

PUTTING THE BEST NEWS FORWARD: THE INFLUENCE OF PRESSURE TO BE
A COMMUNITY BOOSTER ON COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER GATEKEEPERS

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THOMAS PANTERA
Dr. Timothy Vos, Thesis Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the [thesis or dissertation] entitled

**PUTTING THE BEST NEWS FORWARD: THE INFLUENCE OF PRESSURE TO BE
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presented by Thomas Pantera,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Timothy Vos

Professor George Kennedy

Professor Clyde Bentley

Professor Johanna Reed Adams

This thesis is dedicated to editors and reporters who work on the ground in small communities. Their professionalism in the face of low pay, long hours and the ignorance of others of how our profession works – including, sometimes, those to whom they answer – is what continues to make journalism important.

This thesis also is dedicated to the woman I love, Karon Martin. Her love, support, help and encouragement throughout the often intense thesis process – and, in fact, through my entire time in graduate school – truly eased the burden of an often titanic workload. Whatever success I may have in the years to come will be due in no small part to her.

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Dr. Timothy Vos, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine whether newspaper editors feel pressure to be a community booster and how such pressure affects their gatekeeping process. The study used a qualitative method, consisting of semi-structured interviews with 14 Missouri community newspaper editors. Results revealed that while editors and editor/publishers felt some pressure from both internal and external sources at their newspapers, editors' gatekeeping process remained largely unaffected, with gatekeeping decisions made more on the basis of journalistic values like balance, fairness and independence rather than in response to any perceived pressure to either give stories a positive slant or kill stories that showed negative aspects of the community. The principal conclusion is that while some pressure exists, it is merely one factor in gatekeeping decisions and does not carry more weight than other factors.

1. Introduction

Gatekeeping is perhaps one of the most difficult functions of journalism. It requires that journalists not only keep a firm grounding in professional practices and standards, but that they also stay sensitive to what readers both need and want to know and see in the newspaper.

Newspapers often function as the face of a community. They recount what is going on there to those both inside and outside the immediate area. And community members often have strong emotional and social ties to the local paper; they view it not as an independent business, but an extension of where they live, and are often keenly aware of the picture of their home it portrays – and how that might influence both residents and outsiders.

In an era of economic distress in smaller communities, that means there can be pressure on community newspaper editors to act as community boosters – to emphasize good news and downplay bad news to make the community more attractive to both current and prospective residents and businesses. On a more individual level, readers and advertisers do not want their failures, mistakes and foibles laid out for the public, as is shown in some of the interviews conducted for this research. It is not uncommon for editors to hear pleas from people who have been in criminal court – or even divorce court -- to keep that news out of the paper, or from business people to have their misfortunes downplayed

or ignored. In a sense, some people expect newspapers to serve as boosters of individuals as much as the community.

But boosterism may have a positive side as well. It can be a means for showing pride in one's community, especially in a time when smaller communities face economic and social challenges that larger communities do not.

For a newspaper editor, the first step in showing what is going on in the community is determining what goes in the paper and what stays out. The tone and content of stories matter, but the editor's gatekeeping function plays a crucial, early role in a newspaper's portrayal of the community.

Because even the most rudimentary outsider's understanding of a newspaper editor's job recognizes the gatekeeping function (even if it is not called by that exact term), those who seek to influence newspaper content often will contact the editor. If the editor serves as a liaison between the readership and advertisers and staff, those both inside and outside the newspaper will seek to influence his gatekeeping decision-making. For community members who want to see the community portrayed in the best light, that influence can come in the form of pressure to play up stories showing good things about the community and downplay stories that show its negative aspects.

The current research will focus on how pressure to be a community booster affects community newspaper editors' view and practice of their gatekeeping function.

The researcher is focusing on community newspaper editors because of their close relationship to readers. My own background is in community newspapers, and one of the

first things I learned in my career was that the content of my newspaper would invariably provoke immediate and vocal reactions from readers and advertisers. Whenever I did a story, chances were good that I would end up within days standing in line at the grocery store with a source, a reader or an advertiser with an opinion on that story – and they were seldom reticent to let me know that opinion.

While my undergraduate education in journalism did cover the gatekeeping function, some of the intangible aspects of that were not often discussed. No one ever told me how to handle a reader who felt slighted by a story or who disagreed with its point. Neither did anyone ever tell me that readers, particularly those in smaller communities, have a definite interest in how the newspaper portrays their home and feel they should have some influence over that portrayal. It was only in those discussions at the grocery store or local coffee shop that I began to realize how keen and immediate was interest in what the newspaper did.

Yet, those discussions often were with readers who had an imperfect understanding of a journalist's job. They often did not realize that their suggestions might raise questions of professional practices and ethics. If we disagreed over what the paper should be doing and how it should be doing it, presenting my case sometimes was a matter of asserting professional and ethical concerns.

But it also was a question of balancing reader and advertiser concerns with those practices and ethics. Particularly when the differences between reader desires and

professional practices were not clear-cut, in making any gatekeeping decisions a journalist often must take what readers say into account.

Thus, the current research examines how community editors do that balancing and how such pressure plays into the gatekeeping process. Subjects were asked how much pressure they perceive to be community boosters, how important boosterism is to their readers and how it affects how they make gatekeeping decisions, as well as the decisions themselves.

This research could have important implications for journalism because it would help define and refine the way editors and reporters make those decisions. Gatekeeping will always be as much art as science; there is no checklist for what should go in each issue of the newspaper and decision-making processes are often split between the brain and the heart. But a deeper understanding of at least one influence on those decisions could provide guideposts for those who make them.

2. Concepts and theory

Much has been added to gatekeeping theory in the years since David Manning White first applied the concept to journalism in 1950. It has been analyzed on a macro level, and studies like that of Donahue et al. (1989) have started to examine specific factors that go into gatekeeping decisions. But even that work needs to be expanded to examine editors' actual thought processes in gatekeeping.

There are few definitions of "boosterism" provided in scholarly sources. What definitions exist are largely operational. Short (1999) defines it in terms of two discourses. One is a positive portrayal of the city that aims to attract investment, spur development and affect local politics; the second involves control of "the dark side that has to be contained, controlled or ignored" (Short, 1999: 40).

As part of a study of community response to what he calls "Urban Propaganda Projects," Boyle (1997) gives a list of the kind of projects that qualify as civic boosterism: the use of public art and street furniture, construction of heritage centers, organization of "hallmark events," newspapers, the use of posters and advertisements and "new inscriptions into the built fabric of the city itself" (Boyle, 1997: 1982). Boyle lists newspapers as an instrument of community boosterism. Operationally, that means

coverage of all of those other instruments and the kind of positive effects such boosterism can produce.

For purposes of this study, “boosterism” will be defined as the desire and pressure to portray a community in a favorable light by playing up stories that make it look good (for example, portraying local government as efficient and congenial, detailing local business successes and highlighting local people participating in the community), and downplaying stories that are less favorable (for example, crime, scandal and governmental conflict). But boosterism is not necessarily negative; at its best, the impulse toward boosterism shows itself as community pride.

Traditionally, “community” has been defined as “geographically based social groups that are usually rural in nature” (Hatcher, 2008: 2). Hatcher calls for that definition to be expanded to include communities defined by ethnicity, race and religion; that are focused on specific goals or issues; or that are connected by “a common piece of popular culture, such as a popular book or an Internet game” (Hatcher, 2008: 4-5).;

In the current study, “community” will be defined largely geographically as the main circulation area of each paper. But that also takes into account Hatcher’s expanded definition, including a larger element to the community. Many people who do not live in communities (for example, residents who move away after a long period of residence) often still have an emotional tie to it and thus may exert pressure, although less forcefully.

“Gatekeeping” was defined in White’s seminal 1950 study as the selection of what goes in the newspaper and what does not, a selection made by a reporter or editor who decides what gets through the gate and into the news channel as represented by the newspaper’s content. But it is more than that.

... [It is] how messages are shaped, timed for dissemination, and handled. In fact, gatekeeping in mass communication can be seen as the overall process through which the social reality transmitted by the news media is constructed, and is not just a series of “in” and “out” decisions (Shoemaker and Vos, et al., 2001: 233).

In other words, gatekeeping also has to do with the spin messages are given and their intent. Thus, a gatekeeper who seeks to promote the community not only will let positive stories through the gate and keep out negative ones; the gatekeeper also will seek to let through stories that, in the aggregate, present a positive picture of the community. This study’s definition of “gatekeeping” will thus include both what stories are let through the gate and the impression of the community stories seek to give.

There are ancillary questions as well having to do with agenda setting and framing. Part of the study’s examination of gatekeeping will take into account how the community’s agenda is set and what role the local newspaper plays in that. Framing helps determine what angle a story on a given subject will take. Once the community’s agenda is explicated, and once the angle of the story is determined, the editor has a more refined idea of what the story actually will say; the editor must know how relevant the story is to

the community's agenda and whether it takes into account the issues involved before he can determine whether the story will fit through the gate.

“Pressure” will be defined as both overt and subtle. When overt, it can take the form of threats by advertisers to withdraw their business if stories are unfavorable or, conversely, promises to increase their business if stories are favorable, or threats by readers to cancel subscriptions or otherwise stop buying the publication. When subtle, it can take the form of suggestions that gatekeeping should be done differently, that use of unfavorable stories can give the community a black eye or give a skewed version of how life is there.

“Gatekeeping function” is defined as the criteria editors use to decide what goes in the newspaper and the desired story angles that get a story run and how the editor ranks and uses those criteria in decision-making.

3. Literature review

Pressure for newspapers to act as community boosters goes back a long way; in fact, there is some historical tradition of community boosterism in journalism. During the westward expansion of the United States, newspapers were sometimes started with the express purpose of promoting new cities that sprang up in previously unsettled areas.

Huntzicker (1998) noted that “some town boosters hired editors; some lent them money to start their businesses, and others gave them town lots to increase the newspaper’s stake in town prosperity” (Huntzicker, 1998: 75).

The fortunes of newspaper editors and their newspapers were tied to the fortunes of the new cities, making their journalism often coincide with town boosters’ goals. “Editors depended on optimism to assure the stability of their towns and on exaggeration to attract new settlers” (Huntzicker, 1998: 75).

But boosterism only worked for the newspapers as long as it worked for the towns. If those who started a new town were not as successful as they had hoped, ran out of money or just left to start anew elsewhere, the newspaper failed along with the town (Huntzicker, 1998: 75). Still, the practice continued into the 20th century, particularly in the southwest United States (Huntzicker, 1998: 75).

Newspapers engaged in boosterism even in established cities. Northington (1992) notes that William Allen White, an important figure in early 20th century journalism as editor of the Emporia, Kansas, Gazette, “personified local boosterism and used the newspaper in concert with his own active involvement in local groups and campaigns to boost Emporia” and that such action was typical of editors at that time (Northington, 1992: 221). In the wake of societal changes in the 1970s and 1980s, increased attention paid to journalism ethics caused some to question whether it was proper for newspapers to become overly involved in community affairs, forcing editors and publishers to reconcile journalistic values of truth telling, objectivity and independence with the need to promote the newspaper’s own business and be good citizens (Northington, 1992: 221).

