PROFESSIONAL ROLE CONCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC RADIO JOURNALISTS:

A CLOSER CONNECTION TO THE AUDIENCE

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Using the theoretical framework of professional role conceptions and the methodology of semi-structured interviews, 10 journalists at two Midwest public radio stations were interviewed in a qualitative study designed to answer the following overarching research questions:

RQ1a: What are the professional role conceptions of public radio journalists at KCUR, KBIA and Harvest Public Media? RQ1b: Why do they see themselves in these roles? 

RQ2: How does being a non-profit public media outlet impact the content produced at KBIA, KCUR, and Harvest Public Media?

As this was a qualitative study, individual responses were unique and not intended to be generalized. Key findings, however, included a strong desire to provide balanced information uninfluenced by bias and an equally strong feeling of being closely connected to their audience. By offering a glimpse at what a few public media journalists see as the purpose of their job and how their stations’ revenue models influence the news content they produce, this research can help provide insight into how public media may differ from commercial media, both in content and motivation.
Professional Role Conceptions of Public Radio Journalists: A Closer Connection to the Audience

It’s no secret that the news industry has taken an economic beating over the past few years. According to the PEW Research Center, newspaper newsrooms have shrunk by 30 percent since 2000 (State of the News Media Report 2011). “After two dreadful years, most sectors of the industry saw revenue begin to recover” the report overview reads. “With some notable exceptions, cutbacks in newsrooms ended.” The end of cutbacks, however, does not mean a return of pre-recession numbers in newsroom staff. The bleeding has stopped, as it were, but there has been no infusion of new blood to aid in the recovery. The result for the American audience is a loss of news coverage, particularly local news and accountability reporting. According to a 2010 PEW Research survey, 20 percent of newsroom executives (including both newspaper and broadcast) think “their staff is too small to do more than ‘the bare minimum level of reporting.’” Likewise, only eight percent of those surveyed feel their newsroom is “still plenty big to do the job.” In the commercial radio news industry, there have been declines as well. According to Arbitron, for example, there were only 30 all-news commercial stations in the country in 2009 (PEW State of the Media 2011). The Audio section of the 2011 PEW Research State of the Media report goes on to acknowledge that 3,446 stations identified as “news/talk/information” but suggested that “the evidence suggests that means heavily talk” (PEW State of the Media 2011).
A report released by the Federal Communications Commission in 2011 echoes some of these same concerns. One of the major findings of the report was that “An abundance of media outlets does not necessarily translate into an abundance of reporting” (FCC p.1). In other words, just because there is a lot of content out there doesn’t mean it is unique content. However, the report also found one area where a lot of unique content was available: nonprofit media. “The nonprofit media has become more varied, and more important, than ever before” was another major finding of the report (FCC p.1). In 2010 and 2011, even among staffing controversy and a vote in the House of Representatives to abolish federal funding, the number of listeners tuning in and logging on to NPR continued to grow and donations continued to rise (PEW Research 2011 and 2012).

Where commercial media may have to let go of staff in order to maintain enough profit-margin to please shareholders, public media only has to balance the budget. Where commercial media companies struggling to make ends meet might need to sell to the big corporation, public media outlets need only maintain federal funding and cultivate generous donors. Carl Sessions Stepp interviewed journalists at PBS NewsHour and other nonprofit news outlets and found that those he spoke with felt working for a nonprofit gave them greater freedom to cover the topics they felt mattered and take the time to analyze all sides of an issue (Stepp, 2004). Jennifer Hlad pointed to non-profit news outlets as a means to plug “news holes” caused by the newspaper recession (Hlad, 2009).
In response to the growing trend to add pay walls to news websites, Jim Naureckas called for increased funding for public media as a means of “decomodifying” the news; moving news content from a good to be paid for to a service to the public (Naureckas, 2009). But the most ringing endorsement for public media comes from Bill Kling, the founder of Minnesota Public Radio and American Public Media. He says that local public media are needed imminently to fill gaps in news coverage, but that we as a country are not ready due to lack of infrastructure and potential conflicts of interest (Meares 2011).

