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## **Mapping the Online News World: A News-flow Study of Three U.S. Dailies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Based on an intensive news-flow analysis, this article seeks to determine the news geographies of the online editions of the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times*. That is, by tracking the origin, source and topic of the editorial content of these daily newspapers, the article provides a comprehensive picture of their international and domestic coverage. It argues that, in spite of the increased reach the Internet affords these newspapers, they map out a highly circumscribed news world, which consists largely of their respective home states, their federal government, a handful of Washington's closest political, economic and military partners, and the battlefields of Iraq. Not only does this reinforce the news value of proximity, the results suggest that researchers need to account for the economic value of certain kinds of news coverage, particularly in the topic areas of sports and arts and entertainment.

### **INTRODUCTION**

SCHOLARS SUCH AS JAMES CAREY (1989, 1997), Benedict Anderson (1983), John Hartley (1992, 1996) and David Paul Nord (2001) have defined communities as imagined social spheres and have assigned communications media a prominent role in the constitution and maintenance of these spatial-temporal units. Because contemporary societies are large-scale and complex, they argue, we come to know our fellow citizens and our societies' histories, institutions, values, customs and rules through daily media rituals: reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, watching television, reading fiction, going to movies. The media thus comprise an important social sphere in which knowledge is produced and reproduced, in which politics takes place, in which people come to know their community and one another.

Historically, the bounds of community and our sense of belonging have shifted in accordance with societies' means of governance, commerce and warfare, enabled by the speed and range of our communication and transportation technologies. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the reach and velocity of our social, political and economic relations have increased to the extent that it is fair to ask whether the nation-state as the principal unit of social, political and economic organization has been, or is gradually being, eclipsed. Globalization was once defined primarily in economic terms, but it has now come to signify a more holistic experience involving the increased mobility of people, capital, commodities, information and images associated with: the post-industrial stage of capitalism; the development of increasingly rapid and far-ranging communication and transportation technologies; and people's improved access to these technologies (see Lorimer, Gasher & Skinner 2008).

Certainly, our notion of community is undergoing dramatic revision. If, in the age of the Internet, we are witnessing the emergence of a new media ecology on a global scale, as some scholars have argued (e.g., Carey 1998; Mattelart 2000; Castells 2001), then we must revisit the question of how the media constitute community at a time when community can mean so many different things and when the conceptual and material tools for constituting community have never been so abundant or accessible. The Geography of News Project<sup>1</sup> is a research program devoted specifically to the study of how daily newspapers construct community with their online editions; how, and by what criteria, they sketch the spatial-temporal bounds of their target audience or market; how they determine the limits of their coverage; and what this implies for our sense of community. If publishing online offers newspapers the potential to re-imagine and reformulate their coverage area and their audience, to thereby create a product distinct from their hard-copy editions, we ask, are they doing so? If so, how? And upon what bases do they map their online news geographies?

In a 2001 pilot study for this research project (Gasher & Gabriele 2004), we noted that the web site of *The Montreal Gazette*, a metropolitan newspaper, provided a distinct content package from its hard-copy edition. Its web site published articles from 97 places outside Canada and international stories accounted for 63 % of the site's editorial content, even if by far the largest source of foreign stories was the United States, and even if more than half of its editorial content was sports coverage. One-fifth of its articles were published in French. We concluded that this site was addressed to a distinct audience from those who read its hard-copy edition and confirmed at least the premise that the online environment could be the site of new news geographies.

News-flow studies offer a precise way of determining the expanse of a newspaper's community by documenting what the newspaper covers, where its news originates and who provides it. This study of the online editions of *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*, conducted during the summer of 2004, continues the work of tracing the contours and contents of online daily newspapers. Its purpose is

to determine what the results can tell us about who these newspapers are serving, about the communities they imagine.

