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Structure and Constraints on Community Newspaper Gatekeepers

Basic value of information dissemination may transcend structural differences.

► Editors are often seen as having a “buck-stopping” role in the gatekeeping process. In the midst of a flow of information from a variety of sources and directions and in multiple forms, the editor must make the final decision about where, when, and how messages will be published.

As a gatekeeper, the editor operates within a structural context. Structure presents a variety of constraints, such as community pluralism, type of newspaper and form of ownership, which may affect the outcome of the gatekeeping process. This is a report of an exploratory study of some of these constraints as they are perceived by a sample of Minnesota community newspaper editors.

Constraints: Values, Routines and Organizational Management. Among the constraints which may impinge upon media organizations are:

1) Professional values which serve as standards for use, nonuse, modification and layout of news, including (a) the major priorities of gatekeepers and (b) their professional ethics;

2) Constraints arising from implementation of standards in the routines of news selection, including pressures of time and space; and

3) Organizational structure for personnel recruitment, management and change.

Priority questions include the relative degree of concern with information, as contrasted with maintaining economic support of the newspaper through advertising or circulation. Since journalism is presumably based on the primacy of information generation and distribution, one would expect that deciding what to publish would be a foremost value for all editors. Such a primary value becomes a standard for criticism, especially the contention that obsession with profits often deters gatekeepers from concentrating on their main job of gathering, interpreting and distributing information.¹

Ethical constraints in journalism include fairness and balance in reporting controversial issues, with respect for the individuals and groups being reported. Such constraints have been stated formally in journalism, as in all professions, for decades.² Greater recent focus on ethics may in part be related to increased conflict in the system with respect to special interest groups and the ensuing litigation. Anderson, for example, regards media ethics as having been “on the back-burner” of public attention from World War II through the early 1970s. He con-

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¹ Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983; Robert M. Hutchins, *A Free and Responsible Press: A General Report on Mass Communication* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1947).

² Douglas Anderson, “How Managing Editors View and Deal with Ethical Issues,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 64:341-345 (summer/fall, 1987). See also Deni Elliott, “All Is Not Relative: Essential Shared Values and the Press,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 3:28-32 (1988) and David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). The Weaver and Wilhoit volume (pp. 127-145) concentrates particularly on perceptions of journalists about ethics of various reporting practices.

cludes that interest in ethics has increased, as suggested by the finding that three-fourths of a recent sample of 96 daily newspaper managing editors had issued memos on ethical issues and about two-thirds had held meetings or seminars on these topics.³

Constraints arising from implementation of standards through news routines are a basic part of the journalist's environment, as Johnstone, Bowman and Slawski found.⁴ Gieber pointed to the "strait jacket of mechanical details" accompanying some editing positions.⁵ Whitney concluded that organizational inflexibility could produce strains in the organization under both "information overload" and "underload" conditions. The organizations were expected to send a rigidly-specified amount of information "through the gate" on any given day, and a flow above or below an optimum level would lead to coping problems.⁶

Organizational structures for recruitment, management and change present recurring problems in news organizations, as documented in the Johnstone, Bowman and Slawski study.⁷ Conflicts between reporters and editors were central to Breed's analysis of social control in the newsroom,⁸ and to Stark's interpretation of the "trouble maintaining a staff" faced by the editors of a metropolitan newspaper.⁹

Impact of Community Structure on Constraints. Some values can be expressed more easily in one community structure than in another. While rugged individualism is steeped in American tradition, it is more widely expressed in small towns than in urban settings, where high interdepen-

dence requires one to be a "group person" rather than one who is self-sufficient in all realms of life. Autonomy in urban areas is born of interdependence rather than self-sufficiency and rests on more formalized statements of professional conduct.

