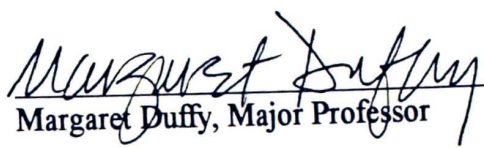


THE JOURNALISTIC COVERAGE OF THE TENNESSEE GENERAL
ASSEMBLY:
CHOOSING TOPICS TO EDUCATE CITIZENS ON PUBLIC ISSUES
OF TO GAIN EXCITING HEADLINES

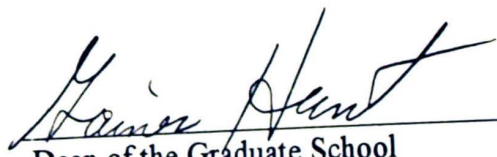
JOHN R. ROBBINS

To the Graduate and Research Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by John R. Robbins entitled "The Journalistic Coverage of the Tennessee General Assembly: Choosing Topics to Educate Citizens on Public Issues or to Gain Exciting Headlines." I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, with a major in Speech, Communication, and Theatre.


Margaret Duffy, Major Professor

Accepted for the Graduate and
Research Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

THE JOURNALISTIC COVERAGE OF THE TENNESSEE GENERAL ASSEMBLY:
CHOOSING TOPICS TO EDUCATE CITIZENS ON PUBLIC ISSUES
OR TO GAIN EXCITING HEADLINES

A Research Paper
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
Austin Peay State University

John R. Robbins

December 1997

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation to my major professor, Dr. Margaret Duffy, for her assistance and patience during this study and to Dr. Ellen Kanervo and Dr. Paul Shaffer for their encouragement and guidance in this endeavor.

I would like to thank my wife, Brenda, daughters, Sandra, Payton, and Jessica for their faithful support and enduring patience throughout this graduate study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	1
Purpose of the Study	2
II. Review of Related Literature	4
Influences on Story Selection	4
Journalistic Influences on Principles of Democracy	9
Journalistic Coverage of National Government	12
Journalistic Coverage of State Government	16
III. Research Questions	20
IV. Methodology	22
V. Results	25
How Topics are Chosen	25
How Journalists' Feel About Topic Choices	28
How Legislators' Feel About Journalists' Topic Choices	29
VI. Discussion and Summary	31
APPENDIX	36
REFERENCES	38

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Despite modern advances in technology and an unprecedented ability to spread information, today's media, as never before are serving what many surveys reveal to be a public that is less informed about and less involved in public affairs. The press' aim is to attract and entertain rather than educate and challenge the populace. Many scholars believe that such reporting is the reverse of what conscientious journalism is all about (Ripley, 1994).

Murray Edelman, as reported in Bennett (1992), argued that political coverage in America and other areas of the world as well, is ever changing into the kind of reporting that involves one-way communication that pulls the public farther from power. He added that the media's desire for more topics of excitement and with modern technologies at the bidding of politicians, the stage has been set for greater public affairs programming to be utilized in the excitement of public interest in the short run, without providing a substantial outlet for individual involvement and political action.

Considering that media are instruments, they can serve different ends. They are vital to a democratic society as they make information available in all places and at all social levels. Media are necessary in criticizing governments, investigating criminal elements, and supporting good and not so good causes. They are to promote discussion and debate. They produce and give meaning to constituencies whose compromises make democracy function--all the while offering a continual reminder of national identity by

generating experiences common to all, offering shared symbols, and purveying to the public a perception of being in contact with its leaders (Bogart, 1996).

Unless the guardians of journalism protect their values, said MacNeil (1995), it will not just be market share, ratings, and circulation that suffer, it will be a greater wasting of the basic understanding of the political foundations of democracy and political procedure. He added that just as we are on the edge of another big move into the unknown--the entire internationalization of news information--our biggest concern should be how well these advancements in media technology aid the principles of democracy and its organizations.

Purpose of the Study

In consideration of journalistic responsibility to report stories that perpetuate the principles of democracy and inform and educate the citizenry concerning governmental actions, this research seeks to address the question of how journalists choose topics to cover. Are journalists motivated to choose topics in order to educate the public so that citizens can make informed decisions concerning public policy or are they motivated to choose topics that generate excitement and gain national attention? Although the above objectives may not be consistently mutually exclusive, this research builds on the assumption that journalism has the responsibility to report stories that promote democratic principles and inform citizens about complex issues of national and state government but does not do so.

Specifically, this study examines the motivation and criteria utilized by the Tennessee General Assembly Press Corps in choosing legislative topics to cover. The

methodology for this qualitative study includes interviews from a non-probability, purposive sample of the Tennessee General Assembly Press Corps reporters and members of the Tennessee General Assembly.

CHAPTER II

Review of Related Literature

Influences on Story Selection

While it is not possible in this effort to mention all the available research that has been conducted as to how journalists choose topics, there are some data that should be noted. For example, in relation to story selection, Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) explored how journalists view themselves in relation to their journalistic roles. They noted that journalistic roles fall into three categories: adversarial, interpretive, and disseminator.

The interpretive or explanatory function, while a principal factor in all media, was most important for print journalists. Broadcast journalists viewed this function with less importance than did print journalists. For example, a majority of all media except radio stated that investigating claims of public officials was of great importance. Patterns of a similar nature were found regarding the importance of furnishing analysis of complex issues and providing discussion about national policy (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986).

The Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) study also found that information dissemination, the second-most important press function, has two dimensions: getting facts to the people quickly and focusing on the widest possible audience. Their research determined that print and broadcast emerge with comparable patterns on the importance of getting news quickly to the public. Radio journalists are most likely to regard getting information quickly to the public as extremely important, with newspaper reporters least likely to view news for the widest audience as a primary goal (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986).

Finally, Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) showed that the adversary or skeptical role, a clearly minority view among American journalists, was more prevalent among print journalists than among broadcast reporters. They found that wire service and daily newspaper reporters are more likely to list being skeptical of the actions of elected officials as a very important function of journalism.

Gans (1979) concluded that journalistic story selection is composed of two processes: one ascertains news availability and relates journalists to news sources; the other determines the suitability of news which links reporters to audiences. According to Gans, before information can become news, journalists and sources must have access to each other but that access is variously portioned depending, to some extent, on the social distance between sources and journalists, and more so on their respective power. Those with economical and political power, argued Gans, can gain easy access to, and are sought by journalists; those with little or no power are more difficult to reach by journalists and are not likely to be sought out until their activities result in some social or moral newsworthiness.

Additionally, a constant, plentiful supply of news means that journalists have more information than they can use. Consequently, argued Gans (1979), journalists must make judgments as to what information is most suitable and sort through this information to select what may be reported with limited staffs and time, and what they can report in the equally limited amount of newshole or air time.

Judgments about what is suitable to report are greatly influenced by story importance. An important factor in story selection is governmental rank and other

hierarchies. What goes on in government is always important, but the higher an official is in the governmental hierarchy, the more important the actions of the official become. Also, the governmental hierarchy is discernible and rank ordered, which aids journalists in making importance judgments. The most important actor in the hierarchy is the president and journalists do not fervently follow the governmental ranking below the presidency. The importance of other officials is determined by the extent to which they affect, change, or oppose the policies of the president, or influence the nation or the lives of other Americans (Gans, 1979).

Another consideration in story selection, according to Gans (1979), is the impact on the nation and the national interest. He noted that journalists give importance to activities which involve the whole nation, such as voting and those which are carried out on behalf of the nation such as the space program and days of national celebration. Gans maintained that most importantly, reporters look for current domestic news, which can be found regarding government officials and policy issues that express, represent, or affect the values of the nation.

Impact on large numbers of people is another factor in choosing stories to cover. The most important story of all is one that affects every American. The assassination or attempted assassination of an American president is considered to be such a story as it is perceived to touch the whole population. Also, news reports about disasters or epidemics become important news, because even if the number of people affected is small, the notion that a similar disaster could happen almost anywhere would affect a much larger portion of the populace (Gans, 1979).

Roshco (1975) reported that choosing topics to be covered is influenced by the routinizing of the news. News judgment, noted Roshco, is based on common occupational experience leading to a consensus of news values found within a news organization. Furthermore, Roshco argued that news judgment is acquired as a result of repeating daily routines, the reason for socializing all new members in an organized activity. According to Roshco, even differences in appraising the newsworthiness of a story are worked out within a largely shared frame of reference, gained through ordinary exposure to existing values.

Whatever the occasional exceptions, news judgment is best described as a reaction to the intertwined imperatives opposed by the organization's functional needs, the reporter's occupational perplexities, and the audience's principle social assumptions. News judgment is therefore a mirror of the economic and political order that dominates the social system and molds its social norms (Roshco, 1975).

According to Weaver and Wilhoit (1986), entertainment is another possible determinant of journalistic choices of topics to cover. Weaver and Wilhoit determined that a significant number of journalists accept the importance of entertaining the audience. They reported that television journalists are the least likely to acknowledge entertainment as important and newspaper reporters are the most likely to report entertainment as a notable function. However, it is the editor, added Weaver and Wilhoit, that is most likely to mention entertainment as important. The Weaver and Wilhoit study showed that 64% of newspaper editors, in contrast to 49% of reporters, say entertainment is either quite or extremely significant.

Gans (1979) reported that conflict and disagreements are a factor in story selection. He found that 15% of domestic reporting is given to disagreements and conflicts within and between sectors of government and the public officials who personify them. Gans argued that because the news gives so much time and space to the president, much of this kind of coverage reports his differences with Congress. A somewhat smaller number of stories, noted Gans, deals with less conflict laden government actions, reporting government activities and issues which may later become points of conflict.

Another influence in choosing topics to cover, said Roshco (1975), is the novel or unexpected. Roshco suggested that because news quickly turns stale, the newsmen's receptiveness to and emphasis on the novel and the unexpected is heightened--so long as it is adequately visible to intrude within their preoccupied understanding. This leaning toward obtrusive happenings that are unforeseen, unfamiliar, or untoward, reported Roshco, presents the significant as superficial and the insignificant as sensational. Roshco affirmed that the novel or unexpected allow new viewpoints--and their sources--to propel themselves into the spotlight, though at the price of ignoring essential details and presenting misleading information.

Journalistic training, according to Weaver and Wilhoit (1986), is yet another strong influence in choosing topics to cover. They found that journalistic training--both on the job and in college courses--was most often reported as very influential.

Gans (1979) determined that although journalists value very highly their autonomy as news gatherers, choosing topics can be influenced by editors. He found that in some news organizations, the editor decides what is to be covered, especially if the reporter is a

beginner. Gans stated that senior reporters usually have freedom to select the stories they cover except when they are writing lead or cover stories. Even so, top editors according to Gans, have the last say as to what is to be covered and the editor often exercises this privilege. He concluded that writers, therefore, must combine their own judgment with what they think will satisfy their editors.

