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The Kalamazoo Promise and Changing Perceptions of the Kalamazoo Public Schools

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Abstract

This research brief addresses the question of whether the introduction of the [Kalamazoo Promise](#) in late 2005 brought about a shift in media coverage of Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS). It is part of an effort to examine the nonacademic effects of the Kalamazoo Promise—more specifically, if and how the Promise has changed the broader community. A review of educational content in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and the *Grand Rapids Press* pre- and post-Promise announcement was analyzed to determine whether the introduction of the Kalamazoo Promise changed media coverage, thereby affecting community perceptions of KPS as compared to Grand Rapids Public Schools. Data from January–June 2005 and 2008–2010 were used as pre- and post-Promise time periods. Data were not collected from the end of 2005 through 2006 to avoid a skewed sample because of the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise, nor were data collected from 2007 because of the superintendent search then under way at KPS. Articles from these time periods with substantive educational content were then coded as positive, negative, or neutral. The content analysis shows that the amount of coverage of KPS increased post-Promise and the percentage of positive coverage increased. There were no corresponding increases in either the volume or the nature of content in the *Grand Rapids Press*.

Key Words: Kalamazoo Promise, content analysis, perceptions, Kalamazoo Public Schools, scholarships

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, Phi Delta Kappa International, a nonprofit organization founded to support high-quality education, along with Gallup, released its annual poll on attitudes toward public schools (Phi Delta Kappa International n.d.). A much publicized finding was that only 29 percent of respondents—the lowest level since the poll was introduced in 1973—expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in them. Yet the same respondents had a high level of confidence in the schools their children attended and the teachers who served them. As the poll’s codirector wrote, “This year, confidence in public schools declined by five percentage points . . . but someone forgot to tell America’s parents. We’ve asked parents to grade the school their oldest child attends for over 20 years, and the grades continue to go up. This year, 77 percent of America’s parents gave their school a letter grade of either ‘A’ or ‘B’” (Bushaw 2012). These findings support a well-established paradox that concerns how people perceive institutions—we may dislike them in the abstract while feeling good about those with which we have a personal connection. (The pattern holds true in other fields as well—the institution with the lowest level of public confidence is Congress, yet we continue to reelect our congressional representatives with surprising regularity.)

While voters in Kalamazoo, even those without children, have shown consistent support for the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) district, regularly passing bond issues or millages to fund school improvements, there is little reason to doubt that this paradox is also in play in public attitudes toward the local school district. Individuals who have a direct relationship with KPS—whether as parent, teacher, staff member, or volunteer—receive their information and impressions through personal experience. Those individuals without a direct connection to the

public schools—the majority of community members—lack firsthand information and hence are dependent on the media and the views of others to shape their perceptions.

Academic research on the ability of media to shape perceptions shows that “the news media exert significant influence on our perceptions of what are the most salient issues of the day” (Bryant and Zillmann 2002, p. 1), with control-group experiments demonstrating a clear agenda-setting effect (Cook et al. 1983). Investigators have also studied the effects of news frames, showing that repetitive news has the potential to strengthen framing effects while competitive news cancels framing effects and, instead, reinforces an individual’s personal beliefs.¹ (Lecheler and de Vreese 2013). As the literature shows, the media has agenda-setting capabilities and influences issue salience. Therefore, a shift in media coverage on a specific topic, such as education, has the ability to influence public perceptions and bring such issues to the forefront of public concern.

This research examines whether the introduction of the [Kalamazoo Promise](#) in late 2005 brought about a shift in media coverage of KPS. It is part of an effort to examine the nonacademic effects of the Kalamazoo Promise—more specifically, if and how it has changed the broader community. The Kalamazoo Promise brought an unprecedented level of national media coverage to Kalamazoo; it would be surprising if this was not matched by a heightened level of local scrutiny. It is less certain, however, whether greater local media attention to the schools would consist of more negative or more positive coverage—the Kalamazoo Promise offered many opportunities for “feel good” coverage, but with the district’s challenges more fully on display, it was also possible that the tone of press coverage could shift in a more negative direction.

¹ “Frames can be defined as patterns of interpretation that are used to classify information and process it efficiently. Frames thus stress certain aspects of reality and push others into the background; they have a selective function” (Lecheler and de Vreese 2013, p. 149).

