

Newspaper Coverage of Selected Urban Problems
in Metropolitan Detroit: A Content Analysis

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Introductory Remarks

There is no need to justify the importance of the role played by the press in all aspects of public life. Especially in the United States, as well as in Great Britain, the press and the other media of communication have been looked upon as the most important partners of the democratic process.

There has been, however, little or no research done about the role of the press in the urban planning process. And yet, if the planner, and public alike, claim the necessity of citizen participation in the planning process, then clearly there is an important task for the press to fulfill the task of information.

These two observations - of the general role of the press and of the expressed need for improved citizen participation - were the primary reasons for undertaking the study described in the present report. It was probably much easier for a Foreign Fellow to perceive the need for such a research study. Things that are quite obvious for people in this country appear with much greater intensity to a newcomer.

One basic assumption must be stated explicitly in advance. Of the various theories of the press, the "Social Responsibility Theory" was a guiding theme of this approach.

Two theories of the press are presently applicable to the American realm. One is the older "Libertarian Theory" which traditionally considers the press as being an enterprise like any other, guided by the general principles of good business conduct, and responsible only to the investors or shareholders.

The Social Responsibility Theory "has this major premise: Freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under our government, is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society".¹

The Social Responsibility Theory of the press gives the right to investigate the degree to which the press responds to the needs of the public. The study presented here was too incomplete in terms of comparative material to justify serious criticism of the press. However, it indicates some of the characteristics of the press that can be of interest for the journalists and planners alike.

The Social Responsibility Theory implies, therefore, the right of the public to investigate the degree to which the press responds to the needs of society. The study undertaken here had this kind of investigation as its goal. The study presented was too incomplete in terms of the size of sample (limited time - see the discussion of this aspect in the following paragraphs). The author felt, therefore, that no direct criticism of the performance of the press could be made based on the available material. However, the study shows:

1. The method that could be used for further investigation.
2. Some characteristics of the press coverage, that can be of interest to the journalists, planners and urban scientists alike.

¹ Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, Wilbur Schramm, Four Theories of the Press, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1963, p. 74.

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The method used in the present study was the so-called "Content Analysis". Well known in various fields of social research, it has either infrequently or never been applied to urban planning problems to the best of my knowledge.² This method can be defined in the following way: "Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communications".³

Due to the limitations of time and resources, only a very partial content analysis could be carried out at this time. It is believed, however, that the method is relevant and that it could, and should, be applied more extensively in a similar way in the future.

Specifically, only the coverage of selected topics by one of the Detroit major newspapers, the Detroit News, during one year, 1970, was taken into consideration.

The reason for choosing a newspaper rather than other media (TV, radio) was that it was technically more feasible to find a complete file on microfilms. Also, there was a prevailing consensus among a few interviewed informed persons that while the TV is very influential in promoting and shaping certain life style, the printed

²"Content Analysis of a State Planning Conference" by Jack C. Fisher and Henry P. Henderson, in American Institute of Planners Journal, March 1967. This report, however, was not strictly a content analysis as usually defined, because it lacked a quantitative evaluation of conference materials.

³Bernard Berelson, Content Analysis in Communications Research, The Free Press Publishers, Glencoe, Illinois, 1952, page 18.

ss is still more important in the process of spreading the information. Also, the press is more detailed with respect to local urban problems than the 1/2 hour local TV news can be. The Detroit News was chosen primarily because of the relatively easier access to the microfilms at the Wayne State University Library.

The time period investigated was an arbitrary, but also practical one. It was felt that the news is rather short-lived and thus a recent period was more relevant to study.

The selected topics were:

1. Environmental Pollution
2. Downtown Detroit Renewal
3. Public Transportation
4. City-Suburb Problems (Regional Planning)

Initially, for the review of the content of the Detroit News, no formal definition of "subject matter" was adopted. All the microfilms of the Detroit News for the month of January 1970 were scanned and any article, even remotely related to urban problems, was taken into consideration. The following subject matter categories were thus covered:

- Air Pollution
- Water Pollution
- Detroit's Downtown Renewal
- Subway (rapid transit)
- Regional Co-operation
- School Financing, Parochial aid
- Housing Financing
- Crime
- Drug Abuses
- Activities of the Board of Zoning Appeals
- Model Neighborhoods
- Various Court Cases Related to Re-zoning, Tenants Protection, Citizen Organization

Total of those articles for the month of January 1970 was 99, an average of some three articles a day.

It soon became evident, that covering the whole year in this would be an unmanageable task. Approximately 1200 articles would be estimated as necessary to scan. It was, therefore, necessary to reduce the scope of investigations, following also almost a general consensus among the Center staff, that some selected problems should be studied only.

Four selected subjects were, therefore, designated for further research, for the following reasons:

1. Environmental Pollution - In January, 1970, President Nixon in the State of the Union Message launched his campaign for the improvement of the quality of the environment. In the following months the theme was quickly picked up by politicians, public officials, and businessmen. In a sense, the year 1970 was a "Pollution Year" and thus the response of the press was of prime importance.

2. Downtown Detroit Renewal - In January, 1970, the "Detroit Renaissance" as a new community organization devoted to the renewal of Downtown Detroit, was inaugurated. Given a substantial press coverage, this event seemed to start a new era in Detroit, coincident with the election of a new mayor.

3. Public Transportation - One of the last actions of the departing president of the Detroit Street Railway Commission, Mr. Robert E. Toohey, was his announcement of a proposal for the Woodward Corridor subway in January, 1970. Though not new, this

proposal from this source seemed to initiate a more substantial discussion of the public transportation issue.

4. City-Suburb Problems - The issue of the metropolitan cooperation, ranging from such loose matters as voluntary association to some more tough ideas about metropolitan governments is probably the issue of urban planning. Articles related to this problem were, therefore, taken into consideration, including such things, like mutual claims of the central city and of the suburbs about subsidizing each other, problems of South East Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), etc.

