Still keeping watch:
Measuring sourcing from statehouse news covering Springfield and Harrisburg in 1986 and 2014

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 5

Methodology ........................................................................................................... 8

Literature Review ................................................................................................... 18

Results .................................................................................................................... 49

Discussion .............................................................................................................. 53

Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 58

Works cited ............................................................................................................ 62

Appendix I ............................................................................................................. 76
Quantifying America’s shifting statehouse press

Introduction

When then-Pennsylvania-lieutenant-governor-turned-gubernatorial candidate Ray Shafer was on the campaign trail in 1966, as the story goes, he was worried about dealing with more than his Democratic opponent, Milton Shapp.

It was the press. The statehouse press. Along the campaign trail, Shafer explained his anxieties to one of his perceived adversaries, Duke Kaminski of the Philadelphia Bulletin (Carocci, p. 16, 2005). The exchange was overheard by one-time Associated Press Harrisburg correspondent Vincent Carocci and later recounted in his 2005 memoir, A Capitol Journey.

“‘Duke,’ Shafer said... ‘I want to tell you I was warned you could be very hard on me during this campaign. But I want to say I’ve found you to be nothing but fair.’”

In 1969, Pennsylvania’s state budget for its general fund was roughly $2.5 billion, or $16.25 billion in 2015 dollars (Governor’s Office of Administration Program and Management, 1969).

Over the last 45 years, that fund has ballooned to nearly twice that size, to just less than $30 billion (Pennsylvania Office of the State Budget, 2015). Kaminski’s Bulletin shut its doors for good in 1982.

And between 1979 and 2009, the Pennsylvania General Assembly added almost 1,500 full-time staffing positions, more than doubling the employment size of the nation’s largest legislature (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2009).
Today, the Philadelphia Inquirer posts only one full-time reporter in the press corps at Harrisburg, the capital city (“Membership”. The Philadelphia Daily News, the Inquirer’s tabloid sibling, has one columnist and one reporter who are members of the official statehouse press corps in Harrisburg (“Membership”), though it is not clear if they are stationed in Harrisburg or Philadelphia.

It’s a sign of the times. And hardly one limited to Pennsylvania. State governments throughout the United States have swollen in size and power. Inversely, the press corps that are supposed to cover that unprecedented growth have shrunk at a greater rate in recent years than have other reporting jobs (Enda, Matsa, and Boyles, 2014). The nation’s remaining state capitol reporters stand at a crossroads. They are squeezed between industry demands, shrinking newspaper revenue, and the daily content demands of editors and readers — who, more than ever, expect members of their Fourth Estate to serve as watchdogs to otherwise unchallenged power (Amid Criticism, Support for Media’s ‘Watchdog’ Role Stands Out, 2013).

Concern about American legislative press coverage is hardly new. Whether expressed by readers, politicians, civil servants or journalists themselves, many parties are now trying to serve as canaries in the coalmine.

In 2004, Webster University journalism professor Don Corrigan wrote in the St. Louis Review of Journalism that big media outlets nationwide are “slackers at covering capital business.” Well before that, in 1978, a majority of legislators in New York reported they were dissatisfied with the news coverage of their capitol (Morgan,
1978). Most even said there was a discernable bias in those reporters’ work (Morgan, 1978).

Lately, however, those worries, now nationally, have mounted. Armed with newsroom census data from trade journals and polling firms, newsmakers and news reporters alike lament the decline of reliable statehouse press coverage. Considering staffing levels in statehouse bureaus nationwide, that assertion could be assumed true. But those basic metrics, a kind of census, are just about all the data researchers have crunched. While the news industry has scaled back more and more of its once-prized statehouse bureaus, academia has failed to measure that phenomenon. That is, for at least the past decade, there has been a noticeable lack of comprehensive academic research examining the vitality and salience of the statehouse reporting that is left.

The question is whether smaller statehouse bureaus translate into less or poorer statehouse coverage. To date, such claims are matters of opinion. Content analyses can help sift fact from surmise. But virtually no such analyses exist. This paper will attempt to fill that void by offering a comprehensive look at the state of statehouse news coverage in two states — Pennsylvania and Illinois. This research will check whether or not the quality of reporting has weakened in those states, as many critics have suggested.
Methodology

The research

This study is based on a content analysis of (n=154) articles concerning state reporting from four newspapers — two in Pennsylvania and two in Illinois.

The articles sampled came from the *Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and *Tribune-Review*. In order to maintain a consistent pool of articles, state reporting was defined as any article that contained the words “legislature,” “governor” and each state’s respective capital city — “Springfield” in Illinois and “Harrisburg” in Pennsylvania.

Articles selected

To compare data from two eras of news coverage separated by three decades of industry change, this paper utilized an approach to content analysis described by Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998).

Two weeks of data — articles — were drawn from 1986 and 2014 from the four surveyed newspapers using stratified random sampling. Those two years — each state had state legislature and gubernatorial elections in 1986 and 2014 — were selected to minimize the potential for dramatic content differences that might potentially skew data (i.e. comparing election content from the year of a gubernatorial race and a separate, “off-year,” could have dramatic differences).

This approach infers a year’s worth of data by randomly constructing two weeks of data. Two different days’ papers from each newspaper were randomly selected to simulate two full weeks of content from each entire year. Days 1 through
365 were assigned random numbers. Using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, those random numbers were placed in ascending order. After the random numbers were split up into days of the week, the dates with the two lowest randomly assigned numbers were chosen for each day of the week. Each newspaper had the same randomly selected days for 1986. A separate set of randomly selected days was assigned to the newspapers for 2014. Table 1 charts which randomly selected days in 1986 and 2014 fell in which months:

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Similar strategies have been commonly used in media analyses. Riffe et al. describe this technique as an “efficient” method of modeling a year of daily newspaper activity (Riffe et al., p. 97, 1998). The methodology for this research did include its quirks, however. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* published six days each week in 1986, without a Sunday edition. To account for that difference, there was no choice but to exclude Sunday data from that newspaper in 1986. There were no data to begin with.

Data from 1986 were collected using microfilm from the Harold Washington Library in Chicago (*Chicago Sun-Times* and *Chicago Tribune*), the University of Pittsburgh - Greensburg’s campus library (*Tribune-Review*) and Google Newspapers (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*). 2014 data were collected via Newsbank and Ohio University’s ArticlesPlus database through Alden Library.
Using the stratified random sample established by simulating two weeks, two independent coders, both sophomores studying journalism in Ohio University’s Honors Tutorial College, were recruited to code the entirety of the articles (n=154), along with the researcher.

Coders took on different-sized stratified collections of the articles, divided by year and publication. Prior to coding, the two coders underwent training and heard an explicit description of the coding sheet and what the research asked of them. After one coder analyzed the first 20 provided articles, a second training session with a set of training articles was held to address concerns and questions. The coding then continued as planned. A minimal number of articles had to be recoded with instruction from the lead researcher if results of one coder varied significantly from the other coders’ results.

Coders had roughly three weeks to do the set of the (n=154) articles studied. They had about two days to code all of a newspaper’s articles in a given year, a sample of anywhere from 20 to 50 news stories. The lead researcher coded the articles at an earlier time, throwing out any that didn’t meet qualifications to be included in this study. Once coded, the results were sent to this researcher for processing and categorization based on sourcing number.

The three categories were established to strengthen the soundness and validity of the study, though precision was certainly sacrificed as a result. Initially, this research would have called for coders to record solely the number of sources in each article, however, those determinants were collapsed prior to the coding. This helped
address any differences in interpretation of coding sheets that might have resulted in different results from each of the two coders. The collapsed categories were divided into three groups:

(v1) Article briefs — the news content categorized as “article briefs” contained three or fewer sources

(v2) Well-reported articles — the news content categorized as “well-reported articles” contained between four to six sources

(v3) Enterprise pieces — the news content categorized as “enterprise pieces” contained at least seven sources

How the coding worked

This study sought to quantify the amount of sourcing in articles from the two sample years, as a way to infer possible changes in sourcing quality. Sourcing was chosen as an appropriate gauge, as it is acknowledged as the foundation upon which articles are written (Fishman, Fico and Freedman) and factors significantly into the agenda-setting tone of a particular article (Fishman, 1980).

Coders tracked the number of sources used per article during the testing periods from the two sampled years. Using a model Fico crafted in his 1985 content analysis of newspaper and wire service reports from statehouses, sources for this study were defined in the following fashion: they included activity sources such as floor and committee votes, interviews, bills and bill summaries, and press releases (see Appendix I for coding instruction sheet provided to coders). Coders totaled the number of sources used over the constructed two-week period, and then this researcher
in the manner described above categorized each article. The two independent coders produced results that yielded a 72.1 percent agreement and a Scott’s Pi (Riffe, Lacy and Fico, 1998) of 0.544. In the case of any disagreements between the two coders, this researcher’s own coding, done previously, acted as a tiebreaker. Between the three coders, a percent agreement test yielded 71.4 percent agreement.

