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## From Religiosity to Consumerism: Press Coverage of Thanksgiving, 1905-2005

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# From Religiosity to Consumerism

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## Abstract

This research looks at the coverage of Thanksgiving during the past 100 years on 11 daily urban newspapers published in the United States in an effort to assess journalistic practices related to the coverage of routine news stories and to understand how through its coverage newspapers represent and interpret social, political, and economic change. The Thanksgiving holiday was chosen because it has been a traditional news story consistently covered each year in the press and an analysis of the coverage provides insights into the basic routines of journalism including news conventions, journalistic values, and norms over the past 100 years.

## Keywords

news conventions, social change, structure of feeling

## Introduction

On October 3, 1789 President George Washington ([60] [1789]) proclaimed a national Thanksgiving holiday to be held on Thursday, November 24 describing it as "a day of public thanksgiving and prayer."

Washington initially conceived of Thanksgiving as a deeply religious holiday through which Americans would give thanks to God for their liberty and prosperity. Washington's religious vision for the holiday was based in part on two earlier Thanksgiving celebrations; the first observation in America, held at Berkeley Plantation on December 4, 1619, was strictly religious and did not involve feasting; the first New England Thanksgiving was held in Plymouth in 1629 after Governor Bradford proclaimed a day of holiday in gratitude for the strong harvest. Following Washington's proclamation, several states celebrated a yearly Thanksgiving holiday, however the United States did not have an established national holiday until 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln officially proclaimed that Thanksgiving would be celebrated on the last Thursday each November. Although President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in 1939, set the holiday one week earlier in order to lengthen the shopping period between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Thanksgiving has been celebrated each year in the United States since Lincoln's proclamation and urban daily newspapers have consistently covered the holiday celebrations each year.

In an effort to understand routine conventions of journalism as well as changes in social, political, and economic aspects of American society, this research looks at the coverage of Thanksgiving during the past 100 years on 11 daily urban newspapers published in the United States. The Thanksgiving holiday was chosen because it has been a traditional news story consistently covered each year in the press and an analysis of the coverage may provide insights into the basic routines of journalism including news conventions, journalistic values, and norms during the past 100 years. The 11 newspapers are geographically diverse and have been chosen to represent possible regional differences within the country. While some of the newspaper's names have changed as a result of mergers and acquisitions during the 100-year period, all of the newspapers included in this research have been published continually since 1905.

A consideration of Thanksgiving coverage over time offers a perspective on journalistic routines within the larger history of urban journalism; it also provides insights into a "structure of feeling" within dominant American culture that exists at specific historical moments in US history. Raymond Williams ([62] [1977], p. 132) envisions structure of feeling as representing the culture of a time, the "living result" of a specific class or society at a particular historical moment. Within the hegemonic process, Williams distinguishes the evolving, lived experiences of individuals, classes, and groups from the more formal concept of ideology and explains that a structure of feeling interacts with and reacts against formal ideological beliefs incorporating "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt." Structure of feeling describes an ongoing tension between what is articulated and what is lived, and methodologically it offers a cultural hypothesis that may help to understand specific material aspects of a society at a distinct historical time. For Williams, a structure of feeling can be understood from a vast variety of documentary remnants of the material culture such as newspaper articles, photographs, novels, films, and fashions, all of which may offer insights into the actual dominant lived culture. From this perspective, a study of the coverage of Thanksgiving, over time, on US urban newspapers may be seen to embody, in Hanno Hardt's ([21], p. 3) words, a "rich reservoir of a living culture, a kind of public conversation that reveals what moves a nation's social, political, and economic spheres."

This research project assesses all articles published the day before Thanksgiving, Thanksgiving Day, and the day after Thanksgiving in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Des*

*Moines Register, Houston Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, Richmond Times Dispatch, Salt Lake City Tribune, and St. Louis Post Dispatch* during the years [47], 1955, and [55]. Articles were obtained from reading microfilm copies of the newspapers for 1905 and 1955, and from print copies of the newspapers for 2005. Overall, a total of 431 articles were evaluated for this project: 209 articles directly related to the Thanksgiving holiday were published in the 11 newspapers during the three-day period in 2005, 143 appeared in the newspapers in 1955, and 79 Thanksgiving themed articles were published in 1905.

In its evaluation of Thanksgiving coverage on the newspapers, this research employs critical literary methods of analysis. Stuart Hall suggests that news is defined through routines and traditions and that through its regular reporting and commentary regarding individuals and events, that newspapers may be seen to reflect changing patterns in a society. The three time periods, 1905, 1955, and 2005, were chosen in an attempt to assess sustained historical change that appeared in the newspapers during the past 100 years. For Hall ([20], p. 11), critical literary methods are particularly useful in understanding how through "selectivity, emphasis, treatment and presentation, the press interprets that process of social change."

