

Power Pressures and Pocketbook Concerns: Perceptions of Organizational Influences on News Content in the Television Industry

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Using a national online survey of television reporters ($N = 612$) and three theoretical approaches, this study examines reporter perceptions of organizational-level influences on news content. Findings indicate that owners and top-level executives have the strongest influence on coverage decisions, based on reporter perceptions, followed by economic pressures. Results also suggest that these sources of influence, along with staff-size pressures, are correlated with instances of agenda cutting, which is a less-studied phenomenon involving forces both within and outside the media attempting to cut or bury news. This research expands both topical and theoretical knowledge bases and provides strong support for agenda cutting and its use as a theoretical approach in media scholarship and beyond.

Keywords: agenda building, framing, agenda cutting, news coverage and reporting

When Amazon founder Jeff Bezos purchased the *Washington Post* in 2013, discussions about his motives for acquiring the long-standing, well-respected newspaper surfaced in national media (Cassidy, 2013; Roberts, 2013). Although Bezos contended that his intent was to turn it into a “more powerful national—even global—publication” (Benner & Wingfield, 2016, para. 3), and respected journalists, such as Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame, saw Bezos as the “inventive and innovative choice” (Roberts, 2013, para. 3), others have been concerned that he would “use the newspaper as a public relations firm on Capitol Hill” (Nazaryan, 2016, para. 6). Concerns ranged from editorial control that would make way for Bezos to spread his own ideological views (Graham, 2013) to “consolidating a commercial dominance that will be hard to counter” (Roberts, 2013, para. 12) because of his already powerful Amazon-based industries. The Bezos-*Post* situation is just one example of the discussions that arise with regard to potential owner, executive, or economic influences on media organizations and their content.

Media scholars such as Bagdikian (1990), Herman and Chomsky (1988), and McChesney (1997) have warned of potential content influences that may occur when media organizations are in the hands of few powerful owners, journalists are pressured from higher-ups, and bottom-line concerns are a priority. With trust in the media at an all-time low (Swift, 2016), it is important to examine such potential organizational-level influences and their possible effects on news content and coverage decisions. Media

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organizations are continually faced with increased bottom-line pressures, adding more momentum to the potential for content influences. Thus, it is especially important to examine how news stories and topics are selected for, presented in, or omitted from coverage that is relayed to audiences.

To examine these potential influences, this study used a national online survey of television reporters to determine through what organizational sources and under what conditions television media are most likely to be influenced and, as a result, what possible effect that has on news content and coverage decisions.

Literature Review

Although Shoemaker and Reese (1991, 1996) suggested that there are many sources of influence, this research focuses solely on three organizational-level influences: ownership and top-level executives, economic and bottom-line pressures, and staff-size concerns. Specifically, this study evaluates how these organizational forces attempt to influence television media and their coverage, and to what extent are they successful at doing so, by examining these potential sources of influence through the theoretical perspectives of agenda building, framing, and agenda cutting.

Types of Influences on News Content Decisions

Organizational and other sources may try to shape news content and coverage decisions by attempting to influence the stories or topics covered in the news by building the media's agenda (agenda building); by emphasizing certain aspects, angles, or interpretations (framing); or by trying to keep certain coverage out of the news or off the main news agenda (agenda cutting). Each of these potential influences is discussed to provide a better understanding of how the organizational sources of influence considered in the current study may attempt to sway coverage.

Agenda Building

The importance of examining how the media's content may be influenced was noted as early as the 1940s, when Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) contended that the media are controlled by powerful organizations and businesses attempting to promote their own agendas and, therefore, set the media's agenda. Cobb and Elder (1971, 1972) later applied this notion of agenda building to politics when they examined how some issues, topics, and controversies made their way on the agendas of governmental decision makers. Scholars such as Turk (1985, 1986) and Gandy (1982) further expanded this area to the field of public relations and public information through their work investigating the use of information studies. Around this time, Shoemaker and Reese (1991) introduced their hierarchy of influences model that has served as the seminal heuristic model, representing the different source levels from which the media can be influenced.

Agenda building differs from its theoretical relative agenda setting, which is focused on media effects. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) renowned study of North Carolina voters and the high correlation between transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda suggested strong support for

their claim that the media do not necessarily tell the public what to think, but instead what to think about. Agenda building, on the other hand, is concerned who or what is telling the media what to cover, write, or talk about. The primary difference between the two approaches involves classifying the media agenda as either an independent or dependent variable (Scheufele, 2000). As Scheufele (2000) clarified, in agenda setting the media agenda is the independent variable and the public agenda is the dependent variable; however, in agenda building the media agenda is the dependent variable, with the sources and types of influence (organization influences in the current study) serving as the independent variable.