While the focus of community boosterism has changed from getting towns going to keeping them going, the question of whether to give in to pressure to be a community booster is not purely one of economics. It also is a question of how the newspaper and its staff members fit into the community’s social fabric.

Some research has examined how newspaper editors are able to become part of that social fabric. Nah and Chung (2011) examined how the demographic characteristics of editors affected how that was done, while Hindman et al. (2011) studied reciprocal social relationships among newspaper staffers and community members.

Community newspapers often operate in less pluralistic, more tight-knit communities. Readers who have spent their lives in a community have developed strong personal ties with each other. Such bonds are not easily broken and becoming part of that social

network can be a delicate business. Because reporting news accurately requires journalists to be plugged in to the community's social network, they must have a certain amount of "social capital" to do the work effectively. Scholars define social capital as "connections or networks among individuals and groups that create trust, norms and values so that community members can solve public problems, build common goods and direct community change" (Nah and Chung, 2011: 35). It is a way not just to build connections, but to establish and reach common goals. That is particularly important in smaller, more homogenous communities, where journalists often develop close relationships with community residents.

How well an editor fits into a community often is tied to demographic characteristics. Nah and Chung (2011) sought to tie editors' demographic characteristics to their building of social capital.

Because journalists must move among all groups within the community, they often fulfill a kind of special, dual role. They work with community residents to strengthen their hometowns, while at the same time they are seen as people who can "mediate, facilitate or coordinate between community elites – public officials, local politicians, business CEOs, etc. – and ordinary citizens" (Nah and Chung, 2011: 35).

Some have criticized journalists for forging poor connections with the communities in which they work. Advocates of public journalism, in particular, have urged journalists to focus on stories that community members are concerned about and to cover them in a

way that addresses readers as citizens and gives them information that enables them to exercise their citizenship (Nah and Chung, 2011: 36).

But focusing on stories of community concern can be tricky. If a community's approach to problem-solving is to simply put the best face forward, there may be pressure on the newspaper to run happy, "touchy-feely" stories at the expense of more solution-oriented, if painful, journalism. If an editor seeks to operate under strong journalistic values of independence and objectivity, and wants the community to really understand the good even discomfoting stories can ultimately do, he must be seen as credible by the community. That means community journalists must actively work to forge strong ties with local readers, thus building their social capital (Nah and Chung, 2011: 37).

In a study of Kentucky newspaper editors, the researchers found that their subjects had "moderate levels" of social trust and were "moderately engaged in community activities" (Nah and Chung, 2011: 39).

They did find some demographic differences among editors. Female editors had more trust in people and more organizational affiliations. Older editors were more likely to have larger networks within the community and to participate in community activities. More educated editors had more trust in people. Editors with higher incomes and strong religious affiliations had larger community networks. Surprisingly, editors with more job experience were more likely to have smaller networks, but more of them (Nah and Chung, 2011: 41).

The study did not address questions of gatekeeping or news judgment. While participating more in the community has advantages for community newspaper editors, the stronger networks and greater number of community ties also provide avenues through which people in those communities can pressure the editor to steer news in the direction they want to see. Increased social capital and the personal relationships it forges could, in a sense, arm editors against undue influence on their news judgment. But an editor would also have to make sure those connections do not lead him to identify too much with the community to the point where it raises ethical and professional questions about his job performance.

Hindman and Yamamoto (2011) noted that social participation and the accompanying interpersonal trust can boost “generalized reciprocity” in the community, making community members more likely to look out for each other – including the newspaper editor. Using social trust as a dependent variable, they hypothesized that more pluralistic communities would have less social trust (Hindman and Bergen, 2011: 841), but that the impact of newspaper use on social trust would be higher in more structurally pluralist communities (Hindman and Bergen, 2011: 844).

The study found no evidence that the relationship between community structural pluralism and newspaper use could predict levels of social trust. “This indicates that the frequency of reading a newspaper was positively associated with social trust across all of the communities included in this study ... In spite of the vast differences in size, the relationship with social trust remained essentially the same” (Hindman and Bergen, 2011: 852).

Such findings could have implications for how community members view the newspaper's role in the community. On one hand, if readers place more social trust in the newspaper, they could be less apt to apply pressure toward boosterism because they will trust the newspaper to put the best face on the community. Or on the other hand, more trusting readers may be apt to place more pressure on the newspaper because they may feel its goals – as reflected in the kinds of stories it runs – should coincide with their own.

Neither of those studies, nor any that the researcher has been able to find, examined how becoming part of the community, and the social pressure that flows from that, affects how editors actually practice journalism. A journalist must become part of his community to do his job effectively, but also must be able to stand apart from the community in making news judgments, including gatekeeping decisions. It appears no one has asked editors how they balance those two often contradictory aspects of their lives and work. The present research seeks to ask and answer that question.

Ultimately, decisions on community boosterism break down to ethical decisions for a journalist. In a study comparing ethical decision-making at larger newspapers in more cosmopolitan locations and smaller papers in smaller, more homogenous communities, Viall (1992) said the latter was less likely to report conflicts “in the interests of maintaining tranquility in society” (Viall, 1992: 47). She notes that in more homogenous, smaller communities, public decision-making is conducted by a more homogenous, smaller group of “power elites” than in larger cities, where there are more centers of power and influence (Viall, 1992: 46-47). In addition, citizens in those smaller communities sometimes fear that negative news will hinder efforts to improve the

local economy (Viall, 1992: 48). Community journalists, who are part of smaller staffs, also work in relative professional isolation and have less support in adhering to journalistic values that may conflict with community values, putting additional pressure on them to pay more attention to community values when the two conflict; thus, even within the community newspaper newsroom, “values encouraged are more likely to be in line with community values.” (Viall, 1992: 49). Community newspaper journalists will thus be more likely to rank higher such values as community acceptance, having a stable advertising base and community interconnectedness (Viall, 1992: 50).

Pressure to be a community booster can come from readers who want to see “more good news” in the local paper. But a more common pressure on gatekeepers is that from advertisers -- either indirectly, through advertisers’ contacts in the newspaper’s advertising department, or directly, through personal contact with editors. Those advertisers often see promotion of their own business as an element of promotion of the community as a whole

To the extent anyone has studied the effects of community pressure on how journalists do their jobs, it has been examined in the context of its economic aspects (Nyilasy and Reid, 2011; An and Bergen, 2007). Studies have examined both how advertisers tried to influence news content and how successful they were, and how pressure was applied through advertising directors who traditionally have not been allowed to influence decisions on editorial content.

Nyilasy and Reid (2011) noted that the question partially is one of definition.

What is “economic censorship,” “advertiser pressure” or “sponsor interference” for ethics academics seems to be value-neutral conceptualizations of “product placement in print,” “entertainment/advertising convergence” or “value added media buy” for some advertising practitioners (Nyilasy and Reid, 2011: 539).

And with the economic pressures on newspapers, print media probably are the most likely to give in to the wishes of advertisers who see the paper primarily as a vehicle for promoting local business (Nyilasy and Reid, 2011: 539).

A 2011 survey of both newsroom personnel and advertising directors showed it was common for advertisers to attempt to influence story selection and story content, and to threaten to withdraw advertising or actually withdraw it. There were fewer cases of advertisers actually attempting to kill stories, newspapers giving in to overt pressure or practicing self-censorship (Nyilasy and Reid, 2011: 544). While instances of advertisers pressuring newspapers varied, attempts at influence more often came in the form of economic pressure (Nyilasy and Reid, 2011: 544).

When it came to attempts in which advertisers sought to influence news coverage by working through the newspaper’s advertising director, most editors saw no problem with taking a press release from the advertising director, but they were less accepting of a request to have lunch with an advertiser or use advertisers as story sources (Nyilasy and Reid, 2011: 544).

The researchers found only partial support for their hypothesis that smaller newspapers were more likely to feel advertiser pressure, although they also found that smaller

newspapers were more likely to respond to such pressure. Employees of smaller newspapers were “more permissive in their personal ethical norms prescribing normative behaviors with advertisers.” For example, employees of smaller newspapers considered it more acceptable to use advertisers as sources for stories and to ask the editor to write a story about an advertiser (Nyilasy and Reid, 2011: 545).

The study also found that while there was “a significant correlation between economic pressure and personal policy permissiveness,” the success of both overt attempts at influence and the degree of self-censorship in the newsroom were not related to personal policy permissiveness (Nyilasy and Reid, 2011: 547).

Overall, the study found that while advertiser pressure is widespread, it does not frequently succeed; that smaller newspapers do not differ from larger ones in any aspect of advertiser pressure; that employees of small newspapers are no more permissive in their personal ethical norms than those at larger newspapers; and that the more economic pressure a newspaper is under, the more permissive will be its employees’ ethical norms.

The researchers speculated that advertiser pressure actually has decreased because editors realize that resistance to such pressure is, in the long term, beneficial to editorial integrity. But they also speculated that advertisers have learned to apply more subtle pressure, causing newspapers to censor themselves (Nyilasy and Reid, 2011: 547).

The researchers noted that in practice, giving in to advertiser pressure in the news columns poses serious ethical problems. Doing so hurts the status of newspapers as a vital tool of the public’s right to know. And on a practical level, “selling out” to

advertisers can undermine credibility with the larger readership (Nyilasy and Reid, 2011: 548).

An and Bergen (2007) looked specifically at the question of whether newspaper advertising directors influence content in the news pages. They noted that earlier research showed that changes in the newspaper business lead to greater market orientation, leading in turn to killing or softening of potential stories to avoid offending advertisers and development of stories aimed explicitly at keeping advertisers happy. They theorized that such practices are more likely to happen at smaller newspapers in uncertain markets (An and Bergen, 2007: 112-13).

The researchers surveyed advertising directors, presenting them with four scenarios that were increasingly ethically questionable and asking whether it was proper for a salesperson to attempt to influence how the newsroom deals with a particular story. The four scenarios involved asking a reporter to use as a source someone from a large local advertiser in copy for a special section; selecting a photo based on its inclusion of an advertiser's logo; using a feature story written by an advertiser; and not covering the arrest of a person associated with a large local advertiser (An and Bergen, 2007: 114).

For the first scenario (using an advertiser as a source), advertising directors at smaller papers found making the request acceptable more than did advertising directors at larger papers, justifying it because special sections are intended primarily to serve advertisers. Advertising directors at smaller papers also were more likely to accept the second scenario (photo selection) than were those at larger papers. The same was true for the

third scenario (feature story written by advertiser). That once again held for the fourth scenario (not covering an advertiser's arrest), although overall unacceptability of that was strongest of the four scenarios (An and Bergen, 2007: 115-117).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the responses showed that "advertising directors are willing to appease their advertisers, and are also willing to positively respond to advertisers' requests." Ad directors at smaller papers in more tenuous markets were more likely to accept all four scenarios (An and Bergen, 2007: 118). The study also found that ad directors at chain-owned newspapers, which sometimes put greater emphasis on the bottom line, were more likely to attempt to influence editorial integrity, and that ad directors at chain-owned papers with small circulations were more likely to do so.