### DRAWING BOUNDARIES, FORGING BONDS

Communities, like audiences, are not fully and naturally constituted prior to the emergence of media which seek to serve them. Media, in fact, play a significant role in constituting communities, establishing their boundaries, membership criteria and values. Building upon previous work by John Dewey and Harold Innis in particular, Carey perceived journalism as “worldmaking” and his theory of communication was rooted in the idea that “a medium implies and constitutes a world” (cited in Rosen 1997, 196). The news has a “positioning effect” on readers. Rosen (1997) writes: “[Journalists] build public stages, people them with actors, and frame the action in a certain way. They create a kind of public space and issue us an invitation to it” (198-9). Carey (1989) himself puts it this way: “We first produce the world by symbolic work and then take up residence in the world we have produced” (30).

Moving beyond the standard “transmission view of communication” in which the idea of communication is confined to “the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control” (Carey 1989, 15), he proposed a “ritual view of communication” in which communication is “directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (18). Carey writes:

Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it (21).

The dramatic arena Anderson (1983) identified was the national arena. He depicted eighteenth-century newspapers and novels as agents of nation-building and nationalism, defining the nation as “an imagined political community.” “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (15). He described the novel and the newspaper of the eighteenth century as new forms of imagining, which provided the technical means to produce in people a sense of “nation-ness.”

If novels created a “sociological landscape” through the depiction of simultaneous events tying together a population of imagined characters (35-6), newspapers presented news stories whose sharing of the news cycle—their “calendrical coincidence”—and whose juxtaposition on the newspaper page created connections among them (37-8). The short shelf life of the newspaper—its “obsolescence”—in turn created “an extraordinary

mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper-as-fiction" (39). Anderson writes:

The significance of this mass ceremony...is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion (39).

Hartley (1992, 1996), too, maintains that publics are created by institutions and discourses, arguing that "the media are simultaneously creative and participatory. They create a picture of the public, but it goes live, as it were, only when people participate in its creation, not least by turning themselves into the audience" (1992, 4). He quotes Marx in asserting that the production process does not merely produce an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object (1996, 47):

It suggests that publics and consumers are not simply people waiting passively out there for something to consume, but on the contrary that they are brought into being *as* consumers and publics by the process of cultural production itself. By this formula, then, journalism cannot simply be thought of as an industry which produces a throwaway commodity (printed paper), but as a form of cultural production which produces its own consuming subjects—the public, the consumer (1996, 47).

Audiences, therefore, are "discursive productions" (1996, 67).

But if Anderson emphasizes the *bonds* of community these media enabled, or their inclusiveness, Hartley underscores the divisions they forge, or their exclusive character. Communities, that is, are in part defined by their distinction from other communities and by specific membership criteria. Newspapers, for example, speak to a particular audience of readers, so that "news includes stories on a daily basis which enable everyone to recognize a larger unity or community than their own immediate contacts, and to identify with the news outlet as 'our' storyteller" (1992, 207). The news, Hartley argues, is organized around strategies of inclusion and exclusion from *our* community, creating domains of We-dom and They-dom, dividing people into "us" and "them." The boundaries of We-dom and They-dom are not coterminous with any formal political boundaries, but can be drawn from any number of bases: not only citizenship, but gender, race, class, ethnicity, etc. (1992, 207). News media, then, not only help to define and constitute communities, but in doing so draw boundary lines which divide communities into domains of "us" and "them."

Nord (2001) undertook an historical examination of "communities of journalism" through the case study of the Chicago daily newspaper industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Communities are built, maintained, and wrecked in communication. In static communities the most potent forms of communication are traditions—religion, myth, ritual, and habit...But when community building is an active, conscious act, as if often has been in American history, communication becomes more conscious, more formal, more organized (2).

He adds that “at the vortex of many collective efforts to build community or to undermine it has been formal, public, printed communication, including journalism” (2).

Citing Toqueville’s “associational character of journalism” (100), Nord described the Chicago *Daily News* as the first “thoroughly urban” daily, “that is, the first to articulate a vision of public community” (108-9). Early twentieth-century newspapers, he writes,

provided their audience with a limited, organized, common frame of reference, so that diverse city dwellers could communicate with each other—communicate in the sense that they could think about the same things at the same time and share a vision of social reality. These newspapers saw in the fragmenting forces of urbanization the germ of public community (111).

