Exploring Local News Coverage of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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Introduction

- In recent years, Americans have held largely negative opinions of news media, but still consistently trust local news more than national news.[1]
- Preliminary WMP investigations have found that local news coverage of structural racism following George Floyd's murder has declined, while coverage of critical race theory, and subsequently DEI, has increased. [2]
- Local news station acquisitions by the right-leaning Sinclair Broadcast Group have led to increased coverage of controversy [3] and distinctly different ideological content from other news stations. [4]

Research Questions

Considering Americans' trust in local news, this project aims to explore the role of station ownership in local news coverage of DEI, leading us to ask:

- How does the volume and sentiment of DEI stories differ between Sinclair and non-Sinclair-owned stations?
- Secondarily, how does volume and sentiment of DEI coverage change over time?

Methods

Sample

- Wesleyan Media Project collected relevant local TV news stories (n = 22,423) across 210 media markets and 790 stations from 1/06/ 2020 – 12/31/2023 from major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox) in addition to PBS via TVEyes.
  - Story boundaries were drawn 3 sentences before and 8 sentences after keyword ("DEI", "diversity, equity, inclusion", etc.) detection.
  - If additional keywords were found within that span, the story boundary expanded 8 more sentences.
- An LDA topic model was used to identify and subsequently filter out stories which were 50% or more about a non-DEI topic (e.g. weather, sports).

Measures

- A Sinclair ownership indicator was created via station ownership data collected from BIA Kelsey.
- Story sentiment was measured using the 2015 Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary (LSD 2015) implementation in the quanteda R text analysis package.
  - The Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary is a freely available lexicon of 2,858 negative words, 1,709 positive words, and 1,721 and 2,860 negations of positive and negative words developed for sentiment analysis of political media and communication. [5]
  - Before conducting the sentiment analysis, pre-processing was done to remove common "stop words" (e.g. "the", "is", "and").

Preliminary Results

Fig. 1

- Non-Sinclair stations (n = 683) on average had higher volume of DEI stories until Jan. 2023, when non-Sinclair-owned stations ran 0.95 DEI stories on average and Sinclair-owned stations (n = 80) ran 1.13 DEI stories on average.
- Overall, non-Sinclair-owned stations ran 0.62 stories per month on average, while Sinclair-owned stations ran 0.56 stories per month on average.