Journalistic Influences on Principles of Democracy

As stated earlier, it is widely accepted that journalism has the responsibility to promote the principles of democracy. Therefore, policy topics that journalists choose to cover are directly related to whether or not these principles are perpetuated in society. In a political democracy, the media are an essential element in holding the interests of the many in the view of the ruling few. Messages conveyed by journalists in print, on radio, or on television are different from those presented by a government official or corporate executive. The distinction is that the journalist has the privilege, indeed the professional responsibility, to frame the communication. The newspaper report or television broadcast also changes an occurrence or account into the cultural form called news. A news story is a declaration of particular concern and significance. It is a pronouncement, by a well-known private and usually professional entity in a public place, that an occurrence is significant (Schudson, 1995; Ripley, 1994; Bogart, 1996).

Graber (1993) concluded that journalists are actively involved in contributing the raw materials and the tools needed to develop and sustain cognitive, emotional, and ethical convictions that support society's political framework and methods. She explained that

the power of news stories to buttress the status quo or advance changes rises or falls depending on journalists' choices of subject matter and framing.

Do mass media inherently serve democracy? Does the fast development of communications technology support the spread and exchange of information and ideas in a tolerant manner? The answer to these two questions is yes. The growth of democratic theory and practice is linked historically to the invention of printing. As literacy increased, ideas spread that overthrew the long standing authoritarian governmental system and expanded the arena of public debate necessary to representative government (Bogart, 1996).

Moyers (1994), however, reported that a study by the Kettering Foundation determined that many Americans believe that they are being removed from their rightful place in democracy by the media. Moyers added that the study showed that a large number of Americans think that the media manipulate democratic discourse so that people are treated as consumers to be amused rather than citizens to be engaged.

Additionally, many scholars have argued that the media are simply tools to be used for powerful interests (Davidson & Oleszek, 1994; Berry, 1989). These scholars have concluded that interest groups can manipulate public policy by utilizing the media to influence law makers and the constituency through grass roots efforts. This manipulation is accomplished, stated the scholars, through advertising and bringing specific topics to the attention of the news media.

Bogart (1996) has proposed that mass media can only sustain democracy through information and ideas, but the greater part of mass media content--particularly in

audiovisual media--is given to entertainment. Bogart added that this cannot be classified as nonpolitical. It is, he has argued, anti-political, because it diverts time and attention away from substantive issues that invariably carry political connotations.

Bill Kovach (1993), curator of The Nieman Foundation, reported that most of the information inundating the system is not connected or related to anything. Much information, he said, maybe most of it, is of no benefit or importance whatsoever. The one benefit, he added, that news reporting should bring into the information system and the benefit that accounts for loyal consumers of news, is that it can be a resource of public understanding and involvement. Kovach stated that journalists exact some order on chaos by choosing, from the abundance of information available at a given time, that information most pertinent to the audience and presenting it in a framework that is understandable and important.

On the other hand, Lasswell and Wright, as reported in Severin and Tankard (1992), noted that media serve as entertainment outlets as well as sources of information. These scholars showed that the media offer "private respite, escapism, fill leisure time, create mass culture-art, music-mass exposure, raise taste, and increase preference."

Many experts have stated that in the future it will be very important for those in journalism to proclaim an end to their neutrality on particular questions. For example, those who are involved in reporting the news should be concerned as to whether or not people participate in the political process, whether this country has genuine debate, whether the political system functions as it should, whether there is citizen involvement in public life, and whether public servants earn the respect of their constituents. As

journalists begin to realize that it is not in their best interest or the best interest of the American people to be neutral on these questions, they will perhaps seek out their own ideology, one that can replace objectivity with something more powerful, something more encouraging. Journalism is one of the more influential arts of democracy, and its foremost goal is not to make news, or reputations, or headlines, but rather to perpetuate democratic values (Rosen, 1993).

Journalistic Coverage of National Government

Additionally, there is indication that journalism coverage of complex national government actions that affect public knowledge about politics is largely missing from today's news reporting. A large amount of news about complex issues flows from the United States Congress. The members of Congress constantly make news. Many newsworthy happenings that take place elsewhere have impact in Congress. Of all American governmental institutions, Congress is one of the most open. However, it can be argued that Congress receives considerably less news coverage than the presidency (Paletz and Entman, 1981).

Baker (1996) argued that the way in which policy is made in the United States is now largely unintelligible to its people. At the very center of public policy-making, added Baker, is Congress, whose members issue large amounts of information to communicate with baffled citizens without really enlightening them about the legislative processes. Baker stated that most of what flows from Congress advertises rather than teaches, propagandizes rather than informs, and confuses rather than simplifies.

A large number of scholarly studies conducted over the last 20 years, reinforced by numerous recent examples, make it clear, said Swanson (1992), that communication from whatever source concerning matters of public and political interest routinely is oversimplified, personalized, trivialized, and dramatized. Political leaders, government officials, and special interest advocates, stated Swanson, attempt to manipulate news reporters and editors in order to manage rather than inform public opinion. Journalists, added Swanson, attempt to expose the manipulation and assert themselves as watchdogs of the public interest while looking for scandal and personal foibles, and the show is staged for popular consumption as a series of soap operas.