Editors of locally-owned papers in small consensus-oriented communities play multiple roles, including reporting, advertising and management. Such editors are acutely concerned about economic survival and hence would be expected to emphasize advertising, circulation and operating profit. The routine for getting the paper out is a formidable task under any conditions, but it is especially complex in a small town newspaper that has a staff of four persons or less with minimal specialization. Daily editors, with their large staffs and division of labor, specialize in news and information while others in their organizations make decisions about advertising, profit and loss. One might speculate that corporate ownership of newspapers, through increasing the scale of operations, is an additional factor in maintaining such specialization and reducing role conflict for the individual.¹⁰

Ethical constraints might well be perceived more frequently in small, homogeneous communities which create a moral conflict resulting from simultaneously knowing (a) the professional obligation to report a bid-rigging charge filed in local court against a council member of personal acquaintance and (b) the personal loyalty to a friend who also may be part of the power structure. This is not a question of community difference in orientation, since personal loyalty to power figures may occur in New York and Los Angeles as well as in Pine City, Minn. or Clinton, Tenn. The secondary nature of urban relations, however, and the balancing of power groups constrains the urban editor to report the charge in spite of the question of personal loyalty. In both the urban and rural community, the editor shares the value orientation of the power group. The difference is that in the pluralistic urban

³ Anderson, *op. cit.*

⁴ John W. C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski and William M. Bowman, *The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 149 ff.

⁵ Walter Gieber, "Across the Desk: A Study of 16 Telegraph Editors." *Journalism Quarterly*, 33:423-432 (1956).

⁶ D. Charles Whitney, "Information Overload in the Newsroom." *Journalism Quarterly*, 58:69-76, 161 (1981).

⁷ Johnstone, Bowman and Slawski, *op. cit.*

⁸ Warren Breed, "Social Control in the Newsroom." pp. 178-194 in Wilbur Schramm, ed., *Mass Communications* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960).

⁹ Rodney W. Stark, "Policy and the Pros: An Organizational Analysis of a Metropolitan Newspaper." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, Spring, 1962. pp. 11-31.

¹⁰ C. N. Olien, P. J. Tichenor and G. A. Donohue, "Relation Between Corporate Ownership and Editor Attitudes." *Journalism Quarterly*, 65:257-264 (1988).

setting, the conflict among power groups is more likely to result in public reporting of individual deviances as well as group differences. The small town editor has a restricted community of advertisers, whereas the urban daily editor could lose one furniture advertiser and still have other advertisers in the same product area. Furthermore, the furniture dealer in the urban center may well have a greater *need* to advertise to reach the target audience. Such factors typify the ways in which pluralism insulates an editor from pressure by any one source, including a personal acquaintance.

Intra-organizational constraints such as managerial problems may be perceived more frequently as constraints by editors of daily newspapers than by editors of weeklies in small communities. This outcome results from bureaucratization, which produces more specialized subgroups, staff meeting procedures and formalized recruiting and dismissal procedures. Specialized bureaucratic arrangements may also contribute to lower satisfaction of journalists as found by Samuelson and Johnstone, Bowman, and Slawski.¹¹ By contrast, newspapers in smaller, more homogeneous and consensual communities tend to have small staffs with individuals having multiple responsibilities and operating on a face-to-face informal basis. Given this logic, one might expect less strain from organizational problems to be reported by editors of weeklies. In these more authoritarian structures, editors make decisions by fiat and, therefore, would be less likely to perceive constraints.

To summarize, four hypotheses were tested.

1) Editors of locally-owned weekly papers in small, less pluralistic communities will be more likely than editors of dailies in larger, more pluralistic communities to perceive a high priority for advertising.

2) Editors of locally-owned weekly papers in small, less pluralistic communities will be more likely than editors of dailies

in larger, more pluralistic communities to perceive constraints associated with treatment of negative news about individuals.

3) Editors of locally-owned weekly papers in small, less pluralistic communities will be more likely than editors of dailies in larger, more pluralistic communities to perceive constraints associated with routine problems of news selection and display.

4) Intra-organizational constraints are more likely to be mentioned by editors of corporate-owned dailies in larger, more pluralistic communities than by editors of locally-owned weekly newspapers in small, more homogeneous communities.

Research Methods

Editors of 155 community newspapers, including 59 weeklies in Minnesota and 96 dailies in six Midwestern states were interviewed by telephone in 1985. The sample was restricted to non-metropolitan communities of 60,000 or less, and each newspaper was in a different county.