Two coded articles were discarded before the final data were compiled. Each had three different categorical assignments from the coders. One was from the 1986 pool of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* articles and another was from the 2014 pool of the *Tribune-Review* stories.

Tallied results were used to answer the following two research questions and to test the hypothesis.

*Research questions:*

*The coding done in this research was meant to answer two research questions, each pertaining to the state of statehouse news coverage in the United States.*

- **RQ1:** Has the amount of sourcing per article for surveyed newspapers using bureaus to cover the Pennsylvania state legislature changed between 1984 and 2014?
- **RQ2:** Has the amount of sourcing per article for surveyed newspapers using bureaus to cover the Illinois state legislature changed between 1984 and 2014?

*Hypotheses*

This study hypothesized:
• H1: There will be a higher percentage of v1 articles at the surveyed newspapers in 2014 than in 1986.

_ILLINOIS AND PENNSYLVANIA: A CASE STUDY ON STATEHOUSE NEWS_

The four newspapers selected for this study were located in two large metropolitan areas with competitive news media landscapes, but are not their states’ capitals. This was meant to control variables such as geography and market competition. As previously noted, in Pennsylvania, the _Pittsburgh Post-Gazette_ and _Tribune-Review_ were selected. The Illinois papers studied were the _Chicago Tribune_ and the _Chicago Sun-Times_. In each state, the newspapers have reporters assigned to cover statehouse news.

_NEWS BUREAUS IN THE U.S. 1988_, a handbook for public relations executives first published a year earlier, offers a glimpse into the health of the four outlets studied and of news bureaus in the 1980s as a whole. Three of the four newspapers, excluding the _Tribune-Review_, were listed in the reference book. The _Tribune-Review_ did, however, have an active presence in Harrisburg during the historical test year, 1986. Other newspapers, aside from the _Post-Gazette_, listed with bureaus in Harrisburg included the _Allentown Morning Call_, the _Philadelphia Inquirer_ and the now-defunct _Pittsburgh Press_ (_News Bureaus in the U.S. 1988_, 1988). The Associated Press, United Press International and the Harrisburg-based _Patriot_ and _Evening News_ also had reporters stationed in the state’s capital (_News Bureaus in the U.S. 1988_, 1988). The _Editor & Publisher International Yearbook_ for 1988 also listed a Gannett bureau in Harrisburg (Velez, 1988). In that year, Gannett owned newspapers in
Chambersburg, Lansdale and New Kensington-Tarentum (Velez, 1988). Those newspapers had a combined circulation of 76,500 (Velez, 1988).


Each of the four newspapers this research studied represents an outlet many in media would describe as a “legacy” newsroom. The Tribune was founded in 1847, while the Sun-Times was founded in 1948, when the seven-year-old Chicago Sun merged with the Chicago Daily Times (“Sun-Times’ colorful past in covering [and making] news,” 2014).
The tale of the two Pittsburgh papers used in this study is fairly similar. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette has existed as various incarnations since 1786 ("History"). Its current chief competition, the Tribune-Review, founded in Greensburg, expanded into the Pittsburgh market to jockey with the Post-Gazette (Tascarella, 1997) As recently as the early 1990s, Pittsburgh was also home to the Pittsburgh Press. In 1960, the Post-Gazette bought out another competitor, the Hearst-owned Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph ("History").

The newspapers sampled in this study reflect recent trends in the news industry. All four have experienced publicized staffing turmoil within the past year. During the 2014 sample year, the Chicago Sun-Times controversially shuffled its staffing by taking longtime Springfield reporter Dave McKinney off the beat, following an article he authored that painted Republican gubernatorial challenger, and later governor, Bruce Rauner in a negative light (Channick, 2014). Rauner, who was later endorsed by the Sun-Times, was part of an investing group that purchased the newspaper in 2010 (Channick, 2014). Following McKinney’s resignation in October 2014, none of the sample days used in this study featured originally reported news articles from Sun-Times reporters stationed in Springfield.

The Sun-Times has not been immune to the news media phenomenon of mass layoffs or buyouts in recent years. At the beginning of 2015, 15 staffers, roughly one-fifth of the newspaper’s guild unit on the paper’s editorial side accepted buyouts (Mullin, 2015). Notoriously, the paper also laid off all but four of its photographers in 2013 (Mullin, 2015). It was a move met with widespread criticism from within the
...journalism industry and elsewhere. In October 2014, the newspaper’s parent company, Wrapports, Inc. sold 38 suburban newspapers to chief competitor Tribune Publishing Co. (Beaujon, 2014). Despite the Sun-Times’ recent turmoil, the Sun-Times is only five years removed from winning its eighth Pulitzer Prize (“Sun-Times’ colorful past in covering [and making] news,” 2014).

Mere months before the completion of this research, large-scale layoffs were announced at two of the four sampled newspapers, the Chicago Tribune and the Tribune-Review. In early November 2015, Trib Total Media of Pennsylvania, the Tribune-Review’s parent company, announced a total of 153 company-wide layoffs as a means to consolidate a few different newsrooms (Hare, 2015). It was not immediately clear whether the move would affect staffing at the news company’s Harrisburg bureau.

During the spring of 2016, the Tribune-Review had one reporter, Brad Bumsted, as a member of the Pennsylvania Legislative Correspondents Association (“Membership”). Three months before that, 68 “long-term” employees accepted buyouts from Trib Total Media (Hare, 2015). In late August of 2015 Trib Total Media put nine of its newspapers in Western Pennsylvania up for sale (“Trib Total Media puts 9 Western. Pa. newspapers up for sale,” 2015). Those nine included four daily newspapers (“Trib Total Media puts 9 Western Pa. newspapers up for sale,” 2015).

In July 2015, the Tribune-Review published an article detailing staffing decisions contemplated at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, where 120 employees were apparently offered buyouts as a means to avoid widespread layoffs at the newspaper
(Fleisher, 2015). At the time of the article’s publication, reporter Chris Fleisher reported that “as many as 21” Post-Gazette workers would be able to accept the buyouts. The Post-Gazette currently has two full-time members of the Pennsylvania Legislative Correspondents Association, in addition to one part-time reporter in Harrisburg (“Membership”).

The Chicago Tribune has faced administrative fluctuations of its own within the past year. In June 2015, Poynter’s Ben Mullin reported that the Tribune would lay off 10 newsroom employees, along with 14 others working elsewhere in the Chicago operation. By early October, the Tribune’s parent company, Tribune Publishing, decided to offer what was expected to be about 50 buyouts at its sister newspaper, the Los Angeles Times (Mullin, 2015).
Literature Review: Observing the state of statehouse news media

Statehouse news bureaus: A quality, but shrinking, commodity

It is undeniable that America’s statehouse press corps is waning. But is the content suffering? This paper, which aims to answer that question while also highlighting the significance of statehouse news, (particularly in shaping civil involvement), and state government accountability, was inspired by the Pew Research Center’s 2014 report, America’s Shifting Statehouse Press. The latest in a line of similar niche censuses once recorded by the American Journalism Review, the Pew study quantified how many reporters remained assigned to state government beats. Modeling their survey from AJR’s previous findings, Pew researchers concluded that, at the newspapers AJR surveyed in 2003 and 2009, there were 164 fewer full-time reporters covering state government in 2014 than there were in 2003 (Enda, Matsa, and Boyles, 2014).

With a 35 percent decline, according to Pew, that dip in staffing is a bit more severe than the overall decline of newspaper jobs during that same time, which was 33 percent (American Society of News Editors, 2015). Diving into the specifics of those moves: In 2008, newspapers in Rockford and Champaign, Illinois closed their Springfield bureaus (Heupel, 2008). In the years prior, other newspapers from Alton and Belleville, both near St. Louis, Missouri, also eliminated reporters from the Illinois state capitol (Heupel, 2008).
Even before the most recent slashes in staffing, though, the reporters left staffing statehouse beats had doubts their work was getting the play they thought it deserved. A 2009 National Conference of State Legislatures survey of reporters in 18 states found that 54 percent of respondents said their newspapers devoted less space to state news than was allotted 10 years earlier (Smith, 2009). Only 3 percent of respondents said their papers devoted more space than was used 10 years ago (Smith, 2009).

*Has the strength of reporting weakened?*

Even if designated space has diminished in size, what has become of the state reporting content that remains in newsprint today? Many — inside and outside of the news industry — claim it has suffered in quality just as precipitously. In that 2009 NCSL report, longtime *Sacramento Bee* reporter Dan Weintraub said remaining state reporters “don’t have time or space to get into as much depth” as they once did in their work (Smith, p. 30, 2009). One need not look far to find other critical takes on the state of contemporary statehouse news reporting.

