

# The Newspaper Industry in a Changing Landscape

*The Shift in News Content of Various Newspapers as a Response to the Rise of Social Media*

Neil Shen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Phillips Academy Andover (Andover, MA), United States of America

Correspondence: Neil Shen, Phillips Academy Andover (Andover, MA), United States of America. Tel: 1-978-905-5360. E-mail: neilshen2@gmail.com

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## Abstract

This paper examines the association between the rise of social media and the types of news content produced by newspaper outlets. Over the past two decades, the rise of social media has precipitated a decline in the role of traditional newspaper outlets. I present two hypotheses and their ensuing rationale – hypothesis one describes how newspapers may increase hard news content to further consolidate their reader base, while hypothesis two postulates that hard news content will decrease as papers try to regain the readers they lost to social media. Data was collected from two reputable and two less-reputable newspaper outlets to see how they reacted to increases in social media usage and whether their responses varied. For each newspaper outlet, the author identified the number of articles that included keywords drawn from hard news and soft news word banks. Using a ratio of hard to soft news, regression analysis was then performed. After running regression analysis with trend data from the Pew Research Center on the number of US adults with social media accounts, results indicate a moderate negative correlation amongst the two more reputable newspapers and no correlation amongst less reputable newspapers, meaning that the more reputable newspapers tended to decrease hard news content as social media became more popular.

**Keywords:** bias, social media, soft news, print communications, digital journalism

## 1. Introduction

When the Pew Research Center began tracking social media use in America amongst adults in 2005, only 5 percent used at least one social media platform. However, by 2011, a mere six years later, that number had soared to 50 percent. Today, over 72 percent of all American adults – over 183 million individuals – actively use at least one social media platform (Pew Research Center, 2019). To be sure, this has permitted users to do all sorts of things they would never have been able to before. With Facebook, they can reach out to friends that have long since drifted away. With Youtube, they can enjoy and consume content made by others halfway around the world. With LinkedIn, they can find employers – and employees – as they see fit. At the same time, however, the proliferation of social media may have yielded unintended consequences.

At the same time, however, with the rise of social media the appeal of traditional newspapers has fallen. The number of newspapers per hundred million people has plummeted by two-thirds from 1945 to 2014, while the number of journalists has similarly fallen by almost a quarter from 1978 to 2015 (Brookings, 2016). Rapid changes continue to besiege the newspaper industry; for example, in the 2017-2018 year alone, weekday newspaper circulation decreased by 12 percent. Over the last few years, as they gradually ran out of readers, a spate of newspapers such as *The Boston Globe*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* have all been bought by wealthy individuals. Rather than seeing them as a profitable economic venture, these newspapers are rather increasingly regarded as an “important institution,” as Amazon founder Jeff Bezos told the *Washington Post* newsroom after buying it in 2013 (Nieman Lab, 2018). Although most large national newspapers have established online platforms, they have struggled to compete due to the digestibility of news of social media.

All the same, just because newspapers are not valued does not mean that they do not serve an important purpose. As small, local daily newspapers shut down throughout the country, communities are increasingly left without a means to access important news of their local regions –leading to a phenomenon known as a “news desert”. Other publications, called “ghost newspapers,” have either scaled coverage so far back that remaining journalists are

unable to fully cover community news or have adopted increased adverts and sponsored content due to economic complications. In all, 1,800 newspapers have gone out of business since 2004, causing 1,300 communities in the US alone to lose their local news coverage as a result. Before eventually shutting down, these newspapers had been watchdogs that held civic institutions responsible, increased inclusivity amongst residents, and provided citizens with timely, relevant local news. In short, a 2011 Federal Communications Commission report tells us, “the fate of communities and the vitality of local news [...] are intrinsically linked,” meaning that the downturn of local news outlets does not bode well for communities across the US.

Although this decline can be attributed in part to the rise of cable television, once social media was invented and popularized, evidence suggests it became perhaps the most predominant cause of plummeting circulation numbers in newspapers. Overall newspaper revenue certainly reflects this; though circulation revenue has stayed around a stable \$10 billion for the last few decades, advertising revenue has fallen from a peak of \$49 billion in 2005 to an estimated \$14 billion in 2014— a decline that coincides with an increase in social media usage amongst US adults rose from 5 percent to 62 percent.

