News Is Beginning To Look A Lot Like Christmas: A Critical History of the Holiday Shopping Season and ABC Network's Nightly News

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This thesis titled
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Abstract

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News Is Beginning To Look A Lot Like Christmas: A Critical History of the Holiday Shopping Season and ABC Network's Nightly News

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This content analysis of ABC Network Nightly News stories from 1968 through 2012 of the Christmas holiday shopping season documents specific social, cultural, and economic indicators. A critical studies approach to this research allows the examination of the social ecology where journalistic norms, news sources, business imperatives and cultural phenomena converge. Overall, the results show a 300 percent increase in the number of Christmas-related stories that aired during the first year and the final year of the study. This work contributes to the critical taxonomy of television journalism’s relationship with America’s commercial culture.
Dedication

I dedicate this academic work to my first teachers: my Dad, David Hunter, for always being there and my MamaBird, Valerie Jennings – I just wish she were here.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1985, on the day after Christmas, ABC news anchor Peter Jennings started the Thursday newscast, “If you were at the mall today we hope you were shopping for the sales, not just returning a present that didn’t fit.” This research is a closer examination of the “we” to whom Jennings is referring and professional broadcast journalism’s role in bonding the welfare of the national economy with commercial consumption.

The idea of Christmas in the United States of America has evolved over several hundred years from a forbidden colonial observance to a cultural rallying point, and national economic indicator. The evolution involved social, political and economic influences, and mass media. The market-driven realities inherent to the holiday season can create an ethical conundrum for professional journalists who produce news content within a commercial industry that is increasingly focused on maximizing profit. Media scholarship concerned with the commercialization of news and journalistic responsibility questions whether the overall quality of a news-gathering operation suffers when stories

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3 Researchers Julian Harriss, Kelly Leiter and Stanley Johnson define news as accounts of “man’s changing relationships, actual events which disrupt the status quo or which have the potential to cause such disruption, events of community consequence.” Julian Harriss, Kelly Leiter, and Stanley P. Johnson, “The complete reporter: fundamentals of news gathering, writing, and editing, complete with exercises,” New York: Macmillian, 1985): 29.
are laden with commercialized content. Academic and former journalist John H. McManus maintains, “there is positive pressure to increase ad revenue by creating content designed to whet consumers’ appetites.” While media scholar Steve M. Barkin adds, “Buffeted by market forces, electronic journalism in America has spent so much time packaging news to make it appetizing that it has lost much of its nutritional value.”

Such concerns coexist with the assertion that commercial logic is not inherently detrimental to professional journalism standards — that it is historically considered one of the key factors to have sparked the movement toward journalistic autonomy.

This content analysis of ABC Network Nightly News stories from 1968 through 2012 of the Christmas holiday shopping season documents specific social, cultural, and economic indicators. By examining story themes over time, this study’s goal is to contribute to the critical taxonomy of television journalism’s relationship with America’s commercial culture. Media researcher Leo Bogart describes “commercial culture” as perpetuating “the existing social and economic structure by making its principles the dominant and unquestioned ideology, suppressing any indications of its evils and

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impermanence, and lulling the masses of the population into a mindless acceptance of the status quo.”

Journalism is an economic, social, and cultural institution that is considered a key component in the structure and maintenance of a healthy democracy. In an effort to foster this healthy democracy, broadcast news journalists have developed a code of ethics that states professional journalists “should operate as trustees of the public, seek the truth, report it fairly and with integrity and independence, and stand accountable for their actions.” And, in the spirit of truth “clearly disclose the origin of information and label all material provided by outsiders,” and independence, “Gather and report news without fear or favor, and vigorously resist undue influence from any outside forces, including advertisers, sources, story subjects, powerful individuals, and special interest groups.”

These standards are failing to register with the national news audience. The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press has tracked views of press performance from 1985 to 2011. In 1985, 53% of the audience polled believed “news organizations are influenced by powerful people and organizations.” In 2011, 80% of the audience polled believed the same. That is a 33% increase in 26 years. And according the Pew Research Center’s State of the News Media 2013 report, nearly 31% of the two thousand adults polled say they have stopped patronizing a particular news outlet because it no longer

provides the news and information that it once did. This is a problem. The very structure of commercial media systems relies on accumulating and keeping an audience — the larger the better. And while Americans may turn to newspapers or, increasingly, to the Internet to learn about current events, television remains the primary news source.

Broadcast media offers a stunning opportunity to expand the voice of the people and the reach of the marketplace. Television is the proverbial north star of this country’s commercial media landscape. Soon after its introduction in the 1940s investors saw its potential, and broadcast radio stations and film studios took notice. Three primary television networks emerged from the entrepreneurial run at the new industry. Both the Columbia Broadcast System (CBS) and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) were established radio companies before adding television stations. The third and smallest network was the American Broadcasting Company (ABC). ABC began as a division spinoff from NBC. It was decades younger than its competition and did not have the wealth of programming to sell to advertisers in order to fund its operation. Since its inception, the television network has been committed to gaining and maintaining the widest possible profit margins. ABC was always in the hunt. ABC’s efforts to build viewership have noticeably affected the way news is presented on television, over the last

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four decades. Its history of catering to consumer-oriented fare offers an ideal framework to examine how journalism’s professional standards can coexist with the pressing economic realities of a news operation in a commercial society.

Once upon a time, broadcast journalism was not produced with its own economic survival in mind. News dissemination was considered a public service and not expected to make a profit. This is not to say that the network newsroom was ever divorced of the economic realities of the media industry. News programming on commercial stations has always included advertisements. There was an era when the entire news broadcast was sponsored by a single corporation — and the corporation, when it saw fit, shaped the news content. Even with the assigned sponsorship, on a whole, news departments were not compelled to make a profit or break even. Money spent investigating and reporting news items was done in the name of the public’s interest and subsidized, as needed, by the ad revenue garnered by the media outlet’s entertainment programming. Standing on the cherished standards professional independence, journalists valued their sovereignty from their corporation’s sales and advertising departments. While news managers did not have open-ended budgets, their operating costs were rarely questioned. The unwritten law

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18 In 1946 NBC aired The Esso Newsreel three days a week. It was sponsored by Esso Gasoline. (Barkin, American Television News, 28). From 1949 - 1955 NBC’s national weeknight fifteen-minute newscast was The Camel News Caravan “produced for Camel Cigarettes by NBC” sponsored by the Camel cigarette company. The broadcast was infused with segments that directly referenced the sponsor. Camel also “banned all film of news that happened to take place where a No Smoking sign could be seen in the background.” (Bagdikian, The Media Monopoly, 156). In 1955 Camel reduced sponsorship to three nights a week - on those other nights it became the Plymouth News Caravan sponsored by the Chrysler car company. (http://www.newseum.org/news/2009/06/have-a-camel--cup-of-joe.html).
that separated the newsroom from the boardroom helped reinforce the journalistic ethic of professional autonomy from financial influence.20

During the late 1990s, when national economic conditions made advertising dollars scarce, newsrooms were forced to reassess their budgets just like any other corporate department.21 The ownership structure of the three broadcast networks had changed, and since the mid 1980s networks were no longer family-owned companies; they were conglomeration-owned revenue streams. Once corporate ideology was introduced to the newsroom, it was not long before journalists were forced to justify the costs of covering the day’s news.22 And when cutting costs did not yield enough profit the bosses cut staff.

The 21st century is marked by the displacement of thousands of journalists and the closing of longstanding newspapers and local news operations and smaller network news divisions.23 Those still producing news content find the barrier between the sales department and the newsroom has virtually dissolved. Once again, sponsored news sets, graphics, weathercasts, segments, and product placement are viable sources of revenue at broadcast news outlets.24 Again, there is a history of advertising occupying a dominant place within the newscast but the heightened concern in this financially focused media

22 Marc Kusnetz, “Network news’s perfect storm: ‘productivity, a central and venerable tenet of corporate culture, began to occupy the world of news in a way it previously had not.’” Nieman Reports no. 4 (2007): 75.
landscape is the socio-political and cultural impact of editorial content subletting promotional material.

My interest in our profession’s participation in this country’s culture of consumerism stems from my career as a television news producer and news department manager. Over the course of my twenty years in the local television news industry, I experienced the transformation in newsroom attitude that began to include opportunities for newscasts to generate income. Media sales departments often looked for ways to grant corporate entities appearances within the newscast content. Public relations personnel consistently engaged journalists in an effort to secure media exposure for their client’s product. During the shopping holidays, the seasonal mentions of the so-called “hottest gifts” and “new gift ideas” were often stoked by products sent, unsolicited, to the newsroom. This yearly story ritual made me curious about the role news journalists play in the information and consumption process in our country. The aforementioned practices fly in the face of efforts to raise journalism above the profit-first fray\textsuperscript{25} and play into the critique of news media as an apparatus endeared to maintaining capitalism and the interests of the ruling class.\textsuperscript{26}

Research documenting the history of key cultural holidays in America outlines the influence of advertisers and media outlets on the shaping of those celebrations for the sake of the consumption of material goods.\textsuperscript{27} And studies analyzing the relationship

between local news broadcasts and advertisers have found commercial influence on editorial content is “ubiquitous” in local television markets — the training ground for staff who go on to work at network news operations.28 But, to date, there is no research that analyzes the news content regarding an increasingly market-driven cultural experience over time. This study will analyze how the material aspect of a religious and government holiday has been reflected within the commercial industry via the occupation that promotes its dedication to the pursuit of professional autonomy and national democracy. The goal of this work is to add to the conversation examining broadcast journalism’s responsibility and participation in the United States of America’s commercial culture.