Much of the research that has assessed newspaper content over time has used content analysis as a methodological tool and has focused on such elements as word usage and readability of newspapers, types of news stories, types of people in the news, front page writing styles, and visual aspects of newspapers including story length, page make-up, headline size, and the number and type of images. For example, Gans ([18]) assessed news stories on network news and in newsmagazines to understand what constitutes news, while Barnhurst and Mutz ([ 2]) purposely sampled news articles between 1894 and 1994 to illustrate how the definition of news had changed. Avery ([ 1]) measured news content in newspapers to show a rise in domestic news content before the War of 1812, while Thompson ([58]) examined sentences and words in two newspapers over a 100-year period to conclude that "oral" words were used more frequently than "print" words. Stepp's ([57]) study of 10 newspapers over time found fundamental changes in the visual appearance of the newspapers, and Meyer ([34]) sampled 2125 stories from 40 newspapers to determine the readability of contemporary newspapers. As the previous examples illustrate, content analysis may be helpful in assessing the manifest content of a newspaper, however critical literary methods of analysis are particularly useful in going below surface categories and distinctions to penetrate "latent meanings of a text" (Hall, [20], p. 15). Hall explains that a consideration of the treatment of an issue, concern, or topic, the tone of an article, the position and placement of a news story, the recurrence of particular themes and topics as well as the stories that stand out as exceptions to the traditional coverage, offer useful strategies of analysis that may showcase the process of social change in a society.

## Continuities in the Coverage

On a basic level some topical aspects of the Thanksgiving coverage remained remarkably consistent throughout the 100-year period. Newspapers routinely drew on aspects of the historical context of Thanksgiving to frame their coverage. Pilgrims and Native Americans figured prominently in discussions of Thanksgiving culinary traditions, and Presidents Washington and Lincoln were remembered as central to the development of the holiday. A number of Thanksgiving-related topics including weather and travel stories, food preparations for the holiday, human-interest stories on local citizens, and

articles about how the President spent his Thanksgiving provided a staple of the newspaper coverage in all 11 newspapers in 1905, 1955, and 2005.

While the tone and language used in the news articles has changed over the years, weather and travel stories remained a consistent Thanksgiving mainstay during the last century. All 11 newspapers included in this study addressed the Thanksgiving weather and many of the articles were written in conjunction with travel plans for the holiday. In 1905 with mid-west temperatures expected to drop to zero, the *Des Moines Register* (November, 30 [15]) noted that only "those who wish to brave the terrors of the chill blast" would be attending church and football games on Thanksgiving, while the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (November 29, [53]) offered a detailed description of the progress of the storm and explained that the destructive blizzard had "demoralized traffic and interrupted telegraphic communication." In a front-page news article on the day before Thanksgiving in 1955 the *Boston Globe* (November 23, [4]) predicted good weather and "record breaking" traffic while on the day after Thanksgiving, the *Los Angeles Times* (November 25, [31]) reported that Southern Californians experienced perfect weather for the holiday; it was clear and sunny with no smog and the temperature reached a high of 64° with "just the right touch of fall crispness." Travel difficulties and traffic delays were reported in all of the newspapers in 2005. A *Chicago Tribune* columnist recommended moving Thanksgiving to October when the weather was better, while a news article in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* (November 23, [48]) responded to increased security travel procedures advising travelers to "wear sensible footwear" and to avoid bringing wrapped presents on airplanes. In general, Thanksgiving travel and weather stories featured in the newspapers in 1905, 1955, and 2005 consistently offered straightforward specific information that was intended to give readers guidance related to their holiday celebrations and as such these news articles may be seen as print versions of public service announcements.

Not surprisingly traditional food stories abounded in the Thanksgiving coverage over the last 100 years. For each time period considered in this study, newspaper readers were instructed on how to carve a turkey, taught what to do with leftovers, and guided through family-friendly holiday recipes. While a 1905 *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 29, [39]) article on turkey preparation, which advised cooks to: "sing the bird and cut off the legs and head. Take a clean cloth and wipe carefully, picking out the pin feathers" may be less useful to contemporary readers, the 1955 *Boston Globe's* (November 23, [5]) instruction to keep hot food hot and cold food cold to avoid food poisoning remains sage advice. In 2005 traditional Thanksgiving recipes were augmented with a variety of offbeat food stories. For example, the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times* included a news story on a food-eating contest during which a woman consumed an entire turkey in 12 minutes, while a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* described in great detail why he despised Jell-O molds. Throughout the coverage, turkey was consistently showcased as the preferred Thanksgiving main course. In 1905 pigs and ducks were described as popular holiday alternatives, while in 2005, due to fears of bird flu, the health benefits of turkey were extolled as a safer alternative to chicken. Studies on scientists' efforts to raise healthier turkeys were also included in the coverage, and as a *Chicago Tribune* (November 24, [8]) Thanksgiving day editorial explained, readers could eat turkey without any guilt because wild turkeys were vicious beasts who regularly attacked people by scratching, chasing, and beating them with their wings. The editorial also noted, that "when it comes to turkeys, it's kill or be killed."

Articles that addressed how the President spent Thanksgiving appeared consistently in the majority of the newspapers in 1905, 1955, and 2005. In 1905 news stories described the Roosevelt Thanksgiving dinner at their country home in Virginia, complete with a 31-pound turkey, while in 1955, news articles reported on the "old fashioned" (Deakin, [12]) Thanksgiving that President Eisenhower enjoyed with his family at his farm after his two-month convalescence following a heart attack. Most of the newspapers in 2005 featured an Associated Press news article which detailed President Bush's Thanksgiving day phone calls to servicemen as well as the holiday menu served at his Crawford, Texas ranch including: "free-range turkey, fresh-milled cornbread dressing, pan gravy, chipotle maple whipped sweet potatoes, roasted asparagus and red peppers, green beans supreme, fruit ambrosia, fresh yeast rolls and orange cranberry relish. Dessert was two kinds of pie—Texas pecan and pumpkin" (Pickler, [45]). Throughout the coverage, the emphasis on each President's family celebrations, complete with traditional Thanksgiving feasts, may be seen as a way to humanize these leaders and to showcase common traditions and practices aligned with the majority of the American public.