An exception to this trend was the *Chicago Times*, which presented news as “miscellany” with no apparent connections between news items. The *Times* “had no vision of the collective life of Chicago. The city was merely a complex of marketplaces where individuals conducted their private affairs” (113).

#### RE-DRAWING THE BOUNDARIES

If newspapers can serve as agents of community-building on the scale of the city, the region, even the nation, can they be agents of globalization as well, positioning news audiences within a larger world? If every news organization draws its own map and subsequently operates, as both a business and a news medium, within clearly demarcated geographical boundaries, can these boundaries be redrawn to encompass a larger coverage area, a broader notion of community? Is this what newspapers seek when they establish a World Wide Web site, circulating their news throughout the wired world?

Research on international news flows in the second half of the twentieth century has portrayed hard-copy daily newspapers as stubbornly resistant to internationalization, reinforcing a gulf between information haves and have-nots (see Mowlana 1997; Gerbner, Mowlana & Nordenstrang 1993; McPhail 1987; Sreberny-Mohammadi 1984). News-flow studies have consistently shown that news organizations are much more interested in some parts of the world than others, resulting in what H. Denis Wu describes as a “discrepancy between the ‘real world’ and the ‘news world’” (2000, 110).

What can the flow patterns of individual *online* newspapers tell us about how those newspapers imagine community and constitute their news audience? We chose to study *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* because they are highly respected newspapers from different regions of a multicultural country,

brand-name newspapers with extensive and sophisticated web sites, sites that we felt had the resources, and thereby the potential, to re-constitute their news geographies.

We downloaded every article from every section of their sites over a composite week between May and July, 2004. For each story, the protocol required the coder to record the: publication name; date; headline; source agency (e.g., Reuters); international filing origin (which country the story was filed from); national filing origin (which state the story was filed from, in the case of domestic stories); countries cited (in the body of the story); states cited (in the body of the story); word count; number of accompanying illustrations; and topic (based on a chart which assigned the sites' particular topic headings to the conventional sectioning of stories into: news, sports, business, arts and entertainment, and lifestyle). Excluded were statistical summaries, event listings, editorial cartoons and all advertising material.

Stories for this study were coded by three student research assistants and subjected to an ongoing inter-coder reliability test.<sup>2</sup> Once coded, data were entered into an SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) database for subsequent analysis. For each site, the analysis was concerned with: where in the world its stories originated; which foreign origins predominated and which were largely excluded; which states predominated in domestic coverage and which were largely excluded; which news agents tended to provide stories (wire services, staff, etc.); what topics foreign and domestic stories tended to address; and the relative prominence of stories from different origins (as measured by a combination of word count and number of illustrations).

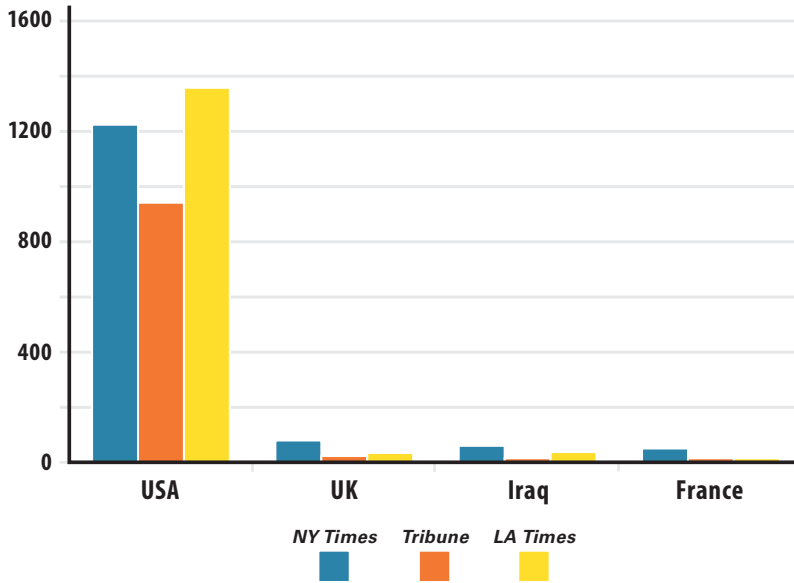
We began downloading the sites on the random date of Thursday, May 13, 2004. We then downloaded one edition of each site every eight days until we had a composite week. We coded 4,427 articles in total.