Public media as they exist in the United States today have their origins in the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. The Act created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which distributes federal funds to public radio and television stations throughout the country. The Carnegie Commission that was the impetus for the Act said the mission of public broadcasting was to “provide a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard” and to “be a forum for controversy and debate” (Hoynes, 2007, p. 370). It has been argued, however, that public broadcasting does a better job with the second mandate than the first (Hoynes, 2007; McCauley et al., 2003) because the audience of public media tends to be white, at least middle class, and well educated. Even so, those in the field of public media still see it as having a vital role. McCauley et al. outline three approaches to the media: the “public service approach” that is designed to be anti-market and guide public conversation but “sometimes give off a strong scent of paternalism,” the “commercial approach” (traditional private business model), and the
“public sphere approach,” with the goal of “societal integration.” McCauley et al.
suggest the public sphere model as the ideal and describe it as an extension of the coffee
house; a virtual “third place” (McCauley et al., 2003, p. xix). The literature on public
media in the United States (Avery, 2007, McCauley et al., 2003, Hoynes, 2007) as well as
the trade journals (Stepp, 2004; Naureckas, 2009; Hlad, 2009; Meares, 2011) all imply
that public media works on a different paradigm, but little research has been done to test
the assumption. With the rising prominence of public media in the American media
landscape, the question of whether or not journalists in the nonprofit sector fulfill a
different mission is more relevant than ever before. This study is intended to be a first
step in answering that question, through research undertaken at two Midwest public radio
stations, KCUR in Kansas City, Mo. and KBIA in Columbia, Mo. as well as the Local
Journalism Center (LJC) Harvest Public Media. Harvest Public Media is based out of
KCUR and KBIA is one of Harvest’s partner stations.

Research Questions

RQ1a: What are the professional role conceptions of public radio journalists at KCUR,
KBIA and Harvest Public Media?

RQ1b: Why do they see themselves in these roles?

Since public radio gets its funding primarily from listener donations rather than
the advertising that funds most newspapers and TV news, theoretically public radio
journalists only have to please their listeners. Unlike commercial news outlets, public
media don’t have to keep advertisers or shareholders happy. Quantitative research based on surveys have been done to see what roles journalists in general see for themselves, but there hasn’t been much qualitative research in that area, nor has a study targeted public radio journalists as opposed to commercial journalists. Weaver and Wilhoit (1986 and 1994) developed four titles for journalists based on the roles they self-identified with in their studies: “adversary,” “disseminator,” “interpretive,” and “public mobilizer” (Cassidy 2008 p.108). The goal of speaking with public radio journalists was to determine whether the roles they identify with mirror those of their commercial counterparts or reflect a different perspective. Furthermore, why do they see themselves in these roles and how do these roles effect their decision-making process?

RQ2: How does being a non-profit public media outlet impact the content produced at KBIA, KCUR, and Harvest Public Media?

Because public radio has a different revenue model than commercial news, it seems likely that public radio journalists have different gatekeepers. It follows, then, that public radio journalists might have different influencers on the content they produce. For example, since part of their funding indirectly comes from the government, do public radio journalists ever avoid stories that reflect negatively on the government? Or is there ever pressure to put people who have donated a lot of money to the station in a good light? What about corporate sponsorships and underwriting? Does that influence content? It must be kept in mind, however, that because non-profits are partially dependent on
donations, their listeners and supporters are often people with disposable income. Does that mean content is chosen that is thought to be favored by those in that economic bracket?

**Relevance of study**

These research questions matter for the broader world of journalism because keeping the media content diverse allows for a freer flow of information and a more informed public. Having revenue sources outside of the media conglomerates sounds like it could help with that goal. Furthermore, the increasing need for alternate sources of revenue is making research on non-profit media more relevant than ever before. Even traditionally commercial newspapers have looked into obtaining audience support. The Columbia Missourian, for example, has partnered with a company called Kachingle that enables Internet readers to donate a small amount of money each month. Some online newspapers have even sprung up running entirely as a non-profit organization. The online newspaper, St. Louis Beacon, for example, is a non-profit that depends on donations for much of its revenue.