Thanksgiving themed human-interest feature stories were also found throughout the newspaper coverage during the past 100 years. In 1905, feature articles detailed lavish holiday parties of the social elite and reported on how Americans visiting London and Rome celebrated Thanksgiving. Similar features appeared in the 1955 newspapers, which also included a variety of medical miracle stories in which a young child or teenager was surgically cured of a rare medical disease or defect. Such articles were consistent with a prevailing belief in the revolutionary power of technology, which framed post World War II American consciousness. Human-interest stories in the 2005 newspapers focused primarily on Hurricane Katrina survivors, holiday celebrations of movie stars and sports figures, as well as including a news brief on the 40th anniversary of one of the most famous Thanksgiving meals in history, immortalized by Arlo Guthrie in his song "Alice's Restaurant" (*St. Louis Post Dispatch*, November 23, 2005).

While the presentation of Thanksgiving themed topics often remained consistent throughout the coverage, a 2005 full-page human-interest article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 24, [43]) titled "The Dysfunctional Family Thanksgiving" clearly illustrated that at a deeper level, Thanksgiving coverage had greatly changed during the past century. The full-page feature appeared as a "Chutes & Ladders" board game, complete with pop psychology commentary that flippantly dismissed serious medical concerns including obsessive-compulsive disorder and Alzheimer's, and harshly judged individuals who chose not to eat meat for ethical reasons. For example, one square read: "Your annoying vegan kid brother expounds on the morality of killing turkeys. Go back 2 spaces." This full-page Thanksgiving article suggests the regularity, commonality, and normalcy of discussing psychological issues, terms, and conditions in contemporary society. It illustrates changes in journalistic practices regarding what constitutes news content and blurs the line between advertising and news. In an attempt to illustrate major shifts in the structure of feeling within American society, this research now assesses significant changes in the Thanksgiving newspaper coverage during the past 100 years.

## Religious Aspects of Thanksgiving

In 1905 Thanksgiving coverage in the 11 newspapers clearly continued to articulate Washington's religious vision of Thanksgiving. Newspapers boldly reminded readers of the religious meaning of the holiday and advised them to combine religious worship with family celebrations. On Thanksgiving eve,

the *Des Moines Register* (November 29, [14]) recommended "that the confessedly religious people of Des Moines spend an hour and a half at church tomorrow," while a front-page *Philadelphia Inquirer* (December 1, [41]) news article the day after Thanksgiving reported: "Everybody yesterday praised God, from whom all blessings flow. Thousands did it in the old conventional way, hallowed by Puritan precedent, of going to church, listening to appropriate sermons and joining in hymns of thanksgiving."

In 1905, all 11 newspapers included at least one article detailing religious services that would be held on Thanksgiving and several of the newspapers ran follow-up articles discussing the specifics of sermons held during religious services. For example, a December 1, 1905 *Richmond Times Dispatch* news story noted: "The preacher did not overlook the evils of the day, but in eloquent words sounded a warning that in their prosperity people might forget the paths of virtue." Although much of the 1905 religious content in the newspapers focused on Christian and Catholic services, four newspapers, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and the *Richmond Times Dispatch* included coverage of Jewish Thanksgiving services which also commemorated the 250th anniversary of the landing and settlement of Jews in America. Each of these four articles detailed the history of Jewish immigration to the United States and framed the coverage around Jews' contributions to the development of the wealth and power of the United States.

Religious aspects of Thanksgiving remained central to the newspaper coverage of 1955. Once again all 11 newspapers covered Thanksgiving religious services that this time often included listings of Jewish holiday services along with Protestant, Catholic, and Mormon worship services. A front-page Thanksgiving Day article in the *New York Times* outlined the offerings of a variety of religious services and included a call by the Zionist Organization of America to pray for peace, security, and stability in Israel. Several of the 1955 articles situated the holiday within its religious historical context, and as a Thanksgiving Day editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 24, [42]) explained, the newspaper hoped that as a part of family celebrations that readers did not forget the "historic consciousness of the gifts of Divine Providence."

Of particular note was the tone of three editorials that seemed to indicate a concern that some readers might need convincing to incorporate worship in their holiday celebrations. A *Salt Lake Tribune* editorial focused on the history of Thanksgiving and explained that religious observance has been tied to Thanksgiving Day since the Pilgrims first "called God to witness the first charter of democratic government in America." The editorial noted that while Thomas Jefferson lobbied for the separation of church and state that:

there is nothing wrong with a religious overtone to the observance. After all, the fact that ours is a God-fearing nation has been recognized throughout our history, from the appeal to the "Supreme Judge of the world" in the Declaration of Independence to the recent acknowledgment in the pledge of allegiance that this is a nation "under God." (*Salt Lake Tribune*, November 24, [52])

A *Houston Chronicle* editorial urged readers to give thanks not only at the dinner table but during religious services, while a Thanksgiving Day editorial in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 24, 1955) maintained: "every citizen of this Nation can take time to offer up his own humble prayer of thanksgiving for life, liberty and the God-given privilege of being an American." The word choice and

tone of these editorials illustrates an acknowledgement of and a reaction to recent challenges to the traditional vision of Thanksgiving as a religious holiday.