Framing Building

Like agenda building, in framing building, the media frame is examined as the dependent variable, and the influence, in this case organizational-level pressure, is considered the independent variable (Scheufele, 2000). That is, it is not viewed as a media-effects approach.

Framing's origins can be traced to the field of psychology with Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) work and Tversky and Kahneman's (1981) well-known psychological experiment that presented participants with an Asian disease outbreak and in terms of gains and losses regarding the number of people killed versus people saved. This form of framing from the media-effects perspective is known as equivalence framing, and it relies on how using "different, but logically equivalent, words or phrases (e.g., 5% unemployment or 95% employment, 97% fat-free or 3% fat) causes individuals to alter their preferences" (Druckman, 2001, p. 228).

Goffman (1974) examined framing from a sociological perspective to better understand how people make sense of information in their everyday lives. More specifically, Gamson and Modigliani (1987) defined a frame as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (p. 143). This perspective expanded this line of study to emphasis framing, which differs from equivalence framing from the psychological perspective. Iyengar (1990), for example, studied framing on a more micro level in his work of episodic and thematic framing of single issues. Entman (1993) later sparked further interest in this area by explaining that a frame "highlights some bits of information . . . thereby elevating them in salience" (p. 53) and can be used as persuasive communication in some instances. Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar (2016) pointed out that Entman's (1993) definition of framing relies on accessibility of information, rather than applicability, and argued that this form of emphasis framing instead falls under other accessibility-based theoretical approaches, such as agenda setting and priming. Instead, following the sociological perspective of emphasis framing, Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) found that the way an issue is framed in the news can have an influence on the way that it is perceived. Here, the media's selection and emphasis on a certain aspect of a topic has been characterized as the "central organizing ideas" that help audiences make sense out of a particular issue or news story (Gamson, 1989).

The current study examines framing from the more persuasive sociological approach of emphasis framing, as sources of influence at the organizational level may attempt to pressure news workers to cover an issue from a particular angle or highlight particular areas of a topic, issue, or story.

Agenda Cutting

The least known of the three influence approaches considered in this study, agenda cutting occurs when forces from both outside and within the media attempt to keep an issue, topic, or story off the media agenda; to remove it once it is on the agenda; or to bury it by placing it low on the news agenda, such as by giving it nonprominent placement within a newscast or little news space (Colistra, 2012, 2014). Wober (2001) discussed possible reasons for the occurrence of agenda cutting, which can be summarized as logistical constraints, such as staff size or size of the news hole; journalists' own prejudices or subjective judgments in story composition or selection, which is similar to White's (1950) well-known gatekeeping study; and when internal and external sources purposely attempt to influence coverage by getting it cut from the news agenda.

Although Wober and Gunter (1988) first devised the term, others have alluded to the phenomenon without calling it by name. For example, Schoenfeld (1979) studied news coverage of the National Environmental Protection Act in "The Press and NEPA. The Case of the Missing Agenda." Rather than specifically mentioning agenda cutting, he discussed his findings in terms of another related theory that had recently gained much support: agenda setting. He noted that with respect to what had been called a new focus on agenda-setting, or "the media's role in development of specific cognitions about issues in the public domain" (citing Becker, McCombs, & McLeod, 1975), in the case of NEPA, there wasn't much of a media role (Schoenfeld, 1979, p. 585). Here, Schoenfeld related agenda cutting to agenda setting and argued that this "new focus" could affect the development of the public's understanding of issues. More recently, Williams (2002) referred to the concept in a content analysis of conglomerates and synergy bias. He discussed the influence that "large corporations with national news outlets" could have on the news and said that this influence "could take one of two forms," one of which was "removing stories that are thought to be detrimental to the corporation" (p. 453).

Agenda cutting has received little attention by academics in the past, which is likely because of its lack of identification (Wober, 2001) and the fact that, because of small sample sizes, it is difficult to empirically measure something that is absent. Williams (2002) also discussed the dearth of literature involving cutting detrimental stories about parent corporations when he noted that "systematic measurement and analysis [of this type of influence on news coverage] remains elusive" (p. 453). For years after Wober and Gunter (1988) first mentioned the term, much of the research related to agenda cutting covered evidence involving observations of its occurrence (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Lee & Solomon, 1990). For example, Wober (2001) provided an example about an internal memo from an aide for the Department for Transport, Local Government, and the Regions that was sent following the U.S. terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The e-mail, which was later leaked to the media, suggested that any bad or undesirable news be released on the day after the attacks, thereby burying the bad news during the heavy coverage of the attacks, which dominated the news cycle (Sparrow, 2001).