This research is personally relevant because of the researcher’s work as a public radio journalist for Harvest Public Media during the professional component of her masters project. She is also planning a career as a public radio reporter upon the completion of her degree. Interviewing journalists at KBIA and KCUR has enabled her to have a better understanding of what her future in public radio may be like.
Theory

Professional Role Conceptions.

Professional role conceptions is a theory that developed from two broader and older theories: news sociology and gatekeeping. The basic idea of professional role conceptions in the field of journalism is that the professional role(s) journalists identify with affects the news that they create. Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman conducted one of the earlier studies that would fall under the framework of professional role conceptions (1976). As part of a detailed national survey of American Journalists, Johnstone et al. asked eight questions about the tasks they carry out and how those are related to their job, and determined that most journalists fell into one of two categories: those that seek to simply distribute the news and those who encourage others to participate in a future action based on the knowledge they gain.

After the 1976 study, other researchers began looking specifically at the professional role conceptions of journalists. But at the time of the study, Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman were conducting a broader survey in the tradition of news sociology, of which role conceptions were only a part.

News Sociology.

The sociology of news framework has its origins in a 1955 study done by Warren Breed. Through observation and in-depth interviews, Breed found that newspaper reporters learned to conform to the expected slant of their newsroom through
socialization. Breed also noted that publishers had a strong role in creating that slant as an enforcer of their vision for the news (pp. 326).

A second major study that forms the basis of news sociology is Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality (Tuchman 1978). Tuchman’s book is the result of ten years worth of observing newsrooms and interviewing staff, with the key finding that news making is a cyclical process between journalist and newsroom norms. The journalist decides what is news partly by norms created in the newsroom, yet at the same time the journalist helps to create and evolve those norms.

Herman Herbert Gans completed a third major study that cast a long shadow within the framework of news sociology in 1979. He did case studies of two national news stations, NBC and CBS, and two weekly national news magazines, Newsweek and Time, over a period of four years. One area of research Gans focused on was the role of the journalist in deciding the content of news. Using existing theory, Gans found that events were the impetus for most stories but that news was also generated by media routines and by the perspectives and judgment of the journalist. Gans also argued for two more influences on how journalists write the news: social norms and organizational cues. As he put it, “Journalists do apply news judgment both as members of a profession and as individuals, but they are by no means totally free agents” (pp. 79).
Gatekeeping.

The idea of journalists being gatekeepers of the news was first introduced by David Manning White (1950) when he observed a wire editor decide which wire copy to include in his city’s newspaper. As mentioned earlier, another early study often mentioned in the development of gatekeeping theory is Breed’s research (1955). A good overview of the role gatekeeping has in creating the content of news can be found in Shoemaker and Reese’s Mediating the Message (1996). They identify five rings of influence beginning with the individual journalist and moving outward to media routines, organizations, outside influences such as sources, and ideology. Shoemaker and Reese built these five rings on Gans’ study and a study by Gitlin in 1980 and posit that each ring represents another gate that content must go through to become news. The influence organizations have on content is of interest as media companies consolidate and come under the ownership of stockholders. In 2009, Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos published Gatekeeping Theory, an update on the role of gatekeeping in constructing social reality via the news. In the introduction to the section of the book on levels of analysis, Shoemaker and Vos describe the five levels as being in a continuum, from which researchers can pull more specific and relevant influencers (pp. 31).
For the purposes of this study, three rings of influence are of particular interest:

1.) The role of the individual public radio journalist; how the role they perceive themselves having as professionals influences what news they cover and how they cover it.

2.) The public radio newsroom as an organization; how expectations and social norms influence the speed and depth of coverage.

3.) Revenue and income sources; the government by way of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, companies and individuals who provide donations, and the universities who often provide studio space and write the paychecks.

