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Community Structure and Media Risk Coverage

Sharon Dunwoody*

Introduction

Many scholars argue that journalists and the organizations that employ them do not work in a vacuum, that news accounts are influenced by the structural context within which they are generated. Reporter values are a product of the prevailing culture, these scholars maintain, and organizational values may track back directly to the political and economic exigencies of commercial life. The result is coverage that frames the world in ways consonant with the needs and values of the prevailing power structure, that defines the social status quo as not just inevitable but ideal.

If these scholars are right, one would expect these structural forces to influence media coverage of risk as strongly as they would influence coverage of any other topic. Designing studies that allow a glimpse of these potentially pervasive forces at work, however, is another matter. How do you “see” the impact of a political structure? How do you separate the role of culture from the idiosyncrasies of individual whims? How do you distinguish purposive acts from chance occurrences? And how do you operationalize such macro concepts in ways that allow you to detect their absence as determinants? In other words, how do you design a study that is capable of telling you that you guessed wrong?

Fortuitously, one team of researchers has indeed operationalized a macro predictor in a way that allows one to gauge its impact, empirically, on media coverage of risks.¹ Tichenor, Donohue and

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¹ Phillip J. Tichenor, George A. Donohue & Clarice N. Olien. *Community Conflict & the Press* (1980).

Olien of the University of Minnesota have spent their careers exploring the effects of social structure on journalistic decision-making by looking at the relationship between story content and the structure of the community in which a newspaper is embedded. With several colleagues, I have applied their theory — successfully, I think — to risk coverage. I'll tell about that research below. First, however, here's a quick look at their conceptual assertions.

Community Structure and Its Impact on News Organizations

The Minnesota trio argues that most mass media organizations in the U.S. are embedded in communities and that their behaviors are largely determined by the way power is distributed in those communities. Sometimes a community is geographically bounded, as is the case with the readers of a typical city newspaper, who have in common a few square miles of territory. At other times, as University of Oregon scholar Cynthia-Lou Coleman notes, community members may be widely dispersed but held together instead by shared values, as is the case with subscribers to an advocacy publication; they may be spread around the globe but hold common beliefs about an issue or a set of larger concepts such as the environment.

At any rate, the crucial dimension of a community is not geographic; it is the extent to which power is centralized in that community. Tichenor, Donohue and Olien argue that the mass media serve the powerful as communication links and that the nature of power distribution necessarily determines the nature of media behavior. Let's look at the two extremes of the power distribution continuum for an illustration of that power-communication relationship:

The community with a centralized power base: Communities in which power is in the hands of a few individuals are usually small, homogeneous settings. Decision-making in these structures is done by consensus and is often accomplished behind the scenes... in the stereotypical, smoke-filled back room of the Moose Lodge or in the church basement. Decisions are grounded in precedent and tradition,

and when conflicting views emerge, they are resolved interpersonally. Many of us who grew up in the small towns that still dot the American landscape can easily picture this context.

Mass media in such settings, say Olien, Donohue and Tichenor, play a role as important legitimizers of community norms. The job of the local newspaper or radio station is not to pose threats to the existing power structure but to support it, to act as community boosters and consensus builders. Thus, media in these homogeneous communities work hard to convey information that reflects well on the community and its leaders and either ignore information that raises questions about the actions of those in power or repackage that information in less threatening forms.

The community with many power bases: At the other end of the continuum is the large, robust, unruly community. Many centers of power compete for influence across a diverse population, with no guaranteed winners or losers. Conflict is a natural component of such a structure; indeed, it is seen as a routine part of community life. Since the setting is too complex to allow competing views to be mediated interpersonally, the "mediation arena" is situated at a very different level. Conflicting views are aired and worked through largely in public.

In such a community, the mass media play crucial roles as conveyers of these conflicting views. The local newspaper or TV station not only informs community members about disparate perspectives but also serves as an important link between competing power factions, who use the mass media to learn about the views and behaviors of each other. Public opinion researcher Vincent Price captures this role nicely in a recent monograph:²

The news media... provide a principal means by which the members of a public communicate. Perhaps most important, journalism allows political actors and spectators to interact. The news supplies continuing accounts of what is unfolding on the elite political stage.... Journalists also register how the audience is reacting to the play as it unfolds.... The news media are

² Vincent Price, *Public Opinion* 81-82 (1992).

mechanisms — perhaps now the dominant mechanisms — that allow publics to carry out their business.

How Does Power Distribution Influence Risk Stories?

