

RESEARCH MEMO · MISSISSIPPI TODAY · NATIONAL FINDINGS

Community stories & investigative journalism

Can the mix of stories audiences encounter shape how they perceive investigative journalism?

FROM Joshua P. Darr, Local NExT Lab · Syracuse University

FIELDWORK Cohort 1 · 2026

The question

Mississippi Today publishes a mix of investigative, legislative and political coverage as well as community-focused stories. As it expanded coverage about “what makes Mississippi unique,” the newsroom wanted to understand whether the mix of coverage surrounding an investigation affects how readers receive that story.

- When an investigative story is surrounded mostly by community coverage rather than by more investigations, does that change how readers receive it?
- Do readers find those stories more relevant, more important and more worth their attention?
- Does that carry over to how readers see the outlet as a whole?
- Are some readers, by political identity or community attachment, more responsive than others?

What we did

HOW WE DID THIS

We conducted two national survey experiments using the same design but different sets of headlines. In each, adults were randomly assigned to see **one of three mixes of five stories**: mostly community-focused stories, mostly legislative stories or mostly investigative stories. Three of the five headlines represented the dominant story type, while the other two came from the other categories.

The same investigative story appeared in every condition and was then shown separately to all respondents for evaluation. This allowed us to test whether the **mix of stories surrounding an investigation** affected how readers perceived that investigation.

The second survey repeated the experiment with different headlines but the same three content mixes, helping test whether the findings reflected the broader mix of coverage rather than a particular set of stories. Together, the two national surveys included 1,768 respondents.

1,768

Adults surveyed (two national surveys)

3

Story-mix conditions

5

Headlines per condition



The same investigative story appears in every condition and is pulled out for evaluation by all respondents.

What we found

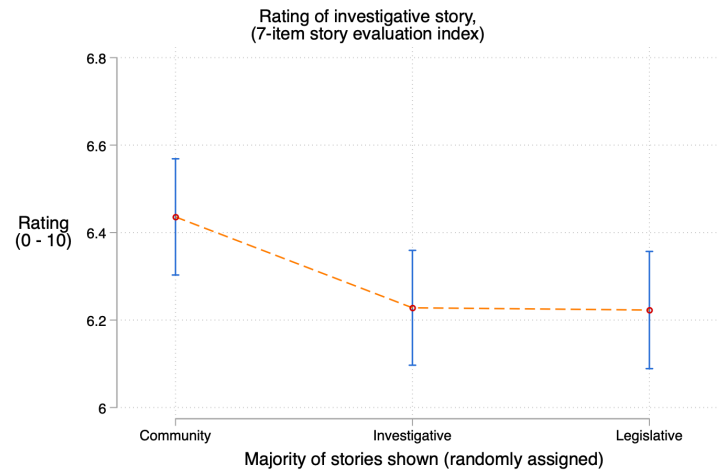
KEY FINDING

Investigative reporting was rated more favorably when it appeared alongside mostly community-focused stories than alongside mostly other investigations.

- Across two national surveys, readers found the same investigative story more relevant and important, and rated it higher overall, when it appeared mostly among community stories than among other investigations.
- That advantage over an investigative-heavy mix was consistent across both surveys and held up under robustness checks.
- Outlet evaluations were somewhat more positive in the community-heavy conditions, but those differences were not statistically significant.
- The comparison with legislative-heavy coverage was less consistent across surveys, suggesting the result may depend upon the particular legislative stories audiences encounter.