I will use the following chapter to present this nation’s history of the Christmas shopping season and the efforts to professionalize the field of journalism. I will then chronicle ABC’s efforts to create a profitable nightly news operation. Chapter 2 begins with an explanation of the study’s theoretical framework. Chapters 3 will detail the methodology, research question and hypotheses. Chapter 4 will present the results of both the quantitative and qualitative content analysis of more than 40 years of ABC’s national news coverage of the Christmas holiday shopping season. Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of the findings as they relate to the theoretical framework and provide suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

Critical theory provides the framework to not only describe, but more importantly, question the impact of social-cultural phenomena on communication conditions. Communications studies scholar Slavko Splichal explains that critical analysis, “is focused on contradictions and conflicts in contemporary societies, which are often rooted in the alienating conditions of individuals and social groups.” The activist-oriented theory is born out of the Marxist critique of capitalist society and has grown to include several different perspectives that stress the importance of historical context when questioning the social, political, economic, and/or cultural order with the expectation of revealing power plays that result in oppression and exploitation and how those dynamics can be eliminated. Critical theory emerged from social scientists and philosophers working within the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt in the 1920s. By the next decade, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and others who came to be known as the “Frankfurt school” began to center their research on analyzing the rise and failings of the socio-political economic environment in regards to citizenship in a democracy. It is from this line of critique that Horkheimer and Adorno damn the “culture industry” or mass media as a tool that co-opts and manufactures culture for profit of elite capitalists. “In addition there is the agreement — or at least the determination — of all executive authorities not to produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above all

30 David Held, Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980): xi. The early 1900s had experienced revolutionary upheaval in Russia and Germany, the rise of Nazism, fascism, world wars, and the installation of liberal capitalism as the dominant world order.
themselves.”31 This pessimistic critique introduces the central concept of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Gramsci posits that ruling groups attempt to legitimize their power by making their own culture into the socially dominant culture by using “everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly” of which “the press is the most dynamic part of this ideological structure.”32 Critical theorist Jürgen Habermas advances critical theory by analyzing the patterns of communication within a capitalist society. Habermas maintains individuals learn through interaction in the public sphere, “the realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed.”33 He pointedly faults commercialized journalism for clouding the democratic discourse within the community, “In the transition from the literary journalism of pirate individuals to the public services of the mass media, the public sphere was transformed by the influx of private interests, which received special prominence in the mass media.”34

These key works of critical theory make it a hard sell for those who do not concede omnipotent power to the influence of media in an individual’s life, but the critical theory line of inquiry does provide an introspective way to examine society’s

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34 Ibid., 78.
“-isms”. Journalism is one of those “-isms”; it serves as a set of beliefs and practices that govern news media content in any given society. Historian John Nerone notes, “…any form of journalism will distinguish news that falls under its discipline from other forms of news. In the modern era, for instance, journalism has designated its ‘other’ in various ways as gossip, tabloid news, sensationalism, partisanship, and so forth. It does not deny that these are news practices, but it does question whether these are journalism.”

Hanno Hardt advises that viewing a society’s cultural history through critical theory’s cultural studies perspective “exposes the reigning ideology in society,” and in the case of journalism would “test its validity as a cherished and celebrated principle of society under current economic and political conditions.” In other words, from a critical cultural studies approach, news text is examined for interpretations of norms that are detrimental to those who are politically or economically coerced into supporting the interests of the power elite. This becomes an issue when the information reported is accepted as the true reality as opposed to a version of events, and the audience is inclined to act on that alleged reality.

But to focus solely on the news media’s cultural impact without also considering its economic imperatives — and vice versa — is problematic because, as Eileen Meehan’s *Conceptualizing Culture as a Commodity: The Problem of Television* writes, “…television always and simultaneously presents a vision for interpretation and an ideology for consumption to a viewership that is always and simultaneously a public celebrating meaning and an audience produced for sale in the marketplace.”³⁹ A critical political economy perspective attempts to shift attention away from the conception of the mass media as ideological apparatuses of the State to focus on the manner in which the financial goals of mass media organizations affects the public good.⁴⁰ This approach to media research examines corporate ownership patterns and how they leverage state regulations, the nature of the media that actually gets produced as a result, and what happens as a result of the consumption of the media in question. Peter Golding and Graham Murdock, key architects of this critique, explain the concern is whether this information is presented as the irrefutable truth.

… or whether they provide space for the articulation of counter-discourses. Also, how is the available discourse handled within the text? Whether they are arranged in a clearly marked hearth of credibility which urges the audience to prefer one over the others, or whether they are treated in a more even-handed and indeterminate way which leaves the audience with a more open choice.⁴¹

This concern fuels research regarding the commercialization of news and its impact on the audience’s receipt of the unadulterated information needed to function in a liberal

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democratic society. According to media scholar Robert McChesney, “to some extent, the
great crisis in journalism today is inherent in a system of private capitalist control over
news media combined with advertising providing the majority of revenues.”42 Another
staunch opponent of media conglomerates, media educator and former journalist, Ben
Bagdikian writes, “once one or a few companies dominate a substantial part of any
market, whether it is in detergents or news, they have wide latitude in setting prices and
altering the product without fear of significant competition.”43

A critical studies approach to this analysis of ABC News’ treatment of the
Christmas holiday shopping season over time allows the examination of the social
ecology where journalistic norms, news sources, business imperatives and cultural
phenomena converge. Through the course of this chapter I will outline the history of the
holiday in question, the efforts to professionalize journalism, and ABC Network’s
maneuvers to grow their news audience in an attempt to place these three American
institutions in context.

History of Christmas

The yearly anticipation of December’s 25th day comes bundled with excitement
and promise: Christians look forward to celebrating the life of Jesus, the impending gift
exchange delivered by Santa and his helpers excites others, and for most corporate
entities it is opportunity to increase or meet the bottom line.44

42 Robert W. McChesney, “Farewell to Journalism?” Journalism Practice 6, no. 5/6 (October
2012): 616.
44 Emek Basker, “’Twas four weeks before Christmas: Retail sales and the length of the Christmas
shopping season,”Economics Letters 89, no. 3 (2005): 317-322; Warren J. Blumenfeld, "The (Christian)
Month of December," Free Inquiry 31, no. 6 (2011): 45-47; Edgar S. Nash, “Why do we do what we do at
Christmas,” Saturday Evening Post, November 1993: 34-73.
Christmas was not always a prominent religious or government sanctioned holiday. Its underwhelming status in early American society was due in part to the angst generated by conflict between the quiet religious observance and the explicit carnival celebration. Historians attribute the progressive popularity of the holiday and the holy day to political, cultural, and concentrated commercial effort that included advocacy from mass media.45

In the late 1600s, acknowledging the imported European holiday in Massachusetts could cost celebrants five shillings. Puritan rule of the colonies held to the fact that there is no Biblical reason for honoring December 25th as the birth date of Jesus. They understood the holy day’s origins as an attempt in the 4th century to transform the pagan solstice festival.46 The devout also detested the annual carnival because of the rowdy way it celebrated the end of the harvest and slaughter season. The raucous activities lasted through the new year. Newspaper accounts in the 1680s describe the season, “The Feast of Christ’s Nativity is spent in Reveling, Dicing, Carding, Masking, and in all Licentious Liberty… by Mad Mirth, by long Eating, by hard Drinking, by lewd Gaming, by rude Reveling…”47 Even caroling during Christmas and New Year’s was frowned upon,


primarily because open-air singing was often accompanied by mumming (cross dressing) and chambering (fornicating).48

According to historian Stephen Nissenbaum, these days of chaos had a ritualized order of social inversion - the urban poor were allowed to wassail, that is, to march uninvited and unannounced into a rich person’s home, demand food, beer, and even money, all while singing short songs that ended in crude threats; servants were served by their masters, women dressed and acted like men, peasants like the elite. Initially, the wealthy did not fight this tradition, as it seemed to serve as a way to make up for a year’s worth of incidences and grievances against them.49

By the mid-1700s the colonies’ most vocal Christians were trading their Christmas season vitriol for reclamation of the season to be marked with quiet family celebrations. And with the Christmas and New Year excesses increasingly degenerating into clashes between the classes and the races in the new nation’s growing urban centers, something had to be done. In the early 1800s newspapers in Boston worked with local clergy to recast December 25 as a religious holiday. The press ran letters and editorials asking merchants to close their businesses so people could attend church. But by the early 1820s it was back to business as usual — quite literally — most of the churches were closed and the markets were open. Indicative of the change in sentiment, the January 2, 1824, edition of the New England Galaxy advocated for businessmen to “pursue their occupations openly,” and cheered the fact that there were no laws “civil or divine” that

48 Nissenbaum, 7.
49 Nissenbaum, 11.
required “the observance of the feasts of the papal and Episcopal churches.” During this same time period in New York City, the elite were hoping St. Nicholas could do what the clergy could not.

_Taming the Culture with Santa Claus_

In Holland, St. Nicholas, also known as Sinter Claas, served as the patron saint of children and on St. Nicholas Day, December 6, he and Black Pete, his devilish enforcer, gifted or punished children based on their behavior. John Pintard, the founder of the New York Historical Society, introduced St. Nicholas to America as the patron saint of New York City in the early 1800s. This icon of the Historical Society was popularized by fellow member Washington Irving with his book _A History of New York, From the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty._

Thus, having quietly settled themselves down, and provided for their own comfort, they bethought themselves of testifying their gratitude to the great and good St Nicholas, for his protecting care, in guiding them to this delocatable abode.

To this end they built a fair and goodly chapel within the fort, which they consecrated to his name; whereupon he immediately took the town of New Amsterdam under his peculiar patronage, and he has ever since been, and I devoutly hope will ever be, the tutelar saint of this excellent city.

Irving's satire is credited with providing the cultural backstory for the conservative, primarily Episcopalarian aristocracy who considered the hustle and bustle of a growing New York City an abomination of a proper patrician society. Irving’s book, more

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50 Nissenbaum, 47.
53 Mary Weatherspoon Bowden, "Knickerbocker's History and the 'Enlightened' Men of New York City," _American Literature: A Journal Of Literary History, Criticism, And Bibliography_ 47, no. 2
commonly known as *Knickerbocker’s History of New York*, outlined a history that was the antithesis of all that was wrong with the current plebian democracy and created a version of St. Nicholas who was slightly more down to earth than his European counterpart. But he still wasn’t associated with Christmas – and exchanging presents was still primarily a New Year’s Day custom.

Those traditions would begin to change in the second decade of the 1800s. Newspaper advertisements began specifically touting merchants’ stock of “Christmas and New Year’s presents.” In 1821, the book *The Children’s Friend* published by William B. Gilley as a New Year’s Eve gift is one of the key artifacts in the evolution of St. Nicholas. In the book, “Old Santeclaus” is still a religious figure who promises harsh punishment for the disobedient, but this narrative drops his Dutch sidekick, Black Peter, and changes his mode of transportation and his nightside visits from St. Nicholas Day:

Old Santeclaus with much delight
His reindeer drives this frosty night,
O’er chimney tops, and tracks of snow
To bring his yearly gifts to you.

