

Fall 1993

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Recommended Citation

Lipschultz, Jeremy Harris and Hilt, Michael L., "First Amendment vs. Business Orientations of Broadcast General Managers and News Directors" (1993). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 68.

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First Amendment vs. Business Orientations of Broadcast General Managers and News Directors

By Jeremy H. Lipschultz and Michael L. Hilt

Abstract: A two-state survey found that general managers and news directors prefer their own judgments, and those of audience members, to government regulation. General managers support the First Amendment when it is good for business, while news directors show some support for business freedoms.

The study of mass communicators as "those who work in media and those who control or occupy the channels of mass communication" has become an important area of research.¹ Often studies of mass communicators rely upon organizational theory,² individual psychological variables,³ or institutional issues.⁴

Studies of media management⁵ sometimes are not clear on theoretical underpinnings, and specific research on radio and television managers often deals with anecdotal evidence.⁶

The importance of occupational norms⁷ - that is, values shared by broadcast managers across organizations - has not been the focus of past research. In the study of journalists, occupation has been related to role theory and demographics:

Factors known to influence occupational performance include social background and traits that are idiosyncratic to particular individuals. . . . Their precise impact on professional orientations remains a matter of heated scientific and political controversy. Idiosyncratic factors, which include artistic tastes, emotional outlook, and intellectual interests, explain why newspeople who come from similar backgrounds will nonetheless prefer different stories or will give a different emphasis to the same news story...⁸

It is surprising that broadcast researchers have ignored the importance of occupational roles, given the widespread circulation of trade publications and membership in industry groups.⁹

The purpose of the present study is to measure responses from broadcast managers to statements about broadcast regulation and social issues, to treat general managers and news directors as members of occupational groups, and to compare First Amendment values, often associated with journalists, to business orientations.

Literature Review

Ownership and Management of Local Media Outlets

Radio and television stations in the United States are distinguished from broadcast entities in other countries by private ownership and a history of localism." The total number of radio and television stations continued to increase in the last decade.¹¹ Recent figures in Broadcasting magazine show 9,356 commercial radio and 1,115 commercial television stations on the air, with another 1,373 construction permits for future facilities.¹² "Like any other business, the station must be operated profitably if it is to survive and to satisfy the financial expectations of its owners."¹³ This suggests the existence of a business orientation within broadcast management.

Despite the large numbers of local stations, some authors argue that there is little content diversity and that station owners are mainly concerned about profit.¹⁴ Mainstream values may be passed on from media owners and corporations to the day-to-day management personnel.¹⁵ Ownership, for purposes of the present study, is seen as one more reason to expect broadcast managers to hold a business orientation.¹⁶

Social Views of Mass Communicators and their Organizations

Mass communication research on mass communicators is grounded in traditional sociology and the "long-standing sociological interests in status and role, occupations and professions, analyses of complex organizations, and the sociology of work."¹⁷ Surprisingly little research has been conducted on roles and functions of mass communicators outside the newsroom. For example, Weaver and Wilhoit studied demographic characteristics of U.S. news people in a widely cited work. These data, however, do not address potential influences of upper-management or the organization itself.¹⁸ McQuail, on the characteristics of mass communicators, concludes "relative attitudes and tendencies" of journalists may be owed to workplace socialization: "This view, while not discounting the influence of social background and personal belief, returns us to the greater probability of organizational rather than individual subjective determination."¹⁹ Left unanswered is how outside pressures of occupational standards affect the views of broadcast managers.

The political views of broadcast managers are one measure of potential agreement at the occupational level.

Political Views of Media Management

The research on political orientations of mass communicators focuses on journalists rather than broadcast managers. The findings are contradictory. Weaver and Wilhoit found the majority of journalists considered themselves "middle-of-the-road," with most of the rest split evenly between "a little to left" or "a little to right."²⁰ However, one study found a majority of "media elite" were "liberal."²¹ Sociologists are divided about whether media personnel support middle-class values and the status quo, "liberal" or "conservative" activism, or are simply apolitical in favor of more immediate economic demands.²²

It is much more common to find mass communication research studying the political orientations of audience members, particularly voters.²³ While researchers continue to explore how mass communication content plays a role in the political socialization of audience members, we know little about the political beliefs of either the individual communicators who produce the content or of their organizations.²⁴ Further complicating the findings is the fact that mass communicators themselves are a part of the audience.

