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Roya Akhavan-Majid

St. Cloud State University, rakhavan@stcloudstate.edu

Anita Rife

Sheila Gopinath

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Chain Ownership and Editorial Independence: A Case Study of Gannett Newspapers

By Roya Akhavan-Majid, Anita Rife, and Sheila Gopinath

A comparison of the editorial positions taken on three public issues in 1989 by 56 newspapers in the Gannett group with a matched set of 155 other newspapers finds that Gannett newspapers were more likely to take positions, but also less likely to vary in the positions taken. (Also, 72% of the Gannett newspapers responded to the survey of editors versus 52% of the matched set of editors queried.) The study did not seek to find evidence that the newspapers were influenced by higher headquarters, but does suggest a number of ways that subtle influences may work within groups.

For the last few decades, the rapid rise of newspaper chains in the United States has been the subject of extensive criticism by media observers. A major point of criticism in this context has been the threat posed by such concentration to the basic premises of freedom of information and plurality of voices in a democratic society. As expressed by press critic, Ben Bagdikian,

True freedom of information requires three conditions: the opportunity to read and watch anything available; a diversity of sources from which to choose; and media systems that provide access for those who wish to reach their fellow citizens. In democratic countries the first condition is generally met. But the media titans are reducing the scope of the other two everywhere as they take over more and more once-independent companies.¹

Conceptually, this criticism is based on a premise of central editorial control within each conglomerate. It is assumed that as each media outlet is acquired by a conglomerate, it begins automatically to take on the voice of its new owner.

Despite the extensive polemic debate surrounding the issue of media concentration, relatively few studies have examined the effect of chain ownership on editorial independence. Whether a central mechanism of control does in fact operate within chain owned newspapers, therefore, remains an open empirical question.

Before an answer to this question can be attempted, however, it is important to distinguish four types of editorial control: potential, actual, direct, and indirect.

Obviously, at the "potential" level, control by the ultimate owner of a newspaper chain cannot be ruled out. By its nature, ownership implies potential, if not actual, control. This is the reason why a major study of chain owned newspapers in Canada, for example, while not finding any uniformity in news themes among the papers studied, still concluded:

At present, there is no way of ensuring that those who own large segments of the Canadian newspaper industry will not use that power to mold Canadian opinion to their own advantage.²

Given the ever-present potential for control implied by the fact of ownership, empirical demonstrations of the absence of editorial interference at a particular point in time are unlikely to fully alleviate the concern regarding future control. For the majority of the critics, the anecdotal instances in which such potential for control has actually materialized provide ample evidence of the dangers of concentrated ownership.

In an effort to respond to this concern, large chains, among them Gannett and Knight-Ridder in the United States, have taken every opportunity to reaffirm their policy of non-interference and their commitment to maintaining the diversity and autonomy of their affiliated newspapers. Gannett's current (1988) Annual Report, for example, displays the following statement on its cover page: "Diversity is strength. By encouraging and expecting a mix of opinions, backgrounds, sexes, races, and ideas Gannett improves results." Knight-Ridder attempts to alleviate fears of control by figuratively disputing the fact of ownership: "We bought them. But we don't own them."³

Such affirmations of a conscious commitment to diversity and editorial independence, however, do not rule out the possibility of potential control in case of a change in company policy, or of an indirect effect on editorial independence. That is, even in the absence of an intended direct control, chain ownership may set into motion a number of other mechanisms that could, either individually or collectively, lead to homogeneity in news and editorial content.

Addressing the continuing concern in the field regarding the impact of chain ownership, a number of non-systematic single-newspaper case studies have focused on the question of what in

general happens to a newspaper—including to its editorial policy—once it is acquired by a chain. The preponderance of evidence produced by these individual case studies tends to support the assertion that the majority of U.S. chains do not openly interfere with the editorial policies of their member newspapers. In a collection of ten such studies of individual newspapers owned by Thomson, Knight-Ridder, McClatchy, Freedom, Scripps League, Hearst, Gannett, Worrell, Donrey, and Ingersoll, Loren Ghiglione concluded that "...virtually every group (except perhaps Freedom) leaves the editorial page policies to the local management."⁴

Notable exceptions to this rule do exist, however, as also indicated by the above study. Confirming the exception in the case of the Freedom Newspapers, for example, another study of three papers owned by Freedom, Thomson, and Gannett indicated an absence of direct editorial control in the cases of Thomson and Gannett, but a rather aggressive pursuit of local ideological indoctrination by the Freedom Newspapers.⁵

Aside from the Canadian study already cited, only four studies have systematically directly addressed the standardizing influence of chain ownership on news and editorial content. Of these four studies, two have focused primarily on homogeneity of news content, while the other two have addressed the question of editorial autonomy as reflected in political endorsement patterns of chain owned newspapers.