In contrast to the 1905 and 1955 Thanksgiving coverage, in 2005 newspapers primarily focused on non-religious topics and there was little indication that Thanksgiving had initially been conceived of as a religious holiday. In fact, a *New York Times* (November 24, [36]) article on how children of immigrants encouraged their parents to celebrate the holiday described Thanksgiving as "one of the more accessible holidays for newcomers, free from religious or political affiliation." In all of the 2005 newspapers in this study, the emphasis of the coverage was directed away from religiosity and focused on other aspects of the Thanksgiving holiday. During the three-day period, only eight articles were published in the 2005 newspapers that discussed any aspect of religion. The eight articles appeared in six of the papers; the other five newspapers did not publish any articles on the religious aspects of Thanksgiving. While the number of articles published alone is only a minor factor in this analysis, it is interesting to compare the content of the eight Thanksgiving articles published in 2005 that focused on religion, with the 25 articles in the 11 newspapers published in 1955, and the 21 articles with religious content published in the 11 newspapers in 1905.

No articles listed religious services for the Thanksgiving holiday in 2005 and only the *Richmond Times Dispatch* mentioned in a general news article that some Richmonders attended religious services as part of their Thanksgiving celebration. The *Times Dispatch* also reprinted George Washington's 1789 proclamation designating Thanksgiving as a religious holiday. Two newspapers, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, included articles reminding readers that Thanksgiving was originally conceived of as a religious holiday, while a *Chicago Tribune* human-interest story on a group of Hurricane Katrina victims mentioned that one family member embraced religion after his struggles. A Thanksgiving Day article in the *New York Times* (November 24, [35]) on the challenge of saying grace at Thanksgiving described it as "the most significant remainder of Thanksgiving's religious roots" and noted that saying grace now intimidated and confused many people. Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* (November 24, [32]) struggled with the religious origins of the holiday and in a Thanksgiving Day editorial stated: "Thanksgiving has always posed problems for those who favor a stout wall separating church and state. Today is a fundamentally religious, Judeo-Christian holiday that was created by federal government—and is deeply enshrined in its traditions." Yet, apart from this editorial, the 2005 *Los Angeles Times* Thanksgiving coverage, like several other newspapers in this study, was completely non-religious. The lack of religiosity in the Thanksgiving coverage clearly illustrates the secular emphasis of contemporary society. According to Stewart Hoover, the treatment of religion in the press may be seen as an indication of the larger status of religion in society. In American culture, the ease with which the press has accepted "the secularization of society as a guiding principle of coverage does suggest the extent to which this idea is embedded in American social, political, and educational philosophy" (Hoover, [22], p. 12).

## The "Needy Ones"

In the early 20th century, a progressive reform movement opposed to waste and corruption sought change at all levels of society and fought to reduce the political power of corporate interests through government regulation. Focusing primarily on urban issues and problems, progressives challenged dominant power relations and worked to make the US government more responsive to the needs of its



citizens. During the progressive era, investigative journalists, known as muckrakers, often focused on social, political, and economic issues that targeted the public ignorance and apathy of middle-class readers and sought to arouse "a lethargic public to righteous indignation" (Weinberg and Weinberg, [61], p. xviii). One classic 1904 study, *Poverty: social conscience in the Progressive era*, by Robert Hunter (Hunter, [25] [1904]), called for a sociological rather than moralistic approach to social issues and concerns. Hunter's research posited poverty as an inter-connected relationship between economic, mental, physical, and emotional problems and redefined poverty as a situation in which individuals "are underpaid, underfed, underclothed, badly housed and overworked" (Jones, [26], p. xix). Relying on census data, unemployment figures, pauper burials, and his own observations, Hunter estimated that in 1904 no fewer than 10 million Americans, or 13 percent of the population, was in poverty and he suggested that up to 15 or 20 million people might actually be considered poor.

In line with the broader Progressive agenda, a primary focus of the Thanksgiving coverage in 1905 was on feeding orphans, the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the homeless and those in the community who were incarcerated. During the 1905 three-day Thanksgiving period every newspaper in this study ran at least one article on efforts to feed the needy and most of these articles were prominently placed, and included long and detailed information regarding specific community service activities. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an in-depth front-page news article describing the Thanksgiving activities of local civic groups and organizations to feed more than 4000 local citizens who were referred to as "needy ones", while the *New York Times* coverage reported, in great detail, efforts to feed nearly 6000 homeless in the city. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (November 30, [54]) described efforts of wealthy local citizens to deliver baskets of food to the poor and noted that for many families living in squalor that the holiday meant another cold day of "numbing gloveless hands and wretchedly clad feet and bodies." Coverage in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Salt Lake Tribune* emphasized efforts to feed homeless children, while a *Richmond Times Dispatch* article focused on efforts to aid African American orphans. Newspapers also detailed Thanksgiving celebrations for those in hospitals and mental institutions as well as community efforts to help the disabled. Overall, with descriptive language intended to showcase the plight of needy individuals, the newspapers reported how thousands of local citizens were aided through community and individual efforts.