In mid-October 2015, former *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *Palm Beach Post* managing editor Tom O’Hara wrote for political reporting startup Florida Politics that “the digital revolution has taken a terrible toll on newspapers.” In that report, longtime *Miami Herald* reporter Marty Merzer criticized the new media model, saying that newsroom leaders calling for less government coverage “should be ashamed of themselves.”
Just two years ago, Mary Ellen Kas, the Herald’s Tallahassee bureau chief, told Pew that the reduced competition has altered what news she and her colleagues cover out of the statehouse. “Stories that in the past they would want us to be all over, it’s a little bit harder for us to make that sell now,” she said (Enda, Matsa, and Boyles, p. 33, 2014). In fall 2010, Nieman Lab’s Ethan Zuckerman wrote that “in-depth statehouse” reporting was an “endangered species” (p. 15). Many reporters, media experts and longtime statehouse observers indicate that the reduced media competition led to weaker statehouse coverage.

Comparing the modern state of political reporting to how it was when he joined the Harrisburg press corps in the 1960s, Vincent Carocci wrote that readers “were spared the instant and constant 24/7 analysis and counteranalysis they are subjected to” now (Carocci, p. 13, 2005).

But that speed and constancy, more and more, might be what political editors want their state reporters to produce. Polling tells us that assertion is likely to be true. A 2010 unscientific survey for the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy of 336 state government officials in 46 states and Puerto Rico found that a 45-percent plurality of respondents claimed there was much more or somewhat more news coverage of state government than there was five years ago (Gibbons, p. 8, 2010). Only twenty-three percent of respondents reported somewhat less or much less news content of that variety than there was five years ago (Gibbons, p. 8, 2010).

Despite that survey’s findings, there still was frustration from the respondents. One, a Kansas state agency director, told the Shorenstein Center that quality capitol
coverage was “rapidly eroding” in their state (Gibbons, p. 8, 2010). Another, a state official in Utah, said news media employees were “overworked” (Gibbons, p. 8, 2010).

Those claims seemingly directly contradict one description of news bureaus — many of them in state capitals — made 22 years earlier, in Richard Weiner’s introduction to News Bureaus in the U.S. 1988. Weiner wrote that “the greatest strength of the bureau system remains with daily newspapers and news services, and the net change here has been upward, in number of bureaus and personnel at each bureau” (p.vii, 1988). At the time the reference book of more than 1,600 news bureaus was published, Weiner wrote, “circulation is (sic) up at most daily newspapers” (p. vi, 1988).

Weiner’s 1988 reference book cited circulation levels for surveyed newspapers. Those circulation audits offer a glimpse into the overall reach of the outlets compared over the last 30 years. 1988 data are from Weiner’s book, while 2014 data come from various sources reporting figures from the Alliance for Audited Media. The closest possible historical figure was found for the Tribune-Review. It came from an article on the PR Newswire.

**Chicago Tribune**

1988 Monday-Friday: 765,371

2014 Monday-Friday: 307,352 (Channick, 2014)

**Chicago Sun-Times**

1988: Monday-Friday: 604,862
The rapid, recent evolution of state government in the U.S.

The U.S. was founded with the supposition that the states would shoulder a great deal of responsibility. Statehouse reporters today are expected to cover legislatures that are bigger, more unprofessional, more partisan — and with more money at their disposal — than most moments in the last half-century (Squire, National Conference of State Legislatures). In this federal system, the state legislatures ultimately carry more power to alter the lives of their constituents than do their counterparts on Washington’s Capitol Hill. Some Americans may be quick to gripe about the political goings on in their federal capital, but it is on their statehouses they should focus their concerns.

In the late 1960s, when the Illinois Commission on the Organization of the General Assembly published its report *Improving the State Legislature*, chairman Harold Katz wrote that the upcoming legislative session would require delineating on topics “in areas of bewildering complexities” (Katz, p. vii, 1967). Katz listed 14 items that would inevitably appear on the legislative agenda and required state oversight at
the time, including public education and the justice system (Katz, p. vii, 1967). That list, of course, did not include additional responsibilities that states have shouldered in the decades since, perhaps most notably the decision whether to expand federally funded Medicaid programs. In 2013, the Illinois General Assembly approved expanding Medicaid to cover some 324,000 additional residents, which would cost the state more than $200 million to cover the federal government’s difference beginning in the year 2020 (Frost and Pearson, 2013). Those initial estimates proved to be much too conservative, and Illinois taxpayers will likely be on the hook for it. During the first year of expanded enrollment, more than 540,000 Illinoisans joined Medicaid, nearly doubling the state’s potential costs (Hirst, 2015).

Within the first seven months of state-expanded Medicaid in Pennsylvania, almost 440,000 residents signed up for coverage (Giammarise, 2015). The state estimated that another 150,000 or so Pennsylvanians qualified for that expanded coverage (Giammarise, 2015).

Today the states levy a series of taxes, write their own laws on drug use and establish environmental regulations on the oil and gas industry. But state legislatures have not only increased in power; they’ve also increased in the size of their staffs. The business of running a statehouse is expanding. In 1979, each U.S. state legislator employed a median of 2.7 staffers (Moncrief and Squire, 2013). By 2009, that number of legislative aides rose to 3.9 (Moncrief and Squire, 2013). And now more than ever in recent history, state legislatures have the power and flexibility to bring about more
local change. That flexibility is had through the unified partisan fronts of policymakers increasingly put into power.

In 1986, less than 40 percent of state governments were unified — meaning a state’s governor and the majority in each legislative body belong to the same party (Moncrief and Squire, p. 11, 2013). By the end of 2012, that number had spiked up to 75 percent. (Moncrief and Squire, p. 11, 2013). The most up-to-date numbers from the National Conference of State Legislatures indicate that number has since stabilized down to roughly 59 percent (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016), which is still a greater percentage than any rate since the mid-1960s. State governments united under one political party have less roadblocks on the way of writing and passing new laws. The two states that are the focus of this paper, Illinois and Pennsylvania, each have divided state governments, however (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). Illinois has a Democratic-controlled legislature and a Republican governor, while Pennsylvania has the exact opposite setup (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016).

It also should be noted that many state legislatures have become less professional over the last 35 years. Key characteristics of more “professional” legislatures include longer session lengths, increased legislative staffing and member pay (Squire, p. 316, 2012). The 20th century saw increasingly more state legislatures adopting stringent ethics policies, as an effort to more closely resemble the congressional model in Washington (Squire, p. 316, 2012). By President Jimmy
Carter’s administration in the late 1970s, however, that professionalism push would already reach its peak (Squire, 2012).

At least since the early 1990s, Squire has used a self-developed index to gauge legislative professionalism. In Squire’s 2012 work *The Evolution of American Legislatures*, he found that both the median and mean professionalism index for all 50 states had fallen marginally since 1979 (p. 309). Over that same time period, Pennsylvania bucked that trend; Harrisburg became more professional during those years (Squire, p. 209, 2012). However, Illinois reflected the overall regression that Squire found (Squire, p. 309, 2012).

Illinois and Pennsylvania each are among only 11 state legislatures in the U.S. that have no pre-determined regular session limits in place (National Conference of State Legislatures). External, not internal, factors drove most of the professional movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and so Squire wrote that some experts say modern legislatures could be “regressing” away from those efforts (Squire, p. 316, 2012).

**Corruption in the capitol: Statehouse reporting’s relationship with misconduct**

Despite the reform efforts of the 20th century, Springfield and Harrisburg each has seen its share of corruption from public officials in state government. As writer Thomas Gradel and professor Dick Simpson wrote in 2015’s *Corrupt Illinois*, “Illinois is one of the most corrupt states in the nation” (p. 37). Between 1900 and June 2011, of the 20 governors Illinois voters elected, six were accused of some sort of wrongdoing (Benzkofer, 2011). That total, of course, does not include such notoriously corrupt public officials who worked out of Springfield in lesser, but still
important, offices, including longtime state legislator and later Illinois Secretary of
State Paul Powell, who set off a flurry of investigations after $800,000 in currency —
about 40 percent of his estate’s worth — was found stashed into shoeboxes in a
Springfield hotel following his death (Paul Powell’s Nest Egg, 1971).

A much more recent and notorious investigation yielded the June 2011
conviction of former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, on charges that he, among
other things, tried to sell President Barack Obama’s former U.S. Senate seat (Gradel
and Simpson, p. 37, 2015). Blagojevich was sentenced to 14 years in prison (Gradel
and Simpson, p. 37, 2015). When Gradel and Simpson published their book in 2015,
they wrote that 19 Illinois state legislators had been convicted of corruption in the
previous 40 years (p. 47).