The steady friend of virtuous youth,
The friend of duty, and of truth,
Each Christmas eve he joys to come
Where love and peace have made their home

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It was another Knickerbocker aristocrat who used this poem as a guide to advance the legend of St. Nicholas in America. Clement Moore’s poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas (Twas the night before Christmas)” was published in an upstate New York newspaper in 1823. In Moore’s story, St. Nicholas was not a bishop but a “jolly old elf” who “looked like a peddler.”56 But more importantly, in pictures and in words, St. Nick was now a folk hero who brought nice children special gifts.57 And it is as a commoner that this patron saint of proper social decorum, the New York Historical Society’s icon, taught believers how to abandon the very behavior and culture its founding father deplored.

*The Christmas Consumer Culture Industry*

While the religious and the social power structures were trying to figure out how to control and contain the Christmas holiday season, the marketplace found ways to capitalize on it. Prior to the Civil War, the town-festival quality of Christmas stayed within America’s regional ethnic communities. But the war weighed heavily over the emerging nation and Christmas’ communal spirit provided the ideal backdrop for stories crafted to foster a sense of happiness, unity, and growth by consumption.58 Where gift-giving initially was commonly food or unique handmade items, this began to change with the country’s socio-economic developments of the late 18th and early 19th century. This “market revolution,” and era of rapid industrialization marks the rise of America's capitalist economic system.59 As historian John Lauritz Larson explains, “it seems clear

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58 Restad, 146.
enough that sometime after the Revolution and before the Civil War Americans allowed market forces and market relations to banish all kinds of emotional attachments, customary rights, familial considerations, class and gender privileges that once had cushioned (or clouded?) their material interactions.60 Religion scholar Leigh Eric Schmidt notes that this period led to the “growing diffusion of goods through industrial production facilitated the democratization of courtly exchange.”61 As values slowly shifted toward individual success and material wealth giving mass-produced, high-end novelties became based more on competition and aspirations to gentility than goodwill. Historians credit the burgeoning “penny press” with helping to pass along images and stories of how Christmas was celebrated in European nations for creating the desire to mimic and elaborate certain holiday customs in America.62 Newspaper ads were increasingly ornate and separate sections of “Holiday Advertisements” started appearing in the 1840s.63 In 1860, The New York Times followed the lead of other newspapers and offered shopping guides for consumers. Twenty years later The Grey Lady denounced the commercialism and “vulgar ostentation” of the season. The Christmas Eve editorial accused most Americans of not having the, “moral courage to be economical or even sensible,” adding “all people of all classes vie with each other in the costliness of their presents.”64 The religious faction also stepped in to counter the focus on consumption with campaigns to increase the profile of Christmas as a product of the nativity of Jesus.

61 Schmidt, 113.
63 Nissenbaum, 136.
64 Schmidt, 183.
and at the very least, time to give charity to the less fortunate.\textsuperscript{65} But there was no turning back – storeowners found use for Jesus and Santa. One inspired the spirit of giving and the other welcomed shoppers to the stores.

Christmas was solidified as an income generator when on Christmas Eve in 1867 Macy’s department store in New York City stayed open until midnight. Consumers rewarded the store with sales so significant that by the next season other retailers created their own version of “extended holiday hours” on the night before Christmas.\textsuperscript{66} A generation of this last-minute shopping rush ultimately led Progressive Era reformers to mount a national Shop Early campaign that begged consumers in 1915, “For the sake of humanity, shop early,” and have mercy on store clerks.\textsuperscript{67} Retailers were none too happy to pick up on this cue, not by just advertising earlier but also by creating events that would compel potential customers to, at the very least, window shop weeks prior to Christmas. Macy’s held its first Thanksgiving Day Parade in 1924. The event served as a kick-off to the holiday shopping season with Santa Claus as its final float.\textsuperscript{68}

It is the financial promise of Christmas gift shopping that, with the help of print media, stabilized the current holiday calendar. In 1939, November had five Thursdays; Thanksgiving at the end of the month meant a shortened shopping season and, possibly, lower retail profits. Retail titan Fred Lazarus, Jr. launched a public relations campaign to permanently move Thanksgiving to the week prior.\textsuperscript{69} Print media editorials championed

\textsuperscript{65} Waits, 173.
\textsuperscript{66} Erb, 27.
\textsuperscript{67} Schmidt,186.
\textsuperscript{68} “Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade,” accessed May 16, 2013, http://social.macys.com/parade/#/about/history/1
\textsuperscript{69} http://www.fds.com/press-room/macysinc-history/1900-1949/default.aspx
Lazarus was the Columbus, Ohio-based chairman of Federated Department Stores, Inc., a holding company for several large
his cause to the White House. Eager to jumpstart the post-Depression economy, President Franklin D. Roosevelt quickly proclaimed in 1939 that, from that point on, Thanksgiving would take place during the 4th week of November. Of course, that mass media would advocate for socio-political change is not new. But what is particularly interesting is how, while newspaper managers were pressing ways to ensure an extra week of advertising sales, newspaper reporters were actually taking steps to drop their reputation as subjective players in public discourse.

*The Culture of Journalism*

The turn of the century also saw the rise of what has become an enduring norm of professional journalism. The Progressive Era reforms toward “objectivity” grew from attempts to answer a history of criticism of the press as blatantly promoting partisan ideals, the exploitation of scandal and sensationalism, and catering to elite interests. Communications scholar Dan Schiller maintains the rise of the “penny press” in the 1830s as the advent of objectivity and “the commercial newspapers’ appropriation of a crucial political function — the surveillance of the public good.” Newspapers were now reliant on advertising revenue and sales to the general public as opposed to subscribers to a particular party line. It made greater business sense to agnostically print information that might appeal to the greatest common denominator. While journalism sociologist Michael Schudson points to this as a critical time in the developing consciousness of

family-owned department stores throughout the country, including Filene’s in Boston, Abraham & Straus in Brooklyn, Shillito’s in Cincinnati, and F&R Lazarus in Columbus.

70 Erb, 24.


news gatherers by noting that reporters, “saw themselves, in part, as scientists uncovering
the economic and political facts of industrial life more boldly, more clearly, and more
‘realistically’ than anyone had done before.”73 Schudson maintains that practicing
objectivity as the promotion of facts and shunning of values with the discipline of
verification came much later and was emphasized in response to “pessimism about the
institutions of democracy and capitalism” after the First World War.74 By pledging to
operate by a number of principles, including independence and impartiality, news
editorial personnel were separating themselves from other media professionals, namely
public relations agents hired by business owners to promote positive media stories about
their products, and propagandists hired by the President Woodrow Wilson’s
administration to promote support for the war effort.75 Esteemed journalist Walter
Lippmann considered the empirical pursuit of news gathering paramount to a fully
functioning democracy and advised in 1920:

> With this increase of prestige must go a professional training in journalism in
which the ideal of objective testimony is cardinal. The cynicism of the trade needs
to be abandoned, for the true patterns of the journalistic apprentice are not the
slick persons who scoop the news, but the patient and fearless men of science who
have labored to see what the world really is.76

Historian John Nerone refers to early 20th century’s professionalization project as a
“brokered settlement” that gave journalists a degree of autonomy, media owners an air
self-regulated responsibility, and the public a sense of relief that they would receive news

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73 Michael Schudson, Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers (New
74 Schudson, 126.
75 These public relations professionals were trained journalists, too. During this time, Columbia
University’s newly endowed Pulitzer School of Journalism produced more public relations than news
that they could trust.\footnote{Nerone, “The Historical Roots of the Normative Model of Journalism,” 450.} The movement was buttressed by the proliferation of journalism schools, professional societies, and codes of ethics. Hallin asserts that, in the late 1940s, the Commission on Freedom of the Press crystallized the American model of professional journalism by fusing the ideology of public service with objectivity. The Commission broadly defined press to include all forms of mass media and, “was concerned both with the danger that media owners would exclude political views contrary to their own, and the danger that commercialization would undermine responsible reporting.”\footnote{Hallin, “Commercialism and Professionalism in American News Media,” 219.} The title of the Commission’s general report, \textit{A Free and Responsible Press}, encapsulated its final warning for the country’s news outlets, “Freedom of the press for the coming period can only continue as an accountable freedom.”\footnote{\textit{A Free and Responsible Press: A General Report on Mass Communication: Newspapers, Radio, Motion Pictures, Magazines, and Books}, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947).} And in order to improve the press’s ability to inform citizens the report offered a number of advisements including hiring better-educated reporters. The general report did not sit well with most working journalists, critics pointed out that the Commission members were public intellectuals and professors — not journalists.\footnote{Stephen Bates, "Public Intellectuals as Media Critics," \textit{Society} 46, no. 2 (March 2009): 124.} Still, the suggestions provided the foundation for the "social responsibility" theory of the press, became the credo for journalism education departments, and influenced journalism research.\footnote{Ibid.}

\textit{Evolution of the Commercial Broadcast Industry}

The Commission’s survey of the broadcast industry came to a similar conclusion — most notably calling for radio to “temper its commercialism with professional

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \footnote{Nerone, “The Historical Roots of the Normative Model of Journalism,” 450.}
\item \footnote{Hallin, “Commercialism and Professionalism in American News Media,” 219.}
\item \footnote{Stephen Bates, "Public Intellectuals as Media Critics," \textit{Society} 46, no. 2 (March 2009): 124.}
\item \footnote{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
During its early years radio was a hobby, an educational opportunity, and a publicity outlet. Its emergence as a commercial medium developed during the first decade of the 20th century. In 1927, the federal government began regulating radio broadcast licensing with the mandate that stations act for “public interest, convenience and necessity.”