In 1905 approximately one million children worked in factories, mines, tenement workshops, and textile mills. Progressives who wanted "to save the children from neglect, overwork, and ignorance" (Bryant Jr., [6], p. 150) made ending child labor one of their primary social platforms. Muckrakers investigated child labor practices and found that within their own field, newspaper owners often exploited the labor of newsboys. At the beginning of the 20th century, newsboys routinely bought their papers from circulation corner men and then resold the newspapers on the street; due to this practice newspaper management considered newsboys merchants rather than employees. As young merchants newsboys had the status of independent contractors and therefore child labor laws did not apply to them. Both the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* covered elaborate Thanksgiving dinners prepared for hundreds of local newsboys who needed assistance. In a lengthy article run the day after Thanksgiving, the *Los Angeles Times* (December 1, [30]) sympathetically described the newsboys as "ragamuffin waifs," "half-starved tatterdemalions," who fought madly to be the first in line for food and greatly enjoyed the holiday meals.

The Progressive agenda also extended to prison reform, particularly as it related to unfair labor conditions and inhuman prison conditions. Muckrakers investigated a "barbaric lease system" (Weinberg and Weinberg, [61], p. 323) and discovered that inmates were routinely being sold to contractors who treated them like slaves. The 1905 coverage of Thanksgiving meals for those in prison clearly focused on prison reform issues and showcased the humane treatment of prisoners. Several of the newspapers noted that special Thanksgiving dinners would be held for prisoners and some of the newspaper articles actually included the menu in the news coverage. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that watching a vaudeville performance and smoking cigars was part of the festivities for 1500 male inmates at the penitentiary, while the [24] (December 1, 1905) noted that for the first time a special Thanksgiving dinner was held in both the county and city jails: "The banquet table was spread with all the delicacies of the season. Turkey and cranberry sauce, oysters and the various courses down to ice cream and cigars were served. A phonograph and a violin were called into service. Games of various sorts were provided and the celebration lasted until far into the night."

By 1955, the Progressive movement was long over and a post-war conservative environment promoted patriotism, anti-communism, McCarthyism, and the Cold War. After witnessing the horrors of Stalinism and the orthodoxies of the Cold War, social critics began to reject ideological formulations and instead embraced conservatism and complacency. American popular culture extolled the virtues of conformity of opinion and showcased rigid expectations of behavior as the norm. In the meantime, as Richard Pells ([37], p. 118) explains, "the problems of poverty, racism, and urban decay simmered under the surface of middle-class affluence." In 1945 Congress had established the G.I. Bill of Rights, which provided educational and training opportunities as well as hospitalization for World War II veterans; Congress had also provided additional funds for veterans' housing. These actions triggered the growth of the suburbs but also contributed to the neglect of key urban issues. By 1955 nearly one-third of the public lived in suburban areas, leaving the poor, racial minorities, the old, the unemployed, and the homeless in decaying urban centers, which were then commonly referred to as "skid rows" (Daly, [11]). Poverty figures calculated from population income data determined that in 1955, 32.5 million Americans, or 19.9 percent of the population, were poor (Barrington and Fisher, [ 3]).

## The New Homeless

Although newspapers in 1955 continued to report on efforts to feed the homeless, the sick, the incarcerated, and the disabled in their Thanksgiving coverage, feeding the needy was an issue that was sometimes conflated with religious aspects of the holiday. On several of the newspapers such activities were downplayed and were included as secondary concerns in articles that focused primarily on other holiday activities. In 1955, only five of the newspapers: the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Salt Lake Tribune* and the *Boston Globe*, showcased efforts to feed the needy in separate news stories. A front-page news article and lengthy jump ran the day after Thanksgiving, in the *Los Angeles Times*, under the headline "Thanksgiving Feasts Served Unfortunates," and reported the activities of about a dozen welfare agencies and rescue missions to feed an estimated 15,000 local residents, while the *New York Times* detailed efforts to feed about 3000 people living in shelters. Some of the newspapers also mentioned holiday meals at the jails: in St. Louis, Salt Lake City and Los Angeles, prison inmates ate turkey dinners while in Houston, city jail occupants ate turkey but prisoners at the county jail ate chicken. Although poverty and homelessness remained significant urban issues in 1955,

the lessening coverage of these issues during the Thanksgiving period may be seen to illustrate a changing structure of feeling specifically related to the relevance of social issues within American society.

In 1955, writers applauded the superiority of Keynesian economics and suggested that with technological developments primarily related to automation that manual labor would soon be obsolete. Mechanized agriculture, artificial photosynthesis, and the use of algae and other materials from the oceans were envisioned as solutions to world hunger; pronouncements such as: "the species' dependence upon nature for a steady food supply has virtually disappeared" (Rosenberg, [50], p. 4), proliferated in books and in the popular press. Yet, larger social issues in the United States were being reflected in dramatic changes in the meaning of the term homeless that was occurring during the 20th century. In his article "The Old Homeless and the New Homelessness in Historical Perspective," Peter Rossi ([51], p. 955) explains that before the 1980s, homelessness meant "living outside family units, whereas today's meaning of the term is more directly tied to the absolute lack of housing." At the beginning the 20th century, the homeless were those workers who constituted the US labor reserve. As Stuart A. Rice, former superintendent of the New York Municipal Lodging House described:

Homeless men are demanded to build the bridges and tunnels, the irrigation systems and railroads, to harvest our forests and embank our rivers. They are the pioneers of modern industry. They go hither and thither to the rough, unfinished, uncomfortable places of the world, to provide homes and civilized comforts for those of us who follow. Meanwhile they live in bunk houses. Homeless women are preferred to do the "dirty work" in our public institutions and to scrub and clean at night in our hotels. Generally only they are willing to accept the work and the hours demanded. ([46], p. 141)