Just two years earlier and three states east, in Pennsylvania, another state
official was facing a high-profile criminal conviction. In 2009, a year after finishing
his 30 years as a member of the Pennsylvania Senate, former Philadelphia-area
legislator Vince Fumo was convicted of 137 felony counts related to, among other
offenses, his misuse of public money to fund upkeep at his various homes in
Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Florida — in addition to reports that he used public
money to spy on ex-lovers (Baer, pp. 129-131, 2012). There’s evidence that Fumo’s
actions weren’t isolated in Pennsylvania’s capital city. Between 2000 and 2006 alone,
Harrisburg politicians stole nearly $14 million from their state’s taxpayers (Bumsted,
p. ix, 2013). In 2010, a Pennsylvania grand jury investigating legislative staffing
bonuses many saw as dubious recommended a number of ethical reforms to the state’s
General Assembly (Associated Press, 2010), which jurors called “irretrievably broken and in desperate need of systemic change.”

The U.S. Department of Justice keeps thorough data on convictions of public officials. Those data suggest how the two states compare nationally when stacked up next to their most corrupt counterparts. With federal data collected from 1976 and 2013 and compiled by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Illinois and Pennsylvania ranked in the top six states in terms of the number of federal public corruption convictions, along with Florida, Texas, California and New York (Simpson, et al., p. 4, 2015). Illinois averaged more than 52 convictions per year and Pennsylvania averaged more than 44 during that time period (Simpson, et al., p. 4, 2015). When those figures are broken down per capita, Pennsylvania and Illinois still are in the top 15 (Simpson, et al., 2015).

When tallied by federal court region, the Northern Illinois district had the most such convictions from 1976 to 2013 — roughly 300 more than second-place Southern California (Simpson, et al., p. 3, 2015). The court district of Eastern Pennsylvania had the eighth-largest number of convictions (Simpson, et al., p. 3, 2015). That behavior apparently does not go unnoticed by residents in either state. A Gallup Poll conducted in 2013 and published the following year found that only 28 percent of Illinoisans and 46 percent of Pennsylvanians trust their state governments (Jones, 2014). Those totals were among the four lowest, with Illinois rounding of the very bottom of the list (Jones, 2014).
Aside from the deficits in public opinion, there’s still more to lose when it comes to public corruption: taxpayer money. Some have estimated public corruption in Illinois costs residents there as much as $500 million annually (Gradel and Simpson, p. 50, 2015).

The latest numbers from the National Conference of State Legislatures show state-level policymakers in Illinois and Pennsylvania have some of the highest salaries among states that pay their legislators a yearly rate (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). Illinois legislators earned $67,836 annually and those in Pennsylvania made just more than $85,000 per year (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). At roughly $91,000, California was the only state to have a base yearly rate greater than Pennsylvania (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). Even if politicians never engage in corrupt behavior, they still are under financial obligation to serve constituents — and make thousands of dollars each year to do so.

Why is statehouse corruption so well documented in the U.S.? In his 2013 book *Keystone Corruption*, longtime Pittsburgh Tribune-Review Harrisburg reporter Brad Bumsted speculated that Americans tend to catch big corruption before it permeates into the federal government. A large part of that safety net is undoubtedly the press covering state government. Bumsted’s colleague, a former Harrisburg correspondent who went on to become a South America correspondent for Reuters, put it on the same spectrum as the 2006 Colombian National Army massacre in Jamundí, Colombia. “In Pennsylvania you write the (Sen. Vince) Fumo stories so you
don’t have to write the Jamundí stories” (Bumsted, p. x, 2013). In that power dynamic described by Bumsted and his colleague, in which a significant amount of American corruption is detected at the state level, the statehouse press corps is a substantial watchdog. Assuring government transparency and accountability undeniably falls on the shoulders of the Fourth Estate.

The partisan, less professional and often corrupt state governments are in turn controlling more and more money. It’s not just, as previously mentioned, the growing health care industry; state spending on education, public safety and welfare has risen by billions of dollars above the rate of inflation since the late 1970s (“About State Government Finances,” 2009). Since 1977, according to the latest data from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, state governments have increased yearly spending in 2010 dollars more than three-fold, from roughly $435 billion in 1977 to $1,454 billion in 2009 (“About State Government Finances,” 2009).

That year, that spending made up 10.3 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product — up from 7.3 percent in 1977 (“About State Government Finances,” 2009). The expansion of state spending has grown faster than the U.S. economy over that span of time (“About State Government Finances,” 2009).

State government is even a major expenditure source for the U.S. federal government. When divided up by source, state government revenue’s largest funding stream is federal assistance (“About State Government Finances,” 2009). In 2009, the federal government devoted more than $481 billion to state governments —
significantly higher than the $134.8 billion it sent to the states in 1977 (“About State Government Finances,” 2009).

In Illinois, state revenue has largely grown over the last 20 years. In the state’s 1993 fiscal year, projected revenue was roughly $14,500 million, translating to just under $24,000 million in 2015 dollars (Wheeler, p. 4, 2003). That revenue currently totals $32,000 million for Illinois’ fiscal year 2016 (Governor’s Office of Management and Budget, 2015, pp. 3-55).

As previously mentioned, Pennsylvania’s state general fund has doubled in size, when adjusted for inflation, over the past 45 years. It stands that state government is one of the U.S.’s large industries — and it’s growing.

As partisans continue to dominate state governments that are ever growing, more pressure is heaped onto state reporters to check that power. Oftentimes, state policymakers are combative against those members of the Fourth Estate. As recently as January 2016, legislators in two states were actively making it harder for reporters to do their jobs. At the beginning of the Virginia Senate’s first gathering of the new year, capitol reporters found that they were precluded from sitting in their usual places on the Senate floor where they could “directly observe proceedings on ground level, review floor amendments, obtain copies of votes and observe interaction among lawmakers in real time” (Nolan, 2016). Instead, Virginia Senate Majority Leader Thomas Norment relegated reporters to a far corner of the chamber’s viewing gallery while the body was in session (Nolan, 2016).
Norment, who has a documented rocky relationship with the Richmond press corps, offered no explanation of the move to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (Nolan, 2016). Within three weeks, an agreement was reached between senate leaders and the Virginia Capitol Correspondents Association, which brought reporters back to the floor, albeit in a limited capacity (Cain, 2016). Despite regaining floor access, the press association released a statement reported in the *Roanoke Times* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch* said the new “workable” floor arrangement “places additional limitations on our members’ flexibility to cover proceedings” (Cain, 2016).

Within a week of the initial Senate vote to ban capitol reporters from the floor in Virginia, another state legislator made national headlines by introducing a bill to the South Carolina General Assembly that would create a state-run registry of journalists there (Jackson and Kropf, 2016). State Rep. Mike Pitts’ bill would make failing to register a misdemeanor that could result in as much as a $500 fine and a 30-day stint in jail (Jackson and Kropf, 2016). Pitts later said the bill was a move to bring attention to the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution by equating it to the First Amendment (Jackson and Kropf, 2016), but it at least shows one state legislator is willing to broker a less-free state press corps for political gain.

Those two legislative actions were preceded by troubling news out of a third state in early 2016: In their first official action of the year, Missouri state senators decided to ban journalists from the chamber floor starting March 29 (Lee, 2016). Their counterparts in the Missouri State House of Representatives already had prevented such access, part of what longtime Jefferson City and current Washington reporter Eli
Yokley called a “slow erosion of justice” (Lee, 2016). Leaders in the Senate also passed along a memo to the Jefferson City press corps asking reporters not to pursue legislators after session, but to set up meetings with staffers instead (Lee, 2016).

Is more transparency needed to fix broken governments?

Those recent legislative actions in three states directly contradict the advice former Pennsylvania Gov. Dick Thornburgh offered to legislators in Brad Bumsted’s *Keystone Corruption*. In order to best curtail corruption, Thornburgh said Pennsylvania needs “statutes that provide for transparent and accountable government…” (Bumsted, p. 202, 2013). A former aide to Pennsylvania U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum also named transparency as one of the key ways to weed out corruption in the Keystone state (Bumsted, 2013). Keeping reporters housed well away from the statehouse floor and registered on public databases does no favors to journalists who try to hold politicians accountable.

The National Conference of State Legislatures in 2011 published a state-by-state report concerning legislative media credentialing. Pennsylvania allows journalists to sit in a designated back row of its chamber, in addition to a speaker system in the statehouse press room (*National Council of State Legislatures*, 2011). Illinois, however, does not provide for media access on the floors of its legislature, according to the NCSL data. The data are incomplete, but indicate that Springfield is one of at
least seven state legislatures that prevents reporters from floor access in at least one body (*National Council of State Legislatures*, 2011).

