organizations is shrinking markedly. What, if anything, is taking up that slack?

The answers are a moving target; even trying to figure out how to answer them is a challenge. But a new study by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, which takes a close look at the news ecosystem of one city suggests that while the news landscape has rapidly expanded, most of what the public learns is still overwhelmingly driven by traditional media—particularly newspapers.

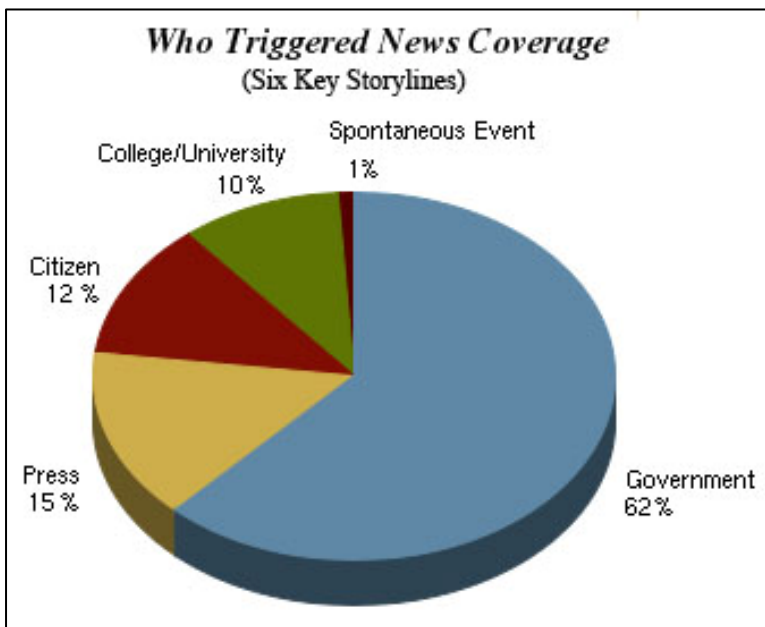
The study, which examined all the outlets that produced local news in Baltimore, Md., for one week, surveyed their output and then did a closer examination of six major narratives during the week, finds that much of the “news” people receive contains no original reporting. Fully eight out of ten stories studied simply repeated or repackaged previously published information.



And of the stories that did contain new information nearly all, 95%, came from traditional media—most of them newspapers. These stories then tended to set the narrative agenda for most other media outlets.

The local papers, however, are also offering less than they once did. For all of 2009, for instance, the Sun produced 32% fewer stories on any subject than it did in 1999, and 73% fewer stories than in 1991, when the company still published an evening and morning paper with competing newsrooms.¹ And a comparison of one major story during the week studied—about state budget cuts—found newspapers in the area produced only one-third as many stories in 2009 as they did the last time the state made a similar round of budget cuts in 1991, and the Baltimore Sun one seventh as many. Yet the numbers suggest the addition of new media has not come close to making up the difference.

Indeed the expanding universe of new media, including blogs, Twitter and local websites—at least in Baltimore—played only a limited role: mainly an alert system and a way to disseminate stories from other places.



New technology was more prevalent as a way for media—both traditional and new—to break news more quickly. The Web is now clearly the first place of publication.

And this faster dissemination of news was tied to three other trends. As news is posted faster, often with little enterprise reporting added, the official version of events is becoming more important. We found official press releases often appear word

for word in first accounts of events, though often not noted as such.

In the growing echo chamber online, formal procedures for citing and crediting can get lost. We found numerous examples of websites carrying sections of other people's work without attribution and often suggesting original reporting was added when none was. We found elements of this in several major stories we traced.

¹ According to Factiva, the Sun produced 23,668 stories on all topics from January 1 through December 31, 2009 and 34,852 in the same time frame in 1999 and 86,667 in 1991.

And sometimes old stories that were already obsolete were posted or linked to after events had changed and the original news site had updated them.

These are some of the results of a close examination of the media covering Baltimore, MD, during the week of July 19-25, 2009.

Among the findings:

- The network of news media in Baltimore has already expanded remarkably. We identified 53 different news outlets that regularly produce some kind of local news content, a universe that ranges from blogs to talk radio to news sites created by former journalists. These are multi-platform operations that also make robust use of Twitter as a way means of dissemination. Twelve of those outlets did not produce any local content during the days studied.²
- Among the six major news threads studied in depth—which included stories about budgets, crime, a plan involving transit busses, and the sale of a local theater—fully 83% of stories were essentially repetitive, conveying no new information. Of the 17% that did contain new information, nearly all came from traditional media either in their legacy platforms or in new digital ones.
- General interest newspapers like the Baltimore Sun produced half of these stories—48%—and another print medium, specialty newspapers focused on business and law, produced another 13%.
- Local television stations and their websites accounted for about a third (28%) of the enterprise reporting on the major stories of the week; radio accounted for 7%, all from material posted on radio station websites. The remaining nine new media outlets accounted for just 4% of the enterprise reporting we encountered.
- Traditional media made wide use of new platforms. Newspapers, TV and radio produced nearly a third of their stories on new platforms (31%), though that number varied by sector. Almost half of the newspapers stories studied were online rather than in print.
- There were two cases of new media breaking information about stories. One came from the police Twitter feed in Baltimore, an example of a news maker breaking news directly to the public rather than through the press. Another was a story noticed by a local blog, that the mainstream press nearly missed entirely, involving a plan by the state to put listening devices on buses to deter crime. A newspaper reporter noticed the blog and then reported on the story, which led the state to rescind the plan.

² Three days of content was analyzed for the study. This included content from July 20, 22 and 24, 2009.

- As the press scales back on original reporting and dissemination, reproducing other people’s work becomes a bigger part of the news media system. Government, at least in this study, initiates most of the news. In the detailed examination of six major storylines, 63% of the stories were initiated by government officials, led first of all by the police. Another 14% came from the press. Interest group figures made up most of the rest.

About the Study

The study examined the news produced by every local news operation we could identify in the city—from radio talk shows, to blogs, specialized new outlets, new media sites, TV stations, radio news programs, newspapers and their various legacy media websites. We identified 53 outlets that regularly produce some kind of local news content. We tracked every piece of content these outlets produced for three days during the target week.³

Then PEJ did a deeper, secondary analysis of six major story threads during the target week, charting the course of the story, where it started and how it grew, story to story, minute-by-minute. The six narratives were selected from among the biggest of the week to reflect a range of different kinds of stories, from breaking news about crime, to state government budget cuts to stories that clearly involved the use of new media. PEJ identified which stories contained new information or added new angles and which sources and people drove the narrative. And Twitter feeds about the news were tracked as well, to see who was using that technology to communicate. That analysis identified 10 additional outlets that passed information along and 15 outlets that offered Twitter updates on the major storylines of the week.

Those six major storylines are provided as detailed chapter narratives of their own in this study, allowing a reader to examine exactly how each story broke, the flow of each narrative through the course of the week, and the lessons it revealed about the news system in the city.

The six storylines included:

- The release of the governor’s plan to cut the state budget
- An announcement that a local university would help develop the swine flu vaccine
- A short-lived plan to put listening devices on buses
- The sale of a historic local movie house
- A shooting of police officers
- A combination of six different events that all concerned juvenile justice in the city

This study is only one attempt at trying to understand who is producing news and the character of what is produced. Additional reports could tell more. But this snapshot was in many ways a typical week—marked by stories about police shootings, state budget

³ Early evening local TV newscasts were recorded and analyzed. For WMAR, WJZ and WBAL, we examined the 6 p.m. newscast. WBFF, the Fox affiliate, does not air news at 6 p.m., so we examined its 5:30 p.m. newscast.

cuts, swine flu, a big international soccer game in town and a mix of fires, accidents, traffic and weather.

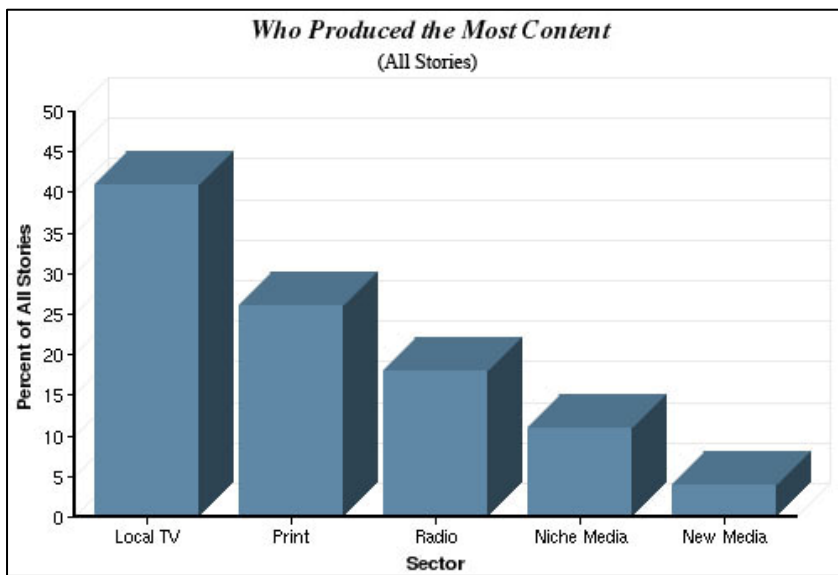
The array of local outlets within this snapshot is already substantial, and as times goes on, new media, specialized outlets and local bloggers are almost certain to grow in number and expand their capacity, particularly if the Sun and other legacy media continue to shrink. New outlets such as local news aggregators, who combine this increasingly mixed universe into one online destination, have cropped up in some other cities such as San Diego. There is a good deal of innovation going on around the country, much of it exciting and promising. But as of 2009, this is what the news looks like in one American city.

The Ecosystem

Of the more than four dozen outlets identified as producing original content about local events in Baltimore, there are four local TV stations, all with their own websites. There are five general interest newspapers: the Baltimore Sun, City Paper, Towson Times, the Washington Post and the Baltimore Times, which focused on African American culture, as well as two long-standing specialized papers—the Daily Record and the Baltimore Business Journal. There are also four general interest websites in town, from the Investigativevoice.com, a local watchdog reporting website started by former Baltimore Examiner employees, to BaltimoreBrew.com, a local news website produced mostly by former Baltimore Sun staffers. There are five local blogs, two of which focus on crime, one called Inside Charm City, a hyperlocal general interest blog produced by a single person. And there are more than 30 that exist inside the universe of the Baltimore Sun newspaper website.

Among more than three dozen radio stations operating in the Baltimore area, just a handful broadcast local news or talk. Those were identified on two commercial stations,

WBAL and WCBM, and two public radio stations, WEA and WYPR.⁴



That first level analysis found that, over those three days, these media produced 715 different stories about local events in the city. Those stories came from 41 different outlets. Twelve outlets produced nothing.

⁴ A third commercial station, WJZ, could not be captured by PEJ.

Local TV newsrooms produced more content than any other sector, an average of 73 stories per station (a total of 291 stories either in broadcast or on their websites out of the three day sample of 715). That was followed closely by newspapers. The five papers studied produced 186 stories during these three days, or 37 per outlet.

Yet the quantity of stories produced does not tell everything about their nature.

Some media were more locally focused than others. The media sector that devoted the greatest level of its coverage to local events was TV news. Fully 64% of the stories on the local 6 p.m. TV newscasts were about local matters.⁵ By comparison, 53% of stories studied in Baltimore area newspapers were local. In talk radio, the majority of the segments were about national or non-local events (52%).

The new media content in new media, on the other hand, was highly local and mostly locally produced, though, as we will see, it was often brief and derivative of other news accounts. More than eight out of ten of the postings or stories (85%) were locally focused.

The level of original work also varied. Eight out of ten newspaper stories (80%) were straight news accounts written by local staffers.

	Total%	Local TV	Print	Radio	Niche	New Media
Crime	16%	23%	17%	7%	0%	16%
Government	15	12	15	19	16	20
Business	10	3	11	7	35	10
Health/Med	8	11	7	8	3	8
Accidents	8	13	3	5	1	8
Courts	6	4	5	4	17	6
Education	6	5	11	1	4	6
Economy	4	3	4	4	12	4
Transportation	4	1	8	5	1	4
Misc.	5	5	3	12	0	5
Lifestyle	3	1	3	7	0	3
Environment	2	1	3	1	3	2
Science	2	2	2	2	0	2
Weather/Traffic/Sports	5	11	0	4	0	5
Other*	6	5	8	14	8	1

*Other includes stories on race, gender, politics, entertainment, media, charity and defense.