## RESULTS

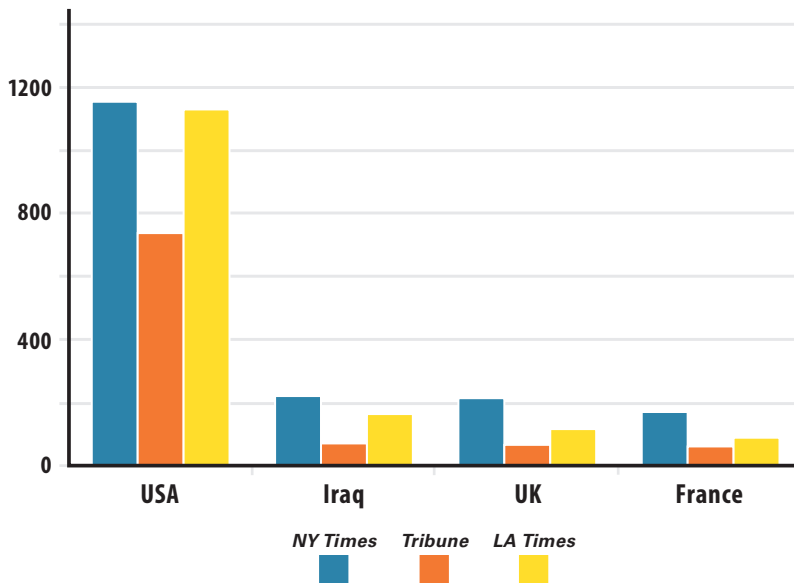
Domestic news coverage predominated on all three newspapers' web sites, accounting for 70.6 % of stories in *The New York Times*, 87% in the *Chicago Tribune* and 83.8% in the *Los Angeles Times* (see Table 1). Overall, more than 86% of the stories filed to these three sites on all topics came from four countries: the United States (79%), United Kingdom (2.8%), Iraq (2.4%) and France (1.8%). These same countries comprised the top four source countries in *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. China replaced France as the fourth-largest source of stories in the *Chicago Tribune*. The entire continent of Africa provided just 37 articles (0.8% of the total), while South America was the source of 27 stories (0.6%), 13 of those from Brazil alone. Of the top seven foreign sources for stories, four—the United Kingdom, France, Canada and Germany—are fellow travelers with the United States in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Group of Eight (G-8).

Because filing origin is not always the best indicator of a story’s subject matter—for example, stories about North Korea are rarely filed from North Korea—we also recorded the countries cited in each article (see Table 2). If the United States, Iraq,