A total of 407 articles were recorded for the study period in 1970 dealing with the selected topics. The rather tedious task of going through the microfilms of all the Detroit News issues of 1970 required some two weeks of work. The author was substantially aided by Mr. Chapin Cook of the Center for Urban Studies.

The relevant characteristics of the articles were recorded on specially designed working sheets (see the following page). The second part of work included a quantitative evaluation of the recorded articles. These results are plotted on the diagrams #1 - #13.

Content Analysis: Newspaper Coverage of the Urban Planning Problems in Detroit

E	DN	DFP	OTHER	
: MONTH	<u>12</u>	DAY	<u>25</u>	YEAR 1970 SUNDAY MAGAZ

<u>A</u> <u>1</u>		<u>A</u> <u>8</u>			
PART	PAGE	PART	PAGE	PART	PAGE
	T	F	T		

(S): _____

END: _____

FILE T

MAPS F

PHOTO F

PORTR

EVALUATION

COLUMN INCHES

TEXT 35.75

TABLES

MAPS

PHOTO 41.25

PORTR

TITLE Olympia cites its own value, shuns stadium
 SUBTITLE
 AUTHOR Bill Brennan

[illegible]

SUBJECT MATTER: Stadium to downtown

LEGEND	
NEUTRAL	/
SUPPORTING	+
STRONG SUPP.	*
CRITICIZING	-
STRONG CRIT.	=
QUOTED	O
LOST CASE	L

General Conclusions

On the whole, the present study is an example of the application of a method rather than a conclusive report on the performance of the press. The limited size of the sample, the lack of comparison between at least two newspapers, and other limitations of time and resources suggest only a very crude and tentative evaluation.

Continuity of the Coverage (Diagrams 1 - 5)

The coverage of the selected topics is characterized by "peaks and valleys" over time. The weekly number of articles varied from 25 maximum to 0 minimum. Also, a half of the articles were published prior to April 20. In the first half of the year, 2/3 of all articles appeared and by the end of August (first 2/3 of the year) some 80% of all the articles were released. Considering the fact that the newspaper could provide articles based not only on reports of some external events, but rather on background studies (as demonstrated by some articles by Don Tschirhart on renewal of several American cities) the question arises, why didn't they give an equal amount of information during the second half of the year?

Form (Diagrams #9 - #10)

The apparent resentment against the "physical planning" - an attitude well felt in professional circles in this country - may well be reflected in the fact that the number of "improved" articles, i.e., articles with features other than text (photographs, maps) was very small. This does not account, however, for the fact that

There was virtually no statistical information to back up the reported facts. The author feels that this situation should be improved, if not for other reasons, then only because such "improvements" create the necessary "redundancy" of information,⁴ reducing the communications noise.

Emotional slant (Diagram 12)

It was a pleasant surprise to the author to find out that the vast majority of statements were made in supporting or at least neutral ways. Only some 15% of statements were criticizing. The point is that one can formulate the same thing either way. The statement can be made against (e.g., against industry polluting the Great Lakes), or for (e.g., for a legal action curbing the pollution). The general result will probably be better in the latter case, as too many "against" reports could only contribute to the feeling of frustration and helplessness (as can be well observed in the kind of coverage of the Vietnam issue).

Personalities (Diagram #13)

An interesting pattern was revealed by the evaluation of the frequency with which persons or institutions were mentioned in the reviewed articles. Generally there is a balance between the involvement of the elected officials and appointed officials. Among the elected officials, however, a few dominate the scene. On the national level President Nixon and Senator Muskie clearly emerge as "leaders" in the selected topics. Governor Milliken completely dominates the state level (mentioned some 80% of all

instances state elected officials were reported). Also Mayor Gribbs accounts for more than 55% of Detroit elected officials mentioned.

The reasons for this dominance of some personalities could be either the real leadership role those personalities assumed, or it could be due to some election campaigns they were involved in. The first case seems to apply to Mayor Gribbs (recently elected, no need for campaigns) and to President Nixon, the second quite possibly could apply to Governor Milliken who was running for reelection in 1970.

The fact that scientists and experts (other than appointed officials, who can be experts or scientists, too, but not referred to as such) account for only 7% of all references to persons involved, can be compared with the fact that about 70% of all references are made to public officials, elected or appointed. The private business accounts for only 12% of references. This pattern may well reflect the relative importance assumed by various groups of society in the planning process.

⁴ Redundancy of information means repeating the same message either by the same medium (for example reprinting the same or only slightly changed text next day) or by another medium (a photograph of a polluted lake in addition to the verbal description of the pollution). Since the reader sometimes does not fully understand the first message, or he simply may be distracted and skip the text, the additional message makes sure that the information will be passed on to him. Edwin Emery, Philip H. Ault, Warren K. Agee, Introduction to Mass Communications, Second Edition, Dodd Mead and Company, Inc., New York, Toronto, 1966, p. 6ff.

Further Research

The author's belief in the validity of the approach exemplified by the present report, has been supported many times by several informed people. The method can be applied to discover several aspects of the mass media role in the planning process. It is the nature of the content analysis that it can be modified to suit different purposes. The primary conclusion of the present study is that more material must be gathered in order to make valid statements and recommendations. On the other hand, the content analysis should be supplemented by other techniques, such as interviews among the subscribers to the press or interviews with informed people, planners and others alike. Sometimes the criticism of the planning commissions was made to the effect that they neglected the "salesmanship" of their ideas. But more than the salesmanship, an improved information and communication process should be advanced, and to define the improvement such analysis as the present one should be undertaken in the future.

Commentary on the Diagrams

Diagram #1: Weekly Number of Articles, All Subjects

The total number of articles on all four selected subjects were plotted against the horizontal time axis. Sunday articles were included in the preceding week's sum. Four "peaks" can easily be recognized, January, March, April and August.

Diagram #2: Weekly Number of Articles, Environmental Pollution

Among the four subjects the environmental pollution problem accounts for 276 articles out of 407 (i.e., close to 70%). The four peaks can easily be recognized. To discover the reason for this pattern a more detailed plotting of the "mercury pollution" problem was undertaken. The mercury issue was typically influenced by events, alarms and external (to the press) situations. The author feels that the conclusion can be made that the press generally responds to whatever information is given to it. It does not do much in terms of generating information.

