

The Canadian News Directors Study: Demographics and Political Leanings of Television Decision-Makers

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Abstract: This is the first academic study to attempt to understand more about the men and women who make key decisions in television newsrooms across Canada. The authors surveyed all television news directors across the country. The research reveals that, unlike in the United States, the voting patterns of news directors mirror those of the general Canadian population. It reveals that news directors are more secular than those in the general population. The research also uncovered significant demographic differences between CBC and private sector news directors. Finally, it suggests that women and ethnic minorities are dramatically underrepresented in senior positions.

Résumé : Cette étude est la première de niveau académique à essayer de mieux comprendre les hommes et les femmes qui prennent les décisions clés dans les salles de rédaction télévisuelles au Canada. Les auteurs ont sondé tous les chefs des informations télévisuelles au pays. La recherche révèle que, contrairement aux États-Unis, les votes que font les chefs des informations correspondent à ceux de la population en général. La recherche a aussi repéré des différences démographiques significatives entre les chefs des informations de la SRC et ceux du secteur privé. Enfin, les résultats indiquent que les femmes et les minorités ethniques ont une représentation très faible dans les postes supérieurs.

Keywords: Television newsrooms; Public/private broadcasting; Politics; Journalists/survey

Introduction

The Canadian News Directors Study: Demographics and Political Leanings of Television Decision-Makers is the first in a multiyear study of the men and women who make key newsroom decisions. In subsequent studies, we also intend to survey radio news directors and newspaper, magazine, and online news editors.

Participants were asked a range of questions designed to gather information about everything from their childhood schooling to their religion and politics. The authors hope that the information and analysis resulting from the study will fill a

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significant gap in Canadians' knowledge and understanding of the people who run news operations across the country, those who have the day-to-day responsibility of deciding what goes to air.

Theoretical context

A number of Canadian studies of journalists as a broad professional group have addressed some of these questions. Miljan and Cooper (2003) studied the demographics and ideologies of columnists, bureau chiefs, and editors from the print media and correspondents, anchors, and producers from the broadcast media. Pritchard and Sauvageau (1998) and Soderlund, Grecelovsky, and Lee (2002) have explored the political leanings of broadcast journalists and newspaper editors respectively. In addition, Pollard (1995), Pritchard & Sauvageau (1998), and Robinson & Saint-Jean (1998) have all conducted significant demographic studies of Canadian journalists. However, no research has been done specifically on television news directors.

In addition, a body of international research, academic and otherwise, has explored journalists' political opinions. Typical of this is the 2001 Kaiser/Public Perspective survey on polling and democracy, which found that the American population as a whole identifies itself as 28% Republican and 18% conservative. In stark contrast, only 4% of the journalists identify themselves as Republican and 6% as conservative (Edsall, 2001). In fact, a number of surveys of American journalists point to a gulf between journalists' political values and those of their public. "Most members of the news media concede that they are out of touch with the public" (Pew Research Center, 1999): 57% of national journalists and 51% of local journalists. In Australia, John Henningham (1998) noted the dissonance between the views of journalists and members of the public and suggested that there might be a link between those views and the news agenda. Wolfgang Donsbach (1993), studying German and American journalists, suggested the same.

Identifying who journalists are and what they believe assumes that this information is meaningful. That assumption in itself, of course, must be addressed.

We start from the position that journalists' demographics and political leanings matter, as did Miljan & Cooper (2003). The beliefs of those in a position to determine the day-to-day specifics of what goes to air matter even more. These are key assumptions of this study.

We are aware that this assumption runs counter to those of a group of theorists whom Miljan & Cooper call cultural critics "...on the grounds that most of the practitioners describe themselves as being engaged in 'critical theory, or cultural criticism,' or some other variety of discourse analysis or semiotics that can trace an intellectual pedigree back, eventually, to the work of Karl Marx" (Miljan & Cooper, 2003, p. 12). Such critics are far more interested in patterns of ownership and systems of hegemony than they are in the individual newsroom director, who is seen, in many ways, as a pawn of the system. When such theorists study journalists, their focus is on how their working environments are affected by the larger system (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). While we appreciate this analysis and do not underestimate economic forces, we see individual agency as a possibility in news-

room culture, and therefore we see the identification of demographic traits and ideologies as offering a valuable window into newsroom activity.

