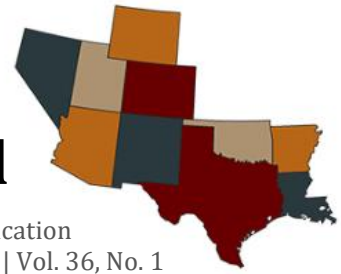


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Who Controls Content Decisions? External Influences on College Media

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Issues of censorship in higher education student media are common and frequent, however it is unclear how often and to what degree college newspapers experience external influences. This study examines censorship in college media through in-depth interviews with student newspaper editors and advisers. Specifically, this study calls upon the recalled experiences of editors and advisers to explore external content pressures, from whom those pressures are felt, and how editors and advisers deal with those pressures. It then identifies some recommendations for organizations to implement to protect editors and student reporters from external pressures.

Keywords: college media, journalism, free expression, censorship, students, media advisers

The issue of censorship on college campuses caught the attention of publications such as *The Atlantic*, *The New York Post*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*, all having discussed the broad issue of freedom of expression on campus in the 2010s. Of particular note was media coverage on censorship of the collegiate press. A 2015 report in *The Atlantic* describes “a string of student-newspaper controversies that have erupted in the past year,” including instances of funding cuts and removal of media advisers in response to controversy regarding campus newspapers (Wheeler, 2015).

One such instance of adverse action taken against the college press occurred in September 2015 when *The Wesleyan Argus* in Middletown, Connecticut, printed an anti-Black Lives Matter opinion

piece and controversy ensued on campus (Jeffries, 2015a). A group of students and faculty angered by the piece went to Wesleyan's Student Assembly with a list of demands for restructuring the *Argus*, including funding cuts and editorial oversight. The group was able to secure a resolution cutting the printing budget for the *Argus* beginning the following year.

News about censorship of college media is not isolated to private colleges such as Wesleyan. At the University of Alabama in October 2015, a group of fraternity pledges stole 300-400 copies of *The Crimson White* after the paper published an editorial cartoon commenting on fraternity culture (Will, 2015). At the beginning of the 2015 fall semester, Louisiana State University Law Center administration created a task force responsible for overseeing and improving the law school newspaper's coverage of diversity (Jeffries, 2015b). The task force was charged with holding student newspaper *The Civilian* to the practice of prior review and prior restraint based on a set of "standards" for improving diversity coverage. The campus newspaper adviser at Muscatine Community College in Iowa was removed from his role in February 2015 after the newspaper published stories criticizing the selection process for student of the month (Keierleber, 2015). The newspaper adviser at Fairmont State University in West Virginia was also removed his role on the publication and dismissed from the university in May 2015 after he refused to practice prior restraint when college administration voiced concerns about the newspaper's coverage of a mold problem in campus dorms (LeBoeuf, 2015).

While these cases of external actors—administrators, fellow students, faculty—attempting to influence college newspaper content have made headlines in mainstream media, it is unclear whether these stories represent a typical experience at college newspapers, or if they are isolated incidents. It is clear from jurisprudence that student journalists at public colleges enjoy some degree of First Amendment protection, but that protection does not always shield college media from attempts at external influence. This study explores whether public college newspaper editors and advisers experience external pressures related to content. When those pressures are felt, this study also explores from whom college newspapers receive content pressures and what practices external actors use to apply those pressures. This study also examines common methods that editors and advisers can and do use to respond to external content pressures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

First Amendment Jurisprudence

Student journalists at public colleges unquestionably enjoy First Amendment protection. The question of First Amendment rights for students was settled in *Tinker v. Des Moines*, in which the Supreme Court affirmed that "[i]t can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." (*Tinker v. Des Moines Community School District*, 1969). In *Tinker*, the Supreme Court held that administrators had violated a middle school student's First Amendment rights when they punished her for wearing a black armband in peaceful protest of the Vietnam War. Administrators at public schools, the Supreme Court said, are state actors and thus are barred by the First Amendment from censoring student expression unless it is likely to pose a substantial disruption to the classroom environment. While *Tinker* dealt with the First Amendment rights of a junior high student, courts have widely accepted its substantial disruption test as the minimum threshold for First Amendment rights at postsecondary institutions as well.

The Supreme Court similarly recognized the importance of free expression in the college setting in the majority opinion in *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, stating, “The classroom is peculiarly the ‘marketplace of ideas.’ The Nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth” (*Keyishian v. Board of Regents of University of State of New York*, 1967). This was reaffirmed in *Healy v. James*, where the Supreme Court “note[d] that state colleges and universities are not enclaves immune from the sweep of the First Amendment” (*Healy v. James*, 1972). Additionally, some federal courts have written that student speech jurisprudence such as *Tinker* is not protective enough in the college setting, and that college students’ speech must instead be examined with the same level of protection as other adults’ expression (*DeJohn v. Temple University*, 2008).