General Managers and News Directors Roles

There is a growing trend among general managers to view their news directors as future general managers.²⁵ Quarderer and Stone found that news directors and their general managers “embrace common beliefs” about news profitability: “But when it comes to hard data on the bottom line, they share impressions more often than they share numbers.”²⁶

The broader sociology of work,²⁷ “attributes or attitudes characteristic of a profession” or “occupational group,” and the “psychology of careers”²⁸ has not found its way into research on broadcast managers. One such model, for example, sees “occupational maturation” as a series of stages: pre-work socialization; entry into the labor force; socialization in the job; and job change.²⁹ The focus on occupation - rather than the usual organizational emphasis³⁰ - means that the research focus changes from an examination of the dynamics of what goes on inside stations to an analysis of broadcast managers across stations.

Methodology

General managers and news directors at commercial radio and television stations in Iowa and Nebraska were selected as a purposive, judgmental nonprobability sample³¹ using the 1990 Broadcasting Yearbook.³² Theoretical sampling³³ was used treating the occupations of general manager and news director as created groups in a grounded theory approach.³⁴ The sample represented in an exploratory way the two occupational roles - general manager and news director - under study.

A total of 323 management-level employees were identified for the survey mailing list. The study followed survey pretesting in summer 1990. The survey was self-administered. The Total Design Method for mail surveys was used.³⁵ Personalized cover letters, survey booklets, and business reply envelopes were sent. The first wave of surveys was mailed in October 1990. This was followed by a reminder postcard ten days later, and a second mailing of the survey to nonrespondents in mid-November.³⁶

The overall response rate was 55.4 percent (N=179). The response rate was above average for mail surveys for “management-level populations.”³⁷ Response rates did not deviate dramatically for any of the subpopulations by state or occupation.³⁸ General managers and news directors were compared as occupational groups using the SPSSx statistical package.

Results

Demographic variables, in the study of print journalists from an occupational perspective, have been an important way to describe characteristics. In the case of broadcast managers, demographic differences appeared between the two occupational groups in terms of age,³⁹ income,⁴⁰ educational backgrounds,⁴¹ and political orientations.

Politics. A majority of both general managers (51.1 percent) and news directors (58.3 percent) considered themselves politically “middle-of-the road.” More general managers (36.2 percent) than news directors (23.6 percent) labeled themselves “conservative.” More news directors (18.1 percent) than general managers (12.8 percent) considered themselves “liberal.” In terms of party affiliation, half of the news directors (50.0 percent) said they were “independent,” while nearly half of the general managers (47.8 percent) identified with the Republican Party.⁴²

Perceptions of Broadcast Regulation and Social Issues

The Perceived Role of Government. General managers and news directors responded to a list of seven statements concerning the effects of government broadcast regulation on their stations. The two groups responded in strongest agreement to the statement:

"Stations should be free to make all programming decisions." The two groups most strongly disagreed with the statement: "The fairness doctrine should be reinstated." On these two statements First Amendment and business values were not in conflict.

The general managers were in greater agreement than news directors on three statements: (1) "Government exerts too much control," (2) "FCC regulations are too stringent," and (3) "A ban on indecent programs is good for broadcasting." The general managers displayed a business orientation, but only on the indecency issue were they in conflict with the First Amendment values. A small-market radio general manager in Iowa criticized broadcast regulation in general:

...promiscuous and liberal granting of broadcast licenses by the FCC without regard to a community's ability to support them is certain to lead to the demise and disqualifying of some otherwise good broadcasters.⁴³

But, a small-market radio news director in Iowa expressed some support for stronger regulation of media:

We need a bit more regulation again. It's my understanding that wages and overall benefits have fallen in the last few years for entry-level broadcasters. (But that may be the downward mobility we're all seeing in the Reagan aftermath).⁴⁴

However, it should be noted that among the members of each occupational group, there was disagreement on several statements. For example, on the statement, "A ban on indecent programs is good for broadcasting," 38 percent of news directors disagreed, 26 percent were neutral and 36 percent agreed. On statements that do involve news content (the fairness doctrine and news story out-takes), general managers as a group shared the First Amendment views of news directors.