How readers evaluated the investigative story

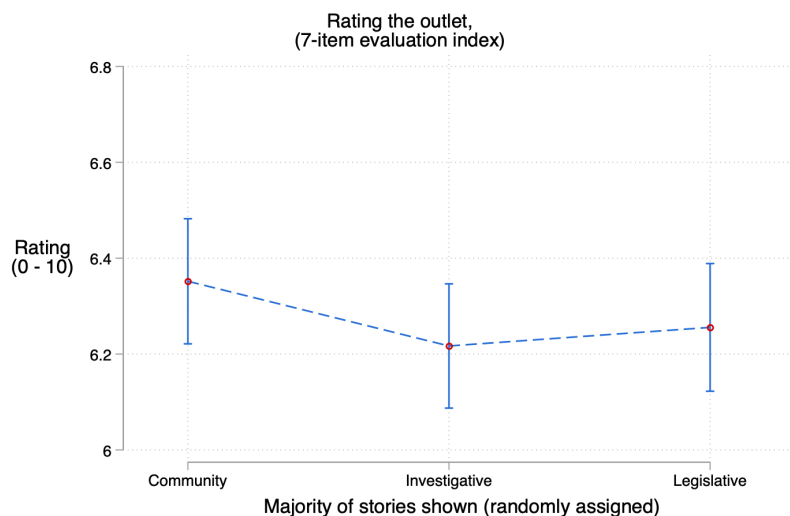
- Pooling both surveys (N = 1,768), readers in the community-heavy condition scored the investigative story 6.44 out of 10 across seven measures: credible, trustworthy, accurate, fair, biased (reverse coded), important, and relevant. Readers in the investigative-heavy condition rated the same story, according to marginal predicted probabilities, 6.23 out of 10, while readers in the legislative-heavy condition rated it 6.22 out of 10.
- The community-heavy advantage over each is about 0.2 points and statistically significant in the pooled data ($p < 0.05$). This advantage is robust to setting aside the legislative condition (-0.21 , $p = 0.03$), to covariate adjustment for reader political interest, partisanship, local-news readership, and local identity (-0.23 , $p = 0.01$), and across the seven individual index components (six of seven move in the same direction).



- The community advantage over an investigative-heavy mix pointed the same way in both surveys (about 0.25 and 0.15 points) and was reliable when the surveys are combined.
- The community advantage over a legislative-heavy mix was strong in the first survey (0.39 points, $p = 0.005$) but absent in the second (essentially zero); that comparison appears sensitive to the particular legislative stories shown and deserves some caution.
- Breaking the index into its seven components shows a broad effect: six of the seven attributes moved in the same direction.
- The clearest gains were in how relevant and important readers found the story and in perceived accuracy, while differences on credibility, trustworthiness, and fairness were smaller and not individually significant.

How readers evaluated the outlet

Readers also rated the (unnamed) outlet that produced these stories. Here the pattern was weaker: outlet evaluations leaned slightly more positive in the community condition, but the differences across conditions were not statistically distinguishable from zero. The null is informative in a sample this large: the lift from community framing appears concentrated on how readers judge the specific story, rather than their view of the outlet overall.



We also fielded a follow-up study with 480 Mississippi residents through YouGov. Though it is the largest we could get through YouGov, once that sample is split across three conditions, it is too small to detect an effect of the size we observed nationally. The Mississippi follow-up therefore is simply underpowered to settle the question.

Who responds most

We registered two questions about who responds: whether the effect depends on readers' partisanship or on their attachment to their local community. Neither moderated the effect to a statistically reliable degree. The community coverage effect shows up broadly across the audience rather than concentrating in any single group.

Applying the findings

Our takeaway: Audiences may evaluate an individual piece of journalism differently according to the context of the other journalism they encounter alongside it, and additional community content enhances investigative reporting when they appear together.

- Investigative stories do not appear in isolation: could an important investigative piece appear next to community content, instead of a separate page or section for investigative stories?
- We found similar results across readers' partisanship and the strength of their local identity, showing that there isn't a particular audience segment driving the findings.
- Newsrooms could test different mixes across homepages, newsletters, social or social media feeds to understand how the mix of content impacts audience response. This approach could help bridge the Lab's survey experiments with their readers' real-world consumption.
- For funders and other journalism support organizations, these findings illustrate the risk in evaluating journalism in isolation, rather than in interaction. Experimentation can reveal interactive effects that could strengthen investments and content strategies.

Questions about this study or the Local NExT Lab? Reach out at jpdarr@syr.edu.

About the Local NExT Lab

The Local NExT Lab, part of the Institute for Democracy, Journalism & Citizenship (IDJC) at Syracuse University, brings together local newsrooms, funders and academic researchers to test approaches to how news is collected, framed and delivered. Through real-world experiments, the lab generates practical insights that participating newsrooms and the broader local news field can use to inform their work.

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