The state governments that are now less professional, more mammoth, and still corrupt, are under the purview of fewer and fewer state reporters. What could that mean for good government and public transparency? Some forecasts are grim. Writing for *Nieman Reports* in Winter 2010, Gene Gibbons opined that the scaling back of reporters has left gaping holes in coverage that could otherwise snuff out wrongdoing by officials. Specifically lamenting what will happen in Springfield once the Tribune’s longtime correspondent Ray Long retires, Gibbons wrote that environment is “likely to give rise to” more “more political flimflammy” (2010). Although there is hope in web-first publications like the Texas Tribune and Investigative News Network, Gibbons wrote that “only the worst miscreants are likely to come under their scrutiny, and the chances of that happening even for the really bad guys are roughly equivalent to being struck by lightning” (2010). Beat reporters, he said, are a much more effective safety net (Gibbons, 2010).

*Statehouse news reporters: Who are they? How do they do their jobs?*

Though they come at a cost, statehouse news reporters have a well-documented track record of producing quality news articles. As reporters go, research has shown that statehouse correspondents, particularly those employed by newspapers, are effective at their day-to-day jobs. Anecdotally, Harkey (p. 219, 1976) wrote that, after interviewing 29 then-statehouse reporters working in Columbus, Ohio,
“as a group, the Ohio statehouse correspondents have no superiors among newspaper people met up with in that experience… One wonders who inserts the imbecilic non sequiturs, the battered grammmer (sic), dangling fragments, and other graces of the new broken-English journalese that soils the newspapers of the 1970s.

Certainly not these people.”

Content studies elsewhere seem to correspond with that description. Frederick Fico, now an emeritus professor at Michigan State University’s College of Communication Arts and Sciences, has produced a handful of academic articles pinpointing just how bureau reporters excel at their jobs. After surveying 275 news articles for his 2004 entry in the Newspaper Research Journal with Eric Freedman, Fico found that wire and bureau reporters in that cohort wrote more than double the amount of structurally-balanced stories than their newsroom-based colleagues (Fico and Freedman, 2004).

When divided between medium (i.e. radio, television, wire service, and newspaper), research (Atwater, Fico, and Pizante, 1987) suggests newspapers contain the highest percentage of “unique stories.” That classification means those articles that center on topics not tackled in any other article during a set research period. Atwater, Fico, and Pizante found that during two weeks in 1984, seven daily newspapers had a higher total percentage of unique stories, at 28 percent, than did broadcast or wire services (p. 56, 1987).
We are now in a time where there are fewer newspaper reporters dedicated to capitol coverage, opening up the possibility of journalists in far-flung newsrooms covering what those specialists would have tackled in years past. That contrasts with opinion of journalists, civil servants and legislators in David Morgan’s Albany, New York survey published in 1978. Most respondents reported that they thought political journalists need training in state politics to do their jobs (Morgan, p. 158, 1978).

Seven years after Morgan published his research, Fico published a solo work in a 1985 issue of the Newspaper Research Journal outlining findings that, during a 12-day study of Michigan statehouse coverage, statehouse-based reporters not only tapped into more sources — they also used a more diverse number of sources (Fico, 1985). Claiming “the advantages of actually being on the scene seem apparent,” Fico was prophetic in saying “the more constrained reporters are by technological and deadline factors, the narrower the range of sources and the less often particular sources will be used in stories” (Fico, p. 50, 1985). In acknowledging the strides made in expanding technology and the 24-hour news cycle, this paper will check if Fico’s fear has been realized.

University of Liverpool professor David Morgan polled all but one of the 24-full-time-member Albany press corps in the late 1970s, finding that they, perhaps unsurprisingly, thought highly of their own work. Morgan himself wrote that much of that reporting “is a product of news competition” in addition to government action and “journalistic selection” (p. 106). A similar study conducted of the Columbus, Ohio, Statehouse press corps in the 1970s found that most of the 48 current, former and
retired correspondents polled resented their editors for not giving their articles better play in the daily newspaper (Harkey, 1976). Only two of those correspondents reported that the reporters covering the statehouse worked in a non-professional manner (Harkey, 1976). All but three of the polled reporters in the Albany survey said that more than 30 percent of their reporting comes from their own “investigation and reconstruction” (Morgan, p. 111, 1978).

Even in the late 1970s, when newspaper journalists were not confronted with the around-the-clock deadlines facing reporters today, a plurality of 12 reporters said that deadlines frequently or always constrained with news publication (Morgan, p. 111, 1978). That total was more than any other single factor (Morgan, p. 111, 1978).

The presentation of news, most reporters said, was often constrained by those same deadlines, but that also was largely due to personnel constraints (Morgan, p. 112, 1978). For context, in 2013-2014, aside from the New York Times and the Albany Times-Union, no New York newspaper had more than two full-time, year-round staffers in the Albany press corps (Enda, Matsa and Boyles, p. 22, 2014).

Yet even within the ecosystem of a statehouse press corps, research has showed that work dynamic might be a hierarchy amongst reporters. In 1976, Columbus correspondents pinpointed “knowledge-experience” as the most important trait for a political reporter (Harkey, p. 232, 1976). Unsurprisingly and similarly, that researcher also found that the most admired statehouse correspondents were most-often cited for “knowledgeability-training” as their most important qualities (Harkey, p. 233, 1976). Researchers have gleaned similar dynamics elsewhere, to such an extent
that it affects the working arrangements in at least one state press corps (Shields and Dunwoody, 1986).

In a 1986 study of journalists covering the Wisconsin capitol, Shields and Dunwoody found that more experienced reporters, with at least three years of on-the-beat work, were within the tighter-knit circles of the press corps there. Those circles had clear benefits. Older reporters with decades of experience fell within an “inner club” consisting of a handful of reporters, generally covering routine events, who had a hand in shaping news out of Madison, according to one outsider (Shields and Dunwoody, p. 47, 1986). The other group, which researchers dubbed “star reporters,” was made up of print reporters with roughly three to seven years of experience who consistently worked on investigative or enterprise pieces (Shields and Dunwoody, p. 48, 1986).

That dichotomy came with perks, showing the worth of staffing a newspaper’s statehouse bureau with experienced, quality reporters. The “inner club” journalists and “star reporters” frequently “shared routine information among themselves freely” (Shields and Dunwoody, p. 48, 1986). Those two classes of reporters also more often got access to privileged information to scoop other journalists (Shields and Dunwoody, 1986).

Regardless of the hierarchy, all reporters stationed at the statehouse still benefited. Shields and Dunwoody reported that reporters commonly shared information and helped each other with accuracy checks, regardless of their statuses in the hierarchy. (Shields and Dunwoody, 1986). Shields and Dunwoody make a clear
finding: There is a definite advantage for a newspaper to have at least one reporter stationed at a state capitol. That advantage could be more thorough sourcing, accuracy or the ability to define news, according to both the quantitative and qualitative results Shields and Dunwoody found.

But what happens when newspapers decide those benefits aren’t worth the cost? If newspapers continue to shutter their bureaus and scale back quality reporting, there could be regional and political implications. Starr (2009) wrote that the financial downturn of traditional newspapers would have “dire” implications for the public sphere. Multiple studies have looked into such claims. Results show what many might have previously suspected: Less news reporting correlates with less political involvement in both the long and short term, and even correlates with changes in election patterns (Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, 2013).

Multiple recent, significant research studies indicate that when a newspaper leaves a city it once covered, that city perhaps won’t be the same (Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, 2013 and What Happens When Newspapers Fail? Studying the Demise of Seattle's Post-Intelligencer and Denver's Rocky Mountain News, 2012).

Following the closing of the *Cincinnati Post* at the end of 2007, Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido found that multiple facets of the local political process — particularly in Northern Kentucky, where the *Post* traditionally had more traction and coverage than its chief competitor, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* — were altered immediately. It could be argued that coverage in those areas was most analogous to a bureau-like work environment. In the years following the paper’s departure, fewer
people voted in elections where the Post was more important (Shulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, 2013). What’s more, Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido found that in those same places, fewer candidates ran for public office, incumbents had an advantage over challengers, and candidates spent less money on elections (2013).

Most of those effects diminished in scale over time, but by 2010, voter turnout in the Kentucky suburbs that were once in the Post’s readership area still hadn’t returned to levels prior to the newspaper’s exit (Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, 2013). The Post only had a circulation of 27,000 at the time of its departure, perhaps supporting Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido’s claim that no matter how small the outlet, newspapers “can have a substantial and measurable effect on public life” (p. 0, 2009).

The same year, in a report looking at the 2009 departures of the Rocky Mountain News in Denver and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer’s print version in Seattle, Shaker made similar findings. Shaker asserted those determinations support his belief that newspapers are “vital” in our society (p. 132). Using the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey, Shaker determined that in Denver, Seattle and the U.S. at-large, newspaper readership was positively correlated with multiple measures of civic engagement. Those measures included contact with public officials, boycotting a product or service, being a member of a neighborhood or civic group and acting as a group officer (Shaker, 2014).