Nor will this study sit well with technological determinists in the tradition of Harold Innis (1986), whose central tenet is that the influence of the medium itself overrides all other considerations.

Others have dismissed as naïve descriptive studies which focus on the personal characteristics of journalists. They do not agree with the hypothesis that individual journalists can affect news production. Denis McQuail (1994) is one such sceptic. He calls it "... a hypothesis which accords well with the ideology or mythology of the media themselves" (p. 150). McQuail believes there is a greater probability of organizational rather than individual subjective determination of what goes to air. This is related to the views of Weaver & Wilhoit (1986) who find that journalists owe most of their relevant beliefs to socialization from their immediate work environments.

However, we believe the reality of news decision-making is more complex and multifaceted than some theorists acknowledge. Many factors determine what makes it to air. These factors overlap and are sometimes difficult to tease out, but they all contribute to what is shown on our airwaves.

To use an example that was of immediate interest in 2004, we may point to the question of whether ownership of a media outlet affects editorial policy. In fact, it is difficult to find empirical evidence of this. A content analysis conducted by Soderlund & Hildebrandt (2001) with a view to helping answer this question was inconclusive. However, if there is any doubt, consider this statement made by Israel Asper from CanWest Media in a CBC interview: "When we bought, I said, of course, we intended to make our point of view heard. That's one of the joys of being a publisher-in-chief.... So we're not doing anything we didn't forecast" (MacIntosh, 2004, p. 20). Common sense might suggest that ownership is one of many factors affecting news production, even if establishing the evidence is problematic.

We certainly agree that organizations tend to subscribe to core values. Perhaps, as McQuail (1994) and Shoemaker & Reese (1996) believe, organizations socialize employees. Perhaps, as we are currently researching, organizations tend to both attract and hire those who share their core values. Journalists who choose to work in public broadcasting, for example, may already enter the field with similar values to those of the public broadcaster.

In addition, we see the impact of hegemony. Journalists are citizens and not immune from currents of thought in their societies. Media outlets certainly tend to give pride of place to opinions offered by societal leaders. Pundits have influence, and pundits are usually recruited from among those that cultural theorists would identify as belonging to the ruling class. However, while we acknowledge that journalism supports dominant institutions, we do not believe that this support is either universal or inevitable. The role of journalism to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable is affirmed within the investigative-journalism traditions of

most healthy democracies. In Canada, such programs as the CBC's *The Fifth Estate* offer a case in point.

Technological considerations also contribute to what goes to air: the demands of a visual medium mean that available pictures sometimes drive the decision about whether a news story is appropriate for television.

With full acknowledgment of the influence of other determinants, we come back to our original position: journalists matter. Although our area of investigation is different from theirs, we join Miljan & Cooper (2003) in asserting that news content is dependent on those who have a direct hand in reporting it. As they write, "Stories are told from perspectives: that is not an accident or defect, but the essence of stories" (p. xi).

A news report is a mediated communication. A journalist communicates a story to an audience. Journalists make choices constantly. If a new poll comes out establishing that more Canadians live below the poverty line, for example, a television journalist has a plethora of decisions: Is the story worth covering? What is the focus of the story? Whom is the story about? Whom should be interviewed? Which pictures will tell the story? Of the newsroom journalists, the most power is held by the news director, who makes the decisions about whether a story should be assigned and who may have editorial input into how the story is told. Cumulative decisions about whether certain stories will be covered are not trivial. Agenda-setting theory, as rethought by Trenaman & McQuail (1961), suggests the media are not necessarily good at telling people what to think, but they are effective at telling the public which issues to think about.

We concede that we do not undertake the monumental task of doing the type of content analysis that links what goes to air with the views of news directors. Although we hope our research will inform the work of those doing content analysis, that is not a task to which we can do justice. In addition, we question whether it is possible to identify demonstrable connections or lack thereof. As we have suggested, many factors contribute to what ultimately appears in media news products.

On the other hand, Miljan & Cooper (2003) have pursued this line of inquiry and concluded that there is an ideological congruence between the views of journalists and the stories that go to air. For example, they assert that CBC English-language news stories provide proportionately more statements arguing a government-intervention position on unemployment than a free-market position, reflecting the ideology of CBC journalists interviewed. They are not alone. Patterson & Donsbach (1996) also found that "journalists' partisanship affects their news decisions, even when they operate within organizations committed to the principle of partisan neutrality" (p. 456). In the United States, Lichter, Rothman, & Lichter, (1986) have also shown that the ideologies that journalists hold, even subconsciously, are expressed in their work. This suggests that gaining a greater understanding of who journalists are and how they differ from those in the general population is significant.