The combination of less market power and profit-hiking corporate culture suggests that advertising directors at small chain-owned newspapers are indeed more susceptible to advertisers' pressure than those at large independently owned newspapers (An and Bergen, 2007: 118-119).

Perhaps what is most disturbing about this study is the acceptance of the fourth scenario, the only one that involves actually killing a story. In the other scenarios, despite the very real ethical questions involved, it still is possible to provide useful information to a reader; with deft editing, any puffery could be removed, even in a story written by an advertiser. But the fourth scenario, killing a story about the arrest of an advertiser, involves actually suppressing news. There is no way to justify suppressing such information as anything other than an attempt to actually conceal an unfavorable story

from the readership; there is no ethical gray area. The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics is explicit in barring such a practice; it reads, “Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage” (SPJ Code of Ethics, n.d.).

Community newspapers are hardly unique in feeling pressure from advertisers. Both larger newspapers and other kinds of publications (albeit with similar market characteristics) have been subject to such pressure and its attendant problems.

Hays and Reisner (1990) found that a depressed agricultural economy was taking its toll on farm magazines, which have had to fight both more competition from computer-based sources of information and declining revenue as farm suppliers cut ad budgets -- and on the editorial side, that poses the danger of compromising editorial integrity (Hays and Reisner, 1990: 937).

The researchers’ survey of agricultural journalists asked whether they were getting pressure from advertisers and what their attitude toward such pressures was. Some of the agricultural journalists who responded to that survey said the threat of displeasing advertisers, and the need to stay in their good graces, were directly affecting editorial content of their publications and even causing advance censorship (Hays and Reisner, 1990: 938).

Nearly two-thirds of those responding said they’d been threatened with withdrawal of advertising from advertisers who did not like published copy. And nearly half said they had actually seen ads pulled, while nearly a fourth said advertisers had directly demanded

editorial copy as a condition of buying ads. Sixty-five percent said they had gotten calls from people pushing products or copy and almost the same number said such pressures had proved effective (Hays and Reisner, 1990: 939). A third of respondents said advertiser attempts to influence editorial copy was damaging the profession of agricultural journalism (Hays and Reisner, 1990: 941).

Once again, while research has shown the existence of economic pressure on newsroom staff, there has been little discussion of what actually happens when that pressure is applied. The studies contain few, if any, examples of actual editorial decisions that resulted from economic pressure and what the process was for arriving at those decisions. Again, the “how” and “why” questions that could be addressed through interviews have not been asked.

The pressure toward community boosterism is not always external. Some research has examined how journalists are pressured internally by the most powerful people in any business -- senior management, up to and including the publisher. While a journalist can appeal to professional principles in making a case to resist pressure, that is more difficult to do when the disagreement comes with those responsible for running the paper itself. Studies have been conducted on how much influence a newspaper publisher can have on coverage of a given issue, how that internal pressure is applied and the effect of that pressure on journalists’ ethical standards (Donohew, 1967; Breed, 1955; Birkhead, 1986).

As the newspaper’s owner or owner’s representative, the publisher’s role is both to set broad policies and to ensure that those policies are carried out; he gives the marching

orders to newsroom management, most directly to the editor (Birkhead, 1986). Those policies may include making community boosterism part of the newspaper's policy.

Often, a community editor answers directly to the publisher; at most, there may be one other person between them. It is thus difficult for an editor to find allies in any dispute with the publisher, particularly if the workplace culture is particularly autocratic. An editor can have the highest possible journalistic standards, but if the publisher is insistent and inflexible, only pressure at that level can prevent him from ordering an editor to violate journalistic norms.

Donohew (1967) studied how publisher attitudes and conception of community opinion affected newspaper gatekeepers' decisions. Combining content analysis with indicators of gatekeepers' attitudes, perceptions and conditions, the study used coverage of Medicare as a case study to determine the effects on gatekeeping.

The study found that a publisher's attitude on an issue was particularly important in determining whether a given newspaper gave favorable or unfavorable coverage to the then-current debate over Medicare. In fact, it was named as the single greatest influencing force within the news channel in which the gatekeepers operated (Donohew, 1967: 66-67).

The study noted less influence from perceptions of community opinion. It found that a publisher's estimate of how the community would have voted on Medicare had little effect on the relative amounts of favorable and unfavorable coverage of the issue (Donohew, 1967: 67-68).

Because today there are fewer community newspapers run by independent publishers, and because the debate over Medicare has shifted from starting it to keeping it going, Donohew's study may need updating. But it may be that the differences in the influence of independent community-newspaper publishers may be ones more of degree than anything else and that merits further study.

If newspaper management is to promote boosterism in the news columns, it requires either buy-in from or coercion of the rest of the editorial staff. As with any broad policy, there must be pressure for its imposition and a means of enforcing that policy. Within the news organization, publishers and other executives can exert pressure through social control of editors and reporters. Some researchers have focused on how that pressure extends down from the highest levels of management to the editors in the newsroom and reporters on the street.

Breed (1955) took a functional approach to how social control is extended in the newsroom. "In practice, we find the publisher does set news policy, and this policy is usually followed by members of his staff" (Breed, 1955: 326). But such pressure can be mitigated by journalists' adherence to ethical norms; the tendency of subordinates such as reporters to "have more 'liberal' attitudes ... than the publisher," and thus more likelihood to invoke those norms; and ethical strictures against the publisher ordering those below him to simply follow policy, defined as "a more or less consistent orientation shown by the paper" (Breed, 1955: 326-7).

New staff members often learn editorial policy “by osmosis” and once that process is sufficiently internalized write stories in a way that conforms to that policy as they observe it in co-workers and in editorial actions, including the way copy is edited and reprimanding of those who go against policy (Breed, 1955: 328). Staff members also are socialized as they learn about the characteristics and affiliations of newspaper executives and by seeing in newsroom meetings how overall content and individual stories are shaped (Breed, 1955: 329). Despite any objections they may have to a given policy, staff members often end up conforming because they submit to the authority of those above them; they feel obliged to or have esteem for their superiors; it enhances the chance of moving up in the organization; it helps keep the newsroom working atmosphere pleasant; and it aids in meeting the constant demand for news (Breed, 1955: 329-31).

If a staff member chooses to go against policy, the story can be killed or the staff member reprimanded. But staff members can sometimes be successful in violating policy. Policy can sometimes be vague. The reporter may know more about the story, and thus may be able to use that knowledge in writing it. He could plant the story with a wire service or other news organization and then submit it to his own editor, arguing it can no longer be ignored. If he is a beat reporter, he can assume more of an editorial, and thus gatekeeping, function; or, if he is a “star” reporter, can use that status to violate policy more easily than can lesser colleagues (Breed, 1955: 333-4).

Breed concluded that eliminating bias at a newspaper must start with the publisher, because the rewards of being a journalist come more internally from the organization,

rather than from readers – and thus, pressure must be applied on the top level of the organization (Breed, 1955: 334-5).

Even if a publisher applies no direct pressure to affect editorial content, the very corporate culture of the newsroom may have an effect. Journalists are socialized within their newspapers as well, giving yet another avenue for pressure toward shaping stories to fit through gates that are defined by boosterism. Gatekeeping is closely tied to autonomy, an important aspect of professionalism, and thus also has ethical implications. A gatekeeper who feels constrained by outside forces may be faced with a question of whether to violate professional ethical norms such as independence and objectivity under that kind of pressure.

In a 1986 study on that aspect of the issue, Birkhead noted that professions, by conventional definition, are occupations in which practitioners have a high degree of control over their work. “To accomplish what professions claim they contribute to society – disinterested public service – they insist upon a good deal of autonomy. This condition coincides with the most fundamental prerequisite of ethical behavior: the freedom to make decisions or take actions” (Birkhead, 1986: 37).

He noted that historically, marketing has been “the principal factor in shaping both the selection criteria of content and the form of the news story, a probing of readership conducted primarily by editors” (Birkhead, 1986: 41). He also noted an earlier study examining how some professional groups are subject to internal organizational controls and some of the ethical problems that could give rise to. That control comes in both

ideological and technical forms, the former involving the ability to determine how work serves the organization's goals and purposes (Birkhead, 1986: 42-43).

Workers who do not feel they have ideological control may face a threat to their own sense of ethics and may change their own goals and values to conform to the organization's – “a process of socialization and indoctrination, or disengaging from the problem altogether.” And ultimately, whether they fit in with journalistic norms or not, “corporate objectives instead become sanctioned as the profession's ends and values” (Birkhead, 1986: 43).

Ultimately, journalists find they must “share their work professionalism with the business of journalism – owners, managers and tacit allies in higher education – as part of the social bargain of professionalization” (Birkhead, 1986: 44).

The question remains, however, whether the pressures on community newspaper editors force them to take a different view of ethics than do editors at larger papers. Reader (2006) found that they do, largely because editors of smaller papers are more likely to base ethical decisions on community values rather than on journalistic values, in large part because the more intimate qualities of small-town life make them more connected to the community than their big-city brethren (Reader, 2006: 862). That does not mean that such decisions would necessarily be different; it simply means that community values are a bigger part of community journalists' calculus when it comes to deciding ethical questions.

Reader's 2006 study also dealt with journalists' views of how their newspaper is perceived in the community. He found that editors at larger papers described the public opinion of their newspaper as a matter of respect for the paper's work, while those at smaller papers said the public based its opinion of the paper on whether they feel it helps bring the community together by providing a forum for local concerns, even if the paper does not wholeheartedly agree with what is happening (Reader, 2006: 856-7). If that is indeed the case, it means community newspaper editors must factor in that concern for community connectivity when they make their gatekeeping decisions.

While past studies have looked at the effects of internal pressures in an economic sense, they badly need updating. Donahew's 1967 work and Breed's 1955 study were done at a time when newspapers faced vastly different economic competition than they do today; news consumers simply had fewer choices and it was easier for even small newspapers to make a profit. Breed's study was done when the Internet, which would radically change news distribution and deeply wound traditional newspaper business models, was in its infancy. With the economic pressures on newspapers much more intense now, that earlier research needs to be checked and undoubtedly updated.

When working in the larger community, journalists depend on professional values of independence, balance and fairness to put the brakes on boosterism, but sometimes those values are not entirely shared by segments of the public.

Ettema and Glasser (1998) note that when the penny press evolved in the 1830s, newspapers prided themselves on independence from political and business elites.