Large companies that assembled networks of stations throughout the country eschewed radio broadcasting funding options that included licensing fees, taxation plans, and private endowments in favor of selling program sponsorships. But advertisers had to be convinced that radio listeners could be valued customers. In the late 1920s broadcasting networks looking to offset the costs of running national operations launched media campaigns to sell radio’s ability to “fulfill advertisers’ needs by appealing to consumers’ senses, providing control over the surround material, becoming an integral part of the advertising campaign, improving brand name awareness, and involving dealers with the products.”

From that point, cultural historian Susan Smulyan explains that American broadcasting, “proved to be directly commercial, passive and homogenized, promoting consumption as the way to happiness.” Just like its entertainment programming, news broadcasts were sponsored by corporations and that commercial media business model would carry over into the next incarnation of mass media. Media policy scholar Steven Barnett writes, “American radio journalism, and

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84 Cong. Rec., 70th Cong., 1927, 1163.
86 Smulyan, 165.
from there television journalism, was therefore left to the vagaries of commercial sponsors and the broadcasters’ own sense of public responsibility.”

But broadcast journalists have a history of being just as protective of their independence and integrity as print journalists. Journalism scholars Upshaw, Chernov, and Koranda link reforms aimed at stemming corporate influence with inspiring the ethical codes that initially guided the separation of financial from editorial interests in television news. “The news/ad wall was rooted in a concern that if journalists are influenced by their employers’ business relationships, including the recruitment and retention of advertisers, journalistic independence would be compromised.” As referenced in the first chapter, in the early days of broadcasting corporate sponsors made willful and, often times, successful attempts to influence editorial content within news broadcasts. In 1970, sociologist Herbert Gans’ research credited journalists’ professional values with keeping national news content from being censored by advertisers but added that they are mindful of the pressure, “…they are apt to be more cautious in processing news that could antagonize advertisers, making sure that convincing evidence supports their stories. In case of pressure, they must be able to defend what they choose to make news.” Thirty years later, a survey of national news correspondents found similar results with 7% feeling some attempt at story influence


89 Bagdikian, 156.

from advertisers; nearly 20% felt that same type of pressure from the corporate owners.\textsuperscript{91} Still, critics of commercial media maintain the ideals that define professional journalism as a public trust are perceptibly missing from the current news culture’s story quality.\textsuperscript{92} Traditionally, broadcast journalists were not expected to think in terms of pleasing corporate sponsors. The production of news was seen as a public service, a network’s responsibility.\textsuperscript{93} Granted, this notion, while fueled by the evolution of journalism’s professional standards is more commonly linked to federal regulations of the industry. The 1934 Federal Communication Act created the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) to serve as the supreme conscious guiding the radio industry’s self-monitoring on the audience’s behalf.\textsuperscript{94} Networks wanted to show that they were deserving of the broadcasting licenses and First Amendment protection by delivering on the FCC’s mission to protect the airwaves in the “public interest, public convenience and necessity.”\textsuperscript{95}

The 1949 Fairness Doctrine was another attempt to regulate not only the business and financial practices of the broadcast industry but also its content. Under these standards broadcasters had to “encourage and implement the broadcast of all sides of


\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{95} Hallin, “Commercialism and Professionalism in American News Media,” 224.
controversial public issues.”

The mandate was predicated on the broadcast industry being keepers of the “public’s trust.” This pattern of federal oversight would continue as the advent of the television industry took its business and programming cues from the broadcast industry it succeeded.

But journalism scholars Shoemaker and Reese contend the fairness doctrine did not ensure free speech within the world of commercial media. “Some broadcasters even adopted policies to avoid controversial issues, for fear that interest groups would complain to the FCC and therefore put the station's license renewal at risk.”

Within the next generation the concept of commercial media companies owing the audience full access to diverse philosophies and educational programs would be successfully challenged and disabled in the name of free market capitalism. A series of deregulatory measures that began under President Ronald Reagan’s administration in the 1980s opened the field of competition against ABC, NBC, and CBS. The rise of cable television and home video left the three major networks at a financial loss. The splintering of the television audience suggested a vulnerability that the networks had not previously experienced. Once stock prices began to drop each company became susceptible to corporate takeover. Within six months after the FCC relaxed media ownership rules in 1985 each of the networks had new owners. ABC was the first to

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97 Barkin, 22.


99 Barkin, 175.


101 Auletta, 49 -89.
change ownership. Its takeover by the much smaller Capital Cities Communications company marked the first time any of the networks had changed hands since 1953. The FCC repealed the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 saying the measure impinged on free speech for electronic journalists. In the hearing FCC Chairman Dennis Patrick proclaimed, “Today we reaffirm our faith in the American people. Our faith in their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction without any help from government.”\textsuperscript{102}

But if this measure was to help professional journalists their bosses failed to read the memo. Changes in ownership began pushing changes in the way newsrooms operated.

In journalist Ken Auletta’s account of how the big three networks ended up being absorbed by conglomerates, he laments the new owners’ logic. “In their haste to impose a new order, to defend shareholder rights, sometimes they failed to see the unintended damage to their investment and to their public trust.”\textsuperscript{103} And after constructing a model of market forces shaping the news content of commercial news corporations, professor John McManus posits, “The more the economic, or market, model of news selection is followed, the less valuable the news becomes as a resource for citizens.”\textsuperscript{104}

Douglas Kellner’s seminal study, “Television And The Crisis Of Democracy” provides a critical qualitative analysis of production practices and values that blaspheme professional journalism’s long-held norms. The media researcher’s examination of major news stories reported by mainstream media outlets lead him to conclude that audiences are being denied the protection of a “watchdog.”


\textsuperscript{103} Auletta, 971.

Hence corporate control severely compromises the democratic functions of television and renders it, first and foremost, an instrument of social control and legitimation, rather than a medium of information and democratic debate.\(^{105}\)

In later research, Kellner also notes that network television, in particular, is too full of contradictions to operate as an efficient ideological apparatus because although it “never broadcasts adequate analyses or critiques of advanced capitalism, or never proposes radical alternatives to its problems” it does, however simplistically, depict “the system’s failings” which could ultimately undermine confidence in the system.\(^{106}\) By documenting a particular area of news coverage this research is an attempt to examine whether commercial influences are, indeed, a component of national journalistic fare. Studies that examined the content of the ABC, NBC, and CBS network nightly newscasts have revealed a significant level of conformity in terms of which stories were covered and how they were presented.\(^{107}\) Broadcast researcher David L. Jaffe’s work to develop a standard of measurement of network newscasts based on journalistic standards identified ABC as being the most committed to investigative journalism and presenting stories that have a greater chance of becoming important news of the day in 1987.\(^{108}\)


The Commercial Culture of ABC News

Of the three commercial network evening news programs, ABC’s thirty-minute broadcast is the youngest. *ABC Evening News* debuted in 1967, more than three years after the NBC and CBS newscasts debuted their half-hour formats. The network itself trailed its competition, due, in part, to the fact that it was the last to begin operation. The network started as a spin-off of NBC’s radio network in 1943 and began broadcasting as ABC two years later. In 1953, the FCC approved United Paramount Theaters’ merger with the nation’s newest network. This peripheral association with motion pictures would help the television corporation to engineer a groundbreaking programming deal with the movie industry. Hollywood executives had scorned the television industry with the expectation that the new medium would siphon profits. But Walt Disney’s need for funds to build an amusement park in Anaheim, California lead him to ABC’s programming deal in 1954. The medium-crossing partnership eventually led to similar deals with other movie studios. Still, NBC and CBS had a multi-decade head start on building an audience and the advertisers that followed. In the late 1950s, ABC commissioned mass communication researcher Dr. Paul Lazarsfeld to create an analysis of television audiences. Lazarsfeld found both CBS and NBC network viewers were attracted to the television version of the shows they listened to on those same radio networks. Lazarsfeld advised audience-hungry ABC to abandon efforts to pull viewers who were loyal to the network’s competition and focus on attracting a younger viewership, because the older


111 Goldenson and Wolf, 130-137.
audience was generally satisfied with its media choices. ABC used this research to create demographic profiles of its programming audiences, then it pushed the concept that while it did not have as many people watching its network it had the advertisers’ most desired potential customers – 19 to 49 year olds. ABC actually sold this concept of tracking audience demographics to advertising agencies. It continues to be the standard on how value is assigned to gain access to a program’s audience. The network’s focus on audience and advertising revenue also affected its approach to its news division.

In 1977, the president of ABC Sports took on the added duties of turning around the network’s still third rated news division. Roone Arledge’s proven track record of creating entertaining event-related television made him the last person many traditional journalists believed should be in charge of ABC News. As Arledge saw it, “Television news was looked on, at least in the media, as some kind of sacred, almost virginal precinct whose purity was constantly under threat of violation by us crass types from other domains. Entertainment, for instance. And now, Sports.” His counter was that the current incarnation of the ABC Evening News was boring and not offering information that viewers wanted. The commitment to building an audience led to a level of experimentation and, ultimately, game-changing standards. From introducing a more conversational style of delivery, relying on consultants, and hiring the first female and African-American network news co-anchors, to adding visually stimulating news graphics and catchy music, ABC News was both lauded and panned for foraging new

\[112\] Goldenson, 148.
\[113\] Ibid.
\[115\] Ibid.
ways to capture viewer interest — ways that when successful were mimicked by the competition.\textsuperscript{116}

Craig Allen’s comprehensive \textit{News is People: The Rise of Local TV News and the Fall of News from New York} details how the network also embarked on what became a nine year proselytizing mission for people’s news that “changed the paradigm for television news.”\textsuperscript{117} People’s news embraced a co-anchor format, with a conversational delivery style that showcased reporter involvement and wrapped the program with a light-hearted story.\textsuperscript{118} This mid-1960s concept, developed at local news stations in Cleveland and Philadelphia, came to be known as “Eyewitness News” and is credited with putting ABC on the road to solvency.\textsuperscript{119} The “Eyewitness News” format increased viewers at ABC’s stations in New York and Chicago and sparked the ABC News Advisory Service in 1977. The team of network executives spread the good word of people’s news to its 200 affiliates by teaching editorial personnel to trade the formal print journalism style of event coverage for a more conversational style of human-interest storytelling.\textsuperscript{120} This free news consulting drive worked as an investment in local news operations that would pay off for the network’s own bottom line.