Research has suggested that not only the personal opinions but also the personal characteristics of the journalist, such as gender, affect the story. Weaver & Wilhoit (1986) asked journalists to submit examples of their best work. They found that that, on average, women cited more female sources than men did. They also seemed to value different stories than men and were more interested in those that dealt with social issues.

Why news directors?

Other studies have focused on large groups of journalists in general. Sometimes they have been senior journalists; often they have represented a cross-section of the newsroom. We wanted to be more specific. Both of us had worked in senior journalistic positions for decades before becoming academics. Both have first-hand knowledge of the news story assignment process, the chains of influence in newsrooms, and the nuances of how newsroom decisions are made. Based on our knowledge of newsroom discourse, we know that although the individual journalist has a lot of professional autonomy, he or she is ultimately accountable to a news director. Sometimes that supervisor is the assignment editor; sometimes that person is the producer. Titles and responsibilities might vary somewhat from television newsroom to newsroom. However, we believe it important to focus on the news director, the person with the most direct responsibility for programming the news on any given day.

Methods

The Canadian News Directors Project targeted every television news director in Canada. Using a directory of television stations across the country (CCN Matthews Media Directory, 2002), we telephoned each one to determine whether it offered news programming. We included both public and private broadcasters and cable stations that generate and broadcast a significant quantity of news programming. Once this was verified, we identified the news director, or the individual who indicated that he or she was most responsible for determining which news went to air.

We then contacted each news director and described our project. Due to the personal nature of many of the survey questions, it seemed important to explain both our methodology and the significance of our research.

Our survey was available in both of Canada's official languages, English and French. Respondents were given a choice: they could opt to complete the survey online or by mail. In the end, 75% of our surveys were completed online; 25% were received by mail. Of the 99 news directors contacted, 67 replied. Of those, 23 were from the CBC and 44 were from the private sector. Of those who completed the survey, nine were from Québec, comprising six Francophones and three Anglophones. We attribute the high response rate among a very busy target population both to telephone contact and surveys that were straightforward and easy to complete. We calculated that it would take each news director an average of 10 minutes to complete the survey.

We synthesized the results of the surveys using SPSS, a statistical software program. We were able to isolate variables to analyze how different groups answered different questions. We then compared results with statistics from the general population, using data obtained by top Canadian polling companies and Statistics Canada.

Findings

In general, we found that the average news director is a White male who is well educated and comfortably middle class. He tends to be more secular in outlook than the average Canadian, more politically active, and more active in his community. His voting patterns mirror those found in the general population.

Childhood and early adulthood

The majority of news directors described the heads of their childhood households as holding middle-class jobs: professional or technical (22.6%), managerial and/or administrative (17.7%), and business owners (16.1%). Sales work accounted for 8.1% of jobs and skilled trades for 12.9%. Only 9.7% described the heads of their childhood households as labourers.

The vast majority of news directors attended public or separate (Catholic) schools. Only 10.4% attended private schools. The latter is marginally higher than the statistic for the rest of the population, where approximately 5.5% of children attend private school (Statistics Canada, 2001a).

Many news directors had the benefit of higher education. Approximately 45% obtained a bachelor's degree and a further 28.3% went to college or university without graduating. Only 3% obtained a master's degree or PhD. Just under 17% had a community-college degree or diploma. These figures are higher than those of the general population. The total percentage of Canadians aged 20 and over with a university education is 23.9%. Another 16.2% hold a college certificate or diploma, while 11.8% are qualified in a trade (Statistics Canada, 2003).

Adult demographics: Home and community life

In adulthood, most news directors continued to live middle-class lives with household incomes above the national average. More than 44% of news directors have a household income between \$51,000 and \$100,000. Approximately one-third (34.3%) have a household income of more than \$100,000. Only 16.4% have a household income of \$50,000 or less. This places news directors in a cohort above the average Canadian, for whom the average income of earners is only \$31,757, rising to \$32,736 for college graduates and \$48,648 for university graduates (Statistics Canada, 2001b).

The vast majority of news directors (85.1%) live in their own homes or condominiums. Only 14.9% pay rent. Home ownership among news directors is higher than among the general population. Figures indicate that 64.6% of Canadian dwellings are owned and 35.4% are rented (Statistics Canada, 2001c).