**Table 1.**  
International Filing Origin



**Table 2.**  
Countries Cited

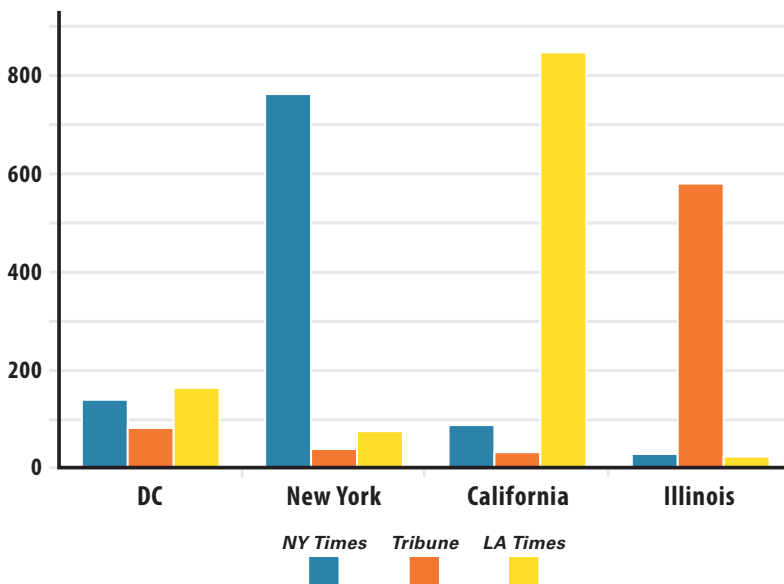


United Kingdom and France remained the countries most often cited, we noted that the countries of Africa and South America were slightly less marginal; at least one African country was cited in 5.8 % of stories and a South American country was cited in 2.8% of stories. Still, the United States was cited in 68% of the articles overall.

The prominence variable—a calculation based on the length of articles and the number of accompanying illustrations<sup>3</sup>—further qualified the international filing origin results. If domestic stories in the *Chicago Tribune* were evenly spread from brief to very long articles, 14 of 20 stories filed from the United Kingdom were brief or short, as were four of eight from France and Israel. On the other hand, nine of the eleven *Tribune* stories from Iraq were very long, as were five of the 10 stories filed from China. In the *Los Angeles Times*, too, 21 of 34 stories from Iraq were very long, as were 10 of 32 from the United Kingdom, 11 of 24 from France, eight of 14 from Israel, four of six from Saudi Arabia and five of seven from Pakistan. Seven of the 10 *Times* stories from Switzerland, however, were brief or short. More than half of the domestic stories in *The New York Times*—639 of 1220—were long or very long, as were 24 of 46 from France, 14 of 22 from Canada and seven of 15 from Russia.

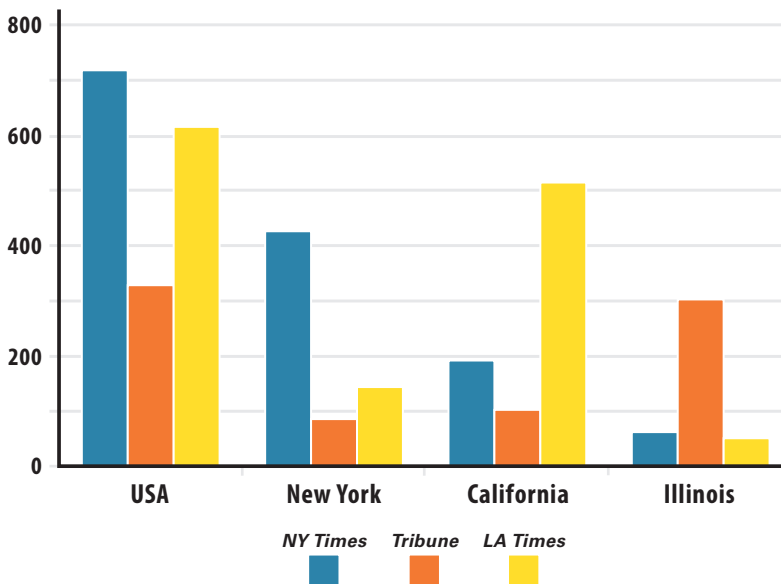
Not surprisingly, domestic stories were most often filed from the newspaper’s home state—62% in *The New York Times*, 62.8% in the *Chicago Tribune* and 62.7% in the *Los Angeles Times* (see Table 3). The District of Columbia, home of the federal government, was the No. 2 source of domestic stories in every case. Sixteen states were each the source of five or fewer stories, and the states of North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming each provided only one article to the total survey.

**Table 3.**  
**National Filing Origin**



When it came to citations in domestic stories, however, the United States as a whole was the leader in each newspaper: 58.4% of domestic stories in *The New York Times* cited the U.S. as a whole, compared to 35.5% in the *Chicago Tribune* and 45.5% in the *Los Angeles Times* (see Table 4). In each case the home state was second. The least-cited states overall were Wyoming (three citations), Idaho (eight), South Dakota (eight) and North Dakota (nine).