In recent years, this line of research has begun to gain the interest of scholars who have worked to provide empirical support for its occurrence. Media Tenor (2003) conducted perhaps the first empirical study of agenda cutting in its 2003 examination of the media coverage and corresponding public reaction to mad cow disease in Germany. It found that the peaks in news coverage about the disease

corresponded with reduced beef consumption. However, when news coverage about the disease declined, despite almost the same number of actual reported cases, beef consumption increased, thereby providing support for an agenda-cutting effect. Later, Fahmy (2010) examined agenda cutting from a qualitative perspective in her study of Egyptian blogs and found that this medium provided an effective way to cover news that was cut from mainstream sources, especially news about government abuse. Thus, Fahmy's work suggests that agenda cutting may be especially important to study in those nations with more limited press freedoms, such as Egypt. Colistra (2012) explored agenda cutting from a macro perspective by examining it as a part of a larger news-coverage influence model and found support for its occurrence. The approach was later examined from a micro level and found evidence that pressures from advertisers especially predicted reporters' perceived instances of agenda cutting on news decisions (Colistra, 2014). These findings provide support for claims made by others through both anecdotal and empirical research involving advertisers and other sources of outside influence (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; McManus, 1994; Price, 2003; Soley & Craig, 1992). The current work intends to expand the current knowledge base of this important area, especially because the recent election has sparked much discussion about news content quality.

Economic Pressures

With the struggle to survive, thrive, and remain relevant in this age of information overload, economic concerns and pressures abound in the media business—and journalists have long taken notice. In Wilnat and Weaver's (2014) survey, nearly 60% of journalists said that the profession is heading in the wrong direction, with slightly more than 20% citing declining profits as the "most important problem facing journalism today" (p. 3). Years prior, McManus (1994) reasoned that media organizations can be viewed as a market-based economy competing in four areas: investors, consumers, sources of news, and advertisers. Of these, McManus claimed that investors are the dominant influencers of news production because their pressure comes from within the news organization, as they are a part of the corporate structure, whereas the others must exercise their influence from outside the organization. Research suggests that news employees have felt these financial pressures.

In a survey reported in *Quill* (Stoll & McManus, 2005), 83% of responding journalists conveyed "too much emphasis on the bottom line" (para. 10) as the most serious problem in the media industry, and a separate Pew Research Center (2004) study reported that journalists believed it was negatively affecting the news coverage quality. A more recent Pew (2008) study found that roughly two-thirds of Internet (69%) and national and local journalists (68% each) said that increased bottom-line pressure was seriously hurting the quality of news coverage, rather than just changing the way that news organizations operate. Similarly, Reinardy's (2009) survey of newspaper journalists' opinions of issues affecting overall job satisfaction found that "the primary reason for leaving journalism was the concern about the quality" (p. 135). More specifically, journalists in the study claimed that "journalistic integrity has been sacrificed for increased profit and efforts to bolster readership" (p. 137). Further, Shoemaker and Reese (1991) contended that this type of pressure is more evident in the television industry, in part because large portions of broadcast media's revenue is generated from advertising.

Owner and Executive Pressures

Owners and top executives typically communicate constraints and pressures at the organizational level. Shoemaker and Reese (1991) noted that "media owners have an unmistakable impact on media content because they [establish] policy for the entire organization" (p. 137). Along those lines, McManus (1994) pointed out management's "legal responsibility to serve the economic interest of owners" (p. 27), suggesting that top-level executives may charge journalists to uphold their entities' economic interests.

The Pew Research Center has also provided evidence of ownership influence on news coverage. A 1999 Pew survey indicated that 36% of national, 48% of local, and 41% of Internet journalists felt that owners had at least a fair amount of influence about news organizations' decisions of which stories to cover or emphasize. Nearly a decade later, another Pew (2008) study found decreases in reports of corporate-owner influences at the national (31%) and local (40%) levels but an increase in the number of Internet journalists (48%) who reported owner pressures on news coverage decisions. Similarly, Price's (2003) survey of national TV news correspondents found that approximately 21% said that they had felt owner pressure to report on a story, whereas nearly the same percentage, 20.6%, reported owner pressure not to report a story.

Beyond journalists' reports of owner influences, scholars (e.g., Bagdikian, 1990; McChesney, 1997; Wood, Nelson, Cho, & Yaros, 2004) have posited that news organizations whose owners have financial interests in other media-related businesses may be more susceptible to influences on news coverage decisions. The vertical integration of media companies has led to increased pressures for news programs to use those connections to their benefit (Cleary & Adams-Bloom, 2009; Williams, 2002; Wood et al., 2004). For example, Hendrickson and Wilkins (2009) provided evidence for this type of ownership-based pressure in their content analysis of soft-news decisions on two of the nation's most watched morning shows: the *Today Show* (now *Today*), then owned by the General Electric–Universal media conglomerate and broadcast on NBC, and *Good Morning America*, owned by the Disney conglomerate and aired on ABC. They found that "both networks focused on entertainment stories that were synergistic with the parent corporation's economic interests . . . more than 50 percent of the time" (p. 385), which, consequently, can lead to diminished journalist autonomy and fewer viewer choices. An earlier content analysis by Williams (2002) yielded similar results, and another by Cleary and Adams-Bloom (2009) revealed that network morning shows not only cover their own entertainment products more often than others but also cover them more positively.