The Supreme Court scaled back First Amendment protection for K-12 student journalists writing for school-sponsored publications in *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* (1988), when the Court imported the forum doctrine to the high school student press. This complex First Amendment doctrine holds certain “spaces,” such as sidewalks and parks, to be open to all protected expression (i.e., “open forums” or “public forums”); other spaces to be open to only certain kinds of expression or only expression from certain people (i.e., “designated forums” or “limited forums”); and a third category of spaces, such as courtrooms, to be closed to most expression (i.e., “closed forums”). In *Hazelwood*, the Court held that where a publication is curricular, bears a school’s imprimatur, and is supported by the school, the school may choose whether to designate the publication as open for student expression. If the school makes this designation, the publication becomes an open forum and the *Tinker* test applies, meaning censorship is barred unless the expression can reasonably be expected to substantially disrupt the educational environment. However, if a school designates a student publication as a curricular exercise, it is not an open forum, and administrators can “exercis[e] editorial control over the style and content ... so long as [administrators’] actions are reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns.”

Because the *Hazelwood* Court heavily considered younger students’ inferior maturity levels in coming to its decision, and because the *Hazelwood* opinion included a footnote cautioning that the Court did not decide whether its test would be appropriate in higher education, early scholarship did not expect *Hazelwood* to curb the First Amendment rights of college students (Abrams & Goodman, 1988). But in a notable application of *Hazelwood* to the college setting, the Seventh Circuit held that if a college-sponsored publication is not designated as a public forum, a college can also restrict the publication for legitimate pedagogical reasons (*Hosty v. Carter*, 2005). Some states, such as California and Illinois, responded by passing statutes declaring all college media or all student media to be public forums, thereby rejecting the application of *Hazelwood* to those media. Similarly, some courts have refused to apply *Hazelwood* in higher education (LoMonte, 2013).

Because of this jurisdictional split and silence on the issue in other jurisdictions, it is often difficult to definitively say when public college administrators are permitted to censor student media. However, restrictions that are not based on a legitimate pedagogical concern are barred under both tests, and many college publications are independent from their home institution or are open or designated forums that cannot be restricted, except possibly if a substantial school disruption is expected. Additionally, regardless of the legal landscape, it is important to explore how editors and advisers perceive and respond to content controls.

College Student Perceptions

Scholarship regarding the freedom of the college student press is limited. Much of the research that exists is found in unpublished student theses and dissertations. Existing literature also often focuses on abstract perceptions of content control and whether censorship is a problem. It does not delve into questions of censoring practices or lived experiences. Overall, college newspaper editors perceive themselves as having more control over the content of their newspapers than institutional faculty or administration, and faculty advisers and administrators agree that control is generally in students' hands (Bickham & Shin, 2013; Enloe, 2011; Bodle, 1997). For example, in a survey of daily student newspaper advisers and business managers, 81.4% reported that their institutions did not have influence over the newspaper's content (Bodle, 1997). Similarly, in a national survey of College Media Association (then College Media Advisers) member newspaper advisers, only 4.3% reported having complied with administrative requests not to publish news articles and only 12.2% thought a link existed between administrative funding and selection of news content (Bodle, 1994). In-depth interviews of editors of financially independent college newspapers revealed similar sentiments, with many noting that advisers would provide advice but never pressure student editors to follow the advice (Enloe, 2011).

These studies suggest that involved actors – including editors, advisers, and administrators – perceive student editors to have the main thrust of editorial control over campus newspapers. However, one study that asked participants whether they view censorship as a problem at their newspapers found that editors tend to agree that censorship is a problem for their publications, but advisers (61%) and administrators (81%) overwhelmingly do not report that censorship is a problem at their institutions' student newspapers (Bickham & Shin, 2013). This indicates that there is dissonance between whom editors perceive to have control over student publications and whether they perceive censorship to be a problem at their publications. It also indicates dissonance between how editors experience influences on content and how advisers and administrators experience these influences.

Studies of high school student press have overwhelmingly suggested that high school newspapers regularly face administrative censorship and control (Kopenhaver & Click, 2001; Paxton & Dickson, 2000). In a 2001 survey, only 27% of high school principals and newspaper advisers reported that their student newspaper is not censored (Kopenhaver & Click, 2001). Principals acted as censor in 61% of schools surveyed. Censorship of the high school press most commonly comes in the form of prior review and restraint, with advisers and administrators granting or withholding approval of stories before publication (Kopenhaver & Click, 2001; Dickson, 1994). However, a slim majority of those surveyed also reported that they would allow publication of an article that was embarrassing to administration if the student journalist could prove it was true (Kopenhaver & Click, 2001).