A 2018 report from the Pew Research Center found that 20 percent of US adults are getting their news “often” from social media, whereas only 16 percent are doing so from print newspapers. Television, however, remains the most popular frequent-source of news with 49 percent. The future prospects of newspapers’ popularity dims even further when considering the popularity of newspapers by the age of consumers. Print media today remains popular with the 65+ population, where 39% get their news from newspapers. However, no more than 18% in any other group do so; as time goes on, the number of readers print newspapers have will likely only continue to decline. This trend is especially prevalent amongst teenagers; a study found that all teens who “reported reading a paper daily had parents who subscribed to daily papers” and that the remaining students did because they received free copies at school and were sometimes required to by teachers (Marchi, 2012). Social media, however, gave teens a means of learning about current events; they preferred “to self-tailor their news” and “felt that blogs offered more local news than did newspapers.” Although there has been minimal research done to quantify the newsworthiness of social media news, it is highly plausible that a system where more catchy headlines and flashy images receive more revenue as a result of the pay-per-click model would contain less informative news content.

### 1.1 “Hard News” versus “Soft News”

So, then, given that many newspaper readers have instead turned towards social media to consume more digestible, more sensational news, how has this impacted the content of newspapers? This article aims to answer the question of whether or not newspapers have decided to adopt increasingly informative articles – or “hard news” – with the advent of social media.

Before all else, it is paramount to first understand the distinction between hard news and soft news. Although the terms have come to accrue a connotation regarding the journalistic quality of these articles, they are far from having strict definitions and boundaries. The terms are unique in being “so important and popular and at the same time so poorly defined and theorized,” as several researchers have pointed out (Lahva, 2009). Ultimately, this results in stilted and often times murky dialogue between researchers who use the terms freely but do not agree on what they mean.

For the purposes of this article, we will adopt Patterson’s definition in his 2009 paper on “soft news and critical journalism.” Hard news, he tells us, refers to “breaking events [...] or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life.” Learning about such events are important, as they allow citizens to understand and respond to public affairs. Soft news, therefore, is all news articles that are not clearly connected to policy issues. As a whole, soft news tends to be more sensationalist, something that “blurs the line before information and entertainment” (Baum, 2002).

Even with the lack of journalistic consensus in the definition of the two topics, however, there has been a clear movement towards soft news in recent years. Since social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter inherently depend on short news bytes with alluring visuals to keep consumers interested, news items tend to be entertaining rather than factual. Soft news programs have proliferated within the last decade, with content in various “infotainment” shows such as The Oprah Winfrey Show, Inside Edition, and Entertainment Night “rivalling that of hard news consumption” (Baum, 2010).

What impact, then, do soft news actually have on the uninformed public? Though little research has been done on whether viewers perceive and process the content they receive from soft news differently than they do for hard news, an example taken from a study by Baum in 2003 may help illustrate the difference.

On August 20th, 1998, President Bill Clinton ordered a series of missile strikes against terrorist sites in Afghanistan and Sudan. The strikes themselves were innocuous and justifiable enough, but they came just three

days after he had testified before a grand jury about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, a white house intern whom President Clinton had been accused of having sexual relations with. Over the following week, the three major networks' presented a total of 69 stories on the subject – the airstrikes were clearly important public policy news. The soft news media, entertainment shows such as the shows mentioned earlier, did likewise; however, out of a combined 46 stories on the subject 35 (76%) addressed the theme of “Wag the Dog” – a movie wherein a fictional president orders the protagonist to ‘produce’ a war in order to distract the public from a sex scandal. In the hard news media, only 11 stories (16%) mentioned either “Wag the Dog” or “Monica Lewinsky.” In post-attack opinion polls, almost 40 percent of respondents said that they believed distracting the nation was one of President Clinton’s considerations in ordering the attack. Education, it seems, plays a role here; respondents without a high school diploma were almost twice as likely as their more educated counterparts (60 percent versus 31 percent) to believe that Clinton had been motivated “a great deal” by the Lewinsky scandal. This would make sense – after all, soft news is considerably easier to digest and process, making it easier to understand than harder news.

