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Role perception as predictor of editors' job satisfaction

by Roya Akhavan-Majid

This survey of newspaper editors finds those who see their roles as disseminators or interpreters more satisfied than those who see their role as adversary or watchdog.

One of the main attractions of the profession to aspiring journalists has been the glamour associated with the ability to influence the course of events in their community through informing the public debate on vital matters of social and economic policy, keeping a check on the government, exposing political corruption and helping to advance a progressive social agenda. Despite the primacy of the profit motive to many owners of the press, the individual editors and journalists who engage in this less-than-lucrative profession tend to still be driven, in many cases, by the grand vision of journalism's influential role in shaping public life.

Previous studies of American journalists have confirmed these observations. Public service - the chance to help people - was reported by John Johnstone, Edward Slawski, and William Bowman¹ as being the top-rated factor by journalists among a list of items pertinent to judging jobs in journalism. Pay and fringe benefits, while viewed as important, were at the bottom of the list. More recent studies by David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit² have borne out these findings, with minor modifications.

It is also clear from previous research that journalists seek to make their impact on society in a variety of ways. Depending on their professional values, journalists may seek to contribute to society as disseminators of timely and objective information, or in more active roles, as watchdogs, critics and agents of policy formation.

Research has shown, furthermore, that a journalist's role perception affects his/her level of job satisfaction. Previous studies on this topic, however, have been confined to general samples of newswriters, and no studies to date have examined this question specifically with regards to daily newspaper editors. Although at the most fundamental level both editors and reporters function as journalists, they differ on key characteristics which may influence their satisfaction on the job. By virtue of their position in the newspaper hierarchy, for example, editors may be expected to experience higher levels of power and autonomy in their job than the journalists under their supervision. Given the importance of autonomy as a factor in job satisfaction, different patterns may hold for editors and journalists with regards to the relationship between role perception and job satisfaction.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between professional role perceptions and level of job satisfaction among American daily newspaper editors.

Review of literature

The preponderance of research evidence on job satisfaction points to the importance of what may be termed the human dimension, as a primary determinant. Such factors as level of autonomy, respect for the leader/supervisor and intrinsic interest and challenge of the job far outrank such material factors as salary, resources and job comfort as predictors of job satisfaction.³

Research in mass communication has generally confirmed these findings. Not only the Johnstone et. al. study,⁴ but also the more recent studies by Weaver and Wilhoit have shown that helping people (61 percent) and autonomy (51 percent), continue to be considered by the majority of journalists as being very important factors in determining their happiness on the job.⁵ Salary, on the other hand, continues to remain on the bottom of the list, with only 20 percent of journalists ranking it as an important determinant of their satisfaction.⁶

In their 1993 study of the relationship between newsroom policy and job satisfaction among journalists, Keith Stamm and Doug Underwood found that emphasis on profits in the newsroom was negatively correlated with job satisfaction, while such policies as serving the

community, serving readers as citizens and reporter autonomy increased job satisfaction.⁷ A study of the correlates of job satisfaction among public relations workers showed that self-actualization and autonomy were much more strongly correlated with level of job satisfaction than job comfort, material support and financial reward.⁸ Finally, in one of the few existing studies of job satisfaction among daily newspaper editors, David Demers found the level of autonomy to be a major influence on how satisfied top editors were in their jobs. Income, on the other hand, was found to be unrelated to editor job satisfaction.⁹

Thus, the human dimension of work appears to be the primary determinant of job satisfaction, both within the media industry and across professions, and in that context autonomy in particular emerges as a major factor in job satisfaction.

As already mentioned, professional role perception has been shown to exert a direct influence on job satisfaction among journalists. In their 1976 study, Johnstone et. al. found that journalists oriented to neutral professional values tended to be more satisfied with their jobs than those committed to participant journalistic values.¹⁰ The 1982 study by Weaver and Wilhoit found that journalists who strongly endorsed the adversarial role of journalism reported less job happiness than those who felt strongly about the importance of the disseminator role of the mass media.¹¹ It is important to note that these studies examined newswriters in all media and included both reporters and editors.

In an effort to predict the nature of the relationship between professional values and job satisfaction among newspaper editors, two competing hypotheses may be advanced. One is that editors who engage in their profession with a passion to change the world, are likely to draw greater satisfaction from their job than those who view their work primarily as the production of information. Given that editors tend to operate at a higher level of autonomy than reporters, they may have greater opportunities for self-actualization as watchdogs and muckrakers. It is equally likely that those with a less romantic view of the profession are operating at a more realistic level of expectation and are less likely to experience disillusionment and frustration.

Ultimately, based on the assumption that editors generally, enjoy higher levels of autonomy than other newswriters to fulfill an activist role, the following hypothesis was tested in this study:

- Editors who endorse activist professional values are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs than editors who subscribe to disseminator values.