Martin (1981), in Nimmo and Sanders, concluded that news coverage of Congress can be explained largely in terms of the workload of the reporter: to make the daily headlines and to find topics that the editor will use, the press member must search out the "ultimate spokesperson." Martin added that for national news, the president of the United States is that person. Of all elected officials, according to Martin, the president represents the largest constituency, and therefore, those complicated policies and issues that are argued in Congress are less scrutinized and the citizens are less informed.

According to a Freedom Forum study, despite greater press and broadcast coverage of Congress in 1995, Roper public opinion polls reported that 61% of the public did not believe coverage of Congress had changed to any degree since the Republicans gained control of the House and Senate. The Freedom Forum study also revealed that 73% said that coverage of Congress is often puzzling and vague and only 50% expressed much confidence in the media or Congress (Arvidson, 1996).

The Freedom Forum study also showed that the knowledge of governance had not improved. Results of the study revealed that 47% of the respondents did not know the names of their U.S. senators, 60% could not name their congressman, 51% could not name the speaker of the House, and 62% could not name the Senate majority leader (Arvidson, 1996).

Paletz and Entman (1981) listed several factors that hinder extensive coverage of Congress: all stories cannot be reported due to limits on time and space; legislative processes do not always proceed smoothly; bills are considered sporadically and intense deliberations are followed by inaction, even elimination. Another factor that hinders extensive coverage of Congress, reported Paletz and Entman, is conflict between congressional norms and news values: congressional norms condemn public expressions of personal hostility; the media feed on conflict and reporters assume, as do many other Americans, that the president is the most valid spokesperson on public issues.

Also, Baker (1996) argued that the watchfulness of the press over the process of policy making should not be limited just to scrutinizing the lives of the politicians or reporting scandal. He said that it should extend to presenting the process, even at the expense, sometimes, of the more succulent stories. Baker added that to stand before a camera and say, "This is the way the process really works," or to insert a few substantive sentences in a glitzy story to inform citizens why public officials are hiding behind a procedure rule, might not be exciting journalism. However, Baker argued that it might "leave the citizen slightly less confused and more informed."

Mintz (1995) declared that the "Big Four," The New York Times, The

Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, and The Wall Street Journal are not guilty of devoting too much space to scandal, sexual misconduct, and gossip, but are guilty of omission. "They are guilty," stated Mintz, "of nonreporting, burial, and trivialization of the news that citizens need and to which they are entitled." The "Big Four," according to Mintz, have a watchfulness for stories with little impact on the lives of everyday people, stories that fill pages of newsprint and distract reporters from work that is less sensational and more important. Therefore, it is everyday fare for the press to fail to provide sufficient information about government's successes and failures (Mintz, 1995).

In an interview with former White House Counsel Lloyd Cutler, Ken Auletta (1994), media and communication columnist for the New Yorker magazine, asked Cutler to comment on his observations of press coverage of the government. Cutler replied that the press believes that it is performing a very important function in reporting the way our government officials operate, but that it does so in a very sarcastic manner. "Journalism is much more inclined to place blame," said Cutler, "or to write stories that apply blame, than it is to give credit and it seems to believe that governmental institutions can be run by perfect people, who are nowhere to be found." Cutler added that if journalism insists on highlighting the mistakes and flaws of everybody in government, there is no one left to run the government.

Deborah Howell (1993), a Washington bureau chief, listed four deadly sins of political reporting:

1. Writing for sources. The journalist's duty is to report news for the benefit of the reader, however, praise from a politician often precedes this priority. Even

conscientious reporters occasionally fraternize with the people they cover and forget their responsibility to the public.

2. Writing too many quarter turn stories. Readers need and are looking for new information and generally do not wish to see old news unnecessarily repeated. This is particularly true of news concerning the state legislature, city hall or the campaign trail.

3. Reporters fail to report what they know. They withhold relevant information-- not things like the overnight affair of some legislator and eager lobbyist, but things like the senate speaker who is being controlled by some special interest.

4. Reporters do not investigate as thoroughly as they should. Readers need to know what is behind a vote or why a particular bill or amendment is being presented. They also need to know how the vote, bill, or amendment will effect them and why they should care about policy issues.

Journalistic Coverage of State Government

Furthermore, it is assumed that journalists have, in their selecting of topics to cover, the responsibility to inform citizens about complex issues of state government (Drew, 1993; Carpini, Keeter, & Kennamer, 1994). James Drew (1993), staff writer for the Toledo Blade, described the role of local government reporters as one that educates and enlightens citizens. "The challenge is immense," he said, "given the need to provide comprehensive daily coverage while also capturing the enormous problems besetting most local governments in the 1990s." Drew also noted that there is no question that the journalist must serve as the watchdog of government.

A fair amount of research has been conducted on state government news coverage and indicates a considerable shortage in this coverage (Hess, 1996; Roberts, 1996; Gurwitt, 1996). According to Carpini, Keeter, and Kenamer (1994), uniformity that depicts national political news does not extend to coverage of local and state politics. State government, they noted, sometimes seems to fade altogether from news coverage, and has been labeled the "hidden layer of government", the stepchild of American politics, an untouched segment of journalism. By any worthwhile measurement of newsworthiness, Carpini, Keeter, and Kenamer argued, state government should be newsworthy indeed. They went on to say that state governments receive and dispense large amounts of tax dollars and are responsible for a great number of activities that impact our lives in very concrete ways.