Perception of censorship may have real effects on the way student journalists manage their publications. Student editors who feel they lack content control may be more likely to self-censor (Bickham & Shin, 2013; Filak, 2012; Dickson, 1994). When student editors believe primary content control belongs to their faculty adviser or administrators, they also tend to abstain from attempting to publish controversial news (Bickham & Shin, 2013). Similarly, student editors who believe their advisers are uncomfortable with controversial topics are more likely to be willing to self-censor (Filak, 2012). Student editors who work on a newspaper that has been designated by policy as an “open forum”—the legal gold standard in preventing administrative censorship—are less likely than others to report censorship or self-censorship.

Administrative Control

While whether student-editors perceive control or censorship in the abstract is in dispute, it is clear from historical and news accounts that administrative censorship of college press does happen, however rare. Case studies of instances of censorship of collegiate media conducted in 1996 revealed that administrators seek control of the collegiate press through not only direct methods such as demanding that articles be rewritten or subjecting student newspapers to prior review, but also through less overt methods such as cutting funding and disciplining media advisers (Kaisor & Darrah, 1996).

Some literature has focused on abstract perceptions of control and specific case studies, and no contemporary published research focuses on reflections of specific censoring practices. Historically, research suggested that administrative control was a real phenomenon in college media. In the most recent published study focused on the subject, researchers conducted in-depth field studies at 18 college newspapers and found that administrators exerted control over the publications by cutting funding, reorganizing governance, and hiring faculty sympathetic to administrators' views of the student press (Holmes, 1986). Similarly, collegiate newspapers were regularly subjected to administrative prior review, prior restraint, administrative pressure, and other forms of overt and subtle censorship, according to surveys of student editors and faculty advisers conducted in the 1950s and 1960s (Edwards, 1966; DeFrank, 1967; Russell, 1952). Publication policies of college newspapers in 1965 revealed that only 49% of public colleges and 8% of private colleges specifically prohibited prior restraint (Devol, 1965). A 1969 survey of student newspaper editors at small colleges found that content removal by individuals other than student staff members had occurred at 28% of small colleges (Dudley, 1969).

Student editors and faculty advisers at California community college newspapers widely reported in a 1992 survey that their publications either faced overt administrative control via prior review or prior restraint, or more subtle administrative pressures on content such as being urged to "tone down" a story or having the adviser's job security threatened (Eberts, 1992). Newspaper advisers at Southern Baptist colleges and universities, as well as newspaper advisers at private and public colleges in the Midwest, similarly reported trends of administrative oversight in the 1980s and 1990s (Loving, 1993; Thomason, 1984). The subtle pressures reported in these studies may partially account for dissonance between perceptions of editorial control and perceptions of censorship being a problem discussed above.

Given changes in the legal status of student newspapers in the last three decades, as well as changes in higher education generally, it is appropriate to reexamine whether, how, and from whom collegiate student newspapers experience external content pressures. This is especially true given the recent rash of headlines regarding censorship of the collegiate press. Research is needed to determine whether the experiences of student media found in the news are anomalous or if they point toward a greater trend, and to look not only at overt instances of censorship (e.g., when administrators ban a newspaper from publishing content on certain subjects), but also subtle control (e.g., when administrators suggest that they would not want newspaper coverage to make the administrator-editor relationship more difficult). With all of this in mind, the following research questions are considered:

RQ1: From whom do college newspaper editors and advisers experience external pressures on content?

RQ2: What actions by external actors do editors and advisers perceive as creating content-related pressures or censorship?

RQ3: What mechanisms help or hinder editors and advisers in maintaining content independence?

METHOD

This focus of this study was to inductively explore who holds power over college press by examining whether public college newspaper editors and advisers experience content-related pressures from external actors – including administrators, students, and faculty/staff. Specifically, this study considers the recalled experiences of college newspaper editors and advisers to examine what practices by external actors lead to perceptions of content pressures, as well as how editors and advisers responded to these pressures. In examining these questions, this study begins to develop a model of what factors correlate to increased external control in college newspapers. Following approval from an institutional review board, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 editors and nine advisers from a total of 14 newspapers at public, bachelor’s degree-granting colleges in the United States. Because of the dearth of contemporary research related to censorship and external influences in college media, the inductive approach of interviewing was appropriate because it allowed participants to reflect upon their experiences without the limitation of closed questioning, giving researchers a less filtered view of the landscape of news operations on college campuses.