Others have studied the effects of ownership on the amount of local news programming content, as the FCC has increasingly relaxed limitations for the existence of consolidated ownership. Although Yan and Park (2009) found that local news content increased significantly in all forms of ownership from 1997 to 2003, Napoli and Yan (2007) found little evidence that duopoly ownership in itself contributed to an increase or decrease in local news production. Smith (2009), however, found a 20% increase in local news programming in her quasi-experimental study of two recently consolidated news stations in Jacksonville, Florida.

Staff-Size Pressure

The staff size of a media organization has been studied in connection with news quality (Busterna, 1988), industry performance (Lacy, Fico, & Simon, 1989), ownership (Underwood & Stamm, 1992), and competition (Powers, 1993), among other areas. Typically, findings suggest that a larger staff size is viewed more positively because more journalists are available to cover and produce the news, which may result in better coverage quality and lower stress factors (e.g., Busterna, 1988; Lacy et al., 1989; Underwood & Stamm, 1992). More recent research by Lacy and Rosenstiel (2015) thoroughly covered the topic of defining and measuring journalism quality and its ties to the size of the news staff, among other measures, further supporting the connection between staff size and news quality.

Although a larger staff is generally associated with positive outcomes, these implications do not always lead to increasing staff size in media organizations, as evidenced by studies outlining the state of today's newsrooms. In 2012, for instance, the annual RTDNA–Hofstra University survey suggested that although nearly half of local television news budgets increased, the number of local stations, median number of full-time staff, and salaries all showed marginal decreases (Matsa, 2013). Wilnat and Weaver's (2014) survey of journalists across all news industries reported a much higher decrease, with 63% of journalists reporting smaller newsrooms. More recent results from the 2015 RTDNA–Hofstra survey results showed a 1% increase since the previous survey in employment numbers in local television, which had added 270 people across the newsrooms under study, in contrast to a decrease in staff in the newspaper industry; the number of stations declined by 10% (Papper, 2016).

Staff size also coincides with perceptions of organizational support and workload of the journalists in these newsrooms. In his 2013 study of burnout levels of television journalists, Reinardy (2015) found that those who were experiencing "high degrees of exhaustion and cynicism—the two catalysts for burnout" (p. 33) noted less organizational support and higher workloads than those with lower degrees of burnout. Journalists with higher degrees of burnout specifically cited promotions, loss of experienced employees, and additional responsibilities as the primary causes. Similarly, Wilnat and Weaver's (2014) study suggested that journalism job satisfaction rates have also taken a hit, with only 23% of journalists reporting that they were "very satisfied" with their jobs, compared with 33% in 2002. In turn, those reporting varying levels of dissatisfaction increased to just over 25%, up from 16% in 2002. These studies of staff size and its relationship with perceived news quality and journalist morale and burnout suggest that this organizational dynamic merits further study, especially into possible effects on news coverage decisions.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Although scholars have proposed that organizational sources can have strong influence, little research has examined what forces are the strongest predictors of influences on news content (e.g., Hays & Reisner, 2007; McManus, 1994; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Soley & Craig, 1992). Further, more research is needed to better understand and expand agenda cutting as a theoretical approach. Thus, this study considered the following research questions and hypotheses.

RQ1: How well does each measure of organizational influence predict outcomes, or influences, of news content decisions after taking into account the other two measures?

H1: The owner-executive pressures measure is the strongest organizational predictor of outcomes, or influences, on news content and coverage decisions.

RQ2: After taking into account the other two measures, how well does each measure of organizational influence predict the level of agenda cutting?

H2: The owner-executive pressures measure is the strongest organizational predictor of instances of agenda cutting.

Method

Data were obtained as a part of larger national web survey of television reporters. This research used a census approach to acquire the contact information for as many television journalists as possible. Reporters were chosen first by compiling a list of U.S. television stations using Cision¹ to identify potential participants, and then by selecting reporters with name-specific e-mail addresses (i.e., those not listed as general e-mails, such as news@wchs.com) from each station, resulting in a list of 2,074 potential respondents. Although newsroom managers, rather than reporters, make final news coverage decisions, reporters were chosen for this study because they are not directly involved with the business side of news and, thus, are more likely to provide unbiased responses about organizational pressures. It is also important to gauge reporters' perceptions of potential organizational influences because they are the ones covering the stories.

