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How community involvement affects editors' role

by Roya Akhavan-Majid

The majority of editors surveyed indicated some degree of community involvement, but such involvement does not seem to have substantial effect on their watchdog role.

The question of whether journalists should become involved in civic causes and community organizations has been a topic of perpetual debate within the academy and the profession. For the individual journalist, the quandary is based primarily in the tension between two conflicting ethical responsibilities; performance of civic duty vs. preservation of journalistic objectivity.

Within the academy, the concern has centered primarily on the potential threat posed by such involvement to the Libertarian ideal of an independent press system serving the interest of a democratic society.

Despite the heated debate surrounding this issue, no systematic studies to date have attempted an examination of three central questions;

- the extent and nature of current community involvement by media professionals,
- the major determinants of such involvement, and
- the effects, if any, on professional values and orientation

The present study is designed to address these questions.

An overview

Historical studies of the press in the United States present evidence of a long-standing tradition of involvement by newspaper publishers in the civic, commercial, and political affairs of their communities. As Gene Burd has pointed out, "earlier publishers were often types of city planners who were activists frequently involved in decisions on site selections for community projects and the selection of political candidates."¹

Recent evidence has shown that heavy publisher involvement in community affairs continues to this day. Indeed, it is not uncommon for newspaper publishers to go beyond active membership in civic organizations and hold political office. A 1985 study by Don Sneed and Daniel Riffe of five communities whose newspaper publishers concurrently held political office, for example, listed at least another 100 towns in which the newspaper publisher held dual roles, often holding such prominent political positions as sheriff, city council member, and senator.²

While extensive civic and community involvement by publishers has long been a fact of life in the American press system, the extent to which the same publishers have allowed their news-editorial staff members to engage in community activities has varied over time.

The first wave of restrictions on community involvement by journalists came in the early 20th century, following the growth of the concept of objective journalism and the ideology of an independent press system.³ These restrictions reached their peak in the 1970s as a result of what John Webster has called "the societal rift surrounding the Vietnam conflict and the Watergate scandal [that] eroded confidence in the American establishment and institutions."⁴

Since the early 1990s, however, the pendulum appears to have swung back in the direction of greater community and civic involvement by newspaper organizations, in the context of a movement which reflects a new, and somewhat unexpected, convergence of economic and intellectual motivations.⁵

Maintaining an active personal presence among the community's business and political elites who function as major sources of news and advertising revenue for the newspaper has long been considered as a sound business practice by newspaper publishers. More recently, however, a new set of economic factors has been added to this equation, leading the publishers to encourage an entirely different kind of activism on the part of their newspaper organizations.

For nearly a decade, newspapers have faced an uncertain economic future characterized by declining advertising revenues and a failure to attract younger readers. Subsequently, a growing number of newspaper executives has begun to seek a solution to this decline by encouraging their newspapers to take on a *change agent* role in the community; to sponsor workshops, to hold town meetings, to encourage citizens to vote, and to help attract new industry into the area.⁶ To many publishers, this movement toward *public journalism*⁷ represents a novel approach to boosting revenues through greater visibility and increasing relevance to the economic and political life of the community.

This new spirit of community activism, however, cannot be accounted for merely on the basis of newspaper economics. Many media critics, coming from a camp directly opposite that of profit-minded executives, have long advocated greater community involvement by journalists as part of an entirely different approach to journalism; one that encourages and empowers, rather than inhibits, the journalist to take action toward positive social change.

The advocacy on the part of these critics in favor of community involvement by journalists rests, in part, on a complete rejection of the traditional notion of *objectivity* as a professional myth; a myth which has long been used by journalists to help them "deny responsibility for what is covered and how it is covered."⁸ The restrictions against active civic involvement by journalists, these critics argue, have served primarily as a means of maintaining the pretense of political neutrality in the press, despite the fact that the press is, indeed, "one of the most political institutions in our society."⁹ The press in the United States should thus face up to its social and political responsibilities, and encourage journalists to replace their false pretense of *objectivity* with an open expression of *moral engagement*¹⁰ in all aspects of their civic, community, and professional life.