Two measures of editor perceptions of constraints were employed. One is a measure of editor's views of their responsibilities. Editors were asked to rank production, circulation, advertising and news-editorial from most to least important as "concerns for decisions you make on your paper." The assumption is that this item taps perceptions of a constraint which rests on the fundamental value of news as governing the gatekeeping role.

A second measure of constraints is an open-ended question framed in terms of difficult decisions:

In all of the decisions that you need to make as an editor, what kinds of decisions would you say are the toughest ones to make?

Responses to this item were placed in one or more of six categories, including fairness in reporting about individuals, news selection and display, pressure from individuals and groups, organizational problems, legal problems and business.

Community pluralism was measured by an index based on proportion of labor force outside agriculture; per capita income; distance to a metropolitan area; community population and county population. Newspapers were categorized as

¹¹ Merrill Samuelson, "A Standardized Test to Measure Job Satisfaction in the Newsroom." *Journalism Quarterly*, 39:285-91, 1962; Johnstone, Bowman and Slawski, *op. cit.*

TABLE 1

Average rankings of editor concerns by editors of weekly and daily newspapers, 1985.

	Minnesota Weeklies (N = 58)	Midwestern Dailies (N = 93)
News and editorial	1.43	1.08*
Advertising	2.08	2.96*
Production	3.05	2.96
Circulation	3.32	2.89

The lower the number, the higher the rank

* = Difference between groups, t-test.

p < .001

local and independent, owned by a group with headquarters in Minnesota or owned by a group with headquarters outside the state. The assumption is that those with outside headquarters tend to have a more bureaucratized form of organization. Newspapers were categorized as dailies or weeklies, with the latter category including six newspapers published semi-weekly.

Results

Pluralism and Ranking of Advertising.

The average rankings for the four different parts of the newspaper operation, for dailies and nondailies, are shown in Table 1. All editors ranked news and editorial at the top, although daily newspaper editors gave that function a higher absolute rating than did editors of weeklies. This ubiquity of the news-editorial function indicates that it is a value of great import. But because of structural variation, the information function is more apparent among editors of dailies.

There is support for the first hypothesis, that advertising will rank higher as a concern among editors of weekly newspapers in small, homogeneous communities than among editors of corporate-owned daily newspapers in larger, more pluralistic communities. Among nondailies under in-state ownership in the low pluralism communities, the advertising ranking is 1.97, higher than for any other group. On the other hand, the very lowest ranking, 3.23, is among dailies under out-of-state ownership in high pluralism communities. These differences provide direct support of the hypothesis.

One might ask from these data which is the most important variable. Under conditions of low pluralism, out-of-state ownership makes no significant difference in ranking of advertising. Also, the observed differences according to ownership among dailies under out-of-state ownership are not significant statistically. These results therefore do not support the contention that corporate ownership by itself is a factor in increasing editor concern with advertising at the expense of news, even though earlier analyses indicate that ownership is related to increased *reporting* of business.

Negative News, Selection and Organizational Problems. Among the editors as a whole, the most frequent categories of response to the "toughest decisions" question were negative news about individuals, 44%; news selection and display, 33%; pressure from individuals and groups, 23%; organizational and personnel problems, 19%; legal reporting, 9%; and business concerns, 8%.

Typical responses coded as problems of "negative news about individuals" were:

... where someone you know could be hurt. In a small community everyone knows everybody, so community matters like these are important.

... as editor ... sensitive issues involving people you've known all your life ... e.g. ... a story on a man indicted in bid-rigging is in today's paper. It's hard to differentiate between what's your obligation to report and any loyalty you might have for that person.

... whether to tear somebody apart who really deserves it. The ex-mayor was trying to create a job for himself ... that's tough because I've known him a long time. . .

Coded as "news selection and display, were:

What to leave out when I am short of space.

What to include, exclude.

Which pictures can get in, using space effectively

It should be pointed out that in terms of gatekeeping processes, the "negative

TABLE 2
Average Ranking of Advertising According to Pluralism, Frequency of Publication and Ownership.

