

NEWS STORIES

An exploration of independence within post-secondary journalism

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Through focus groups with four self-described “independent” college student newspapers, this study provides a new perspective on how to view student media independence. Choices student journalists make concerning sourcing, funding, location and guidance may contribute to the newspaper’s level of independence more than how much an institution attempts to control the student media. Expressed invitations by student journalists to non-students and faculty in guiding editorial content and by using university resources to produce a newspaper, such as Internet access, relinquishes the students’ control to the university and other non-students.

KEYWORDS college students; editorial independence; ethics; news processes; student media

Introduction

The concept of independence in the American press is one that stretches back to the nation’s founding. In recent years, editorial independence has also become an important issue worldwide (Lewis et al., 2008). Today, few would argue with the idea that journalism should not answer to government or to big business, but only to the needs of the public.

As a training ground for new journalists, it is not surprising that university media aspire to such similar independence. Yet independence for college newspapers is not as concrete a concept—a 1974 survey of college media found only 10 percent of 157 newspapers surveyed enjoyed financial, legal and editorial “independence,” while nearly all had significant financial ties to their host university (Peterson, 1974). More than 30 years later, while common law rights of the student press to act without censorship do exist, many college student newspapers still struggle to get the separation they desire to best serve their readers (Student Press Law Center, 2001).

This study examines independence in the student press—how it is perceived, how perceptions compare to reality, and the impact of both the reality and the perceptions on the newspaper’s day-to-day operations and decision-making. The degree of independence among the thousands of US college newspapers ranges from total institutional control to complete student control. Ingelhart’s (1993) anecdotal evidence points to vast differences among college newspapers in the amount of what he calls “autonomy” granted by the university structure to student editors. Student newspapers with high autonomy are self-funded and self-directed with little (if any) institutional direction. Low-autonomy student papers can be fully dependent, and may experience prior review by a university employee or be solely funded by the university. In the middle, one finds student newspapers with varying degrees of direct institutional involvement.

Decision-making stands to be greatly influenced by a newspaper's position on this autonomy spectrum. If the consequences of a risky decision are more than simply angry readers or a withdrawn ad, but may also include a loss of critical funding, office space, Web presence or academic credit, it is reasonable to believe that decision-makers may be more deliberative—and cautious.

But who are the decision-makers? Past research on student media independence has focused on the external decisions made by host universities—whether or not to fund student journalism, what strings may be attached to the money, if prior restraint is required or assumed and, if money is awarded, what level of involvement the university enjoys in editorial selections. Less attention has been paid, however, to the decisions made by the student journalists themselves, decisions regarding what may at first be seen as minor issues, such as office space, formal and informal advisors, and Internet hosting and sourcing. On further reflection, these offhand elements may have as much, if not more influence, on independence than previously believed.

Student Media and Independence

The relationship between universities and their student newspapers regarding editorial independence has generally been a challenge to define. Universities have historically sought some forms of control of the student speech spread throughout their campuses, often seeking editorial control through financial support. Student newspapers have sought independence by becoming separate, non-profit entities or by challenging the university's attempts to further control student media (Merrett, 2007).

However, many more newspapers are connected by necessity to their universities through critical funding, use of university facilities, or significant use of university faculty for advice and sourcing. Literature on both college student journalism independence and autonomy within professional journalism provides a valuable foundation from which to explore the decisions collegiate-level publications make regarding their day-to-day operations, as well as their editorial platform.

Ingelhart's (1993) *Student Publications: legalities, governance and operation* identifies 26 aspects of a student publication's structure and process that makes a paper independent. Nine of Ingelhart's aspects deal strictly with financial connections to the university, seven focus on instructional independence and the remaining 10 relate to a mix of financial and instructional independence, such as university influence in editorial content. Very few student newspapers meet Ingelhart's standards for independence, as most newspapers are not able to fulfill all requirements.

Still, Ingelhart's exploration of student media has provided a foundation for understanding the complicated relationship between student publications and their institutions. Many of his findings, ranging from implications upon student media to independence from legal issues to structure within the student organization, were based on research in coordination with College Media Advisers, an advocacy group for student publications, in the late 1980s. Based on quantitative data gained through surveys of hundreds of student newspapers, Ingelhart, while providing a framework for evaluating student media independence based upon potential influences, suggests that "the independent college student press simply does not exist in the United States to any significant degree" (1993, p. 146).