In the context of this study, an activist mind-set is defined as one which views the editor/journalist not as a passive by-stander, but as an active agent in policy development and social change through interpretation, investigation, and criticism.

Method

In order to conduct the study, a systematic sample of 468 daily newspaper editors was drawn, using the *Editor & Publisher Yearbook*.¹² The sample was stratified by size, representing equal numbers of small (20,000 and below circulation) medium (20,001 to 70,000 circulation) and large (70,001 plus circulation) newspapers. A mail questionnaire was then designed, with eight items from the role perception scales developed by Johnstone et al. and Weaver and Wilhoit, and seven additional role perception items developed for this study. (See Table 1) A response rate of 56 percent (N= 258) was achieved after two mailings.

Table 1: The journalistic role perceptions scale with origin of items

Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman

Get information to the public quickly
Concentrate on news of interest to the widest public
Provide entertainment and relaxation
Discuss national policy while it is still being developed
Provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems
Investigate statements by government officials
Develop intellectual/cultural interests of the public^a
Stay away from stories with unverified content^a

Weaver and Wilhoit

Function as an adversary of government
Function as an adversary of big business^b

New

Provide critical evaluation of local government performance
Function as a watchdog of people in positions of power
Expose unethical practices of elected officials
Function as a watchdog of business on behalf of consumers
Promote social reform

Create awareness about global problems^c
Raise consciousness about global interdependence^c

^a *These items were not used in this study*

^b *Weaver and Wilhoit used the phrase, adversary of business*

^c *These two items were designed to tap the level of global consciousness among editors*

Results

Factor analysis of the role perception items revealed four factors in the data, which were subsequently designated as adversarial, watchdog, global interpreter, and disseminator. The definitions and groupings of these items are reflected in Tables 1 and 2. The four factors reflect descending levels of activism, with the adversarial factor being the highest and the disseminator factor being the lowest in level of activism.

To test the hypothesis, the mean responses of the editors on each of these four factors were correlated with their level of job satisfaction. The results showed a clear relationship between role perception and job satisfaction, although the relationship was opposite to the hypothesized direction. The data indicated that editors who place a high level of emphasis on activist values are those with the lower, not higher, levels of satisfaction.

The mean responses to global interpreter and disseminator factors showed significant positive correlations with the level of job satisfaction ($p < .01$), while the watchdog factor reflected a weak positive correlation and the adversarial factor was negatively correlated with job satisfaction.

The pattern of results changed slightly, however, when the same analysis was performed separately on the data for editors of large, medium, and small. Within the large newspapers, the watchdog factor was more strongly correlated with job satisfaction than the global interpreter factor. However, consistent with the overall pattern, the disseminator factor had a positive, and the adversarial factor a negative correlation with job satisfaction. Within the medium and small newspapers, the pattern for all four factors remained consistent with the overall findings.

These results indicate that, despite operating at a higher level of autonomy than journalists, editors show a somewhat similar pattern of relationship between professional orientation and job satisfaction. In general, those editors who pursue adversarial and watchdog roles tend to be less satisfied with their jobs than those who are content with the production, interpretation, and dissemination of information.

The slight deviation from the pattern by the editors of large newspapers with respect to the watchdog and global interpreter roles, however, is interesting and needs further investigation. Among other things, such deviation from the overall pattern may be due to a potentially greater sense of efficacy experienced by the editors of large newspapers in realizing a watchdog (though not an adversarial) role. Given the pluralistic nature of the metropolitan areas in which they tend to operate, and the resources available to them in pursuing investigative journalism, the watchdog editors of the larger newspapers may be able to perform their preferred professional role more effectively than their counterparts in the smaller newspapers.

Table 2: Principal components analysis with rotation to oblimin*

	Global Interpreter	Watchdog	Disseminator	Adversarial
Global Interpreter				
Global Problems	.89	.36	.08	.16
Global Interdependence	.82	.23	.07	.20
Discuss national policy	.83	.38	.29	.13
Analysis/interpretation	.78	.37	.19	.09
Promote social reform ^a				
R ²	32.9%			
Watchdog				
Expose unethical practices	.28	.84	.14	.21
Watchdog of power	.27	.82	.20	.26
Critical of government	.23	.71	.18	.27
Investigate statements	.57	.63	.23	.21
Watchdog of business	.46	.59	.04	.29
R ²	12.7%			
Disseminator				
Widest public interest	.07	.10	.79	.07
Inform public quickly	.04	.23	.69	.23
Entertain and relax	.31	.16	.65	.03
R ²	9.9%			
Adversarial				
Adversary of business	.23	.27	.11	.91
Adversary of government	.09	.34	.17	.90
R ²	8.8%			
Total R ² : 64.2%				