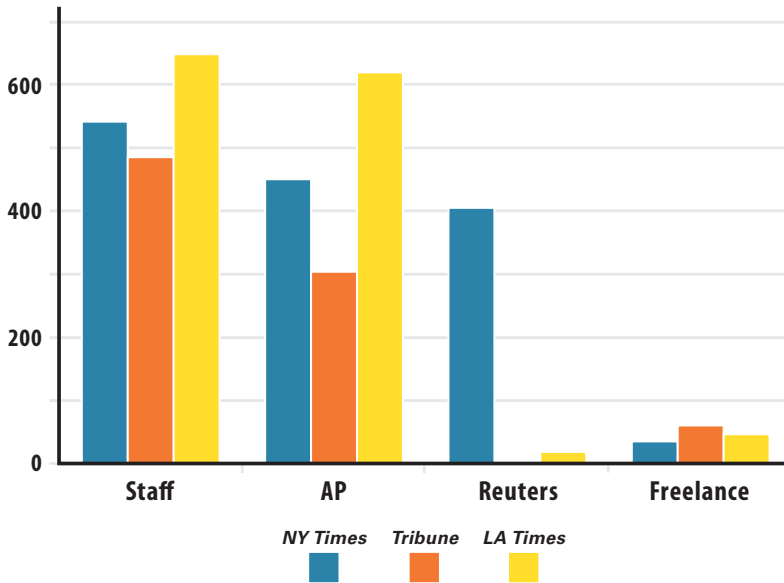
**Table 4.**  
**States Cited**



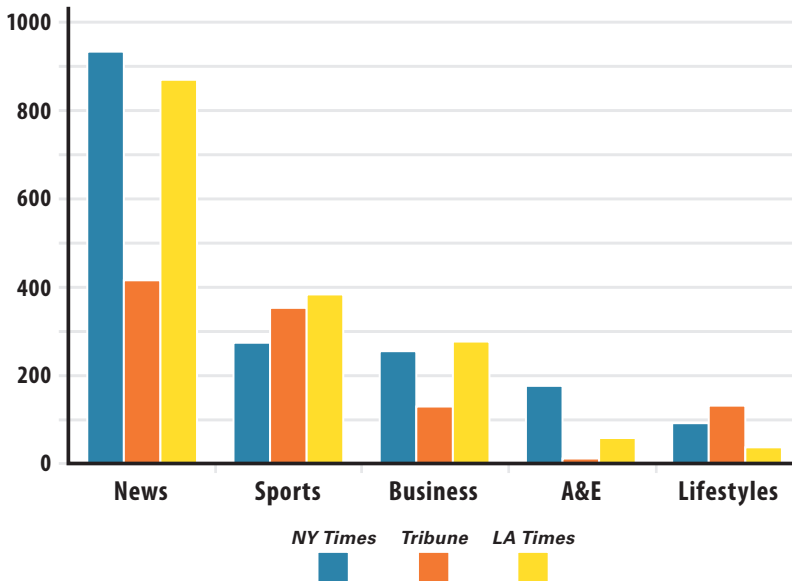
Staff reporters were the No. 1 source of content on all three sites—31.2% in *The New York Times*, 44.8% in the *Chicago Tribune*, 40% in the *Los Angeles Times*—with the Associated Press wire service second in every case (see Table 5). Close to 90% (88.7%) of *The New York Times* staff stories were domestic filings, as were 95% in the *Chicago Tribune* and 90% in the *Los Angeles Times*. Foreign coverage was largely produced by wire services.

If news, not surprisingly, was the single largest topic of articles in all three newspapers, sports was second across the board, accounting for 15.7% of articles in *The New York Times*, 32.6% in the *Chicago Tribune* and 23.5% in the *Los Angeles Times* (see Table 6). In international coverage, too, sports was clearly the No. 2 topic, accounting for 19.8% of international stories in *The New York Times*, 36.4% in the *Chicago Tribune* and 27.6% in the *Los Angeles Times*. News and sports together made up 85.7% of international coverage in *The New York Times*, 94.3% in the *Chicago Tribune* and 79.7% in the *Los Angeles Times*.