Within this view, Ingelhart recommends several approaches to better understand and strive for as much media independence as possible. The 20 recommendations include: student publications should remain separate from student government, despite any connection between student fees or university monies that fund the publications; student publications should have an advisor who is a member of the journalism faculty; student journalists should have space on campus to work; and, student journalists should take journalism classes while working on the publication to better the publication's professionalism. Yet, Ingelhart's findings—and recommendations—view student media in a normative sense, not through a larger social and cultural lens that addresses a variety of influences that restrict and shape media, in general (Berkowitz, 1996, 2010). This gap creates a problematic foundation upon which to view the processes, practices, and influences of news media.

Attempting to Understand Independence

Despite the challenges, student journalists and scholastic media researchers continue to address the issues of independence, as though the major influences upon such a designation depends on tangible evidence, such as finances or the existence of prior restraint. Additional studies regarding the operations of student media tend to focus on the purpose and activities of newspaper advisors. Few studies beyond Ingelhart's have explored how student journalists perceive independence or strive for it. For example, one study suggests student newspapers claim levels of independence without adequate evidence (Nelson, 1989). Nelson studied 85 college daily newspapers that considered themselves independent from "university control," while only 10 demonstrated a significant amount of independence from their universities. And, in 1997, Bodle created five categories of instructional independence of daily college student newspapers: strongly independent, moderately independent, mixed, moderately curriculum-based and strongly curriculum-based.

Newspapers fit into Bodle's categories based on answers to survey questions about how the newspapers were organized, run, and funded. Bodle's writings show how some aspects of publication that may be perceived as hindering independence—such as having an advisor—could instead have little influence on independence if, for example, the advisor worked solely on the business end instead of editorial (1997, p. 21). Twelve of the 101 student newspapers involved in Bodle's study were "strongly independent," with most of the remaining papers in a "mixed" state, indicating that student newspapers, at least when the surveys were conducted in 1993, relied on their universities for money, advisors, instruction, and other resources.

Another influence shaping journalists' decisions and practices comes from media convergence. Increasingly, college student media are following professional media outlets through convergence efforts, creating online publications, and using online social media and standards in their journalism. In June 2010, for example, *The University Daily Kansan*, a student-run newspaper at the University of Kansas, merged its newspaper newsroom and TV newsrooms to converge and promote news through multiple platforms (*The Capital-Journal*, 2010). Yet, as Singer suggests, the expansion of journalism online presents challenges to the reporter and news organization through balancing—or maintaining—objective news as a consumer product and by maintaining across populations equal

access to news as a democratizing tool for media outlets internationally (Singer, 2007, 2008, 2009).

Finally, the role of the law cannot be overlooked. The 1988 *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* decision, while focused on K–12 student speech, has been “trickled up” to the college press in the Seventh Circuit, and has been considered by other courts as a valid legal precedent to apply to any student medium. That decision, which reaffirmed the right of a Hazelwood East High School administrator to remove two pages of the student newspaper before it went to press and without consultation with the student staff, hinged on the idea of the student press as a vehicle of school expression over student expression:

We hold that educators do not offend the First Amendment by exercising editorial control over the style and content of student speech in school-sponsored expressive activities so long as their actions are reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns. (*Hazelwood*, 1988 at 272–3)

The Court gave six areas of consideration to determine if a publication is fairly labeled as “school sponsored” and therefore a *private* forum which is open to school regulation so long as it is supported by a legitimate pedagogical concern, as opposed to a *public* forum, which is much harder to regulate:

1. if the speech is part of a classroom curriculum
2. if the newspaper has not traditionally been open to the community at large
3. if the speech is part of graded work
4. if a teacher retains a level of control over the speech
5. if prior restraint has been accepted in similar situations in the past, and
6. any relevant written policies of the school or district. (Sanders, 2006, p. 166)

Seventeen years later, *Hosty v. Carter* (2005) was argued before the Seventh Circuit Court. In this situation, the Governors State University student newspaper, the *Innovator*, challenged Dean of Student Affairs Patricia Carter’s order to the newspaper’s printer to refuse to print future issues without the school’s express approval. The order came in response to several articles written by student reporter Margaret Hosty that were highly critical of the administration and its decision not to rehire the newspaper’s faculty advisor. Calling it an illegal prior restraint, Hosty filed suit.