Many risk stories constitute potential threats to the status quo. Let's take one example: the local business whose pollution is identified as posing a possible health threat to community members (i. e., a paper mill in northern Wisconsin whose waste includes trace amounts of dioxin). We would expect community structure to make a difference in the way a local medium would handle that risk story.

Specifically, we would expect the media organization located in a pluralistic community to recognize the dioxin contamination as a problem worthy of news coverage and to tackle it readily, with few qualms about the harm that such coverage could wreak on the paper mill itself. The stories would displease the company, of course, but the paper mill would be only one of several power loci in the community, so it could not bring enough pressure to bear on the newspaper publisher or editor to prevent or dramatically alter the stories. Other interest groups in the community, in fact, might welcome the coverage and reward the newspaper or TV station for its "watchdog" behavior.

Thus encouraged, the media organization might go well beyond covering hearings, press conferences and other structured news events to engage in enterprise reporting, devoting staff time to longer stories that try to uncover the genesis of the problem or to explore such things as long-term health effects. Throughout, competing interest groups would rely on the medium as an important source of information about each other's activities and about how the community itself feels.

In contrast, the news organization situated in a more homogeneous community would have a much more difficult time treating the contamination as big news, as evidence of a potential problem. The paper mill owner — as well as the medium's owner or publisher — may be part of a small coterie of individuals who "run" the community, and stories such as this would cast doubt on their performance. Remember, the role of a mass medium in a community such as this is to legitimize

those in power, not question them. So we would expect the medium to downplay coverage of dioxin contamination. "Downplaying" may mean something as drastic as ignoring the contamination altogether or, at the very least, minimizing coverage of conflicting views about the issue or reconstituting the problem not as one that poses a risk to the community but, rather, as one that illustrates how handily community leaders can come to the rescue.

We have used Tichenor, Donohue and Olien's community pluralism concept in several studies of newspaper coverage of risks over the years. And for the most part, we find the types of differences articulated above.

For example, in the mid-1980's, with Marshel Rossow, now at Mankato University, I looked at how a group of Wisconsin newspapers covered the possibility that the federal government might situate a high-level nuclear waste storage site in northern Wisconsin. We discovered that, as predicted, newspapers from heterogeneous communities were far more likely to write about the controversy, air conflicting points of view in those stories, and engage in enterprise reporting than were newspapers that served smaller community settings.

More recently, in a study of environmental risk stories in nineteen midwestern newspapers, Robert Griffin and Christine Gehrmann, both at Marquette University, and I found that newspapers in pluralistic communities were more likely, in their stories, to link contamination from local businesses to threats to human health in the community and to frame local contamination as a problem. Yet, newspapers in homogeneous settings tried to avoid articulating a contamination-health link and were more likely to frame the contamination not as a problem but as a situation that had found a solution.

Community structure did *not* emerge as a predictor of daily newspapers' likelihood of covering a 1991 report about toxic contaminants produced by industries in their communities. But another structural variable employed in that study did seem to play a role: community reliance on manufacturing. We found a curvilinear relationship between reliance and likelihood of publishing a

contaminants story: Newspapers in communities with medium reliance on manufacturing were more likely to run a contamination story than were newspapers in communities with either low or high reliance. We speculate that communities with few businesses (low reliance) would not find the issue of contamination relevant, while those with many polluting industries (high reliance) would find it a sensitive topic, indeed.

An Example

Still, the bulk of our research to date suggests that distribution of power in a community can be a powerful determinant of the media's approach to risk stories. To give you a richer feel for this relationship, let me illustrate it with a brief tale taken from a series of case studies that Professor Bob Griffin of Marquette University and I conducted of media coverage of three Superfund sites in Wisconsin. Here's what we found when we examined newspaper coverage of the Better Brite Chrome and Zinc sites in De Pere, Wisconsin:

Contamination from two plating companies — one for chromium and the other for zinc — was substantial enough to warrant the establishment of a Superfund site in a residential area of De Pere, a small community of less than 20,000 near the city of Green Bay in eastern Wisconsin. The owner of the two sites, Better Brite Plating Inc., had made some efforts in the late 1970's to contain leakage from the underground plating tanks, but the state was unimpressed and filed suit in 1980 to force Better Brite to clean up. In 1985, the company declared bankruptcy and fled. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency began cleanup operations in 1986. As of 1992 (when the case study ended), an on-site water treatment system was handling contaminated water at the chromium plating site and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources had been given the authority to coordinate remaining cleanup efforts.