In television, there was also less original content from staff reporters. Roughly a third the stories, 34%, were edited packages featuring correspondents doing the reporting (the TV equivalent of an original staff written story), and another 13% were anchors narrating a

⁵ This analysis examined the early evening newscasts of ABC affiliate WMAR, CBS affiliate WJZ, NBC affiliate WBAL and Fox affiliate WBFF.

taped package that did not feature a correspondent from the field. But more than a third 36% were “anchor reads” and “tell stories,” often material from wire services.

In radio there was little of what would be considered reporting. Roughly half the segments were anchors doing monologues, and 38% of the segments involved the host interviewing a guest or a caller. There was no original reporting found, either in talk radio or in the news inserts and radio headlines that were produced during the periods studied (during the 7 a.m. drive time hour).

Looking at the topics covered, too, the news agendas of these outlets were strikingly different. The world one encounters differs dramatically depending on where one seeks his or her information.

On local television, for instance, fully 23% of stories studied were about crime, twice as many as other subject.⁶ In newspapers (online and print) coverage of crime was almost matched by that of government and closely followed by business and education. On radio in Baltimore, by contrast, government was the No. 1 topic. New media was most often focused on government.

To go deeper, however, to see how the ecosystem moved, how information traveled from one sector to another, who initiated the news and who was first to transmit and frame the narratives that the rest of the media followed, the study also took a look at six of the major stories of the week more closely.

Six Major Storylines

1. The proposal by Governor Martin O’Malley to cut \$300 million from the state budget, or about 40% of the total cuts he sought to make from the state’s \$14 billion budget.
 - 69 stories appeared across all the outlets studied during the week, only six of which came from new niche media. The Sun produced six in print (and six more online), but that was a fraction of the 49 it produced during a comparable week in covering the 1991 budget cuts.
 - Fully 71% of all the stories were triggered by the governor’s statements. Just 7% were the result of press enterprise.
2. A shooting incident in which a 34-year-old Baltimore man, apparently high on the drug Ecstasy, terrorized two former female companions and then shot two city police while being wounded and apprehended himself.

⁶ Add accidents (another 13%), and more than a third of all the coverage related to public safety—numbers that track closely with research on local TV that PEJ has produced over the years. And if one looked at the stories that led the newscasts, crime and accidents made up roughly six out of ten stories (58%). That number, incidentally, is also identical to that we found in a five-year study of more than 33,000 stories in local TV news examining 150 stations around the country. “We Interrupt This Newscast: How to Improve Local News and Win Ratings, Too.” Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 33.

- Despite at least five separate crime-oriented blogs in Baltimore, nearly all of the information on this story came from the Sun or local television. Aside from brief mentions on two of the blogs, the niche-crime outlets were silent.
- The mainstream press and the police department used Twitter extensively to update information.

3. The announcement that the University of Maryland, Baltimore had been selected as one of eight sites nationwide that would test the new H1N1 vaccine for the National Institutes of Health.

- Media enterprise was all but absent in covering this development tied to a larger national and world event. Nearly all of the reporting came from the initial university news release and the press conference held on campus.

4. The auction of the historic Senator Theater, an old movie house in north Baltimore that continued to fight for survival while defaulting on its loans.

- The press largely missed the story. Of the 15 identified stories that ran before the auction, only three raised the possibility of what ended up happening.

5. A plan by the Maryland Transit Administration to put listening devices on buses died a sudden and conclusive death once the press discovered it.

- The death in this case revealed the power and influence that the mainstream press still holds. The story was first reported by an online niche website but went unnoticed for days until a Baltimore Sun reporter picked it up. Then, within hours, MTA killed the plan.
- Then in the echo chamber of the Web, the broadest distribution of MTA's plans came after the agency had already killed it. Ten of the 14 local stories (and another 12 reports outside of Baltimore) "revealed" the plan as a possibility being considered after it was already dead.

6. A series of different events intertwined and formed the biggest narrative of the week—framed by an investigation by the local newspaper—involving how the state and the city approached juvenile justice and incarceration.

- There were 78 published pieces on juvenile justice during the week. Of those, 68 came from traditional media outlets. And two news outlets – the Baltimore Sun and NBC Affiliate WBAL-TV—did almost all of the reporting. Others mostly picked up and reproduced their work.

Maryland Governor Announces Budget Cuts

On Monday, July 20, over dinner with legislators at his mansion, Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley revealed how he proposed to cut nearly \$300 million from the state budget.

The next day, O'Malley provided details to the press, and on Thursday invited the public to make comments and suggestions about the cuts on a new website.

The budget would prove the biggest story in the Baltimore media this week.

Lessons from Coverage

- *Traditional Outlets Drove the Coverage.* O’Malley’s cuts were the biggest story of the week, but only in the mainstream media. Just four news websites not tied to the mainstream press mentioned the cuts at all.
- *Enterprise Reporting was hard to find.* Reporters conveyed the general outline of O’Malley’s cuts, but most of those details came directly from the Governor’s office and relied on the same handful of sources. Few outlets approached the story with a fresh angle.
- *Immediacy and the Web.* Mainstream outlets took advantage of the immediacy of the Web, usually posting reports to their websites first and their legacy platform second. Beyond that, though, the Web and new media played little role in broadening the reporting or the discussion. Indeed, no local blogs studied published any content related to the reductions, though one mentioned them on Twitter.

Traditional outlets provided most of the coverage and most new information

On Monday, July 20, the Baltimore Sun published an editorial that offered suggestions for ways Maryland could trim its budget. The paper was already too late.

That evening, at dinner with legislators, O’Malley outlined his proposed cuts. By 8:51 p.m. Washington Post reporters posted a story about the dinner and the planned cuts on Washingtonpost.com.

The next morning, the Baltimore Sun online and in print included some new information.

- The cuts would focus on state agencies and target health care and higher education.
- Senate President Mike Miller and House Speaker Michael Busch were quoted on the record saying furloughs might be needed in a future round of cuts.

NBC affiliate WBAL soon posted a story on its website citing the Sun’s report for its information.

At 1:30 p.m. the governor made himself available to the press for questions. Once he had explained himself on camera, the story gained momentum.

Budget Stories with Significant New Information	
Newspaper	
SUN	6
Washington Post	2
Citypaper.com	1
Television/Radio	
WMAR	1
WBFF	0
Maryland Public Television	0
WCMB	0
WBAL	1
WJZ	3
Online Only or Niche	
Daily Record	1
Bizjournal.com	1
Examiner.com	0
Total	16

By week’s end, 69 stories would appear in the Baltimore media ecosystem about the plans to cut the budget. Six would come from niche news outlets—two business papers and the alternative paper in town. Another 42 would come from television stations (across online, radio and TV platforms), half (21) from a single station, NBC affiliate WBAL. The local metropolitan newspaper, the Sun, would produce 12 stories (six in print and six online); the nearby Washington Post would produce five (both print and online).

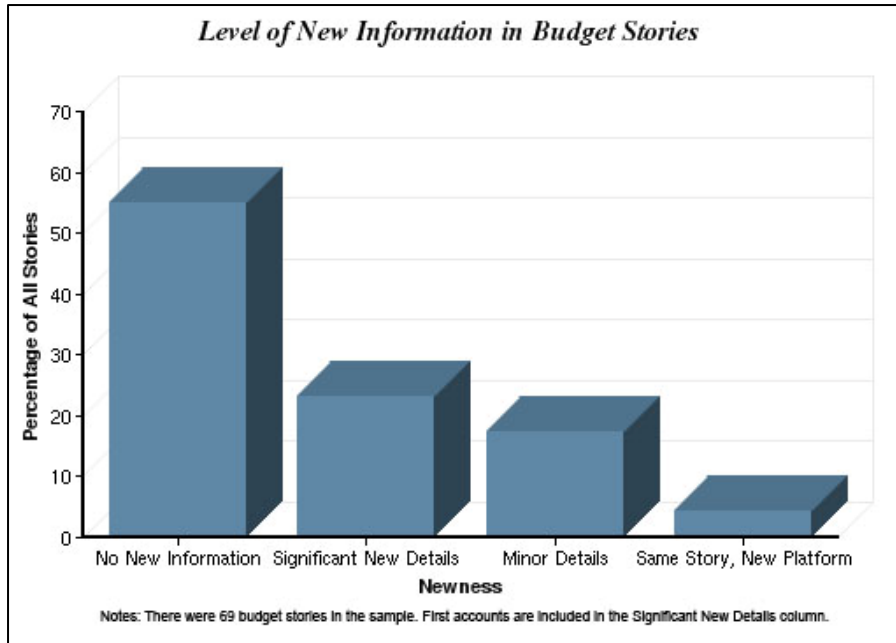
However, just 16 of these 69 stories, 23%, would include significant new information.⁷ Almost all of these came from older or more traditional news operations—eight from the Sun or the Post, one from ABC affiliate WMAR, one from NBC affiliate WBAL, three from CBS affiliate WJZ and three from the websites of niche print publications.

Following the governor’s briefing Tuesday afternoon, the website of the Baltimore Business Journal, a niche news outlet focusing on business news in Baltimore, was first with specifics of the plan—where the cuts will occur, the savings, and that K-12 education would be spared. “[We] are doing everything in our power not to have massive layoffs,” O’Malley was quoted as saying.

Budget Stories by Outlet	
Newspaper	
Sun	12
Washington Post	5
Citypaper.com	1
Television/Radio	
WBAL	21
WJZ	7
WMAR	7
WBFF	4
Maryland Public Television	3
WCMB	2
Online Only or Niche	
Daily Record	3
Bizjournal.com	2
Examiner.com	2
Total	69

That evening all four local affiliate stations did stories, mostly with video from the press briefing. Two stations, ABC affiliate WMAR and CBS affiliate WJZ, offered new details beyond that.

In addition, there were five separate tweets about the cuts. The Baltimore blog Inside Charm City posted two, the first highlighting cuts in tuition assistance to national guardsmen and directing people to the governor’s Twitter page; the second linking to an O’Malley interview on MSNBC from earlier that day that was not directly



⁷ Two of these stories were those that first broke details of the plan. The other 14 were those that added significant new details along the way.

about his plans. WJZ, WBAL and Fox Baltimore tweeted with links to their budget stories from TV.

The next morning the Sun published two long reports, each with new angles. The first featured reactions from executive director of MedChi, the state medical society, and University System of Maryland Chancellor William Kirwan and looked back at O'Malley's past fiscal actions.

The second was an editorial that put the budget challenges in context, suggesting that the governor had found some cuts that wouldn't impact residents—like slicing lottery advertising—but the other cuts would hit them hard. “The standard he (O'Malley) has set for himself, and it's a good one, is to manage the cuts in such a way that Maryland will be poised to recover more quickly from the recession than its peers. On that score, he makes some good decisions and some bad ones.”

Wednesday morning the Board of Public Works unanimously approved the governor's proposal, after which 22 more stories appeared that day across six different mainstream media outlets and two niche publications. Most simply reported the plan's approval, recapping details of the cuts from Tuesday.

Two exceptions stood out. WMAR-TV interviewed Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon about how the cuts would affect the city. The Washington Post, in print and online, reported that O'Malley was “harshly criticized afterward by Republicans for not acting more boldly.” House Minority Leader Anthony O'Donnell said, “We are in dire financial straits, and the governor continues to fail to act.”

Two niche business publications, the Daily Record and the Baltimore Business Journal, weighed in. The Daily Record offered new details, including comments from the state director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees that O'Malley “should look to streamline personnel systems or reduce the amount of independent contractors it uses, rather than cutting staff.”

The third day, Thursday, July 23, 16 more stories appeared. By now the narrative had shifted mostly to a single angle—how the cuts would affect higher education, in particular the possibility of a tuition hike—after the announcement that the University of Maryland Board of Regents would hold an emergency meeting to determine how to handle the \$40 million cut.

One outlet, the Washington Post, explored a different angle, and it was purely political. The piece online and in print discussed how O'Malley's plan could impact his re-election bid for 2010 and how his relationships with key special interest groups who will all be affected by his cuts—such as labor unions, environmentalists and educators—could play a role.

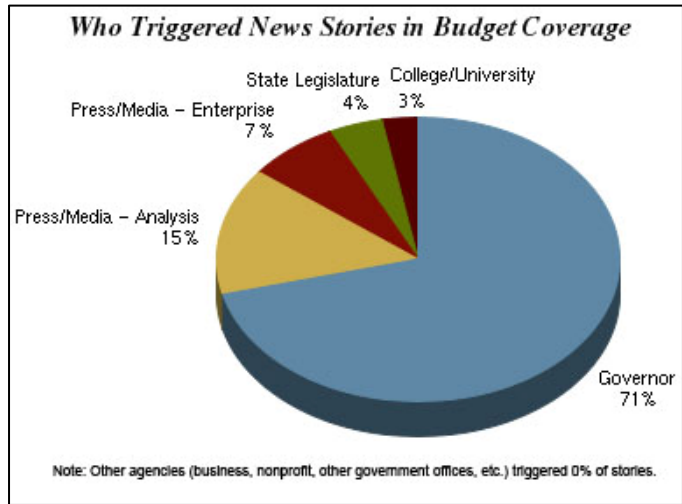
On Friday, July 24, 11 more stories about the cuts appeared in five traditional media outlets and the website of the alternative newspaper in town, Baltimore City Paper. Six

focused primarily on the governor’s online suggestion box. The Baltimore City Paper and the Baltimore Sun both tweeted about it.