The Seventh Circuit found for the University, using the *Hazelwood* decision as its chief precedent, stating, “Whether *some* review is possible depends on the answer to the public-forum question, which does not (automatically) vary with the speakers’ age (*Hosty*, 2005 at 734). After reviewing a range of Supreme Court decisions indicating that First Amendment rights at public institutions have been applied uniformly, regardless of grade level, the court concluded, “We hold, therefore, that *Hazelwood’s* framework applies to subsidized student newspapers at colleges as well as elementary and secondary schools (*Hosty*, 1988 at 735).

The US Supreme Court declined certiorari on the *Hosty* appeal, so it remains the controlling precedent in the Seventh Circuit. The First Circuit has declared *Hazelwood* to be relevant to K–2 schools only (*Student Government Ass’n v. University of Massachusetts*, 1989 at 480, n. 6), and the Sixth Circuit has argued that *Hazelwood* had “little application” to college publications (*Kincaid v. Gibson*, 2001 at 346, n. 5). Other circuits have declined to take up the question.

Depending on the location of the post-secondary student press, a necessary financial connection to its home college or university may equal an unwanted yet unavoidable level of potential editorial control. In these cases, a newspaper may be faced with an “all or nothing” situation, where declining institutional funding and/or separating from the academic department to avoid institutional control may mean giving up the publication entirely.

Independence as a Bridge Between Media

While various cultural influences may influence the differences in how journalists—and journalism students—view journalistic practices, journalism education, and the role of media in society (Sanders et al., 2008), editorial independence has increasingly become a standard shared between international communities of professional and student journalists. Research on independence and decision-making among college student journalism reveals many of the characteristics of the college student newspaper newsroom are similar to those of the professional newsroom (Ingelhart, 1993; Kleiman, 1996; Peterson, 1974; Singer, 2007). It is common for college student journalists to attempt to pattern their policies and procedures after their professional counterparts to best mirror the working environment, and the two populations tend to share some of the same processes and challenges in the field, such as issues of autonomy and independence (Breed, 1999; Gans, 2007).

Regarding professional journalism, professional journalists strive for editorial autonomy both to produce and distribute news (Deuze, 2005; Singer, 2007). Within an interpretive community of journalists, a normative definition of journalism continues to embrace shared standards including maintaining objectivity, immediacy and, perceiving journalism as a public service, sharing a common set of ethics, and maintaining autonomy from external forces. Autonomy, or independence, has become a professional journalism standard as well recognized as the standard of accuracy. Independence has become seen to be vital to “shape political reality” and to create news agendas (Singer, 2007, p. 81).

Independence for professional journalists has largely meant independence from government intervention and autonomy from corporate oversight on editorial decision-making (Akhavan-Majid et al., 1991). Political officials and traditional political tools, such as opinion polls and political debates, were suggested to “dominate” coverage of domestic issues within two professional Swedish newspapers in 2008, threatening the democratic purpose of the news: to create open dialogue as officials—not an independent news media—set the news agenda (Shehata, 2010).

College media attempt to mirror this standard in the attempt to be independent from university officials and institutional oversight. Professional decision-making, then, may also have similarities between both populations of journalists, such as the journalistic gut feeling that influences decisions (Schultz, 2007), the process and details of gatekeeping (Beam, 2006; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009), and the use of sources to drive news (Berkowitz and Beach, 1993). However, journalism is not threatened merely by dependence on government and business demands.

The process of newsgathering itself may also create issues that infringe upon independence. Blau (2001), for instance, suggests professional journalists tend to have an “overdependence” on certain sources (p. 62), much like student journalists and their reliance on sources within their campus communities, regardless of those sources’ ability

to be neutral regarding their university employers. Both dependencies limit insight and perspective in reporting.

While professional and student journalists tend to work in a similar manner, there are significant differences that influence decision-making that cannot be ignored. First, retribution—or the threat of it—for college student newspapers can be more direct, such as in censorship or halting publication (Student Press Law Center, 2001). Second, students work and live in small educational environments where many of their sources are peers, professors and administrators, creating a unique power struggle between professors/sources/reporters and peers. Third, student journalists are working in newsrooms and for publications during an important time during their educational and personal development (Astin, 1999; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005), which influences their overall decision-making abilities.

The Study

Several past studies have used surveys to understand student journalism independence (Bodle, 1997; Ingelhart, 1993). This case study of four university student newspapers attempted to identify qualitatively the relevant factors that may be used to assess independence. Researchers used a focus group approach and hypothetical scenarios to explore student journalists' perceptions of their own independence, as well as the decisions they make in their day-to-day operations that can advance or hinder that independence.