Journalists of the day, who saw themselves as muckrackers, disturbed their more conservative readers – particularly members of the political and business classes – but their reporting appealed to the working-class audience the penny press pursued. “The ideal of objectively reported fact allowed journalists, like scientists, to position themselves and their work as value free” (Ettema and Glaser, 1998: 65). But even today, some outside the profession question whether journalism’s values align with those of the larger society. “Contemporary journalism is often seen to be dangerously adversarial in its stance toward traditional values” (Ettema and Glaser, 1998: 66). And journalists must remain aware that journalistic values sometimes exist in tension with those of the larger community. “Reporters must learn to respect the idea that, beyond the newsroom, there exists a community and its values” (Ettema and Glaser, 1998: 69)

Some in the industry itself have called for changes in the very basis of news judgment. Such analysts are calling for a change in the traditional role of journalists as gatekeeper, urging them to rely less on maintaining traditional standards born out of professional practices and more on giving the public what it wants, and gauging how that change is being made (Giles, 1993; Beam, 1998, 2003).

“Sharing” their professionalism may mean that as gatekeepers, journalists will have to tailor news judgments more toward what readers and advertisers want to see in the paper, rather than basing such judgments strictly on traditional journalistic criteria. Increased sensitivity to opinions outside the newsroom has been called “market-oriented” journalism. Increasing economic pressure on community newspapers has led some to recommend that they become more “market-driven” – that is, that they tailor news

judgments more toward what readers and advertisers want to see in the paper, rather than basing them entirely on accepted professional norms (Giles, 1993; Carter, 2009). While some may be concerned that a greater focus on what readers want to see may lead to newspapers abrogating their public service function, defenders of market-driven journalism see it as simply a new orientation that preserves the medium's core values while enhancing its economic survival (Giles, 1993). And such an orientation has important long-term effects for the newspaper industry, in that it "forces a business to look at the future in a logical, structured, sustained manner while maintaining its creativity" (Carter, 2009: 88).

Giles called for "[A] redefinition of the concept of the customer that embraces ideas and innovation, that rewards agility in responding to new markets, new technologies, rapid demographic shifts," along with "a strengthening of core journalist values through sinking deeper roots into the communities newspapers serve and reestablishing the credibility of the news report in the minds of readers and advertisers" (Giles, 1993: 32-33).

He said that newspapers must move away from a sales-driven culture to "one that identifies what customers and potential customers want and then shapes the organization to provide that" (Giles, 1993: 35). And perhaps most worrisome to traditional journalists, he called for advertising personnel to be stronger advocates for their customers in the newsroom (Giles, 1993: 36).

Such a call for more attention to advertiser and reader desires appears to be having an effect. Beam (1998) noted that as newspapers have faced stronger business challenges, many have focused more on market orientation.

“Rather than relying strictly on journalists’ expert judgment to decide what to publish in the newspaper, newsroom managers have encouraged reporters and editors to pay more attention to perceived reader interests. They also have asked reporters and editors to shape content to more closely conform to those reader interests” (Beam, 1998: 2-3).

Some have argued that that approach will enable newspapers to survive, but those critical of it have warned that it could cause newspapers to de-emphasize serious content for more frivolous stories; breaches the ethical separation between the newsroom and business office; and does not serve newspapers’ obligation to cover public affairs (Beam, 1998: 3).

Beam studied market orientation as defined by Kohli and Jaworski.

A market orientation entails 1) one or more departments engaging in activities geared toward developing an understanding of customers’ current and future needs and the factors affecting them, 2) sharing of this understanding across departments, and 3) the various departments engaging in activities designed to meet select customer needs (Beam, 1998: 4).

Beam compared market-oriented newsrooms with public service-oriented newsrooms, examining whether market-oriented newsrooms have a different mix of content; whether they are less inclined to take a stronger adversarial role in the community; whether they have different organizational goals; and whether senior editors at those organizations interact more with other departments of the newspaper, including the advertising department.

The study found that while newspapers with a strong market orientation used more special-interest and visual content, they were not necessarily less committed to using traditional content, including news of public affairs (Beam, 1998: 8). Beam speculated that rather than trading off market-oriented copy for copy seen as having a more traditional news value, editors in more market-oriented newsrooms simply ran a greater variety of stories (Beam, 1998: 10-11).

Newspapers with a strong market orientation were found to be more likely to take an adversarial stance with public and business officials and were “more inclined to want to publish investigations of consumer fraud” (Beam, 1998: 11).

Papers with a stronger market orientation also ranked higher on both the quality of their journalism and employee morale goals and were more likely to see as important a reputation for public-service journalism and good content. “In short, these results suggest that it may be incorrect to assume that organizations with a strong market orientation care less about the quality of their journalistic product and more about the bottom line than other newspapers” (Beam, 1998: 12).

Newspapers with a stronger market orientation did show more interaction between the newsroom and the advertising or business departments, something which traditionally has been discouraged to preserve editorial independence. “This tends to support assertions by critics of market-oriented journalism that the boundary between the newsroom and other parts of the organization can become blurred” (Beam, 1998: 14).

Beam concluded that the results of the study were somewhat counterintuitive, that newspapers with a weaker market orientation “appear to be somewhat less committed to providing traditional content – indeed, to content of all kinds.” That could mean that more market-oriented newspapers have made more focus on reader wants part of the organization’s own notions of what makes a good newspaper. “More simply put, maybe these days editors have concluded that a *good* newspaper is a market-oriented newspaper” (Beam, 1998: 16; emphasis in original). But he cautioned that the greater inter-departmental interactions at more market-oriented newspapers raises ethical questions about the independence of journalists in making news judgments (Beam, 1998: 17).

In a 2003 continuation of the study, Beam focused specifically on content differences between papers with strong and weak market orientations. That study used content analysis of 12 newspapers, half with “a relatively strong market orientation” and half with “a relatively weak market orientation” (Beam, 2003: 369). It found that while main display pages of all the newspapers included news about government and the public sphere, market-driven papers “publish proportionally fewer items about public life and

proportionally more items about lifestyle issues and sports,” areas thought to be attractive to readers (Beam, 2003: 369).

Beam’s research raises the possibility that market-oriented journalism does not mean pandering to audiences and advertisers, but instead means that the mix of content newspapers are publishing is changing while still retaining journalism’s traditional public-service function. That in turn would require some changes in gatekeeping criteria – for example, elevating some less-important stories the community may want over some stories that, while traditionally seen as having importance to public service, may attract fewer readers.

Beam hypothesized that newspapers with a stronger market orientation would “place less emphasis on content for the public sphere”; “place more emphasis on content for the private sphere”; “place more emphasis on content about sports and other amusements”; and “place less emphasis on investigative journalism” (Beam, 2003: 373).

The later study found that papers with a relatively strong market orientation indeed placed less emphasis on public-sphere content; at “strong” papers, such content made up 40.9% of the content, against 51% at “weak” papers (Beam, 2003: 377). Weaker papers showed greater emphasis on coverage of government and public affairs, while stronger papers had more coverage of sports, amusements and the private sphere (Beam, 2003: 378). Perhaps surprisingly, given the rest of the results, strong papers featured more investigative journalism and news analyses, although the proportion of such copy in all 12 papers studied was relatively small (Beam, 2003: 379).

Beam speculated that more market-driven newspapers still pay significant attention to public-affairs news because audiences actually want it; that professional control still remains in newsrooms with strong market orientation; and that newspapers are more broadly defining what is important, significant information for readers (Beam, 2003: 381). He also noted that strong papers seemed more inclined to run investigative stories or special reports, both of which are more expensive to produce (Beam, 2003: 382).

Those studies make a case for stronger market orientation, but again, the findings need to be translated into on-the-ground effects of market orientation on specific journalism functions, such as gatekeeping. In other words, studies done so far on market orientation lack specificity. To the extent that market forces may have a greater effect on gatekeeping than in the past, the current research examines the severity of that effect and whether it is the result of a conscious drive toward market orientation or is simply the result of piecemeal efforts to take more account of community desires.

The current study also examines how gatekeeping practices have changed and evolved in the more than half-century since White examined gatekeeping in 1950. Others have expanded on and refined gatekeeping theory since (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Donahue, Olien and Tichenor, 1989).

Judging how much of what readers want should go into the newspaper's daily budget has been part of gatekeeping since the concept was first defined. In his 1950 study, White noted that the gatekeeping criteria his subject, the wire service editor "Mr. Gates," used in accepting or rejecting stories were connected to his perceptions of what readers wanted

(White, 1950: 389). But he also questioned Mr. Gates about whether he had prejudices that could affect his choice of news stories. Mr. Gates said he was prejudiced against publicity-seekers and in favor of human interest stories, as well as ones that were “well-wrapped up and tailored to suit our needs (or ones slanted to conform to our editorial policies)” (White, 1950: 390). He saw readers as people of average intelligence and varied interests and abilities. “I believe they are entitled to news that pleases them (stories involving their thinking and activity) and news that informs them of what is going on in the world” (White, 1950: 390).

That would seem to make gatekeeping a highly subjective process, but later research highlighted its rationality. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) broke gatekeeping down into five levels of analysis: individual, communications routine, organizational, social institution and social system.

On the individual level, the researchers noted that a gatekeeping “is similar to the consumer decision-making process because gatekeepers are consumers, producers, and distributors of messages” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 39). During that process, gatekeepers identify alternatives in solving the problem of what goes in the newspaper. It is at this stage that outside influences enter the picture. “If a source controls the range of information available to a communication organization, then the individual communication worker’s decisions are influenced.” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 39).

Among the strategies used by individual gatekeepers is the risk model, in which “the gatekeeper evaluates the risk of losses or failures associated with each information unit,

selecting the one that entails the least risk” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 41). Those risks can be personal (how gatekeeping decisions would affect co-workers’ views of him) or organizational (how the decision to keep a story out or put it in would affect readers’ views of the paper). Such a model would give the gatekeeper a basis for evaluating whether either internal or external pressure to run or not run a given story would be troublesome, both to the paper’s relationship to the community and to any journalistic principles or practices with which such a story would be in conflict.

Such decisions are related to the gatekeeper’s professional role conceptions, which shape those gatekeeping choices (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 47). Shoemaker and Vos break down those role conceptions into broad categories. Among those are the disseminator, who sees his role as selecting information that comes along routinely; and the adversary, who actively seeks stories dealing with misdeeds by government and business (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 47). The latter would pose a particular problem for a gatekeeper who is under pressure to serve as a community booster, since stories of misdeeds by definition would make someone in the community – and by extension, the community itself – look bad.

At the communications routine level, an aspect Shoemaker and Vos identify as “management decisions” enables journalists to pick and choose from “seemingly limitless information from which to fashion news.” “Routines are developed by all organizations because routinization helps control the flow of work. It is for just such a purpose that journalists categorize events into five categories: soft news, hard news, spot news, developing news and continuing news” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 57). Management

decisions on hiring limit the number of reporters editors have to generate copy. But even if an editor had an unlimited personnel budget, management decisions on news hole limit the amount of space available for publishing news; even online, where space is not a concern, the number of hands available to produce news limits what can be done.