And by Saturday coverage dropped off dramatically. We captured just one more piece, a Baltimore Sun story about how the cuts would impact the Chesapeake Bay.

Enterprise played small role in O’Malley coverage

The governor initiated most of the budget coverage. Fully 71% of all the stories were triggered by statements from O’Malley—his legislative dinner, press briefing or the public meeting where the cuts were approved. Press commentary triggered another 15% of stories. Only 7% of budget stories were the result of any press enterprise, exploring implications of the cuts or angles on the media’s own volition.



There were a few notable exceptions. Timothy Wheeler’s July 25 Baltimore Sun article discussed the implications of O’Malley’s reductions on the state’s efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay and included detailed statistics about funding for the Bay’s restoration and interviews with several experts.

Most Influential News Maker in Each Budget Story*	
Person	Stories
O'Malley, Martin	35
No cited Person	10
Colmers, John	3
Gladden, Lisa	3
Kirwan, William	3
Miller, Mike	3
Gonzales, Patrick	2
Hogan, P.J.	2
Kopp, Nancy	2
Dixon, Sheila	1
Griffin, John	1
Kurt (caller)	1
Roy (caller)	1
Steven (caller)	1
Terry (caller)	1

*This table reflects the most influential voice in the story. It does not include the total number of stories these sources in which these sources were cited.

Three broadcast reports also stood out for initiative. WJZ’s July 21 evening broadcast report interviewed three state workers who expressed concern but also a sense of resignation about the prospect of furloughs, and two days later WJZ interviewed University of Maryland students about the reductions.

On July 24, Maryland Public Television aired the only live conversation about the cuts with opposing points of view from original sources. In a point-counter point format, the show asked two legislators, Democrat Lisa Gladden and Republican Alex Moody, to share opinions on the underlying causes for the budget cuts. Moody claimed that the cuts were due to high levels of spending, especially on transportation. Gladden asserted that the cuts were inevitable because revenue fell short of expectations.

Generally however, when it came to sources, citizens heard from the same handful of people again and again.

Governor O’Malley was quoted in 40 different news articles and was the driving source in 35 of those. Other individuals quoted often were Public Works Board members Peter Franchot, who is the state’s comptroller, (13) and Nancy Kopp, the state treasurer, (10); State Director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Patrick Moran (10); Chancellor of the University System of Maryland William Kirwan (8); and University System Vice Chancellor P.J. Hogan (6).

While the quotes differed from story to story, it was clear that most of the sound bytes came from the Wednesday board meeting. And there was little effort in seeking out alternative points of view or sources not directly related to the decision.

The one new aspect that radio provided was soliciting direct opinion (usually critical) from Maryland residents through call-in portions of the shows. Of the programs captured for this study, all three of the radio talk shows that mentioned the cuts—Shari Elliker, C4 and the Ron Smith Show—were broadcast on one station, WBAL.

With a full dose of sarcasm, Bruce Elliot, a guest host on the July 22 C4 show, thought the cuts weren’t enough. “Found this buried in budget ... Draconian cuts in state workforce. State employs 80,000 people. He cut 39 jobs—58 ‘positions’ ... Boy the sacrifice the state workers are making is stunning, isn’t it?”

The role of the web

What role the web played in this story largely involved traditional media using a new platform to break stories quickly. Of 28 total online stories, 24 came from traditional outlets. None of the blogs identified by the study that deal with local affairs commented or reported on the governor’s reductions. The Baltimore Sun, Washington Post and Daily Record all posted stories online prior to the print versions.

Three web sites not tied to the mainstream press—bizjournal.com, citypaper.com and mddailyrecord.com—mentioned the cuts. The only citizen participation found was in interviews on local news and call-ins on radio talk shows.

Twitter

In a separate analysis of Twitter posts about O’Malley’s cuts, 16 tweets from seven different outlets appear from July 19 through July 25. Yet the same pattern emerged. Just two of the outlets were not part of a traditional news organization—Inside Charm City and Baltimore City Paper. And of the four Inside Charm City tweets, two simply re-ran earlier posts from other outlets—one from the Baltimore Sun. All others were posted by the twitter accounts of WJZ, WBAL, WBAL Radio, Fox Baltimore and the Baltimore Sun.

Tweets about Budget Cuts	
Outlet	Stories
Inside Charm City	4
Fox Baltimore	3
WBAL	3
WJZ	2
WBAL Radio	2
Baltimore City Paper	1
Sun	1
Total	16

A look back at budget cut coverage in 1991—more reporting; greater depth

The budget story also offered a window on how newspapers in Baltimore have changed, or more accurately, shrunk.

The last time significant budget cutting occurred in Maryland came during the tenure of Governor William Donald Schaefer in 1991. How did the coverage compare to 2009?

Overall, the 1991 cuts generated significantly more coverage in newspapers than did O’Malley’s cuts this year.

Schaefer announced his proposal to cut \$450 million in spending to balance the state budget on September 30, 1991. From that day through October 6, 1991 (the same number of days examined for this report), a total of 83 stories appeared in newspapers, more than triple the number in 2009.

Coverage of State Cuts: 1991 and 2009		
Newspaper	1991	2009
Baltimore Sun	49	7
Washington Post	12	4
Washington Times	12	--
Associated Press	6	6
Chicago Tribune	2	--
Orlando Sentinel	1	--
Los Angeles Times	1	--
The Capital (Annapolis)	--	3
The News Journal (Wilmington, Delaware)	--	2
The Washington Examiner	--	1
Targeted News Service	--	2
US State News	--	1
Total	83	26

The Baltimore Sun produced the most articles, 49, or 600% more than the seven published in the Sun newspaper in 2009; the Washington Post and the Washington Times (both with 12) followed.⁸ The Washington Post published three times more print stories in 1991 than in 2009. Papers in cities as far away as Orlando and Chicago also mentioned Schaefer’s reductions.

If newspaper-run websites are included in the comparison, Schaefer’s cuts still received nearly double the coverage of this year’s cuts (83 to 44 in 2009), though some of the web stories were repostings of the same stories as in print rather than different stories.

And to what extent has the expanded media ecosystem made up for the diminished level of coverage from print outlets? There were 73 budget stories produced by Maryland area papers in 1991 in the seven days following the governor’s announced cuts. There is no way of counting how many radio or television stories were also generated that week. But those 73 stories alone are more than the 69 produced by all outlets in 2009—and only 16 of these 69 budget stories contained new information. Though a precise comparison is impossible, a fair inference suggests there has been a substantial diminution in the amount of information the public was receiving.

There did seem to be greater controversy surrounding the 1991 proposed cuts, perhaps explaining some of the increased reporting. An October 2, 1991, AP story describes,

⁸ For this comparative analysis of with 1991 and 2009, Nexis databases were searched for all stories relevant to the 2009 budget cuts in any section of the paper. Baltimore Sun articles from 1991 are not available through Nexis/Lexis; the online Sun archive was used to find 1991 articles.

“State troopers, cheered on by a group of drug addicts, marched on the capitol Wednesday in an unsuccessful attempt to block approval of the governor's \$446.2 million budget reduction plan.”

A Washington Post story the same day told the story of Steve Proctor, a state trooper who was scheduled to lose his job three weeks prior to his wedding day. “Like many of the other 1,765 state government employees whose jobs have been ordered cut to save money, Proctor reacted yesterday with surprise and some bitterness, warning that virtually every Maryland resident may eventually feel the effects of his and the other layoffs,” Charles Babington writes in his article “A Storm of Reaction Swirls Around Md. Governor; Workers, Agencies Affected by Reductions Say All Residents Eventually Will Be Hurt.”

But the journalistic initiative went far beyond covering the controversy at hand. Enterprise stories ranged from reports that placed Maryland’s budget woes in context with other states to how troopers, the poor and arts programs will be affected by the reductions. The Baltimore Sun produced a variety of original reports in 1991, including “Budget Response Shows Difference between City and Suburb,” and “Suddenly Unemployed: Coping with the Shock and Stress of Layoff Becomes First Order of Business”. The Baltimore Sun also ran a series titled “Balancing Act” on how Carroll County government was coping with the budget.

There is other evidence, however, that the output of the papers is diminished. An examination of the Factiva database finds that the Sun overall produces far less than it did in 1991 the last time of major state budget cuts, or even 1999, a decade ago, to a degree that new media in that community can not yet come close to compensating for. For all of 2009, the Sun produced 23,668 stories. That is 32% fewer than it did for all of 1999, when it produced 34,852. And it is 73% fewer than in 1991, when the Baltimore Sun newsrooms produced 86,667 stories. The company at the time published both an evening and morning paper and operated competing newsrooms, another indication of the contraction in the resources that the Sun company is now able to deploy in covering the city.

Two Police Wounded In Shoot-Out

On Saturday morning, July 18, a 34-year-old Baltimore man named Shawn Sinclair shot and wounded two city police officers before being wounded and detained himself in a gunfight that culminated a wild, drug-infused morning of violence.

The incident provided a window into the way breaking violent crime stories, a staple of local media, are covered in the emerging digital era.

Lessons from the coverage

- *Twitter broke the story, but new media outlets otherwise had a limited role. A non-news outlet—the Baltimore Police Department Twitter feed—played an*

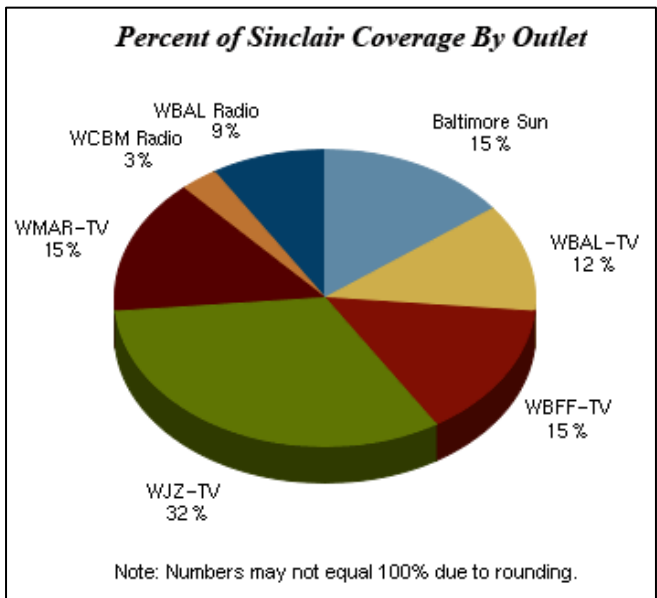
important role early on as the story unfolded. It was the mainstream news organizations, however, that provided the lion’s share of coverage and context. With few exceptions, new media outlets—including local crime blogs—were silent.

- *Traditional media drove the coverage using new platforms:* The internet was the primary platform for breaking the story and disseminating new information. In most cases, this reporting was done by traditional media outlets, who posted first and published or broadcast in their legacy platforms second.
- *TV defined news differently.* Broadcast television tended to emphasize the emotionally vivid aspects of the story. But in this case, the medium also added new angles to the unfolding narrative.

Twitter broke the story but new media outlets otherwise had a limited role

Except for early on, new and niche media played barely any role in the reporting of the Shawn Sinclair story. Despite the presence of at least five separate crime-oriented niche news outlets, the bulk of information came from the mainstream press—the Baltimore Sun and four local television news stations.

That Saturday, July 18, word of the police shooting was first reported on Twitter at 11:17 a.m. by Justin Fenton, on his Baltimore Sun Twitter feed.⁹ Twenty minutes later, the Baltimore Police Twitter account weighed in, releasing the fact that two officers had been



shot, not just one as Fenton had written.¹⁰ “OFFICERS SHOT: 2 Officers shot while taking suspect into custody. Officers condition stable, police working scene, will hv briefing later,” read the BPD feed at 11:37 a.m.

Fenton and the BPD would each tweet two times that day, mostly to update new information: “UPDATE POLICE INVOLVED SHOOTING: Officers have been stabilized by Shock Trauma physicians. Suspect in custody. Formal briefing later today,” read the BPD feed at 12:17 p.m.