Post-secondary student newspapers publish in a wide variety of configurations, from four-page monthlies to multi-sectioned dailies. While the dedication of the student journalists on all these newspapers cannot be questioned, researchers decided to pursue student publications that were highly active on a regular basis—thus, they opted to contact student daily newspapers (generally publishing five days a week) with an active website publishing at least some unique content as well as an active advertising department. These criteria also more closely mimicked professional newspapers, which would allow for some comparison between the two. Researchers wished to conduct all focus groups in person and together, so for purposes of time and financial efficiency, one geographic area was selected. Thus, eight daily college student newspapers in four Midwestern states were contacted, and four newspapers from three states chose to participate.

The editor-in-chief from each newspaper was asked to invite between five and seven members of his or her staff, with an emphasis on upper management from both editorial and advertising/business to attend the session. Focus groups were held at non-campus locations and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each. Students were promised confidentiality in an effort to promote a free and open discussion. The discussions were audio recorded with permission of the participants in order for the researchers to focus on the conversation, to ask probing questions and for clarifications, and so that the conversations could be revisited later.

Half of each session covered the structure of the newspaper, including its management, financial support, use of outside advisors, connection to its host university and ethical and legal resources. The second half of the session presented two hypothetical situations, encouraging participants to “think out loud” as they discussed their rationale behind the decisions they would make. One hypothetical challenged participants to

consider a situation in which the newspaper had received through the use of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) a list of donors to the university and the amounts of their gifts in anticipation of the enactment of a state statute that closed access to such records. The statute would close all donor information, including gifts made to the university's lobbyist. The hypothetical asked students to consider the consequences of possible conflicts with alumni donors or donors to their journalism school should they publish the contents of the list.

The second hypothetical presented a multimedia package regarding faith on campus, and asked participants for their reactions to an interview subject who wished to be removed from the package due to safety concerns, a church wishing to advertise within the section when no other faith communities had been offered such an opportunity, and an outside advisor suggesting they remove the public's ability to post comments on the section from the website. While the first hypothetical challenged student journalists to think about their relationship with their university audience(s), the second focused more on their relationship with their student readership (Murley, 2007).

The goal of this study was to get a glimpse—through active discussion—of factors impacting on independence in the student press. Both Bodle and Ingelhart have analysed the external pressures on student newspapers that may limit their independence. This study sought to examine whether there are internal decisions that may have the same or even greater effect. The purpose of this study was not to generalize findings, but rather to lay the foundation for a new way to explore the independence of the student press, to present further perspective on an issue of social behavior, and to provide questions for future research on student media and media independence, in general.

Using previous research on college student newspaper independence (Bodle, 1997; Ingelhart, 1993; Nelson, 1989) as a guide, the four newspapers were observed regarding the depth and breadth of their connection to their host university or other external influences, using such parameters as financial support, physical location, supplementary resources (i.e. Internet access, utilities, etc.), professional guidance and source availability for articles. Based on these observations, the four newspapers are described as follows.

Student Newspaper 1 (SN1)

This publication has a circulation of 50,000 (based on print and online estimates). It has a staff of 100 students, with reporters and photographers paid on a per-article/photo basis and upper management on monthly salaries. The staff is guided by a part-time professional writing coach, part-time professional photo coach and full-time professional Webmaster, who are hired by the newspaper. The newspaper is also guided by a full-time publisher, who is hired by a private corporation that is under contract with the university to run the newspaper, as well as several other forms of student media. There is an advisory board consisting of university faculty and non-newspaper staff students. The newsroom is located within the university's journalism building and uses university utilities and Internet resources. The newspaper receives 10 percent of its budget from student-segregated fees, and has worked with the university's foundation to pursue fundraising opportunities with alumni.

Student Newspaper 2 (SN2)

This publication has a circulation of about 6000. The publication is created by a paid editorial student staff. The newsroom is located on campus in the student union in a rent-free space, to which three newspaper staff members have 24-hour access. University utilities and Internet access are used. The staff is guided by a Board of Directors comprised of faculty and alumni, along with a non-faculty full-time general manager as well as a full-time, non-student advertising manager and non-student office worker. Salaries, along with all other newspaper expenses, are funded solely through advertising revenue.