The data used to determine any potential shift in media coverage of the Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) came from the community's main media outlet, the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, with an analysis of the *Grand Rapids Press*'s coverage of Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) serving as a control for the Kalamazoo data. Although it is a larger city, Grand Rapids was chosen as a comparable community because of its proximity to Kalamazoo (50 miles away), demographic makeup, and similar role as the urban center of a broader region. The school districts serving the urban core of these two communities also resemble each other in several ways. GRPS is slightly larger than KPS (although its enrollment has declined in recent years, as opposed to KPS, which has grown dramatically since the introduction of the Kalamazoo Promise). The socioeconomic and racial/demographic makeup of the two districts is similar, with 72.3 percent of KPS students and 82.6 percent of GRPS students qualifying for federally subsidized school meals, and nonwhite populations of 63.0 percent for KPS and 79.3 percent for GRPS in the fall of 2012 (Center for Educational Performance and Information 2013). Both districts are located in the urban core of their respective regions and compete for students with surrounding schools districts that tend to be more middle class and have higher test scores, as well as with charter and private schools. Until recently, each region was served by a single major newspaper; as a result, community members' perceptions of the school district serving the urban core have in recent years been shaped by the schools' portrayal in their respective newspapers.

THE DATA

A content analysis of educational coverage in the local newspapers of both Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids was used to determine whether the introduction of the Kalamazoo Promise changed media coverage and affected community perceptions of schools pre- and post-Promise

announcement. This research sought to address whether or not there was a shift in the amount and/or the tone of substantive coverage on KPS in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* following the introduction of the Kalamazoo Promise. The hypothesis was that the announcement of the Kalamazoo Promise would bring more attention to KPS, increasing the volume of educational content in the local paper but not necessarily changing the nature of coverage, as such attention could either be negative or positive.

The data used for this study included content from the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and the *Grand Rapids Press*. These newspapers were chosen for the content analysis as both companies provided the main source of educational coverage in their respective cities. Also, at the time data were collected, Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids each only had one newspaper.² The time periods during which content was collected included January–June 2005 and 2008–2010. Data were not collected from November 2005 through the end of 2006 to avoid a skewed sample due to the almost daily news coverage in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* of the Promise following its announcement in November 2005. We opted to exclude 2007 from the sample because of the superintendent search taking place in KPS that spring. There was only one baseline period available (January–June 2005) because of database limitations.

In collecting these data, the LexisNexis database was used to find all *Kalamazoo Gazette* and *Grand Rapids Press* articles containing the key words “Kalamazoo Public Schools” or “Grand Rapids Public Schools,” respectively. Letters to the editor, athletic news, opinion columns, brief announcements (such as meeting reminders), and editorials were dropped from the sample to keep the focus on substantive news coverage. The search was further narrowed to

² At the end of 2011, the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and the *Grand Rapids Press* became part of the MLive media group, although editorial decisions continue to reside with distinct editorial boards. In February 2012, both newspapers reduced home delivery to four days a week. The content analysis presented in this policy brief took place before these developments occurred.

articles with KPS or GRPS as the chief focus. This excluded articles on district enrollment across the region, state education trends, or other general pieces that may have included some information about, but were not exclusively focused on, KPS or GRPS.

The data show that there was a large shift in the volume of substantive educational content in the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, while there was no shift in the amount of coverage in the *Grand Rapids Press* between January 2005 and June 2008. The total amount of substantive educational content in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* rose from 31 articles in 2005 to 63 articles in 2008, more than doubling coverage of KPS. In the *Grand Rapids Press*, the total amount of coverage remained relatively constant, with 32 articles in 2005 and 38 articles in 2008. The amount of educational coverage in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* did not continue to increase after 2008, however, the volume did remain above the 2005 level, and the *Kalamazoo Gazette* consistently ran more substantive educational articles than the *Grand Rapids Press* each year. See Figure 1.