Qualtrics survey software was used to implement the research. Reporters from the sample were automatically assigned a respondent-specific link to access the survey, allowing for response tracking and excluding those who had already responded from receiving reminder messages. To solicit participants, several practices outlined by Dillman (2000) were used, including a prenotification letter sent by postal mail on university letterhead, followed by an e-mail invitation to participate one week later. Both the letter and the e-mail invitation were personalized by using the reporters' first names. Three reminder messages were also sent to improve the survey response rate. The Institutional Review Board at my university approved all research communication.

The survey was pretested on academics with extensive television experience to check for inconsistencies and potential terminology issues prior to distribution. The preliminary data file consisted of 618 usable responses, which resulted in a 30% response rate. The population (Designated Marketing Area list) consisted of 40% of reporters representing the largest markets (1–25) compared with 69% of the

¹ Cision is a subscription-based service used by public relations professionals and researchers, among others, to identify target audiences and influencers and to identify and contact people working in any segment of the media industry.

survey participants. A 17-percentage-point difference surfaced within the DMAs of 51 and higher (37% of the population list versus 20% of respondents). The remaining 11% worked in the 26 to 50 DMAs. As a precautionary measure for the discrepancy between the sample and the population for DMA representation, the data were weighted and compared with the original raw data file. The comparison revealed no marked differences, so the original unweighted file was used. Respondents were almost evenly split by gender (51% male). Reporters 25 to 34 years old made up the majority of respondents (51%), followed by those 35 to 44 years, with 21.3%. Participants who were 45 to 54 years old made up 12.5% of the respondents, and those 18 to 24 (9.3%) and those 55 or older (6%) made up the smallest group of respondents. The average respondent had worked in the industry for approximately 13 years ($M = 12.76$; $SD = 9.04$). Those respondents in the majority age range, 25 to 34, had approximately 8 years of industry experience, and 65% of all respondents had been employed at their current stations from 1 to 5 years.

Variables Defined

The survey used a 7-point Likert-type format consisting of two main scale measures: 1 = almost never, 7 = very often, and 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. Questions were worded to assess reporters' perceptions of situations in typical TV newsrooms rather than just their own, which is a general approach often used by research organizations such as Pew Research Center, so respondents were less likely to feel apprehensive about completing the survey.

Independent Variables

The survey included 10 survey questions to assess the three organizational-level measures for this study: owner or executive pressures, economic pressures, and staff size. Questions measured attempts at influencing the media to cover or emphasize certain stories (agenda building), the manner in which a story or topic is covered (framing), and attempts at influencing the media to not cover a story or topic (agenda cutting).

Three questions assessed potential instances of influence from owners or top-level executives ($M = 8.86$, $SD = 4.56$, $\alpha = .94$). A sample item is, "How often do owners or top-level executives try to influence journalists/stations not to cover (avoid covering) a particular story or topic?" In addition to possible pressure from owners and executives, previous research indicates that many journalists believe that bottom-line pressures are seriously hurting the quality of news coverage and that these pressures are more prevalent in the television industry. Thus, five survey questions (sample item: "How often do you believe that television news content is compromised because of economic pressures?") evaluated the levels of economic pressure faced by reporters ($M = 19.76$, $SD = 6.21$, $\alpha = .78$). Past studies have found that an inadequate staff size may have detrimental effects on news content; however, many media organizations have been forced to cut staff because of bottom-line pressures. To examine this potential influence on news coverage, two questions were used to measure reporters' opinions on particular staffing statements. A sample item is, "An inadequate staff size hurts the quality of news coverage." The scale is

reliable ($M = 12.42$, $SD = 1.84$, $\alpha = .69$).² Because this reliability statistic is on the lower end of the acceptance parameters, which may be in part because of the two-item scale, results of this particular measure are interpreted with caution and more scrutiny in the analyses.

Dependent Variables

A total of 27 questions measured how content is potentially influenced as a result of the various types of aforementioned organizational pressures. Nine questions for the agenda-building outcome specifically assessed how frequently organizational sources attempted pressure and their level of success at influencing decisions of what news stories to cover or emphasize ($M = 30.01$, $SD = 9.43$, $\alpha = .80$). A sample item measuring this outcome is, "How often do journalists/stations cover or emphasize particular stories because of influences from . . .?" Eight questions (sample item: "How often do journalists/stations cover a story in a certain way (e.g., the angle of a story or stance on an issue) because of influences from . . .?") evaluated the frame-building outcome measure, which involves perceived successes in influencing the manner in which news workers cover a story or topic ($M = 27.06$, $SD = 8.38$, $\alpha = .80$). The agenda-cutting outcome was measured with 10 questions about perceived successes in influencing news content and coverage decisions through pressuring reporters to not cover (or avoid covering) a story, topic, or issue ($M = 28.68$, $SD = 10.19$, $\alpha = .84$). Sample items measuring this outcome are: "How often do journalists/stations decide not to run some stories because they might offend . . .?" and "How often do journalists/stations not cover (avoid covering) stories or topics because of influences from . . .?"