⁹ July 18 falls before the sample period of July 19-25. Some content was analyzed from July 18, however, due to the fact that the main events of the story unfolded on that day.

¹⁰ @BaltimorePolice is followed by 4,136 users.¹⁰ Among its followers are local news organizations, including @FOXBaltimore, @wbaltv11, @wjznews, @baltimoresun and others. The department posted 13 tweets between July 19 and July 25, the sample time frame for PEJ’s analysis.

The press briefing, by Police Commissioner Frederick Bealefeld, was held Saturday afternoon outside of University of Maryland’s shock trauma center, where the officers and the suspect had been taken. Bealefeld addressed reporters, delivering the facts of the story. (After this first day, @BaltimorePolice did not tweet about the case again. Fenton would tweet three more times over the course of the week: linking to a Sun article, quipping about Bealefeld’s candor in the press briefing, and tallying the number of police shootings in the past three years.)

Outlets that Advanced the Sinclair Story	
Source	Stories*
SUN	3
WBAL-TV	3
WBFF-TV	1
WJZ-TV	6

* Includes stories that added significant new information or new details

Beyond these, as well as a brief mention of the shooting on the independent crime blog “Baltimore Crime” around 1 p.m., the rest of the coverage of the Sinclair story would come from mainstream outlets.

In all, PEJ found 34 news stories produced on the Sinclair case this week, all of them from mainstream news outlets. There would three brief mentions in blogs and 15 Twitter posts, three of them from the police, six from mainstream news outlets and six from Fenton, the Sun reporter, using his personal account.

Most of the news stories did not break news. Of those 34 news reports, 13 or 38%, contained new information that advanced the story, three from the Baltimore Sun, three from WBAL-TV and six from WJZ-TV, which claimed exclusive access to Sinclair’s family. The rest restated information already known, often stories from one platform replayed on another.

The first news reports came at 11:24 a.m., seven minutes following the Sun reporter’s initial Tweet through a post on wbaltv.com, the website of local TV station WBAL. It amounted to a few sentences adapted from an Associated Press story.

The first full accounting of the morning’s events appeared on baltimoresun.com at 8:37 p.m., about nine hours after the original wbaltv.com posting. The 920-word account by reporters Jill Rosen and Mary Gail Hare included context that had not yet appeared anywhere—background on Sinclair and the details of the suspect’s trail of mayhem: “The 34-year-old male suspect with a long arrest record, first forced himself into a home in the 3200 block of Lake Avenue in Northeast Baltimore, brandishing a handgun.” The Sun article also included historical context, such as the number of cop shootings on record in recent years, and cited the details of specific cases: “In January, an officer was shot twice in the face while trying to make an undercover drug purchase in Seton Hill. Dante Arthur, an eight-year veteran of the city police department, required reconstructive surgeries.”

At 8:58 p.m., 20 minutes later, wbaltv.com updated its earlier report. The story, containing contributions by the AP, did not provide as much detail as the earlier baltimoresun.com story.

None of the stories on the day of the incident named the shooter or the wounded officers.

Sunday, July 19, the day after the shootings, 10 stories appeared at different times in the legacy outlets and websites of the Baltimore Sun and local TV stations. (It is possible that the local stations aired broadcast stories as well. However, the study sample did not include weekend broadcasts.)

Only a few delivered new developments, almost all from mainstream outlets, though they came across different platforms. In print the Baltimore Sun updated the story posted online the night before, revealing that the seriously injured officer was “out of surgery Saturday night and is expected to survive.” WJZ.com, the website of another TV station in town, cited a witness to the arrest who accused police of beating the still unnamed suspect after he was in custody. WBAL-TV tweeted that the suspect had been involved in domestic disputes. And toward the end of the day, news organizations—including WJZ-TV and WBFF-TV—began reporting that the police had released Sinclair’s name.

On Monday, July 20, more news outlets filed or updated stories. Television stations aired packages on their evening broadcasts. WCBM Radio included the story in its morning headlines. And the story went from the front page of the Sun to the pages of its crime blog, written by reporter Peter Hermann.

The Sun’s morning print edition had the most complete account. It revealed the names of both the suspect and the wounded cops and delved into Sinclair’s rap sheet and the history of protective orders filed against him by several women.

The Monday evening newscasts, however, added more dimensions to the story, and the image one got of the case differed depending on which channel one watched.

WJZ-TV’s (CBS) 6 p.m. newscast included exclusive interviews with the suspect’s cousin, who refuted police commissioner Bealefeld’s assertion during his press conference that Sinclair was a “maniac.” Instead, Wendy Williams described her cousin as “a good person, but he snapped,” and the story contained new background on Sinclair’s employment history and the children he supported.

WBAL-TV (NBC), meanwhile, portrayed the darker side of a criminal who “had a gun, and was not afraid to use it.” Reporter Kate Amara characterized Sinclair as “no stranger to the court system,” and echoed the Sun’s foray into Sinclair’s past brushes with the law. The story included an interview with Margaret Burns, a spokeswoman for the Baltimore City state’s attorney, in which viewers learned that the suspect’s estranged wife had filed an assault charge against him back in March 2008.

Meanwhile WMAR-TV (ABC) interviewed one of Sinclair’s assault victims from the day of the shooting, who described him as “not a maniac, but a loving man.”

By Tuesday, the paper was finished with the Sinclair story, but television was not. There were updates throughout the day as local TV websites updated their accounts, but the

stories contained no information that had not already been reported elsewhere, mostly the Sun.

The persistence of violent crime in Baltimore City has fueled a cottage news industry. In addition to independent Twitter feeds, Baltimore has at least five specific crime blogs. Some of the more prominent ones include Baltimore Crime and Baltimore John Watch.

But at least in this case, those outlets were largely silent. The study found only two blogs that addressed the shooting during the week. Baltimore Crime mentioned the shootings in two brief posts Saturday, July 18. On Sunday, the day after the shooting, the author of Buzoncrime wrote a relatively long though unrelated piece about the Internal Affairs Department that raised questions in one paragraph about the lack of details in the reporting of the incident, but it then moved on to another topic.

What were these blogs covering instead? In general, each focused more attention on particular crime trends that dovetailed with their authors' interests. In the week following the incident, Baltimore Crime published posts on taxing illegal gambling, an off-duty officer that shot a burglar and a few other shootings that had just occurred. Murderland contained no new posts during the week. Baltimore Slumlord Watch and Baltimore John Watch stuck to their niche crime topics. Inside Charm City posted about utility bills and MARC train delays on the July 19, the day after the shooting. And Investigative Voice, an independent local news website that often focuses on crime, covered water bills and city pensions that week.

Traditional media often relied first on new platforms

The Shawn Sinclair story was a breaking news event with new pieces of information revealed over several days. The Web proved to be a useful tool of mainstream outlets in delivering the news quickly, almost as it was available. In most cases, news organizations used Twitter or their websites to disseminate initial information and then repeated or elaborated in their traditional platforms.

The Baltimore Sun website, baltimoresun.com, for instance, carried the first full report about the shooting some 10 hours after the incident occurred. The next day, July 19, the Sun printed the same story, but with updates, including the condition of the severely wounded officer. The same pattern occurred on Monday July 20.

With local TV, too, there were a number of cases in which the stations posted information on the Web that would not resurface until later in the nightly newscast. Out of all of the 34 stories captured about the shooting, 21 were from local TV websites.

Not every outlet broke all its stories online. WJZ's July 20 evening broadcast brought viewers exclusive interviews with both the suspect's cousin and also his close friend which had not appeared on the Web.

How important in the end was Twitter, in addition to being the medium that first broke the story? The social media tool functioned as a vehicle for disseminating new information throughout the course of this story. At 9:56 a.m. on Sunday, July 19, WBAL-TV tweeted about the suspect's history: "Police: Cop Shooter Involved In Domestic Disputes." The item linked to a story on wbal.com, which revealed the names of the officers and the suspect. The story included a quote from police commissioner Bealefeld, who said "We know he's (Shawn Sinclair) been involved in other domestic violence incidents." This would be elaborated in other news reports later on, notably in WBAL-TV's evening newscast on July 20.

On the evening of Sunday, July 19, at least two local stations used Twitter to alert audiences to other new information in the case. At 5:11 p.m., WJZ-TV tweeted that the name of the suspect had been identified. At 9:04 p.m., WBFF-TV's (Fox) Twitter feed announced that a suspect had been identified, citing information gleaned from the AP. The tweet linked to WBFF-TV's website.¹¹ The next morning, July 20, WJZ-TV tweeted at 6:59 a.m. that the police officers were still recovering.

WBAL's Multi-Media Coverage of the Sinclair Story	
Saturday, 11 a.m. (approx.)	Shawn Sinclair is arrested for shooting officers.
Saturday, 11:24 a.m.	shooting first reported, wbal.com (AP contributed)
Saturday, 8:58 p.m.	updated version of previous story, wbal.com (AP contributed)
Sunday, 9 a.m. (approx.)	basic facts of story on wbal.com, the radio station's site (AP story)
Sunday, 9:56 a.m.	WBAL-TV tweets that suspect was involved in domestic disputes
Sunday, 1:20 p.m.	wbal.com posts full account of story, an update of previous day's brief. Contains witness interviews.
Monday, 9:57 a.m.	WBAL-TV tweets that there's more info on the suspect, links to website.
Monday, 6:02 p.m.	WBAL-TV airs package in evening news cast, including interviews with suspect's wife & state's attorney office. Full investigation of criminal background.
Monday, 7:24 p.m.	wbal.com posts a story with no new details (AP contributed)

TV news focused on the vivid but still uncovers new angles

Local TV stations not only ran with the shooting story longer than other media, they also focused heavily on vivid and emotional dimensions of Sinclair's rampage. Much of this involved often-repeated footage of the crime scene, stock phrases such as "had a gun and was not afraid to use it," and an emphasis on interviewing witnesses, relatives and friends of the suspect about what kind of man he was.

By Tuesday, most Baltimore news outlets had moved on from the shooting. But one outlet in town carried on. WJZ-TV secured what it dubbed "exclusive access" to the

¹¹ Due to the limitations of capturing and archiving all web updates, an analysis of the Twitter link destination in this case could not be conducted.

suspect's family and then promoted that access to portray a more sympathetic portrait of Sinclair.

After interviewing Sinclair's cousin Monday night, WZJ continued to cover the story online and on air for two more days after others stopped. On Tuesday morning, a WJZ.com story fleshed out the suspect's history and character: "Sinclair's relatives say he was a family man, coaching his son's ball games and working steadily at a Foot Locker."

That evening, it quoted family members saying that Sinclair had taken Ecstasy the day of the shooting, which "fueled a gun battle that turned the father of five out of control."

The final piece came on Thursday evening. WJZ, in its evening broadcast, updated viewers on the condition of one of the wounded police officers and said that Sinclair would face "a number of charges."

UMB Chosen To Develop Swine Flu Vaccine

On Wednesday, July 22, the University of Maryland, Baltimore announced that it had been selected as one of eight sites nationwide that would test a new H1N1 vaccine. The study, funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), would conduct a trial of vaccines from two different manufacturers. The university publicized its plan to begin the testing immediately with the goal of recruiting around 1,000 volunteers. The trial would take place at the university's Baltimore campus (UMB) at the Center for Vaccine Development.

Lessons from the coverage

- *Newspapers Dominated the Story.* A niche outlet (in this case, the legal and business paper Maryland Daily Record) can capitalize on its specialties by descending early on a story, but the Baltimore Sun ultimately provided the most depth and context.
- *A press release drove the coverage.* The story was characterized by a general lack of enterprise reporting. The outlets that covered the announcement mostly reacted to a press release and news briefing, and few addressed the lingering questions surrounding the safety of the vaccine.

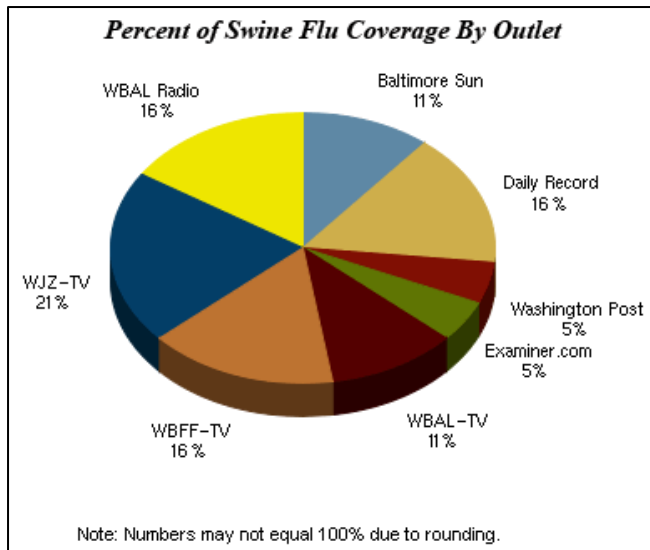
Both niche and general interest newspapers played key roles in the coverage

The university announced the swine flu program the morning of Wednesday, July 22. At noon, the Maryland Daily Record, a five-day-a-week newspaper focused on a handful of specialty business beats, including law, real estate, biotech and health care, posted the first story on its website. The 603-word report covered the basic facts, including how the vaccine doses would be administered and the impact of H1N1 in Maryland and elsewhere.