	Low Pluralism		High Pluralism	
	Nondaily	Daily	Nondaily	Daily
In-state ownership	1.97** (33)	2.43 (7)	2.35* (20)	2.95* (37)
Out-of-state ownership	2.00 (4)	2.00 (7)	—	3.23** (39)

** difference between groups, $p < .001$, t-test

* $p = .035$

news" concern is a special case of news selection in that it is a matter of deciding whether to publish the item causing consternation. These two categories dominated the responses to the "toughest decisions" questions, and that other issues which might have been expected from the literature on journalism ethics were virtually nonexistent in the responses. There were no mentions of reporter deception, for example, or of problems with unnamed sources or questionable methods of information gathering. It may well be that such problems are more likely to be perceived by journalists in the largest, most diversified and specialized media organizations of metropolitan areas where public conflict occurs more routinely and "investigative journalism" is more likely to be seen as an ongoing part of the media operation.

Also, it may be noted that writing editorials was mentioned as among the "toughest decisions" by only four of the 155 editors, and only two referred specifically to problems of getting "in-depth" coverage or "investigative news" into their papers. The foremost professional problems of negative news about individuals and more general concerns with news selection were seen as the "toughest decisions" rather than concern about whether to comment editorially. The implication is that editorializing, which about 9 editors in 10 reported doing, may in fact be a rather routine and noncontentious activity. Such a finding is somewhat surprising, in that the idea of editors being troubled about writing editorials is not supported.

Coded as "pressure from individuals and minorities" were mentions of specific

local purposive communicators, individuals or groups, who seek either to have information placed in, or kept out of, the newspaper.

Typical responses coded as "organizational problems" were:

Keeping the publisher happy.

Hiring is one. It takes so much time to do it right. Managing the newsroom while trying to do many other things—(including) resolving conflicts among staff.

Personnel decisions. We have gone through tremendous changes—refinement of newsroom structure . . . you're tampering with peoples' lives. Some will get good jobs, some worse and some will have no job.

Structure and "Toughest Decisions". Problems of "fair treatment" of individuals were mentioned with similar frequency regardless of type of newspaper, ownership, or pluralism. The findings do not support the second hypothesis, that editors of locally-owned weekly papers in small, less pluralistic communities would be more likely than editors of dailies in larger, more pluralistic communities to perceive constraints associated with treatment of negative news about individuals. There are no significant differences in mention of this concern according to pluralism, frequency of publication or ownership. Also, there are no differences according to whether the community had undergone substantial change in population growth or decline in agriculture in the past decade.

The third hypothesis, that problems of news selection and display would be more frequently mentioned by editors of weeklies under local ownership in less pluralistic

TABLE 3

Percent Mentioning Organizational Problems as One of the "Toughest" Editorial Decisions, According to Pluralism, Type of Newspaper, and Ownership.

	Low pluralism				High pluralism			
	Nondaily		Daily		Nondaily		Daily	
In-state ownership	0%	(34)*	0%	(8)	15%	(20)	23%	(39)
Out-of-state ownership	0%	(4)	29%	(7)	—		36%	(39)*

* = Difference, chi-square test, $p < .01$.

tic communities, was also not supported. Rather, this category was mentioned in about the same proportion of cases regardless of community pluralism or whether the newspaper was a daily or nondaily. Nor were there differences by ownership. It appears that for the most part, problems with negative news about individuals and more general concerns about selecting and displaying the news are fundamental to newspaper journalism regardless of the structural factors studied here.

A related aspect of the findings suggests that editors in small communities do not necessarily depend more on overt pressure from purposive communicators than do editors in more pluralistic communities. While the differences are not significant, it might be noted that the nondailies in the least pluralistic communities were less likely than nondailies in more pluralistic communities to mention pressure from individuals and groups as among their "toughest" problems.

Organizational Constraints. The fourth hypothesis, that organizational problems would be more likely to be perceived in more pluralistic communities and in daily newspapers under outside ownership, is supported by the data (Table 3). None of the editors of nondailies in communities with low pluralism mentioned organizational problems. However, such problems were mentioned by 36% of the editors of dailies under out-of-state ownership in the more highly pluralistic communities. Pluralism again appears to be the primary variable, as can be seen from results of a hierarchical regression, with mention of organizational problems treated as a dichotomy. When pluralism is entered first as a fundamental variable, adding the next two variables makes only slight changes in the variance explained, .017 from publica-

tion frequency in the second step and .014 from ownership in the third step (Table 4). As with ranking of advertising and news-editorial concerns, ownership is a condition which appears to have relatively little additional impact on editor perceptions after community structure and daily vs. weekly publication are controlled.