Social Views. General managers and news directors responded to a list of ten statements concerning their views on political and social issues. General managers and news directors agreed most strongly with the statement, "Private enterprise is fair to workers." They disagreed most strongly with the statement, "Environmental problems are overstated." On five items statistically significant differences appeared between the two occupational groups, and in all cases general managers were in the direction of greater agreement with the statements: (1) "Private enterprise is fair to workers," (2) "Less regulation of business is good for the USA," (3) "Labor unions do not serve the best interests of workers," (4) "National news media coverage is biased," and (5) "Social programs should be cut, not defense spending."

For most of the ten statements, more disagreement occurred within the news director group than within the general manager group. These statements did not raise fundamental First Amendment concerns. There was news director consensus on the three statements concerning environmental problems, social program cuts, and farm subsidies. News directors tended to disagree that national news media bias existed, while general managers tended to agree.

Discussion

A majority of both groups considered themselves politically “middle of-the-road.” However, more general managers than news directors considered themselves “conservative,” while more news directors than general managers considered themselves “liberal.” Nearly half of the general managers identified with the Republican Party, while half of the news directors called themselves “independent.” Thus, while both groups lean toward the center, the general managers are more likely to tilt slightly to the right of center. These self-reports remained consistent when compared with their responses to broadcast regulation and social issue statements.

Both groups support self-regulation by broadcasters as opposed to government control. This is evidenced by their strong agreement with the statement, “Stations should be free to make all programming decisions.” At the same time, however, the general manager group favored an FCC ban on indecent programs. And both groups looked to the public as the best judge on whether a program is too violent. So, for the most part general managers and news directors prefer their own judgments, and those of audience members, rather than those of the government.

In the present study, First Amendment views and business orientations were rarely in conflict. General managers supported the First Amendment when that position was good for business. News directors, while not as pro-business as general managers, show some support for business freedoms.

Two major response patterns emerged from the present data set: (1) the older, politically conservative broadcast general manager who was likely to be more deeply embedded in the community, and (2) the younger, politically independent news director who was likely to be on the move. On political issues such as business regulation, private enterprise, social programs, media bias, and labor unions there were response differences between occupational groups. General managers gravitated toward the pro-business orientation. However, on political issues such as abortion, the budget deficit, the environment, trust of politicians and farm subsidies - issues affecting society at large - there were no significant differences between groups in the present study.

The present study was limited to one point in time, one narrow geographic area (two midwestern states), and two specific occupational groups. Obviously, these data need to be replicated in a random national sample. The present study can be seen as a fairly narrow aspect of a large and complex study of mass communicators. In the case of general managers and news directors of local stations, their impact goes well beyond news programming. These broadcast managers influence everything from community and station image to entertainment programming and business concerns.

This research explored the political and social views of general managers and news directors as occupational groups. The study of occupational roles, long ignored in the research of broadcast management, provides an encouraging opportunity to generalize about these mass communicators. Despite the temptation to pit First Amendment values against business orientations, these data suggest that the two occupational groups can be supportive of both positions in most cases. Future research needs to examine news director roles in making business decisions that preserve their First Amendment views.

Notes

1. Dennis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory, An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 1987), 138.
2. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York Pantheon Books, 1979), 78-81; Warren Breed, "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis," *Social Forces*, 33,4 (1955): 326-335.
3. George Comstock, *The Evolution of American Television* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1989).
4. Ehjamin H. Bagdikian, "The U.S. Media: Supermarket or Assembly Line?" *Journal of Communication*, 35,3 (1985): 97-109.
5. Cecilie Gaziano and Kristen McGrath, "Newspaper Credibility and Relationships of Newspaper Journalists to Communities," *Journalism Quarterly* 64 (Summer/Autumn 1987): 317-328; and John C. Bustema, "Television Station Ownership Effects on Programming and Idea Diversity: Baseline Data," *Journal of Media Economics*, 1,2 (1988): 63-74.
6. See Peter K. Pringle, Michael F. Starr, and William E. McCavitt, *Electronic Media Management*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Focal Press, 1991); Richard J. Goedkoop, *Inside Local Television News* (Salem, Wis.: Sheffield Publishing, 1988); Barry L. Sherman, *Telecommunications Management, the Broadcast & Cable Industries* (New York McGraw-Hill, 1987); Peter E. Mayeux, *Broadcast News, Writing and Reporting* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1991); and Jerry Jacobs, *Changing Channels, Issues and Realities in Television News* (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing, 1990).
7. See Donald Super, "The Psychology of Careers," in Geoff Esland and Graeme Salaman, eds., *The Politics of Work and Occupations* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: The Open University Press, 1980), 112-117.
8. Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1989), 60.
9. David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist, A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
10. Sydney W. Head and Christopher H. Sterling, *Broadcasting in America*, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).
11. Sherman, *Telecommunications Management*.
12. "For the record," 14 January 1991, 124.
13. The authors add this caveat: "Yet, despite its pervasiveness, broadcasting is a comparatively small business. It employs less than 1 percent of the civilian work force, and its revenues account for less than 1 percent of the gross national product."
14. Bagdikian, "The U.S. Media."
15. Bagdikian, "The U.S. Media," 104.
16. Pringle, Starr and McCavitt, *Electronic Media Management*, 2,26.
17. Charles R. Wright, *Mass Communication, a Sociological Perspective*, 3rd edition (New York: Random House, 1986).
18. Weaver and Wilhoit, *The American Journalist*, 26.

19. McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 151.
20. Weaver and Wilhoit, *The American Journalist*, 26.
21. S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter, *The Media Elite: America's New Powerbrokers* (Bethesda, Md.: Adler & Adler, 1986).
22. McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 151.
23. Don R. Pember, *Mass Media in America*, 6th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 483.
24. See David L. Altheide, and Paul K. Rasmussen, "Becoming News," *Sociology of Work and Occupations* 3,2 (May 1976): 223-246; and James M. Bemstein and Stephen Lacy, "The In-depth Coverage and Commentary in Local Television News." Paper delivered to the Radio-Television Journalism Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Minneapolis, August 1990.
25. Vernon A. Stone, "The Changing Profiles of Broadcast News Directors." Paper delivered to the Radio-Television Journalism Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Norman, Okla., August 1986.
26. John M. Quarterer and Vernon A. Stone, "NDs and GMs Define News 'Profitability,'" *Communicator*, April 1989, 10-12; J. M. Quarterer and Vernon A. Stone, "NDs and GMs Describe their Managerial 'Marriages,'" *Communicator*, May 1989, 32-34; and Vernon A. Stone, "News Directors Move for Professional Advancement," *Communicator*, September 1988, 16-8.
27. Terry C. Blum, Paul M. Roman, and Deborah M. Tootle, "The Emergence of an Occupation," *Work and Occupations*, 15,1 (February 1988): 96-114.
28. Super, "The Psychology of Careers," 112-117.
29. Super, "The Psychology of Careers."
30. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1980).
31. Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 5th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1989).
32. The yearbook is more comprehensive than other directories (e.g., RTNDA) in that it lists by station rather than by membership of individuals.
33. Steven R. Brown, *Political Subjectivity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980).
34. Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory; Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).
35. Don A. Dillman, *Mail and Telephone Surveys, the Total Design Method* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979). The response rate might have been higher had we used a telephone follow-up. However, budgetary restrictions prevented this. Further, telephone follow-ups raise the potential of introducing response bias.
36. The reminder post-card and a second mailing to nonrespondents raised the response rate by 15.8 percent, adding 51 surveys to the total.

37. See Bruce Garrison and Michael B. Salwen, "Professional Orientations of Sports Journalists: A Study of Associated Press Sports Editors," *News Research Journal*, 10,4 (Summer/Fall 1989): 78. That study had a 40 percent response rate, and the authors continued: "Although this response rate appears low, it is not out of line with mail surveys, especially mail surveys of 'elite' or management-level populations." There were ten respondents who were not classified as either a general manager or news director (ninety-six general managers, seventy-three news directors and ten others) for purposes of the analyses of group differences. This included program, farm and sports directors.

38. The response rate from Iowa was just above 50 percent, and the response rate from Nebraska was over 60 percent. The response rates for each of the two occupational groups under study were above 50 percent.

39. The average age for general managers in the sample was 43, and the average age for news directors was 37. Among general managers, 92.6 percent were white, 6.3 percent were native American and 1.1 percent responded "other." This group was 91.7 percent male. Among news directors, 97.3 percent were white, 1.4 percent were black and 1.4 percent responded native American. The news director group was 76.7 percent male.