**Table 5.**  
Principle Sources



**Table 6.**  
Principle Topics



Sports, in fact, frequently overshadowed news coverage from specific countries. For example, 31 of 75 *New York Times* stories filed from Britain were sports, as were 21 of 46 from France, 11 of 22 from Canada, and three of five from Mexico. In the *Chicago*

*Tribune*, 13 of 20 stories filed from Britain were sports, as were six of eight from France, six of seven from Canada and all three from Germany. In the *Los Angeles Times*, 18 of 32 stories filed from Britain were sports items, as were 18 of 24 from France, six of seven from Canada and eight of 10 from Switzerland. Sports was the topic of all five stories in which Monaco and Belarus were cited by the three newspapers, all three in which Kazakhstan was cited, and three of five stories in which Latvia and Slovenia were cited.

Business news accounted for 14.7% of all international filings, arts and entertainment represented 13.4% of international coverage and lifestyles stories just 1.5%.

Domestically, too, sports was the principal topic in *New York Times* articles filed from Indiana, Michigan, Nevada and Texas, in *Chicago Tribune* stories filed from Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Texas, and in *Los Angeles Times* stories filed from Kentucky, Michigan and Ohio. Overall, the states of Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota and Tennessee were cited more often in sports articles than in stories covering any other topic.

## DISCUSSION

These results suggest that instead of building international bridges, these online newspapers in effect portion off the world, clearly demarcating relatively few places, peoples and topics of interest, rendering the better part of the globe largely irrelevant. They map out a very conventional and conservative notion of community in their coverage, clearly privileging stories about the United States as a whole and their respective home states. This may not be entirely surprising, but it nevertheless reveals a number of assumptions on the part of these newspapers:

- ✦ that they perceive their audiences as predominantly local or regional, drawn from the same pool of readers who buy the hard-copy versions of these newspapers;
- ✦ that they believe their audiences are primarily interested in local news, news from the national capital, and sports;
- ✦ that they imagine their audiences' interest in foreign affairs to be negligible, particularly when it comes to news from beyond Western Europe, and especially from the continents of Africa and South America;
- ✦ that they believe their audiences have a great appetite for sports coverage.

These newspapers map out a highly circumscribed news world, which consists largely of their respective home states, their federal government, a handful of Washington's closest political, economic and military partners, and the battlefields of Iraq.

But their news maps are further circumscribed in terms of the kinds of news provided. News and sports coverage predominated, accounting for more than 75% of stories overall and more than 85% of international coverage. Consequently, their

business, arts and entertainment, and lifestyles sections contained few foreign stories. This is surprising when we consider the global interconnectedness of the American economy in general, and the arts and entertainment industries in particular.

The manner in which these sites packaged their sports and arts and entertainment sections warrants special attention. All three sites had separate and extensive sports sections. The *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* offered distinct and colorful subsections for each of its city's major-league sports teams—e.g., the Chicago Bulls, the Los Angeles Dodgers—and for each of the sports it covered. The *Tribune* sports section was branded [chicagosports.com](http://chicagosports.com), but remained part of the main *Tribune* site. Clearly, each of the newspapers assigned considerable journalistic resources to their sports sections.

Each had, however, a distinct approach to arts and entertainment. While *The New York Times* included a separate arts section which accounted for slightly less than 10% of its total number of articles—90% of which were domestic—the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* assigned the bulk of their arts and entertainment coverage to separate web sites (which we considered to be distinct sites and did not include as part of our coding of these online dailies). The *Tribune* site itself carried very few arts and entertainment stories and its MetroMix section consisted primarily of listings. The *Los Angeles Times* assigned most of its arts and entertainment coverage to [calendar.com](http://calendar.com), a separate site accessible only by paid subscription.