On the whole, the body of systematic study on the subject has produced mixed results. In their comparative study of three sets of morning and afternoon Louisiana newspapers, for example, Hicks and Featherstone found no significant duplication of content within the two sets of chain owned newspapers under study.⁶ A more recent case study by Glasser, Allen, and Blanks, on the other hand, found extensive uniformity in the "news play" given to the Gary Hart story within the Knight-Ridder group.⁷ In their study of editorial page presidential endorsements during the 1960-1972 period, Wackman et. al. found a high degree of homogeneity in the endorsement patterns of chain-owned newspapers.⁸ This finding was replicated by the Gaziano for the 1972-1988 period.⁹

If a mechanism of control does in fact operate within newspaper chains to produce uniformities in news play and political endorsements, that mechanism of control may also be expected to lead to uniformity in the editorial positions taken by chain-owned newspapers on major national issues.¹⁰ Any tendency on the part of

large newspaper chains to orchestrate editorial opinion on national issues would seem to represent one of the most serious threats posed by chain ownership to freedom of information in a democratic society.

This study seeks to address the effect of chain ownership on editorial independence by examining the level of variation in the editorial positions taken by the Gannett chain on several national political issues. A nation-wide sample of non-Gannett papers provides the basis for comparison.

The selection of Gannett was based, first on its size. With a total circulation of close to six million (5,887,787)¹¹ Gannett represents, by far, the largest and potentially most powerful media conglomerate in the United States. Second, Gannett has been the nation's most vocal chain in proclaiming its commitment to editorial autonomy for its group-owned newspapers. Both of these characteristics make Gannett an appropriate candidate for study.

Based on the findings of two previous studies on the editorial page endorsements of chain papers, it was hypothesized that:

H: As compared with a nationwide sample of non-Gannett newspapers, the Gannett papers will tend to reflect a higher level of uniformity in editorial positions taken on major national issues.

Sampling. The Gannett sample included all Gannett daily papers in the U.S. for which addresses were available (N=78). The latest list, as of 10/6/89 obtained from Gannett itself, listed a total of 80 daily newspapers in the United States.¹²

A nationwide non-Gannett sampling frame was developed using the 1989 *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook* and the 1989 *Gale Directory of Publications*. Matched with the Gannett sample in terms of publication schedule (daily), range of town sizes (20,000 plus),¹³ and general geographic dispersion (coast to coast), the non-Gannett sampling frame represented one daily newspaper from every U.S. town of 20,000 or more population. Whenever there was more than one daily in the same town, one of them was drawn randomly to be included in the sampling frame. This procedure yielded a total of 654 daily newspapers for the non-Gannett sampling frame. A random sample of 300 non-Gannett newspapers was then drawn from this sampling frame to provide the point of comparison for the study.

Procedure

In order to assess the uniformity of editorial positions, it was first necessary to identify a set of controversial national issues prominent enough to have been carried by the variety of newspaper types (i.e., small town, regional, and national) represented within the Gannett chain. A preliminary examination of editorials carried in 1989 by a number of small town, regional, and national newspapers identified several issues of this type. The final decision as to which issues to include in the study was based on the level of controversy associated with the issue and the extent to which it lent itself to taking a clear-cut editorial position.¹⁴ Among the several controversial issues identified,¹⁵ three seemed to meet both of these requirements. These were:

1. The nomination of Senator John Tower for the position of Secretary of Defense by President Bush,
2. The Supreme Court Affirmative Action decision, known as the Richmond Set-Aside case, in which the court removed the requirement to set aside 30% public works contracts for minorities, and
3. The Supreme Court Webster decision giving the jurisdiction on abortion to individual states.