40. For general managers in the sample, 76.6 percent were above the \$35,000 mark, and 53.3 percent were above \$50,000 in reported household annual income. For the news director group, 61.9 percent were below \$35,000 (36.6 percent, \$20,000-35,000; 21.1 percent, \$10,000-20,000; and 4.2 percent below \$10,000). In the most recent census data available, the median household income in the United States was \$32,191. U.S. Census Data (1988) reported 45.7 percent of households above \$35,000, including 25.7 percent above \$50,000. See U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, in *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2990, 110th edition (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), tables 726727,450. The latest national survey of news director salaries reports the median income for television news directors was \$44,990, and the median income for radio news directors was \$18,200. See Vernon A. Stone, "Salaries lag cost of living," *Communicator*, February 1991, 12-14.

41. In the sample, all news director respondents reported formal education beyond high school, while 12.6 percent of responding general managers did not continue beyond high school. News directors were more likely to have received a college diploma (63 percent versus 35.8 percent for GMs). However, high percentages of general managers reported attending graduate school (21 percent versus 10.9 percent) and receiving graduate degrees (8.4 percent versus 6.8 percent). General managers were more likely to have studied business or liberal arts (other than mass communication), while news directors were more likely to have studied journalism or mass communication.

42. For general managers, the party affiliation percentages were: Democrat, 15.6 percent; Republican, 47.8 percent; and Independent, 36.7 percent. For news directors, the distribution was: Democrat, 20.6 percent; Republican, 29.4 percent; and Independent, 50.0 percent.

43. A 67-year-old white male who called himself a conservative independent.

44. A 27-year-old white male who called himself a Democrat. After striking-out "liberal" on the survey, he replaced it with "progressive." He also noted that he was "hoping for an insurgent, viable, left third party."

TABLE 1
*Comparison of General Manager and News Director Responses on the
 Effects of Government Broadcast Regulation on their Station*

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Means*</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>t Value</i>	<i>2-tail probability**</i>
Government exerts too much control	GMs	3.60	0.96	3.58	.000
	NDs	3.05	1.03		
FCC regulations are too stringent	GMs	3.24	0.94	2.74	.007
	NDs	2.85	0.89		
The fairness doctrine should be reinstated	GMs	2.72	1.07	1.03	n.s.
	NDs	2.55	1.01		
Out-takes on news stories should be privileged	GMs	3.62	1.05	-1.11	n.s.
	NDs	3.79	0.95		
A ban on indecent programs is good for broadcasting	GMs	3.50	1.27	2.66	.009
	NDs	2.99	1.21		
Stations should be free to make all programming decisions	GMs	3.75	0.98	-0.46	n.s.
	NDs	3.82	1.03		
The public is the best judge on whether a program is too violent	GMs	3.32	1.16	-0.50	n.s.
	NDs	3.41	1.10		

*The five-point scale was: 5=strongly agree; 4=agree; 3=neutral; 2=disagree; and 1=strongly disagree.

**The sample sizes for each group were: General Managers (N=96) and News Directors (N=73). The pre-set level of statistical significance was the conventional .05 test.

TABLE 2
*Comparison of General Manager and News Director Responses
on their Views about Society*

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Means*</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>t Value</i>	<i>2-tail probability**</i>
Less regulation of business is good for the U.S.A.	GMs	3.71	0.97	4.28	.000
	NDs	3.04	1.03		
Private enterprise is fair to workers	GMs	3.79	0.82	5.20	.000
	NDs	3.11	0.87		
A woman has the right to decide about an abortion	GMs	3.35	1.46	-1.35	n.s
	NDs	3.65	1.39		
Taxes need to be raised to cut the budget deficit	GMs	2.64	1.25	-0.77	n.s
	NDs	2.79	1.26		
Environmental problems are overstated	GMs	2.37	1.10	0.82	n.s
	NDs	2.24	1.00		
Social programs should be cut, not defense spending	GMs	2.51	1.03	2.75	.007
	NDs	2.08	0.93		
Politicians cannot be trusted	GMs	3.26	0.92	1.58	n.s
	NDs	3.03	0.93		
Farm subsidies should be eliminated	GMs	2.78	1.00	1.21	n.s
	NDs	2.60	0.90		
National news media coverage is biased	GMs	3.36	1.05	2.85	.005
	NDs	2.89	1.06		
Labor unions do not serve the best interests of workers	GMs	3.67	0.87	3.83	.000
	NDs	3.14	0.92		

*The five-point scale was: 5=strongly agree; 4=agree; 3=neutral; 2=disagree; and 1=strongly disagree.

**The sample sizes for each group were: General Managers (N=96) and News Directors (N=72). The pre-set level of statistical significance was the conventional .05 test.