In the 1950s, the homeless were primarily "alcoholic old men" (Rossi, [51], p. 954) who lived alone in flophouse hotels, or mission dormitories on skid rows, located near freight yards and truck stops. Most of the homeless were Caucasian; some had physical disabilities and others dealt with chronic mental illness and social maladjustment. Those physically able to work supplemented their pensions and social security checks with intermittent low-paid, menial work. Local shelters and mission dormitories provided housing and food to those individuals who could not work. Yet, by the 1980s, a new type of homeless began to appear in the United States with men, women and even children sleeping in cardboard boxes and in doorways, abandoned cars, parks, and other public places. According to the US Census Bureau ([59]), 37 million Americans, or 12.6 percent of the population, were below the poverty level in 2005. At any given time, approximately 3.5 million Americans below the poverty level are homeless in the United States (Burt et al., [ 7]) and a study released by the National Alliance to End Homeless estimates that in 2005 homelessness among families was increasing, with 41 percent of the homeless currently consisting of families with children (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 January [44]).

Clearly the issue of homelessness remains a serious problem in the United States and yet in 2005, none of the newspapers in this study addressed efforts to care for the homeless of their own communities nor was there any coverage of holiday meals served to individuals who were in hospitals, nursing homes, or prisons. While homelessness was not an issue addressed in the 2005 Thanksgiving coverage, some of the newspapers focused on efforts to aid Hurricane Katrina survivors. With New Orleans

residents displaced after the Hurricane, such an emphasis generally reported local campaigns to help Katrina survivors.

Five of the newspapers also addressed efforts to feed needy local citizens: a general news article in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* described Salvation Army efforts to serve a holiday meal to needy Richmonders; the *Des Moines Register* covered efforts to feed Iowa families displaced by recent tornados; and the *Boston Globe* ran several news articles on local efforts to feed the needy at Thanksgiving, including a news story about Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney serving underprivileged citizens Thanksgiving dinner. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* ran a list of charities with contact information and suggestions on ways local citizens could help, while news articles in the *Houston Chronicle* detailed citywide efforts to feed approximately 40,000 low-income Houston residents Thanksgiving meals. The Houston holiday effort also provided local citizens as well as some Hurricane Katrina survivors with clothing and blankets, medical check-ups, and flu shots. The *Houston Chronicle* also ran an editorial column by Brian Green ([19]), CEO of the Houston Food Bank, which focused on the problem of Americans who are "food insecure"—that is unable to acquire sufficient food on a daily basis. In his column, Green noted that according to the US Department of Agriculture, in 2005 16.4 percent of Texans were food insecure and he wondered how it was possible for people to go hungry "in a society that obsesses about the consequences of overeating."

Interestingly, an obsession with weight was clearly the emphasis of a prominent news story in the *Los Angeles Times* run on the front page of its local news section the day after Thanksgiving. The lengthy news article and jump with the headline "Toning and Atoning on the Run" featured ways to burn off extra calories consumed at Thanksgiving. The news story estimated that a traditional Thanksgiving dinner consisted of about 3000 calories and discussed strategies that Southern Californians planned to use, including cycling, hiking, running and jogging, to burn off the meal. Yet the article quoted an exercise physiologist who warned readers that their holiday celebrations could have long-term consequences: "It's futile to think you'll be able to work off your Thanksgiving meal in one day" (Horton and Ricci, [23]). This news article appears to be targeted to an affluent readership with plenty of leisure time rather than one of the "254,000 men, women and children [who] experience homeless in Los Angeles County during some part of the year and approximately 82,000 people [who] are homeless on any given night" (Los Angeles Almanac, [29]). An obsession with weight was also apparent in the *New York Times* Thanksgiving coverage. Seemingly unaware of a 2005 report by the [9] that found the number of food insecure and homeless New Yorkers had reached an all-time high, the *New York Times* ran a Thanksgiving day column "You Are What You Overeat" which addressed stuffing oneself at Thanksgiving, beginning with "fat-filled stuffing" as a type of "moral or civic obligation" (Klein, [27]). While the sarcastic tone of the column chides readers for overeating, it also clearly assumes that all New Yorkers (or all New Yorkers who matter) have plenty to eat each day.

Although the US Department of Agriculture reports that in 2005 35 million Americans suffered from food insecurity, apart from the *Houston Chronicle*, none of the other newspapers in this study mentioned this issue in any of its Thanksgiving coverage. According to the US Department of Agriculture, as well as homeless figures for the cities represented in this study, food insecurity and homelessness remain major problems in the United States. Yet, reading the 2005 Thanksgiving coverage as a whole, it is difficult not to conclude that feeding needy local citizens is no longer a news

story covered by the majority of the newspapers—that is unless people are in need as a result of a natural disaster. The lack of coverage in these newspapers may be seen to contradict the reality of larger social issues within these communities and illustrates targeted coverage of an affluent readership rather than a focus of these newspapers as papers of record for their local communities.