Diagram #3: Weekly Number of Articles, Detroit Downtown Renewal

Following the early peaks of January and March there was rather an even though quantitatively scarce coverage of the renewal problems. Moreover, while the January peak is due to the inauguration of the Detroit Renaissance and has some more general relevance, virtually all the other articles, including the March peak, are related to the problem of the Stadium. This problem, though expressly related to the revitalization effort, was given too much importance in view of the other well-known problems of Downtown Renewal.

Diagram #4 and #5: Weekly Number of Articles, Other Topics

The sheer quantity of the articles on the two other topics (Public Transportation 29 articles out of total 407, and City-Suburb Problems 14 articles) was too insignificant to indicate any kind of pattern. The coverage virtually vanished for several months.

Diagram #6: Frequency Distribution of all Articles by Size

The depth (in inches) of a standard column ($1/8$ of the page width; the depth of one standard column running down the whole page of the Detroit News is approximately 22 inches) was used as a measure of the physical quantity of the coverage. As would be expected, a skewed normal distribution curve can be detected. About $1/2$ of all the articles are 22 inches deep or less. There can hardly be any conclusion made on this basis, due to the lack of comparative material for other topics or other newspapers. The size distribution can as well be due to some general feeling of what is the "good" size of any article.

Diagram #7: Frequency Distribution by Size and Subject Matter

Even less conclusive are the frequency distributions by subject matter categories. While the Environmental Pollution reveals a pattern similar to the Diagram #6, all that can be said about the others is that there was a complete lack of larger articles (which generally give more background, not a pure report only) on the Public Transportation and the City-Suburb problems.

Diagram #8: Percentage of Articles by Starting Page and Day of the Week

Clearly an article starting on the first page of a newspaper attracts more attention from the reader than any other articles. Also, starting other first pages can have more impact, as the reading habit very often observed is to skip the bulk of the newspaper by looking only at the conveniently accessible first pages. Also, given the larger circulation and more reading time

the Sunday editions, such articles that appear in the Sunday can be qualified as more influential.

It is interesting to note that there was no Sunday first page article on the Environmental Pollution and on the City-Suburb problems. While the percentage of Sunday articles for all topics is about the same (the larger percentage of the City-Suburb Problem is not indicative, due to the extremely small total sample size), almost a half of the Sunday articles on Downtown Renewal was on the first pages. Again, a comparison with other topics (Vietnam, race, crime) would be necessary to draw valid conclusion about this distribution.

Diagram #9: Percentage of "improved" Articles

While it appears logical that the Downtown Renewal problems had the largest percentage of articles with features other than text (photographs, maps), there is clearly a lack of pictorial backing up of the public transportation problem. The announcements of the Woodward Corridor subway and of the Mound Road Corridor subway would require at least a sketch of the location of those two facilities in relation to other elements of the urban structure.

Diagram #10: Percentage of the Total Article's Space Assigned to the Features Other than Text

This diagram was designed to discover a possible preference as to the size of photographs or other pictorial improvements for different subject matters. A comparison of this diagram with the Diagram #9 suggest that the pictorial improvements of the articles on the Environmental Pollution were given relatively more physical space than improvements for other topics.

Diagram #11: Percentage of Articles by the Level of Discussion and Subject Matter

The "level of discussion" is understood as the level of reference made with respect to the discussed or reported topic. If, for example, the pollution of the Great Lakes would be compared to the pollution of other lakes of the nation, the level of discussion of the Pollution problems was mostly national and state-wide, whereas in contrast the level of discussion of the Downtown Renewal was predominantly local.

Diagram #12: Percentage of Statements by Emotional Slant and Subject

This diagram was constructed in the following way: each of the persons quoted in an article was given one point. This was positive, neutral or negative, according to his attitude toward the discussed subject matter. Editorial articles were assigned one point, too. Thus, if, for example, on the subject of location of the new stadium in Detroit rather than Pontiac two persons were reported to support the proposal and one was criticizing it, then two "statements" were counted as positive, and one as negative.

An alternative method would be to judge the general emotional slant of the article as a whole. This, however, was felt to be less objective.

Diagram #13: Frequency of the Actors

In a similar way each person mentioned in an article was counted once. The "actors" were then classified by their "level" (U.S., State of Michigan, Counties of the Detroit Region, City of Detroit, etc. The most convenient classification within these

...vels was by elected, appointed or semi-public officials. Additional
...roups, as scientists and experts, business, etc. were added.
...e interpretation of the diagram is given in one of the preceding
...paragraphs (see General Conclusions).