A mail questionnaire was then designed and sent to the editors of the Gannett and non-Gannett newspapers in our sample, asking them to indicate the editorial position taken by their newspaper on each of the three issues under study.¹⁶ The choices included with each item were:

- a) Did not carry an editorial on this issue.
- b) Supported the nomination (or decision).
- c) Opposed the nomination (or decision).
- d) Other (please explain).

After two mailings, a total of 56 Gannett and 155 non-Gannett newspapers responded to the survey. These figures reflect a 72% response rate for the Gannett and a 52% response rate for the non-Gannett newspapers.¹⁷

Results

Because the survey contained an "other" option, responses falling under that category needed to be properly classified before proceeding with the data analysis.¹⁸ An examination of the explanations provided by the editors for the "other" category revealed the following pattern. In the case of the Tower nomination,

the "other" category responses were either critical of Tower without making an overt statement regarding whether he should be confirmed (e.g., "Tower should withdraw"), or commented on the process without taking a position (e.g., "decision showed that congress does have a role to play in appointments"). In the case of the Richmond Set-aside case, only one editorial fell under the "other" category and was non-committal. In the case of the Webster decision, again the "other" category responses were either highly critical of the decision (e.g., "Webster weaves a crazy quilt"), or took the explanation approach to editorial writing, explaining the decision and how it might impact the relevant laws within the state in which the newspaper was published (e.g., "the decision...is not likely to alter state laws"). None of the responses in the "other" category reflected a supportive position.

After determining the pattern of responses in the "other" category, the editorial positions taken by the Gannett and non-Gannett papers were analyzed in two ways. At one level of analysis, in the Tower nomination and Webster decision cases the "critical" category was collapsed with the "opposed" to create a new "opposed/critical" category. The few responses falling under the "other" category which did not reflect a specific editorial position were excluded from the editorial position analysis. At another level of analysis, only the original "opposed" and "supported" positions were analyzed and all other responses falling under the "other" category were excluded from the analysis.¹⁹

The comparison of the editorial positions taken by the Gannett papers with those taken by the non-Gannett papers showed a high level of homogeneity within the chain and significant differences between the Gannett and non-Gannett papers.

First, the Gannett papers were significantly more likely to carry editorials on each of the three issues than the non-Gannett papers.

Table 1

Percentage of papers carrying editorials on
Tower nomination by type of ownership

	Gannett	Non-Gannett
Editorials	91.1% (51)	68.4% (106)
No editorials	8.9% (5)	31.6% (49)
	N= 56	N= 155

$\chi^2 = 11.11; df = 1; p < 0.001$

Table 2

Percentage of papers carrying editorials on
Richmond-Set-aside by type of ownership

	Gannett	Non-Gannett
Editorials	53.6% (30)	37.8% (60)
No editorials	46.4% (26)	61.3% (95)
	N=56	N=155

$\chi^2 = 3.71; df = 1; p < 0.1$

Table 3

Percentage of papers carrying editorials on the
Webster decision by type of ownership

	Gannett	Non-Gannett
Editorials	73.2% (41)	58.1% (90)
No editorials	26.8% (15)	41.9% (65)
	N=56	N=155

$\chi^2 = 4.01; df = 1; p < 0.05$

Second, the Gannett papers appeared almost unanimous in their opposition to or criticism of the Tower nomination (87.8%), the

Richmond Set-aside decision (82.8%), and the Webster decision (92.1%). These figures stand in significant contrast to 67.6% opposition to/criticism of the Tower nomination, 51.7% opposition to the Richmond-Set aside decision, and 74.4 % opposition to/criticism of the Webster decision among the non-Gannett papers.

Table 4
Position on Tower nomination by type of ownership

	Gannett	Non-Gannett
Supportive	12.2% (6)	32.4% (34)
Opposed/Critical	87.8% (43)	67.6% (71)
	N=49	N=105

$$x^2 = 7.0; df=1; p < 0.01$$

Note: The "Critical category comprised 4% of the response (i.e., 2 out of the 49) for Gannett and 2.8% of the responses (i.e., 3 out of 105) for the non-Gannett papers. The difference between the two groups of papers is significant at the .01 level whether the "Critical responses are collapsed with the "Opposed or not ($X^2=6.93$).