Participant selection

Participants were selected using a purposive random sampling method, which sought a participant pool that reflected diversity on a variety of characteristics. While a few organizations—such as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, the College Media Association, and the Associated Collegiate Press—maintained incomplete lists of student newspapers at public institutions of higher education, no complete database of public college newspapers could be found. Therefore, a database of college newspapers at public, bachelor’s degree-granting institutions was developed using the National Center for Education Statistics database of institutions of higher education, an incomplete database of U.S. college newspapers from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, college websites, college newspaper websites, and other Web-based research. The database accounts for institutional student enrollment numbers, type of campus (urban/suburban/rural/small town), region, state, availability of a journalism major, print publication schedule (daily/weekly/etc.), and whether the newspaper publishes online.

A total of 44 newspapers were selected for this study. To select participants, the database was sorted by region (West, South, Northeast, Midwest), and eleven newspapers were chosen per region using a random number generator to avoid selection bias. Once two newspapers from a given state were selected, further newspapers from that state were excluded. Care was taken to ensure that selected newspapers reflected diversity on institutional enrollment, type of campus, availability of a journalism major, and publication schedule. Within the 44 selected newspapers were 35 advisers or those in similar positions (representing 33 newspapers) and 44 editors (representing 43 newspapers), all of whom were contacted via publicly available email addresses. A total of 77 emails were sent, with a follow up email 1-2 weeks later. A total of 9 advisers (25.7%) and 10 editors (22.7%) representing 14 newspapers (31.8%) accepted the invitation to participate (Table 1).

Table 1
Participant newspapers

| Newspaper | Region | Institution Enrollment | Campus Type | Journalism or Mass Comm. Major | Print Publication Schedule | Editor interviewed | Adviser interviewed |
|-----------|-----------|------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| 03 | Midwest | 10,000-14,999 | Suburban | N* | Weekly | Y | N |
| 08 | Northeast | 10,000-14,999 | Suburban | N* | Weekly | N | Y |
| 11 | South | 5,000-9,999 | Suburban | Y | Weekly | Y | Y |
| 17 | West | 10,000-14,999 | Suburban | N* | Weekly | Y | Y |
| 18 | West | 20,000-24,999 | Suburban | Y | Daily | Y | Y |
| 23 | Northeast | 20,000-24,999 | Suburban | Y | Weekly | Y | N/A |
| 26 | South | 5,000-9,999 | Urban | Y | Monthly | N | Y |
| 27 | South | 30,000+ | Urban | Y | Daily | N | Y |
| 28 | South | 10,000-14,999 | Suburban | Y | Weekly | Y (2) | N |
| 32 | Midwest | 20,000-24,999 | Suburban | Y | 2X/Week | Y | N |
| 36 | Midwest | 30,000+ | Urban | Y | Daily | Y | N |
| 38 | Northeast | 0-4,999 | Suburban | Y | Weekly | N | Y |
| 39 | South | 0-4,999 | Rural | Y | N/A | Y | Y |
| 44 | Northeast | 5,000-9,999 | Urban | N* | N/A | N | Y |

Note: *These colleges offered related majors, such as media production, media studies, communication studies, etc.

Pre-interview Questionnaire and Interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews of roughly 45-75 minutes were conducted with all 19 participants via phone or video conferencing. Prior to interviews, participants were asked to respond to a brief pre-interview questionnaire to give the researchers background on the organizational and financial structures of their newspapers. Interview questions focused on recalled experiences regarding how content decisions are made and how newsgathering is done, as well as relationships between involved and external actors. Researchers prompted participants to recall specific past experiences in order to elicit detailed accounts of variables that affect content. Interviewers avoided using the term “censorship” throughout the interview, instead opting for language such as “influences” and “control.” The final question in each interview, however, asked participants to reflect on the issue of censorship in college media in general. As every attempt was made to reflect accurately direct quotes from editors and advisers, in the analysis that follows, filler terms such as “uh,” “um,” and “like” were removed to improve readability. Identifying information in direct quotes was replaced with bracketed clarifying language.

Data analysis

To ensure that interviews with participants were executed similarly while leaving room for a free exchange of ideas, the researchers conducted five interviews jointly to refine the interview protocol. Then each researcher completed half of the remaining interviews independently. The researchers then reviewed the interviews they conducted independently following a constant comparative method (Boeije, 2002), listening to the recording of each interview again while taking extensive notes. The researchers then identified themes that emerged in the interviews they conducted and followed a negotiated agreement approach when comparing themes and notes to identify commonalities across all participants, which has been shown to be effective process for developing overall agreement in qualitative research (Campbell, Quincy, Osseman, & Pedersen, 2013).