Student Newspaper 3 (SN3)

This publication has a circulation of 10,000. The staff are volunteers. Students are guided by a 14-member Board of Directors (consisting of students, professional journalists, faculty members and alumni), an editorial advisor (who teaches at another university and was formally a newspaper staff member) and an extensive alumni association. The newsroom is located rent-free inside the university's journalism building and uses the university's Internet network and utilities. Its Web server is located and maintained by university employees. The publication is funded from advertising revenue. Special projects, such as conference attendance or editorial contest entries, are funded through alumni donations.

Student Newspaper 4 (SN4)

This publication has a circulation of 16,000. Members of the business department and all editorial staff from associate editor and up are paid, while reporters are volunteers. Students are guided by a nine-member Board of Directors and three informal university faculty/staff advisors. The newsroom is located in a privately owned rental office space several blocks from campus and the publication pays utilities and Internet services separately. The publication is a 501(c)(3) organization that is purely funded through advertising revenue.

Analysis

This study sought to address the following research question:

RQ: What role do student decisions play in post-secondary student newspaper independence?

After analyzing the discussions of focus groups' included in the study, three areas of interest emerged:

1. Students' perceptions of independence as policy compared to practice.
2. Student's use of implicit authority in the "group decision."
3. The role of a comfort zone of external influence.

Perceptions of Independence as Policy Versus Practice

All four newspapers claimed independence from outside influences as a matter of general policy—they self-defined as fundamentally independent. Respondents articulated this independence in different ways, but in general, the most influence a non-student might have upon the decisions of newspaper staff and influence upon content came in the way of advice, which could be freely ignored. Respondents primarily claimed independence from their host university, but also declared alumni, advisors, advertisers, their own advertising departments and even their own readers as non-influential in the decision-making process of the newspaper.

As questions posed to the students examined the day-to-day processes of the paper, and follow-up questions sought clarification on items such as budgets, funding and location, respondents were quick to defend their independence when their answers appeared to run contrary to their stated independence. For example, when answers to questions about SN1's operational logistics revealed that the newspaper received significant funding from the university in the form of segregated fees—enough to cover a full year's printing and delivery expenses—respondents added: "we decide where that money goes, not the university." When asked to describe the responsibilities of the newspaper's two paid consultants—a writing coach who also held an adjunct faculty position and a photo coach—it was clarified that the coaches were employed by the newspaper, and that there was "no direct affiliation with the School of Journalism." Similar comments followed regarding the newspaper's location within a university-owned building. Students said, without being asked, that their office space within a university building was rented from the university, with utilities included in the rent package.

While discussing the hypotheticals, SN1 respondents described a situation in which their non-student publisher made a decision to remove online comments below a news story, contrary to the wishes of the student staff and the comments policy. When asked how this decision came to be, one SN1 respondent said:

At the end of the day, I can make the decision to do it or not to do it, and there are very few times when [the publisher] will step in and really advocate one way or the other, because he really does let us have almost complete control. Well, we do have complete control, but he'll tell us how he feels about it and it's not very often that he'll advocate strongly one way or the other. And then it's up to me to decide whether I really want to piss him off and disagree with him. But I mean I certainly can.

Yet, another SN1 respondent directly followed with:

One time that he stepped in when I guess we lost—instead of having the newspaper the way you usually look at it, the designers wanted to take one giant photo and run it horizontal. I'm not sure if somebody went to [the publisher] for this decision, but he basically told us no, you shouldn't do it. [He'd] seen people try it and it doesn't work. I think he actually said that it would make him want to throw up if we tried it. So that was something that the designers were really upset on, that they lost the battle with the publisher.

Another prompting for independence reassertion came from SN4 respondents. These students self-defined their newspaper as independent, but defined competing peer newspapers as dependent upon the university. Reassertions of independence emerged

when the students believed they were being compared to dependent student papers. SN4 respondents argued that their own independence removed them from any level of similarity that may exist between them and any other student publication. As one SN4 respondent noted:

We take the fact that we're an independent student newspaper very seriously. I mean, a lot of it is we just feel lucky that we don't have to answer to a university because we know that it's rare, a rare opportunity to do this. So I guess it's a point of pride, but it's also a responsibility.

SN4 participants were emphatic about their separation from their host university. When questions about the composition of their Board of Directors revealed that several university faculty members were invited to attend board meetings, an SN4 respondent said, "But they're only there to advise. They're pure advisors and have no voting rights . . . they can't force us or ask us [to do] anything."