All Subjects
Total of 407 Articles
Half of them appeared prior
to April 20

205

202

25

20

15

10

5

April

January

February

March

April

May

June

July

August

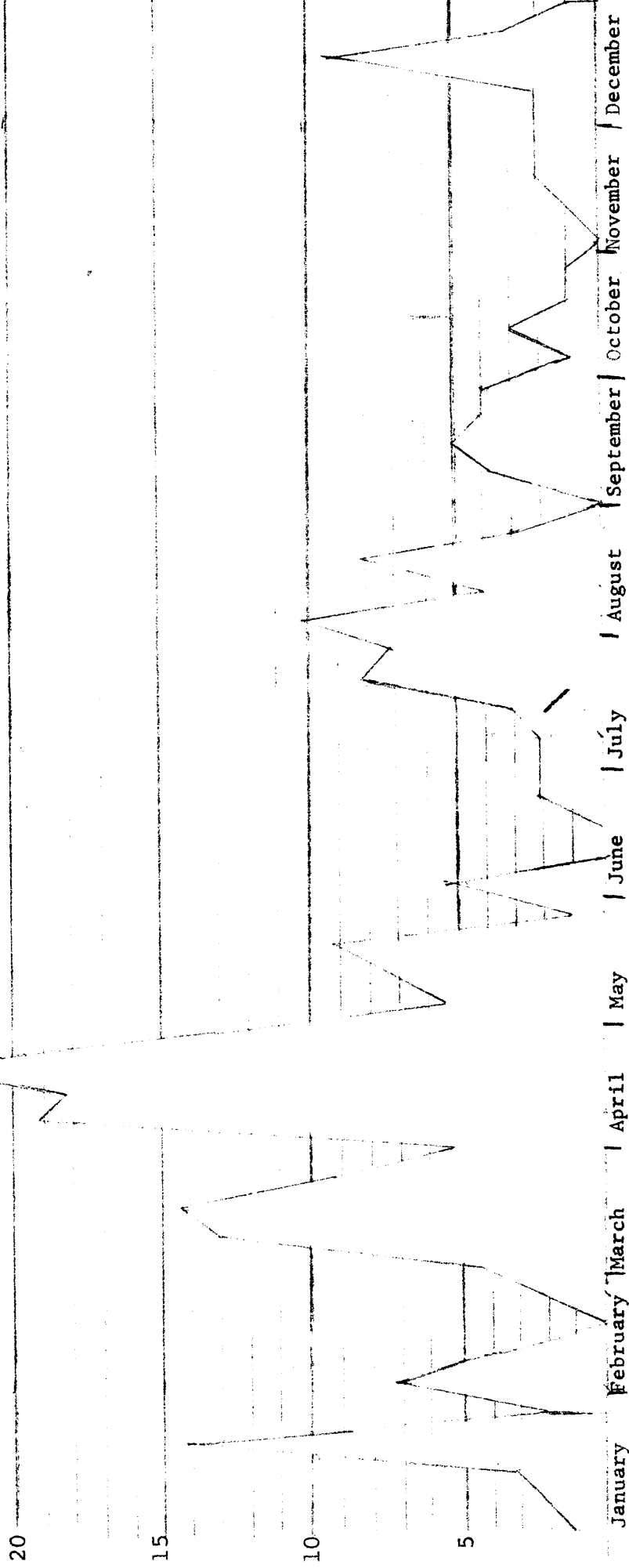
September/October

November

December

Weekly number of articles
Subject matter: Pollution
Total: 276 articles
more than half of them appeared before April 20
Shaded area: articles on "mercury"
(see text for explanation)

< 140 articles 137 articles

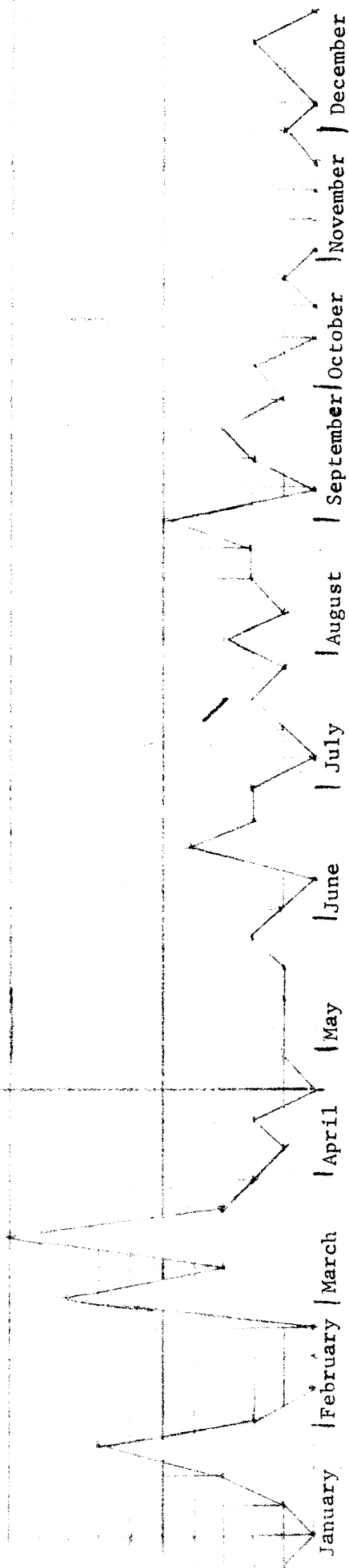


Weekly Number of Articles
 Subject: Downtown Renewal
 Total 88 Articles
 Half of them appeared before April 20