FINDINGS

In discussing issues related to influences and censorship of college newspapers, several themes emerged related to structures of media organizations, financial and professional security, discussions of specific content, and education efforts on the part of editors and advisers. Most telling, editors and advisers from small campuses and those without significant resources for student media more often reported being the subject of overt or subtle censorship by administrators or others in power. Some advisers expressed a concern for their job security if student media published articles about certain topics, and some editors noted a desire to avoid covering certain topics to protect their advisers from scrutiny. Content related to university policy and student life often received more attention than other topics.

Editor and adviser response to content pressures depends on the amount of authority held by the external actor seeking to influence content. When the external actor is perceived to have vast authority, as with administrators and student governments, editors and advisers often reported having a “fight or flight” approach: Either they responded by resisting against pressures from external actors, or they responded by complying with requests and practicing future self-censorship. When the external actor is perceived to have limited authority, as with students and community members, editors and advisers

often reported taking feedback into consideration but not using it to determine high-level content decisions.

Structure and Systems

Discussion of newspaper structures primarily focused on the design and model of the editorial board, and the existence and actions of any professional staff or editorial adviser. Structures varied throughout the sample, with some editors expressing feelings of too much editorial oversight from professional staff such as advisers and creative directors, while other editors desired more input from faculty or staff. It should be noted that, in many newsrooms, editorial decisions were made after traditional business hours when professional staff was not present, and this could be a structural barrier to collaborative decision-making.

One predominant theme in college media organizations was the existence—but inaction—of the advisory board. While some newspapers did not have an advisory board, among those that did, many stated that the advisory board would meet irregularly or annually with the intent of making hiring decisions for top editorial and business positions. Different systems existed, with some advisory boards comprising faculty, staff and administration from the school while others were made up of alumni or a combination of different interested parties. Many advisers and editors both noted that advisory boards had the power to make changes to the newspaper or exert control but rarely did.

A typical adviser relationship with the newspaper was expressed as a “presence” and “influence” but not a controlling actor. Many advisers make themselves available but made specific attempts to avoid volunteering opinions when there were not expressly asked. They sometimes expressed an opinion on the content of the news organization before it is published but attempted to do so without impinging on the discretion of the student editors. This was reflected in a summary by an editor at a large university in the Midwest:

For the most part, he lets us make our own decisions, but he'll weigh in if we have a story on the front that we're planning to run, that we didn't think maybe about the implications of putting it above or below the fold, or if we're not sure what photo to run and one shows one student and the other is a group photo, he kind of weighs in based on his experience as a journalist what he thinks would be the most appropriate.

Advisers may attend planning meetings and suggest story ideas, but typically advisers discuss what is happening at the news organization with the editor in individual meetings and focus editorial commentary on previous editions after they are published. An editor at a news organization at a Western university has this to say about her relationship with the adviser:

We meet twice a week. Well, we'll often meet three times a week. But Mondays and Wednesdays are our big meeting days, so we have a pitch meeting on Mondays and on Wednesdays we go to production. He is there for both the pitch meeting and the Wednesday production. Our production goes from 2 to 8. He's usually there from 2 to 6. So he's totally involved with that. I work pretty closely with him in the fact that—since we are a college that has a journalism program, as opposed to just a communications program—he teaches all of the journalism classes. So I work with him on getting students to write for the paper. And he mentors a lot of them and helps them to get to the paper and to write for us as well. I probably talk to him Monday through Wednesday non-stop and then we email quite frequently on the weekends if anything comes up.

Advisers usually are instructors or professors from a journalism, communications or English program at the university if one exists. In some cases, however, advisers are contract employees who are employed by the college only to advise the newspaper. In still other cases, a college communications or PR representative advises the newspaper. The adviser usually has professional journalism experience and draws upon that experience in offering advice to the newspaper editors. Some advisers, especially adjuncts and those at schools with no journalism department, felt “alone” or without a support network and struggled to balance the academic and administrative aspects of the position. This was reflected in a sentiment from an adviser from a Northeastern university:

I didn't have any training in how student affairs works, and so as an academic faculty member going over there, it can be very overwhelming trying to figure out how stuff gets done. But in a perfect world ... they would help me with payroll issues, paperwork issues, like student employment paperwork. They would help me kind of plan our budget for the next year because then we have to propose a budget to our (student government) each year, so that student affairs staff person would help me think through that—helping with purchasing so if we need equipment, if we need supplies, books, anything like that, that would all happen through that, you know, someone. I have a few different contacts through the administration side of things. And I would say that's most of it, in my experience, what that relationship has been like. There's really no connection between the students and, you know, anyone on that end. I'm kind of the conduit, if you will.