At the organizational level, the gatekeeper would have to deal with routines set and opinions held by those above him, primarily the publisher. Studies have shown that while good journalistic practice has held that a publisher's opinion should only be made known on the editorial page, in practice that opinion often influences news judgment – and gatekeeping decisions – to varying degrees (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 64).

But the publisher is not the only one who may apply pressure to steer gatekeeping decisions in directions favorable to the community. Particularly in a time of declining newspaper revenues, advertising directors also may influence news content, pressuring the gatekeeper to use criteria other than traditional journalism values in making decisions. “Media advertising directors see news content through the eyes of advertisers and sometimes advocate within the news organization for priorities based on advertisers’ criteria” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 69).

At the social institution level, gatekeepers must be concerned with those outside the organizations because “to the extent that media organizations respond by seeking to maximize income, markets will dictate the media content” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 76). If readers are displeased by news content, they simply will stop buying the paper. And more directly, if a large advertiser is displeased by news content and responds by

limiting, or even stopping, ad purchases, the market can directly affect not only the newsroom but the entire newspaper.

While there is some disagreement about how much the readership affects the market, some research indicates that journalists fear bad news will alienate readers and they may distort it to soften the blow (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 79). That is in part determined by whether a journalist is introjective, meaning he identifies with readers' feelings and values, or projective, meaning he feels the audience's feelings and values are the same as his (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 79).

But a more immediate organizational concern is the reaction of advertisers, who provide the bulk of a newspaper's revenue. Advertisers unhappy with a newspaper may withdraw their ads; organize a boycott; and warn the newspaper in advance of stories to which they may object. Those actions in turn could cause stories to be killed or buried, reporters to be disciplined or fired, the writing of puff pieces, the handing over of sections to the advertising department – or self-censorship by gatekeepers (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 81).

Even if the pressure is not direct, editorial gatekeepers make decisions knowing that advertising is responsible for the financial health of their publication. Bad news about advertisers is slighted, good news about advertisers is magnified, and news that puts audiences in a buying mood becomes more valuable. Gatekeepers can also agree to 'advertising-disguised-as-news in advertorials' ... or so-called

feature ads – those designed to look like editorial content (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 82).

Similar, although not as dramatic, pressure can come from sources, public relations agencies, interest groups and the government (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 84-92).

While Shoemaker and Vos treat the social system level of analysis from national and world perspectives, social systems also exist at the community level. Thus, the social system of an individual community makes up “the social environment’s structure [that] makes a difference in media content” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 99).

While increasingly wide-ranging systems up to the social system level all have an influence on gatekeeping, in practice the decisions at community newspapers come down to editors who often know the subjects of unfavorable stories and realize that whatever gatekeeping decision they make, someone will call them to account for it.

In a 1989 study on how structure and organizational constraints affected gatekeepers, Donahue, Olien and Tichenor found that personal loyalty to subjects of negative news stories was a concern to editors of both small weekly papers in relatively homogenous communities and editors of larger newspapers in more pluralistic communities.

The study noted accusations that “obsession with profits often deters gatekeepers from concentrating on their main job of gathering, interpreting and distributing information” (Donohue et al., 1989: 807). The researchers noted that editors of locally owned community newspapers often are concerned not just with journalistic functions, but also

with advertising and management. “Such editors are acutely concerned about economic survival and hence would be expected to emphasize advertising, circulation and operating profit” (Donohue et al, 1989: 808). At the same time, working in a small, homogenous community may create ethical and moral conflicts for editors, who must, for example, balance professional obligations to report a scandal against personal loyalty to a friend who may be involved in that scandal (Donahue et al, 1989: 808).

When it comes to the risk of losing advertising, the authors contend that while the editor of an urban daily can afford to run a story that loses an advertiser, loss of just one advertiser would have a relatively greater impact on a smaller community newspaper. That leads to a hypothesis that editors of community newspapers place a higher priority on advertising and those same editors perceived constraints related to reporting negative news about individuals in the community (Donohue et al, 1989: 809).

Interviews with editors asked for rankings of the relative importance in their decision-making of production, circulation, advertising and news-editorial; and asked them what kind of decisions were the toughest to make.

On the first question, all editors ranked news and editorial issues first. But advertising ranked as a higher concern for weekly editors in small, homogenous communities than it did for editors of corporate-owned daily papers in larger, more pluralistic communities (Donohue et al, 1989: 810).

Among all the editors interviewed, 44% ranked whether to report negative news about individuals as their toughest decision. Pressure from individuals and groups came in

third with 23%, behind news selection and display (33%). One editor was quoted as saying his toughest decisions involved “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” (Donohue et al, 1989: 810).

Editors also were questioned on how much effect pressure from individuals or groups who seek to have stories either put in or kept out of the paper affected decision-making. While one answer (“Keeping the publisher happy”) referred to internal pressures, the study found that such pressure has no more effect on community newspaper editors than it does on editors at larger papers (Donohue et al, 1989: 812).

Overall, the study found that the core journalism value of information dissemination trumps other concerns in the decision-making process, regardless of the size of the newspaper (Donohue et al, 1989: 812). But because the study was done in 1989, and rural communities have seen greater economic and social disruption in the more than two decades since, the findings of the study may need to be updated.

4. Methodology

The present research focuses on how community pressure toward boosterism affects community newspaper editors' gatekeeping process and gatekeeping decisions. It seeks to answer three research questions:

RQ1a: How is pressure toward boosterism exerted on community journalists?

RQ1b: How overt or subtle is the pressure and how is it manifested?

RQ2: How does that pressure influence gatekeeping decisions?

The study used a qualitative method consisting of semi-structured interviews of community newspaper journalists.

Interview subjects were chosen with help from the Missouri Press Association. Newspapers were picked from throughout Missouri and ranged in circulation from about 2,000 to 33,000.

In academic literature, the definition of "community newspaper" is somewhat imprecise; some studies base it on population, such as communities of 60,000 or fewer (Donahue et al., 1989: 809). Others do it by newspaper circulation, such as newspapers with a circulation of less than 50,000, which one study called "a common benchmark used by

community journalism scholars” (Nah and Chung, 2011: 37). That leaves the definition somewhat open for researchers.

Subjects were chosen from newspapers with circulations of 33,000 or less in Missouri. While the choice is somewhat arbitrary, circulation at that level implies several factors. It implies that the community is relatively small and that the journalists working at the newspaper have frequent, day-to-day contact with readers due to that small size. Thus, the newspaper’s readers and advertisers would see the newspaper as one of the main outlets, if not the only one, for information about the community to spread to the larger world. The newspapers chosen included six dailies, five weeklies and two biweeklies to give a broad picture of community newspapers.

There also are economic and social factors in that choice. Papers with smaller circulations generally would run on a smaller economic margin than would larger ones (Lacy, Diddi et al., 2006; Tharp and Stanley, 1992). Logically, it would follow that the loss of even a single advertiser would have a larger impact on a paper with a smaller profit margin. In terms of the newspaper’s social position within the community, smaller papers often have a closer relationship with readers who are more emotionally and socially invested in the product (Eisendrath, 1979).

The researcher chose newspapers in Missouri so that all interviews could be conducted in person. Nine of the interviews were conducted outside of the subjects’ offices; the rest were conducted in their offices behind closed doors. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes.

Five of the journalists were editor/publishers who owned their newspapers, while the rest were editors who worked under the supervision of a publisher. In one case, the researcher interviewed two editor/publishers of the same newspaper because they split editorial duties, one responsible for news content and the other for photographs and the editorial page. A mix of editors and editor/publishers was used because an editor's gatekeeping criteria generally will be somewhat narrower than that of an editor/publisher who must concern him/herself with both news content and advertising lineage.

Subjects varied in demographic characteristics and experience. Five were female and eight male. Ten had college degrees, three had taken some college classes and one was a high school graduate. They had worked at their current newspapers from 39 years to one year.

A table of interview subjects has been included as an appendix.

Thirteen of the interview subjects were read an oral consent form before the interviews began; one asked to skip the reading due to time constraints and was given a copy of the consent. During the interviews, the researcher explained his own professional background as a reporter and editor on community newspapers to provide some common ground with interview subjects and build a sense of trust. But care was also taken to maintain a certain psychological distance between the researcher's experiences and the subjects', since "interview strategies must be particularly explicit to avoid interference" (Perks and Thomson, 1998: 160). During the interviews themselves, the researcher

suspended analysis of the answers in favor of simply listening to catch details that differ from the researcher's own experience (Perks and Thomson, 1998: 161).

The current study is largely about mental processes; that is, how pressure on gatekeepers both from within and outside of the newspaper translates into and affects their actual decision-making process. It is, then, an attempt to discover the link between thoughts, motivations and actions. Through the use of open-ended interview questions, the researcher was able to ask "how" and "why" questions, both to determine how editors perceive pressure and how that pressure affects the decision-making process at the heart of gatekeeping. As Birks and Mills (2011) note, interviews serve as a means for the researcher and subject to produce knowledge together and "provide a site for interplay between two people that leads to data that is negotiated and contextual" (Birks, 2011: 56). The exploration of those "how" and "why" questions will provide exactly that context.

In the course of the interviews, the researcher sought to explicate what has been termed "tacit knowledge." While there are several theses about tacit knowledge, for this research the researcher is particularly aware of the Gestalt thesis, which holds that:

When one is engaged in a certain activity, like playing piano, riding a bicycle, swimming, etc., one has to rely on a certain unproblematic background; otherwise the activity cannot be fluently carried on. If a person focuses on the background and tries to articulate it by linguistic means, the person will obstruct the performance of the activity. That is to say, the unarticulated background that is

necessary for the performance of a certain activity cannot be articulated by the agent himself in the process of performance. The knowledge that the agent has about this unproblematic background is a kind of tacit knowledge (Zhenhua, n.d.).

The interviews were conducted with a semi-structured format. The researcher posed a list of questions, but remained aware of the opportunity for follow-up questions that would illuminate or expand on the subjects' answers. Interviews began with questions about the subject's personal and professional training and background to provide some context for their answers. That also enabled the researcher, during analysis of the data, to determine whether variations in responses may be connected to differing educational or professional backgrounds. Subjects were asked whether they perceive both external and internal pressure to tailor the paper's content to promote the community and also were asked about their view of their gatekeeping work; that gave the researcher some grounds for determining whether any pressure actually affects them.

A note on the questions' wording: As much as possible, the researcher avoided the actual word "gatekeeping" in talking to subjects, using euphemisms such as "content decisions." Since "gatekeeping" is something of an academic or technical term, synonyms for it were used as much as possible to keep the discussion focused on real-world problems and practices.

All interviews were confidential, with each subject identified by a first-name pseudonym and only enough identifying information to distinguish among the journalists interviewed and their newspapers. Questions were pre-approved by the University of Missouri

Institutional Review Board. All but one of the interviews were transcribed by a transcriptionist who took IRB training and was certified as a research assistant; the remaining interview was transcribed by the researcher.