Methods

This research was conducted through the use of semi-structured interviews, building a bridge between Breed (1955) and Gans' (1979) qualitative case studies that created the foundation of the theory of professional role conceptions and the quantitative surveys that generated basic categories with which journalists can identify (Johnstone et al., 1976; Weaver et al., 1986; and Weaver & Wilhoit, 1994). By conducting interviews, I was able to gather information about why participants see certain tasks and roles as more important than others. This is data surveys cannot easily collect. At the same time, using semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask follow up questions and deviate from the set questions slightly as needed (Fontana 1994 pp. 364-365). In structured interviews, the interviewer follows a script set ahead of time without deviation in order or content. This allows for answers to be given under the same conditions.
Frey note, “The predetermined nature of structured interviewing is aimed at minimizing errors” (pp. 364). However, forbidding clarification for the person interviewed and follow-ups on the part of the interviewer can be too limiting. It also ignores the fact that interviews are a form of social interaction, with a give and take (Fontana pp. 364). Unstructured interviews were developed as a tool embedded in the social environment, with no questions developed ahead of time. At most, the interviewer would plan topics to bring up (Fontana pp. 365-366). As such, unstructured interviews are not concise enough for the type of information the researcher wished to obtain. Therefore, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and asked the same general questions in all interviews, but allowed room for clarifications and follow-up. This enabled the researcher to compare answers across interviews while leaving room for flexibility the social situation called for.

The process.

Through connections gained from working as part of Harvest Public Media in the KCUR newsroom and as a student journalist in the KBIA newsroom, this researcher made arrangements to conduct semi-structured interviews with the content-producing staff of three newsrooms:

- KCUR, NPR affiliate in Kansas City, Mo.
- KBIA, NPR affiliate in Columbia, Mo.
- Harvest Public Media Reporting Team based in Kansas City, Mo. (Harvest)
Those interviewed included:

- Frank Morris, News Director of KCUR and Managing Editor of Harvest

- Bill Anderson, Program Director of KCUR (*His answers are not included in the results, as it was determined he did not produce news content*).
  - Stephen Stiegman, Producer of KCUR call-in show Up to Date

- Andrea Silenzi, Producer of KCUR call-in show Central Standard

- Suzanne Hogan, fill-in Producer of KCUR weekly news magazine KC Currents

- Elana Gordon, KCUR Health Reporter

- Ryan Famuliner, Assistant News Director of KBIA

- Kellie Kotraba, Religion Reporter for KBIA and Editor of Columbia Faith and Values

- Rehman Tunkegar, Producer of KBIA talk shows Intersection and Global Journalist

- Donna Vestal, Editor of Harvest Public Media

- Jeremy Bernfeld, Multi-media Editor and Reporter for Harvest Public Media

As motivation to participate, the newsrooms have access to the research as a self-reflective tool in how they do their work and why they do it. The sampling was purposeful, with the criteria for participation being that the individual is a member of the content-producing staff of that newsroom. Each journalist was a unit of analysis.

**Recording method.**

The audio of each interview was recorded in order to ensure accuracy of the transcript.
Justification of method.

Semi-structured interviews allow for individuals to convey their thoughts and explain their motivations and experiences beyond the confines of a survey. The methodology for this research followed in the tradition of Breed (1950) by holding interviews to understand what individual public radio journalists perceive as their professional roles. Also similar to Breed, further validity was gained by observing the newsroom environment of Harvest Public Media during the researcher’s professional project.

Existing study that is methodologically similar.

Randall Sumpter’s case study on the routines of daily newspaper editors is a good example of an existing study that is methodologically similar (2000). Sumpter discovered that editors at that daily based decisions off what a hypothetical reader would be interested in. Sumpter was also looking for insight into the motivations of professional journalists and the methods he used were observation and interviews, like I used. However, he used non-participant observation as his primary research method followed by in-depth interviews to validate his findings, while the primary research method for this study was semi-structured interviews supplemented by relevant observation.
Interview questions.

1. Describe in your own words what you see as the purpose of your job.

2. What role do journalists have in society and the community?

3. Do you see yourself as a participant in the news? Is there someone else in the newsroom who fits that role?

4. Or are you better described as an information provider? Is there someone else in the newsroom who fits that role?

5. Do you see yourself as a community organizer, someone who motivates the public to action? Is there someone else in the newsroom who fits that role?

6. Would you describe yourself as a watchdog? Who do you watch over? Is there someone else in the newsroom who fits that role?

7. Does one of those four roles fit you better than the others? Or is there a better description for what you do?

8. Does working for a non-profit newsroom change the way in which you work? How so?

9. Does your role as a public media journalist differ from one who works in commercial media? How so?

10. Does your audience influence the news content you produce? How so? (Public radio listeners tend to be white, well-educated, and at least middle class).
11. Since part of your funding indirectly comes from government, how does your
newsroom handle reporting on the government?