Media critics derided the extremely successful, not to mention profusely replicated, production technique and researchers lamented: “The emphasis on the violent, the humorous and the emotional represents a shift toward those elements more likely to

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 36.
\end{flushleft}
create viewer interest rather than viewer edification.” But according to an assessment of a survey of viewers, the format seemed to answer an ongoing complaint about network news:

For many viewers, particularly Lower-Middle and Upper Lower class people, the most facilitating way to become involved in a news story and understand it is to see and identify the people directly concerned. The ability to relate and absorb information presented ‘in the abstract’ is generally dependent upon the degree of education… a person has had. Most people are simply not equipped to deal extensively with abstract material. They become interested and understand things better by observing other people. 122

How could this move to reach more Americans be wrong? The University of Chicago sociologists who conducted the aforementioned audience research found television newscasts were talking to college educated viewers — who made up only 25% of the audience. 123 The pointed strategy to disseminate news to society’s lower classes renewed the arguments that sparked the Progressive Era’s call for journalism reform. Media critics in the early 20th century were concerned that pandering only to what caught the public’s attention would generate a society of titillated rogues instead of informed citizens. In response to that criticism journalists began to redefine their trade so daily news would reflect higher standards that focused on educational and not solely commercial appeal. 124 Now, the fear is that journalism cannot withstand the economic

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124 Schiller, “Historical Approach to Objectivity and Professionalism in American News Reporting,” 47.
pressure to keep its professional standards intact while producing news content.

“Economics,” as Hallin so bluntly states, “has eroded the barrier between journalism and the profit-making business of selling audiences to advertisers.”

Even with the budget and personnel cuts that marked much of the 1980s, ABC’s efforts to tailor news content bore financial fruit. By the end of the decade World News Tonight had become the most popular network nightly newscast and could charge advertisers the highest rates.

**Culture, Commerce, and Commercialism: The Big Picture**

What I have attempted to do in briefly noting the histories of Christmas, professional journalism, and ABC Network’s nightly news is outline a pattern of culture shaping in the name of financial gain. As media scholar Hazel Dicken-Garcia advises, “When journalistic standards are viewed as part of a larger framework of forces – against a background of social developments, changing values, press criticism and content, they come into focus.”

To be clear, Christmas is a social phenomenon in American culture. It is not meant to suggest any news media can or should ignore the annual event. However, I agree with the Glasgow University Media Group’s assessment written in 1976: “Television news is a cultural artefact [sic]; it is a sequence of socially manufactured messages, which carry many of the culturally dominant assumptions of our society.”

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the commercial broadcast news industry must be scrutinized for hegemonic patterns that, in this case, are built around a season that has been primed for commercial exploitation. This research will contribute to that analysis by cataloguing how this country’s unabashedly profit-seeking network news operation has handled the subject of Christmas and its commercial aspects, over time.
Chapter 3: Research Questions & Methodology

This thesis will include a quantitative content analysis and a critical interpretation of a purposive story sample to provide context to the findings. The exploratory study will answer the following questions:

RQ1. What is the pattern of news coverage of the Christmas holiday shopping season on ABC network’s nightly newscasts from 1968 to 2012?

RQ2. What is the pattern of news coverage regarding the national economy and the Christmas holiday shopping season on ABC network’s nightly newscasts from 1968 to 2012?

RQ3. What is the pattern of news coverage regarding the retail sales aspects of the Christmas holiday shopping season changed on ABC network’s nightly newscasts from 1968 to 2012?

RQ4. What is the pattern of commercialized content within coverage of the Christmas holiday shopping season on ABC network’s nightly newscasts has increased from 1968 to 2012?

This study analyzed abstracts from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive (VTNA) in Nashville, Tennessee. The VTNA has recordings of newscasts from August 1968 to present. From its start, the archive recorded the nightly newscasts of the ABC, CBS, and NBC networks, and in 1988 ABC’s Nightline broadcast was added to the collection. The archive also includes content from CNN, FOX, and MSNBC. The VTNA now offers access to the actual broadcasts via a loan service and streaming video online. Abstracts of each news program and each story within that broadcast are available on the
VTNA website. The database’s search engine provides search filters that include: date, network, keywords, reporter, and length of story. There are nearly 100,000 abstracts and 40,000 hours of programming available via the VTNA.

Stories that aired August through the following January each year from 1968 to 2012 were analyzed. The content from the six-month period was chosen as a way to include possible pre- and follow-up stories regarding events during the holiday season. A keyword search for “Christmas” and “holiday” and “shopping” and “retail” revealed 1,192 abstracts of the ABC Evening News/World News Tonight national newscasts. After discarding stories that listed Christmas as a proper name of a person or location, 1,176 pertinent stories listed on the VTNA abstracts were coded for a quantitative content analysis.

Harold Lasswell introduced content analysis as a systematic method for media research while studying propaganda in 1927. Lasswell, Lerner, and Pool describe content analysis as, “a technique, which aims at describing, with optimum objectivity, precision, and generality, what is said on a given subject in a given place at a given time.”\(^{129}\) Noted media researcher Kimberly Neuendorf strictly defines the method, “Content analysis is a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method.”\(^{130}\) Qualitative content analysis of media examines the actual text for content and its possible relationship with its audience. Media researcher Jim McNamara writes qualitative content analysis “pays attention to audience, media and contextual factors –


not simply the text,”¹³¹ and provides opportunities for a multifaceted discussion because text can mean different things to different people. By identifying the social, political, and economic climate in the previous chapter this effort at contextualizing the news text falls into the literary aspect of the qualitative research method.¹³² Communications scholar Elizabeth Lester explains that this form of textual analysis can “reveal how ideological dimensions structure reporting of news and in fact narrow the range of discursive and democratic possibilities.”¹³³ In the following chapter, the results of the quantitative study will be complemented with a critical cultural studies approach to a textual analysis of news stories.

The coding instrument (see Appendix B) captures the story’s slug, date, length, and twenty other variables. The coding instrument utilizes Guido Stempel’s news topic categories: “politics/government acts”, “war/defense”, and “economic activity.”¹³⁴ The questions regarding commercial content are based on Avery and Ferrar’s research of prime-time television and a 2004 study on the prevalence of commercial content in local and national television news.¹³⁵ Commercial content includes coding categories for “brand/product portrayal”, “product placement”, “news framing of business stories”, and “promotional tone.” Additional topics tailored to this research include: the Christmas

theme of the story, whether Christmas is referenced as the religious or the secular holiday, and the mention of retail sales figures. Theme coded whether the Christmas holiday is the primary focus of the story or secondary theme mentioned as an aside or point in time for another event. If content explicitly references a religious figure, ritual, message, phrase, or activity it was coded as religious. Secular holiday references included content regarding Santa Claus and his team, decorations, vacations, and so forth. Retail sales coded for specific mentions of statistics related to the financial impact of the shopping season. The “geographical locations” category was further parceled by region, with a nominal response for each region and any location outside of the United States coded international. The reference aid for this category was a map of the United States Regions prepared by the United States Census Bureau (see Appendix C). The majority of the variables required a nominal no or yes response, acknowledging a news story might fall into several, possibly even conflicting, categories. The “national economy” and “retail sales” variables were coded to describe whether the topic was not mentioned, a negative mention, a positive mention, or mentioned with no details. The subcategories for the “story presenter” include anchor, anchor and reporter, and other.

Approximately 21 percent or 250 of the total sample ($N = 1,176$) was used to calculate intercoder agreement among three coders.\textsuperscript{136} Krippendorff’s $\alpha$ (alpha) is a flexible but stringent measure of agreement that can account for multiple judges, missing data, and agreement by chance when categorizing text. Communication researcher Klaus Krippendorff considers $\alpha \geq 67\%$ as an acceptable level of agreement in scholarly research.

\textsuperscript{136} Each of the coders were journalism graduate students: one with a background in film documentaries, the other a sports journalist, and the author; only the author had a broadcast journalism background.
that does not involve human lives.\textsuperscript{137} The Krippendorff’s alpha coding agreement values were story presenter, 96.5 percent; interview source, 94 percent; geographic locations, 85.6 percent; Christmas theme, 90.6 percent; story topics, 82.3 percent; brand portrayal, 78.3 percent, and business framed as news stories, 67.2 percent.\textsuperscript{138} The measures of whether stories had a promotional tone or showed evidence of product placement proved difficult to determine by simply viewing the abstract and garnered only 60.5 percent and 55.7 percent agreement, respectively, and therefore are unreliable inquiries that cannot be considered in any of the findings.\textsuperscript{139} Overall, intercoder reliability for this study is 81.6 percent.\textsuperscript{140}

The limitations of interpreting and coding a written synopsis are evident when compared to reading a full transcript, or better yet, viewing the actual item. Researchers Edy, Althaus, and Phalen found abstracts do not adequately capture the evaluative tone of news, but the topical content of news can be effectively represented.\textsuperscript{141} The researchers also determined emerging topics and those not discussed by the White House are likely to be underrepresented in abstracts. With this in mind the author traveled to the VTNA in Nashville to view and analyze select broadcasts.\textsuperscript{142} This 200 unit purposive sample was chosen for further scrutiny out of necessity because either the abstract was missing key


\textsuperscript{138} The agreements for the geographic locations (85.6\%) and story topics (82.3\%) variables are averages of the Krippendorff’s alpha coding agreements for their individual categories within each variable.

\textsuperscript{139} Due to time and financial constraints it was not prudent to view the full sample (N = 1,176) in search of promotional tones or evidence of product placement.

\textsuperscript{140} This calculation includes twenty variables, and no agreement calculations were made for the slug, network, date, or length of each story.


\textsuperscript{142} Full text transcripts of national newscasts have only been archived in national databases such as LexisNexis since the early 1990s. Research at the VTNA took place July 23-26, 2013.
information about the length of the story or there was an interest in the subject of the story that warranted further examination.

The results of the data offered by the content and textual analyses will present a more thorough picture of the broadcast discourse regarding the seasonal stimuli and is discussed in the following chapters.
Chapter 4: Results

Analysis of ABC Network Nightly News’ stories regarding the Christmas holiday shopping season reveals thought-provoking trends throughout forty-four years of coverage. Overall, there was a 300 percent increase in the number of Christmas-related stories that aired during the first year and the final year of the study. Twenty-two or 1.8 percent stories of the observed stories (N=1,176) aired in 1968 and in 2012 there were 66 or 5.6 percent. In addition, there was an increase in the number of Christmas-themed stories that also touted commercialized content that either mentioned specific brands or used specific businesses as a backdrop for a news story. This information will be reported throughout this chapter.