A full 92.5% of news directors described themselves as heterosexual, and the average news director is married (71.6%). In contrast, 48.9% of Canadians are married or living in common-law unions (Statistics Canada, 2002).

Nearly three-quarters (73.1%) of news directors have children. They are also active in their communities. Over 70% of news directors are involved in volunteer work (70.1%). The areas in which they volunteer most are work-related (42.6%), school/community (40.4%), and recreation/sports (40.4%). This compares favourably with the rest of the Canadian population, which shows a participation rate of 51% (Statistics Canada, 2000). Canadians as a whole volunteer most in work-related, sports/recreation, and religious activities. The relative absence of news directors from religious volunteerism may reflect another finding: that they are not as religiously engaged as other Canadians.

The majority of news directors (38.8%) indicated they were Protestant; 20.9% said they were Catholic, and 23.9% of those who answered said they had no religious affiliation. The others named another religion or did not answer.

This contrasts with Statistics Canada data. In 2001, 43.2% of Canadians were Catholic, compared with 29.2% who were Protestant. Only 16.2% indicated they had no religious affiliation (Statistics Canada, 2001d).

Among news directors, 11.9% indicated they would attend services during a typical week. This compares with 20% of Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2001d). Our survey revealed that almost half (47.8%) of news directors attend a place of worship either once a year or not at all. News directors appear to be more secular than the rest of the Canadian population. In general, male news directors attend places of worship more frequently than female news directors. Only 38.5% of female news directors indicated they attend more than once a year, compared with 54.7% of male news directors.

Gender

While women do constitute a significant percentage of the broadcast-journalism workforce, increasing from 20% in 1974 to 37% in 1994 (Robinson & Saint-Jean, 1998), they are vastly underrepresented among newsroom decision-makers. We found that 79.1% of Canadian news directors are male; only 20.9% are female. While this scarcity of women meant our female sample was quite small, there are numerous observations that can be made with confidence about this group.

On many points, male and female news directors are demographically similar: they are as likely to be married, to have children, to own their own homes, and to volunteer in their communities. However, differences in age, education, and experience are more telling.

Women news directors are, as a group, much more educated than their male counterparts. They are almost twice as likely to have a university degree (71.4% of women, compared with 37.3% of men) and nearly three times more likely to have a journalism degree (57.1%, compared with 18.9%). More than 85% of women have some postsecondary journalism training, while this is only true for half of male news directors. This phenomenon corroborates what has been found in other Canadian studies (Pollard, 1995; Robinson & Saint-Jean, 1998).

There is a significant discrepancy between male and female household incomes. While only 15.4% of female news directors indicate that their household income is more than \$100,000, 38.9% of males fall into this category. On the other

hand, almost 40% of female news directors report a household income of less than \$50,000.

Women say they face special challenges in the industry. Many news directors (70.2%) say "the news business makes family commitments difficult." Women were twice as likely as men to strongly agree with this statement: 28.3%, compared with 14.3% of men. In addition, 15.4% of the women we surveyed were divorced, compared with 7.4% of male news directors.

Although the situation for women news directors seems difficult, the data does suggest some changing trends. While women make up only 20% of news directors, they comprise nearly half (45.5%) of those under 35, which may mean younger women are making headway in top news positions. Additionally, women are overrepresented among news directors who have entered journalism in the last 10 years (35% of women, compared with 5.7% of men), which could mean that women are rising to positions of power faster than men: half of male news directors have been in journalism for more than 20 years. Moreover, survey responses signalled significant change in future demographics: 50% of women strongly agreed that they will be in journalism 10 years from now, while only 28% of men made the same claim.

Race

More than 90% of news directors are White. This compares with 4.5% who are Aboriginal and a further 4.5% who are East Asian.

Statistics indicate that 13.4% of the Canadian population is made up of visible minorities, a threefold increase in the last 20 years (Statistics Canada, 2001e). Compared with the population as a whole, non-Whites are underrepresented in the ranks of the news directors. Certain groups, such as Blacks, were not represented at all among those who responded to our survey.

Politics

News directors are more politically active than other Canadians. A full 89.6% of news directors indicated they vote regularly; 11.9% said they do not. During the 2000 federal election, 61.2% of registered voters exercised their right to vote (Statistics Canada & Elections Canada, 2000).