Fig. 2

- Mean DEI story sentiment before 2023 was 0.797 (moderately positive) while mean DEI story sentiment starting in 2023 was 0.409 (slightly less positive).
- Overall, mean DEI story sentiment among non-Sinclair-owned stations was .61, while among Sinclair-owned stations it was .37.
  - A Welch's Two Sample t-test indicates a statistically significant difference between the means (t = -10.81, df = 2563.7, p < .001)
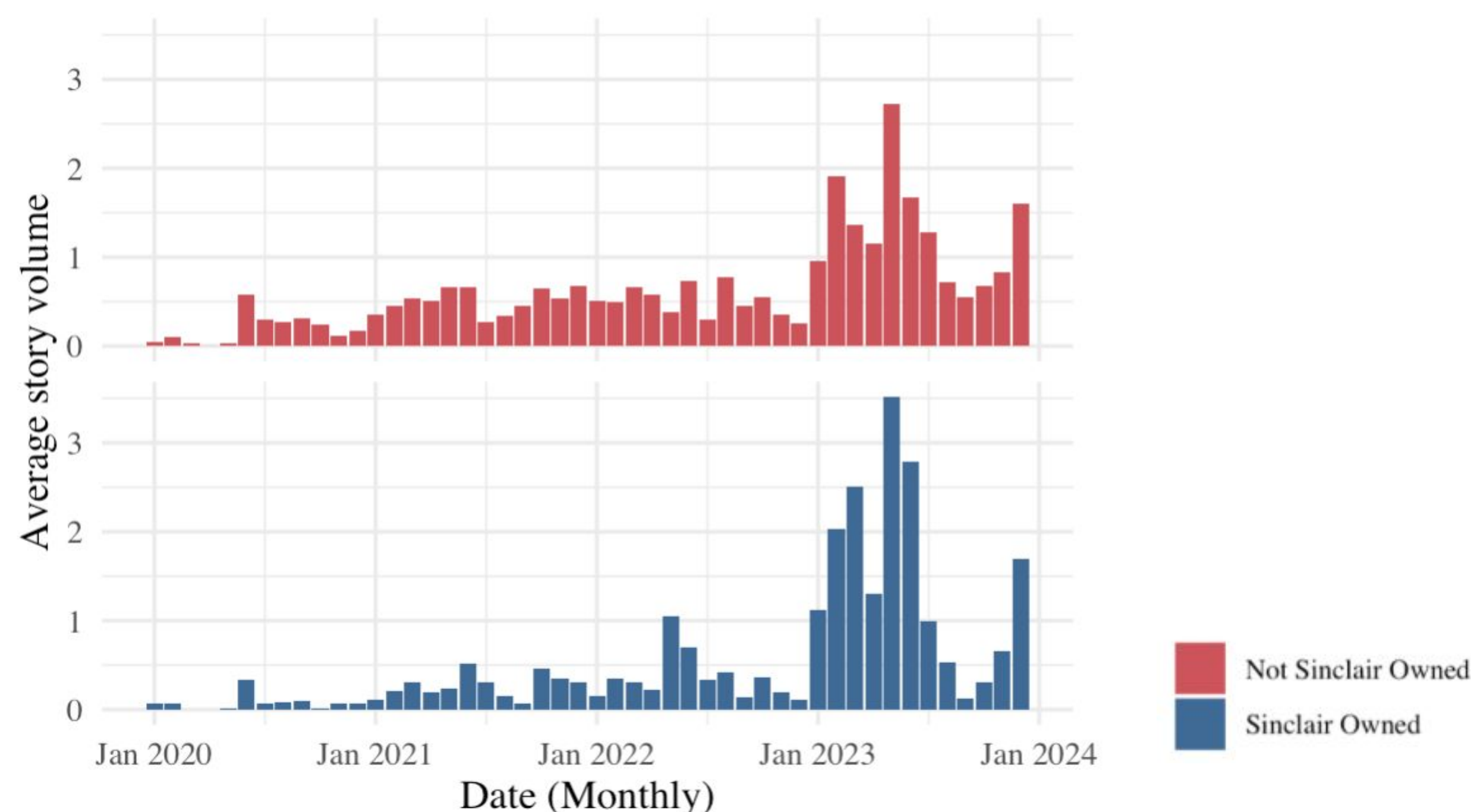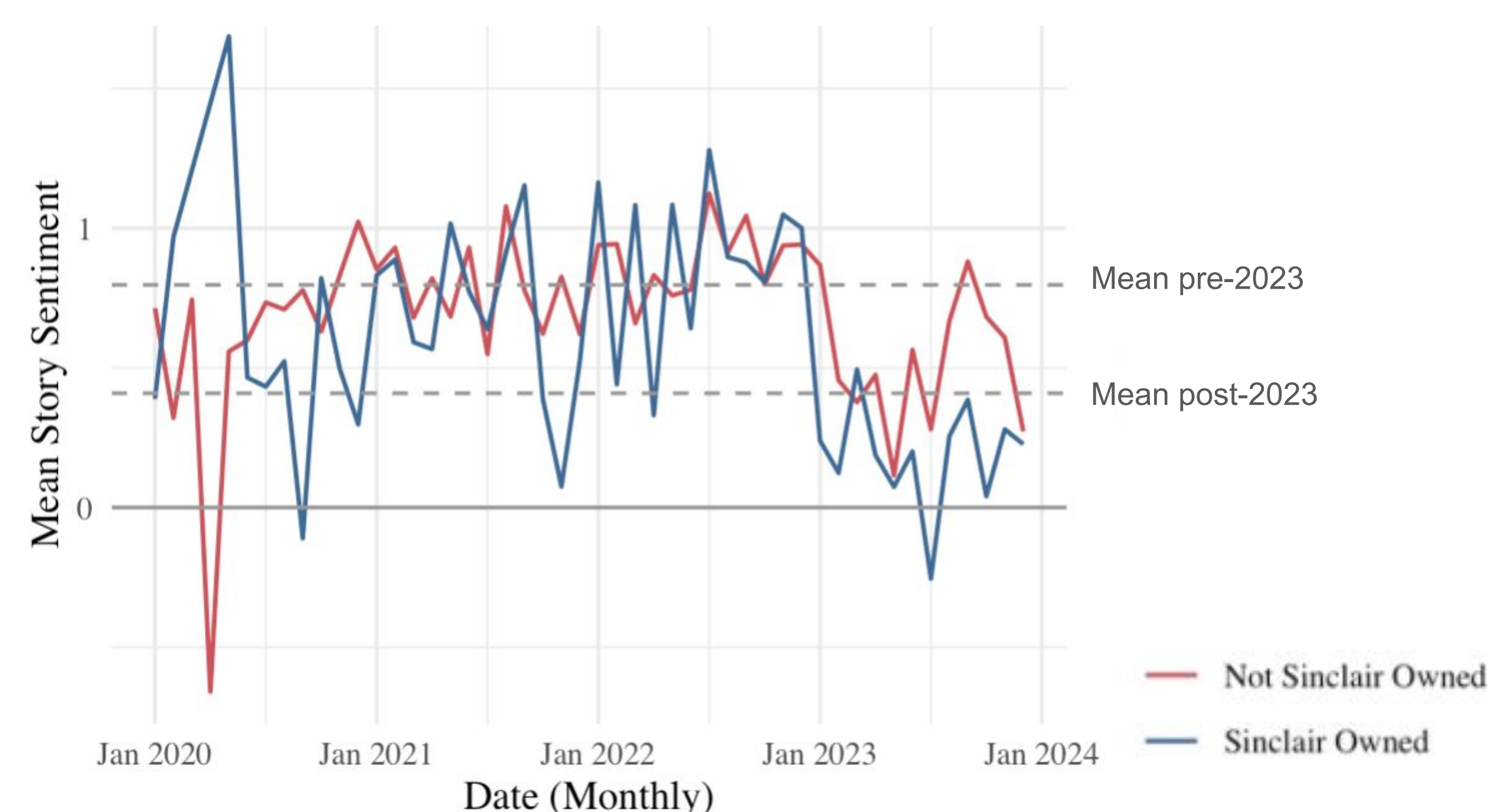