At another level, public journalism may be considered to reflect a trend toward re-asserting the personal freedom of the journalist to engage in community affairs. As John Merrill has argued, historically, the notion of press freedom has not always translated into personal freedom for the journalist. Rather, there has been a prevailing assumption that "the journalist is simply another employee and will conform to the corporate structure, taking orders and relinquishing his or her autonomy in journalistic matters to the institutional freedom of the press."¹¹ Gradually, with the willing compliance of many journalists, journalistic freedoms have been traded in for the comfort and predictability of institutional routines. In this context, public journalism may be considered to reflect a shift away from institutionally-enforced routines toward a wider range of choice and personal freedom for the journalist.

As may be expected, however, the current trend toward civic involvement by journalists is not without its critics. The increasingly heated debate carried out within the pages of newspaper trade publications indicates that many journalists and academics continue to view this

as a "dangerous trend which risks co-opting the newspaper as an independent voice of the community" and threatens to turn journalists into "cheerleaders for the establishment."¹²

Research hypotheses

Despite the increasingly heated debate surrounding the issue, few studies to date have attempted a systematic examination of the extent, nature, determinants, and effects of community involvement by journalists. To the extent that they do exist, studies in this area have either focused on documenting specific cases of publisher involvement in community affairs,¹³ or sought to analyze the ethical dilemmas and offer solutions to those media professionals and executives who wish to engage in community leadership.¹⁴ In addition, while the extensive involvement in community affairs by publishers and the restrictions placed on reporters against such involvement have, to some extent, been documented, the role of the newspaper editors, who are in a position to shape both managerial policy and the overall character of the newspaper content, has remained largely unexamined.

Are editors involved primarily in grass-roots community activities such as Boy Scouts, PTA, and Community Theater, or in elite-oriented organizations such as chambers of commerce and bank directorates? Do such structural variables as size of the newspaper and type of ownership, or such personal variables as age and political affiliation, make a difference in the level of involvement? Do highly active editors perceive their professional tasks and editorial mission differently than those who are not involved in community organizations?¹⁵

The debate regarding community involvement by editors has tended to focus primarily on the potential for gradual integration of newspaper editors into the local elite power structures and the subsequent impact on their willingness to investigate and criticize those elites. Reflecting these concerns, the present study tested the following hypothesis:

- **Editors who are active in community organizations will be less likely than non-active editors to perceive their professional role as a watchdog or adversary of government and business elites.**

While active community involvement may be deemed as a deterrent against taking an adversarial stance toward the local elites typically represented in community organizations, one may also expect such involvement to be associated with a desire to take leadership in social policy and economic planning and reform within the community. It was, therefore, further hypothesized in this study that:

- **Editors who are active in community organizations will be more likely than non-active editors to perceive their professional role as active agents in the policymaking process.**

Based on historical and anecdotal evidence, which points to a high level of community involvement by editors of small community newspapers, it was further expected in this study that the size of the newspaper would be a major structural determinant of community involvement by editors:

Editors of small newspaper organizations will be more heavily involved in community activities than those in the medium and large newspapers.

Method

In order to conduct the study, a systematic sample of 468 editors¹⁶ was drawn, using the **Editor & Publisher Yearbook**. The sample was stratified by size, representing equal numbers of small (20,000 and below circulation) medium (20,001 to 70,000 circulation) and large (70,001-plus circulation) newspapers.¹⁷ A response rate of 56 percent was achieved after two mailings of the questionnaire.

In order to assess the nature of involvement, an open-ended question was included in the survey, asking the editors to list the civic and community organizations of which they were an *active member*. The responses to this question were subsequently coded into the following categories:

- 1) business/commercial (e.g., chamber of commerce, bank directorate, city planning commission),
- 2) Community service (e.g., Lion's Club, Rotary Club, Kiwanis),
- 3) charitable/philanthropic, (e.g., American Heart Association, United Way),
- 4) Cultural/artistic (e.g., community theater, Arts Council),
- 5) youth/scholastic (e.g., PTA, Boy/Girl Scouts),
- 6) religious
- 7) Environmental (e.g., Sierra Club),
- 8) Fraternal (e.g., Greek organizations).