43 articles 45 articles



April 20



Subject: public
Total: 14 articles

5

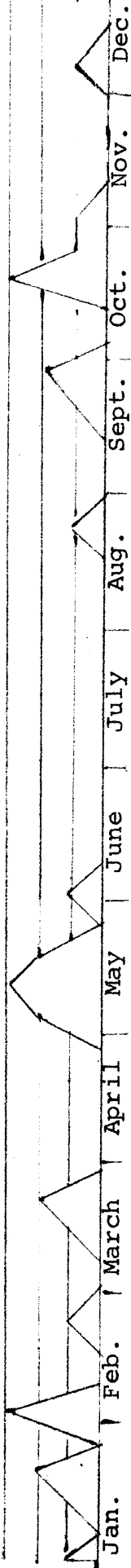


Diagram #5

Weekly number of articles
Subject: regional cooperation
Total: 29 articles

5

no coverage

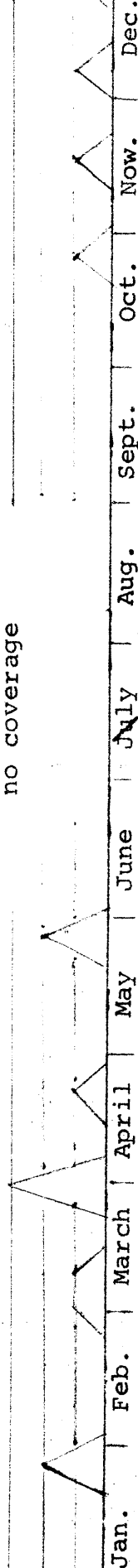
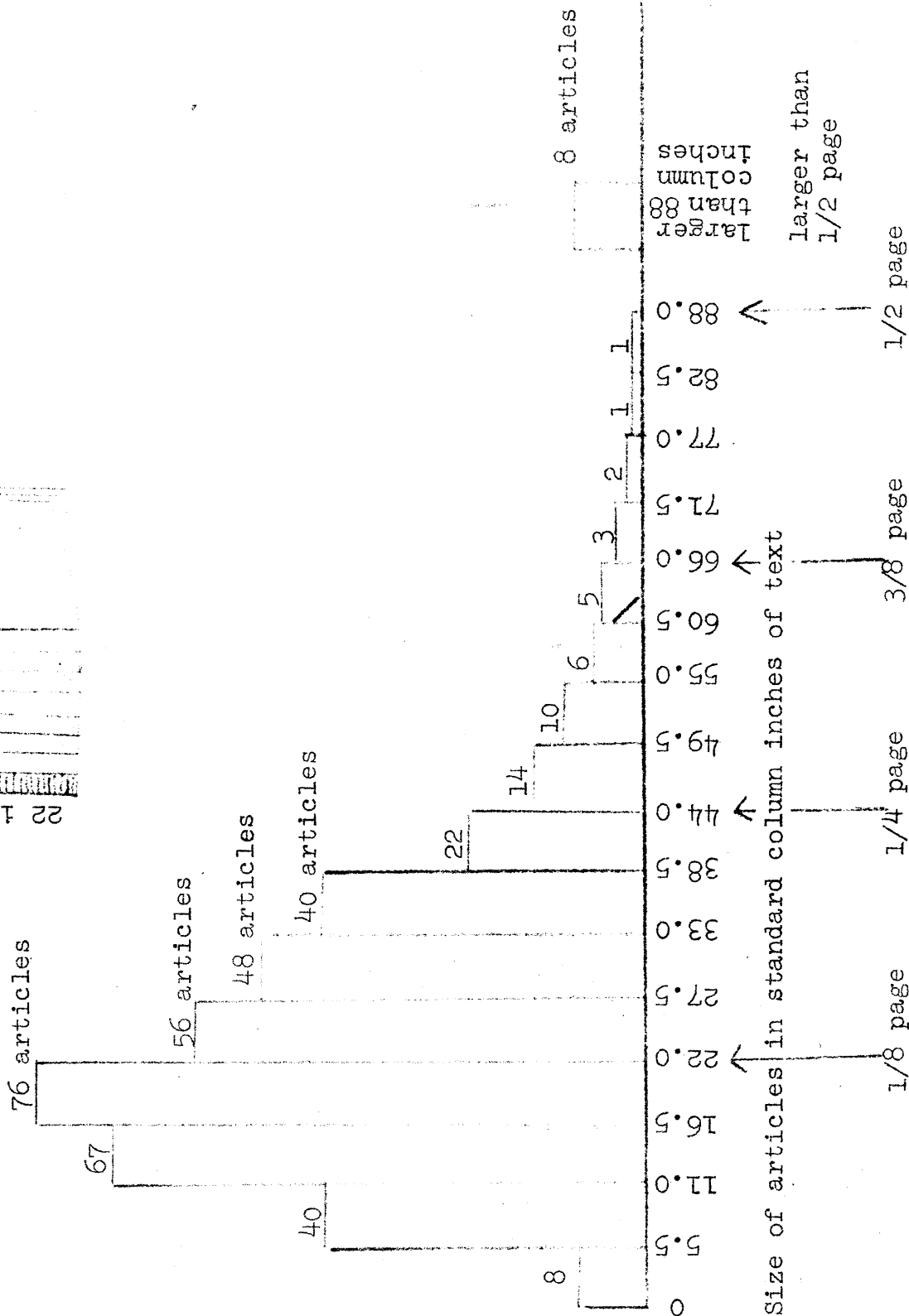
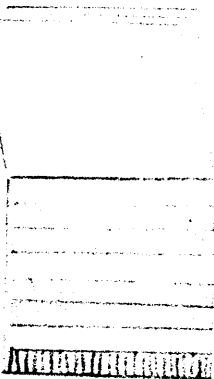


Diagram #6

Frequency distribution of
all 407 articles by size
of articles (text only).