De Pere is served by a small weekly newspaper, the De Pere Journal. Nearby, the community of Green Bay, at nearly 100,000 residents a

much larger and more heterogeneous city, was served primarily by the afternoon daily newspaper, the *Press-Gazette*. Variance in community pluralism is pronounced across these two communities, and so were the differences in coverage of the Better Brite Superfund site. Among those differences:

- Consistent with earlier studies, we found that the *De Pere Journal* tried hard to put the best face on the presence of a major contamination site in the middle of town. The publisher and the editor of the newspaper argued in personal interviews that the Better Brite story was really a story about how things had gone right rather than how they had gone wrong, that local and federal officials had responded to the problem in a timely manner and would soon have it under control. They asserted that city residents had little interest in the site and that the site thus warranted minimal coverage; indeed, the newspaper rarely wrote about the site.

In contrast, the *Press-Gazette* never varied from its definition of the Better Brite site as a major contamination problem. Coverage of the site fell primarily to one reporter, who not only wrote dozens of stories over the years but also engaged in extensive enterprise reporting.

- As part of that extensive reporting, the *Press-Gazette* did not hesitate to depict the (now gone) owners of Better Brite as villains who first balked at cleaning up the two plating sites and then fled their responsibilities entirely. The *De Pere Journal*, on the other hand, never mentioned the owners in its stories. The publisher and editor, in interviews, recalled the owners favorably, as individuals who were active in the local Chamber of Commerce and who gave generously to civic endeavors. Better Brite was a good, well-run company, they said, whose owners were themselves innocent victims, as they could have known nothing about the potential negative effects of their actions.

- Finally, the two newspapers took very different approaches to framing the risks to health posed by the site. While the *Green Bay* newspaper framed the site as posing a danger, the *De Pere Journal* defined the risks as minimal.

For example, when in 1991 the Wisconsin Division of Health issued

a preliminary report about possible health effects, the Green Bay Press-Gazette began its story with the following lead: "The former Better Brite plating shops in De Pere pose health problems to neighbors, a new study suggests."

Contrast that with the De Pere Journal lead on the same information: "'We have alleviated the immediate threat to humans and the environment,' David Linneer, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Remedial Project Coordinator, said in reference to the initial clean up at the Better Brite chrome and zinc shop sites in west De Pere."

Behind these very different approaches to the same issue, we think, are important community structural differences that influence the role that each medium sets for itself. The Green Bay Press-Gazette, embedded in a more heterogeneous community, feels a responsibility to seek out problems in the community landscape and to highlight them for readers. It is rewarded for its "watchdog" role by residents who rely on the newspaper for information about the world around them.

In contrast, the De Pere Journal is embedded in a small, homogeneous community whose centralized power base prods it to act like a community booster. Indeed, the newspaper itself is part of the power structure, and its goal — with respect to Better Brite — is not to make citizens aware of the problems posed by the site but to alert them to the good job that city officials are doing in dealing with the problem. Were the newspaper to suddenly "act out," to begin to behave like the Press-Gazette, reader sentiment would quickly turn against it. The Journal's role is to be a legitimizer of the status quo, and it is rewarded for that behavior not only by the power structure of the community but also by community residents themselves.

Conclusion

Studies of news making commonly make the argument that news work is culturally bound work. That's a powerful but diffuse notion, and while I have always found it attractive, I have chafed at the absence

of empirical support for it. Tichenor, Donohue and Olien's development of community pluralism as a surrogate for the distribution of power in a community gives us a means of exploring the communication-power relationship empirically.

Applying the community pluralism concept to studies of the construction of risk stories has so far told us nothing new about the communication-power relationship. But it has told us a great deal, I feel, about the "why" behind media risk accounts. Of course, distribution of power in a community cannot account for all the variance in story construction; in fact, other social structural variables, as well as individual-level ones, can also play important roles.³

But I am impressed by the extent to which media organizations are indeed creatures of their communities. I no longer find questions about the "accuracy" and "objectivity" of media risk accounts conceptually interesting or worth pursuing; in a world that finally has acknowledged that media accounts are social constructions, answers to the question "who's right?" are relative. (For example, it is not at all clear whose Better Brite lead is the more "accurate" one in the two contradictory examples provided above.) What's interesting to me is whose version of reality dominates risk storytelling in the mass media and, ultimately, what that means for audience understanding.



³ See, e.g., Sharon Dunwoody, *The Media and Public Perceptions of Risk: How Journalists Frame Risk Stories*, in *The Social Response to Environmental Risk* 75 (Daniel W. Bromley & Kathleen Segerson, eds. 1992).