For reporting and comparison purposes, the individual years were consolidated into the following decades: 1960s (1968 - 69), 1970s (1970 - 79), 1980s (1980 - 89), 1990s (1990 - 99), 2000s (2000 - 09), and 2010s (2010 - 12). The data collected from more than twenty variables and categories found significant, \( p < .05 \), changes throughout the decades in every category except for the mentions of the secular aspects of Christmas and the portrayal of businesses framed as news stories categories. The national economy and retail topics were each collapsed from not mentioned, negative mention, positive mention, and mentioned with no detail, to not mentioned and mentioned.\(^{143}\)

RQ1. What is the pattern of news coverage of the Christmas holiday shopping season on ABC network’s nightly newscasts from 1968 to 2012?

\(^{143}\) The data also revealed interesting trends that are outside of the scope of this study namely, the results for the “presenter,” “war/defense” mentions, and a comparison of “religious” and “secular” results.
Stories that addressed Christmas as the primary theme of the news item by mentioning either the secular, religious or both aspects of the holiday more than quadrupled from the 1960s with 31 or 2.6 percent to the 2010s with 138 or 11.7 percent. In both the 1960s and the 1970s there was a 1.2 percent difference in the number of stories that referenced Christmas as a primary theme and those that referenced it as secondary theme. But that gap jumped to 9.8 percent in the 1980s where 172 stories or 14.6 percent of the overall sample used Christmas as a primary theme as opposed to 57 or 4.8 percent that did not. During the 2000s the gap between themes widened even further to 15.2 percent (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decades</th>
<th>Primary (%)</th>
<th>Secondary (%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>31 (2.6%)</td>
<td>16 (1.4%)</td>
<td>47 (4.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>138 (11.7%)</td>
<td>124 (10.5%)</td>
<td>262 (22.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>172 (14.6%)</td>
<td>57 (4.8%)</td>
<td>229 (19.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>164 (13.1%)</td>
<td>41 (3.5%)</td>
<td>205 (17.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>215 (18.3%)</td>
<td>36 (3.1%)</td>
<td>251 (21.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010s</td>
<td>138 (11.7%)</td>
<td>44 (3.7%)</td>
<td>182 (15.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>858 (73.0%)</td>
<td>318 (27.0%)</td>
<td>1176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ2. What is the pattern of news coverage regarding the national economy and the Christmas holiday shopping season on ABC network’s nightly newscasts from 1968 to 2012?

While the vast majority of the sample, 858 or 91.2 percent, did not mention the national economy in conjunction with the Christmas season, it is important to note that the mentions increased to peak in the 1980s. Of the 103 stories that did mention the economy, the 29 (or 28.2 percent of the sample) that aired in the 1980s were the most that aired in any other decade (See Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decades</th>
<th>Not Mentioned (%)</th>
<th>Mentioned (%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>46 (4.3%)</td>
<td>1 (1.0%)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>246 (22.9%)</td>
<td>16 (15.5%)</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>200 (18.6%)</td>
<td>29 (28.2%)</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>180 (16.8%)</td>
<td>25 (24.3%)</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>228 (21.2%)</td>
<td>23 (22.3%)</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010s</td>
<td>173 (16.1%)</td>
<td>9 (8.7%)</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>858 (91.2%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>103 (8.8%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>1176</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On Tuesday, November 24, 1981, three days before the official opening of the Christmas shopping season, the lead story explained the Consumer Price Index included an analysis from an economist who discussed the possible impact on holiday shopping.

On the Friday after Thanksgiving, the first three stories of the November 27 newscast
were about the economy and the recession’s impact on holiday shopping. The reporters for the lead story and the two that followed interviewed department store officials at Saks, Radio Shack, Tiffany, and Neiman Marcus. On Friday, November 26, 1982, store spokespersons expressed their concern regarding holiday sales while an economist, this one affiliated with Citibank, expressed, “the importance of consumers in improving the economy.” Similar stories linking holiday sales with the nation’s economy that interviewed business spokespersons would go on to lead each Black Friday newscast for the next two years.144

On the same Friday in 1985 the one “Holiday Sales” story did not lead the newscast but the gist of the story was the same — retailers were concerned about the holiday shopping season. The “Economy: Christmas Shopping” story that aired on the day after Thanksgiving in 1987 broke from the formula of stories past and included interviews with shoppers. But in 1989 the only Christmas story that aired on the Black Friday newscast was about a toy recall. That proved to be an anomaly as the stories about the economy and holiday sales on the first official day of the Christmas shopping season resumed in 1990s.

RQ3. What is the pattern of news coverage regarding the retail sales aspects of the Christmas holiday shopping season changed on ABC network’s nightly newscasts from 1968 to 2012?

Stories that mentioned or referenced retail sales activities, outlets, or projections relating to the holiday season steadily climbed throughout the decades to comprise 28.5

144 The fact that these stories lead the newscasts does not take into account what other options for lead stories there were that day. That control falls outside of the scope of this study.
percent of the sample (N = 1,176). One story, or .3 percent of stories within retail
mentions, aired in the 1960s, but that jumped to 12.2 percent in the 1970s and 16.1
percent in the 1980s. The climb continued with 22.1 percent of the mentions happening in
the 1990s, peaking in the 2000s with 29.3 percent, followed by 20 percent in the 2010s
(See Table 3). The only story that mentioned retail sales figures in 1960s was on
Thursday, December 5, 1968, slugged “Toys/ Christmas/Children/Television” and it
bemoaned the fact that holidays bring advertisements that, “make children ad targets” and
take the fun of Santa bringing surprises on Christmas morning.145 In 1969, references to
the gift giving aspect of Christmas were embedded in stories about military action,
namely Texas millionaire, H. Ross Perot’s attempt to deliver presents to American POWs
in North Vietnam. By the next year Christmas stories began including references to the
actual act of shopping for holiday gifts. On Thursday, December 9, 1970, news anchor
Harry Reasoner, in an obviously sarcastic tone, introduced Greg Jackson’s story about
how honest shoppers pay for shoplifting, “We believe in tradition around here and one of
the traditions of the news business is that you do a story on shoplifting shortly before
Christmas.”146 The story went on to examine Macy’s security system in their Manhattan
department store. The next night highlighted and named games about the ecology as a
possible Christmas gifts and featured the board game “Extinction.”147 A story about the
toy car industry aired on Monday, December 21, 1970 focused on the Federal Trade
Commission’s investigation into whether certain manufacturers were making claims

146 After Jackson’s story Reasoner said, “Two other pre-Christmas traditions among right-thinking
editors are you do stories about the training of Santa Clauses and about greeting cards. Keep tuning in until
Christmas and see if we get them done.”
about their toys that were not true. It was not until December 1, 1971 that there was an actual report on holiday shopping that linked retail sales figures, the government, and commercial content. On that Wednesday evening broadcast, Harry Reasoner introduced Virginia Sherwood’s report on the first lady, Pat Nixon, shopping with her daughter Julie Eisenhower. As Mrs. Nixon explained, they were shopping at a Sears department store to bring publicity to the store’s commitment to keeping its prices down for the holidays, “We’re here, because they keep their prices low and that’s important.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decades</th>
<th>Not Mentioned (%)</th>
<th>Mentioned (%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>46 (5.5%)</td>
<td>1 (.3%)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>221 (26.3%)</td>
<td>41 (12.2%)</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>175 (20.8%)</td>
<td>54 (16.1%)</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>131 (15.6%)</td>
<td>74 (22.1%)</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>153 (18.2%)</td>
<td>98 (29.3%)</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010s</td>
<td>115 (13.7%)</td>
<td>67 (20.0%)</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>841 (71.5%)</td>
<td>335 (28.5%)</td>
<td>1176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1974, Harry Reasoner’s commentary on Tuesday, December 10, railed against the commercial aspects of the holiday and warned that he wouldn’t be surprised if, “the day was moved to the third Monday in January to make for a longer shopping season.”

On the day after Christmas there were three different reports about Christmas sales. This December 26, 1974 newscast marked the first occurrence of reporting post-holiday sales figures. The story out of New York City focused on how department store owners were worried about the recession but shoppers broke single day sales records as they were “spending their way through the doors on the last days.”\(^{(151)}\) The story that followed was Greg Dobbs’ report from Evanston, Illinois, where there were more purchases of sporting goods, but customers “were no longer buying big money items.”\(^{(152)}\) Ken Kashiwahara’s story out of Beverly Hills told a similar spending pattern for luxury jewelry. As a wrap-up of the three stories, anchor Howard K. Smith noted, “A lot - not all - but a lot of Americans spent money this Christmas, like spending is about to go out of fashion. And who knows - next year it may.”\(^{(153)}\)

Of course, spending did not go out of style in the next year. In fact, it would appear that Christmas-related news stories in 1975 made sure that it would not go out of style. The first script associating Christmas shopping as a way to improve the national economy aired on the day after Thanksgiving – the first day of the Christmas shopping season. In explaining the federal Commerce Department’s economic indicators report, reporter Dan Cordtz notes that shoppers are the key to a solid recovery, “Heavy Christmas spending would be helpful - otherwise, back to the recession.”\(^{(154)}\) Approximately two weeks later a follow-up story on the economy relayed shoppers’ discontent with their inability to pay for their gifts — but that they were going to buy

\(^{(152)}\) Ibid.
\(^{(153)}\) Ibid.
anyway. On Christmas Eve, First Lady Betty Ford, rationalized the increasingly commercial nature of season, “The commercialism of Christmas is too bad, but I guess it’s very good for the stores and businesses that it’s commercialized. It can be commercial as long as you, in the background are thinking of the real meaning of Christmas.” The reminders about the importance of shopping for the good of the nation’s free market capitalist structure seemed to work. On December 26, ABC Evening News anchor Harry Reasoner told viewers that Christmas shopping was reportedly up 10 to 25 percent. That story also pointed out that the trending gifts had been mood rings and pet rocks.