About 1/2 articles are 1/8
page large or less

standard = 1/8 page
column



54 articles

Diagram #7
Frequency distribution of
articles by size and sub-
ject matter

1. Environmental Pollution
276 articles

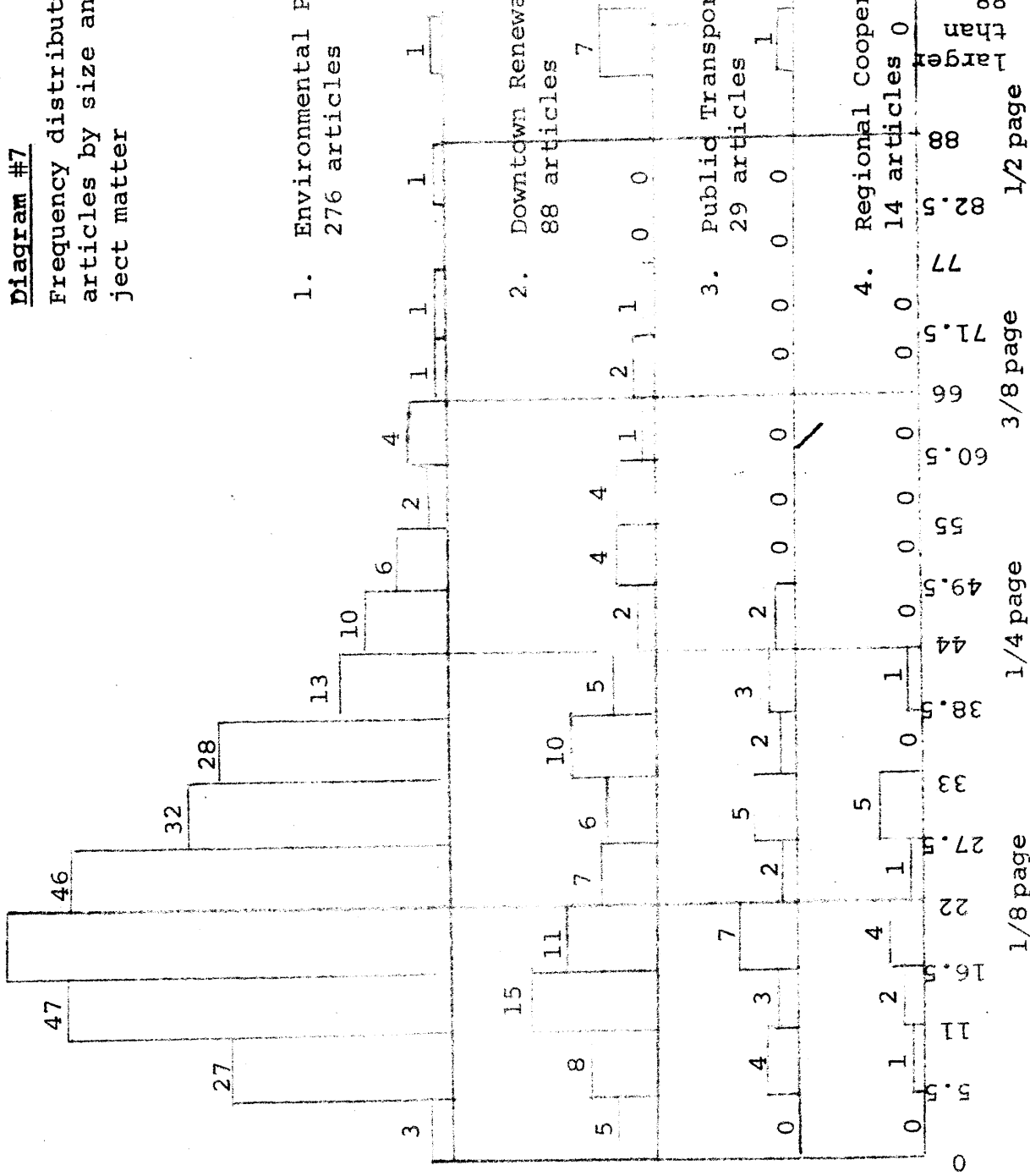
2. Downtown Renewal
88 articles

3. Public Transportation
29 articles

4. Regional Cooperation
14 articles

larger than
88 column
inches

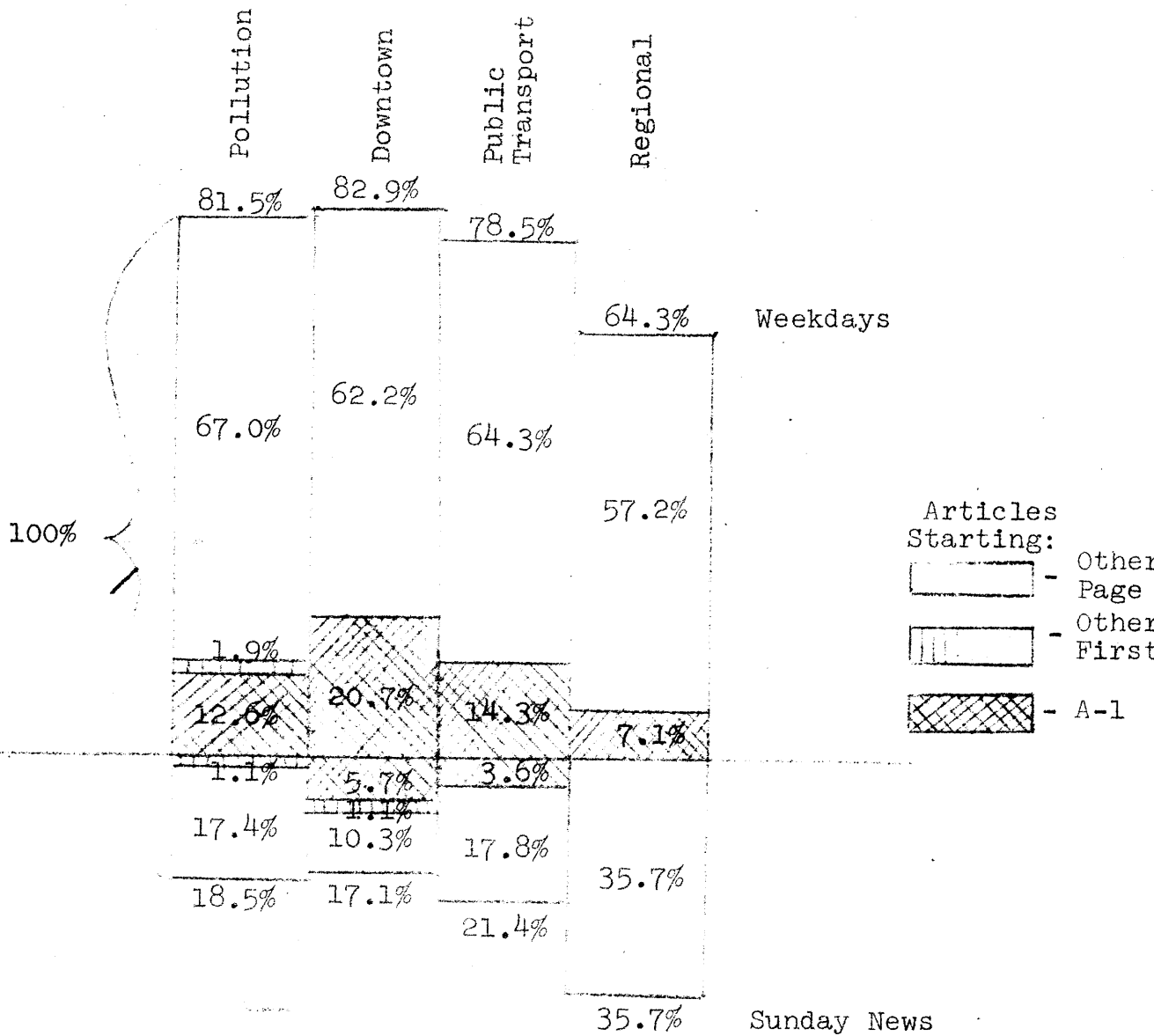
larger than
1/2 page