When asked which federal party they would vote for if they went to the polls tomorrow, 45.8% of responding news directors (n=48) said they would vote Liberal, generally considered to be the centrist party in the Canadian political spectrum. The right-wing parties fared less well. The news directors gave 14.6% of their votes to the Progressive Conservatives. The most right-wing of the parties, the Canadian Alliance, would win 10.4% of votes. On the other hand, the most left-of-centre party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), would win precisely the same percentage. Only one news director, a Francophone from Québec, would vote for the Bloc Québécois, a party active only in the province of Québec. Finally, 16.7% of news directors said they would not vote for any of the major political parties.

A series of polls tracking federal voting intentions in Canada, conducted by Environics in January, March, and July of 2002, showed between 40% and 46% of

the population would vote Liberal, followed by 15% to 18% who would vote Conservative, and 14% to 18% Canadian Alliance. The NDP support was measured at between 13% and 16% and Bloc Québécois support at 8% to 9% (the remaining voters either did not know or refused to answer) (EnviroNics Research, 2002). Further, in the 2000 federal Canadian elections, the Liberals received 40.8% of valid votes.

This suggests that although the news directors distinguish themselves by being more politically active, their voting patterns are not significantly different from those of other Canadians.

Public vs. private broadcasting

In most cases, the demographic portraits of news directors in the public sector (the CBC) were similar to those in the private sector. However, there are some differences worth noting.

Every CBC news director who answered our survey was White. This was the case with 86.4% of those in the private sector.

Although comparable numbers of public and private broadcasters intend to vote for the Liberals, other voting patterns are different. Only 4.5% of private news directors intend to vote for the New Democratic Party. This contrasts with 13% of CBC respondents who have that intention. In addition, 11.4% of private news directors intend to vote for the Canadian Alliance. Not one of the CBC news directors had that intention.

CBC news directors are more secular. A third (34.8%) said they never go to a place of worship. This is twice the number (15.9%) of those in the private sector who made the same claim.

In other respects, the demographics of news directors are similar, be they in the public or private sector.

Future directions and conclusions

We have argued in this paper that many factors determine which news items make it to air. We acknowledge that media ownership and other factors can influence broadcast decisions. However, we are guided by this central premise: news directors have some personal agency over, and can influence, what goes to air. It is important to understand their demographics and political leanings, since both have at least the potential to influence what is broadcast.

The data suggest that, in general, news directors tend to have grown up in middle-class families and continued to live comfortably middle-class lives. They are likely to have families and to be involved in their communities.

They differ from those in the general population in one respect: they are somewhat more likely to have no religious affiliation and much less likely to attend a place of worship.

This first stage of *The News-Directors Study*, with its findings specific to television newsrooms, offers many avenues for future research. It should enable researchers conducting content analyses to do so with an understanding of the demographics and political leanings of those making decisions about what should

go to air. It should be useful for those studying differences between public and private broadcasting in Canada. In addition, the data should help those who want to chart how gender and race representations in television newsrooms change over the years. That information should also be useful to those conducting content analyses.

Furthermore, certain aspects of this study are particularly significant to the discourse about media. The data suggest that news directors' voting patterns are in line with those of the general population. Although there are some important distinctions, for the most part news directors' voting choices differ little from their neighbours. This information should be of interest to those on both the right and left who maintain that journalists' personal political agendas can lead to biased reporting.

The finding is also notable in that it is unusual. International studies usually suggest that journalists are both more liberal and left-wing than the population as a whole. Our Canadian study suggests otherwise. However, there is one proviso. It should be noted that journalists at Canada's public broadcaster, the CBC, share a different profile and are more likely to hold left-of-centre political views.

Many areas related to this study still need to be explored. In addition to studying the demographic profiles of news directors and their voting patterns, our research is examining news directors' attitudes about the social, economic, and political issues that receive significant airtime on most broadcasts. It is also examining how news directors understand the roles of the journalists who work for them. The authors will explore those findings in subsequent papers.

A shortcoming of the study is its failure to adequately survey Francophone news directors. More work needs to be done in this area.

Finally, little Canadian content analysis has been related to gender and race issues. Our findings about underrepresentation of both women and minorities in newsrooms suggest a context for that kind of content analysis.

In short, this analysis of Canada's news directors should contribute on a number of levels to a better understanding of the people who run television newsrooms and assign stories to journalists.

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