## Advertising and News

An assessment of Thanksgiving-related news coverage over the past 100 years illustrates that during the last part of the 20th century advertising became a normalized and regular part of news coverage. At the beginning of the 20th century, news and advertising departments were strictly separated in an effort to maintain the independence of journalists as well as the credibility of the news (DeLorme and Fedler, [13]). In 1905, the boundaries between news and advertising were quite firm—none of the Thanksgiving coverage in the 11 newspapers contained any advertising or promotional material. A 1905 column in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 29, [40]) on the day before Thanksgiving illustrated the care taken by newspapers to insure the separation between advertising and news. A question and answer column, "Womanly Answers to Womanly Questions," included a question regarding the suitability of two hotels in the Philadelphia area. While it was clear that the reader mentioned the names of the hotels in her letter, the hotel's names were omitted from the reprint of her question in the column as well as the answer to her question. The columnist responded that the first hotel mentioned was more suitable for women as the other "entertains a number of businessmen and seems given over to them entirely." Strict boundaries between advertising and news may also be seen to illustrate the role of advertising in 1905 American society, an era before the wide-scale implementation of mass production occurred during the 1920s. At the beginning of the 20th century, advertisements described products to the public but were not yet used, in Stuart Ewen's (1976, p. 33) words, as "a means of effectively creating consumers as a way of homogeneously controlling the consumption of a product."

By 1955, the boundaries between advertising and news had begun to blur, in part a response to a post-war commercialist environment that created the "fancied need" (Ewen, [16], p. 35), requiring individuals to buy, not only in response to their own needs, but also to satisfy the needs of industrial capitalism. While the majority of the Thanksgiving coverage remained free from advertising, news articles covered Thanksgiving Day parades sponsored by Macy's and Gimbels, and a few of the newspapers mentioned gift-giving ideas for the upcoming holiday season and included actual product names and locations where the gifts could be purchased. For example, a *New York Times* article on children's toys available at local stores tied the Thanksgiving holiday to the opening of the Christmas shopping season. The article described popular toys such as a Humpty-Dumpty doll that was available at Gimbels and included a selection of luxury toys that the article suggested "rich uncles" might wish to purchase: "Rocking horses covered with real pony skin priced at \$115 are at Schwartz, which also has a \$350 doll's house with a door bell that rings. And a small version of the Ford Thunderbird, which works on batteries is displayed at Macy's for \$350" (Corrigan, [10]).

Although advertising was beginning to encroach on Thanksgiving news coverage in 1955, by 2005 the ubiquity of advertising often made it difficult to determine where news ended and advertising began. In a contemporary environment where the American way of life is described, depicted, and promoted through advertising, product placement was fully integrated into the 2005 news coverage—marking

significant changes in the definition of news content. References to the Butterball Turkey Talk Line 1-800-BUTTERBALL were included in the newspapers' Thanksgiving food coverage and "Black Friday" business stories focused on strategies major retailers planned to lure holiday shoppers to their businesses on the day after Thanksgiving. For example, the *Boston Globe* ran two business articles on Massachusetts' blue laws that prohibited most large retailers from being open on major holidays like Thanksgiving. Both articles focused on specific retailers, Whole Foods and Wal-Mart, giving significant publicity to the retailers themselves as well as their efforts to challenge the blue laws.

A majority of the newspapers featured a lengthy obituary for Stove Top stuffing inventor Ruth Siems in their 2005 Thanksgiving coverage. Although Siems actually died on November 13, the newspapers chose to hold the obituary and feature it as part of their Thanksgiving coverage. The *New York Times* article considered Stove Top stuffing an enduring emblem of postwar convenience culture and noted that the product's advertising motto, "Stuffing instead of potatoes?" was a part of American's collective consciousness. However, the obituary read more like a press release for Stove Top than a news story particularly as it explained: "Stove Top stuffing comes in a range of flavors, including turkey, chicken, beef, cornbread and sourdough" (Fox, [17]). The *New York Times* obituary for Siems was also run in the *Des Moines Register*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *Chicago Tribune*; the obituary also discussed business aspects of the product, explaining that 60 million boxes of Stove Top stuffing are sold each Thanksgiving, and lauded the role of General Mills in the development of stuffing that was quick to prepare, could be eaten anytime of the year, and spared "cooks the nasty business of having to rout around in the clammy interior of an animal" (Fox, [17]). Yet, as the *Los Angeles Times* obituary noted, Siems was a dominant figure in the company, in her own right: "When the billionth package of Stove Top Stuffing rolled off the assembly line in 1984, no one thought to send one of the T-shirts commemorating the occasion to Siems, a slight for which she found an appropriate response in the words emblazoned on the back of the T-shirt: 'Stuff it'" (McLellan, [33]).

Nearly every newspaper prominently covered a minor accident that occurred at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade in New York when the M&M balloon veered off course and slightly injured two people. The promotional references in the story offered prime publicity, which probably offset any potential damages that Macy's or M&M's parent company Mars Food might have incurred. More than half of the 2005 newspapers covered the pardoning, by President Bush, of two turkeys, Marshmallow and Yam. After they were pardoned the two turkeys were flown first class to Disneyland where Marshmallow served as grand marshal of Disneyland's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Marshmallow was dubbed "the happiest turkey on earth," an interesting play on Disneyland's advertising slogan, "the happiest place on earth."