Data were screened to ensure that all assumptions for the analysis were met, and six questionable cases were removed, resulting in a final data file of 612 usable responses. SPSS was used to run the analyses.³ Descriptives for the measured variables in the study are shown in Table 1.

² Although three questions were originally posed for the scale, one item reduced internal consistency and reliability. After closer inspection, it was determined that this item measured something else—using advertising or public relations materials because of inadequate staff size. Thus, it was removed.

³ To evaluate the content influence or outcome, it was converted from a latent construct to an observed variable in AMOS. To do so, the factor score coefficients from running a confirmatory factor analysis were obtained, and the product of each estimate and the value of its respective observed indicator were summed to compute a new observed variable in SPSS to run the multiple regression analyses: (Coefficient 1 × Agenda Building) + (Coefficient 2 × Framing) + (Coefficient 3 × Agenda Cutting) = Observed Variable for Content Influence or Outcome.

Table 1. Descriptives of Data File.

Variable	<i>M</i> ^a	<i>SD</i>	Minimum ^b	Maximum
Owner or executive pressure	8.86	4.56	3.00	21.00
Economic pressure	19.76	6.21	5.00	35.00
Staff-size pressure	12.42	1.84	2.00	14.00
Agenda-building outcome	30.01	9.43	9.00	59.00
Framing outcome	27.06	8.38	8.00	50.00
Agenda-cutting outcome	28.68	10.19	10.00	56.00

^a All descriptives represent the actual values after data imputation and the removal of outliers and potential problem cases.

^b The minimum and maximum values do not represent the actual range values. Instead, they represent the possible values.

Results

Research Question 1 and Hypothesis 1

Multiple regression was used to analyze how media content is influenced by each measure of organizational influence considered in the study, after controlling for the contributions of the other two measures. As indicated in Table 2, all three organizational measures are significantly related to the dependent variable, content influence or outcome, and to each other.

The full regression model indicates that a linear combination of the three organizational measures explains 47.2% (47% adjusted) of the variation in content influence or outcome; $R^2 = .472$, $F(3,608) = 181.504$, $p < .001$. Specifically, this direct solution indicates that a combination of the three measures significantly predicts reporters' perceptions of influences on media content. As shown in Table 3, findings indicate that both the economic and owner or executive pressure measures make significant unique contributions to explaining the variance in reporters' perceptions of influences on media content (economic $t = 10.594$, $p < .001$; owner or exec. $t = 11.775$, $p < .001$); however, the staff-size pressure measure does not [$t = -1.162$, $p = .246$].

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for Organizational Influence Measures and Overall Influence or Outcome on Media Content.

	Content Influence or Outcome	Staff Pressure	Economic Pressure	Owner or Executive Pressure
Content influence or outcome	1.00	.153***	.592***	.609***
Staff Pressure		1.00	.331***	.151***
Economic pressure			1.00	.531***
Owner or executive pressure				1.00

Note. $N = 612$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Full Regression Model for Three Organizational Measures Predicting Overall Content Influence or Outcome.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	12.566	1.674
Staff-size pressure	-.162	.140	-.036	-1.162	.246
Economic pressure	.510	.048	.386	10.594	< .001
Owner or executive pressure	.736	.063	.410	11.775	< .001

Note. *N* = 612; *B* = unstandardized (raw) coefficient; *SE* = standard errors of the unstandardized (raw) coefficients; β = standardized beta weight.

A commonality analysis was conducted to more fully describe the interrelationships of the variables. The analysis explains how the independent variables combine to explain the dependent variable and uncovers the strongest predictor via individual contributions. The owner or executive pressure measure explains 37% of the variance in reporters' perceptions of influences on media content with a unique contribution of nearly 12% ($t = 18.978$, $p < .001$),⁴ making it the strongest predictor in the overall regression model. Thus, H1 was supported. Economic pressure is the second largest contributor to explaining the dependent variable, with 35% and a unique contribution of nearly 10% ($t = 18.129$, $p < .001$). The staff-size pressure measure explains 2.3% of variation in the dependent variable but makes virtually no individual contribution with, 0.1% ($t = 3.831$, $p < .001$).

Given that the staff-size pressure measure makes virtually no unique or joint contribution to explaining the dependent variable, it appears that the most parsimonious model for predicting influences on media content comprises only two independent variables. Therefore, a regression analysis was run on this two-variable model. By excluding the staff-size pressure measure, the total variance explained stays at 47%, but the *F* statistic shows a large jump: $F(2,609) = 271.425$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, all variables included in the new two-predictor regression model make significant contributions (Table 4). The revised regression model with only two organizational influence measures explains 47% of the variation in reporters' perceptions of influences on content, the dependent variable.