The following questions were asked, along with any follow-up questions that would amplify the responses:

1. Did you grow up in a community similar to the one in which you are working?
2. What is your educational and career background? How did you come to this community?
3. What is your newspaper's role in the community?
4. With whom inside the newspaper do you discuss content? What do they say?
5. With whom outside the newspaper do you discuss content? What do they say?
6. What is your role in determining which stories go into the paper and which stay out?
7. How does your role in doing that fit in with those of other staff members?
8. What criteria do you use in deciding which stories should go in?
9. How much do comments from people outside the paper influence content?
10. How do reader comments influence content?
11. How do advertiser comments influence content?
12. Do you perceive pressure from outside the newspaper for the publication to act as a community booster?
13. What form does that pressure take?
14. Do you feel that pressure is effective? Why or why not?

Using the constant comparative method as described in Glaser and Strauss (1967), the researcher analyzed the results thematically (rather than by circulation or community size) to give a broad picture of the results. Under that method, data (in this case, interview answers) were coded to formulate categories and determine how those categories related to each other, with the aim of explaining both similarities and variations in the data (Stern, n.d.). Such an approach enabled the researcher to spot emerging patterns in the data, as well as to note any responses that varied from the researcher's own experience, thus avoiding confirmation bias. Analysis of the results focused on journalists' perceptions regarding whether pressure toward boosterism affects the actual gatekeeping processes of the journalists, what those specific effects are and how the journalists view both the pressure itself and its effects.

The researcher's analysis was a combination of Van Maanen's "realist" and "impressionist" tales, in that the researcher factually recounted the subjects' point of view (the "realist" element) while taking into account the contingency of the subjects' views and opinions (Mumby, 2003). Van Maanen discusses the impressionist tale mostly in the context of ethnography, but elements of it also can be applied to the kind of interviews that comprise this study's methodology. In this case, the researcher noted not only the interviewer's interpretations not just of the subjects' answers, but also of the subjects' tone of voice, body language and other nonverbal indicators that may have amplified their answers. In that sense, "impressionist tales present the doing of fieldwork rather than simply the doer or the done. They reconstruct in dramatic form those periods the author regards as especially notable and hence reportable" (Van Maanen, 1988: 102).

As in any research based on interviews, the researcher was dependent on the subjects' honesty and forthrightness. However, this study's interviews were particularly delicate because the researcher, in effect, asked subjects if they cave in to pressure when doing their jobs – a practice that might violate journalistic principles like autonomy, fairness, balance and independence. There are no independent data against which the researcher can check the veracity of their answers. An attempt was made to deftly phrase questions so as to sound neither accusatory nor condescending and the researcher was highly conscious of building rapport from the beginning of each interview.

Given that the researcher, in a sense, asked subjects to pass judgment on their own job performance, he also attended to what Perks and Jack (1998) call their “moral language” and “meta language.” Subjects' evaluation of their adherence to professional standards in the face of pressure allowed the researcher to “examine the relationship between self-concept and cultural norms, between what we value and what others value, between how we are told to act and how we feel about ourselves when we do or do not act that way” (Perks, 1998: 166). That is the element of “moral language.” Subjects' “meta-language,” their comments about their thoughts or a previous statement in the interview, shed light on how keenly subjects feel any departure from accepted professional norms (Perks, 1998: 168).

Regarding other qualitative methods, a case study focusing on one, or even a few, newspapers and their editors would not provide enough breadth to establish any patterns in the current research. While ethnography could have been somewhat helpful, it would

have shown the results of the editors' thought process but not have answered questions of how and why decisions are made.

This research does not confirm empirically whether journalists are, in fact, under pressure to be boosters in their communities. But that actually is a less important question than whether they perceive such pressure. In effect, if they feel they are under that pressure, they are. And even if they say they are not under pressure, it may simply mean that they have so internalized that as a factor in their decision-making process that they do not consider it a separate, discrete component of that process.

5. The interviews

Basic to any understanding of gatekeeping is an understanding of what role an editor believes the newspaper plays in the community, and within that what his role as the editor is. That role conception plays a large part in determining what gets through the gate.

All interview subjects had similar answers to their beliefs about the newspaper's role in the community, although they often named them in different order. At the most basic level, editors said the newspaper's role was to inform residents of what was happening in the community. Edith (editor of a 5,355-circulation daily paper) gave perhaps the most "textbook" answer, saying, "Our role is to educate the community about what's going on within the community, and let them know what is going on. And to be a watchdog of government." Nearly all of the editors put those tasks high up on their lists of the newspapers' roles. And that particular aspect did not just cover current goings-on in the community; the newspaper also was seen as a chronicler of the community's history. Frank (editor/publisher of a 4,737-circulation biweekly) said his newspaper "should be a reflection of the community's history, ongoing" and Irene (editor/publisher of a 3,681-circulation weekly) said part of her paper's goal "is to tie the community together and to remind people of their heritage, and what the community is all about."

But beyond those basic journalistic functions, editors saw the newspaper as having a social function within the community. Harrison (editor of a 10,971-circulation daily) said that, in a sense, just serving basic journalistic functions is a social function that may not be explicit boosterism but serves a positive purpose all the same.

We're community boosters even when we're not taking a stand pro or con on something. Even when we're playing something straight up, we're community boosters by providing the information that people in our community need to make decisions, to move the community forward.

But others see the newspaper taking a more activist role in the community. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that view is most pronounced among editors who are also publishers, who must inform the community and, at the same time, see themselves as part of the local business community. Don (editor/publisher of a 4,050-circulation weekly) said, "I feel like I have a responsibility to the community to not only report the news as fairly and as accurately as I can, but to also be a responsible community member." That often means running stories that encourage public discussion and participation in the community. Community newspapers should be "an agent for positive change in the community," Harrison said.

It's one thing for people to show up at city council meetings and scream into a microphone. It's another thing when an established community resource, when the voice of the community, stands up and says, no, we're not going to take this,

we're going to make certain that everyone knows how wrong you are about this and why you're wrong about this, and why we need to do something different.

One rare area of disagreement among subjects was the concept of “partnership” between the community and the newspaper. Jay (editor of a 17,130-circulation daily) noted that “We're community partners in many different things -- in donations and charitable ventures.” Yet, Louise (editor of a 33,000-circulation daily) is adamantly opposed to the term, feeling it signals too close a relationship with sources.

I'll have people [say], oh, you guys are good partners. And I am very quick to say we are not partners with anybody, because if you mess up, we're writing about it. I hate that, when people love to call the newspaper their partner.

Balancing pressures

Editors are careful to weigh some groups' desire for stories that boost the community against what the general readership wants to see in the paper. Jay said those opinions must be balanced against each other: “Business owners, civic leaders, Optimists Clubs, Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, they're all about positive, positive, positive. But you know what our readers want? They want the news. ... They're not interested in the fluff.”

Editors reported various pressures toward boosterism in their communities. Some reported virtually none. Many initially denied there was any, but on further conversation said it happened, albeit subtly. Others said it was frequent, but again, only in quiet ways, often in the form of spur-of-the-moment, casual conversations with community members, phone calls and letters to the editor.

Irene was among editors who have noticed a long-term change in the severity of boosterism in her community, saying it was a consequence of the increasing distractions of modern life. She and her partner have owned the newspaper since the 1980s and perhaps 25 years ago, people were more inclined to view the paper as a tool to promote the community. But now, she said, “People don't care about their community and their newspaper and what each other thinks because they're so distracted by so many things, they're so fragmented, that the community is no longer the center of their world now.” Mark (editor/publisher of a 2,100-circulation weekly) , whose newspaper had the smallest circulation of any of those in the study, said members of his community were somewhat apathetic about the paper and have never pressured him about its content, “but that may be because our role isn't as great as it would be if we were a daily that was insulated from outside competition. They probably just don't think we're that important, or our voice is that important.”

Being consistent

Some editors say that consistency in dealing with requests for stories that are less news than promotion helps minimize such requests.

I don't know if people just understand better that we just aren't going to knuckle under so there's no point in trying to get us to do that, whatever they want, or if they've got so many other problems right now, that's the least of their worries.

Some editors actually answer complaints that there is not enough positive news, or too much negative news. Edith noted that the mayor of her city had complained that she

should put more positive news on the front page “and my comment to him was if the city council would quit screwing up, maybe I could, because it does in a sense hurt the community.” After a school official complained of too many negative stories, Jay sent him links to positive stories the paper had done about the school district and that eventually stopped the complaints. And in the end, some editors simply endure the complaints, falling back on their sense of mission and their independence. Kay’s (editor of a 5,600-circulation daily) newspaper is in a community that makes much of its income from tourism and “there are factions in tourism that don’t want us to say the word ‘flood,’” she said. “But we do it anyway.”

For editor-publishers such as Don, who must keep one eye on the bottom line, some of the pressure to be a community booster can be internal.

Sometimes I feel pressure, but I put pressure on myself to do that as well. I mean, in my opinion, if I try and make this community look bad every chance I get, what does that say about me? I live here, I work here, I choose to do business here -- if it's such a crappy place, why do I do that?

Frank said that dynamic works both ways, since community members also know that keeping a good relationship with the paper is in the interests of both sides, the paper and the individuals seeking to influence gatekeeping.

If I make a mistake in the newspaper, they're going to find me at church or whatever and tell me about it. If they come in my office and make an ass of

themselves because we're not supporting the community right, I'm going to see them at church too.

Advertiser pressure

When pressure is less subtle, it often comes from advertisers, who frame a desire for free publicity as advocacy of promoting the community. Several subjects reported that advertisers sometimes either assumed buying an ad would guarantee them coverage or explicitly asked for such a *quid pro quo*, seen by most editors as a violation of basic journalism ethics. A typical response was offered by Don.

You've always got people that run ads with you and then think that they deserve something in return for that. I always make that pretty plain to them: You know, you're advertising with me because you feel that I offer you a service, i.e., I mail out 12,000 newspapers a week, and that is a value to you. I offer nothing in return.

Frank recounted his response to an advertiser who threatened to pull advertising if a story was not done on his business. “Sorry. Pull your ad. It doesn't happen often. And the guy who did it here, I mean, I've talked to him since then, and he understands why I won't [do the story].”

In other cases, angry business owners have threatened to stop advertising when newspapers have reported negative stories about them. This can be a particular problem in smaller communities, where readers would recognize the business based on only its address. Edith said a mom-and-pop store that had suffered a break-in was angered by

reports that gave its location. “There’s only one convenience store at [that location]. Well, they got mad ... Well, I’m sorry, I still have my job to do.”

Pressure can even backfire, causing some editors to dig in their heels. Edith, who admits to being “bullheaded,” said, “The harder you press this management, it's going to cause resentment. So I just don't want to be pushed, and I don't push other people.”