Why, then, is social media the perfect catalyst for soft news? A fairly recent study revealed startling data with regards to the spread of false information on the social media platform Twitter. As a whole, it took such the truth around six times as long as fake news to reach an audience of 1500, as the latter was 70% more likely to be retweeted than the former (Vosoughi, 2018). This study suggests that since fake news is generally more attention-grabbing, users who are looking for news to share with their friends often select such soft news over hard news.

Soft news, while likely less accurate and authoritative, nevertheless has a tangible effect upon popular opinion – especially amongst those who are less educated (Baum, 2003). However, if the goal of news is to inform individuals of facts, as a whole, soft news seems inferior to hard news for this purpose. For instance, in the aforementioned example, viewers of soft news developed a misconception about President Clinton on a serious issue, while viewers of hard news were less likely to believe these falsehoods.

Given that hard news is important and is furthermore preferred over soft news, then, it is important to examine whether newspapers have shifted their content with the rise of social media as an alternative news source.

### *1.2 Hypothesis*

This article presents two primary hypotheses regarding how newspapers have shifted their content in response to the proliferation of social media. In this section, each hypothesis and its rationale are presented.

#### Hypothesis 1: Increased hard news elements

In response to the appeal of social media as a soft news element, newspapers have, by and large, come to focus on hard news. Since social media, indisputably, has taken much of their audience, the remaining reader base is likely to be one that is more interested in hard news. Since purveyors of soft news would have long switched over to social media platforms anyways to consume information, newspapers are now free to appeal to those who are exclusively interested in objective and factual reporting.

#### Hypothesis 2: Decreased hard news elements

An alternative to the first hypothesis is that newspapers actually incorporate less hard news elements in their articles. Since such papers are one of the sole resources people turn to when looking for factual reporting, it is likely that such an audience will continue reading the papers due to lack of an alternative no matter what. This, then, leaves newspapers free to compete with social media for customers who are on the fence between hard news and soft news.

Of the two hypotheses, newspapers with longstanding reputations as being relatively objective, reputable papers such as the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post are expected to support hypothesis one while newspapers that were initially designed to cater towards entertainment are expected either not to change their business strategy or to support hypothesis two in increasing soft news coverage.

The rationale for this is simple – most newspapers are more likely to try and maintain their aura of objectivity. Since such papers depend on advertising revenue and brand deals as much as they do circulation revenue, the decision to move towards a soft-news based system would actually cause their reputation to be harmed. Circulation revenue may temporarily improve, but if companies are now unwilling to promote their businesses in the newspaper than the overall revenue the newspapers receive will decline sharply. As such, to reiterate, reputable newspapers would want to keep their reputation.

For tabloid newspapers, however, the case is quite evidently different. Since such papers would already have had business models based on the propagation of entertainment centered news, it would make less sense for them to

focus on hard news. Doing so would only estrange their current readers, for their customers are those who tend to be uninterested in hard news (those who would have already moved on to more reputable ones). Furthermore, just as more reputable newspapers have their brand image, so do less reputable ones; by completely revamping their content they stand to alienate those who might have wanted to place ads in the newspaper. As such, the tabloid newspapers would be incentivized either to increase their selection of soft news so as to try and dissuade their users from consuming news on social media or to keep their content the way it is in hopes that their customers continue to consume their news.

## 2. Materials and Methods

In order to examine whether hard news content amongst various newspapers have increased over time alongside the rise in popularity of social media, this article uses word banks to measure the number of articles containing hard news and soft news, comparing how the instances of words varies across the period of social media proliferation. This represents a novel approach for studying this phenomenon; to the best of my knowledge, no previous studies have employed a word bank in a similar fashion. Four national daily newspapers were selected in this study; The Washington Post, The New York Times, New York Daily News, and New York Post. To increase the sample size, two relatively informative newspapers and two tabloid newspapers were chosen.