12. Since you are technically employees of the university, how does your newsroom
handle reporting on the university?

13. Is there ever pressure to put people who have donated a lot of money to the
station in a good light?

14. What about corporate sponsorships and underwriting? Does that influence
content?

*The questions with an asterisk are modified from the roles Weaver & Wilhoit defined
(1994).

Limitations of the study.

It is important to note the limited nature of this research. As it is qualitative
research and limited in scope, it is not generalizable. Instead, the purpose is to develop a
rich and complex understanding of the roles the participants self-identify as having of
their own regard.

Directions for future research.

The understanding gained through learning the roles a few public radio journalists
see for themselves could help inform survey questions for a national quantitative study.

By surveying a generalizable sample, hypotheses about public radio journalists seeing
themselves in a different role and thus serving an important purpose in keeping the media content diverse can be tested.

**Importance of the study.**

If this research can foster further interest in studying how public media add to the United States’ media mix, then further knowledge can be gained about the role public media have in our society. In addition to helping public media journalists understand their own role moving forward, research in this area could help support the continued funding of public media by serving as an example of why public media are important to Congress and prospective donors alike. With the recent memory of Congress debating pulling funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 2011, the need for such research to support the role of public media is a real possibility.

**Literature Review**

William Cassidy is among the most modern researchers of the professional role conceptions of journalists. In 2008, Cassidy surveyed more than 500 newspaper journalists in all 50 states to compare the professional role conceptions of male and female journalists, and in 2005 he compared the professional role conceptions of print and online journalists (2005). His 13 survey questions were adapted from studies done by Weaver and Wilhoit (1994) who adapted their questions from a national survey conducted by Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1976). Both of the earlier studies were broad in scope and collected data on everything from demographics to the level of autonomy
journalists had on the job. But the section of the surveys Cassidy adapted for his own use asked journalists to rank the importance of various tasks for or aspects of their jobs.

Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman asked eight questions and divided the answers into two types of professional roles for journalists: those who take an active role in news discourse and those who take a more passive role (Table 7.1, pp. 230). They called the roles “participant” and “neutral” journalism and found that most journalists felt the participant role was more important than the neutral one. For example, more than 75 percent of those surveyed found it extremely important to “investigate claims and statements made by the government” while only 56 percent found it extremely important to “get information to the public as quickly as possible” (the highest percentage for each role).

Initial studies done by Weaver, Drew, and Wilhoit (1986 pp. 691) separated journalistic roles into three types: “adversary,” “interpretive,” and “disseminator,” but later studies completed by Weaver and Wilhoit (1994) added a fourth: “public mobilizer.” The purpose of Weaver, Drew and Wilhoit’s 1986 study was to compare radio, television, and print journalists. For television and newspaper journalists in large organizations, the interpretive role resonated most strongly, while the disseminator role was the most common designation for radio journalists. In small organizations, radio and television journalists maintained the same areas of dominant professional roles, but newspaper journalists were almost equally divided between disseminator and interpretive.

Interestingly, the 1994 study on print journalists found a greater number of participants
rating the neutral, or disseminator, role as important than the 1986 study or the 1976 study done by Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman. This time, 70 percent of journalists found a task in the disseminator role to be highly important, tying for the most important with a task in the interpretive, or participant, role.

Jane Singer has also completed a relatively recent study on professional role conceptions of journalists (1997). Her research followed Breed’s lead by being qualitative in nature – a combination of a case study and a Q study. The Q study was created by William Stephenson and is designed to group people with similar opinions along a spectrum (1997). As Singer’s research topic was the impact of the then-emerging Internet on newspaper journalists, the Q study asked participants to rank statements about online tools for media and from those rankings found six groups of journalists sorted by their attitudes towards the Web: the “Benevolent Revolutionary,” the “Revolutionary,” the “Nervous Traditionalist,” the “Traditionalist,” the “Rational Realist,” and the “Realist” (pp. 4). Singer completed another study in 2001 under the theoretical framework of gatekeeping. She did a content analysis of the online and print editions of six Colorado newspapers to see if they reflected different slices of the world, and found that online editions had more local content than their print counterparts.
Conclusions