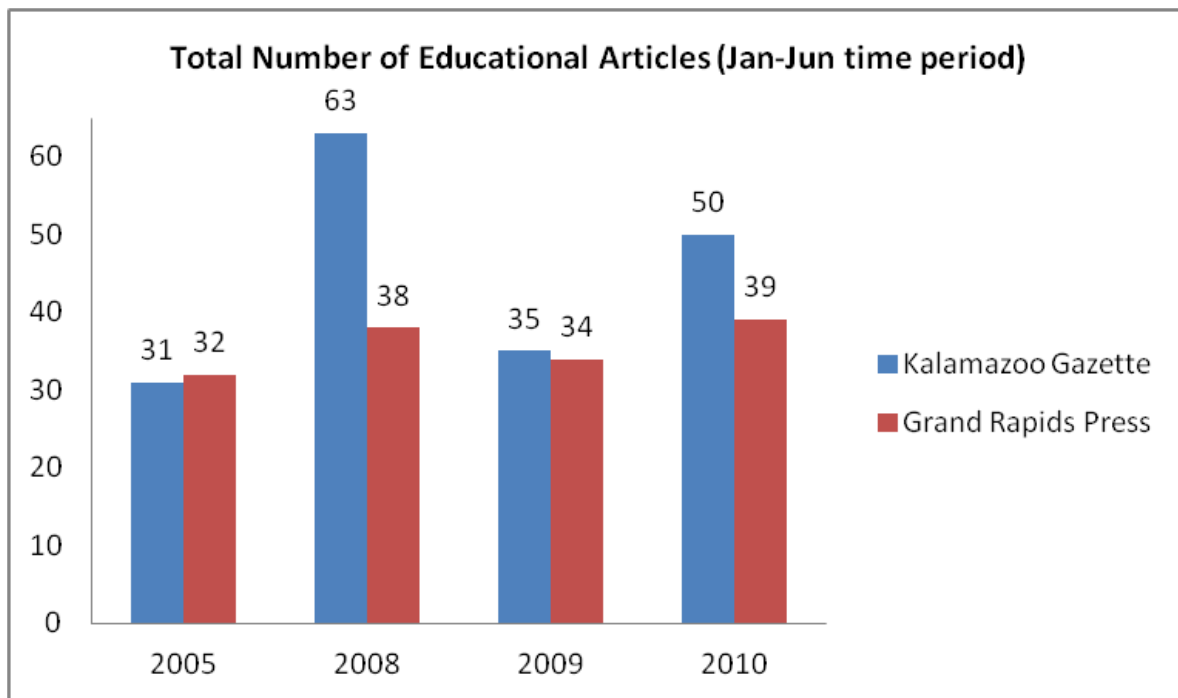


Figure 1 Total Number of Substantive Educational Articles in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and *Grand Rapids Press*, January–June 2005 and 2008–2010.

The percent of positive coverage rose by 21 percent between 2005 and 2008 in Kalamazoo, with virtually no change in Grand Rapids. Furthermore, the percent of positive coverage in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* continued to increase each year data were collected, beginning at 35 percent positive in 2005 and reaching 78 percent positive in 2010. This can be compared to a stable level of positive coverage in the *Grand Rapids Press* that never exceeded 38 percent from 2005 to 2010. See Figure 2.