Dealing with the boss

All interview subjects said they were the main, if not only, gatekeeper for the newspaper. That was indisputable for the editor/publishers. With one exception, they were their newspapers' owners, and even in the case of the exception, Frank, the editor/publisher was part of a family that ran several papers and was given total authority for his operation. Thus, they were the ultimate gatekeepers.

The determination of the final gatekeeper was more varied at papers at which editors answered to a publisher. Some editors described their publisher as being more hands-off, while others had publishers who took a more direct role in determining editorial content.

In the former case, that sometimes was a function of how long the editor had worked at the paper. Kay, who has been with her paper for decades, said she had long since gained the trust of her employer when it came to making gatekeeping decisions. "The people that I started out with are now corporate executives, so I've got a working relationship with them, and they're very respectful and supportive of what I do," she said. "They think I'm good." Frank, who has run several newspapers for the same company, said he has never discussed content with anyone outside his newsroom other than an attorney in the case of legally sensitive stories.

In cases where the publisher was more hands-on, the degree of publisher input into gatekeeping varied. Often, the publisher set broad parameters for content, leaving the final determination up to the editor – subject to some second-guessing.

Interestingly, in one of those cases, the editor reported that his publisher had explicitly promoted “boosterism” in a discussion with him. Jay said, “He used the word ‘boosterism,’ and then that is what we are. ... The problem is that I've never really specifically understood what that means, even though I've tried to ask him what that means.” In another case – the only interview in which this happened – George (editor of a 4,736-circulation weekly) reported that his publisher would keep negative stories about advertisers out of the paper entirely.

“If it's negative and it involves an advertiser, we'll probably leave it out, to be honest. And that's where the publisher might step in and say, well, I don't want you to do that story. That happens. And he overrides me, so I have to do what he says.

George said that is not common, but did not give an estimate of how often it had happened.

George's paper also was one of only two in the study – the other was Mark's – which had no editorial page, often a spot used by publishers to promote community causes.

Even if the publisher does not exert such direct control, directives from above can breed cynicism in the editor. Jay said, “I feel like there's a strong willingness to have the staff do something to make it easier on upper management to look people in the eye that they like and have known for a long time.”

In other cases in which the editor worked under a publisher, they generally had infrequent discussions about content, usually consisting of the publisher informing the editor of a

possible story idea he had heard while out in the community. On the positive side, editors said their publishers often seemed to screen out many of the comments they heard about the newspaper's content. Adam (editor of a 4,600-circulation daily) said he believed his publisher does get comments on content but rarely mentions them to him.

At smaller community newspapers, staffing concerns also enter into editors' decisions about whether to cover a story with questionable news value. The number of reporters at newspapers studied ranged from 15 at Louise's paper to one at Mark's, where there are only three employees and he is the only editorial staffer. Harrison, who has nine editorial staffers, said he has passed on stories about promotional events that happen on a Sunday. "People will say, you know, well, this is something that's good for the community -- why aren't you doing anything with it? ... Well, because it's the one day during the week that my reporting staff has off." Edith, who has three reporters, said, "It's great that Boy Scouts go do their Eagle Scout projects, but unless it's affecting a tremendous amount of people, I can't dedicate a reporter to go out and do that."

Separating stories

Some editors find a way to compromise with advertisers by devoting separate areas in the paper to what often is largely promotional copy. Such areas range from regular spots for photos to designated business pages to entire sections.

At Louise's paper, "We have a thing called photo of the day, or it's called community photo. It provides this really good venue to do happy crap without committing much time to it." Louise's paper also features a weekly column by a business beat reporter detailing

changes and news from that beat. Frank's paper has a monthly Chamber of Commerce page, which includes a feature on a business, a column by the Chamber's president and briefs detailing promotions. Adam's paper produces several special sections throughout the year, covering areas such as home improvement, car care and lawn and garden – subjects that provide ample opportunity for copy based on interviews with local business people. Adam makes the difference between those sections and the regular newspaper explicit to his staff.

What I've told my staff is, in these special sections, which are never very special, if you're doing something on car care or home improvement or what have you, you're a PR person in that respect. You don't have to put your name on your story if you don't want to, you don't have to put your name on your photo if you don't want to. It's strictly PR, we're not gonna pretend it's anything else.

Frank's newspaper does a similar thing, explicitly labeling sections to differentiate them from news copy. "There are sections we do periodically that are listed as advertisements, where they do get the column or something," he said. "It's not done like a news story."

The advertising department's role

Some advertisers seek to do an end-run around the editor by asking the advertising manager or advertising salespeople for coverage. Most interview subjects said they often talk to advertising staff about stories, but treat that input only as suggestions, another avenue to find legitimate stories, rather than as directives.

In some cases, advertising sales people are not only encouraged, but expected, to pass on story ideas about local businesses. Harrison gives his advertising sales staff stacks of his business cards so that when advertising clients pitch stories, they can contact the editor directly. The most extreme separation between the advertising and news sides is at Edith's paper, where she has forbidden the advertising staff from talking to reporters. Advertising representatives are told "if one of your clients has an idea, or has got an event going on, you need to go through the editors or the publishers -- specifically the editors -- to get that information to [a reporter]," she said.

In the larger picture, while most subjects said community pressure on content decisions has relatively little influence on gatekeeping decisions, there can be a more subtle influence that leads to self-censorship of negative stories. Cathy (editor of a 5,504-circulation biweekly) was the most explicit in discussing that:

It's part of just knowing your community and knowing your audience, and knowing how they might react to something. And that's not to say that we're not going to report a local business owner who was arrested for passing a bad check. ... But when it's those topical-type stories, we do sometimes -- it does depend ... is this going to fly in this local community? Or is it going to ruffle too many feathers, and not be worth it?

6. Results

Broadly speaking, results of the current research provide a reason for optimism for those who worry about journalists' adherence to traditional values of the craft. It found very little organized pressure on editors to run or not run content. Rather, such pressure often came in the form of casual comments from readers while their editors were out and about in the community. In the end, most subjects did not shy away from killing stories that were more promotion than news, or from running stories that made the community look bad. And when faced with adverse public reaction to a story -- either an upcoming one or a story that has run -- editors are quick to point out to those who complain that they are merely reporting what happened, rather than causing it.

RQ1a: How is pressure toward boosterism exerted on community journalists?

The research found that pressure toward boosterism is rarely the result of organized effort. Rather, it comes to editors individually, although some individuals -- such as government officials or members of business groups -- may represent what actually are individual criticisms as a kind of consensus among their constituencies. This seems particularly true when the pressure comes from a Chamber of Commerce, which represents a wide variety of types of businesses and rarely will advocate for just one of those types.

The pressure is exerted both negatively and positively; sometimes, community members will phrase it negatively, by telling the editor the newspaper is printing “too much bad news.” Alternatively, it can be phrased positively, by suggesting to the editor that the paper print “more good news.” On the level of individual stories, pressure is exerted by framing a positive story in terms that appeal to the editor’s news judgment, rather than any overt attempt to promote the community

RQ1b: How overt or subtle is the pressure and how is it manifested?

Most of the pressure is subtle, coming in the form of casual conversations with people in the community or, internally, through conversations with publishers and advertising representatives who are, on the surface, merely pitching story ideas – but story ideas that provide a favorable slant on the community, or on individual entities, such as businesses, within the community.

As noted above, pressure is not the result of an organized group effort among officials, advertisers or readers; for example, none of the interview subjects reported threats of a community-wide boycott of the newspaper based on its content. Thus, the kind of overt pressure that would result from group action – which would pose more of a threat to advertising revenues than a threat from a single business to pull its advertising – is not a factor. Nor is it so specific that an editor could routinely base specific content decisions on specific stories or subjects on the comments.

RQ2: How does that pressure influence gatekeeping decisions?

Pressure by itself does not have influence on specific gatekeeping decisions. Most editors, for example, reject outright a business's request to cover a story based on a promise to buy advertising if the story is done. Nor do editors buy into arguments that they are making the community look bad by printing negative stories. In fact, they generally have an answer: It is not the story that is making the community look bad, it is the entity the story is about, through its actions, that is making the community look bad and the newspaper is merely reporting what happened.

But while pressure may not influence specific decisions in specific cases, it becomes one factor editors consider in making content decisions. Editors noted that after some time in the community, they realize what stories will appeal to the community and what ones won't. That can cause a level of self-censorship, which results from a sort of cost-benefit analysis of content in which the editor judges whether the news value of a story will be worth possible negative ramifications, such as angering community members or harming the newspaper's reputation.

7. Discussion

Interview subjects' defense of conflicts caused by their newspapers' reporting revealed a moral calculus that finds upset caused by the very reporting of adverse facts was outweighed by the necessity to publicize problems in the community. Edith recalled an instance in which issues in the city government ultimately led to both a recall election and a state lawsuit against the city for violation of state sunshine laws.

The town divided and so the support of the paper also divided at that time. ...Some people blamed us for the suit. ... But if the city government would have been following with the state statutes, then we wouldn't have had the issue.

For editors, balancing journalistic values and community norms can be a delicate act that presents something of a moral quandary. Jay said his publisher doesn't like what he calls "gotcha stories," meaning that minor mistakes or gaffes by public officials aren't reported. "And then, on the flip side, it's a little frustrating when something happens and we're mildly criticized because we didn't do enough research and background on it."

Most interview subjects said that when community reaction butts up against the need to tell unpalatable truths, the journalistic value of independence wins out. Harrison's reasoning was typical.

We take stands that are popular and need to be said. Other times we take stands that may not be as popular, but we believe are questions that need to be raised about the direction of the community.

Note the use of the word “need”; it reflects the subject’s belief that there is a moral imperative to raise difficult questions no matter how much they may upset members of the community.

That also helps deal with internal organizational pressures toward boosterism-as-babbity, a devotion to making the community look good even to the extent of ignoring problems. While most of the editors did not report a great deal of gatekeeping interference from the publishers to whom they answer, a commitment to professional norms provides them some ammunition when differences with their bosses’ view put them in conflict. For example, while Jay’s publisher explicitly told him part of the newspaper’s mission was boosterism, Jay sought to define exactly what that meant, rather than simply running with it by putting the paper’s emphasis on promotional stories. That is revealing of the editor’s thought process, of how he continues to serve journalistic norms while accepting the kind of broad policy directives the publisher promulgates. It thus adds a deeper level to Birkhead’s (1986) description of how publisher and editor fill their respective roles, revealing that those roles are informed by the newspaper’s internal politics.