Fig. 1, Average Station-Level Volume by Ownership

Fig. 2, Mean DEI News Story Sentiment Over Time

Discussion

- After DEI story volume increased in 2023, the mean story sentiment across all stations was slightly less positive; stories from Sinclair-owned stations also seemed to have slightly less positive sentiment than stories from non-Sinclair-owned stations.
- Next steps include:
  - further measuring tone through other methods, such as Aspect Based Sentiment Analysis (ABSA)
  - incorporating key DEI events and policies
  - investigating other measures of news story content (e.g. identifying message via topic modeling or hand coding)

References

[1] Knight Foundation. 2023." American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy."
[2] Wesleyan Media Project. 2024. "Local News Coverage of Competitive Messaging on Race and Racism" (working paper)
[3] Neumann, Markus et al.2024. "Politicizing Masks? Examining the Volume and Content of Local News Coverage of Face Coverings in the U.S. Through the COVID-19 Pandemic," Political Communication, 41:1, 66-106, DOI:10.1080/10584609.2023.2239181
[4] Martin, Gregory J., and Joshua McCrain. 2019. "Local News and National Politics." American Political Science Review 113(2): 372–84. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055418000965
[5] Young, L., & Soroka, S. (2012). Affective News: The Automated Coding of Sentiment in Political Texts. Political Communication, 29(2), 205–231. DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2012.671234