By mid-afternoon (2:25 p.m.) the Baltimore Sun had weighed in with a sparse report on its website also based largely on the university news release. Roughly 90 minutes later, (3:57 p.m.) WJZ.com, the website of the local CBS affiliate, published a story that covered the basic facts.

The Washington Post also ran a story on the vaccine trials the next morning in its print edition. Of the 19 stories in PEJ’s analysis, seven were from newspaper print editions or websites. Nine were from local TV

websites or broadcasts. The rest appeared on local radio websites. No story appeared in any local blog captured by the study.



The next day—Thursday, July 23—the Sun produced the most thorough treatment of the vaccine trial to appear all week. The 1,265-word Page 1 story contained interviews with sources that had not been featured before, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Reporter Kelly

Brewington provided information about the other stakeholders involved in other nearby testing sites in Frederick and Annapolis. She revealed the name of the drug maker that would provide the vaccine, Sanofi Pasteur.

The Sun was also the only outlet that directly addressed the unknowns related to the vaccine, like safety concerns that are an issue when a vaccine is rolled out rapidly.¹² “There are unanswered questions about the campaign” and “There’s still a lot that researchers don’t know about the new virus,” wrote Brewington. The article also described the reported side effects of a vaccine for a 1976 swine flu strain.

More stories appeared that day as well but few provided any new information.

The Daily Record’s print edition expanded on its Wednesday web story, but not by much. It elaborated slightly on the spread of the flu thus far in Maryland and beyond. And it included a quote from John M. Colmers, secretary of Health and Mental Hygiene for the state. Local TV and radio websites, including wbal.com, foxbaltimore.com, wbaltv.com, and wjz.com, all posted or updated stories. But these contained few pieces of information not already reported in their previous evening’s newscasts or in other outlets.

¹² WJZ’s 6 p.m. broadcast from July 23 also addressed the safety issue, though indirectly. The anchor mentioned that drug makers will begin studies to make sure the H1N1 version in its vaccine causes no more side effects than its regular version.

By Friday, July 24, newspapers had stopped covering the testing. No more broadcasts aired, and only wbal.com still had a story on its home page.

Lack of enterprise reporting

With only a couple of exceptions, most of the reporting came from the university news release from the morning of July 22 and the press conference held on campus later that afternoon.

In part, this stemmed from technology making the news something that can be produced immediately. For instance, the university press release stated that “the research is a first step toward the U.S. government’s stated goal of developing a safe and effective vaccine,” and the Daily Record story echoed with “Research on the vaccine is the first step toward the U.S. government’s aggressive goal of developing a vaccine for the virus.”

Level of New Information in Swine Flu Stories	
Story Type	Stories
First account	1
Significant new info	3
New details	3
No new information	9
Same story, another platform	1
Blank/does not apply	2
Total	19

The first account is out, largely the way the originating news source framed it, and that stands as the basic outline.

In the end, only a few of the news reports on the announcement advanced the story significantly. Out of the 19 analyzed, just three added any significant new information (another three added some new minor details).

Even hours later, the account from the university press release and press briefing still framed what people knew. That evening, for instance, the local TV news teams aired packages on the announcement, but these veered only infrequently from the basic details from the university.

Only WJZ-TV advanced the story somewhat. Reporter Mike Helgren focused more on the impact of H1N1 so far in the state of Maryland, like the number of illnesses and deaths so far. The story included an interview with a local victim of the flu, Lori Tritto, as well as Secretary Colmers. Instead of dwelling on the vaccine testing news, the secretary discussed the possible benefits to Maryland residents that such a vaccine could hold.

Who Triggered Swine Flu Stories	
Trigger	Stories
Colleges and universities	13
Press/Media – Enterprise	1
Press/Media – Interview	2
Other	1
N/A (does not apply)	2
Total	19

In print, only the Baltimore Sun story on Thursday was marked by a significant level of enterprise.

The story advanced mainly as new breaking news came in. Around 4 p.m. on Thursday, for instance, wbal.com reported that the university’s medical center was receiving calls from prospective volunteers. At 6:08 p.m., WJZ-TV aired information on a local

company, MedImmune, which would be producing some of the vaccine in nasal spray form.

It would not be until months later that questions about the safety of the swine flu vaccine would surface. This time, local outlets seemed to pay more attention, correspondent with a rise in public anxiety.

In all during the week, two-thirds of the stories originated from the University of Maryland. The university sent out a press release and followed that with a briefing. News outlets relied on these two points of dissemination for much of their reporting.

The Auctioning of the Senator Theater

On Wednesday, July 22, the Senator Theater, a historic but financially troubled movie house in North Baltimore, was sold at a sidewalk auction for \$810,000.

The city, the winning bidder, immediately said it hoped to find someone to operate the old theater or even to buy it.

The auction itself was a kind of theater, held on the sidewalk and accompanied by protests. Baltimore media provided extensive coverage, coverage that showed how differently different media can define news.

Lessons from the coverage

- *The Press Proved a Poor Predictor.* While many early press accounts speculated about how the auction would go, most of the media missed what would eventually happen. The fact that the city might bid on the theater and retain control was recognized in early accounts but then seemed to get lost amid other options.
- *Traditional Media Used New Platforms to Break News.* The media tended to use new digital platforms to deliver breaking news and then produce fuller versions on legacy platforms.
- *Newspapers Dominated.* Print tended to drive the coverage and frame the narrative. In other media, the same information tended to be repeated over and over again.
- *Media Rashomon.* The coverage of the story that a consumer received depended greatly on the type of media he or she relied on.

A poor predictor

The Senator Theater had captured the attention of the local media for years, mostly for its money problems.¹³ And the city was already deeply involved. Back in March, when the theater fell behind on its loan payments and the bank initiated foreclosure procedures, the city stepped in, buying the mortgage for \$950,000 and putting the theater up for auction.

The auction was held on Wednesday, July 22. When only one bid materialized—for \$800,000—the city quickly submitted its own bid for \$810,000 to protect its investment, and officials said they would request proposals for a new owner or operator.

The idea that the city could end up the winner of its own auction should hardly have been a surprise. The possibility had been mentioned in news stories for months.¹⁴

Even on the Sunday before the auction, the Sun published a 776-word advance story that noted the possibility that the city could come to buy the theater itself if sufficient bids from others were not received:

Baltimore City, which bought the theater's mortgage from 1st Mariner Bank in May, has about \$1 million invested in the theater and likely will not sell it if it's unable to get at least that much at auction. Should no new owner emerge Wednesday – and several city officials have said it is unlikely anyone would be willing to pay more than \$1 million for the Senator given current economic conditions, the cost of needed repairs to the building and the borderline profitability of a single-screen urban movie house – there will be a nationwide search for someone to come in and operate it.

But few other media picked up on the point. Even the Sun, by Tuesday, had largely dropped the angle.

Of the 15 stories identified that ran before the auction, only three raised the prospect of what ended up happening.

Most media instead followed false trails about what might occur, particularly the prospect of a bid from a local college, which was echoed on the Twitter feeds of insidecharmcity.com and WJZ-TV and reported on the websites of a local news radio station and the Baltimore Business Journal and on two local TV newscasts.¹⁵

In the end, only one bid other than the city's was submitted—by an unidentified buyer, for \$140,000 less than the city had paid months earlier. Loyola officials said they did not bid.

¹³ The Senator Theater opened in 1939 in north Baltimore and is on the National Registry of Historic Places. But it has struggled financially as a single-screen theater in an industry dominated by multi-plex movie houses that have the ability to attract ticket-buyers with several movies at once.

¹⁴ For example, the Baltimore Business Journal reported on May 14, 2009: “Baltimore City is already planning to solicit bids to buy and redevelop the Senator Theater. That’s because the city does not expect a buyer from an upcoming auction.”

¹⁵ WMAR and WBFF

Traditional media used new platforms to break news

News outlets began reporting word of the sale shortly after it concluded. Several media outlets used twitter feeds to announce the purchase by the city. “Sold....City Retains Senator Theater At Public Auction,” WBAL radio posted at 11:25 a.m.

The Baltimore Sun posted a short story to its website at 11:46 a.m. It updated the account about an hour later with a longer version that noted the bidding was contentious. Short stories, 200 to 300 words, soon followed on the sites of the Daily Record, the local business paper, WYPR.org, the website of a public radio station, and at 4:09 p.m., on the website of WJZ-TV. About the same time, WBAL Radio updated its short story, including links to video and an excerpt from the mayor’s statement about the sale.

More substantial accounts soon began appearing. The Baltimore Business Journal was first to report on likely next steps. An account posted on its website shortly after 4 p.m. reflected interviews with sources at the scene and elsewhere and contained significant details about what was likely to occur next.

That night, the four network-affiliated local TV stations produced stories all mainly focused on video of protesters at the auction.

The day after, some longer accounts appeared. Baltimorebrew.com, a local news website created by a former Sun and Washington Post reporter, posted a 691-word account rich in color and detail about the auction itself and included multi-media components such as links to photos and a YouTube video snippet.

The Daily Record looked ahead to the 45-day process by which the auction would be certified by a court. It also discussed the city’s plans to issue a formal “request for proposals” from people interested in buying or operating the theater and even quoted people who had seen drafts of the RFP:

According to those who have seen drafts of the RFP, it calls for an operator that will run the Senator for educational, arts and entertainment purposes.

“Our concern is that the facility continues to be used as a film or entertainment facility of some sort, and that seems to be reflected in the RFP,” said Mike Wicklein, a member of Senator Community Trust, a nonprofit formed in February to raise money for the theater’s operations.

The Baltimore Sun also tried to advance the story. Its lengthy 1,326-word story the day after the auction also explored the city’s plans—and included the only voice of dissent in the media regarding the city’s action.¹⁶ It quoted the city comptroller, Joan Pratt, who

¹⁶ The Sun typically posts all the content of the day’s edition early in the morning. The Daily Record, which has earlier deadlines, does so the evening before.

argued that the city should have cut its losses and sold the theater for \$800,000 to the sole bidder:

"We know that the city does not have funds to operate, maintain and retrofit a movie theater...."

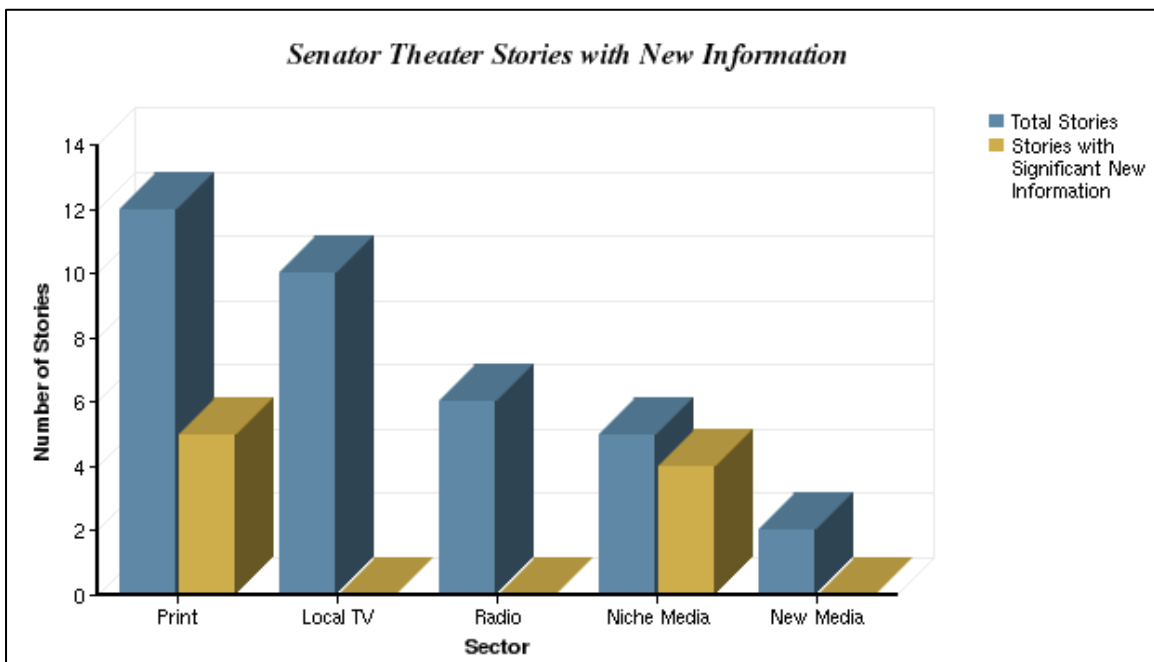
The city's already lean budget is expected to take another hit, with [Baltimore Mayor Sheila] Dixon asking all of her agency heads to identify 5 percent cuts from their spending plans.