The conceptualization and measurement of editorial role perceptions in this study was based, in part, on previous studies of journalistic role perceptions conducted by John Johnstone, Edward Slawski, and William Bowman,¹⁸ and David Weaver and Cleveland Wilhoit.¹⁹ In their classic 1976 study of professional values among American journalists, Johnstone et. Al. used the terms *participant* and *neutral* to refer to two distinct modes of journalistic role perceptions (i.e., the journalist as an active agent in the discovery and interpretation of news vs. the journalist as a passive transmission link dispensing information to the public).

In the Johnstone *et al* study, the items on the role perception scale defining *participant* values were:

- investigate statements made by government officials;
- provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems; and
- discuss national policy while it is still being developed.

The items defining the "neutral" orientation were:

- get information to the public quickly;
- concentrate on news of interest to the widest public;
- provide entertainment and relaxation;
- avoid stories with unverified content; and
- develop intellectual and cultural interests of the public.

While employing the same role perception scale, in a more recent study Weaver and Wilhoit introduced the two new terms, *interpreter* and *disseminator*, to replace *participant* and *neutral*. They also added a new category, termed *adversarial*, to the scale, defined by the following items:

- function as an adversary of the government; and
- function as an adversary of business.

The present study included almost all of the items previously used by Johnstone *et al* and Weaver and Wilhoit²⁰ but went further to address additional sets of professional values. In order to expand the conceptual reach of the role perception scale, the following new items were added to the questionnaire in this study:

- provide critical evaluation of local government performance;
- function as a watchdog of people in positions of power;
- expose unethical practices of elected officials;
- function as a watchdog of business on behalf of consumers;
- promote social reform;
- create awareness about global problems; and
- raise consciousness about global interdependence.

Results

The study indicated a relatively high level of community involvement among daily newspaper editors (51 percent). Community service organizations, such as the Rotary Club, Lion's Club, and Kiwanis, were listed most frequently by the editors (37 percent), with business/commercial organizations, such as chambers of commerce, city planning commissions, and board directorates, being the second largest category (20 percent). Charitable organizations were listed by 13.5 percent of the editors, youth/scholastic by 11.1 percent, cultural/artistic by 9.9 percent, religious organizations by 5.6 percent and environmental groups by .4 percent.

Overall, organizational membership by editors was concentrated in community service and business/commercial organizations which placed them in close contact with the local elites.

As hypothesized, newspaper size proved to be a major determinant of community involvement by editors. (See **Table 1**) A large majority (71.4 percent) of the small newspaper editors reported involvement as compared with 62.6 percent at the medium and 27.4 percent at the large newspapers. ($p < .05$)

Type of ownership, however, did not have a significant influence on level of involvement. Chain-owned and independent newspaper editors engaged in community activities at similar rates.

Another significant determinant of involvement was political affiliation. Republicans were the most involved (72.2 percent), with the Democrats and Independents reporting involvement at the rates of 55.7 percent and 45.4 percent respectively. ($p < .05$)

Age was also a significant factor in community involvement; older editors were more likely to be active in the community than the younger ones. Eighty percent of the editors above the age of 61 were active as compared with 50.3 percent of those between the ages of 41 and 60 and 46.2 percent of those between the ages of 21 and 40. ($p < .05$)

As hypothesized, active and non-active editors differed significantly in the aggregate on their response to the item, "promote social reform," with the active editors being significantly more likely to endorse this editorial task. (See **Table 2**)

Table 1: *Percentage of active and non-active editors by newspaper size*

	Active	Non-active
Large (N=95)	27.4%	72.6%
Medium (N=99)	62.6%	37.4%
Small (N=63)	71.4%	28.6%

Chi-square, p < .05

Table 2: *Mean responses of active and non-active editors*

	Active	Non-active
Get information to the public quickly	3.78	3.78
Concentrate on news of interest to the widest public	3.46	3.50
Provide entertainment and relaxation	2.72	2.80
Discuss national policy while it is still being developed	2.97	3.13
Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems	3.34	3.43
Investigate statements made by government officials	3.26	3.33
Create awareness about global problems	2.74	2.92
Raise consciousness about global interdependence	2.43	2.41
Function as an adversary of the government	2.29	2.35
Function as an adversary of big business	1.86	1.98
Provide critical evaluation of local government performance	3.64	3.58
Promote social reform*	2.66	2.42
Function as a watchdog of people in positions of power	3.60	3.67
Expose unethical practices of elected officials	3.64	3.72
Function as a watchdog of business on behalf of customers	2.93	3.06
	(N=133)	(N=125)

Note: The response scale ranged from a low of 1 ("not at all important") to a high of 4 ("extremely important").

t-test, p < .05

'Indicates significance

Given that newspaper size was found to be a significant factor in the level of involvement, the active and non-active editors were further compared on their role perceptions within each newspaper size.