Furthermore, Hess (1996) argued that the state level of government is consistently deprived of news coverage. He stated that the national media--network television, weekly news magazines, and certain elite newspapers--focus on city-level news and state government actions too often go unnoticed. This ignored segment of news coverage, argued Hess, becomes more important as the activities of state government have more impact in the lives of citizens.

Gene Roberts (1996), managing editor of The New York Times, declared that good or bad, state and local governments are becoming increasingly more important and profoundly more newsworthy and this should be an opportune time for state and local news organizations. However, according to Roberts, many news organizations are more lacking in staff, newshole, and commitment to governmental coverage than ever before

and this will radically affect the political coverage the public receives.

Historically, journalists have paid very little attention to state government and state politics. This is partly due to a lack of strong visuals for television, inadequate staffing, and cost. Brooks and Gassaway's 1984 survey found that 38% of newspapers' state bureaus had just one reporter during legislative sessions, and 58% had one reporter between sessions. As a result, state reporting often focuses on the governor, a few legislative actions, an occasional scandal, and leaves the public largely uninformed about the complex issues of state government (Carpini, Keeter, & Kennamer 1994).

Gurwitt (1996) stated that one of the major problems that will plague state government coverage will be the lack of interest back at the newsroom. He asserted that few daily news organizations will readily admit indifference toward activities at the state capitol. The reality though, according to Gurwitt, is that over the last 15 years or so, there has been a noticeable decline of dedication in covering either the legislative or the executive branch.

Carpini, Keeter, and Kennamer (1994) found that state news coverage may be particularly weak in just those places it should strong--large urban areas, where the majority of the American population lives and where the impact of the "New Federalism" has been most severely felt. Their study also suggested that learning requires not only the will to learn, but also the opportunity to do so.

Previous research mentioned in this study indicated that journalistic roles, values, training, availability of news sources and suitability of news, entertainment, conflict, and organizational philosophy are among some of the factors that influence how journalists

choose topics to cover. These factors appear to influence whether journalists choose topics that educate the public so that citizens can make informed decisions concerning public policy or whether they choose topics that generate excitement, entertain, or gain national headlines.

Furthermore, previous research mentioned in this study suggested that a majority of today's news reporting falls short of promoting democratic principles and fails to inform citizens about complex issues of national and state government. According to Baker (1996), much of what is called conscientious journalism entertains rather than informs, advertises rather than teaches, propagandizes rather than enlightens, and confuses rather than clarifies.

CHAPTER III

Research Questions

This study investigated how journalists and legislators in one state, Tennessee, believe reporters choose legislative topics to cover. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

Q1. How do journalists choose topics?

For instance, do journalists choose topics to please their editor? Do they choose topics that have conflict and drama? Do they choose topics that they think will be published? Do they choose topics that they think will make the front page? Do they choose topics because they are entertaining? Or do they choose topics they believe readers should know about in order to understand and participate in the legislative process?

Q2. How do journalists feel about the choices they make in selecting topics to cover?

Journalists may feel good about the topics they choose to cover. Perhaps they believe the topics they cover contribute to the understanding of the citizenry regarding public policy; they may believe they are conveying important information to the public; or they may believe it is appropriate to shoot for the stories that are exciting and the topics that are front page material. In contrast, they may not feel good about the topics they cover. Journalists may believe that the public is being deprived because the topics they choose to cover many times lack substance and depth. They may believe that the influence of time constraints, employer philosophy, and editor expectations may deprive them of the opportunity to choose stories that are informative and relevant to understanding the policy

process.

Q3. How do legislators feel about the choices journalists make in selecting topics to cover?

For example, do legislators believe that journalists choose topics that promote democracy? Do they believe journalists choose topics that educate the public about important legislation? Do they believe that journalists choose topics that promote cynicism toward government officials? Do they believe that journalists choose topics that contribute to the passage of certain legislation?

CHAPTER IV

Methodology

The qualitative approach for this study was chosen because the research could be conducted in a natural setting (the Tennessee State Legislature) and the participants' understanding and perspective of journalistic reporting could be captured in this setting. The study assumed that individual differences have various meanings and that these meanings are shared and can be identified. Data for this study was obtained through electronically recorded in-depth interviews with a non-probability, purposive sample of Tennessee State Legislative Press Corps members and a non-probability, purposive sample of members of the Tennessee General Assembly.

The research for this study was conducted at the Tennessee State Legislature during the period of February 1997 through April 1997. The Tennessee Legislature is made up of 99 representatives and 33 senators. The House has 12 standing committees and the Senate has 10 standing committees. In-depth interviews were conducted with the following House committee chairs: Shelby Rhinehart, Commerce; and Clarence (Pete) Phillips, Calendar and Rules. Speaker Pro Tempore, Lois DeBerry; Majority Leader, Jere Hargrove; and Minority Leader, H. E. Bittle were also interviewed.

Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with the following Senate Committee Chairs: Douglas Henry, Finance Ways and Means; and Carl Koella Jr., Commerce, Labor, and Agriculture. Lieutenant Governor John S. Wilder; Speaker Pro Tempore, Robert Rochelle; Democratic Leader, Ward Crutchfield; and Republican Leader, Ben Atchley were interviewed as well.

These officials were chosen on the basis of their leadership positions, experience in dealing with controversial legislation, and exposure to the media. Other considerations included political status, knowledge and insight into government affairs and policy making, and familiarity with press relations (Borquez, 1993; Spitzer, 1993; Graber, 1993; Baker, 1996).

Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with the following members of the Tennessee State Legislative Press Corps: Dureen Cheek, The Tennessean; Rebecca Ferrar, The Knoxville News-Sentinel; Paula Wade, The Commercial Appeal; Andy Sher, the Nashville Banner; Brian Hicks, the Chattanooga Times; and Phil West of the Associated Press.

The choice to interview members of the Tennessee State Legislature Press Corps was based on the premise, that they are directly connected with reporting the activities of government policy making, and are able to gauge the development of legislation that affects the public welfare. Furthermore, the Press Corps journalists have the opportunity to learn the process of policy making and may be more knowledgeable than journalists who report on legislative action sporadically (Gurwitt, 1996; Roberts, 1996; Bonner, 1993).

The rationale for selecting newspaper journalists and excluding radio and television reporters was that, newspapers have the potential to report policy actions in greater depth and with more substance. As such, newspapers may be capable of disseminating more information that permits the public to be better educated on important policy questions (Davidson & Oleszek, 1994; Dye, Zeigler, & Lichter, 1992; Gurwitt, 1996).

The above methodology is not without its limitations. The choice of a non-random, purposive sample is not generalizable to all state legislative Press Corps and legislative members. Also, the interviewees chosen for this study may not be the most knowledgeable concerning legislative Press Corps coverage or the policy-making functions of state government, and the responses of the interviewees contain subjectivity.

CHAPTER V

Results

How Topics Are Chosen

Q1. How do journalists choose topics to cover?

Interviews with reporters of the Tennessee General Assembly Press Corps and members of the Tennessee State Legislature revealed a number of influences on topic selection. The most shared influence of story selection among reporters was the impact that legislative issues and governmental actions have on the public. This correlated with Gans' (1979) study which found that impact on large numbers of people was a primary factor for journalists in choosing topics to cover, but disagreed with a study conducted by Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) which found the interpretive function to be the most salient in story selection. Tennessee Legislative Press Corps members stated that they attempt to remember that everyone is a consumer of government and as a result, they look for legislative issues that place consumers at risk. For example, taxes, health care, education, and safety are all important issues according to the Press Corps members. These are all, they argued, topics that affect citizens in very identifiable ways. Legislation that prevents an individual from getting good health care service is going to affect that individual's life. Tax reform may place an additional tax burden on the average citizen and crime legislation may, or may not, provide additional safety for the public.

Another motivating factor in topic selection, according to journalists interviewed for this study, is information dissemination. Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) found that

information dissemination was a contributing factor in choosing topics to cover--especially for print journalists. The Tennessee Legislative Press Corps members shared the belief that it is important to let the public know what is going on in government. They argued that every citizen cannot be present when public policy is being made and therefore, the role of the journalist is to make the public aware of the issues as well as the actions of their elected officials. According to these journalists, information dissemination is vital to citizen involvement in government, public debate about policy issues, and the promotion of the principles of democracy.

It is interesting to note that the journalists interviewed for this study said that editor influence was not a factor in story selection. This finding indicates that editor influence in story selection may not be as wide spread as that found by Gans (1979). Journalists in the sample for the present study said that they are free on a day-to-day basis to choose the issues they cover. In contrast, members of the Tennessee General Assembly said that editors do influence the Press Corps' selection of topics to cover. Although this study found that the Press Corps respondents said that they were free to choose the topics they want to cover, it was determined that a series of stories concerning a particular topic usually require editor approval. Some reporters said that they had worked with editors who did influence story selection but that it was not so with their present editors. A number of reporters interviewed related that their editor had, on occasion, reduced the column inches of their stories and thus reduced the amount of information intended for their readers.

Additionally, this study revealed that the complexity of some issues was a determinant

in choosing legislative issues to cover. The interviewees for this study stated that some policy issues are so complex that there is not enough time to properly study them and disseminate information in a substantive manner. The Tennessee health care system, TennCare, as well as the state budget are examples of complex issues. These issues, said journalists, are of great importance but require much time to study in order to report them in great detail. Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) found similar patterns in their study of journalistic roles. Also, a limited newshole, stated Press Corps members, prevents extensive space needed to understandably present complex issues. As a result, only the basic facts are presented and other topics are covered instead of in-depth, follow-up stories of complex issues. This finding correlated with information obtained from interviews with members of the Tennessee General Assembly who shared the belief that the complexity of an issue determines story selection.

Furthermore, journalists and legislative members interviewed for this study agreed that time constraints are a factor in choosing topics to cover. Paletz and Entman (1981) listed time constraints as a factor that works against extensive coverage of governmental actions. In the 1997 session, the Tennessee General Assembly considered approximately 2000 bills. As a result, Press Corps members and legislative members said that there is not enough time to cover all the committee meetings and the actions of the House and Senate. Additionally, newspaper deadlines do not allow enough time to report all the legislative activities of state government. According to the journalists interviewed, an important topic that needs to be covered in greater detail can sometimes be written on Friday and appear in the Sunday edition.

Also, some topics are covered just because they become issues--they are just there. One journalist called it the tail that wags the dog. For example, the Ten Commandment Bill and the Monkey Bill were debated during the 1996 Tennessee legislative session and made headlines and gained national attention. Most of the journalists interviewed said that these were not the most important issues considered. However, because they were emotional issues, they catapulted themselves to the forefront. Conversely, the majority of legislators interviewed for this study believed that many topics chosen by the Capitol Hill Press Corps were strongly influenced by sensationalism and headline potential.