Kimberly Clark, an executive vice president at the Baltimore Development Corp., said that the city will likely have to spend more money to make capital improvements to fix the theater, though she will not know how much more until the city can properly assess the building.

The Sun also posted a commentary from its movie reviewer about the cultural contributions of single-screen theaters and an editorial questioning the city's purchase and hopes for recouping its investment, both of which were published the paper the next day. Two columnists also weighed in. One, on Saturday, assembling a list of other cultural attractions the city had tried but failed to save, warning that the success of such ventures had been highly inconsistent. The other, on Sunday, ended a busy week of coverage by raising the prospect of "Senator fatigue" if a solution couldn't be found soon by the city.

Newspapers drove the coverage

Interest in the theater's fate prompted widespread coverage across every media sector. But print outlets drove this narrative, and much of what appeared elsewhere was duplicative and contained no new information for the reader or viewer.



In all, the study found 35 stories by 18 media outlets on the sale during the week. Just nine of the stories, roughly 25%, provided significant new information. All of these were produced by news organizations associated with print outlets.

The Sun produced five, the Daily Record three and the Baltimore Business Journal, one.¹⁷

The rest of the media merely repeated what had been reported elsewhere.

In general, the papers wrote more—measured by total words—and used more sources. The Sun averaged 2.4 sources per story and the Daily Record four. And they were the only media organizations to produce stories citing at least five sources. The Sun’s long Thursday piece cited nine—including several city officials, business leaders and people who were thought to be interested in the theater but chose not to bid.

Media Rashomon

The auction itself lasted only a few minutes and made for colorful sound bites and video. The proceedings received widespread coverage across media sectors – but the news a consumer received in this case depended greatly on the type of media he or she relies on.

Who Triggered Senator Theater Stories	
Trigger	Stories
City department-other	33
Colleges/universities	2
Total	35

Television viewers received accounts that focused chiefly on the protests taking place during the auction. Not one of the TV stories analyzed, however, gave the city or auctioneer an opportunity to respond to the videotaped accusations by protesters that the bidding had been rigged.

There were only two accounts from online-only sites, the 691-word story in the BaltimoreBrew.com, and a link to a Sun story on examiner.com. Baltimore Brew’s auction coverage offered interactive features and some of the voice and attitude familiar to regular visitors to the blogosphere:

Spectators who came to the auction of Baltimore’s Senator Theatre yesterday expecting melodrama were not disappointed. They found a plastic vulture waiting for them in the lobby of the financially-troubled movie house, a woman in a long red cape sobbing outside and another Senator supporter, a blogger known as “AstroGirl,” wryly knocking back a late-morning Natty Boh. “Louder!” “We can’t hear you!” “This is rigged!” people yelled, during the brief auction. Others yelled at them to be quiet. Perhaps the most heart-stopping moment came just as auctioneer Paul Cooper was beginning his rapid-fire description of the building when a man in a wheelchair – artist

¹⁷ The Baltimore Business Journal is a weekly publication and its edition for the study week contained no reference to the Senator Theater. Its website, however, provided the earliest detailed version of the story that went beyond the basic facts.

Dan Keplinger, the subject of the Academy Award-winning documentary “King Gimp” – howled his outrage at the proceeding.

And who made news on the Senator theater story? The city drove nearly all of the coverage, 94% of the stories during the week. There was not a single story initiated by the press as an enterprise story.

Listening Devices on Buses?

Looking for ways to deter crime, the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) considered adding listening devices to the video recorders already installed on its buses.

As a first step, the agency wrote the state Attorney General’s office asking for a legal opinion about the idea. The Attorney General’s office posted the MTA request on its website. In time, an enterprising blogger saw it and set off a chain of events that led the transit agency to suddenly drop the whole thing.

The story provides a case study of the evolving relationship between new and traditional media.

Lessons from the coverage

- *New media served as an alert but didn’t make any inquiries.* The story was broken by a new-media outlet, but it didn’t gain traction until being relayed by the Sun, which provided a larger audience and follow-up reporting.
- *More outlets didn’t mean more information.* Other than the blog that broke the story and the Sun, none of the other 22 media outlets reviewed provided any significant new information to this story.
- *A lack of updating or crediting was a factor here.* Most outlets, especially from new media, demonstrated a willingness to copy material from other outlets without proper credit and a failure to update material.

Scoop: Maryland Politics Watch breaks the story

On July 10 the MTA wrote the state Attorney General about adding listening devices on buses, asking whether recording the conversations of passengers and drivers would run afoul of the Maryland law against surreptitious recording.

Within days, the Maryland Attorney General’s office posted the MTA request on its website, a method often used to get input from citizens.¹⁸

¹⁸ In a letter to another agency seeking an opinion from Gansler’s office unrelated to the MTA and its buses, a Gansler deputy explained that “It is the policy of this office to accept and consider any information and views submitted by interested parties or other members of the public concerning pending opinion

One who saw it was Paul Gordon, a contributor to a weblog called Maryland Politics Watch, which was founded in 2006 by a political science professor at American University who felt that too much of the coverage of state government in Maryland was focused on Baltimore at the expense of the Washington suburb in which he lives. The site is now chiefly edited by [Adam Pagnucco](#), a Democratic activist and researcher for a labor union who keeps the site updated in his spare time.

On July 17, roughly a month after the Attorney General posted the notice, Gordon posted a 474-word item on the site.¹⁹ His account contained no indication that he had contacted the MTA or other sources for comment or reaction. He did, however, add commentary:

*Personally, I find the idea of the state recording people's conversations on public transportation creepy, something I would expect from the old Soviet Union.*²⁰

The following Monday—three days later—Baltimore Sun transportation writer Michael Dresser posted a link to Gordon's item and the Attorney General's website on his own blog, "Getting There," which is hosted by [baltimoresun.com](#). Dresser summarized the request for public comment and gave credit to Maryland Politics Watch for noticing it.

A few hours later, a third blog, Inside Charm City, spotted Dresser's item and posted a link to both it and Maryland Politics Watch.²¹

Dresser also took an important reportorial step: he called the state for comment. Within a few hours, word came down that the acting director of the Transportation Department, which oversees the MTA, had scuttled the idea. She claimed she had not been aware the policy was under consideration or that a query had been sent by her agency to the Attorney General. Upon learning about it, she had withdrawn the idea for further consideration.²² Dresser announced this news with a paragraph on top of his blog posting. Then, at 8:39 p.m., he posted a new version of the story on his Sun blog with quotes from agency officials, lawmakers, nearby transit agencies, the American Civil Liberties Union and others.

Dresser then posted a link to his new story as a comment on Maryland Politics Watch saying the site "can share the credit" for the state changing course. The politics blog then

requests." Gansler's spokeswoman, Raquel Guillory, did not respond to a request for the date the MTA letter was posted on the site.

¹⁹ Gordon is described on the blog as a former attorney now working at the progressive advocacy organization People for the American Way. He is listed as a development writer on that organization's site.

²⁰ Maryland Politics Watch has a limited audience. According to the counter on its site, the blog had 19,696 visitors in July 2009.

²¹ Charm City is a nickname for Baltimore.

²² The query letter to the Attorney General was signed by Paul J. Wiedenfeld, administrator of the Maryland Transit Administration. Acting transportation secretary Beverly Swaim-Staley told the Sun "It certainly should have been vetted at the department level and it was not. We have not weighed the issues we should weigh before making a decision like this."

posted its own item taking note of Dresser’s story, linking to it and offering a comment that might strike some as sounding more like advocacy than reporting:

The Maryland Transit Administration has told the Baltimore Sun that it has pulled back its audio surveillance proposal. Sun reporter Michael Dresser credits MPW guest blogger Paul Gordon for helping to generate this decision. Thanks, Paul and Mike!

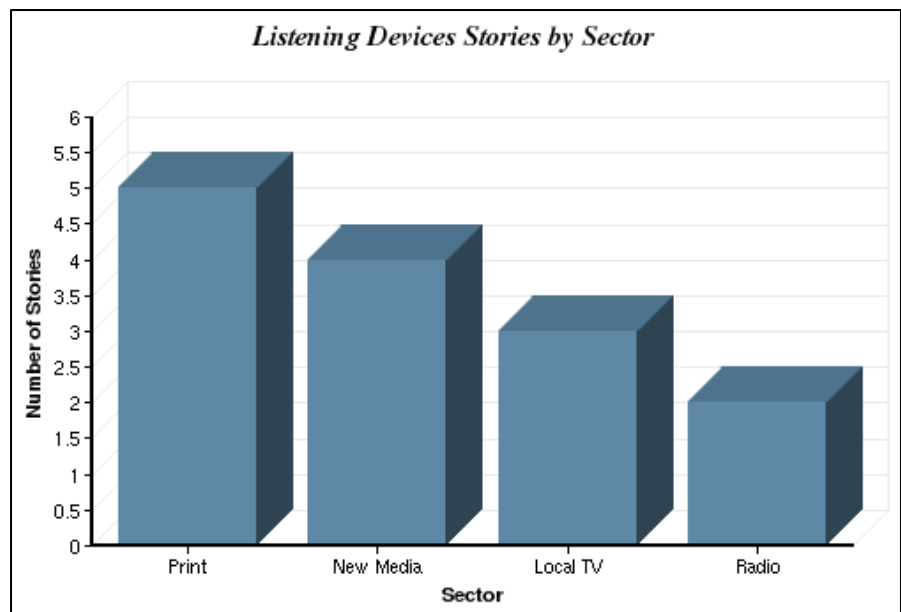
By the time the story finally appeared on the front page of the Baltimore Sun the next day, Tuesday, the effort to add listening devices was already dead. Yet it was about to get its broadest distribution.

Of the 14 stories captured during the week on the subject, 10 were disseminated on or the day after the story appeared in the print edition of the Sun. (The exceptions were the Maryland Politics Watch item, two stories from Baltimoresun.com and an item on Inside Charm City.²³)

In addition, 12 other non-Baltimore websites and blogs reported on the case around the country—all of them after it had been reported by Baltimoresun.com.²⁴ The Associated Press moved a short version to its clients the day after the Sun’s printed version. Two local TV stations posted brief items online. None of these outlets added new information.

The first broadcast reports came Tuesday after the Sun story appeared in print when a pair of local radio stations, WBAL and WCBM, included the story in their morning news roundups.

Sometimes there was a confusing chain of reportorial custody to these accounts. Greatergreaterwashington.org, a site founded by a former Google employee that describes itself as devoted to “improving the vitality” of Washington area communities, posted a



²³ Monday postings for Inside Charm City were retrieved from the internet but not included in our grid of stories during the week because of our capture schedule.

²⁴ Additional websites that carried the story that were not part of the study sample but were discovered through internet searches: Inside Tech, Delusionalduck, DailyMe, Boing Boing, BrickHouse Security, Treehugger, UTU.org, ACLU of Maryland’s Facebook page, Fark.com, Greatergreaterwashington.org, To the People, and Homeland Security Newswire. In addition, the Associated Press moved a five-paragraph version of the story on a regional wire at 10:05 a.m. on July 21, crediting the Sun for its information.

short item at 9:14 a.m. noting the state had backed off on plans to add the listening devices. The website credited the news to Inside Charm City, which, in turn, had linked its account to the Sun story.

WJZ.com, the local CBS affiliate, posted a 379-word item at 9:21 a.m. that did reflect original reporting—interviews with passengers and a local law professor—but no significant new details. The story erroneously said the state was still awaiting an opinion from the Attorney General on the matter.²⁵

The story also spread through social networks. A link showed up on the FARK.com on Tuesday and attracted a large number of comments from users. The ACLU of Maryland posted a link to the story on its Facebook page under the heading of “ACLU speaks out against proposed MTA surveillance.”

As the day progressed, the story of the aborted idea spread further and further on the internet, finding its way to various virtual communities of people with a potential interest in the story, from security firms to civil libertarians.

A lack of updating or credit

The rapid spread of the story online illustrated the potential of the internet to disseminate local news to people near and far who might have an interest. But some online versions weren't updated consistently, resulting in stories that were days behind the news – rendering them inaccurate.