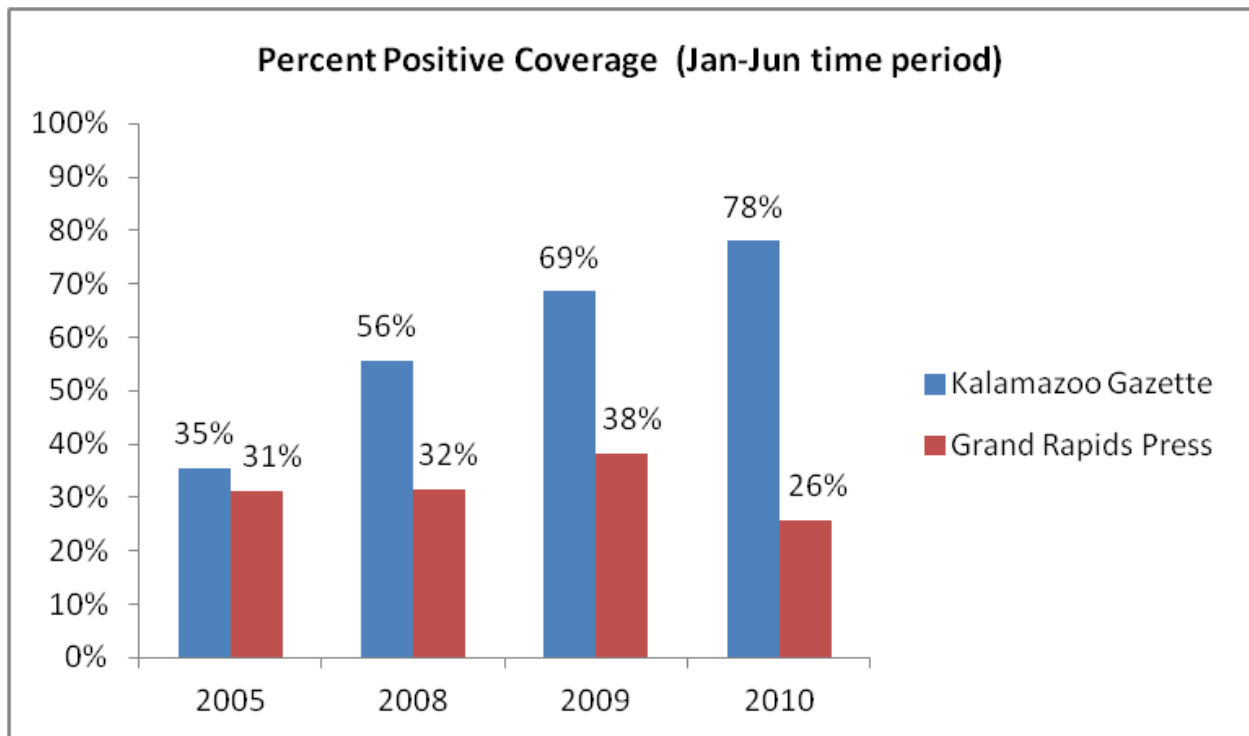


Figure 2 Percent of Positive Educational Articles in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and *Grand Rapids Press*, January–June 2005 and 2008–2010.

The volume of negative coverage remained fairly consistent across all years for both Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids. As a result, the increasing percentage of positive coverage seen in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* came mainly from previously neutral coverage. It is also worth noting that while the percent of negative news coverage stayed consistent across all years, Grand Rapids had a significantly higher percentage of negative educational content than Kalamazoo even pre-Promise.

As discussed above, the shift in tone of educational content in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* post-Promise announcement persisted through 2009 and 2010. Likewise, the static nature of coverage in the *Grand Rapids Press* did not change. Figure 3 compares substantive educational content in both the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and the *Grand Rapids Press* pre- and post-Promise announcement. Figures 4 and 5 show how changes in the type of educational content post-Promise announcement persisted through 2009 and 2010.