Size of articles in standard column inches of text

Diagram #8

Percentage of articles on starting page, day of the week, and subject matter



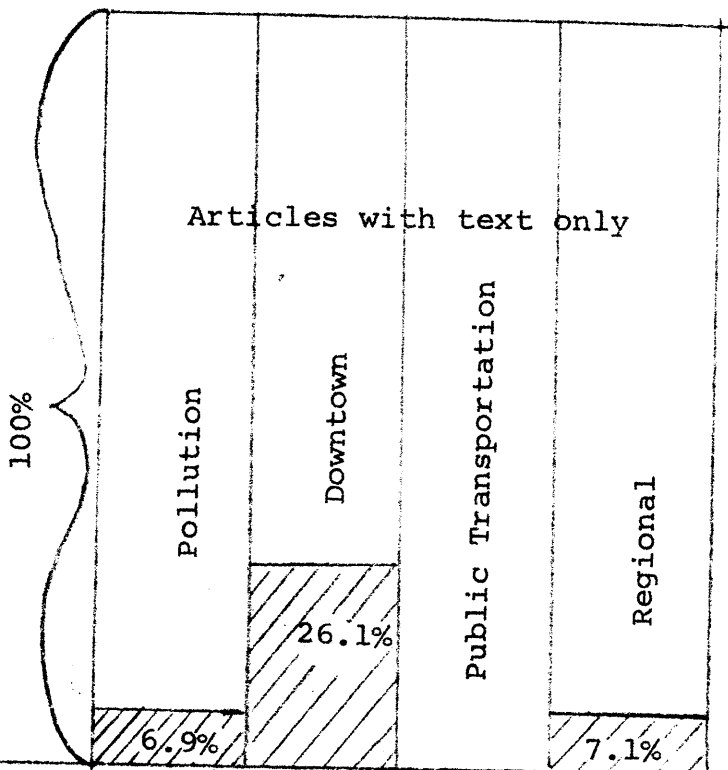


Diagram #9

% of "improved" articles (with maps, photographs, tables, graphs, and features other than text)

← % of the total number of articles

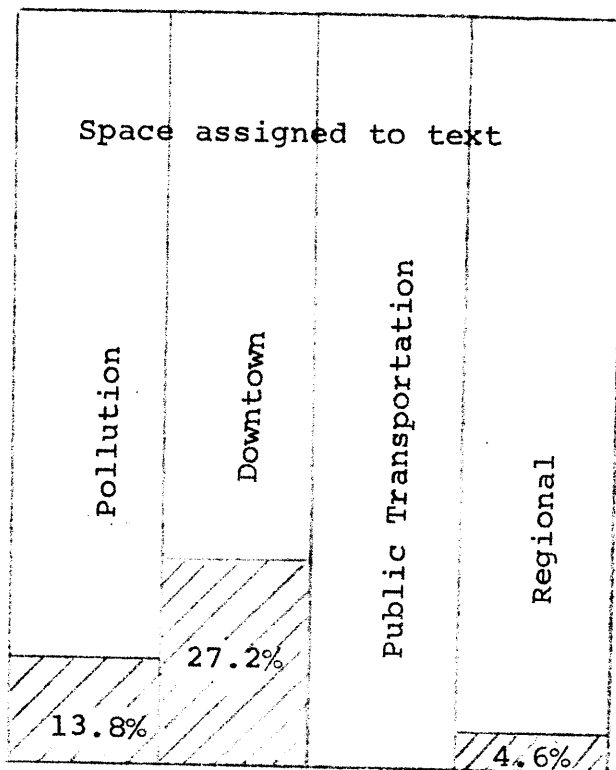


Diagram #10

% of the total paper space assigned to maps, tables, photographs, etc.