Some student media organizations were developed through an ongoing class. In these cases, the adviser typically also held the role of instructor of record, with news articles and reporting activities being graded assignments. This sometimes prevented a more traditional adviser/student media relationship by transforming the adviser into more of an authority figure. Advisers in this situation often reflected that student editors were reluctant to make independent decisions, even if given that authority by the adviser. Instructors of record, however, often expressed a desire to have their relationship with their publication mimic the classic adviser/student media relationship whenever possible.

Financial and Professional Security

Unsurprisingly, news organizations that were more financially independent from the school generally reflected more independent attitudes. Funding mechanisms varied across the different participating media organizations in this study. Most organizations had some combination of advertising and circulation revenue to fund operation costs, and many supplemented this with student fees. Operations subsidies from student activities funds, however, could reach as much as 100% of the overall operating budget.

Student editors from organizations that received subsidies from their schools sometimes expressed more concern about editorial oversight, as exemplified in this quote: “This is where having a very heavily university funded newspaper gets interesting. It’s not like we have to walk on eggshells, but we have to be very careful. We don’t have editorial freedom.” This organization had supplemental funding pulled for accusations of plagiarism a few decades ago, and this remains on the mind of the editorial staff:

They were quick to rip that money away, so I’m not looking to chance that. So I’m trying to find the balance between keeping the university accountable to what it’s doing and being a university cheerleader. And that’s probably been the hardest thing as EIC, is

finding that balance and keeping it and not giving in to how easy it would be to just publish articles about how great our university is, because that's essentially the realm that the paper can get into if the editors aren't trying to maintain some editorial independence.

When this organization published a story challenging the university's admission policies, an administrator met with the adviser and editor to provide a list of corrections to print, expecting them to run in the next issue. While the question of funding was not explicitly discussed in the meeting with the administrator, this editor measured ignoring this demand against the possibility of not having a newspaper on campus, saying "that's the absolute worst thing I could do as editor, pretty much, is get the paper shut down." This student editor expressed dismay of the lack of a support system and said she did not feel there was much faculty or student support for the organization. Furthermore, inexperience on the part of the adviser and a lack of understanding of journalistic norms and practices campus-wide were sometimes expressed as a concern.

Advisers expressed concern about their job security, and this was sometimes reflected in the behavior and decisions of the student editors. Here is one example from a Southern university:

Of course we have to watch what we put in the paper, because it can affect my adviser and my creative director's job. So while we may want to talk about a specific topic that could harm or damage the image of the school, then you know, that's when they'll be like, oh no, we can't do that because that's my job.

When advisers did not have tenure, both advisers and editors expressed more concern with how editorial decisions could impact the adviser's job.

Content

Content that editors and advisers identified as controversial or as topics that would lead to administrative attention generally fell into three categories – challenges to administrative decisions or school policy, student government decisions and student life (particularly Greek life), and sexuality or drug use. When discussing topics perceived to be controversial, advisers and editors reported challenges to content primarily presenting as arguments that the content does not reflect the mainstream, or that writing about this topic reflects poorly on the university. One response from an editor at a Southern university represented this well:

I would have to say, honestly, we get the most feedback when something, I guess, inappropriate happens on campus or like something that—a sensitive topic—or any topic that [administrators] feel harms the university image and appearance. Then that's when we get feedback from campus police and people like that.

School officials sometimes responded by moving newspaper displays away from admissions offices or by having public relations officials provide "suggestions" for stories that displayed a more positive reflection on the school. In more extreme cases, administrators responded to coverage of controversial issues by threatening newspapers' funding, student editors' scholarships, or advisers' jobs. In the most extreme cases, administrators made threats to shut down the newspaper entirely.

At one Southern university, the adviser had vast influence over what the newspaper covered, and made these decisions based on fear of administrative disapproval. This was summarized by the editor there:

I will say that there are certain story ideas that we like to push that [adviser] will say, 'Hey, this isn't going to go well. This, let's just not even worry about this, because the

higher ups won't want this.' So, I mean, there's no communication [between editors and administration], but there are definitely some unwritten rules about certain topics that we're just not going to write about. Say someone gets fired – that's not... we're not going to write that in the paper.

This was especially true when covering personnel issues at the university:

[The newspaper's adviser] was like, with all the mess that's been going on about, you know, [a college official's] firing, and how long it was before he was fired, and the online petition, it was something that she just didn't want, she didn't feel comfortable delving into because, [university], it's a large university ... but people talk. She didn't want that coming back to her.

But as a result, this student editor felt there was a disconnect between the administration and the students.

As far as personnel, I think we should be able to talk about personnel also. Because regardless of whether it gets published in the newspaper or not, you know, it's still how we feel. It may not be in the newspaper, but we still feel some kind of way about certain things, and if we are allowed to publish certain things that could be quote unquote controversial, it would show administration how we're really feeling.