Data from these newspaper sources were integrated with data from a Pew Research Center study on the use of social media over time. The study, whose aim was to record the number of US adults with at least one social media account at any given period, includes more than 20 data collection points collected at different points between 2005 and 2019; because the time points were collected at varying time intervals across this period, the dates are extremely unlikely to have anything to do with news content given that the study makes no mention of news in social media or of anything other than new accounts. In order to space the data more evenly, fifteen data collection points were selected, with each being as close to 8 months apart from the next as possible. In order to test the relationship between the quantity of hard news and the increase in popularity of social media, the dates used to collect hard and soft news words from the newspaper sources exactly mirror the dates presented in the Pew Research Center data.

Next, the data points having been selected, a word bank for hard news and a word bank for soft news was created using excerpts from the top articles of The New York Times and The New York Daily News respectively on 7/16/2019. While the hard news word bank contains phrases such as “economy,” “policy,” “statistics,” and all variations of such words, the soft news word bank contains words such as “scandal,” “exclusive,” and “love.” Naturally, all word variations are likewise included for the soft news word bank. As stated above, the word banks may be subjected to bias since they are selected by hand without an algorithm. Despite this, however, the results are still likely to be valid – since the words are mostly exclusive to each side of news (it is quite unlikely for a soft news article, say, to include the word “policy” in it). This lack of overlap suggests that it is possible to compare these word banks to detect differences and that they are likely to be valid.

Using LexisNexis archives, the number of articles containing one or more of the words in hard news word bank for each of the data points was recorded; the same process was completed for the soft news word bank. A ratio of hard news to soft news was then computed in order to account for the difference in articles produced per day throughout the various newspapers. Next, using regression analysis I examined whether newspapers had increased their number of hard news articles relative to soft news while the percent of US adults who had at least one social media account grew. The regression analysis for the two more reputable newspapers was performed together in order to decrease bias - as was the regression analysis for the two less reputable newspapers.

## 3. Results

The table below includes the terms that were selected to indicate newsworthiness in articles. If one or more of the hard news indicators appeared in an article, it was defined as a hard news article. All words and variants of words above were searched for.

Table 1. Hard news and soft news word banks

<b>Hard News Word Bank:</b>	<b>Soft News Word Bank:</b>
Economy	Scandal
Congress	Celebrity
Politics	Tragedy
UN	Secret
Trade	Exclusive
Diplomat	Intimate
Currency	Controversy
War	Star
Growth	Fashion
Election	Youtube
Policy	Marry
Law	Sex
Research	Rich
Statistics	Love

Table 2. Number of articles containing hard news and soft news in The New York Times and The Washington Post

Date	NYT Hard News Articles	NYT Soft News Articles	NYT Ratio (Hard:Soft)	Washington Post Hard News Articles	Washington Post Soft News Articles	Washington Post Ratio (Hard:Soft)
3/21/2005	96	75	1.28	85	86	0.99
12/8/2005	152	106	1.43	209	194	1.08
8/31/2006	135	104	1.30	495	262	1.89
8/10/2008	245	251	0.98	171	184	0.93
4/19/2009	294	259	1.14	151	150	1.01
12/27/2009	221	209	1.06	122	122	1.00
9/13/2010	110	78	1.41	72	73	0.99
2/19/2012	223	274	0.81	148	150	0.99
8/7/2012	119	90	1.32	83	84	0.99
5/19/2013	221	252	0.88	132	146	0.90
1/26/2014	218	227	0.96	124	135	0.92
7/12/2015	233	253	0.92	159	158	1.01
11/6/2016	265	254	1.04	149	136	1.10
1/10/2018	229	178	1.29	82	81	1.01
2/7/2019	220	208	1.06	102	91	1.12
Total	2981	2818	N/A	2284	2052	N/A

As can be seen above, the New York Times tends to publish more articles than the Washington Post does, with the number of hard news articles in the Washington Post on 8/31/2006 being an outlier. The number of Washington Post articles at any given time fluctuates wildly, perhaps because it publishes more articles during the weekends than it does during the weekdays.