Within the large newspapers, the active editors were, once again, more likely than non-active editors to endorse "promote social reform," indicating a desire to actively participate in bringing about change within the community. The active editors, however, were less likely to endorse "function as a watchdog of people in positions of power," although in general they did place a high level of emphasis on this editorial task. (See Table 3)

Table 3: Mean responses of large newspaper editors active vs non-active

	Active	Non-active
Get information to the public quickly	3.65	3.78
Concentrate on news of interest to the widest public*	3.30	3.60
Provide entertainment and relaxation	2.69	2.85
Discuss national policy while it is still being developed	3.30	3.40
Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems	3.61	3.71
Investigate statements made by government officials	3.34	3.46
Create awareness about global problems	3.00	3.11
Raise consciousness about global interdependence	2.80	2.50
Function as an adversary of the government	2.00	2.31
Function as an adversary of big business	2.00	1.98
Provide critical evaluation of local government performance	3.61	3.58
Promote social reform*	3.00	2.48
Function as a watchdog of people in positions of power*	3.46	3.79
Expose unethical practices of elected officials	3.61	3.79
Function as a watchdog of business on behalf of customers	3.15	3.15
	(N=26)	(N=69)

t-test, p < .05

**Indicates significance*

Within the small newspapers, the comparison between the active and non-active editors showed the active editors to be significantly more likely than the non-active ones to endorse such participant/interpretive roles as "discuss national policy" and "provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems," reflecting, once again, a greater desire to actively participate in the

policymaking process. (See Table 4) The active editors, however, did not significantly differ from the non-active ones on the items reflecting a watchdog or adversarial role dimension. Both groups placed an equally high level of importance on such tasks as "provide critical evaluation of local government performance," "function as a watchdog of people in positions of power," "expose unethical practices of elected officials," and "function as a watchdog of business on behalf of consumers."

Table 4: Mean responses of small newspaper editors active vs non-active

	Active	Non-active
Get information to the public quickly	3.80	3.73
Concentrate on news of interest to the widest public	3.59	3.40
Provide entertainment and relaxation	2.71	2.53
Discuss national policy while it is still being developed*	2.64	2.13
Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems*	3.09	2.53
Investigate statements made by government officials	3.14	2.86
Create awareness about global problems	2.42	2.20
Raise consciousness about global interdependence	2.26	2.00
Function as an adversary of the government	2.30	2.53
Function as an adversary of big business	1.80	1.93
Provide critical evaluation of local government performance	3.57	3.53
Promote social reform	2.59	2.46
Function as a watchdog of people in positions of power	3.57	3.46
Expose unethical practices of elected officials	3.57	3.66
Function as a watchdog of business on behalf of customers	2.92	3.00
	(N=42)	(N=15)

t-test, p < .05

** Indicates significance*

Conclusion

This study sought to assess the extent and type of involvement by the nation's daily newspaper editors in community organizations, illuminate the major determinants of such involvement, and measure its effects on editorial role perceptions.

Overall, the results of the study indicate extensive involvement by editors in civic and community organizations, particularly by the editors of smaller newspapers. While editors do occasionally join grass-roots community organizations such as PTA and Scouts, they are most heavily involved in organizations which typically function a both formal (e.g., chamber of

commerce) and informal (e.g., Rotary Club) conduits of interaction among local community leaders and business and political elites.

With regards to the major hypotheses within the study, the results indicated clear differences between active and non-active editors in the way they view their roles. As expected, there appears to be a significant association between community involvement and a desire to take a leadership role in local policymaking and reform.