Table 4. Full Regression Model for Two Organizational Measures Predicting Overall Content Influence or Outcome.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	10.864	.810
Economic pressure	.494	.046	.373	10.734	< .001
Owner or executive pressure	.739	.063	.411	11.813	< .001

Note. *N* = 612; *B* = unstandardized (raw) coefficient; *SE* = standard errors of the unstandardized (raw) coefficients; β = standardized beta weight.

⁴ The *t*-statistics describing the results of the commonality analysis in this section are from the regression analyses in which the independent variables were entered in different orders.

Overall findings suggest that as reporters perceive more instances of economic pressure and of pressure coming from owners and top-level executives, the more they perceive these sources as having an influence on content and coverage decisions. This relationship is especially apparent with owners and top-level executives, as this source of influence is the strongest predictor in the model. Results from the multiple regression analysis suggest that although staff-size pressure is also a predictor of the reporters' perceptions of content influences, the variation that it explains is almost wholly achieved in combination with the other two variables, which were included in the final model. Therefore, it should not necessarily be discounted as a predictor of content influences, but instead it is unnecessary to include in the most parsimonious model for the scope of the current study. The final regression equation is as follows: Content Influence or Outcome = $.494 \times \text{Econ} + .739 \times \text{Owner or Exec} + 10.864$.

Research Question 2 and Hypothesis 2

In addition to assessing organization influences on the content outcome variable, this study also examined how each measure of organizational influence predicted perceived instances of agenda cutting. As indicated in Table 5, all three organizational measures are significantly related to the level of agenda cutting and to each other.

Table 5. Correlation Matrix for Organizational Influence Measures and Level of Agenda Cutting.

	Level of Agenda Cutting	Staff Pressure	Economic Pressure	Owner or Executive Pressure
Level of agenda cutting	1.00	.116**	.616***	.675***
Staff pressure		1.00	.331***	.151***
Economic pressure			1.00	.531***
Owner or executive pressure				1.00

Note. $N = 612$.

** $p < .010$. *** $p < .001$.

Results of the full regression model indicate that a linear combination of the three independent variables explains 55.4% (55.2% adjusted) of the variance in the dependent variable. Specifically, this direct solution indicates that a combination of the three measures significantly predicts reporters' perceptions of agenda-cutting effects on news content: $R^2 = .552$, $F(3,608) = 251.858$, $p < .001$. Illustrated in Table 6, each measure makes significant individual contributions to the overall regression model.

Table 6. Full Regression Model for Three Organizational Measures Predicting the Level of Agenda Cutting.

	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	12.391	1.912
Staff pressure	-.470	.159	-.085	-2.949	< .010
Economic pressure	.638	.055	.388	11.588	< .001
Owner or executive pressure	1.075	.071	.481	15.050	< .001

Note. $N = 612$; B = unstandardized (raw) coefficient; SE = standard errors of the unstandardized (raw) coefficients; β = standardized beta weight.

A commonality analysis was again conducted to uncover the individual and joint contributions of the individual variables in explaining the dependent variable, and to uncover the strongest predictor. In support of H2, the owner-executive pressure measure is the strongest predictor in the overall model, as it explains 45.5% of the variance in reporters' perceptions of agenda-cutting occurrences, with a unique contribution of 17% ($t = 22.586, p < .001$). Economic pressure accounts for 38% of the variation in the dependent variable, with a unique contribution of 10% ($t = 19.314, p < .001$). The staff pressure measure makes the smallest contribution, 1.4%, in explaining the variation in the level of agenda cutting, making a unique contribution of 1% (0.6) ($t = 2.896, p < .010$). The measure was retained in this instance because its unique contribution was higher than in the previous analysis and its joint contribution was significant in this case.

Overall findings suggest that the more TV stations have to contend with economic and staff pressures, and with pressures from owners and executives, the more likely agenda-cutting effects on coverage decisions are likely to occur. Again, these findings are based on reporters' perceptions of these influences and their effects on content—in this case, not covering a particular topic or story. This relationship is especially apparent with owners and top-level executives, as this source of influence is the strongest predictor. The final regression equation follows: Level of Agenda Cutting = $1.075 \times \text{Owner or Exec} + .638 \times \text{Econ} - .470 \times \text{Staff} + 12.391$.

Discussion

This study examined how organizational forces attempt to influence, and are potentially successful at influencing, news content and coverage decisions, based on a national online survey of TV reporters. The relative contribution of the organizational influences measures was assessed to determine the strongest predictor of both content influence or outcome and, in particular, instances of agenda cutting. Because the study serves to further develop and test this phenomenon, the most obvious form of agenda cutting—ignoring, or not covering, a story or topic—was measured in the survey.