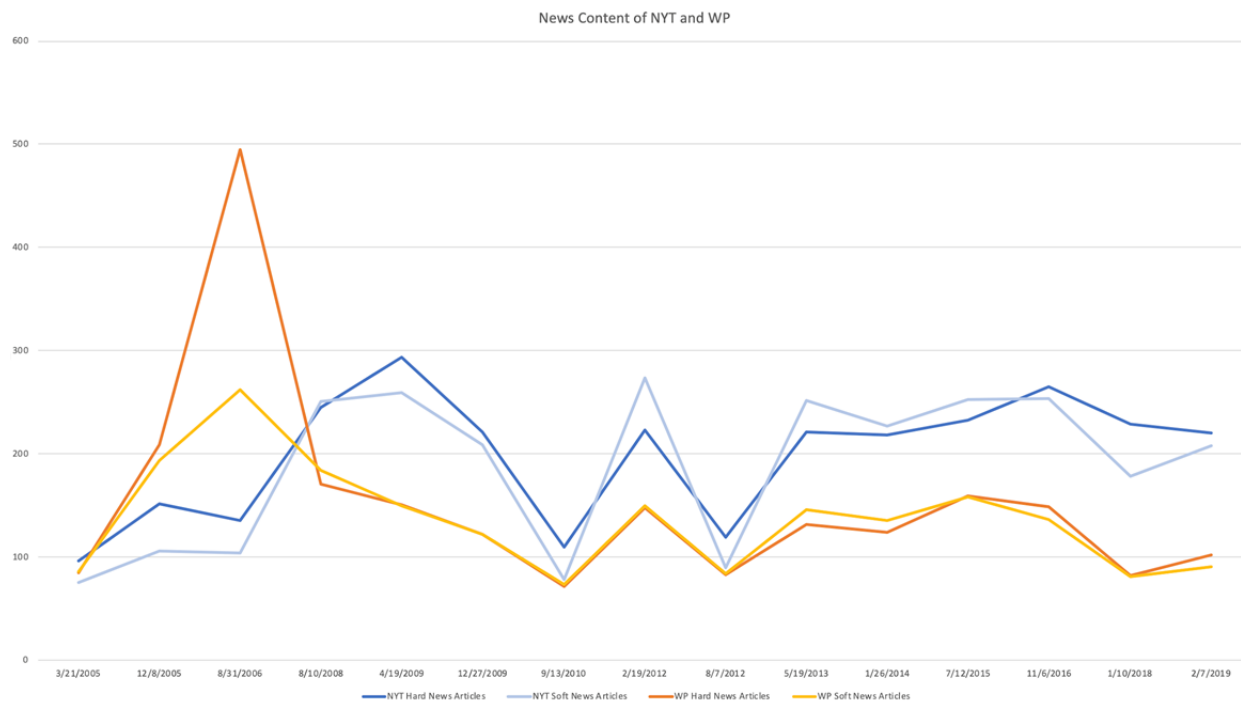


Figure 1. Number of hard and soft news articles in the NYT and WP

As seen above, both the NYT and the WP have a higher number of hard news articles than soft news ones. There seems to be a spike in articles around the beginning of the year in 2012, although it's not clear why. The number of news articles in aggregate has stayed relatively consistent throughout the years.

Table 3. Number of articles containing hard news and soft news in The New York Post and the New York Daily

Date	New York Post Hard Articles	New York Post Soft News Articles	New York Post News Ratio (Hard:Soft)	New York Daily News Hard News Articles	New York Daily News Soft News Articles	New York Daily News Ratio (Hard:Soft)
3/21/2005	43	47	0.91	46	54	0.85
12/8/2005	72	73	0.99	59	71	0.83
8/31/2006	39	54	0.72	53	58	0.91
8/10/2008	62	84	0.74	68	94	0.72
4/19/2009	50	86	0.58	70	85	0.82
12/27/2009	51	71	0.72	53	78	0.68
9/13/2010	35	56	0.63	38	56	0.68
2/19/2012	105	173	0.61	54	79	0.68
8/7/2012	44	61	0.72	37	60	0.62
5/19/2013	60	79	0.76	57	75	0.76
1/26/2014	33	56	0.59	45	72	0.63
7/12/2015	55	80	0.69	50	84	0.60