Of those measures, four declined significantly in Denver from 2008 to 2009 and two declined significantly in Seattle during that time (Shaker, 2014). Shaker surveyed individuals in eight other U.S. cities. In all of those cities, only five
combined measures of civic involvement changed significantly from 2008 to 2009 (Shaker, 2014). Concluding on those findings, Shaker claimed that “the advent of new communication opportunities” could alter the way people involve themselves civically (p. 145). But what if the new communication opportunity, or the new business model for state government news, at traditional newsrooms that still exists, falls short of reaching that goal?

*Statehouse news media’s role in setting agendas*

Why ought Americans care about the reporting coming out of their statehouses? Dwindling commitment to statehouse news reporting at a metro newspaper could have serious implications that extend well beyond the newsroom — from changing electoral participation to altering how news consumers think about the political issues. The findings at shuttered newspapers previously discussed do not even directly discuss the news media’s role in agenda setting. A breadth of media research has demonstrated that news media play a significant role in molding public opinion. This goes beyond the impact news media have on electoral participation and outcomes, which this study has highlighted. Statehouse reporters, in particular, are in position to have that impact, as their work directly concerns the daily happenings of state government and political campaigns. The news media’s role in setting a public agenda can also be observed at a much more personal level. The strength of a newspaper’s reporting is something that the public should care deeply about, because the way people think about and assess the news hangs in the balance.
News media integrate local populations into politics. Political communication offers consumers the fuel to formulate educated opinions and participate in the democratic, electoral process. Recent research (Camaj, p. 650, 2014) has confirmed the belief that mass news media “build support for democratic institutions, and incite a participatory citizenry.” That finding goes hand-in-hand with results of McLeod, Scheufele and Moy’s (1999) analysis indicating newspaper readership’s relatively high potential for predicting institutional participants of local government, (i.e. voting, contacting public officials), when compared to other variables such as television use, external efficacy, and political knowledge.

That does not even take into account that political knowledge has to come from somewhere. News media consumption itself is positively correlated with greater political knowledge — as well as trusting of and participation in government (Norris p. 11, 2004). Studies from the U.S., United Kingdom and elsewhere make it clear that (Norris, 2004) news media “reduces (sic) the barriers to further civic engagement” (p. 13).

Regardless of whether those civil participants feel engaged, (Moon, 2014) the news media have a large role in signaling which issues they consider most important. Moon’s philosophy of a hierarchy of issue importance expresses that whatever topics outlets devote more energy and space to covering will be the topics most news consumers consider to be most important (2014).

The salience of candidate attributes also can come from the news media in a similar fashion. King (1997) found in a content analysis of Taiwanese voters that
results seemed to indicate “the press was able to tell voters not only what (candidate) attributes to think about, but also how to think about them” (p. 38). Press coverage of two candidates’ speaking abilities, integrity and virtues predominantly matched up with how voters assessed those candidates (King, 1997). Overall the mental image that voters had of each candidate was “significantly” influenced by the press (King, p. 40, 1997).

How can a press corps environment impact the news?

Media outlets can have an effect on how their competitors cover the news. Fishman (1980) and Shields and Dunwoody (1986) observed that news corps are defined by interpersonal communication, and sometimes even teamwork, that affects how news is gathered. Journalists working a beat interact with their competitors about the news sometimes in the same way they would with sources (Fishman, 1980). Using a city and county government beat as his research setting, Fishman found that interaction included sharing gossip, updating colleagues who missed government meetings, and clarifying certain facts like spelling of names or identification of sources.

Those interactions not only shape the day-to-day routine of a journalist, they also can alter the way news is conveyed to a news audience. Atwater, Fico and Pizante (1987) found a strong, statistically significant correlation of commonness amongst news article topics from wire services, broadcast stations and newspapers covering state legislature. The three researchers additionally found weaker, but still existing
correlations for much more specific story agendas from the three types of news sources. The authors wrote that the results “suggest a significant degree of commonness in news judgment from reporters from three media” (p. 58).

A competitive media landscape can promote different topics and agendas in the content outlets produce. Both Chicago, home to the Tribune, the Sun-Times and other hyper local outlets, and Pittsburgh, where the Tribune-Review and Post-Gazette compete, represent such an environment. Research has described a media ecosystem in which most outlets agree which issues Americans ought to care about, but differ as to how the audience should interpret those issues (Lasorsa, 1997). That agenda setting stops short, however, of telling news consumers what exactly they should think (Lasorsa, 1997). Examples of coverage differences the two respective markets were fairly common within the confines of this study.

For example, a handful of articles from the Tribune and Sun-Times centered on the December 1986 deal to build the Chicago White Sox a new ballpark in Chicago. On December 7, both newspapers dedicated large spreads toward coverage of the city-state joint deal that brought what would later be known as U.S. Cellular Field. Who the newspapers most credited for the deal, though, differed. The Tribune front-page headline read, “Mayor covered all bases to swing Sox deal.” The Sun-Times, in contrast, ran a story with a headline that put more responsibility on the shoulders of Springfield officials. “Legislators play ball in 2 wins,” read one headline, though its sub headline was “How mayor-governor team scored for Sox, Arlington.”
There also were discrepancies in what rival publications reported within the actual text of stories, or where facts were placed within those texts. For example, both the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review covered a campaign finance disclosure from Republican then-Gov. Tom Corbett during his unsuccessful re-election bid. How each paper described the finance report, however, differed slightly. The Tribune-Review referenced Corbett’s lagging polls in the second clause of its story’s lead sentence. It took the Post-Gazette six paragraphs until its article mentioned Wolf’s “lackluster public approval numbers.”

Newspaper reporters, in particular, have a specific importance in conveying issue and candidate salience to news consumers. Even in a competitive market, newspapers seem to have some clear advantages over competition from radio or television broadcast stations. This is despite the similarities that undeniably exist between competitors’ news coverage (Atwater, Fico and Pizante, 1987). Research indicates, however, that the permanence of newspapers may lead to a more “powerful” agenda-setting effect on news consumers (Wanta, p. 143, 1997). At the very least, newspapers seem to have much more lasting effects than do their broadcast counterparts, though broadcasts tend to correlate with faster agenda-setting effects (Wanta, 1997). News consumers might not learn more information from newspapers, but it seems they very well can retain information for much longer periods of time thanks to reading a newspaper (Wanta, 1997).
The new digital-first landscape of news has not appeared to disrupt the media’s agenda-setting effects. Statehouse reporters, like any reporter for a newspaper, still hold agenda-setting influence over their readers.

The newspaper, and now newspaper website, remains a source of education and understanding among readers (Martin, 2014). Martin (2014) found during a two-week study of before the 2008 Indiana primary that the news articles presented as the most important online and in print often corresponded with the stories that had the most user comments. So people who read newspapers, online or in print, are still influenced by the content and presentation of the content they read (Wanta, 1997, Schulhofer and Wohl, 2013, What Happens When Newspapers Fail? Studying the Demise of Seattle's Post-Intelligencer and Denver's Rocky Mountain News, 2012).

A second (Martin, 2014) study, this time of the 2010 U.S. Senate election in Indiana, found that of 220 randomly selected registered voters, those voters considered newspaper websites the most important and most popular source of information on the Internet for campaign news (Martin, 2014). That outpaced television news websites, social media, campaign websites and blogs (Martin, 2014). Statistical analysis found that the local newspaper and those other online sources had a greater agenda setting impact on voters than the candidates themselves. (Martin, 2014).

Even within the confines of social media, traditional news outlets still have a hand in competing with the venues offered by the Internet to drive discussion. Meraz (2014) found that during the rise of the Tea Party during Barack Obama’s first
presidential term, the Tea Party Patriots Facebook group “actively” utilized traditional news content to plot discussion agendas (Meraz, p. 21, 2014).

At this time, the crux of Tea Party support came through its vigorous use of social media, and Facebook in particular. Much of that movement’s prominence started in discussion groups on Facebook, which in turn started with dialogue spurred by what individuals read from their local traditional news outlet, often a newspaper.

The importance of sourcing: And how it can lead to accountability

Sources are the backbone of the articles found in those newspapers. That is not specific to statehouse news, but the maxim also rings true for that type of reporting. Fishman (1980) noted that sources, particularly those relied upon most often, have the opportunity to set agenda and shape news consumers’ worldviews. The experts, politicians and public relations flacks that a reporter interviews ultimately contribute to an article’s voice just as much as a reporter. They are the building blocks of a news story, Fishman observed, specifically calling bureaucratic facts the “hard data of newswork” (p. 87).