And while some online outlets offered links to the Sun's story, and a few to the blog that broke the story, others appeared to repeat the reporting without credit.

On Monday at 9:07 p.m., for instance, Inside Charm City updated its posting, noting that the Sun reporter Dresser had reached a state senator who opposes the idea of bugging buses. But it missed the fact, as Dresser had reported, that the idea had already been withdrawn by the transit agency.

Delusionalduck.com, which specializes in news from Charles County in Southern Maryland, was still referring to Dresser's original item until Tuesday morning, well after the state had backtracked on the initiative.

A website operated by a New York-based security firm, BrickHouse Security, wrote on Wednesday that the MTA “may install audio surveillance” on its buses. The item borrowed liberally from the Sun's reporting on Monday and included a link to the paper's story at the bottom. It wasn't until Thursday that it alerted its readers that the state had already dropped consideration of the plan.

²⁵ No story was aired on the evening news that night, suggesting the story may have been bumped by other news or limited to another newscast, such as the morning show, which was not part of the PEJ sample.

Another element of much of the blog coverage was a disregard for the convention of crediting original reporting. Instead, some represented others work as their own. Boing Boing, a self-decried “group blog” edited in California, for instance, on Monday reproduced several paragraphs of Dresser’s earliest posting without any mention of him or the Sun. Later that day it updated the story, reproducing without credit more of Dresser’s writing, and thanked a reader for pointing out the state had dropped the effort. Homeland Security Newswire, a New York-based news site devoted to matters related to homeland security, credited Dresser, but its story was often identical to his word for word without quotation marks. A libertarian blog, To The People, reproduced part of Dresser’s story without any credit. And there were numerous other cases.

In the end, the aborted idea of putting listening devices on buses received widespread coverage in a variety of media. But the added coverage added little new information. The technology enhanced dissemination but did not add reporting.

One reason may have been the fact that once the Sun reported the story, the state

Who Triggered Listening Devices Stories	
Trigger	Stories
State agency or department	11
Press/media – other news outlet	3
Total	14

withdrew the idea of bugging its buses. However, there was still fertile ground for follow ups, especially by niche new media outlets with a focused interest. A security-oriented site, for example, might do some reporting on whether listening devices were in use in other mass transit systems and

whether they had reduced crime. A political blog might pursue whether the state official who came up with the idea suffered any ramifications.

Other than the discovery of the document by the state political blogger and the digging by the Sun, none of the other media outlets that carried the story added any significant new information at all, our analysis found.

Of the 14 stories captured during our coverage week, nine were online, seven of those on websites associated with legacy media outlets such as newspapers and television stations.²⁶

A spokeswoman for the MTA said the Sun was the first media organization to call about the issue. Three television stations called to request on-camera interviews after the Sun’s story appeared in the paper. No other media called the agency on the topic.²⁷

Only three of these 14 stories added significant new information or details to the storyline: the original MPW blog item that broke the story and two articles by the Sun.

²⁶ The outlets we captured that reported on the story included several affiliated with the same organization: Baltimore Sun/Baltimoresun.com, Washington Post/washingtonpost.com, WBAL radio/WBAL.com. The others: WCBM, wjz.com, foxbaltimore.com, Inside Charm City, Maryland Politics Watch, exhibitAnews. The analysis that follows is limited to the stories in this sample, details of which can be found in our methodology section.

²⁷ September, 17 2009, interview with Jawauna Greene, MTA spokeswoman.

Nor did any of the additional news outlets that reported on the story—the ones that fell outside our formal sample of local news related outlets.

Then there is the question of who initiated the news. Of the 14 news items that ran during the week locally, nearly 80% of them were reporting on the decision by the agency's acting director to scuttle the listening device idea. But all of that flowed from the independent blogger who first noticed the letter and the Sun blogger who picked up on it.

Crime Events Raise Concerns About Juvenile Justice

The week of July 19, six different stories involving juvenile justice circulated in the Baltimore media. By week's end, as news organizations looked for overlapping themes, the stories formed a loose master narrative about how authorities tried to prevent juvenile crime and punish offenders in Maryland.

In the process, at least one crime incident that might have been considered minor and received scant attention in another week became the biggest story of the week studied.

Lessons from the coverage

The six stories demonstrated how media can try to make sense of different news events that seemed thematically related and might hint at a more complex narrative. Among the lessons:

- *Traditional, news outlets drove coverage of juvenile justice during the week.*
- *A handful of news organizations did original reporting.* Most of the others merely echoed their work.
- *News outlets outside of the mainstream emerged as only bit players in the coverage.* They mostly catalogued specific incidents or offered commentary.
- *Television and radio news tended toward emotional or personal stories, and they played a role in amplifying what would otherwise have been a minor event.*
- *The press followed the events and newsmakers.* Examples of press enterprise were few and far between.

Traditional outlets drove the coverage

It all began on Sunday, July 19, when the Baltimore Sun published a long front page enterprise story that raised questions about the effectiveness of Maryland's juvenile sentencing and monitoring. The story focused on the case of Lamont Davis, a 17 year-old with a long juvenile record who was accused of wounding a 5-year-old girl during a gunfight with another teenager in South Baltimore. At the time, Davis was supposedly being monitored through a G.P.S. ankle bracelet.

On Monday, the Associated Press published an article about a separate event: a report by the Maryland Attorney General's office about the escape of 14 minors two months earlier at a state-run juvenile detention center in western Maryland during which the offenders attacked staff and took control of the facility.

On Wednesday, in response to the report, state legislators promised hearings on failures at the state Department of Juvenile Services. Perhaps not coincidentally, as the week progressed, three alleged Cullen escapees involved in the melee were charged as adults for their actions in May.

And against this backdrop, two crimes involving minors got significant coverage during the week. On Sunday, July 19, a 19-year old named Brandon Brown allegedly shot and killed 16-year-old Jerrod Reed in East Baltimore and wounded another 16-year-old in the process. A day later, police arrested three Baltimore boys ages 7, 8 and 11 for stealing a scooter, a wagon and bicycle parts from a neighbor's yard in North Baltimore's Medfield community and detained them at the Baltimore City Juvenile Justice Center. This story would get the most coverage of all.

Throughout the week, traditional news organizations drove the juvenile crime coverage—particularly the Sun newspaper and the news operations of local television and radio stations.

There were 78 pieces of content in the media on juvenile justice during the week: 55 traditional news stories, 21 Twitter updates, four stories from the alternative press and two blogs entries. Of all these, 68 were produced by traditional news outlets.²⁸

Moreover, every full news story that appeared came from a traditional news organization, though not always in the legacy platform: 22 appeared on websites, 12 were broadcast on local television, 10 were broadcast on radio and six appeared in print.

Only a handful of outlets did original reporting; most simply echoed others work

Two legacy media outlets, the Baltimore Sun and WBAL-TV broke most of the stories during the week and largely framed the narratives that were later picked up and reproduced by other outlets in the market.

Of the 55 traditional news stories, 16, or 29%, offered new information. But only six provided what amounted to significant new developments that would alter a news consumer's understanding. WBAL produced three of the stories that added major advancements. The Sun produced two. The other account came from WJZ-TV, the CBS affiliate.

²⁸ One blog post on the Baltimore Sun website that served as the basis of a print story the next day was included in this sample.

Outlets Breaking Juvenile Justice News	
Story	Outlet that Disseminated First Account
Juvenile sentencing/monitoring	The Baltimore Sun
Cullen Center report	The Associated Press ¹
Minors arrested/detained for theft	WBAL (Local TV newscast)
Murder of Jerrod Reed	Baltimore Police (via Twitter) ²
Legislative hearings on Cullen to be held	The Baltimore Sun
Cullen escapees to be tried as adults	WBAL (Local TV newscast)/WBAL.com ³

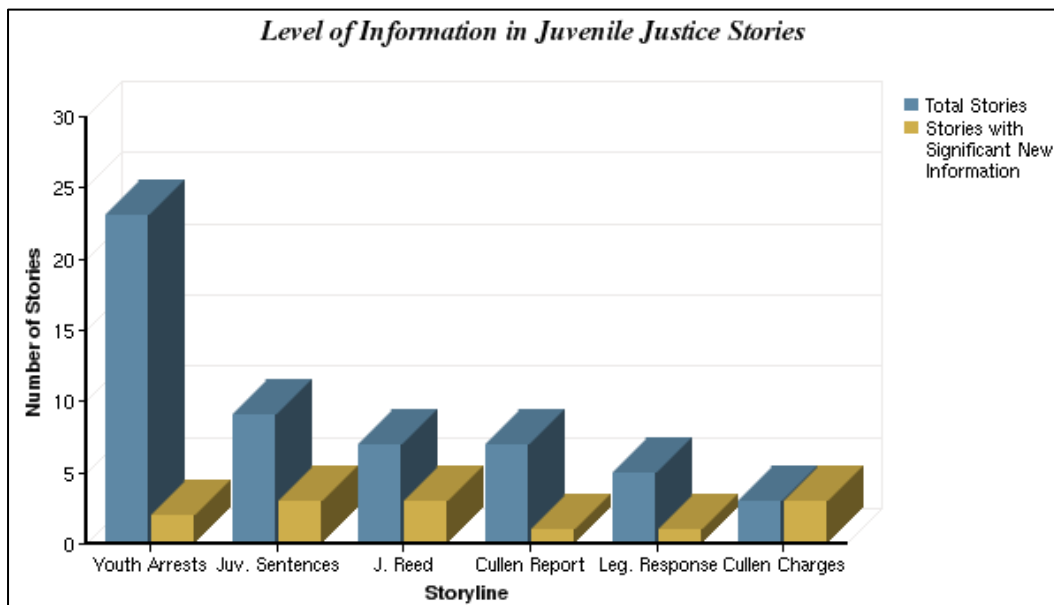
(1) A shortened version of the original Associated Press story appearing on the WBALTV.com was the first story produced by a local news source. (2) The Baltimore Sun disseminated the first full account of the shooting. (3) Two separate reports identified three minors who were to be tried as adults.

More often outlets just paraphrased or repeated earlier reporting done by others. The most influential piece was the July 19 Baltimore Sun story by Julie Bykowitz that examined the state of juvenile sentencing and monitoring.

After it ran, three local television websites posted a brief from the Associated Press summarizing Bykowitz’s story. The three web postings were identical, but two of them, on the websites of WMAR and WBAL radio, had added staff bylines along with the AP credit line, suggesting that the local outlets had in some way contributed to the report. That was not so. The local Fox affiliate website posted the same AP brief, word for word, with just the AP credit line.

On Sunday evening, Bykowitz, on her Sun Twitter feed, called attention to the lack of attribution by media peers:

You've heard it on TV, radio without attribution. Curious about juvenile justice reform? Here is the Baltimore Sun story: <http://tr.im/t4KK> 6:11 PM Jul 19th from web



A rare example of an outlet doing additional probative reporting was WBAL's July 21 story package that looked deeper into the issue of monitoring juvenile offenders. It built on the Sun story from July 19, which had touched upon problems with monitoring but focused more on juvenile sentencing.

Using the case of 15-year-old Simone Butler who ran away from her home while under house arrest, the WBAL report documented failures of the company the state had hired to electronically track offenders.

The new media and alternative press were bit players in the juvenile justice narratives

New media played only a minimal role in the juvenile justice narratives that week.

Perhaps the most significant use of new media came not from a news organization but from an official source. Late Sunday evening, Baltimore Police, the department's official Twitter feed, was the first source to break word of Jerrod Reed's murder:

SHOOTING/HOMICIDE - KENWOOD & MADISON, 16 year old male shot.
Police investigating 10:55 PM Jul 19th from txt

The only local new media outlet to reference juvenile justice during the week was Inside Charm City, a Baltimore-based news and information blog, though it did none of its own reporting. On its Twitter account it linked to two different stories produced by the mainstream media.²⁹

The alternative press in town also had only a limited role in the juvenile justice narrative. The July 22 edition of City Paper, Baltimore's alternative weekly newspaper, detailed the killing of Jerrod Reed in its Murder Ink section, a column that lists the previous week's murders. The column, which reads like a police blotter, noted that Reed was the 17th teenager murdered in 2009.

Murder Ink reporter Anna Ditkoff told PEJ that she is able to update stories in print only as space allows but can post new information online as soon as she gets it. Shortly after an arrest was made in the Reed murder, for instance, Ditkoff posted an update on the web, reporting that "Brandon Brown, a 19-year-old African-American man, was arrested on July 31."

The independent blog Baltimore Crime also posted the murder, but lagged behind the City Paper blotter and offered less information—Reed's name, age and the location of the shooting with an image of the location via Google maps, but no additional details as police released more information on August 1.