In 1977, the toys and trending gifts were spotted before the holiday season. On Monday August 22, ABC ran a Christmas feature story on summer being Hong Kong’s peak season for America’s Christmas season, labeling Hong Kong the “toy manufacturing capital of the world.” Three months later on Wednesday, November 30, the secular holiday story pointed out the Kenner toy company’s delay in receiving their Star Wars movie action figures from “the Orient.” The company’s answer was to hand out gift certificates, but Kenner’s president advised parents, “It would be a mistake if children only received the gift certificate” and to remember the joy of opening gifts. On Monday, December 19, a report on toy safety included a follow-up to the Star Wars story stating the action figures would be delivered by late January. Viewers were also

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reminded during a report on Christmas sales and the economy, on Wednesday, December 21, that robust shopping numbers are “good news for all of us because consumer spending is the mainstay of the US economy.”

RQ4. What is the pattern of commercialized content within coverage of the Christmas holiday shopping season on ABC network’s nightly newscasts has increased from 1968 to 2012?

The brand/product portrayal and businesses framed as news stories categories were combined into the overarching commercialized content variable.\footnote{162} Again, the majority of the sample, 76.4 percent, did not mention commercialized content, but looking at the steady increase in mentions is key. There was no commercial content detected in the stories of the 1960s, 16.4 percent of the Christmas stories in the 1970s were touting products or businesses. In 1980s, that figure was 20.1 percent, and 26.3 percent of the stories during the 1990s were harboring commercial content. But during the next decade, 33.1 percent of the Christmas stories were of a commercial nature (See Table 4).

\footnote{161}{ABC Evening News, “Economy,” December 21, 1977.}
\footnote{162}{The “promotional tone” and “product placement” categories were not included because their Krippendorff’s alpha coding agreement values were below the accepted 67 percent standard of reliability in scholarly research.}
Table 4: Overall Stories Mentioned Commercialized Content Per Decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decades</th>
<th>Not Mentioned (%)</th>
<th>Mentioned (%)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>47 (4.0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>219 (18.6%)</td>
<td>43 (3.7%)</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>183 (15.6%)</td>
<td>46 (3.9%)</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>151 (12.8%)</td>
<td>54 (4.6%)</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>168 (14.3%)</td>
<td>83 (7.1%)</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010s</td>
<td>130 (11.1%)</td>
<td>52 (4.4%)</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>898 (76.4%)</td>
<td>278 (23.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While it is beyond the scope of this research to tally the frequency of each business’ specific mention, Sears, Macy’s, Bloomingdales, Toys R Us, Marshall Fields, Walmart, and Kmart are some of the retailers that were most often referenced or consulted for stories regarding the holiday shopping season.

If stories mentioning retail sales figures have increased throughout the decades, then, perhaps, it makes sense that content focused on retailers would increase as well.

On December 14, 1997 a news story labeled “Economy: Holiday Shopping” looked at a group of protesters outside of a shopping mall in Burlington, Vermont. The group’s “Spend Time Not Money” campaign was aimed at exposing the idea, “America is obsessed with consuming.” The spokesman’s complaint that the “Christmas holiday has become a commercialist fest” was juxtaposed with one shopper who vowed to “spend as
much as I want” and another who added, “If I have it to spend, I should be able to spend it.”

Consumer advisories, stories that addressed or warned viewers as potential customers also increased throughout the decades. These stories kept pace with the content that mentioned retail sales or commercialized content during each decade. In the 1970s, for example, 12.2 percent of the stories in that decade mentioned retail sales, 16.4 percent of the stories included commercial content, and 11.1 percent of the stories in that decade were considered consumer advisories. Each of these three categories peaked during the 2000s where 29.3 percent of the stories in that decade mentioned retail, 33.1 percent included commercial content, and 26.3 percent were some kind of warning (See Table 5.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decades</th>
<th>Retail Mentioned (%)</th>
<th>Commercial Content (%)</th>
<th>Consumer Advisory (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s (n = 47)</td>
<td>1 (2.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s (n = 262)</td>
<td>41 (12.2%)</td>
<td>43 (16.4%)</td>
<td>29 (11.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s (n = 229)</td>
<td>54 (16.1%)</td>
<td>46 (20.1%)</td>
<td>34 (14.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s (n = 205)</td>
<td>74 (22.1%)</td>
<td>54 (26.3%)</td>
<td>34 (16.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s (n = 251)</td>
<td>98 (29.3%)</td>
<td>83 (33.1%)</td>
<td>66 (26.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010s (n = 182)</td>
<td>67 (36.8%)</td>
<td>52 (28.6%)</td>
<td>44 (24.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (% overall)</td>
<td>335 (28.5%)</td>
<td>278 (23.6%)</td>
<td>207 (17.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=1176

Even consumer advisories that warned of winter snowstorms or travel delays could be tied to holiday sales figures in 2009. On Sunday, December 20, Dan Harris told viewers, “A white Christmas for many Americans but a bleak Christmas for many retailers.”

As the results outlined in this chapter report, Christmas and the material consumption aspects of the holiday have occupied increasingly more story content on ABC Network’s nightly newscasts throughout the last four decades. The increase of stories bonding the welfare of the national economy, with consumer spending can perhaps, be best summed up by the “Made in America” series of stories that began in 2011. The first “Made in America” Christmas shopping story aired on Tuesday, November 29, 2011, and challenged viewers to commit to buying American-made gifts as a way of creating jobs in this country:

…Did you know that the average American spends $700 on Christmas or holiday gifts? … just $64 of that, less than ten percent is all it would take to create those 200,000 jobs. So where will you spend your money this year?

Less than a week after that first “Made in America (Christmas)” story ran, ABC News produced a story that included video of Americans accepting the challenge and shopping for American made gifts:

Finally the power of those three words “made in America.” We reported here about how so many more Americans could get back to work if each of us spent a little more on products made here at home and tonight we’re happy to report that many of you are responding – accepting the challenge and jobs are coming back.

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166 ABC World News with Diane Sawyer, “Made in America (Jobs),” December 5, 2011.
The story also included footage of plant managers and workers from different companies thanking the ABC news program for highlighting their businesses, which increased sales and, in turn, allowed for the hiring of extra workers. From that point on, any item branded with the “Made in America” franchise reiterated the point of the story and the attempted recruitment of more viewers to join the campaign. Again, the question becomes whether the promotion of commercialism, patriotism, and capitalism follows broadcast journalism’s widely accepted tenets of objectivity and autonomy.
Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusions

As the results outlined in the previous chapter report, Christmas and the commercial consumption aspects of the holiday have occupied increasingly more story content on ABC Network’s nightly newscasts over the last four decades. These findings are consistent with the history of mass media’s involvement with the evolution of the holiday shopping season. In the early 1800s, America’s Santa Claus was introduced as a role model for upstanding behavior during a traditionally raucous Christmas carnival season. Santa as a social icon of decorum and generosity proved to be a malleable symbol for the early republic’s materializing commercial culture. The emerging market economy also fueled the news media’s current advertiser-supported business model. The federal government actively displayed its support for the marketplace through proclamations and laws that regulated mass media, Christmas, and the relationship between the two. Journalists developed watchdog policies to distance news gathering practices from federal and commercial influences, but the common economic roots have created a consistently ripe line of inquiry questioning how well journalism’s democracy-ensuring policies stand the test of daily execution.

The Christmas holiday’s spectacle has been the primary theme of nearly 400 percent more stories aired in the final decade of this study than in the first. Along with this increase in frequency came an increase in Christmas themed stories that mentioned the national economy, retail shopping figures, and content that promoted particular brands and businesses. A critical cultural response suggests that there is an inherent problem with this trending dynamic. As journalists charged with disseminating
information crafted to impact public affairs, there remains the concern that news stories are copping to public relations. For instance, on October 28, 2010, ABC network nightly news anchor Diane Sawyer read,

> And now before you finish carving your pumpkin, retailers are rolling out jingle bells. That’s right and big discounters are trying to move up Black Friday, the biggest shopping day of the year to tomorrow! Traditionally it’s been the day after Thanksgiving. Sears is now dubbing Black Friday now. Amazon, Walmart, Target, and Toys R Us all following suit. So tomorrow is the day.\(^{167}\)

Sawyer read the last line as if she couldn’t believe it herself. But in the months that followed there were no other stories that explained or followed up on that information. One might see that as proof that the journalists at ABC do not promote the whim of big businesses. Or, one might see just the opposite. Why was that kind of knowledge important to broadcast as a story in the first place? There is no perspective - no counter balance - just some information that was delivered to the station and no doubt verified for its truth value but not for its value as a story. Perhaps this kind of shopping information falls into the helpful, “news you can use” consumer advisory category; perhaps it was an unplanned and uninspired, yet free, advertisement for big business.

News stories about retail outlets should be more investigative in nature, more like the story that aired on Friday, December 17, 2010 and less like the story that followed the next day. That Friday night story revealed how credit card companies were trying to maximize profits by enticing shoppers to use credit cards instead of cash during the holiday season.\(^{168}\) But on Saturday, reporter Jeremy Hubbard showed off smart phone applications that promised to make price comparison easier while shopping. In the


December 18 report he also called Walmart, Toys R Us, JC Penney, and Best Buy and asked each spokesperson, “OK, what is your very best deal?” Each store had their “very best deal” and its price displayed on the screen. For instance JC Penney touted their women’s cashmere blend peacoat that was “originally $200 but now on sale for $59.99,” and a Toys R Us spokesperson explained shoppers can “save $20 on Buzz Lightyear,” the action doll.169 In a follow-up story on Christmas Eve, newscast anchor David Muir introduced reporter Jeremy Hubbard’s live report by telling viewers, “And we’re going to turn now to the economy. We heard something today that we couldn’t believe: According to predictions from economists now, sales from this holiday shopping season could be the best ever - even in this economy.” Hubbard, who was performing a live report outside of Macy’s department store in New York City explained the National Retail Federation’s holiday shopping statistics and restated one of the “very best deals” he had reported in the story that ran nearly one week prior on December 18. Hubbard then played the calls he made asking for the very best post-holiday deals.170 Journalist as retail concierge.