11/6/2016	62	84	0.74	45	52	0.87
1/10/2018	43	53	0.81	50	39	1.28
2/7/2019	50	58	0.86	36	26	1.38
Total:	804	1115	N/A	761	983	N/A

As the two tabloid newspapers are smaller in size, they tend to publish fewer articles. Additionally, their hard news to soft news ratio is also consistently lower than the ratios in the other two newspapers.

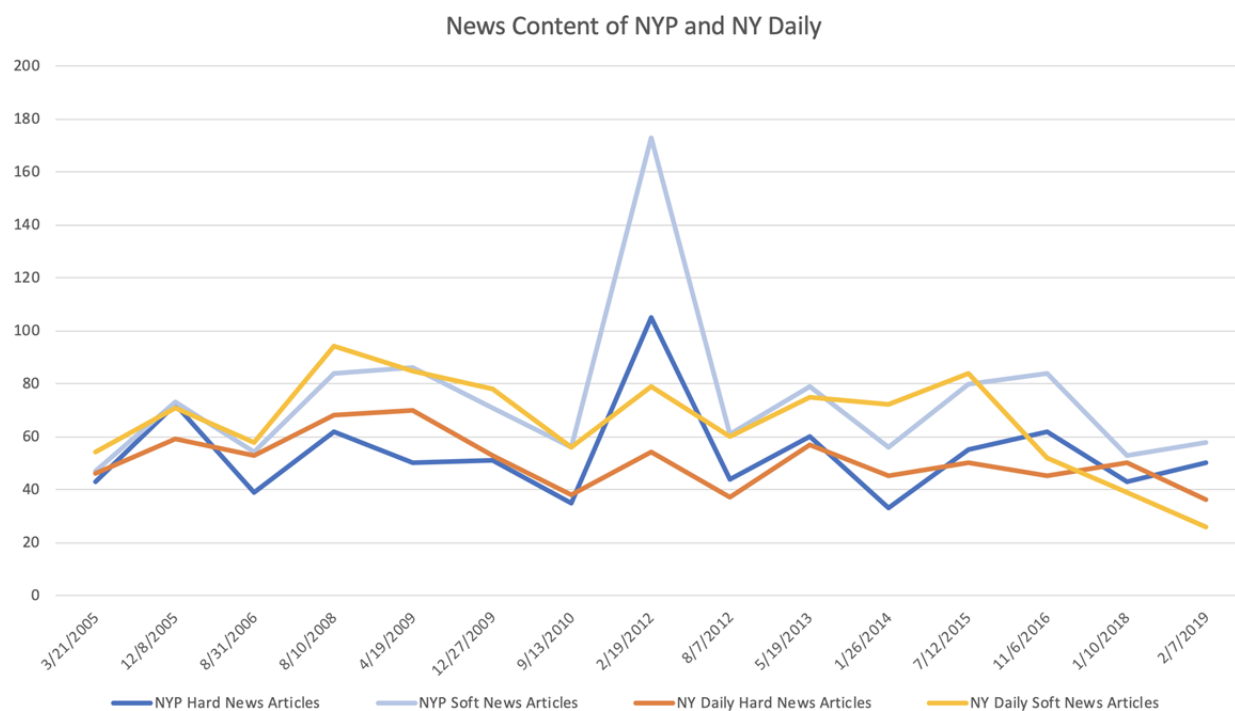


Figure 2. Number of hard and soft news articles in the NYP and NY Daily

Amongst the less reputable newspapers, the number of soft news articles is consistently higher than the number of hard news ones. There's likewise a spike in news content in 2012, although the spike is less evident in the NY Daily. Although the number of articles published by these newspapers are much lower than that of the NYT and the WP, they are still relatively consistent.