Some editors and advisers reported similar topics eliciting strong reactions among the student body and faculty. However, editors responded to student and faculty efforts to influence newspaper content in three ways: (1) They urged complainants to write letters to the editor; (2) They accepted the complaints as part of business as usual; (3) They considered ways to improve future reporting to better reach their target audiences. In other words, when complaints came from those in authority—such as student government or administration—student editors sometimes sought to alter their content. However, when complaints came from those without authority, student editors often accepted this as part of being a media organization.

Support Systems and Outreach

Editors and advisers at newspapers with strong support systems—such as through academic departmental structures, administrative structures, or confident and strong advisers—more often reported resisting external pressures from those in authority. When such support was lacking, however, editors and advisers reported feeling like they had no other option but to comply with administrative demands. One editor at a Midwestern university with no journalism department summarized this:

If I give the OK to one more article that they [the administration] don't like, I mean, I don't know what's going to happen. So I'm not walking on eggshells, but I'm being cautious. The repercussions of the ... article could have been worse, but they could have been better too. So I don't necessarily think that the censorship going on here is very obvious or blatant, but it's more subtle. It's more kind of the provost twisting my arm behind my back in some cases. So if I hadn't been kind of playing it cool, I don't know what would happen necessarily, but I'm really not interested in finding out, only because it's not as if I have faculty support.

Some newspapers boast a keenly supportive administration. Uniquely, one college president—a former journalist—responded to accusations of malfeasance in spending priorities by strengthening the editorial independence of the student media organization through a school-wide announcement and discussions

with other administrators. The adviser described this as “refreshing.” In another example of support for the student newspaper, a communications director at a Northeastern university visited a newspaper staff meeting to express his support for the publication and discuss the importance of the newspaper telling stories that are “uncomfortable.” Some advisers discussed that support from administration was evidenced by administrative inaction. This sentiment was reflected by an adviser at a Southern university:

Quite frankly, I think our administration values the role of the student newspaper at the upper levels. I think there are a lot of people in between that don't. At the end of the day, I think there a lot of people who could take action, but I don't think that [the upper administrators] ever would.

When asked how situations of external pressure have been addressed in the past, one common frame focused on educating those who sought to exert content influences. For example, multiple advisers discussed reminding administrators about the value of a free press and the newspapers' ethical obligations to remain editorially independent. In this way, editors and advisers can begin to form a support system within their campuses by educating others on the needs of student media. In one example, when members of the student government objected to negative coverage of two candidates at a Southern university, the adviser said the newspaper needed to do a better job of educating those outside the newspaper staff that vetting candidates is part of the job of the student newspaper. In this case, the newspaper got backlash for printing that one candidate had an arrest record:

A lot of people thought it was unprofessional to print that. They didn't understand that it was a public record. I think that there is education [needed] on both sides there. But that happens a couple of times a semester—different populations of the university view certain things as inappropriate to publish. They're really just trying to do their job. They may not always do it the right way, but the intent is there.

At one Western university, the adviser noted that administrators seemed to respond well to this kind of outreach effort. He relayed his belief that education is among the most important jobs of campus media:

We all have to be on guard, especially in the programs that are tied to universities because what we do is very misunderstood. A lot of times you have people that are governing those types of programs that have no journalism background whatsoever. So those are the types of things where ... maybe you have to train the people who oversee you as well. Not just looking down into your organization. You have to look up to see, you know, where's the funding coming from, who are we going to be interacting with on a regular basis, what do they need to know to really truly understand what our core values are, what our mission and goals are, and how we achieve those? And so communication, ironically, I think would be my specific answer to that question. We need to over-communicate with everybody that we're working with. And that transcends whether or not you're a university program or you're a hyper-independent college media group as well.

As an alternative to educating administrators and other campus authorities, some editors and advisers find their support in external organizations. At one university, the editor related a story about a previous editor who fought back when negative coverage of the university resulted in the loss of a scholarship. The previous editor eventually had the scholarship restored after professional media outlets and

advocacy organizations publicized the story. The current editor said this empowered the organization to be more ambitious. At another university, the adviser said she felt like organizations such as the College Media Association (CMA) created a support system for her. In sticky situations, she would thwart what she considered would-be censorship by threatening to contact these organizations:

[Administrators] had gone through all kinds of options [after the newspaper printed a controversial story], and I basically told them that if they did any of those, I would contact [the Society of Professional Journalists] and CMA and tell them. Luckily we [department chair and adviser] both know enough about the industry to tell [administrators] that [censoring the newspaper] would create a media storm and we'll create that media storm for them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In exploring how college media are generally perceived and treated by interested parties on college campuses throughout the country, it was evident that administrators, faculty and student governments attempt to impact content in student publications. When coming from students, faculty, and advertisers with little to no power over the newspaper, editors and advisers did not see content pressures as censoring, but as part of business as usual. When coming from authority figures, however, editors and advisers saw external pressures as more of a concern. These pressures sometimes came through explicit restrictions on what could be published, but also occurred through creation of structures and systems that did not foster a sense of news freedom. This study has revealed that school administrations have the ability to influence media coverage, both in what student journalists cover and in how they cover it, through threats to advisers' job security or to the newspapers' funding mechanisms. This is also sometimes expressed as a desire for the student newspaper to print the "good news" of the university and campus community; however, it has also at times resulted in attempted to diminish the role of student media on campus or eliminate it entirely.