Over the course of the researcher’s professional project at Harvest Public Media, eleven interviews were conducted with staff at KBIA in Columbia, Mo. and KCUR in Kansas City, Mo. Upon reflection, it was decided that the program director interviewed didn’t truly fit the definition of a journalist, as he didn’t produce or edit news content. Therefore, 10 interviews were analyzed, both for content and comparison. Those interviewed had varied positions and levels of experience: five men and five women; three in editorial/managerial positions, four producers and three reporters; three with 10 or more years experience, three with five or more, and four with less than three years. Three of the journalists were on staff at KBIA, and seven were at KCUR (three of those seven were affiliated with Harvest). Most of those interviewed included reporting in their job description, but interestingly only one was a reporter full-time without any additional responsibilities. Additionally, it bears repeating that those interviewed were not selected for any characteristics beyond being members of the newsrooms I had access to, and therefore this study has no statistical significance.

The first half of the interview questions were designed to discover the journalists’ professional role conceptions, beginning with big picture, open-ended questions and then moving to specific terms generated from prior research mentioned in the literature review. In the course of the interviews it became apparent that some of those terms had negative connotations for the journalists interviewed, so attempts were made to find
terms that gave different shades of meaning but stayed within the intended spectrum of the researchers who coined the terms. The terms “participant in the news” and “newsmaker,” for example, appealed to none of the journalists interviewed as a role to strive for. However, most of them acknowledged active choices they made in producing content, such as selecting topics, choosing actualities (sound bites) to include, and adding analysis and context. Yet even when asked more generally whether they considered their role active, most still said no. In the parameters of this research, it is difficult to know whether this insistence is an accurate reflection of the work they do or a blind spot reflective of a desire to not overly influence their audience. Their answers to an earlier question about the role of journalism in society reinforces the possibility of a blind spot, however. Nine answers to that question included wording that suggest journalists actively shape news, even if it’s nothing more than by choosing what is important enough to cover. The health reporter for KCR, for example, said part of a journalist’s role is to shed light on important issues. Other common ideas in the same vein included filtering and framing information and encouraging the audience to think critically and seek clarity.

Conversely, those interviewed were much more comfortable with the idea of being more neutral information providers. This mirrors the findings of Weaver et al. from 1986--radio journalists surveyed then also felt most comfortable with the disseminator role. Nine of the 10 journalists interviewed said being information providers was a part of their job as public radio journalists. Six of them thought it was their primary role or one
of the most accurate descriptors for what they do. The only one who didn’t say she was
an information provider was the editor of Columbia Faith and Values. She was torn
between the description of being a reporter distant from the story and a writer who more
actively created news. Interestingly, in the more general question about the role of
journalists in society, there was less mention of providing information. Three talked about
being fair and unbiased sources of information, and one talked about being a mirror of
society. Two others included informing the public as a role, which overlaps with the most
prevalent response: some variation on serving or engaging the community.

Eight of the 10 people interviewed described engaging the audience or serving the
public as part of the role journalists have in society. And although they were at first put
off with the terminology Weaver and Wilhoit coined “community organizer” and the
phrase “motivating the public to action,” further questioning also highlighted that most of
the journalists felt like involving the community was an important part of their job. Eight
of the 10 journalists interviewed described fostering community conversation or
facilitating dialogue as one of their main professional roles.

The fourth and final role designated a specific question based on prior research
was that of watchdog. Half of the journalists interviewed said being a watchdog was one
of the roles they fulfilled, although more thought it was an important role. Some
producers thought it was more of a role for reporters, and some reporters wished more
watchdog reporting was being done but said it was difficult with many tasks to fulfill and
the small number of staff the stations have. Again, their earlier responses to the more general question about roles of journalists in society bear out their belief in the importance of investigative or watchdog journalism. Even before it was mentioned specifically, six people indicated being a watchdog was an important role for journalists (although only one person called it by that name—others called it digging out truth, being an advocate for the community or holding people accountable).