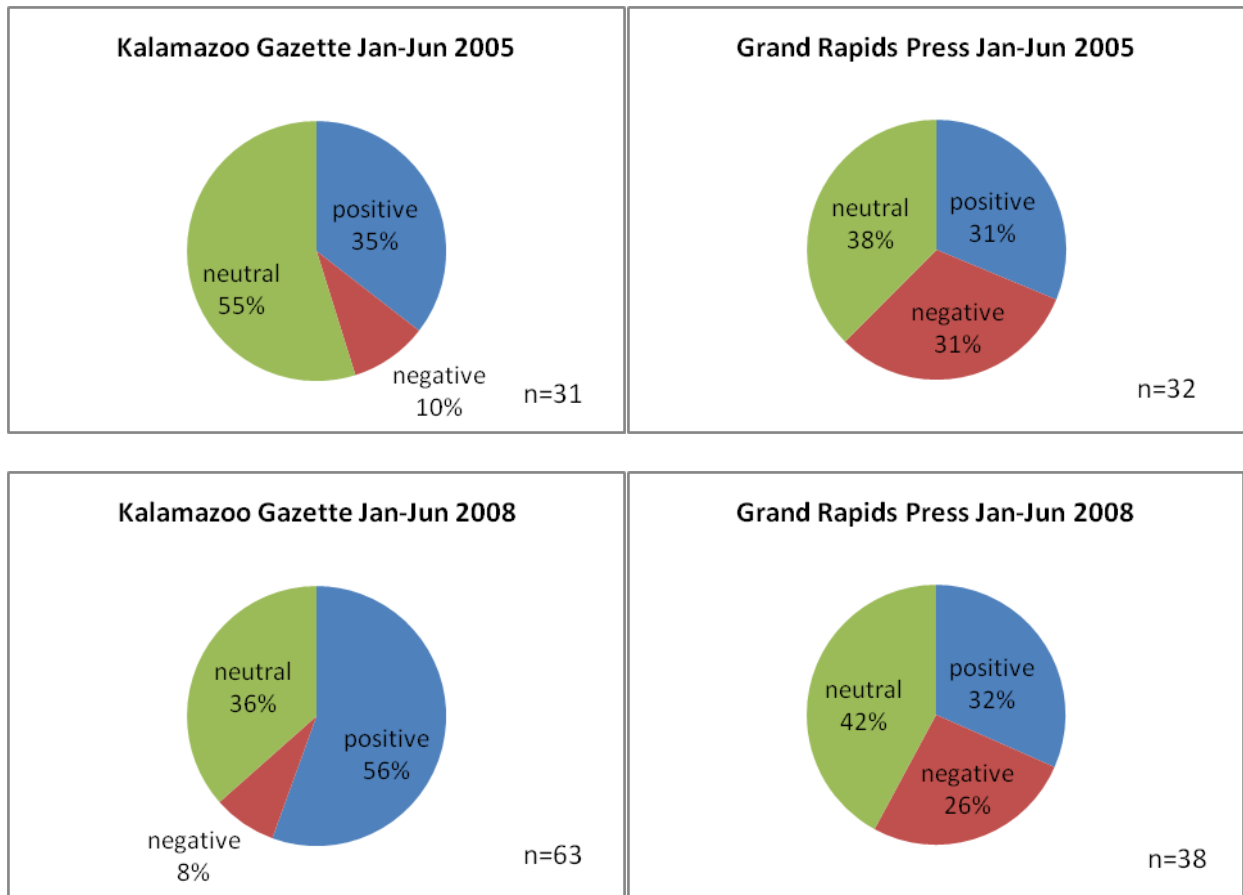


Figure 3 Comparison of Substantive, Educational Content in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and the *Grand Rapids Press* Pre- (2005) Post- (2008) Promise announcement, January–June 2005 and 2008.

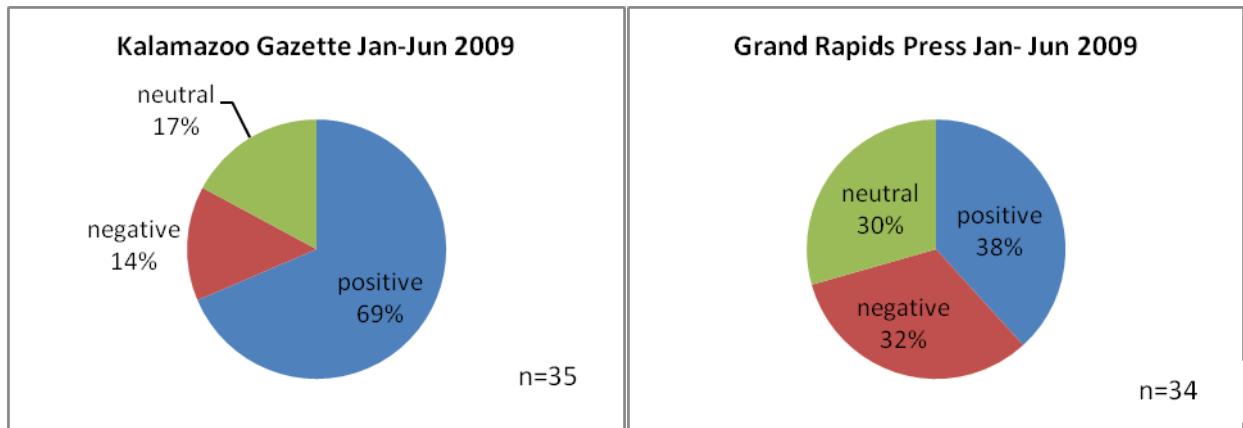


Figure 4 Substantive, Educational Content in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and the *Grand Rapids Press* Post-Promise Announcement, January–June 2009.