He added that there is a much more limited role for nonbureaucratic sources; getting bureaucratic sources on the record creates the structure of a breaking news story. Stationed at or near a state capitol, statehouse reporters have great opportunities to interact with the bureaucracy of government every day. Research studies and government records offer the chance to give a story more weight in the mind of the reader. As Fico and Freedman put it in a 2001 article for Journalism and Mass
Communication Quarterly, “Story agendas are assumed to result from some mix of journalistic and source values and pressures” (Fico and Freedman, p. 447, 2001).

More sources do not always equate to a more fair and balanced approach, but they do offer the chance for more article complexity and development of an issue’s nuances. One legislator, for example, could be much less adequate to explain a state budget than multiple state budget experts. Sources do not only shape a reader’s interpretation, they also can lead to slant from reporters themselves. In Fico and Freedman’s 2001 article, which looked at how the largest Michigan dailies covered the state’s 1998 governor election, they found that 22 percent of pooled articles had subjective leads (Fico and Freedman, p. 445, 2001).

But of those statements which, researchers said, contained “interpretations, conclusions, or creative departures from objectivity,” the vast majority were followed up with material that backed up those claims (Fico and Freedman, p. 445, 2001). Only one-fifth of the articles with subjective leads had no information in the following paragraphs that gave that subjectivity credibility (Fico and Freedman, pp. 445-446, 2001).

To be clear, statehouse reporters used their own assertions to start articles more than other types of reporters in the study — although 56 percent of those leads could be objectively verified (Fico and Freedman, pp. 445-446, 2001). However, those capital-based journalists also used various types of experts in their articles at roughly twice the rate did local and wire reporters (Fico and Freedman, p. 446, 2001). This Fico and Freedman study again represents research seeming to indicate that capitol
reporters are more effective than other colleagues at offering readers a more thorough and balanced take on the news.

The primary way the University of Illinois at Chicago researchers said Americans can combat corruption in their government, and specifically in Illinois? “Demand more transparency and accountability” (Simpson, et al., p. 2, 2015). Often that accountability and transparency can come from the statehouse press. Columbus reporters in 1976 told a researcher they identified their roles as watchdogs and interpreter of issues — active duties listed alongside more passive interpretations like recorders of events and observers (Harkey, 1976). That self-awareness shows how capitol reporters view the importance they place on their occupation. News reporters have a large say in bringing accountability to government, and statehouse news reporters, in particular, have been proven to be more thorough in going about that work.
Results

This study measured the amount of sourcing per article at four “legacy” newspapers in two states during randomly sampled two weeks. The sample was formed to simulate two distinct years of content. A total of 154 articles was gathered to compose the sample — 99 from 1986 and 55 from 2014. Table 2 displays a breakdown of the sample, by newspaper and year.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Chicago Tribune</th>
<th>Chicago Sun-Times</th>
<th>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</th>
<th>Tribune-Review</th>
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<td>32</td>
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• Includes articles later thrown out

After a sample was collected, coders calculated the amount of sourcing for each article, and that sourcing was assigned to one of three categories. The two independent coders were the first line of analysis. Between the two existed a 72.1 percent agreement and a Scott’s Pi score (Riffe, Lacy and Fico, 1998) of 0.544. In the case of any disagreements between the two coders, this researcher’s prior coding acted as a tiebreaker. Between the three coders, a percent agreement test yielded 71.4
percent agreement. However, one article from the 1986 pool of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* articles and another from the 2014 pool of the *Tribune-Review* stories were eliminated. Those two articles yielded three different category assignments from the three coders.

The categorized data were then compiled, still divided by year and newspaper. The percentage of news stories categorized in each of the three sections was then calculated in Microsoft Excel. Category v1 represents any article with three or fewer sources, category v2 was used for articles with 4 to 6 source and category v3 represents any article with more than 7 sources. Categories were lumped together by year. Table 3 shows the results of this analysis.

**Chart 1: Percentage of articles in each category.**
Articles in 1986 were more likely to have fewer sources than articles from 2014. Articles in 2014 were more likely to have more sources. By raw percentages, 1986 newspapers had the higher rate of articles coded into the v1 category, more than 10 percent more common than v1 articles during the two-week sample in 2014. At the other end of the results, 2014 had the higher rate of articles coded in the v3 category, with 26 percent of that year’s overall total. In the 2014 sample period, 42.6 percent of articles were in the v2 category, a nominally higher rate than the 1986 equivalent.

Table 3: Percentage of stories during the two-week period, which contained fewer than four sources

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<th>1986</th>
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<td>Tribune-Review</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Sun-Times</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Numbers depicted show the percentage of each paper’s total in both 1986 and 2014 that were coded into the v1 category.
- Data were supported with a moderately negative Pearson correlation coefficient of -.66.
Hypothesis 1 claimed that the newspapers published in 2014 would have more fewer-sourced state government articles than their equivalents from 1986. To test that hypothesis, the percentages of stories coded into the v1 category were ordered by newspaper and year. That layout yielded a Pearson correlation coefficient of -.66. That figure shows a moderately strong negative correlation between year and category among the data — indicating a downward trend in the rate of minimally sourced stories over the 28-year span between collection periods. That is, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Laying out a similar set of data looking at the differences in v3-coded articles yielded a weak positive correlation — a Pearson correlation coefficient of .32 — between year and percentage, not necessarily supporting the assumption that more articles produced in 2014 would have at least 7 sources included.
Discussion

With sourcing as a compass pointing toward quality reporting, this study found that capitol journalism in Illinois and Pennsylvania today is perhaps stronger than it was in the late 1980s. Those results have implication on how we assess the current crop of statehouse reporting in the two states included in this study. They show that recent worries about statehouse reporting may or may not be factually supported, depending on how one measures reporting vitality.

The primary variable measured in this study, amount of sourcing measured by three categories, varied between 1986 and 2014 differently than did the pure number of articles. The overall number of surveyed articles dropped dramatically between the two-week periods in 1986 and 2014. The percentage of those articles categorized into v2 and v3, though, increased between 1986 and 2014.

This study hypothesized:

- H1: There will be a higher percentage of v1 articles at the surveyed newspapers in 2014 than in 1986.

Results did not support the H1 hypothesis. In 1986, some 45 percent of the surveyed articles contained no more than three sources. By 2014, that rate fell to about 31.5 percent of all articles. Table 3 indicates that data was supported by a moderately negative Pearson correlation coefficient of -0.66.
With more sourcing comes more opportunities to expand an article’s context. Additional sourcing can be a means to give more experts space to shed light on an election. It could be the difference between running one quote from a bill opponent or two quotes from two different bill opponents; the difference between a balanced story and an unbalanced one. Sourcing can require considerable work, and so it is heartening to see more of it, per article, during the 2014 period at the four outlets studied here. It’s one metric showing that there still is true, in-depth reporting going on in Springfield and Harrisburg — and that it might not be as uncommon as one could think.

This study was not meant to simply measure the amount of statehouse news reporting in each two-week sample size — but those numbers are noteworthy, particularly in the case of the Chicago Sun-Times, which lost its longtime Springfield reporter, arguably because of its own doing, in fall 2014. In 1986, when circulation at the Sun-Times was possibly upward of 600,000, the Sun-Times had 32 articles collected for this study. In the 2014 sample, there were only four articles — strikingly fewer than the 1986 total. The difference could be explained by the random sampling, Dave McKinney’s resignation, or the “statehouse reporting” definition used while gathering the sample. Still, the drop off in number of printed Sun-Times statehouse articles was precipitous. It’s also not even clear if the Sun-Times replaced McKinney. The most recent telephone directory for the Illinois Legislative Correspondents Association, as of the spring of 2016, still includes Dave McKinney, and only Dave McKinney, as the group’s sole representative from the Chicago Sun-Times. Data
indicate the *Sun-Times* didn’t have any state news articles on surveyed days following McKinney’s stepping down in early fall 2014.

The limitations of this study, solely gathering articles that appeared in print during 2014, may also account for the discrepancies. Print consumption, however, still is part of the business plan and readership of all four newspapers.

At the opposite end of that dynamic was the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, which had only four fewer articles during the 2014 survey period than it did in the two-week spread from 1986. The tale of the *Tribune-Review*’s last 30 years is fairly opposite to that of the *Sun-Times*, though the Western Pennsylvania newspaper has faced struggles in the last two years. Throughout the 1990s, the *Tribune-Review* purchased or established bureaus and regional papers throughout metro Pittsburgh (Tascarella, 1997). By the second half of the decade, the outlet moved a newsroom to downtown Pittsburgh to compete with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Tascarella, 1997). Today, Trib Total Media operates 14 newspapers throughout suburban Pittsburgh (“Contact us”), though several have been sold or put up for sale since the beginning of 2015 (“Trib Total Media” puts 9 Western. Pa. newspapers up for sale,” 2015).