As hypothesized, pressures from owners or executives had the greatest influence on news content and coverage decisions, based on reporters' perceptions. Economic pressure was the second strongest organizational predictor of content influences, and pressures from staff size showed the least amount of influence. The overall findings suggest that as reporters perceive more instances of bottom-line economic pressures and pressures coming from owners and top-level executives, the more they perceive these sources as having an influence on content and coverage decisions. This relationship is especially apparent with owners and top-level executives, as this source of influence is the strongest predictor in the model. Although a Pew Research Center (2008) report suggested that economic and business pressures are the top concern for the local and national journalists who were surveyed, the present study suggests that pressures from owners and top-level executives are also a powerful force—particularly with regard to influences on news content. Evidence in separate studies by Shoemaker and Reese (1991) and McManus (1994), among others, provide support for this finding that owners and top-level executives can be strong influencers of news coverage decisions.

Although staff-size pressure also exhibits an influence on reporters' perceptions of influences on news content and coverage decisions (content influence or outcome), the variation that it explains is achieved in combination with the other two measures, and it provides virtually no unique contribution in explaining influences on news content. As a result, this organizational measure was excluded from the most parsimonious regression model. The staff pressure measure, however, should not necessarily be discounted as a predictor of content influences. Future researchers could continue to assess opinions about staff size, and the actual size of the staff to provide additional information on this measure's potential role in affecting content influence or outcome.

In addition to assessing the organizational influence measures' effects on overall content influences, these measures were examined with instances of agenda cutting. The findings show a similar pattern as the previous analysis of the organizational measures and influences on content, and they suggest that the measures more strongly influence reporters' perceptions of agenda-cutting occurrences than they did for content influence or outcome.

As predicted, owner-executive pressure was the strongest predictor of instances of agenda cutting, based on reporters' perceptions. Economic pressure was the second strongest organizational influence, and reporters' views of staff-size pressure was the weakest in explaining instances of agenda cutting. Overall findings suggest that the more TV stations have to contend with pressures from owners and top-level executives, and with economic and staff pressures, the more likely that instances of agenda cutting will occur in coverage decisions. These findings are based on reporters' perceptions of these influences and their effects on content—in this case, not covering a particular topic. This relationship is especially apparent with owners and top-level executives, as this source of influence is the strongest predictor in the model. Although staff-size pressure offered little explanation for instances of agenda cutting, it was included in the overall regression model because of its significant unique contribution and its contribution in conjunction with the other measures.

Conclusions

One strength of this study is its coverage of and support for agenda cutting, in addition to its contributions to the growing body of knowledge about this little-studied approach. Prior research has consisted of anecdotal evidence of agenda cutting's existence (e.g., Wober, 2001; Wober & Gunter, 1988; empirical evidence from a macro perspective examining this area as a part of a larger influence model (Colistra, 2012); and evidence from micro-level work studying media coverage of policy legislation (Schoenfeld, 1979), outbreak (Media Tenor, 2003), Egyptian blogs (Fahmy, 2010), and influences outside the media (Colistra, 2014). The current study contributes to the existing knowledge base by focusing on potential organizational-level sources of influence and by examining this concept alongside two other theoretical approaches. Results suggest that the process is most likely to occur because of external and internal influences (in this study, organizational influences), and it also provides some support for influence from logistical constraints (e.g., staff-size pressure). This study provides strong support for occurrences of agenda cutting, as indicated by the significance levels of the correlation matrix ($p < .001$ for owner or executive pressure and economic pressure; $p < .01$ for staff-size pressure) and for all three paths in the regression model ($p < .001$ for owner or executive pressure and economic pressure; $p < .01$

for staff-size pressure). Evidence from previous scholars and the current study suggests that agenda cutting merits even further investigation to uncover instances, motivations, and results of its occurrence in varying situations. Additional strengths include the national-level survey, larger sample size, focus on a specific area of potential influence, and perceptions of front-line news workers.

Limitations of this study are its focus on only one news medium, lack of consideration of digital media, the reliance on perceptions of influence via a survey rather than actual outcomes on content via a content analysis of coverage, and the discrepancy between the sample and population for market size (previously noted).

In addition to the suggestions already made for extending this study, future research should consider additional sources of influence, including interest groups, activists, social media, and other media sources (intermedia agenda building) that may pressure news workers and media organizations to build, cut, or frame the news agenda. Qualitative textual analysis for specific types of omitted news or cases, such as news involving the environment, politics, or the pharmaceutical or other industries, could help to further pinpoint influences and potential motivations for pressuring news entities to cut, bury, or frame news. Further, a deeper qualitative investigation of a reporter's attempts at publishing the cut news (e.g., as either a personal blogger or by otherwise trying to get the story issued via another platform) would provide further insight. Finally, an examination of other media industries and newsroom management would be useful to determine whether the findings in the current study still hold true, or whether the nature of the industries or those surveyed differ in their perceptions of influence.

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