Conclusions

These results as a whole suggest that the basic value of information dissemination may be a characteristic of the journalism profession that transcends structural differences. Similarly, how to distinguish between personal loyalty to a person under accusation and journalistic obligation to report that accusation is a vexation for editors regardless of structure.

Perceptions of other constraints do vary by community structure. The higher ranking of advertising by small town editors does not necessarily suggest a more cross view of their community roles. Rather, because of their multiple roles as entrepreneurs and information gatekeepers, their concern with advertising income and profits is to be expected as part of their role definitions. Among editors of dailies, advertising and profit values exist as corporate reality, but are dealt with by specialists outside the news-editorial department.

Problems of organizational management are more likely to appear as strains in regional centers which constitute the more pluralistic communities in this study. A question which cannot be analyzed with these data is whether problems of organizational management are even more salient among editors of larger metro newspapers. If they are, it may well be that the tough organizational decisions of editors occur in precisely the same structures

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other hand, being bigger inhibits such restrictive control, at least on decisions about support for presidential candidates.

Homogeneous chain newspapers outnumber heterogeneous chain papers, but heterogeneous chain-owned papers have the largest circulations. Perhaps these two characteristics cancelled out an endorsement effect in 1980.³⁷ The 1984 and 1988 vote patterns remain to be studied.³⁸ Changes in the rate of growth of each type of chain could have contributed to election outcomes in those years and can enhance or decrease endorsement effects in the future.

The 1975 study suggested that Republican-leaning newspapers³⁹ may counterbalance the Democratic tendency of the electorate, thus helping to maintain partisan politics. Since then, however, voters have elected Republicans. The growth of large, heterogeneous chains may rein-

force tendencies to vote Democratic. Recently, this type of group has shown the most growth—in the largest circulation areas, which also have the most heterogeneous population make-up.

Newspaper endorsements will be less important to presidential candidates since endorsements are declining.⁴⁰ It is possible that if editorial pages are increasingly silent on candidate preferences, the public may become more apathetic about elections, or at least, certain segments of the editorial-reading public may become more apathetic.

On the other hand, uncommitted dailies can have an impact on voter behavior like that of Democratic-endorsing dailies, at least in state elections. If this is true for national elections, the increasing tendency of newspapers to be uncommitted in elections may reinforce voting for Democrats. The decline of newspaper endorsements does not necessarily mean decreased "endorsement effect" if non-endorsement can affect voter behavior.

³⁷ Hurd and Singletary data, *op. cit.*

³⁸ Scholars desiring to update the Robinson and Hurd/Singletary studies should contact the author about feasibility of obtaining newspaper data from this study to match with names of newspapers read by survey respondents.

³⁹ The American press has favored GOP presidential candidates in 23 out of the 24 presidential elections since 1896.

⁴⁰ In 1932, about 7% of newspapers replying to *E&P's* poll were uncommitted. In 1980, it was 43% and in 1988, 65%. The timing of the *E&P* poll (earlier than usual) partly accounts for the high number in 1988. See: "Editorial Endorsements," *Editor & Publisher*, Oct. 8, 1988, p. 8.

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TABLE 4

Hierarchical Regression, Mention of Organizational Problems as One of the "Toughest" Editorial Decisions, 152 Editors.*

Independent Variable	Simple Correlation	Multiple R Square	Change in R Square	Overall Significance
Step				
1 Pluralism	.31	.095	.095	.001
2 Pub. Frequency	.27	.112	.017	.001
3 Ownership	.26	.126	.014	.001

* The number of cases is reduced by three for this table because of missing data.

in which reporters are often most concerned about autonomy and professional fulfillment.

Another question is whether problems of negative news about individuals are as likely to be seen by editors of newspapers in larger metro centers, where there is not

only greater separation from the citizen role but also greater dependence upon formal legal advice. Such questions suggest that further analysis of both internal and external structures, and how they impinge on values and organizational constraints, may be fruitful.