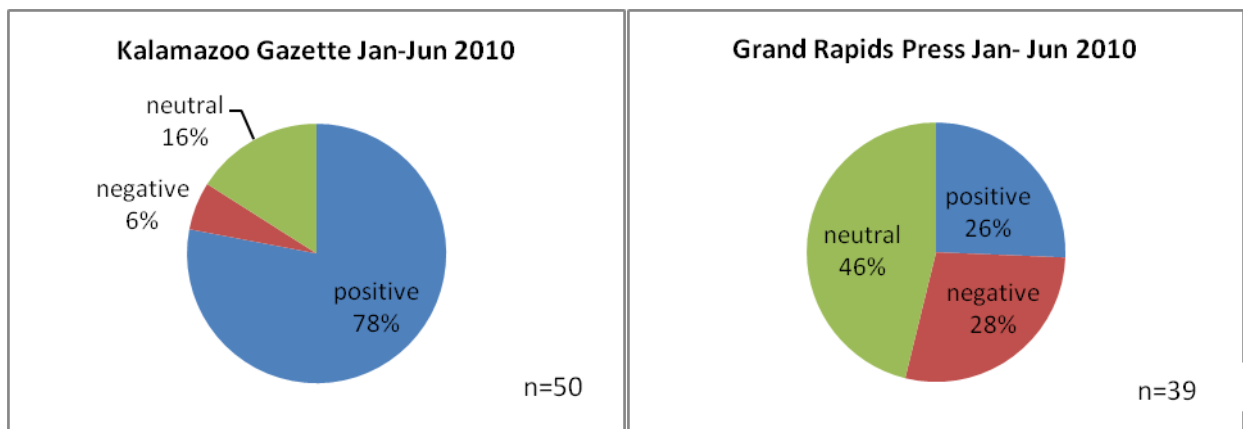


Figure 5 Substantive, Educational Content in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and the *Grand Rapids Press* Post-Promise Announcement, January–June 2010.

In addition to the January–June time period, data were also collected from July to October in 2005 and 2008 only. Looking at the entire January–October time span for these two years, changes in both volume and tone of educational coverage followed the same patterns seen from January to June. The amount of substantive educational content increased substantially in the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, while coverage in the *Grand Rapids Press* increased by just seven articles. Furthermore, the percent of positive coverage of KPS shifted from 44 percent to 59 percent between 2005 and 2008 for the whole January–October time span. This can be compared to a static level of positive coverage in the *Grand Rapids Press*. Finally, there was a slight

decrease in the percent of both negative and neutral coverage in the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, while in the *Grand Rapids Press*, negative coverage decreased by 6 percent and neutral coverage increased by 8 percent. The similar patterns during January–June and January–October suggest that the January–June period, while only half of the year, is representative of changes taking place during the longer time span. Figures 6 and 7 display the shift in type of coverage for the entire January–October time period pre- and post-Promise announcement.

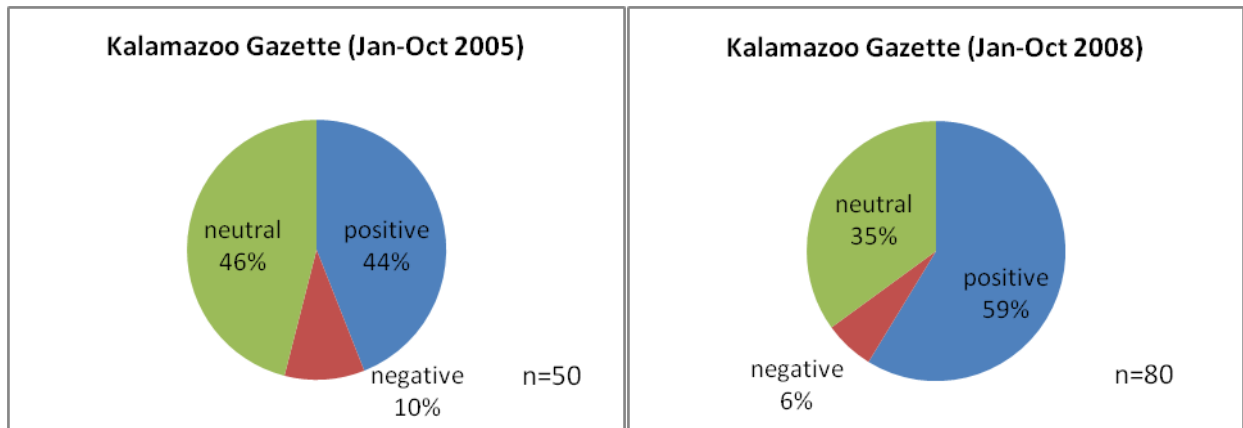


Figure 6 Shift in Tone and Amount of Educational Content in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* Pre- and Post-Promise announcement, January–October, 2005 and 2008.