There must be more that we can do as workers within a salient media discipline than act as auxiliary spokespersons; but by not rigorously questioning the entities asking for time and attention, journalists are just that. Journalists working in the public relations or advertising fields see nothing wrong with that statement. But journalists who are news and public affairs workers are expected to be independent thinkers who operate outside of the spectrum of corporate and political influence in order to provide their audience with

the unadulterated information needed to maintain the checks and balances of a healthy democracy.

Conclusions

This exploratory study set out to spotlight the relationship between broadcast news media and the Christmas holiday season – an age-old relationship but one worth re-examining. While ABC Network’s nightly newscasts have a history of pioneering news production techniques that ultimately influence its competition, coding similar content from CBS and NBC network nightly newscasts will offer a more complete view of the national broadcast coverage of the Christmas holiday shopping season. Comparing network coverage could also prove beneficial to any analyst concerned with investigating the network’s tone and presentation to its audience, the stakeholders, as well as its shareholders.

Again, coding broadcast content via reading abstracts as opposed to viewing the content cedes a level of rich analysis. Information from that analysis would provide clues of the relationship between corporate media and retailers; thus furthering the discussion of the scope of commercialization of broadcast news content and its impact on the audience and sales profits. Also, given the findings show the increase in commercial content over time, a more comprehensive multi-network comparison of the content could analyze how the often-criticized shift from hard to soft news topics developed and the trends of agenda setting and story framing over time. That research could lead to a juxtaposition of what other stories were ignored during the same time periods.
The nation’s free market capitalists developed a culture holiday into an exploitable profit season that is depicted by journalists as the public’s opportunity to support the solvency of the current economic system. For the journalism school graduates who work in public relations and advertising the previous statement is one of successful message management for their corporate clients. But the journalists dedicated to disseminating information in the interest of the community’s public affairs should pay attention as it violates professional news-editorial standards. Continuing this line of research also can document the confluence of journalism disciplines in producing newscasts. ¹⁷¹

Yes, newsroom personnel have to be comfortable with being transparent about the financial obligations that are inherent to running a sustainable news operation. Even if commercial media operations released journalists from the burden of cultivating profits via the news department there is a practicality in maintaining a solvent economic system. But promoting instead of investigating activities that claim to be essential to the survival of a community runs the risk of reinforcing an ideology. By reminding viewers that increased shopping helps the national economy the news message runs the risk of being a supporter of the status quo. Events and behaviors associated with practices necessary to keep a healthy democracy should be met with a skeptical curiosity that questions the cultural, political and professional expense of message’s editorial exposure. Are mass media tools of the nation state? I don’t believe they are. But I do believe that any failing

¹⁷¹Public relations or strategic communications personnel, advertising, and news editorial professionals often are educated within a university’s journalism school. See for example the programs at Ohio University, University of Missouri, Indiana University and University of Oregon.
to question a capitalist economic system that is fueled by bastardizing cultural practices and financially cannibalizing its labor force relegates media workers to tools.

Perhaps the journalists who work in news and public affairs, (and those who train them), need to acknowledge Douglas Kellner’s conclusion after his critical analysis of media practices in a democracy.

The large number of important stories published in the 1980s by the investigative press and ignored by mainstream media leads me to conclude that we have two media systems in the United States: the mainstream capitalist media, which tend to be working with – and indeed are a part of the existing power structure, in contrast to the investigative media, which maintain the honorable tradition of free and independent press. 172

And with these two media systems come at least two categories of journalism – commercial and investigative or more simply – news and public affairs. Commercial news is the commodity of journalism. News is information that is gathered under the influences of the cultures from which it emerges and disseminated for public consumption. In other words, commercial media outlets will produce content that supports its own commercial existence. The question then becomes whether the promotion of commercial culture, a de facto promotion of capitalism, is key to a healthy democracy. Ultimately, individuals who turn to commercial news media expecting to be informed should, instead, expect to filter that information for persuasive messages. The constant filtering will breed distrust and the need to monitor the journalists who are expected to monitor the political system on the public’s behalf.

While the public broadcasting system in this country relies on funding from a variety of sources, including the federal government and major corporations, I believe it

172 Kellner, Television and the Crisis of Democracy, 226.
to be the ideal environment for investigative or public affairs journalism. Public broadcasting’s funding system has its issues, but it exists on the principle of providing educational information to the nation’s citizens. As it relates to this particular study, it would be interesting to see how the Public Broadcasting System’s nightly newscast reported on the holiday shopping season since the program began broadcasting nationally in 1975.

After two decades in the commercial media industry I now manage a public service media outlet’s newsroom that is affiliated with a university. The newsroom serves as a practical laboratory where I work with the student labor force as they prepare for a career in a professional, more than likely commercial, newsroom. While they investigate and report stories that serve the public’s interest the student journalists are pushed to critically examine the information they receive from corporate mailings and press releases. The students are asked to reflect on whom each potential story will benefit. Students are also pushed to determine how we, as journalists, are contributing to the impact of each potential story. Ideally, these students are learning that professional journalists must also think about and act on our roles within the community of people who give us their attention as American citizens — not just consumers and potential customers.


174 Hired to the position in August 2014. I am still learning how to infuse the theoretical with the practical but I understand the action to one of the most important points of critical research. It is not enough to name or analyze a problem, on must be willing to find a solution.
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Appendix A: Coder Instruction Sheet

RECORD THE FOLLOWING AS YOU COMPLETE ONE SHEET FOR EACH ABSTRACT:

Case # The handwritten number on each abstract, used to keep track of cases.

A. Story Slug: title of specific content, listed on each Vanderbilt Television News Archive abstract as “Headline” (e.g., “Middle East/Summit/Protests,” “Shopping Sounds”)

B. Date: list the year, month, and day (YYYY/MM/DD) of the evening newscast on each VTNA abstract.

C. Story Length: on each VTNA abstract as “duration.” List minutes and seconds following the MM:SS format

D. Story Presenter: media personnel responsible for delivering news content to viewers. VTNA abstracts list all on-air personnel as reporters. For this study, one reporter is coded as “Anchor only.” More than one reporter listed is to be coded as “Anchor and Reporter”

E. Interview Source: (soundbite) sources of information are identified as either
None, Official/Expert/ (politicians, experts, famous art and sport faces), People-based / Consumer, or both Expert and Consumer

F. **Geographical location(s) mentioned:** coding for cities, states, regions, countries, and/or continents *named* by the anchor and/or reporters. Commonly known national/international landmarks are to be coded as “geographic location(s) mentioned.”

E.g., White House/Capitol Hill/Lincoln Memorial, etc. = Washington, D.C., Eiffel Tower = Paris, etc.
Identify region: Using APPENDIX C (USA map), locate state mentioned and list its host region as Northeast, South, Midwest, and West. Any location other than the United States of America is to be coded “International”

G. CHRISTMAS THEME:

Primary: Christmas as a holiday, season, celebration, observation or itself a point in time is a necessary component of the story and removing the reference to Christmas would change the intent of the story. E.g., “Buying gifts for Christmas

Secondary: If the word Christmas is removed from the text or replaced with a calendar date, the meaning of the text will not change, e.g., “They expect to sign the bill before Christmas” or “he will try again after Christmas.”

H. STORY’S TOPIC:

Religion: refers to any kind of religious message, themed activity, or controversy. Message or activity can be delivered via religious personnel and/or anyone operating in religious capacity

Secular/Holiday: any reference to non-religious aspects of Christmas season, e.g., Santa, gift shopping, decorations, lights, holiday spirit

War/Defense: content referencing or involving any organized armed personnel and its activity

Government activity: Federal, local, or state government legal and political activity
**Consumer Advisory:** content supports the viewers or customers in any kind of situation, e.g., health, shopping, traveling, savings.

**Nat’l Economy is up/down/no details:** reference to the federal budget and current trend

**Retail Sales are up/down/no details:** any activity involving retail outlets, financial projections of sales,

I. STORY’S COMMERCIAL CONTENT

**Brand/Product portrayal:** Identifiable brand or product shown or mentioned.

**Promotional Tone of Content:** This usually involves a TV news story in which a company is both star and beneficiary: Its name, spokespersons, product brands, or other company-specific identifiers are shown or discussed on-screen and the company is portrayed in a generally positive context. This category includes all video news releases (VNRs).

**News framing of business:** This is newscast content in which the topic is civic, economic, or other legitimate news for which the station chooses one particular company or product to exemplify the story’s theme.

**Product placement** Particular brand is visually identifiable, but not verbally mentioned and no attempts made to alter or disguise logo.
### Appendix B: ABC News/Christmas Code Sheet

Case # _____  _____  _____  _____

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Story Slug</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Date (YYYY/MM/DD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Story Length (in seconds)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Story Presenter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 = Anchor only</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Anchor &amp; Reporter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 = Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Interview Source</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 = No Interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Elite/Expert</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 = Common/Public</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 = Both Elite &amp; Common</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Geographic Locations(s) Mentioned? (If No, go to Question G)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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If **Yes**, which regions(s) (use Appendix C for reference, select all that apply)

- Northeast 0 = No 1 = Yes
- South 0 = No 1 = Yes
- Midwest 0 = No 1 = Yes
- West 0 = No 1 = Yes
- International 0 = No 1 = Yes

**G. Christmas is:**

1 = Primary theme

2 = Secondary theme

**H. Story topic(s) (select all that apply):**

- Religion 0 = No 1 = Yes
- Secular/Holiday 0 = No 1 = Yes
- War & Defense 0 = No 1 = Yes
- Gov’t & Politics 0 = No 1 = Yes
- Consumer Advisory 0 = No 1 = Yes
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAT'L ECONOMY</th>
<th>0 = Not Mentioned</th>
<th>1 = Negative Mention</th>
<th>2 = Positive Mention</th>
<th>3 = Mentioned w/ no details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RETAIL SALES</td>
<td>0 = Not Mentioned</td>
<td>1 = Negative Mention</td>
<td>2 = Positive Mention</td>
<td>3 = Mentioned w/ no details</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**I. COMMERCIAL CONTENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Brand/Product:</th>
<th>0 = No</th>
<th>1 = Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promotional Tone</td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Frame of Business:</td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Placement:</td>
<td>0 = No</td>
<td>1 = Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: News/Christmas Map