This study reveals avoiding external influence requires creation of mechanisms that reduce the power differential between administrators and student newspaper staffs. These mechanisms can include financial independence and strong organizational structures, including ensuring that advisers are protected by tenure. However, when financial and structural independence are not available, building robust support networks—including instituting efforts to educate administrators and student governments about the legal rights and ethical obligations of journalists—can begin to mitigate the power differential and thwart would-be censorship and influence.

Recommendations

While wholesale prior restraint or even some more subtle forms of editorial control occur without regularity in many places, in order to provide an adequate training ground for professional journalists, college journalists need to enjoy as much editorial independence as possible. This protection is recognized in the principles established by *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*. A robust educational environment benefits from a free flow of ideas. With this in mind, the following recommendations are made based on the themes that emerged in the findings:

(1) Wherever possible, student media organizations should seek financial independence from the university. This includes independence from academic units such as a journalism or communications programs, as well as independence from student government. Should a news organization accept

financial support from the university, it should clearly articulate how the funding is used operationally and what it enables the news organization to do. It is unrealistic to expect all student publications could achieve financial independence from such oversight organizations, but student media should make moves toward independence whenever possible.

(2) Organizations should cultivate broader support and advocacy networks, including their alumni bases. These advocates can articulate the educational and experiential value of participating in college media to administrators and university personnel. They can “lobby” for greater protections for student media. Student journalists should also be encouraged to take advantage of support offered by organizations with the mission of assisting student media with issues related to editorial influence by external actors.

(3) Advisers and editors should educate their student government and administrators about the rights afforded to the student media through law as well as the obligations discussed in industry guidelines, such as the CMA’s Code of Ethical Behaviors (College Media Association, n.d.). Advisers should be clear with administrators and faculty that the student press has the right and responsibility to remain editorially independent, including remaining free from oversight by advisers and administrators. Our findings indicate that when advisers and editors cite ethical and legal standards, administrators and other actors with authority listen. At public institutions, student media should ideally be designated by the school as a public forum to ensure full legal protection.

(4) Student journalists should be enabled and empowered to make editorial decisions without oversight and control by outside forces. To achieve this empowerment, advisers and other journalism faculty should effectively train student journalists while giving them latitude in reporting their own content. Structure of the organization can sometimes dictate the level of involvement of the faculty or adviser, but advisers should express a desire not to review content before it is published in order to foster student pride in the publication.

Student media hold important functions within the ecology of college campuses. While when asked who has the most control over content at student media organizations, most editors and advisers unequivocally responded that it was the student editor and editorial staff, a closer examination showed that subtle influences exist inside and outside student media organizations that are not always conducive to the operation of a free press.

Limitations and future research

News organizations at smaller and more insular colleges and universities (such as schools with a high population of non-residential students and historically black colleges and universities) face challenges that are not generally experienced at larger and more “traditional” colleges and universities. It appears that the intimate culture of these schools leads to a desire on the part of interested parties—sometimes including student journalists and editors themselves—to “protect” the reputation of the institution. Primarily, student editors and advisers at these institutions expressed that reporters did not challenge administration both for fear of retribution and for fear to taking chances or lack of experience. Reporters were “young” and “unsure” and as such still wanted approval from authority figures. This area of scholarship should be further developed in future research.

Due to a small number of participants, this study is limited in its generalizability. Further study is needed to attain a broader view of how college newspaper editors and advisers experience and respond to external content pressures. This area of scholarship would be well served by a mix of further in-depth

qualitative research to understand broader contexts, as well as larger-scale quantitative research that can begin to demonstrate frequency of these issues more broadly.

Finally, it is important to note that this study did not explicitly consider the important role that social media has had in shaping and cultivating perceptions of free expression and censorship on college campuses. This is a limitation of this study. Future research would benefit from drawing distinctions between reaction to content *prima facie* and reaction to content's virality on social media. Furthermore, additional research into content control decisions in college media should incorporate additional topics related to student journalists' and advisers' online content decisions in reference to how institutions of higher education are reacting to student media outlets.

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