The second half of the interview questions were designed to answer the second research question: whether or not working for a non-profit influences the content produced. There was much greater consensus and a lot less ambiguity in these responses. In a nutshell, the journalists interviewed felt that working for a nonprofit positively impacted the work they produced without creating negative side effects.

All but one of the journalists interviewed, for example, thought that working for a nonprofit newsroom changed the way in which they worked. When asked how it changes the way they work and how it differs from commercial media, variations on two phrases were used repeatedly: fewer conflicts of interest and a closer bond with the audience. Several journalists said working for a nonprofit gave them more freedom to cover whatever topics most need covering. Similarly, others said that they had fewer conflicts of interest, which gave the station more credibility and afforded the station a positive connotation. Several of the journalists interviewed also stated that being supported by the people who listen to the station makes them more aware of the audience, creating a
feeling that they are serving the listeners and the community. In turn, the listeners are tangibly showing the value they place on the journalists’ work by monetarily supporting the station.

All ten of the journalists interviewed said that even though the stations they work for receive funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and thus indirectly from the government, their reporting is not impacted. “I don’t think that it’s an influence in any way,” said the fill-in producer for KC Currents. The KCUR news director said the newsroom handles reporting on the government “as if there were no connection at all.” The common refrain in answering this interview question was a variation on “I don’t think about it” or “I don’t worry about it.” Two journalists mentioned that there is a firewall between funding sources and the newsroom. Two KCUR journalists mentioned that the portion of the station’s budget that comes from CPB is insignificant when compared to the portion that comes from underwriting and listener donations. “It’s like eight percent of our budget,” said the KCUR health reporter (it’s actually less than five percent). And the producer of Up To Date said he felt like “the funding we get from CPB usually goes straight back to NPR” (to pay for NPR programming). It’s important to note that Harvest was funded solely through a grant from the CPB at the time of the interviews. Even so, both the Harvest journalists interviewed said they were unconcerned about fallout from reporting negatively on government entities such as the Department of Agriculture. “The needs of our audience is more important than job security,” said the
multimedia editor. “I can’t posture in a way that would make the government either fund me or not fund me,” said the editor of Harvest, “It’s to big for that...so taxpayer or government funding doesn’t really [impact my work] other than making me feel accountable...to live up to it.”

Similarly, the journalists interviewed felt being licensed to and employed by the university did not place constraints on their reporting. Several commented on it being potentially more of a problem than reporting on the government since the university was closer at hand, but that the newsroom still covered the university fairly. “There’s no favoritism but there is scrutiny,” said KCUR’s health reporter. And KCUR’s news director said that the newsroom covers the university “as if it were any other university,” but with perhaps “a tiny bit of deference.” “Sometimes we give them a heads up but we never shy away from a topic,” said the producer of Up to Date. The assistant news director of KBIA said that being affiliated with the university might give the newsroom greater access because of proximity and perhaps a mistaken belief on the part of university spokespeople that the station would treat them more kindly than other journalists would. The fill-in producer for KC Currents mentioned that at times she feels like she has relied too heavily on university faculty to be guests on the show.

To sum things up, the journalists interviewed felt working for a nonprofit radio station gave them greater independence to report on relevant issues that needed coverage without adding negative constraints. Just as the 2011 FCC report found, having firewalls and
diverse sources of donations and/or revenue adds to the ability to report freely. Two key findings also stood out: a close connection to the audience and a strong desire not to introduce bias into their work. Those interviewed almost uniformly shared an awareness of the needs of their audience and community, often expressing a desire to serve. This sense of journalistic service to the community informs their actions at a basic level. From their adamant aversion to being public mobilizers and participants in the news, it is obvious that the journalists interviewed wanted to give their audience the tools to draw their own conclusions without telling them what to think. They felt more comfortable being disseminators than interpreters of information, sometimes to the point of underestimating the influence their decisions make on the end product. Perhaps the reason for this lies partly in the restrictions placed on being a 501 (3) c organization. As the 2011 FCC report noted, activities that are commonplace among commercial newspapers, such as endorsing political candidates, would put nonprofit radio stations in danger of losing their FCC nonprofit license and the tax incentive of being a 501 (3) c organization (FCC Nonprofit 2011).
REFERENCES