Table 4. Relation between hard: soft news ratios and social media usage over time

Date	Hard:Soft news articles ratio (reputable newspapers)	Hard:Soft news articles ratio (irreputable newspapers)	Percent of US adults at given day with at least one social media account (Pew Research Center)
3/21/2005	1.13	0.88	5%
12/8/2005	1.26	0.91	8%
8/31/2006	1.59	0.82	11%
8/10/2008	0.95	0.73	26%
4/19/2009	1.07	0.70	36%
12/27/2009	1.03	0.70	42%

9/13/2010	1.20	0.65	46%
2/19/2012	0.90	0.65	53%
8/7/2012	1.16	0.67	59%
5/19/2013	0.89	0.76	61%
1/26/2014	0.94	0.61	62%
7/12/2015	0.96	0.64	65%
11/6/2016	1.07	0.80	69%
1/10/2018	1.15	1.05	69%
2/7/2019	1.09	1.12	72%

The table above depicts how the hard:soft news ratio has stayed relatively consistent with social media usage over time – especially for the more reputable newspapers. For the less reputable newspapers, although hard news content actually declines quick extensively between 2005 and 2015, it has also risen sharply since then.

Table 5. Regression analysis of reputable newspapers

	<b>Coefficients</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>P-value</b>
Intercept	1.27106975	0.08314824	4.06E-15
Social Media Use	-0.3910384	0.16338582	0.02364115
		Observations	30

Using the hard: soft news ratio of the reputable newspapers, regression analysis was done to determine whether there was an association. Given the X variable of -0.391, there is a moderate negative correlation between increase in social media usage and increase in hard news articles amongst reputable newspapers. The low P-value of 0.02 above indicates that there is an extremely low possibility (2%) that the null hypothesis was true – in essence, this means that the results were significant, although the null hypothesis that the effect is negative cannot be rejected entirely. An additional 10% increase in social media accounts would cause a 0.039 decline in the ratio of hard to soft news amongst such newspapers.

Table 6. Regression analysis of less reputable newspapers

	<b>Coefficients</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>P-value</b>
Intercept	0.78460818	0.07739101	7.10E-11
Social Media Use	-0.0118342	0.15207289	0.93852519
		Observations	30

Using the hard: soft news ratios for the less reputable newspapers, regression analysis was similarly performed to determine the existence(or lack thereof) of a relation. The high P-value and the low correlation coefficient points to the fact that there is no relation between news content amongst such newspapers and usage of social media.

#### 4. Discussion

In conclusion, the data presented shows that there is a moderate negative correlation between an increase in social media usage and the news content of more reputable newspapers and a minimal correlation between that and less reputable newspapers. While correlation does not necessarily lead to causation in cases filled with as much theorization as this, the reasoning for why more reputable newspapers would do this does seem to hold up given that social media giants are emerging as one of the largest competitors to their business. With soft news, however, there is no correlation between the news content and social media usage, although there is an interesting uptick in the hard news to soft news ratio across both reputable and irreputable newspapers in the last few years of data collection. As a whole, the data seems to support hypothesis two, although the data from the less reputable



newspapers are negligible.

This study, being exploratory in nature, poses various questions for future research. For one, there should be more work done in order to verify whether hypothesis two (that social media increase leads to more soft news content) really is correct. Although the data presented here seems to support the idea that hard news articles will decline as social media use increases, more statistical analysis remains to be done. For example, the analysis done in this paper only applied to two newspapers; in future research this could be expanded across other large newspapers.

Additionally, the use of the word bank should be examined. Given the novelty of this idea, the robustness of the choice of words used remains to be seen. As such, in future research, I would like to look at how the selection of words may have impacted my results and at which words disproportionately impacted the results. This would increase objectivity and decrease the bias of the entire study.

In all, this paper provides several potential implications. The degree to which the general public is informed is paramount in any healthy democracy—when they don't do so, populists and those who bend or entirely dismiss facts tend to rise. If, as this paper suggests, some of the most reputable newspapers in this country have incorporated more soft news and abandoned hard news, then further study has yet to be done. For all the benefits and advantages of social media, it may have made information ever so slightly more subjective and sensationalised. That, in itself, is grounds for concern.

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