²⁹ One update provided a link to a July 20 Baltimore Sun story on the murder of Jerrod Reed and the Sun's account of the state's report on the Cullen Center on the same day.

BALTIMORE CRIME

He who seeks vengeance must dig two graves

FRIDAY, JULY 24, 2009

126, 127



[View Larger Map](#)

Sixteen-year-old Jerrod Reed was shot to death last Sunday (7/19/09) at
Kenwood & Madison

CAPTION: Murder Ink’s notice came on July 22 and Baltimore Crime did not post it until July 24, five days after the shooting.

Another alternative publication, the Baltimore Times, a long-established weekly African-American newspaper, weighed in on juvenile crime and justice policies with a July 24 opinion piece on its front page. In it, Gregory Kane, a former Baltimore Sun columnist, argued that leniency for juvenile offenders begets more crime, a notion that was repeated in the press and echoed in citizen postings on media websites and by callers to talk radio during the week. Kane argued against “the wrist-slap” school of punishment:

“For decades, Baltimore and other localities have been using what I call the ‘little dear’ approach to juvenile justice. That approach goes like this: don’t punish juvenile offenders. REHABILITATE them. After all, they’re just poor, misunderstood little dears who need our sympathy, not our punishment. ... That approach is now under attack, and rightly so. And in a way, we have one of those juvenile miscreants to thank: Lamont Davis.”

Kane’s piece, as well as other analyses and opinion in the media throughout the week, returned to the theme first advanced in Sun reporter Julie Bykowicz’s Sunday story: the state’s policy of “rehabilitation over punishment,” leads “teens who are lightly sanctioned for early offenses” to “graduate to more violent crimes.”

TV and radio accounts tended toward emotion and sensation and led to a small story becoming a big one

Television and radio—and one news organization in particular—stood out for an intense focus on one of the more emotional stories of the week: young boys who committed a minor property crime.³⁰

On Friday, July 17, police arrested and detained three boys ages 7, 8 and 11 for stealing a scooter, a wagon and bicycle parts from a neighbor’s yard in North Baltimore’s Medfield community.

Percent of Juvenile Justice Stories, all media		
Storyline	Stories	Percentage of stories
Juvenile sentencing/monitoring	9	16.4%
Lawmakers pledge hearings	5	9.1
Jerrod Reed murder	7	12.7
Cullen report	8	14.5
Cullen escape charges	3	5.4
Minors arrested/detained	23	41.8

By week’s end, that story would account for 42% (23 stories) of all the 55 juvenile justice news accounts captured during the week. Nine of those stories aired on radio, eight appeared on legacy websites, five on local TV newscasts and one story in print.³¹ Five news outlets covered the story.

This news event accounted for an even greater portion of television and radio coverage during the week. On local TV, five of the 12 juvenile justice stories were about the bike thefts, and all nine stories on radio were about the event.

WBAL broke the story in their late newscast on July 20, airing an exclusive interview with the mother of one of the boys’ mothers. The station then posted the story on its website later that night and widely disseminated it on WBAL radio talk programs the next morning.

The mothers of two of the boys then granted interviews with the competing local TV stations, all of which aired stories in their early evening newscasts on July 21.

The Baltimore Sun followed with a story in the July 22 edition of the paper and a posting on Peter Hermann’s crime blog the same day.

In broadcast outlets, the story stretched out for another two days despite few developments. Instead, the additional reporting emphasized the parties in conflict with reactions from Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon, the police department and the parents.

WBAL in particular—with its television, radio and web platforms—made the most of its “scoop.” More than half of the stories (13) on the incident were produced by WBAL.

³⁰ The two boys admitted to stealing a wagon, a scooter and bike parts from a neighbor’s yard.

³¹ Eight stories about the incident appeared online, four of which were second platform versions. The other four reports contained no new information.

Tim Tunison, the assistant news director, told PEJ that Jaime Greeley, mother of Jesse Flayhart, the 7-year-old who was handcuffed and taken in by police, contacted the newsroom early on July 20. WBAL ran an exclusive story on Jesse and 8-year-old Ayize Massey's run-in with police that night on its 11 p.m. newscast. Greeley and Ayize's mother, Toya Goodson, also appeared on Maryland's Morning News with Dave Durian on WBAL radio on the morning of July 21.

Tom Rouse, the guest host of WBAL radio's Shari Elliker Show, which follows Durian's program, devoted much of the first hour to the incident and took several phone calls from listeners, all of whom sided with police.

Looking across all 23 stories, though, only five contained new information that added to the initial report by WBAL.

Despite intense attention in the broadcast media, there wasn't much public debate over the police action. An analysis of comments to stories related to the incident on the Baltimore Sun website, callers to the Shari Elliker Show on WBAL and responses to an unscientific text poll conducted by WBAL-TV showed overwhelming support for the officers' actions.

Methodology

The study, *How News Happens*, involved several different methodological phases. All aspects of the analysis were performed in house by PEJ staff researchers.

Identifying the Media Universe

The first step was to identify all the local media outlets in the Baltimore, Md. metropolitan area. This occurred in the summer of 2009.

To do this, an audit of media outlets covering the area was conducted. To be included in the sample, an outlet had to be active and produce or disseminate local public affairs news.³²

That resulted in a list of more than 60 different news outlets and programs. All sources whose content could be captured—obtained in print, saved from a website or recorded digitally—were included in the study.³³

For outlets with multiple programs or broadcasts, researchers selected appropriate news programs, including both traditional news programming as well as talk or interview programs.

Specifically, PEJ chose news segments—radio headlines and local TV newscasts—that air when most people are getting their news.

For headlines on the radio, that's the morning rush hour commute.

For local TV news, PEJ captured and analyzed programs of the four Baltimore-area network affiliates in the early evening timeslot.³⁴ With the exception of the Fox affiliate WBFF—which airs news between 5:30 p.m. and 6 p.m.—the signature newscasts come before the network evening news, between 6 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

In addition to the sample of local TV newscasts, PEJ analyzed two local news and talk programs on Maryland Public Television.³⁵

Broad Sample of News Outlets Studied (July 19-25, 2009)

Newspapers (6)

The Baltimore Sun (Frequency Sun.-Sat.; captured every day)

³² Outlets or programs that specialize in sports or arts and entertainment coverage were excluded from the study.

³³ Outlets not included in the study were either inactive or could not be captured.

³⁴ More recent data for 2009 show that late night newscasts had slightly bigger audiences than for early evening newscasts.

³⁵ Direct Connection and State Circle.

Baltimore City Paper (weekly)
The Baltimore Times (weekly)
The Baltimore Afro American (weekly)
The Towson Times (weekly)
The Washington Post (Local content in the Baltimore edition; captured every day)

Newspaper Websites (4)

The Baltimore Sun (BaltimoreSun.com; captured twice daily at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.)
Baltimore City Paper (CityPaper.com; captured retroactively)
The Baltimore Afro American (Afro.com; captured retroactively)
The Washington Post (Baltimore-area content captured twice daily at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.)³⁶

Niche Print (2)

The Maryland Daily Record (Frequency Mon.-Fri.; captured each weekday)
The Baltimore Business Journal (weekly)

Niche Print Websites (2)

The Maryland Daily Record (MdDailyRecord.com; captured twice daily at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.)
The Baltimore Business Journal (baltimore.bizjournals.com/Baltimore; captured retroactively)

Local TV Evening Newscasts (4)

(Each weekday newscast downloaded from the TV Eyes Media Center)
WBAL-TV (6 p.m.-6:30 p.m.)
WBFF-TV (5:30 p.m.-6 p.m.)
WJZ-TV (6 p.m.-6:30 p.m.)
WMAR-TV (6 p.m.-6:30 p.m.)

Local TV Websites (4)

ABC2News.com (WMAR ; captured twice daily at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.)
FoxBaltimore.com (WBFF; captured twice daily at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.)
WBALTV.com (captured twice daily at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.)
WJZ.com (captured twice daily at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.)

Public TV News Programs (2)

Direct Connection (MPT; captured via DVR July 20, 2009)
State Circle (MPT; captured via DVR July 24, 2009)

³⁶ Stories from this source were analyzed in the study of the six main story threads but were not included in the first level of analysis because no new relevant content was produced within the specified time frame.

*Radio News Headlines*³⁷ (7 a.m. drive time) (2)

WBAL (captured each weekday)

WCBM (captured each weekday)

Radio Talk Shows (7)

Ron Smith (WBAL) (online stream captured each weekday)

The Shari Elliker Show (WBAL) (online stream captured each weekday)

The Tom Marr Show (WCBM) (online stream captured each weekday)

Maryland Morning with Sheila Kast (WYPR) (podcasts downloaded for program dates July 20, 21, 22 and 24)³⁸

Midday with Dan Rodricks (WYPR) (podcasts downloaded for program dates July 20-23)³⁹

C4 Show (WBAL) (online stream captured each weekday)

Marc Steiner (WEAA) (online stream captured July 20-23)

Anthony McCarthy (WEAA) (online stream captured July 24)

Radio Websites (3)

WBAL.com (captured twice daily at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.)

WCBM.com (captured once daily at 4 p.m.)

WYPR.org (captured retroactively)

New Media/Blogs (10)

Baltimore Brew.com (captured retroactively)

Baltimorecrime.blogspot.com (captured retroactively)⁴⁰

BMoreNews.com (captured once daily at 4 p.m.)

Examiner.com/Baltimore (captured once daily at 4 p.m.)

ExhibitANewsBaltimore.com (captured retroactively)

InsideCharmCity (captured once daily at 4 p.m.)

InvestigativeVoice.com (captured retroactively)

Maryland Politics Watch (captured retroactively)

Twitter.com/BaltimorePolice (captured retroactively)

BaltimoreSpectator.blogspot.com (captured retroactively)

Capture and Content Retrieval

Researchers captured and saved all news content from July 19 through July 25, 2009.

³⁷ PEJ could not capture radio news headlines from WYPR due to technical issues.

³⁸ Due to technical issues, this program was coded from a podcast available on WYPR's website.

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⁴⁰ A post from this source was referenced in the study of the six main story threads but was not included in the first level of analysis because no new relevant content was produced within the specified time frame.

Hard copies were used for all newspapers that were available in print in the Baltimore area.

Using automated software, radio programs were captured through online streams of the shows. The purpose of this method is to ensure that we have a version of the program in a manner that represents the way a typical listener would hear the program with commercials and newsbreaks. WYPR could not be captured using this method. PEJ coded talk shows from podcasts made available on the station's website. The station does not post digital copies of its daily local headlines.

Local TV newscasts were downloaded and digitally archived from the subscription-based online media monitoring database TV Eyes.

All content was then coded by a member of PEJ's staff who watches or listens to the archived version of the program.

The frequency of website captures was determined by how often content was updated and how news stories were archived. Websites that updated content frequently throughout the day were captured twice daily at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. Websites that updated less frequently but did not archive news stories were captured once a day. Blogs and other sites that archived all content were captured retroactively the week of July 27.

First Level of Analysis

An initial content analysis was conducted on all local stories that appeared on July 20, July 22 and July 24. For this analysis, basic information about each story was recorded.⁴¹ The main variables included:

Housekeeping Variables

Story Date

Source

Placement

Print Only Variable: Story Word Count

Broadcast Only Variables:

Broadcast Start Time

Story Start Time

Story End Time

Headline

Main Variables

Geographic Focus (The geographic area to which the topic of the story is relevant in relation to the location of the news source)

⁴¹ Codes for this study were adapted from the PEJ News Coverage Index.

Format (Measures the type and origin of stories. It designates, at a basic level, whether the news story is a product of original reporting, or drawn from another news source. It delineates stories within the publication or broadcast, while measuring the stories type and origin.)

Story Descriptor (A short description (approximately 5 – 15 words) of the content of each story)

Broad Story Topic (Determines the type of broad topic categories addressed by a story. The topic involves the issue/event being covered)

Analysis of Six Main Story Threads

The third phase of analysis was a close study of six major narratives identified by PEJ. For this element of the study, researchers identified all stories on the specified topics throughout the week (July 19-25, 2009).⁴² The secondary analysis included coding to derive more information about the origination, enterprise and sourcing of individual stories. They include:

Trigger (Designates the action, event or editorial decision that makes this news, thus triggering its publication. What was it that caused a story to be published on this particular occasion and this particular day?)

Cited Person(s) (The first five named human sources—no organizations as sources)

Level of Involvement of Cited Person (specifies the level of involvement of a source with a news story)

Expertise/Position (The expertise/position of the highest level source in a news story)

Newness (Indicates how much information, if any, has been added to a particular storyline)

⁴² Stories that fell outside of the broader three-day sample were coded for housekeeping and main variables as listed above.