Table 5
Position on Richmond-Set-aside by type of ownership

	Gannett	Non-Gannett
Supportive	17.2% (5)	48.3% (29)
Opposed	82.8% (24)	51.7% (31)
	N=29	N=60

$$X^2 = 8.0; df=1; p < 0.01$$

Table 6

Position on the Webster decision by type of ownership

	Gannett	Non-Gannett
Supportive	7.9% (3)	25.6% (20)
Opposed/Critical	92.1% (35)	74.4% (58)
	N=38	N=78

$$X^2 = 5.0; df=1; p < 0.05$$

Note: The "Critical" category comprised 26.4% of the responses (i.e., 10 out of the 38) in the case of Gannett, and 7.7% of the responses (i.e., 6 out of the 78) in the case of the non-Gannett papers. The difference between the two papers on the "Opposed" position alone (without collapsing it with the "Critical" category) is significant only at the .068 level ($X^2 = 3.31$).

Third, as also may be inferred from above, the Gannett papers showed a consistent pattern of opposition across all three issues, while the non-Gannett papers were far less consistent. The mean conformity to the Gannett pattern was 1.8 for the Gannett papers and 1.0 for all non-Gannett papers. The difference is significant at the .0001 level.²⁰

Discussion

These results suggest that a homogenizing effect on editorial position and policy results from chain ownership. The outstanding question, however, concerns the process through which such uniformity results.

Previous studies of the homogenizing effects chain ownership have speculated about a number of factors that may be responsible for the uniformities found in news and editorial content of chain owned papers even in the absence of direct controls. Among the possible sources of uniformity suggested by previous research are hiring practices, i.e., the tendency to hire "like-minded" editors who then go on to make similar editorial decisions;²¹ management procedures, ranging from Management by Objective (MBO) techniques²² to the use of computerized information systems; peer pressure, ranging from socialization in the newsroom to the "arterial effect" discussed by

Breed,²³ and similarity in news sources, such as that resulting from subscription to the group-owned wire service.²⁴

This analysis suggests a homogenizing mechanism may operate within the chain-owned papers examined in this study, producing a high level of uniformity in their editorial positions on controversial political issues.²⁵ Other studies, focusing on a different set of issues and other newspaper chains, however, are needed before such a homogenizing effect can be generalized across all newspaper chains. In addition, future research needs to focus on illuminating the specific mechanisms of indirect control which work to bring about uniformity in editorial posture within chains, despite efforts on the part of their owners to preserve local editorial autonomy.

¹ Ben Bagdikian, "The Lords of the Global Village," *The Nation*, June 12, 1989, p. 812.

² Ronald Wagenberg and Walter Soderlund, "The Influence of Chain Ownership on Editorial Comment in Canada," *Journalism Quarterly*, 52: 93-98 (Spring 1975)

³ *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 1987, p. 17

⁴ Loren Ghiglione, ed., *The Buying and Selling of America's Newspapers*, (Indianapolis: R.J. Berg and Company, 1984), p. xii.

⁵ Gary Logan, Tom Korosec, and Joanne Jones, "A Libertarian Direction," *The Quill*, July/August 1980. Janet Higbie, Mary Farrell and Robert Potter, "An Emphasis on the Bottom Line," *The Quill*, July/August 1980; and William Ruberry, Diana Tomb, and Ben Read, "Improvement at the Risk of Being Bland," *The Quill*, July/August 1980.

⁶ Ronald Hicks and James Featherstone, "Duplication of Newspaper Content in Contrasting Ownership Situations," *Journalism Quarterly*, 55: 549-553 (Autumn 1978).

⁷ Theodore Glasser, David Allen, and Elizabeth Blanks, "The Influence of Chain Ownership on News Play: A Case Study," *Journalism Quarterly*, 66: 607-614 (Autumn 1989).

⁸ Daniel Wackman, Donald Gillmor, Cecilie Gaziano and Everette Dennis, "Chain Newspaper Autonomy as Reflected in Presidential Campaign Endorsements," *Journalism Quarterly*, 52: 411-419 (Autumn 1975).

