

## RESEARCH IN BRIEF

### DECISION MAKING PREFERENCES OF CANADIAN NEWSPAPER REPORTERS, EDITORS AND PUBLISHERS: A RESEARCH NOTE

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This note compares preference of publishers, editors and reporters toward reporter decision-making. Reporters prefer more participation than executives. Results are also compared with American studies.

Cet article compare les préférences des maisons d'éditions, des éditeurs et journalistes envers les décisions prises par les journalistes, concernant les informations. Les journalistes préfèrent plus de participation que les pouvoirs exécutifs. Les résultats sont aussi comparés avec American studies.

Social psychologists theorize that most workers want to participate in decision-making (Argyris, 1959; Likert, 1961; Maslow, 1970; McGregor, 1960). But, do Canadian daily newspaper reporters want participation? The purpose of this exploratory research note will be to determine reporters' preferences toward decision-making. The secondary objectives will be to assess the

views of managing editors and publishers toward reporter decision-making. Reporters may want participation in certain decisions, but such involvement seems unrealistic if management is opposed.

There is no empirical study on decision-making preferences of Canadian reporters, editors or publishers. Wright (1974), however, claims that reporters want to have an influence on "important decisions." In studies with United States dailies (Joseph, 1982c), it was discovered that reporters generally wanted to be consulted by management before management made its decision. Moreover, reporters wanted more control over work-related decisions and less over traditional higher-management issues. These studies demonstrated that female and male reporters have the same participative preferences, and that reporters under 30 preferred slightly more participation than reporters 30 and over. It was also found that editors preferred less reporter participation in decision-making than did reporters, and that female editors preferred slightly more reporter involvement than male editors. Age, however, did not influence editors' preferences. Publishers (Joseph, 1981) preferred less reporter involvement than did reporters, and sex and age did not influence preferences.

It is risky to extrapolate United States attitudes to Canadian journalists. It seems reasonable, though, in this seminal research to use the U. S. data as hypotheses. Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1) Canadian reporters will prefer to be consulted by management on most decisions.

2) Reporters will prefer participation to a greater degree than what editors and publishers prefer for reporters.

3) Age will not influence preferences for editors and publishers however younger reporters will prefer more participation than older reporters.

4) Female editors will prefer more reporter involvement than male editors while there should be no difference between male and female reporters and publishers.

## Method

All English-language Canadian dailies, under separate management, were selected ( $n = 95$ ). Data were collected in late 1980. Publishers or general managers and managing editors or other top news executives, who were listed in the **1980 International Editor and Publisher Yearbook**, were selected. A city or county reporter was selected from by-line articles. These reporters were selected because they form the nucleus of most newsrooms. The initial sample, then, for each group was 95. The final sample, after two mailings, was publishers ( $n=25$ ); editors ( $n=47$ ); and reporters ( $n=40$ ). The Reporter Preference Questionnaire (RPQ), created by this author for the United States studies, examined preferences for decision making. The thirty-four item measure is presented in Table One. Most decisions in the questionnaire were created after interviewing journalists, editors and publishers concerning their dominant decisions. Some decisions were also drawn from the literature on newspaper decision making and the author's personal experience as a newspaperperson. Responses on the scale are: 1 - Reporters should not be involved, let management handle; 2 - Management should consult reporters but should make final decisions; 3 - Management and reporters should discuss and have equal

vote; 4 - Reporters should consult management but make final decision; and 5 - Reporters should be responsible for decision with no management input. A higher score would indicate that respondents wanted more reporter decision-making.

## Results

Reporters, as expected, wanted generally to be consulted by management before management made a decision. Moreover, reporters wanted more participation than editors and publishers. The aggregate reporter ( $n=40$ ) mean was 2.24 ( $p=.05$ ,  $2.06 < z < 2.24$ ), the editor mean was 1.54 ( $p=.05$ ,  $1.46 < z < 1.63$ ) and the publishers' mean was 1.60 ( $p=.05$ ,  $1.48 < z < 1.72$ ).

The female reporters mean was 2.33 ( $n=19$ ); male reporter was 2.11 ( $t=1.02$ , one-tail, n.s.). The female editors ( $n=2$ ) mean was 1.50 while the male editors mean was 1.54 ( $t=-0.23$ , one tail, n.s.). The female publisher ( $n=1$ ) mean was 1.38 and the male publishers ( $n=24$ ) was 1.61 ( $t=0.76$ , one tail, n.s.). For reporters, the under 30 years of age ( $n=29$ ) mean was 2.18 while those aged 30 or over ( $n = 11$ ) was 2.41 ( $t=-1.18$ , one tail, n.s.). There were no publishers under thirty years of age.