But the decline in overall production is something that likely is unsurprising to many. What is perhaps more surprising is the rejection of Hypothesis 1, showing that the evolution from 1986 to 2014 has correlated with a lower percentage of fewer-sourced articles containing fewer than four sources. Consumers of traditional print media in Chicago and western Pennsylvania have fewer printed articles to read when it comes to state political news; however the articles that remain are, at least marginally,
more thoroughly produced by including more sourcing than the articles consumers would have read some 30 years ago in 1986.

Compared to their non-capitol colleagues, statehouse reporters long have done a fine job at including more sources in their articles (Fico, 1985). There could be a trade-off, however, if there is a higher percentage of well-reported articles, amid considerably fewer articles overall. To be sure, sourcing, particularly any hard fact, is the meat of the story (Fishman, 1980), and one could reasonably assume a more deeply sourced story equates to a more thorough look at the news, but one study has found that some statehouse-based reporters neglect to interview experts, at least within the setting of an election (Freedman and Fico, 2004). This study made no attempt to qualify the sources used, which would be worthy for future researchers to explore in similar studies on capitol reporting.

Were reporters in 2014 using more easy-to-acquire sources, like bill texts or spokespeople? Perhaps the rise in legislative staffing (Moncrief and Squire, 2013) has equated to more public relations experts to speak on behalf of politicians and officials. It is a simple explanation, but even the Internet could explain the increase in sourcing. Reporters could be more apt to gather information from legislative service commission websites or the websites of state representatives themselves, rather than acquiring such literature in person. Reaching state legislators is now even more convenient, as reporters can contact them via cell phones, social media accounts, and emailing.

Another question could lead to a dire answer: Are statehouse reporters covering less “small news” like committee hearings and bill introductions in stories
that might not need as much sourcing? The possibility could be likely; given the reality that increasingly fewer journalists are assigned state capitol beats. With fewer colleagues, editors may ask them to cover elections or larger news stories. That should raise a flag for good government advocates. Readers deserve to read statehouse news from throughout the political process — not just the sexy content newspaper editors think the audience wants or expects will be well received.

Those questions raise flags on potential limitations of this research, one that the author readily admits. There are many symptoms of the ill-equipped statehouse press corps of the 2010s. At minimum, this study at least offers the input that one more symptom can be gauged, beyond past research on job totals. Reporting that offers more sourcing was more common in 2014 at the four newspapers in this study than it was 28 years earlier — even though there were fewer articles altogether. This research is a sign that journalists reporting today from Harrisburg and Springfield are likely doing fine work, despite industry criticisms indicating otherwise. They may not be as productive, (in terms of article production), but their content’s quality is greater than it was 30 years ago. Reporters (and their editors) seem less interested in filling the paper and more focused on adding additional context and perspectives to their work. That trend is one worth boasting. More fleshed-out articles can tell stories better than 100-word briefs. As long as readers are still there, society stands to be more educated as a consequence.
Conclusion

This study’s results appear to contradict current conventional wisdom about the trajectory of statehouse news in the United States. To be sure, staffing is at strikingly low levels nationwide (Enda, Matsa and Boyles, 2014). That appears to have correlated with a drop in the number of printed articles produced from capitol correspondents in the two states included in this study. Nevertheless it might be premature to announce the death of quality statehouse reporting altogether, at least in Pennsylvania and Illinois. In those states, this research shows, members of the state press corps have quality reporting on-par with, and in some cases better than, the news work from 30 years ago. This is not a funeral, at least not yet.

Sourcing is the crux of the news article (Fishman, 1980) and analyzing it from a capitol news perspective offers one way to measure the quality of reporting. If one assumes more sourcing to equate to higher quality reporting, this study thus concludes that statehouse reporting in both Illinois and Pennsylvania improved between the two-week periods in 1986 and 2014. At minimum, however, there are significantly fewer statehouse-related stories appearing in the print editions of today than there were some 30 years ago. The capitol reporting in the two states this study researched thus might not be alive and well. It would be more accurate to say reporting is well, than it is alive. There is a proportionally larger foundation of top-notch reporting, but modern newspapers do appear to lack the extensity of coverage they once had.

The breadth of past research gathered largely came from journals published some ten, twenty, or sometimes thirty years ago. Many of the content analyses that
dealt with statehouse news and were cited in this paper were published at least ten years ago. In short, there is a noticeable lack of recent studies doing what this study did: checking the quality and quantity of statehouse news reporting. More media researchers need to fill the void, especially as this paper represents but one mechanism for gauging quality at only four newspapers in two states. Researchers must do more to pick up where Fico and Freedman left off, by planning content analyses that further explore sourcing in modern statehouse news. This research here is also notably limited to stories that appeared in print editions; future studies expanded to web content might lead to different findings regarding number of articles and the amount of depth in those stories.

Financially supporting statehouse news is a worthy investment — both from the perspectives of readers and newsroom administrators. News consumers must critically assess the reporting they read and reward the thorough looks at how government truly operates, especially as outlets continue trying to find their financial footing. For newsroom bosses, there still are cheap avenues to staff reporters at capitol cities. Some statehouses, including the Ohio Statehouse, contain pressrooms where reporters can be stationed. Otherwise, outlets could consider consolidating privately held bureaus together through content sharing agreements.

There even are alternative options for labor. The Illinois state press corps is populated, in part, by graduate students at the University of Illinois at Springfield (“What You Can Do With This Degree”). In Columbus, students from Ohio University’s E.W. Scripps School of Journalism are staffed each semester.
(“Statehouse News Bureau Fellowships”) covering the statehouse for outlets like the *Columbus Dispatch* and the Northeast Ohio Media Group. As recently as 2012, similar programs existed in Indiana for students at Franklin College and Butler University (Schoettle, 2012). When Pew published its 2014 statehouse news census, it reported that 223 students made up 14 percent of the overall statehouse press corps (Enda, Matsa and Boyles, 2014). It doesn’t directly involve students, but even 9-year-old Politico has ambitions of staffing capitol reporters nationwide, ostensibly covering stories that are otherwise untold (Doctor, 2015).

Nonprofit newsrooms covering state issues are also deserving of financial support. They often fill in the gaps when legacy media cut back. Some actually go so far as employing long-term, experienced reporters laid off from the newspapers of yesteryear (Dorroh, 2009). In 2014, one in six statehouse reporters worked for “nontraditional outlets” that included digital-only sites and news non-profits (Enda, Matsa and Boyles, 2014). In 2014, the Texas Tribune alone had 15 staff members dedicated to state government coverage in Austin (Enda, Matsa and Boyles, 2014). Readers are in a unique position to reward outlets like the Tribune directly, through donations.

Those alternatives create better circumstances for readers and taxpayers than one where there are fewer scribes at their statehouses. The point is this: Options exist. News consumers, publishers and scholars all need to do more. Americans deserve a productive nationwide statehouse press corps.
Statehouse reporting cannot afford to go by the wayside like many beats at metro newspapers have in recent years. For decades, those reporters have been the ultimate vanguards against government misdeeds. Bureaus should not be closed. Boots-on-the-ground reporting at capitols should not be ignored. Good government hangs in the balance.
Works cited


http://www.journalism.org/2014/07/10/americas-shifting-statehouse-press/


Appendix I
Code book

Stories tallied in this survey include ANY article mentioning “HARRISBURG” or “SPRINGFIELD” primarily concerning state government OR ANY article contained the word “governor” that centered on the four gubernatorial elections OR ANY article containing the word “legislature” that referred to news coming out of each statehouse.

- Not included were AP stories, briefs.

Stories were totaled by date. Some days have as many as four stories. Some days have one. Each story has a number attached to it that identifies it from all other article PDFs from that day.

- Record the number of tallied sources in the column that corresponds with the unique article.

The following steps should be followed when coding articles:

As previously indicated, you’ll be coding for number of sources ONLY. Do not bother spending much time preoccupied with how the reporter identified the source, though that is important here.

Sources include: present-tense statements from persons (can be identified by name or position), citations of laws, exact vote totals (could be in a legislative committee, House floor, elections), declines to comment, budgets, government reports, bills, official state plans.

Once you have identified a source, it cannot be tallied again with the same article.

Acceptable source attributions include:
“'The governor said. . .’
“The report showed . . .”
“The State Senate voted 12 to 5 in favor of the proposal . . .” OR “The bill passed unanimously”
“'A spokeswoman said. . .’
“A source said . . .”
“According to the lawmakers’ plan . . .”

Sources do NOT include: “could-not-be-reached-for-comments,” past-tense statements (i.e. “Gov. Kasich has said. . .”), non-descript plural attributions like “experts say. . .” and general vote results.

Unacceptable source attribution includes:
“The bill passed by a landslide margin. . .”