At the same time, the study lent only partial support to the primary notion against community involvement by editors; that of a potentially negative influence on their willingness to criticize local government and business performance. While the item "function as a watchdog of people in positions of power" received a lower degree of support by active editors in large newspaper organizations, the majority of the critical/watchdog items were endorsed at equally high rates by both active and non-active editors in the large, medium, and small newspapers. Overall, the desire on the part of active editors to exercise policy leadership - via the newspaper pages as well as through community involvement - was more clearly reflected in the data than a chilling effect on performing a critical/watchdog role.

Notes

1. Gene Burd, *Objectivity and Civic Ideology: Policy and Performance Dilemmas*. Paper presented to the Qualitative Studies Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Annual Conference, Boston, Mass., August 1980.
2. Don Sneed and Daniel Riffe, **The Publisher-Public Official: Real or Imagined Conflict of Interest?** New York: Praeger, 1991.
3. Kristi Bunton Northington, *Split Allegiance: Small-Town Newspaper Community Involvement*. **Journal of Mass Media Ethics**, Summer 1992, pp.220-232.
4. John Webster, *The Publisher and Civic Activity: Civic Activism Dilemma*. **Journal of Mass Media Ethics**, Fall/Winter 1986-87, pp. 41-47.
5. **Editor & Publisher**, *Involvement in Community Affairs Urged by Publisher* May 14, 1993, p. 32; Tony Case, *Can Journalists Be Joiners?* **Editor and Publisher**, Jan.30, 1993, p. 15; **Editor and Publisher**, *Community Involvement is his Credo*. March 27, 1993, pp. 20-21.
6. Joel Kaplan, *Shop Talk at Thirty: Newspapers and Community involvement a Slippery Slope*. **Editor and Publisher**, April 11,1992, p. 48.
7. Davis Merritt, **Public Journalism and Public Life**. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Earlbaum, 1995. Also see. Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt, *Public Journalism: Theory and Practice*. An occasional paper of the Kettering Foundation, 1994.
8. Theodore Glasser, panel presentation. Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Atlanta, August, 1994; Theodore Glasser, *Objectivity Precludes Responsibility*. **The Quill**, February 1984.
9. *Ibid.*, AEJMC panel presentation.
10. Theodore Glasser and James Ettema, *Investigative Reporting and the Moral Order* **Critical Studies in Mass Communication**, March 1989, pp.1-20.
11. John Mernll, **The Dialectic in Journalism**. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1989, pp. 113-125.

12. John Taylor, *Can You be a Catalyst Without Becoming a Part of the Story?* **The Masthead**, Fall 1993, pp. 29-30.
13. Don Sneed and Daniel Riffe, *op.cit.*
14. Kristi Bunton Northington, *op. cit.*
15. Some evidence of a generalized effect on editorial orientation may be found in a study by Clarice Olien, George Donohue and Phillip Tichenor, which showed that editors who were integrated in the local power structure were less likely than those without such integration to report on community conflict. *The Community Editor's Power and the Reporting of Conflict. Journalism Quarterly*, Summer 1968, pp. 243-252.
16. After accounting for the non-delivered mail due to newspaper closures and "no forwarding address," the size of the original sample was reduced to 464.
17. To draw the sample, three sampling frames of small (below 20,000 circulation), medium (20,000 to 70,000 circulation), and large (70,001 plus-circulation) daily newspapers were developed. Reflecting the pattern in **The Editor and Publisher Yearbook**, the papers were listed in the alphabetical order of the states in which they were located. A systematic sampling procedure was then used to draw samples of 156 newspapers each from the small and medium-size newspaper sampling frames. The intervals used in drawing the systematic samples were chosen in such a way as to ensure inclusion in the sample of newspapers from all geographic areas within the United States. The sample size of 156 for the large papers was equal to the actual population of daily newspapers with over 70,000 circulation.
18. John Johnstone, Edward Slawski, and William Bowman, **The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work**. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1976.
19. David Weaver and Cleveland Wilhoit, **The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work**. Bloomington, Indiana; Indiana University Press, 1986.
20. The two "disseminator" items, "avoid stories with unverified content" and "develop intellectual/cultural tastes," were not included in this study.