Table One demonstrates some important intra-group disagreements and agreements. Publishers, editors and reporters agree that reporters should be consulted by management before management makes its decision on assigning and training reporters, determining if art should be used, killing story, and final editing. They also share the same philosophy that reporters should not be involved with hiring reporters and editors, future plans and budgets for non-news departments, major fiscal decisions, management salaries and fringes, and promoting management.

Table One

Preferences of Canadian Reporters, Editors,  
Publishers Toward Reporter Decision-Making

| Decision                       | Average for         |                   |                      |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
|                                | Reporters<br>(N=40) | Editors<br>(N=47) | Publishers<br>(N=25) |
| Aggregate                      | 2.24                | 1.54              | 1.60*                |
| How to cover story             | 3.72                | 2.40              | 2.80                 |
| Time needed to<br>report/write | 3.65                | 2.23              | 2.60                 |
| Length of story                | 3.38                | 2.02              | 2.20                 |
| Story suggestions              | 3.07                | 2.27              | 2.44                 |
| Overtime needed                | 2.82                | 1.89              | 1.79                 |
| Art suggestions                | 2.75                | 2.31              | 2.24                 |
| Which stories to cover         | 2.70                | 1.93              | 2.00                 |
| By-Line assignment             | 2.67                | 1.82              | 1.76                 |
| Beat Assgn/Transfers           | 2.65                | 1.91              | 1.88                 |
| Future of newsroom             | 2.65                | 1.87              | 1.88                 |
| Postponing story               | 2.62                | 1.78              | 1.68                 |
| Salary/fringes-Rep's           | 2.55                | 1.51              | 1.58                 |
| Assigning reporters            | 2.45                | 1.80              | 1.76                 |
| Evaluating reporters           | 2.43                | 1.59              | 1.44                 |
| Determine if art used          | 2.40                | 1.65              | 1.92                 |
| Killing story                  | 2.40                | 1.60              | 1.52                 |
| Training reporters             | 2.37                | 1.53              | 1.84                 |
| Final editing                  | 2.35                | 1.53              | 1.84                 |
| Evaluating editors             | 2.15                | 1.31              | 1.20                 |
| Editorial Page                 | 2.15                | 1.44              | 1.64                 |
| Determining newshole           | 2.08                | 1.08              | 1.20                 |
| Raises/Promo-Rep's             | 1.92                | 1.31              | 1.24                 |
| Determining page for<br>story  | 1.90                | 1.25              | 1.40                 |
| Selecting columnists           | 1.87                | 1.25              | 1.44                 |
| Disciplining Rep's             | 1.82                | 1.17              | 1.52                 |
| Editorial Budget               | 1.75                | 1.21              | 1.24                 |
| Firing reporters               | 1.57                | 1.06              | 1.12                 |
| Hiring reporters               | 1.47                | 1.01              | 1.16                 |
| Future-other Depts.            | 1.42                | 1.10              | 1.28                 |

Table One continued

|                        |      |      |      |
|------------------------|------|------|------|
| Hiring Editors         | 1.37 | 1.10 | 1.12 |
| Major fiscal decisions | 1.37 | 1.12 | 1.08 |
| Salary/Fringes Mgt.    | 1.35 | 1.02 | 1.00 |
| Promoting Mgt.         | 1.27 | 1.08 | 1.04 |
| Budgets-Other Depts.   | 1.17 | 1.04 | 1.00 |

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\*F=35.18, df=111, p<01

- Scale:
- 1 - Reporters should not be involved, let management handle;
  - 2 - Mgt should consult reporters but make final decision;
  - 3 - Management and reporters should discuss and have equal vote
  - 4 - Reporters should consult management but make final decision
  - 5 - Reporters should be responsible for decision with no management input

Editors and reporters also want management to consult reporters on evaluating reporters but publishers prefer limited or no reporter input. Publishers do agree, though, with reporters that management should consult reporters before making a decision on the direction of the editorial page. Editors, on this issue, lean toward no reporter participation.

Reporters want to consult management and make decisions on how to cover the story and time needed to report and to write; editors want reporters consulted while publishers prefer an equal vote. These reporters also lean toward an equal vote on length of story, story and art suggestions, overtime needed, which stories to cover, by-line assignments, beat assignments and transfers, newsroom plans, postponing stories, and

salary and fringes for reporters. Editors and publishers prefer that management make these decisions after consulting with reporters. On eight other decisions, (see Table One), reporters want to be consulted by management before it makes the decision while editors and publishers lean toward limited or no reporter participation. These decisions are: evaluating page for story, selecting columnists, disciplining and firing reporters, and determining editorial budget.

## Discussion

This note demonstrates that these city/county reporters have specific decision-making preferences. The psychological theorists noted earlier predicted that these reporters wanted involvement but they could not predict specific rankings or the specific reasons for the rankings. Now, for the first time, precise preferences are available. Yet, without case study interviews, it is difficult to explain reporter rankings. As noted elsewhere (Joseph, 1982b), it is possible that reporters are artists who prefer to control work related decisions. Such post-hoc explanations are, however, speculative and need to be clarified by interviewing reporters.