*Minimum eigenvalue for factoring = 1.0

^a“promote social reform” showed a factor loading of .453 on the “global interpreter” factor and a loading of .446 on the “adversarial” factor. It was subsequently deleted from the analysis because of the low factor loadings

Because of the seven additional items developed for this study, and the resulting new factors, the data in this study cannot be directly compared to those obtained by Johnston et. al. and Weaver and Wilhoit. However, a plausible difference does emerge between editors and the previously studied samples of newswriters when conceptually similar dimensions are compared across these studies. The global interpreter factor in this study corresponds conceptually to, and contains, most of the participant items used by Johnstone et. al. and the interpreter items used by Weaver and Wilhoit (Table 1). As such, the data in this study point to a potential difference between editors and other newswriters with respect to the participant /interpreter role. In contrast to the Johnstone et. al. findings, which showed participant values to be negatively related to job satisfaction among newswriters, this study indicates that an interpretive /participant role is positively associated with job satisfaction among editors.¹³

Summary and discussion

This study sought to examine the influence of professional values on job satisfaction among editors. Overall, the findings of this study are clear with respect to the disseminator and global interpreter roles. Editors who see their role as disseminators of information, as well as those who seek to interpret complex problems and shape government policy, tend to be more satisfied with their jobs than editors who seek to function as adversaries to big business and government and/or watchdogs of people in positions of power.

The expectation that the editors' relative autonomy to achieve their professional goals would temper the relationship between their role perception and job satisfaction, was not supported. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that the existence of such autonomy on the part of editors was assumed, rather than measured, in this study. It is indeed quite possible that, although placed at a higher level of authority than reporters, editors still have to contend with a variety of constraints in their job, including organizational goals and pressures from publishers and business managers. Future research needs to focus more directly on measuring the mediating influence of autonomy on the relationship between role perception and job satisfaction.

Nevertheless, the positive correlation between a global interpreter role and job satisfaction may indicate that, in general, editors who pursue active participation in the policy process within their communities, are able to draw a high level of satisfaction from their work. Equally interesting, however, is the consistent finding that an adversarial and/or watchdog orientation is not conducive to job satisfaction in journalism.

Notes:

¹ John Johnstone, Edward Slawski, and William Bowman, **A Sociological portrait of American journalists and their work**. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1976.

² David Weaver and Cleveland Wilhoit, **The American Journalists: A portrait of U.S. news people and their work**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. David Weaver and Cleveland Wilhoit, *U.S. journalists at work, 1971-1992*. Paper presented to the Media Management and Economics Division at the 77th Annual Convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Atlanta, August 10-13, 1994.

³ Lori Bergen and David Weaver, *Job satisfaction of daily newspaper journalists and organizational size*. **Newspaper Research Journal**, Winter 1988, pp.1-13; David Demers, *Effect of organizational size on job satisfaction of top editors at U.S. dailies*. **Journalism Quarterly**, Winter 1994, pp. 914-925; Tanya Johnson, *A study of full-time faculty burnout at Evergreen Valley College*. Major Applied Research Project, Nova University, 1989. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED308905); Terry Lynn Rentner, and James Bissland, *Job satisfaction and its correlates among public relations workers*. **Journalism Quarterly**, Winter 1990, pp. 950-955; William Shreeve, *Job satisfaction: A responsibility of leadership: A Report*. 1984 (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED275638); Keith Stamm and Doug Underwood, *The Relationship of job satisfaction to newsroom policy changes*. **Journalism Quarterly**, Autumn 1993, pp. 703-712; James Worthy, *Organizational structure and employee morale*. **American Sociological Review**, April 1950, pp.169-179.

⁴ Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman, *op.cit.*

⁵ Weaver and Wilhoit, *The American Journalists*, *op.cit.* Weaver and Wilhoit, *U.S. journalists at work*, *op.cit.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Stamm and Underwood, *op.cit.*

⁸ Rentner, and Bissland, *op.cit.*

⁹ Demers, *op.cit.*

¹⁰ Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman, *op. cit* p. 151.

¹¹ Weaver and Wilhoit, *op.cit* , p. 91.

¹² The questionnaires were addressed to the editor listed first under the "News Executives" section of the yearbook. This was generally an "editor." If no "editor" was listed, the list of all editors was examined and either the "managing editor," the "news editor," or the "city editor" was selected. This latter selection was based on the best judgement that could be made, given the paper's size and staffing composition, as to which editor would have the primary responsibility for assigning most news stories. In several cases, the questionnaire was routed to the appropriate editor after being received by the newspaper.

¹³ As already indicated, Weaver and Wilhoit do not report on a relationship between job satisfaction and the interpreter role for their sample of newswriters.