Threats to perceived independence also led respondents to volunteer clarification when none was requested. For example, when SN3 students were asked where their offices were located, they answered:

Our newsroom is located in the [name of university building], and we are there rent-free, which has always been the case. But we are absolutely not affiliated with the university. We're independent.

SN3 respondents offered the same immediate clarification when asked about the role of their advisor, a journalism faculty member of another university and former member of the student newspaper staff. Several respondents said they would use this advisor as a sounding board regarding the newsworthiness of stories, possible ethical conflicts or business decisions. Following one of these comments, another respondent said, "As far as [the advisor] goes, we can say f**k off whenever we want, and he's made that abundantly clear. If we want to run a giant middle finger on the front page, he may plead with us not to, but in the end, if we want to, we'll do it."

Implicit Authority in the "Group" Decision

English poet John Donne once said "No man is an island," and the four student newspapers in this case study appear to implement that philosophy in their decision-making. Respondents from all student newspapers spoke frequently about an established chain of command and collaborative decision-making used in all aspects of the newspaper. Yet again, respondents stressed that every link in this chain was a student, thus reinforcing and magnifying their authority as independent decision-makers of the newspaper

All newspapers utilized the same basic internal structure—a top tier of management, including the editor-in-chief, one or more managing editors and the business manager. A middle tier of management included section editors and their assistants, as well as editors of areas such as graphics, photo or Web. Beat reporters, general reporters and photographers completed a lower tier of management.

When dealing with editorial decisions, student staff members were expected to begin at their current level and proceed step-by-step to the managers above them until they had reached the top. As an SN4 newspaper respondent described:

The reporters will go to the associates. If the associates have questions, they'll come to the three section heads. It's mostly just consulting the person above you if you have any questions. If I can't solve it or if [name of person] can't solve it, we go to the news editor, and if he can't solve it, it goes up—you just go up there until you resolve it and come to a conclusion.

No reference was made to skipping over management levels. A beat reporter apparently would not seek out the editor-in-chief directly, but would pursue guidance through the appropriate channels, which may or may not lead to the top tier of management. This is not unlike the operations of a professional newspaper, as reporters in need of guidance will generally seek the advice of their section editors, who would in turn consult with their supervising editors, etc.

Combined with the chain of command was a reliance on meetings to accomplish decision-making in a collaborative fashion. While editors-in-chief of all four newspapers were present at their respective focus groups, only once—in the SN1 newspaper discussion—did a respondent make a comment implying that a final decision-maker existed:

In the end, [the editor-in-chief] will have the final say. If she's not there, I'm going to have the final say. If I'm not there, and so forth . . . It's usually a consensus-type thing, though. I don't think we've had a situation where we've not been able to agree on something.

Discussions among the newspapers also implied the use of a group process in decision-making, which involved multiple staff members. For example: "We talk about it in our budget meetings, we talk about it in our edit board meetings and even after an article comes out, we talk about it."

Each of the four newspapers referenced a daily afternoon meeting to discuss content, to which the top tier of management always attended, as did lower tiers as needed. Weekly meetings were generally section-specific, especially for sections with more in-depth reporting involved. Monthly meetings included the advisory or publishing boards.

When controversial issues arose in the newsroom, respondents from all four newspapers showed a preference for collaborative decision-making rather than a single decision maker. The SN2 respondents' first comment after the presentation of both the hypothetical situations was, "We would definitely meet about it," so they might consult with a law and ethics professor at their host university for guidance and perspective.

The SN3 newspaper made similar comments in the spirit of reasserting autonomy, and referenced checking in with their volunteer advisor, as well. In response to the second hypothetical, SN1 and SN4 newspapers suggested they would meet with the student requesting to have her name and image removed, as well as internal meetings with upper management.

Overall, each of the four newspapers favored a collaborative approach within a structured system of management, stressing that both the collaborations and management were completely student based. This helped reinforce their perceptions of their own independence, showing how fundamental structures and processes critical to any publication were occurring at their newspaper, and occurring strictly with student actors. The more they could show that student decisions were driving the course of their publication, the more authority existed behind their belief in independence.

A Comfort Zone of External Influence

While all four newspapers articulated and defended their claims of independence, focus group discussions revealed the existence of common comfort zones of external influence—areas that affect the newspapers' independence. However, respondents were unwilling to admit such influence directly or willing to note how they would accommodate the influence should it occur, rather than make adjustments to avoid it.