Another influence of topic choice, reported interviewees, is the newspaper's circulation area. For instance, a Press Corps member from the Knoxville, Chattanooga, or Memphis area may pay more attention to issues that affect the circulation area of the newspaper.

How Journalists' Feel About Topic Choices

Q2. How do journalists feel about the choices they make in selecting topics to cover?

Interviews with the Tennessee General Assembly Press Corps indicated that news reporting, like any other profession, at times produces outstanding results and at other times leaves room for improvement. Journalists reported that some days they believe they do an outstanding job of selecting topics that inform and educate the public about important issues and other days their reporting is inadequate. A lack of time to cover all issues and to cover them thoroughly, results in the belief that sometimes the public does not receive the coverage they deserve. For example, a journalist may only have 15

minutes to prepare a story for printing, when, two hours on the same story would result in a more substantive, interpretive story. Sometimes, the journalists said, the only news that can be reported are the basic facts. Government, they argued, is not terribly interesting to many people and it is difficult to make policy issues meaningful to the reader, especially complex issues, unless there is sufficient time to work on the story.

Results from this study suggested that Tennessee Legislative Press Corps members believe they are entrusted with a mission to figure out what government is doing and report it to the people. Also this study revealed that the interviewees believe that sometimes they do their job of news reporting very well, sometimes not well at all, and at other times they believe they are somewhere in the middle.

How Legislators' Feel About Journalists' Topic Choices

Q3. How do legislators feel about the choices journalists make in selecting topics to cover?

Interviews with members of the Tennessee General Assembly suggested that legislators believe the media are necessary in promoting the principles of democracy. However, the interviewees stated that the media fall short of informing and educating the public about policy issues and governmental actions. For example, the majority of legislators interviewed believed that journalists tend to choose topics that sell papers, sensationalize, entertain, and appeal to public sentiment. Also, this study indicated that legislators thought that editors have a direct influence as to what Press Corps reporters choose to cover.

Additionally, some legislators argued that reporters spend much of their time looking for topics about scandal and wrongdoing among governmental officials instead of reporting issues that inform and educate the public. Others concluded that the Press Corps reporters make a real effort to choose topics that inform, educate, and contribute to the principles of democracy.

Furthermore, legislators interviewed said that news reporting contributes to public cynicism toward government officials. They faulted the press for concentrating on topics that attack and criticize officials and emphasize muckraking. They stated that reporters should concentrate on important issues and spend less time scrutinizing the lives of elected officials. On the other hand, the Tennessee Legislative Press Corps members declared that it is their responsibility to report to the public the actions of their elected officials and to criticize government.

Also, interviews with legislators revealed that there is a shared belief that reporters' selection of topics to cover may result in proposed legislation, and may affect the outcome of legislation under consideration. For example, legislator interviews showed that extensive news coverage of the ethics issue may have influenced a public demand for ethics legislation. This demand resulted in reform of existing laws concerning gratuities that Tennessee lawmakers receive from interest groups and lobbyists.

CHAPTER VI

Discussion

This study indicates that the Tennessee Legislative Press Corps respondents view their role in educating and informing the public about policy issues and governmental actions as one of great importance. These journalists believe they have a responsibility to choose topics that promote the principles of democracy--topics that foster public debate and encourage citizen participation. Previous studies and information from scholars and other professionals reported in this study, indicate that journalism is not fulfilling its responsibility to educate the public on important governmental issues, and is not adequately promoting the principles of democracy. While much criticism can be found concerning the shortcomings of journalism, reporters of the Tennessee Legislative Press Corps interviewed for this study say that they conscientiously attempt to cover topics that impact the public. They also report that they view seriously their responsibility to inform and educate the public and to promote the principles of democracy.

Additionally, several implications can be deduced from the interviews. For instance, journalists indicate that they try to avoid influences such as personal bias and personal philosophy when selecting stories to cover. They report that when an issue surfaces about which they believe they cannot be objective, they pass the news story to a colleague. However, legislators share the belief that journalists lack objectivity. They argue that journalists should strive to present both sides of an issue and allow the public to form their own judgments about policy issues.

Also, there is indication that an adversarial relationship exists between government officials and reporters. Interviews with legislators indicate that the Press Corps looks for foibles in the lives and actions of the legislative members. Whereas, interviews with the Press Corps members indicate journalists believe the public has a right to know how their elected officials are performing in office. The legislators express a distrust of the media, stating, that many times the actual stories take statements out of context and a headline sometimes suggests content that was not intended. Furthermore, legislators fault the Press Corps for not being knowledgeable enough about the legislative process, and suggest that many issues that should be reported are neglected due to the inexperience of the reporters.

A strong belief exists among the Tennessee Legislative Press Corps members that the people have a right to know what their elected officials are doing in government. These journalists express a desire to choose topics that present facts in an understandable manner so that the public can be informed and become involved in the political system. They also state that they are interested in educating the public about the policy making process and promoting the principles of democracy.

Several areas of additional research may be suggested from this study. For example, this effort did not address the effect that the presence of lobbyists may have on topics the Press Corps members choose to cover, or the communication that journalists may have with lobbyists and special interests. It would also be worthwhile to compare the story selection criterion used by the Tennessee Legislative Press Corps with that utilized by reporters who cover legislative activities in other states. Furthermore, an effort should be made to determine what citizens believe about the topics legislative reporters choose to

cover, and as to whether or not these choices contribute to citizens' understanding of policy issues and the activities of government officials. Additionally, it would be useful to study the journalist's role as the unelected representative of the people in government. The average citizen cannot attend the making of public policy and therefore, the reporter may serve as the people's advocate.

