



Existing Decision-Making Practices on Daily Newspapers in Canada

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Reporter alienation is evident in some Canadian daily newspaper newsrooms.¹ One of the reasons for the alienation could be the traditional autocratic bureaucratic environment where management makes most decisions and simply excludes reporters from meaningful participation in decision-making. One classic solution to eliminating such alienation, according to social psychologists Argyris, Maslow, Likert and McGregor, is decentralization.² Such increased participation in decisions will, say these theorists, increase the mental health of most individuals and the organizational health.

It is possible, though, that reporters are involved with decision-making on a variety of issues. Perhaps Canadian dailies are decentralized and allow reporters a major role in decision-making. This exploratory note will focus on the existing decision-making practices within daily newspaper newsrooms throughout Canada as perceived by city and country reporters.

There is no known literature on decision-making within Canadian daily newspapers. A related study, though, on existing practices at American dailies might provide a basis for predicting Canadian practices. Reporters, in that national survey, reported that aggregate decision-making leans toward management consulting reporters but management made the final decision in most cases. Moreover, it was discovered that reporters on smaller papers had more autonomy than those on larger papers. The relationship was linear.³ Johnstone also reported that American reporters on smaller news organizations had more freedom than those on larger ones, but he was measuring weeklies, dailies and broadcast operations.⁴

It is risky to extrapolate American findings to Canadian newspapers, but it seems reasonable, though, to test the Canadian organizations with American data. In time, Canada data will serve as a more meaningful guideline for additional research. Therefore, it will be hypothesized that Canadian reporters will generally be

allowed the same degree of decision-making involvement as the American reporters, and that reporters on smaller papers will be allowed more decision-making freedom than those on larger papers.
Method:

All English-speaking dailies under separate management were selected in September, 1980 (N equals 95). Copies of the newspapers were obtained and city/county reporters were, in most cases, randomly identified from by-line stories. City and county reporters were selected because they participated in the American survey and, in both cases, were considered the nucleus of most newspapers. All respondents were assured anonymity and were allowed a free summary. Two mailings produced a 41 percent return rate (N equals 39). The return rates for each circulation category were: 100,001 and up (82 percent); 50,001 to 100,000 (71 percent); 10,001 to 50,000 (38 percent) and 25 percent for 10,000 and under. Reporters were asked to describe their existing participative practices according to the following Likert Scale:

- 1 - Reporters not normally involved; management makes decision;
 - 2 - Management consults reporters but makes final decision;
 - 3 - Management and reporters discuss and have equal vote;
 - 4 - Reporters consult management but make final decision; and
 - 5 - Management not normally involved; reporters make decision.
- A higher score, then, would mean that reporters are more involved with making the decision.

Results:

The first hypothesis predicted that Canadian reporters would generally be allowed the same degree of decision-making as the American reporters (1.68 mean). The aggregate data, per Table 1, reflect a 1.69 mean (se equals .09).

Table 1
Canadian Daily Newspaper Existing Practices -
Aggregate and Groups - Mean Data

Decision	Aggregate (N=39)	100,001 and up (N=9)	50,001 to 100,000 (N=5)	10,001 to 50,000 (N=16)	Under 10,000 (N=9)
All Decisions	1.69	1.49	1.99	1.63	1.83
Time Needed	3.28	3.36	4.40	3.18	2.44
How To Cover	3.15	2.88	4.40	3.06	2.88
Length of Story	3.05	2.50	4.60	2.93	2.88
Story Suggestions	2.84	2.55	3.80	2.68	2.88
Overtime Needed	2.65	3.11	3.60	2.37	2.12
Which Stories to Cover	2.41	2.22	3.60	2.06	2.55
By-Line Assignment	2.31	1.88	3.60	2.06	2.44
Art Suggestions	2.25	1.66	3.20	1.93	2.88
Assigning Reporters	2.02	1.66	2.40	1.81	2.55
Beat Assignment/Transfer	1.92	1.33	2.00	1.93	2.44
Determine if Art	1.89	1.22	2.60	1.68	2.55
Final Editing	1.74	1.66	1.60	1.68	2.00
Postponing Story	1.66	1.33	2.00	1.62	1.88
Salary/Fringes-Reporters	1.59	1.37	1.80	1.67	1.55