Comfort zones were formed through associations with multiple influences, interest groups, and people outside of the student population that runs the newspaper. One area within a comfort zone included external advice. All four newspapers sought it, though at different times in their decision-making processes, and all newspapers stayed within the college community, rather than seeking resources such as area professional newspapers or journalism organizations.

All four newspapers had university community members on their advisory boards. Some had faculty or other non-student staff in or near the student newsroom that students would interact with while making decisions. When the role of advisors or non-student staff emerged during focus group discussions of the decision-making process, respondents reiterated that such outside influence was strictly advisory.

At SN2, students did not consider their advisor, or other professional staff as influential to the students' decision-making: "[The general manager] is kind of a pseudo-advisor, but she'd never tell us you have to do this or have to do that. She offers suggestions." Yet, SN3 respondents noted a strong reliance on their volunteer advisor as an initial step in the decision-making process:

It's basically whenever we have any questions we can call him up or run stories by him . . . For example: Yesterday, we had a story about athletics and players misusing their scholarship money. We weren't sure how newsworthy that was, so I talked with him about it and he gave us his opinion on it.

Another comfort zone area includes the publication's website. Three of the four newspapers (SN1, SN2, and SN3) appeared to be less rigorous about control over their Web editions than their print issues. Those three papers were more willing to turn to outside advisors for decisions about control earlier in the decision-making process when dealing with online issues. Staffers were more willing to relinquish control over content updates, design, advertising and server storage to non-student professional staff or—to some extent—online website management companies, such as College Publishers.

A non-student professional Webmaster for SN1 was located a few hours from the student newsroom and was solely responsible for uploading the site's content, design and management. SN2 and SN3 relied on outside site managers and rented or used university-owned and operated servers. At SN3, a student newspaper staff member in charge of the website was also employed by the university as a student worker in the Information Technology department. None of the newspapers considered these arrangements to be problematic.

A third comfort zone was the physical location of the newsroom. Three of the four newspapers (SN1, SN2, and SN3) were housed in university-owned buildings, utilizing university utilities and Internet access. Of those three, one paid rent, one applied for space

as a student organization, and one had a historical agreement with its host university that provided space for the newspaper's offices.

For these newspapers, access to their own offices and computers was an issue. SN2 had three staff members with 24-hour access to their offices, all senior editors. SN3 respondents said that only one member of the entire newspaper staff had a key card for 24-hour access to the university building that houses their offices. Staffers shared frustration about the process:

[The building manager] ended up conceding and saying that she would give [name] and I keys, but they ended up costing money, like \$50 to make, and beyond that they have an ID access thing, and she gave us ID access that didn't work.

Despite issues with office access, access to keys, utility breakdowns and unscheduled building maintenance, none of the three university-housed newspapers considered moving to non-university space. However, students claimed such restrictions and complications do not influence the students' abilities to produce independent journalism.

A final comfort zone area was finance—bending to the external forces of advertisers, readers and alumni. In the first hypothetical, when the paper had to decide whether to publish donor information, SN3 respondents debated the potential consequences of angering donors who helped contribute to their operations: "Well, if we're exposing some alumni for donating to a government lobbying organization, that may affect us too. We may be undercutting our funding. So I don't know if we still publish the story." Another respondent shortly followed with, "I would probably discuss it with our editorial advisor and talk with our Board, too. If it was a story with long-lasting implications, I would probably get people's input."

SN1 respondents balanced accountability to their financial well-being with their responsibility to their readers and mission. One said:

My first thought was "I'll let ... our publisher worry about money." Our first job is to report that story ... So if it was my decision, I would write that story and say screw the consequences. Do we really want money from donors who don't want us to practice good journalism?

Only SN4 noted a separation between the newspaper and outside influences, but seemed to perceive the first hypothetical as a test of independence. After it was read, the conversation began among students as follows:

When you were first describing the situation with all the people with ties to the university, we wouldn't consider those ties to be important.

Yeah, I saw people rolling their eyes at that.

If it's our closest advisor and there's a problem with them, we're going to report it, no questions asked.

Further discussion with SN4 respondents revealed a similar distancing from their host university, their advertisers and their readers regarding influence over or considerations within their decision-making. Ultimately, as one staff member said, "Basically, we answer to the law."