⁹ Cecilie Gaziano, "Chain Newspaper Homogeneity and Presidential Endorsements, 1971-1988," *Journalism Quarterly*, 66: 836-45, (Winter 1989). This recent 1989 replication of the earlier Wackman et. al. study by Gaziano found a relative decrease in the overall level of homogeneity in endorsements.

¹⁰ See Ben Bagdikian, "The American Newspaper is Neither Telegram, Examiner, Observer, Monitor, Mirror, Ledger, Bulletin, Register, Chronicle, Gazette, Nor Herald of the Day's Events," *Esquire*, March 1967, pp 134-8.

¹¹ John Bustema, "Trends in Daily Newspaper Ownership," *Journalism Quarterly*, 64: 831-38 (Winter 1988).

¹² Although Gannett owns papers in Guam and Virgin Islands, these were excluded from the sample.

¹³ Almost all Gannett dailies are found in towns of 20,000 or more population.

¹⁴ Thus, an issue such as the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, although widely editorialized on in 1989, did not qualify because almost all U.S. newspapers would be likely to support it. Similarly, an issue such as the Jim Wright ethics investigation did not qualify because it appeared to be too multi-faceted to lend itself to a clear-cut support/opposed position.

¹⁵ Aside from the Jim Wright ethics investigation and the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, these included the Congressional pay raise and the Savings and Loan bail out.

¹⁶ Initially, we intended to conduct a content analysis to determine each newspaper's position on the above issues. After some deliberation, however, we decided that a survey of the pertinent editors would better serve the purposes of our study for two reasons. First, given the inaccessibility through the library system of the majority of the 378 papers we intended to study, clippings would need to be requested from the newspapers. This we predicted, would greatly reduce our response rate. Second, we felt that even after obtaining the editorials, our judgment as to whether an editorial reflected a position of support or opposition on an issue would not necessarily be more valid than the self-report by the editor who wrote it.

¹⁷ Obviously, the 52% response rate by the non-Gannett papers raises some concern about the generalizability of the results for the non-Gannett sample. In an effort to gain some insight into the nature of the nonresponse, the second wave responses for both samples were examined for possible systematic differences from the first wave. The examination showed that the majority of the second wave respondents were the ones who had not carried any editorials on any of the three issues and were therefore less likely to return the survey the first time.

¹⁸ Out of the 43 responses given by the editors under the "other" category, 4 were judged to reflect a decisively opposed or supportive position. These were, from the outset, classified under the appropriate "opposed" or "supported" categories.

¹⁹ These comprised 1.4% of the total responses in the case of the Tower nomination, .5% in the case of the Richmond-Set Aside case, and 7% in the case of the Webster decision.

²⁰ Mean conformity to the Gannett pattern refers to the average number of times the Gannett or the non-Gannett papers took an "opposed" position on the three issues. If all Gannett papers had consistently taken an "opposed" position on all three issues, the mean conformity score would be equal to 3. If none had taken such a position, the mean conformity score would be equal to zero.

²¹ Wackman et. al., *op. cit.* p. 419. Also see Theodor Glasser et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 613. Also see Ben Bagdikian, *Media Monopoly*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) p. 21.

²² John Soloski, "Economics and Management: The Real Influence of Newspaper Groups," *Newspaper Research Journal*, November 1979, pp. 19-27; Also see Dean Flatt, "Managerial Incentives: Effects at a Chain owned Daily," *Newspaper Research Journal*, Fall 1980, pp. 48-55.

²³ The term "arterial effect" as used by Breed in his study of the sources of standardization in newspaper content refers to a tendency on the part of editors to "look up to" larger newspapers in making editorial decisions. See Warren Breed, "Newspaper Opinion Leaders and Process of Standardization," *Journalism Quarterly*, 32: 277-284 (Summer 1955).

²⁴ John Soloski, *op. cit.* Also see Theodore Glasser et. al. *op. cit.*

²⁵ These results take on an added significance if one considers the possible association that may exist between editorial policy as reflected in a paper's op-ed pages and its pattern of news coverage. See Peter Clarke and Susan Evans, *Covering Campaigns*, for example, for a study of the relationship between editorial endorsements of political candidates and the news coverage of these candidates.