## CONCLUSION

Our purpose here is not to lament the lack of international news coverage by the web sites of these major American daily newspapers. Instead, given the possibilities the Internet affords and the material and human resources available to these brand-name newspapers, it is to consider what their news geographies can tell us about how they imagine and constitute community in the emergent online realm.

The most obvious conclusion pertains to the news value of proximity. Journalists employ a number of criteria to determine the newsworthiness of potential news stories, and one of the most central is proximity; that is, the more geographically, culturally or emotionally close an event, the greater its news value and the more likely it will receive news coverage (Mencher 2000, 72-7). This, of course, requires a highly subjective judgment by journalists on behalf of their audiences: who and what do their readers feel close to? This is particularly revealing when it comes to decisions about cultural and emotional proximity. By concentrating their coverage on state and national events, and international events involving primarily Western European trade partners and military allies, these newspapers are drawing clear lines between what they imagine as We-dom and what they perceive as They-dom. We would suggest that these boundary lines are being drawn in part by an ethnocentrism that is at odds with a globalized world and at odds even with the geographic, cultural and emotional ties of these newspapers' own local constituents.

A second, less obvious conclusion has to do with another kind of news value; that is, the *commercial* value of particular news audiences. Specific topics, like sports, may be particularly conducive to international news flows. The attention given to sports coverage may suggest that for readers most interested in sports, that interest is less tied to the local than the interests of those who frequent the news, business and arts and entertainment sections. But more importantly, it may also be an indication of the commercial imperatives of these Web sites, which are seeking to cash in on attracting particular demographic segments of the news audience—in this case, sports fans—who have proven to be attractive to advertisers. If not all news stories can be said to have equal value, neither do all news consumers (see Hamilton 2004).

Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times*' relegation of its arts and entertainment coverage to a separate, paid-subscription site may speak to the value of this topic of news, particularly when it is produced by a newspaper located in one of the country's—and the world's—entertainment capitals. The *Times* has created a distinct media commodity with its calendar.com web site, refusing to give away for free its arts and entertainment coverage.

This suggests that our definition of news value cannot be reduced to a series of strictly professional criteria of news judgement *à la* Mencher, or reduced to the inherent properties of the news event itself. Instead, our work to date (see Gasher & Gabriele 2004; Gasher 2007; Gasher & Klein 2008) points to the need to expand the notion of news value to include the audience when it comes to the criteria by which journalists distinguish between members of We-dom and They-dom and the commercial value of particular groups of news consumers.

As a quantitative, macro-scale methodology, news-flow analysis has its limitations, of course. What we are doing in the second stage of this project is singling out particular news events and conducting textual analyses—close readings of these texts—as another, and more precise, way of determining who these newspapers are addressing, who constitutes their We-doms and They-doms.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This project, based in the Department of Journalism at Concordia University in Montreal, has received funding from Concordia University (2000-2003), le Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture (2002-2005) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2004-2007, 2008-2011). The project has employed a number of methods to measure how these media constitute community. In the initial stage of the project, we conducted a series of news-flow studies to measure *what* these newspapers covered in terms of story topic, source, place of origin and places cited. In the second stage, we are conducting a series of textual analyses to determine *how* different events are covered and, thereby, to discern the target audience for these stories.

<sup>2</sup>The formula for Scott's Pi, explained in Riffe, Lacy & Fico (1998) is a modified Chi-Square which takes into account both chance agreement and the strength of the operationalization of each variable.  $Pi = \%OA - \%EA / 1 - \%EA$  where OA = observed agreement and EA = expected agreement. The three coders had inter-coder reliability scores of greater than 80%

for every value. The author would like to thank research assistants Karen Biskin, Tina Silverstein and Philippe Gohier for their coding work, and Andreea Mandache for her help in developing the methodology.

<sup>3</sup>The prominence variable is a combination of number of illustrations accompanying an article and the number of words in the article. We gave each illustration (photograph, map, chart) a value of 100 words. The articles were then assigned one of five categories: brief (up to 199 words), short (200 to 399 words), medium (400 to 599 words), long (600 to 799 words), very long (800 words or more).

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