These reporters, as Table One reports, want more participation than editors and publishers. It is also difficult to explain the relative rankings of these executives. Argyris (1974) suggests that newspaper managers, reared professionally in an autocratic environment, would tend to be relatively autocratic. Simon (1976, 236) claims that centralization could be rationalized by managers on such grounds as the reporter is not skilled enough or that if management makes the decision, it will be the correct decision. A study for the Kent Commission (1981) suggests that Canadian

Table Two

Preferences of Canadian and American  
Reporters, Editors, Publishers Toward  
Reporter Decision-Making and Existing  
Practices - Mean Aggregate Data

| Nation | Preferences |             |             | Existing<br>Practices |
|--------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|
|        | Reporters   | Editors     | Publishers  |                       |
| Canada | 2.24(n=40)  | 1.54(n=47)  | 1.60(n=25)  | 1.69(n=39)            |
| USA    | 2.07(n=484) | 1.66(n=562) | 1.66(n=128) | 1.68(n=518)           |

Scales: Preferences: see Table 1. For existing:  
1 - Reporters not normally involved, management  
makes decision; 2 - Management consults reporters  
but makes final decisions; 3 - Management and  
reporters discuss and have equal vote; 4 - Repor-  
ters consult managment but make final decision;  
and 5 - Management not normally involved, reporter  
makes decisions.

publishers tend to perceive their newspapers as  
businesses which must turn large profits. If so,  
it is possible these publishers prefer limited  
employee democracy because it might be more cost  
efficient. In any case, the best explanations,  
again, for specific rankings must come from re-  
spondents.

In the meantime, it would be useful, it  
seems, for reporters and editors to generate a  
dialogue concerning their general and specific  
philosophical positions on reporter decision-  
making. Argyris (1974, 274) suggests that such  
interaction might not be possible as most editors  
have matured professionally in a closed environ-



ment. Even though he claims newspapers "desperately need processes for self-examination and self-renewal, and these activities should ultimately be the responsibility of the members of the organization," he does not predict genuine open dialogue.

But if dialogue were to occur, it might also focus on preferences and existing practices. In other research with Canadian city/county reporters (Joseph, 1982a) existing decision-making practices were examined. In general, reporters are not being allowed their preferred level of decision-making. The effects of such deprivation might be one factor causing the malaise among Canadian journalists (Kent, 1981, 31; Pelrine, 1982).

In any case, it must be stressed that not all Canadian reporters are deprived. Aggregate data can be misleading. As research with an American daily is demonstrating, reporters (and editors) have idiosyncratic preferences. This research has shown that while most reporters want more participation on many decisions, a few want less involvement.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is important to study individual preferences and existing practices and the effects of too much or too little participation. It would also be stimulating to study the effects on reporters and editors when reporters are given the desired degree of participation. There are many other research challenges in this area. Nobody, with the exception of a case study (Joseph, in process) has determined the form of participation desired by reporters. Do they want, for example, to evaluate editors face to face or through a written report? Other variables, such as sex, years experience, other beats, chain affiliation, need to be controlled for possible influences on existing practices and preferences. There is also a need for more theoretical integration of the classical organizational model and the psychological model which predicts participative

needs (see Kanungo, 1981; Mulder, 1971).

This study might serve as a foundation for continued cross-cultural research of reporters, editors and publishers. As Table Two notes, there do not seem to be any significant differences among Canadian and American journalists. Moreover, the existing practices are identical. In other nations, however, existing practices might be different. In West Germany, for example, many unions have bargained for seats on the board of directors. In Holland, all Dutch newspapers are, in part, controlled by statutes concerning many existing decision-making practices. Research is also needed on preferences of journalists in other nations. It is possible that French journalists, for example, might be more democratic oriented. Regardless, one must probe such journalists for the logic behind their philosophical perspective.

Can these data be generalized to other Canadian reporters, editors and publishers? The editors (n=47) represent approximately 50% of the population. It seems reasonable to suggest these editors represent non-respondents since sampling theory indicates a fifty-percent sample is sufficient to give a response within three percent of the actual value ninety-nine percent of the time (Yamane, 1967). Such an inference is not possible for city/county reporters whose population is larger. Other beat reporters may also have different preferences. Generalization to non-responding publishers is not possible. Intuitively, it is felt that other publishers would be less democratic-oriented than these respondents.

Finally, one should challenge the value of the statistical tests used in this research. When one is dealing with a small population, it is debatable if statistical tests have meaning.

## FOOTNOTES

Current experimentation with a 40,000 circulation daily being done by the author. This project is allowing reporters the desired degree of decision making with most decisions. For details, please write the author.

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