←

Diagram #11

% of Articles by level of discussion of the subject matter

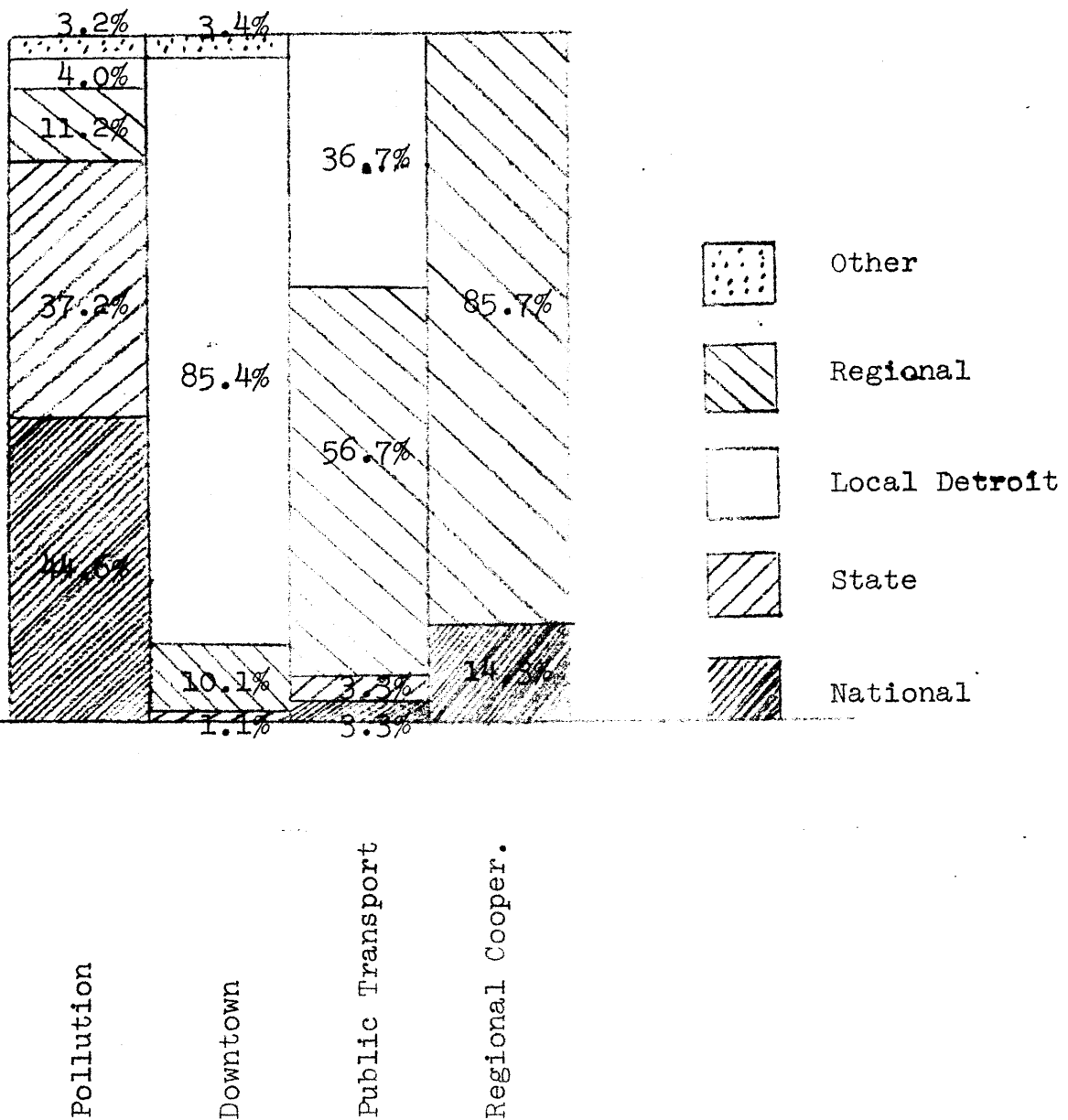
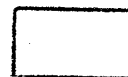


Diagram #12

Emotional Slant

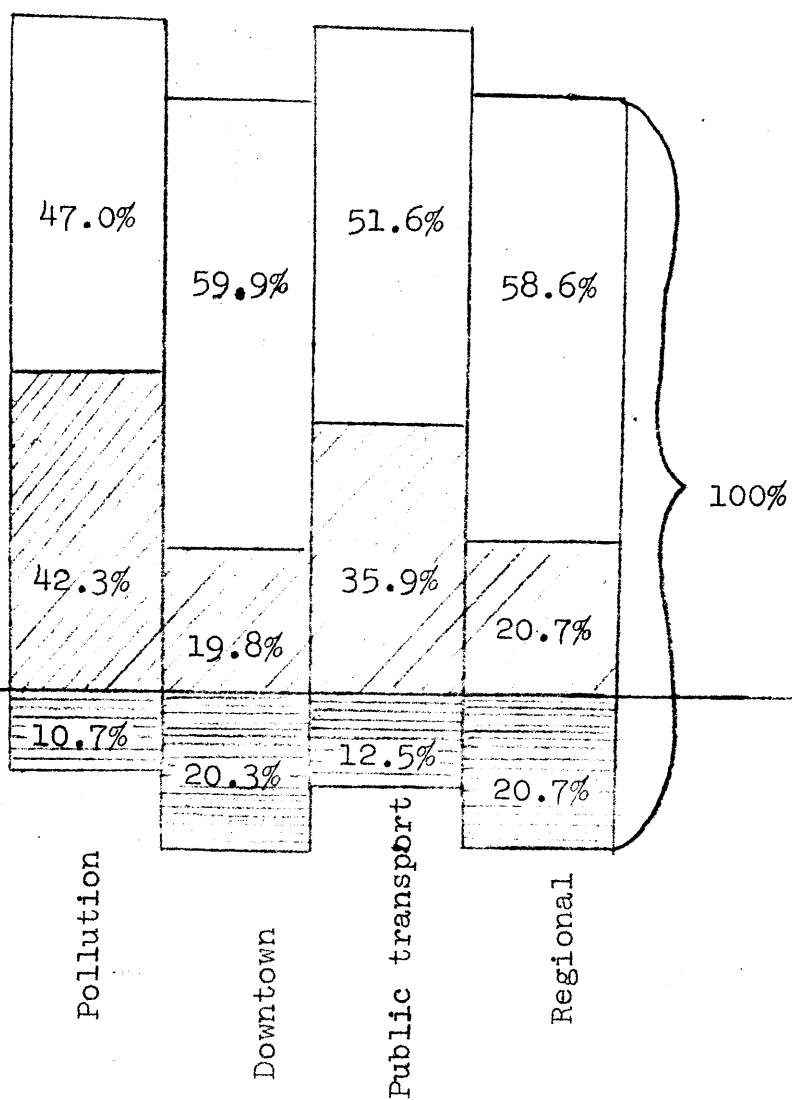
supporting



neutral



criticizing



Actors, frequency of occurrence

<u>US</u>	Elected officials	Nixon 21	Muskie 12	Other 51
	Appointed officials	47		
	Semi public	7		
<u>State of Michigan</u>		73		
	Elected officials	Milliken 57		
	Appointed	Purdy 23	Vogt 11	Other 85
	Semi Public	2		
<u>Counties of Detroit Area Regional Authorities like SEMCOG, etc.</u>		3		
	Elected			
	Appointed	37		
<u>City of Detroit</u>		47		
	Elected	Gribbs 26		
	Appointed	22		
	Semi Public	Adams 14	Fetzer 14	Ford 11 70
<u>Other Cities Detroit Region</u>		15		
	Elected			
	Appointed	2		
<u>Scientists, Consultants</u>		39		
<u>Business Executives</u>		70		
<u>Other</u>		14		