The *Los Angeles Times* included an in-depth article in its local news section on Southern Californians who rejected the stress of traditional Thanksgiving family celebrations and instead traveled to Palm Springs for a "laid-back" (Lin II, [28]) holiday. The article was a mix between a travel article and an advertisement for the La Quinta Resort and Club, describing in detail the amenities of the resort including specifics of a holiday buffet that cost \$67 per adult and \$36 per child. Similarly, the *New York Times* reported on long lines for Thanksgiving shopping at Citarella, a popular upper west side grocery store. Although the article ran prominently on Thanksgiving Day, on the second page of the local news section, under the headline: "It's 9 a.m. Do you Know Where the Turkey Line Begins?" (Steinhauer,

[56]) the article's content seemed little more than a thinly veiled advertisement. The *New York Times* also included an article on the challenge of saying grace at Thanksgiving, which referenced a new book published by Tyson Foods, *Giving Thanks at Mealttime*. The *Boston Globe* bemoaned the lack of turkeys 24 pounds and larger, quoting employees at Whole Foods and Stop 'n Shops throughout the article, while a news article in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* discussed the Richmond Thanksgiving plans of two friends who had evacuated New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, and showcased how the precooked turkey breasts at the local supermarket Ukrops had solved their holiday food needs. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* featured holiday fashions for sale at local shops, including a sweater set with ostrich feathers, available for \$178 at Nordstrom, while the *Richmond Times Dispatch* included an article on new Thanksgiving themed sodas available from Jones Soda. In contrast with the clear separation between advertising and news seen in the 1905 Thanksgiving coverage, the 2005 coverage fully blended advertising, publicity, and news.

## Conclusion

In his essay "Advertising: The Magic System," Williams ([63], p. 182) suggests that during the first half of the 20th century, modern advertising emerged as part of an "advanced system of capitalist production, distribution and market control." Advertising developed from a simple strategy to sell products into an integral part of contemporary society, a highly organized information and persuasion system through which individuals not only buy goods but also "buy social respect, discrimination, health, beauty, success, [and] power" (Williams, [63], pp. 188–9). For Williams, advertising's impact on development of individuals who view themselves as consumers rather than as product users is a fundamental aspect of the contemporary Western capitalist structure of feeling and it is this changing structure of feeling that has been illustrated in this assessment of newspaper coverage.

This research project focused on Thanksgiving coverage on 11 urban daily newspapers during the past 100 years in an effort to assess journalistic practices related to the coverage of routine news stories. More importantly, it has sought to go beyond analyzing or measuring distinct units or types of journalistic practice in an effort to understand how through its coverage newspapers represent and interpret social change and how an emergent structure of feeling may be read off that coverage.

American culture has changed dramatically since 1905 when a progressive movement challenging the power elite was seeking political, economic, and social changes in the United States. Progressives fought to reduce the political power of special-interest groups and challenged the government to become more responsive to the needs of its citizens. Muckrakers, the investigative journalists of the progressive era, targeted public ignorance and apathy and encouraged the middle class to speak out about problems, issues, and abuses in society. The emphasis on caring for the needy as well as other aspects of social responsibility found in the 1905 Thanksgiving newspaper coverage clearly illustrates the larger progressive social agenda. The 1905 newspapers also adhered to strict boundaries between advertising and news and maintained an editorial position as newspapers of record whose primary purpose was to represent the news of the community to its readership.

By 1955 a conservative and conformist social environment, which extolled the virtues of technological progress, consumerism, and corporate identity had begun to alter a social responsibility framework and the separation between advertising and news began to blur. By 2005, newspaper coverage of

Thanksgiving was fundamentally a-religious and devoid of any sense of social responsibility. Much of the coverage emphasized individual pursuits, targeting an affluent readership rather than extending coverage to the entire community. Although issues of homelessness and feeding the needy remained significant community issues in 2005, the majority of the newspapers in this study did not cover these important social issues and instead the papers focused on entertainment and advertising.

In another sense, throughout the last century, articles on Thanksgiving remained a consistent story covered extensively by all of the newspapers in this study. An uncontroversial American holiday, Thanksgiving represents the type of routine reportage showcased in US daily newspapers. Such coverage may also be seen to illustrate the role of nationalism and patriotism in creating the US press culture. While there have been major social, political, religious, and economic changes in the United States over the past 100 years, messages of nationalism and patriotism have consistently been promoted in urban daily newspapers. As early as 1938, sociologist O. W. Riegel ([49], p. 513) noted that the press responded to divergent economic and political interests as well as foreign and domestic conflicts by increasingly relying on popular and uncontroversial subject matter to maintain its readership. An emphasis on extensive holiday coverage, feature stories, comics, and other popular trends helped to create the press as a "vehicle of nationalist propaganda" through which a confused population gained comfort and satisfaction from reading articles based on familiar patriotic images and messages. In recent years, explicit displays of the patriotism of the press are a public expectation routinely queried in press surveys and public opinion polls (see, e.g., Pew Research Center Survey Report, [38]).

Finally, the 2005 Thanksgiving coverage in the 11 newspapers may be seen to illustrate successful "reality engineering" by advertisers to shape the social images depicted in popular culture. It is an accomplishment that James Karrh (1998, p. 34) suggests has resulted in citizens' acceptance of "brand images into areas of public life that were formerly 'commercial-free' and to see brands and their identifiers as a natural part of everyday life." In 1905 journalists attempted to instill a sense of righteous indignation in the minds of readers; 100 years later newswriters have been co-opted as handmaidens of the advertising industry, selling thanksgiving as just another product without any understanding of the religious, moral, or social foundations of the holiday.

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