Long-Range News Plans	1.59	1.33	1.80	1.62	1.66
Killing Story	1.58	1.33	2.00	1.50	1.77
Training Reporters	1.50	1.12	1.40	1.50	1.89
Evaluating Reporters	1.50	1.00	1.40	1.68	1.66
Determining Page	1.48	1.00	1.60	1.37	2.11
Editorial Page Direction	1.41	1.00	1.40	1.37	1.88
Raises/Promotions-Reporters	1.35	1.00	1.20	1.56	1.44
Determining Newshole	1.35	1.00	1.40	1.31	1.85
Selecting Columnists	1.25	1.11	1.00	1.18	1.66
Disciplining Reporters	1.20	1.00	1.00	1.18	1.55
Editorial Budgets	1.12	1.22	1.00	1.12	1.11
Hiring Reporters	1.10	1.00	1.00	1.06	1.33
Firing Reporters	1.07	1.00	1.00	1.06	1.22
Evaluating Editors	1.05	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.22
Major Fiscal Outlays	1.05	1.22	1.00	1.00	1.00
Promoting Management	1.02	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.11
Long-Range Plans - Other	1.02	1.11	1.00	1.00	1.00
Other Budgets	1.02	1.11	1.00	1.00	1.00
Salary/Fringes-Mgt.	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Hiring Editors	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00

The second hypothesis suggested that reporters on smaller papers would be more involved with decision-making than those on larger papers. The results, were in the predicted direction with the exception of the 50,001 to 100,000 papers. The relationship is not linear as expected. A one-way analysis of variance (F equals 1.13, df equals 38) was not significant at the .05 level. The mean scores for the organizations were: 100,001 and up - 1.49 (N equals 9); 50,001 to 100,000 - 1.99 (N equals 5); 10,001 to 50,000 - 1.63 (N equals 16) and 10,000 and under - 1.83 (N equals 9).

Discussion:

The aggregate data (1.69) show that city/county reporters perceive a decision-making environment that leans toward management making most decisions. Reporters tend to have, though, an equal vote on time needed, how to cover, length of story, story suggestions and overtime needed. On several job-related issues per Table 1, management tends to consult reporters before making the decision. The explanation for this generally management-dominated environment may be that management cannot perceive the need for a more democratic environment. After all, as Argyris has noted, many editors and publishers could not understand a more permissive, open system of management because they have grown up in a non-permissive organization.⁵ The implications of such a management system on reporters is, of course, idiosyncratic. One embittered female reporter from Ontario wrote: "In our newsroom, reporters quickly learn an unwritten motto which epitomizes the attitudes of our particular management: You are paid to write, not think." Her alienation is expected in a centralized atmosphere, according to the social psychologists, and such frustration may also be latent for many other reporters who want increased decision-making.

A major challenge is to compare the existing practices with the decision-making needs of reporters. There are reporters who are satisfied with the status quo; there are those who enjoy a more

authoritarian environment and there are others who need a more democratic system.⁶ The need is for management and reporters to create a dialogue which would allow both sides to discuss their needs. Why does editor x, for example, feel so strongly that by-lines ought to be controlled by management? Why does some reporter perceive the need for personal by-line control? This research does not probe the reasons why practices exist. There needs to be a more formal examination of editors' decision-making philosophy and its perceived impact on reporters. Moreover, there needs to be more research on why the existing practices at the 50,001 to 100,000 papers are idiosyncratic. In other research, there has been a linear relationship between organization size and degree of freedom. Now, however, it is discovered that these 50,000 plus papers allow more freedom than expected. On several job-related issues, as Table 1 demonstrates, reporters have exceptional freedom relative to their peers on other papers. At this point, there is no explanation for these results.

A final challenge is to determine the degree of alienation and the degree of work autonomy or democratic decision-making. One might even identify degree of alienation, existing practices and preferred decision-making needs. Such a study might help in understanding the nuances in the relationships.

FOOTNOTES

1. C. Edward Wilson, "Why Canadian Newsmen Leave Their Papers," *Journalism Quarterly*, 43 (Winter 1966), 769-772; "Dr. Gertrude Joch Robinson Finds Wider Job Spread for Canadian Media Women," *Media Report to Women*, May 1, 1976, 5 and Donald K. Wright, "An Analysis of the Level of Professionalism Among Canadian Journalists," *Gazette*, 20, (Fall 1974), 133-144.
2. See Chris Argyris, *Integrating the Individual and the Organization*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1959); Rensis Likert, *New Patterns of Management*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961); Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) and Douglas Mc Gregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960).
3. Ted Joseph, *Daily Newspaper Reporters and Editors Preferences for Decision-Making and Existing Decision-Making Practices*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio University, 1980.
4. J.W.C. Johnstone, et. al., *The News People* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1976).
5. Chris Argyris, *Behind the Front Page* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974), 242-244.
6. Ted Joseph, *Decision-Making Preferences of Canadian Daily Newspaper Reporters, Editors, and Publishers*. Unpublished paper, The University of Toledo, 1980.