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AHEAD OF ELECTION DAY, NEWS AUDIENCES FAVORED STORIES ON SCANDAL, SAW LESS COVERAGE ON ISSUES

In the run-up to the 2016 general election, local news outlets focused less and less on coverage of issues, with coverage of corruption and scandal receiving more page views and social referrals, according to a new report from the [Engaging News Project](#).

The Engaging News Project collaborated with the [American Press Institute](#) to examine local news coverage of down-ballot, non-presidential races for U.S. Congress, governor, and local offices ahead of the 2016 general election by nine newspapers across six states. We analyzed the campaign coverage characteristics included in articles about local, state, and federal contests and compared it to traffic data from API's analytics tool [Metrics for News](#). This project was funded by a grant from the Democracy Fund.

Findings show that the average number of issues mentioned per article declined as the general election approached. On average, a news story published 20 to 32 days prior to the election had 2.5 issue mentions compared to 1.8 issue mentions in news stories published zero to nine days before Election Day.

There could be a reason why news outlets chose not to cover issues as the election approached: lack of audience engagement. Analysis found that as the number of issues mentioned in an article increased, the predicted number of page views decreased. An article containing three issue mentions had about 1,300 fewer page views compared to a local news story not mentioning any issues.

Articles that did earn more page views and social referrals were ones that referenced a scandal. A news article mentioning campaign or governmental corruption could expect to see 2,000 more page views and double the number of social referrals than articles that did not mention corruption.

"Pre-election polls showed that individuals viewed the economy as the most important issue facing the country," said Joshua Scacco, assistant professor at Purdue University and faculty research associate with the Engaging News Project. "Despite these public concerns, individuals flocked to local news content emphasizing corruption and scandal as opposed to other issues like public safety and infrastructure. These results seem to challenge the conventional wisdom that economic concerns were the main motivator for individuals in the 2016 election."

Other findings include:

- A third of local news stories referenced social issues. Specific economic topics like jobs and trade were not prominent on the news agenda.
- State and local campaign coverage drew audiences. A news article referencing a state or local political campaign garnered 1,800 more predicted page views and almost 300 more predicted social referrals compared to an article not covering a state or local race.
- A clickbait-style headline reduced the predicted page views by 2,000 and social referrals by 250.
- Fact-checking is rare in local election news.

"Much scrutiny and attention falls on the coverage of the presidential election and the national press corps, but hundreds more local reporters are covering thousands of state and local campaigns around the country," said Jeff Sonderman, deputy director of the American Press Institute. "This research dives into exactly what issues were, and were not, covered in those state and local races, and examines how audiences responded to different types of coverage."

The Engaging News Project provides research-based techniques for engaging online audiences in commercially viable and democratically beneficial ways. Learn more at engagingnewsproject.org

The American Press Institute conducts research, training, convenes thought leaders and creates tools to help chart a path ahead for journalism in the 21st century. Learn more at americanpressinstitute.org