The same is true, perhaps even more so, in how editors deal with internal pressure from the advertising department. Rather than accepting the kind of definitions of news Nyilasy and Reid (2011) note are used by many advertising directors, editors persist in

holding to their own definitions of what constitutes news and what belongs in a newspaper. And as Nyilasy and Reid found, while editors have no problem with using advertising directors as a source of story ideas, they are careful to keep some separation between the advertising and news departments. The separation can be dramatic, such as Edith's ban on contact between advertising salespeople and reporters, or somewhat less so, such as Harrison's providing of his business card to salespeople, who are expected to pass it on to their clients who have story ideas. But the separation still puts the gatekeeping onus on the editor, who operates more or less independently of the business side of the operation. It is notable that George's admission that he will keep negative stories out of the paper at the publisher's order makes him an outlier among the subjects in the current study. It bears out Nyilasy and Reid's (2011) conclusion that greater economic pressure can result in more permissive ethical norms for newspaper employees, but the rarity of George's response calls into question how pervasive that is, and how much it matters.

Results of the current study also partially bear out Nyilasy and Reid's (2011) finding that advertiser pressure on content decisions has decreased. But while the earlier researchers said that was partially due to editors' realization that resisting such pressure builds cultural capital by maintaining editorial integrity, Irene's contention that a decrease in pressure may have come simply because people care less about community boosterism puts it in a larger context. That assertion, and the broader questions it raises about how engaged residents of smaller communities are in promoting where they live, could have

implications far beyond journalism; it raises questions about how those residents view their home, questions that are more the purview of sociology than journalism studies.

It also bears noting that gatekeeping decisions about when to even cover stories, much less run them, are partially a function of whether there is anyone available to do so. Shoemaker and Vos's (2009) separation of gatekeeping routines classifies matters such as staffing level and news hole as an organizational characteristic. Interviews with editors show that in particular, staffing levels affect how much boosterism a paper can engage in. If it comes down to the choice between sending a reporter to even a routine city council meeting or a ribbon-cutting, given freedom to make the choice editors will choose the former, even if that choice means irritating an advertiser who seeks some free publicity. When it comes to promotional stories of relatively dubious news value, editors fall back on organizational constraints, such as the number of reporters available at a given time. Jay is among editors who make such decisions partially based on staffing concerns.

Sometimes, if a walk is the only thing that's going on on a Saturday, if it's the only thing to really go out and cover, we'll do that. But if we've got five to 20 other events ... no we're not going to get out there and cover that.

The same is true with a limited news hole, although that choice can be less dramatic because many of the latter kinds of story are not time-sensitive and a newspaper's web presence mitigates concerns over the size of the news hole.

The current study adds specificity to gatekeeping theory by examining the effects of one form of pressure on gatekeeping decisions. The pressure to be a community booster,

because it is seldom organized and often rather nebulous in both its methods and goals, creates a special minefield for community journalists. Even if, like Jay, an editor is told that boosterism is part of the newspaper's mission, the definition of boosterism is left unsaid and can be difficult to nail down. It is not unlike the old definition of pornography: "I know it when I see it." But that provides little practical guidance for an editor in making gatekeeping decisions about whether a given story serves other functions that promoting the city or, conversely, spotlighting a problem or an adverse event. As a first step toward helping editors refine their decision-making process, this study seeks to gauge whether such pressure currently has an effect.

The current study's overall conclusion is a somewhat happy one, from the standpoint of professional ethics: Despite economic pressures and despite the internal organizational pressures editors often face, they put their faith in – and base their practice on – professional norms. The relative importance of professional norms and the form they take can be debated, but most editors seek to serve values such as autonomy, objectivity and independence.

One of the most interesting aspects of the current study is that while its subject has not often been treated academically, in those few instances where it has the current findings are somewhat different. Reader's 2006 study, for example, found that small newspaper editors are more likely to consider a story's ramifications on the community as a whole rather than how it fits in with established journalistic principles. But in this study, the majority of editors said that ultimately, they based their gatekeeping decisions on classic journalistic values, such as independence and the responsibility to provide an accurate

picture of the news. Indeed, when questioned about their role in the community, subjects in this study often gave textbook answers that assumed their first job was to serve the public's right to know.

That difference could be explained by the somewhat different focuses of the two studies. Reader's 2006 study was more about broader issues, such as what community members want their newspaper to be and do, while the current study focuses on a relatively small, more focused part of that.

While technological and economic changes in the newspaper business have come quickly over the last few years, that difference between the two studies probably is not a function of time; there are only six years between the two studies and that would not seem to be enough time for changes that would explain such a dramatic difference. On the other hand, it may be that community newspaper editors have come to realize that too much attention to community concerns at the expense of journalistic values may in fact make their job more difficult and the results of their work less useful to the community. Note, for example, that many of the interview subjects made a concerted effort to explain their decisions to those who objected to them, such as Jay's sending of positive stories to the school district official. Were an editor to merely accede to a community member's views, he would not find it necessary to do that.

That means that community newspaper editors, when choosing between acquiring social capital and acquiring cultural capital, generally opt for the latter. Meadows (2009) defines social capital as "access to persons or organizations of power" and cultural capital as

“knowledge of cultural habits and practices associated with power” (Meadows, 2009: 17). Day to day, a newspaper editor operates more on the basis of cultural capital, organizing his work more around professional journalism’s norms and principles than basing it entirely on what readers want to see. When deciding to run a story that may draw an adverse reaction from the community, or not run a story that is more puffery than news, editors decide based on news judgments informed by their professional training, principles and goals. That means that cultural capital, in the end, is more important than social capital, even when that social capital takes more time to build.

More than anything else, results of this study show that editors take as a first principle Kovach and Rosenstiel’s assertion that community journalists’ relationship to their readers is “based on their values, on their judgment, authority, courage, professionalism, and commitment to community” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 61). Even among editor/publishers, who have more direct responsibility to the bottom line, their function as journalists most often trumps any concerns about business impacts of their work. Many editors respond to complaints about conflicts between boosting the community and reporting negative stories with some variation of “I have a job to do.”

Editors also take pains to serve the journalistic value of autonomy, a handmaiden of independence. Adam’s separation of his reporters’ work in the news columns and tabs, which are run more as promotional pieces, and his directive that reporters need not put their names on promotional copy, empowers both him and his employees to exercise a degree of autonomy. Even though special sections are part of the revenue stream for his newspaper, in keeping them separate to that degree he has managed to strike an

acceptable compromise between the newsroom and the business office. And from a journalistic standpoint, it allows journalists the kind of autonomy Birkhead (1986) said is necessary for them to consider themselves professionals.

Social capital remains important. But editors base their building of social capital on what they can do for the community *as journalists*, whether that means promoting happy community events or pointing out problems as a first step to solving them. Editors reconcile the building of cultural capital and the building of social capital – which need not be mutually exclusive but sometimes are – by defining for themselves what is best for the community and making gatekeeping decisions based on that as much as possible. They speak in a moral language that privileges their adherence to professional standards over their desire to make their community look good, or at least not look bad. In the end, they say they value truth-telling over boosterism, explaining that giving an accurate picture of the community will, in the end, serve the community better than simply putting on a happy face.

8. Conclusion

This study sought to examine how the pressure to be a community booster affects the gatekeeping process of community newspaper editors. It found that while pressure does exist, it rarely comes in organized form; rather, it comes in casual conversation and general advocacy for the paper to print less negative news about the community and more positive news. The editors' response was to focus on journalistic values of autonomy, independence, fairness and balance in making gatekeeping decisions. When defending themselves against charges of printing too many negative stories, editors often point out to readers that they are not the ones responsible for those stories; rather, they are merely reporting what others have done and said and if that reflects negatively on the community, it is the source's fault.

The research shows that while community pressure is one factor in gatekeeping decisions, it is only one – and a relatively unimportant one at that. Editors find that adhering to sound journalistic practices and ideals better fills the paper's role in the community and also adds to the newspaper's credibility.

While most gatekeeping theory has focused on broader issues, this research adds specificity to it by examining one of those issues in detail to determine how much a factor it is in gatekeeping decisions.

The current research provides a basis for further study in several areas. Because it is so unusual in the context of the interviews here, George's experience with killing negative stories about advertisers should be explored, lest a major problem in journalism go undiscovered; a quantitative study of how often that happens industry-wide would be valuable. Likewise, a study that seeks to gauge how often publishers interfere in any manner in gatekeeping decisions would help determine how big a problem that is for journalism, both practically as it affects gatekeeping decisions and, more broadly, whether it is causing a re-examination of core journalism values like autonomy, independence and professionalism.

Beyond journalism, this study does not deal with the view community members have of what role the newspaper should play in the community's overall life. If there is a disconnect between those community members and practitioners of journalism, it should be explicated as the first step in finding a way to bridge that gap. In fact, there appears to be a dearth of research on the view community members have of the local newspaper's social role. The researcher was unable to find any studies of what readers want their community newspaper to be and do and whether most readers even feel it should be a community booster. That could provide fertile ground for further research; it would, for example, expand on the present proposed study by determining whether editors who feel community pressure are even responding to it effectively.

The current study does suggest avenues for continuing examinations. It does not deal with opinions of those outside the newspaper, or even outside the newsroom, about what the paper's role should be in promoting the town and how well readers and advertisers

feel the newspaper has fulfilled that role. Nor does it provide any information on how pressure on gatekeepers has actually affected the content of the paper; such a study would require content analysis that is beyond the scope of the present research.

The current study also provides avenues for examination of the differences between traditional print and online community journalism. Because the online versions of the papers examined are not operated by separate staffs or overseen by separate editors, the researcher did not examine whether there were content differences between traditional and online versions – specifically, whether stories that were kept out of the newspapers based on concerns over boosterism were put on the paper’s website and whether that website functioned as a kind of dumping ground for questionable stories. Content analysis of publications could answer that question.

The current study does not deal with one of the more important aspects of community journalism – local sports coverage. While such coverage does provide avenues for boosterism, in community journalism sports stories present some unique challenges that make them qualitatively different. Chief among those is that local sports stories involved the community’s children and thus are less likely to be critical. And because sports provides many small communities with a large part of their identity, an editor making gatekeeping decisions about such a story must take that larger issue into account.

But this study does provide at least a start for examining a specific issue in the gatekeeping process. It examines how community newspaper editors deal with an often nebulous but important part of their job – how they deal with the public and how much of

a role what the public says has in their decision-making process. It's an area for which there are seldom right or wrong answers, but in explicating the struggle to come up with answers at all it is revealing of both how editors think and how they put those thoughts into action.

Appendix

Interview subjects

Pseudonym	Frequency	Title	Gender	Education	Publisher
Adam	Daily	Editor	M	College	Non-local group
Brenda	Weekly	Editor	F	College	Local family
Cathy	Biweekly	Editor	F	College	Non-local group
Don	Weekly	Editor/publisher	M	College	Local
Edith	Daily	Editor	F	College	Local
Frank	Biweekly	Editor/publisher	M	College	Group
George	Weekly	Editor	M	High school	Local
Harrison	Daily	Editor	M	College	Chain
Irene/Isaac	Weekly	Editor/publishers	F/M	Some college	Local
Jay	Daily	Editor	M	College	Local chain
Kay	Daily	Editor	F	College	Chain
Louise	Daily	Editor	F	Some college	Local
Mark	Weekly	Editor/publisher	M	College	Local

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