Discussion

College student newspapers are not only media for student expression, news, and entertainment. They also serve as training grounds for future media professionals and a practical learning lab for students. But campus newsrooms have also been a hotbed of students striving for independence and universities wishing to restrict speech (Kleiman, 1996).

While many newsrooms may have accomplished certain levels of independence—such as the ability to publish without prior restraint—this study suggests that there remains some dissonance between student journalists' perception and reality of their independence. Evidence from these focus groups indicates that students, themselves, may be reducing their independence through the choices they make on such fundamental issues as sourcing, funding, location, and guidance.

Throughout this study, newspaper staffers strongly affirmed that they alone made editorial decisions, yet a closer look at the respondents' stories reveal that more frequently than they cared to admit—or recognized—non-students and external influences that the students themselves invited in to the process were involved in decision-making over editorial and business decisions.

Instead of recognizing the potential influence of peripheral connections to the university—newsrooms within school buildings, the use of school Internet access, renting university server space and seeking guidance from faculty members—respondents built their perception of independence primarily on the level of *financial* connection to their university and whether university officials requested or demanded changes to editorial content.

This study, then, disagrees with that perception and suggests editorial independence is about more than financial support or overt attempts by the university to control the content of student media. Independence is also influenced by the student journalists' own choices—choices that may unwittingly relinquish control to non-students.

While Ingelhart (1993) and past researchers approach independence mostly from the perspective of how much a university may or may not intervene with a student newspapers' operations, this study suggests that students' own journalistic practices define their independence. Such choices and processes may limit independence from non-student staffers, resulting in:

- *Limited sources and guides to those within their own campus community.* By primarily seeking sources and advisors from the campus community, respondents reduced their opportunity to separate from their host schools and incorporate a greater variety of perspectives.
- *Not using their revenue and other funding to seek off-campus space, utilities and Internet access.* Refusing to recognize the impact of relying on such university resources as Internet access puts the paper in a tenuous situation should conflict arise. Similarly, relying on their host university for things like office space, Internet access and utilities limits independence as well.
- *Lack of confidence in their own ability to make key decisions.* Creating a tradition of seeking guidance from non-students and faculty regarding editorial content or business decisions has the potential to limit the students in their ability to make independent decisions.
- *Relying on non-students, including university staff and/or resources to maintain the paper's Web presence.* Many respondents displayed a cavalier attitude about who loads their

online content, how advertising is placed, and who owns their servers. Such relationships further the blurred understanding of how online news outlets operate.

Student journalists who view their level of independence based on the overt influence of their universities upon the newspaper may argue these points, yet students and educators must realize that a news outlet's level of independence relies on more than who pays the bills or sets the day's editorial platform.

For example, SN2 respondents revealed that only one member of their entire staff had a key card for 24-hour access to the university building housing their offices. This prevents students from having the choice—and ability—to write news on breaking deadlines or to access materials within the newsroom when needed. Whether students would produce breaking news if they had access to the building or desire entrance when the building is closed is not the point. Instead, the point is that the students' decision to remain in a university building restricts their independence to choose to take such actions should an opportunity arise.

Similar influences upon independence may arise from the students' reliance on university utilities, Internet access or Web resources—server maintenance or energy-saving measures that control electrical usage by reducing its ability to operate free from university involvement.

Additionally, when student journalists limit their expert sources and advisors to faculty and/or other members of their own campus community, it becomes harder to recognize conflicts of interest. Student journalists, too, are also insulated from specific perspectives and choices while making decisions. Such involvement from non-students in decision-making also reduces the chance for students to make mistakes and to learn from them, especially regarding accountability to advertisers and readers.

Finally, influence from non-students about editorial, ethical or business matters alters the students' voice. The SN1 staffers said that they did not wish to remove comments from the newspaper's website, but the publisher did, resulting in a student publication that did not reflect the student staff's perspectives or voice. Choices of sources, newsroom location, resources, and guidance ultimately influence student staffs and their ability to independently inform their community under the auspices of their own decisions. Misunderstanding this influence, and a publication's actual level of independence, leads to unnecessary distractions from the work at hand.

This case study of four focus groups offers a new direction for the study of student media independence. Examining the decisions of students themselves allows researchers to get a fuller picture of how today's student media are functioning in an ever-shrinking news cycle. Further exploration of how independence is defined beyond the basics of funding and "final say" can benefit student journalists as they choose to assess their own levels of independence, admit to what they cannot or are unwilling to change, and alter what is within their power to do if they wish to experience greater independence.

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