In summary, this study indicates that information dissemination, impact of governmental actions on the public, complexity of issues, time constraints, issues that propel themselves to the forefront, and circulation area are factors that the Tennessee Legislative Press Corps interviewees consider when choosing topics to cover. These journalists believe that they have the responsibility to determine what government is doing and report it to the people and that sometimes they do this very well, sometimes not well at all, and at other times they believe they are somewhere in the middle. Furthermore, journalists interviewed for this study relate that informing and educating the public on policy issues and promoting the principles of democracy are a high priority.

Results from interviews with members of the Tennessee General Assembly indicate that journalism is necessary in a democratic society, but falls short of educating the public about policy issues and governmental actions. These interviewees argue that the Tennessee Legislative Press Corps members choose topics that sensationalize, entertain, sell papers, and appeal to public sentiment rather than choosing topics that educate and inform. This study also shows that respondents from the Tennessee General Assembly believe that journalists choose topics that concentrate on the personal lives of elected officials, produce stories about scandal, and promote cynicism toward public officials.

Others believe that the Press Corps members attempt to be objective, and inform and educate the public on policy issues. Finally, the majority of legislators interviewed agree that the topics journalists choose to cover can affect the outcome of pending legislation or cause new legislation to be introduced.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Questions For Members of Legislative Press Corps

1. What contributions should journalism make to the principles of democracy?
2. What criterion do you use in choosing topics to cover?
3. What are the benefits your readers receive from the stories you report?
4. What constraints do you experience in choosing topics to cover?
5. How do you feel about the choices you make as to the topics you report?

Questions For Members of The Tennessee General Assembly

1. What contributions should journalism make to the principles of democracy?
2. What do you think motivates journalists to choose the topics they cover?
3. What effect do the stories reported by journalists have on the legislative process?
4. What do you think the press should do differently?
5. How well does journalistic coverage serve the public good?

REFERENCES

REFERENCES

- Arvidson, C. (1996). Congress and media get a blueprint to build more informed citizenry. American Journalism Review, 18, S4-9.
- Auletta, K. (1994). On the presidency and the press: Lloyd Cutler tells Ken Auletta what's wrong with White House coverage. Columbia Journalism Review, 33, 42-46.
- Baker, R. (1996). Congress: Boom box and black box. Media Studies Journal, 10, 1-11.
- Bennett, W. (1992). White noise: The perils of mass mediated democracy. Communication Monographs, 58, 401-406.
- Berry J. (1989). The interest group society (4th ed.). New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Bogart, L. (1996). Media and democracy: Hand in hand. Current, 3-8.
- Bonner, R. (1993). The ones we miss. Nieman Reports, 47, 50-57.
- Borquez, J. (1993). In Spitzer, R. (Ed.). Media and public policy. Greenwood: Praeger.
- Carpini, M., Keeter, S., & Kennamer, D. (1994). Effects of the news media environment on citizens of state politics and government. Journalism Quarterly, 71, 443-454.
- Davidson, R. & Oleszek, W. (1994). Congress and its members (4th ed.). Washington, DC: C. Q. Press.
- Drew, J. (1993). Local government and the press: From the desk of a reporter. Public Management, 75, 8-11.
- Dye, T., Zeigler, H., & Lichter, R. (1992). American politics in the media age (4th ed.). Pacific Cove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing.
- Gans, H. (1979). Deciding what's news: A study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time. New York: Pantheon.
- Graber, D. (1993). Media impact on the status quo: What is the evidence? In Spitzer, R. (Ed.), Media and public policy. Westport: Praeger.

- Gurwitt, R. (1996). Comes the devolution. Columbia Journalism Review, 35, 52-55.
- Hess, S. (1996). News and news making. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- Howell, D. (1993). The four deadly sins of political reporters. Spectrum: The Journal of State Government, 66, 60-64.
- Kovach, B. (1993). The ones we miss. Nieman Reports, 47, 50-57.
- MacNeil, R. (1995). Regaining dignity. Media Studies Journal, 9, 103-111.
- Martin, L. (1981). Government and the news media. In Nimmo, D. & Sanders, K. (Eds.), Handbook of political communication. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Mintz, M. (1995). Stories the media miss. Washington Monthly, 27, 10-14.
- Moyers, B. (1994). Old news is good news. In Ripley, C. Jr. (Ed.), The media and the public. New York: The H. W. Wilson Company.
- Paletz, D., & Entman, R. (1981). Media, power, politics. New York: The Free Press.
- Ripley, C. (1994). The media and the public. New York: The H. W. Wilson Company.
- Roberts, G. (1996). Drowning in shallow waters. Columbia Journalism Review, 35, 55.
- Roshco, B. (1975). News making. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rosen, J. (1993). Beyond objectivity. Nieman Reports, 47, 48-54.
- Schudson, M. (1995). Creating public knowledge. Media Studies Journal, 9, 27-33.
- Severin, W., & Tankard, J., Jr. (1992). Communication theories: Origins, methods, and uses in the mass media (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.
- Spitzer, R. (1993). Media and public policy. Westport: Praeger.
- Swanson, D. (1992). The political media complex. Communication Monographs

59, 397-400.

Weaver, D., & Wilhoit, G. (1986). The American journalist: A portrait of U.S. news people and their work. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.