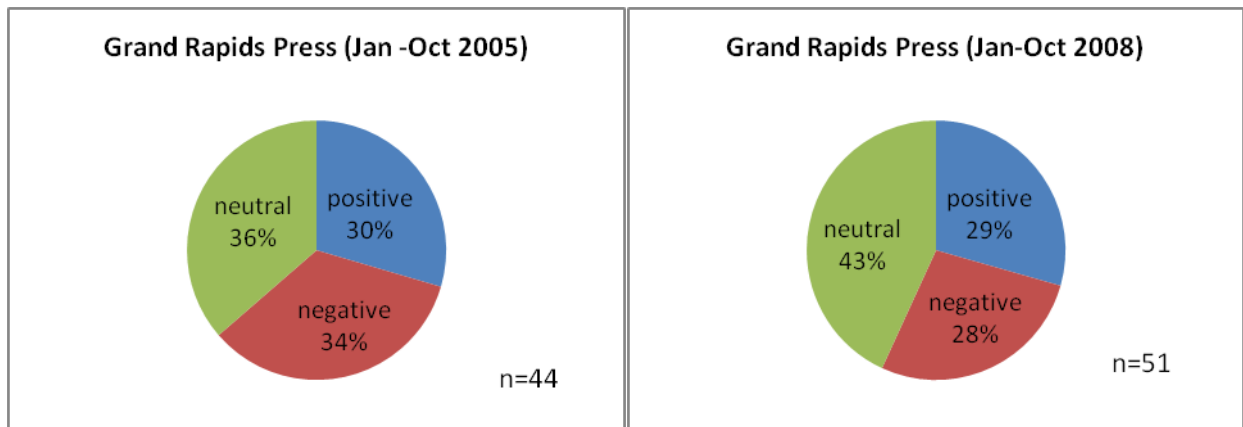


Figure 7 Shift in Tone and Amount of Educational Content in the *Grand Rapids Press* pre- and post-Promise announcement, January–October, 2005 and 2008.

Finally, we later went back and collected newspaper content from 2007 and 2011 in order to expand the search; however, discrepancies in the data between these two years and the previously collected data raised concerns. Both the 2007 and 2011 content search in the

Kalamazoo Gazette produced a total volume of 14–15 substantive educational articles. Yet for 2005 and 2008–2010, the lowest volume of substantive educational articles was 31. As the 2007 and 2011 content search was performed at a later date, one concern is that specific types of articles picked up in the first search were missed the second time around. This could be due to slight differences in the terms and search filters used. Likewise, the total number of substantive educational articles in the *Grand Rapids Press* for 2007 and 2011 were also below all other levels found in the original search. As a result, data from these two years were not included in the detailed analysis.

CONCLUSION

The content analysis presented here shows the volume of educational content in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* increasing significantly compared to content in the *Grand Rapids Press* following the introduction of the Kalamazoo Promise. The tone of coverage of KPS in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* also became increasingly positive over this period. These shifts in both the content and nature of educational coverage on KPS have the potential to shape perceptions and therefore the broader community.

As with any study based on correlations, such as this one, the causal relationship between the variables cannot necessarily be determined. It is possible that positive coverage of the district improved not because of the introduction of the Kalamazoo Promise but because of actual improvements in the school district. There is little evidence, however, for this relationship. The school improvements set in motion by the Kalamazoo Promise have been slower to materialize than the shift in positive news coverage. In addition, during this period KPS was becoming an increasingly low-income and minority district in terms of enrollment, coming to resemble GRPS

more closely in terms of its demographics. The shift in coverage is more likely related to a combination of editorial decisions and shifting perceptions of the school district, which fed on each other in a virtuous circle.

“Perceptions individuals have of social reality can influence their behavior, regardless of whether they are accurate,” and our behaviors shape reality (Hoffman 2013, p. 464). In the past, KPS’s negative reputation—whether or not supported by reality—kept many parents from enrolling their children in the district. In fact, perceptions of KPS led some families to move outside of the district in order to attend schools with better reputations, thereby contributing to the district’s shrinking size. Furthermore, middle-income families who had more mobility were more likely to exit, increasing the rates of low-income children served by KPS. However, if this reputational trend has been reversed (partly through media influence on community perceptions), the more positive reputation will help support a virtuous circle, drawing new families into the district and thereby contributing to its growth and possibly socioeconomic diversity.

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