

AGENDA-BUILDING: MEASURING THE INFLUENCE OF THE  
CUMBERLAND COUNTY PLAYHOUSE'S PUBLIC RELATIONS DEPARTMENT  
ON THE CROSSVILLE CHRONICLE

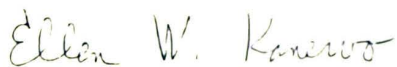
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JEFF WHITE



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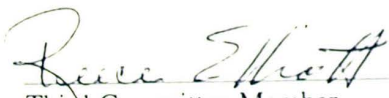


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Agenda-Building: Measuring the Influence of the Cumberland County Playhouse's  
Public Relations Department on the *Crossville Chronicle*

A Thesis

Presented to the  
Graduate and Research Council of  
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Jeff White  
November 1998



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## Abstract

This study investigated the agenda-building influence the public relations department of the Cumberland County Playhouse has on the *Crossville Chronicle*, the local newspaper in Crossville, Tennessee. This study examined the *Crossville Chronicle*'s coverage of Playhouse events, with the intent of identifying and measuring the agenda-building (source-to-media) relationship, from the public relations department of the Playhouse to the *Crossville Chronicle*. A content analysis was conducted, comparing information distributed by the public relations department to actual Playhouse coverage by the *Crossville Chronicle* over a period of six months. Beginning with the opening of the musical comedy *Nunsense* in October of 1996, through March 31, 1997, and the opening of both indoor stages in the 1997 season, 32 items have been published by the *Crossville Chronicle* covering the Playhouse. Of these items, 21 have come directly from the Playhouse public relations department. Of the 21 items published, 17 press releases were published verbatim with no editorial changes, and four photo releases were used. Evidence from this study indicates a definite influence of the Playhouse public relations department building the agenda of the *Crossville Chronicle*. A secondary set of research questions was also answered in an interview with Mike Moser, editor of the *Crossville Chronicle*. Moser's comments provided insight into his decision-making process regarding coverage of the Playhouse. Perhaps the most significant finding is the editor's view of the newspaper's role in the community, stating the newspaper has a vested interest in the community.

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# Chapter I

## Introduction

The phenomenon of agenda-setting and agenda-building in the mass media has been addressed quite extensively since Cohen (1963) first suggested “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” (p. 13)

In fact, before Cohen, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Walter Lippmann (1922) stated the media act as a mediator between “the world outside and the pictures in our heads.” (p. 3) And in 1972, political analyst Theodore White observed the following when examining presidential debates and elections: “The power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk and think about....” (p. 245)

In their analysis of the agenda-setting function of mass media, McCombs and Shaw (1972) produced evidence that the mass media have the ability to organize and present news of the world to the public, and, in effect, structure and organize the thinking on issues for their audience. They considered this influence of the mass media the most important effect of mass communication because of its ability to effect cognitive change among readers.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) further concluded editors play the crucial role in shaping the perception of social reality as they decide the daily distribution of information and news. Earlier research by David Manning White (1950) described a series of gates that news items pass through before meeting the printed page, with editors serving as the “gatekeepers.”

However, before the agenda can be set, it must be built by those who successfully pass information past the “gatekeeper.” This function, known as agenda-building, is the source-to-media relationship that will be examined here with the

Playhouse public relations department functioning as the source, and the *Crossville Chronicle* as the medium.

The first theorists of agenda-building were Roger Cobb and Charles Elder (1972) in their book, *Participation in American Politics: The Dynamics of Agenda-Building*. Later notable studies include the work of Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang (1981) in their examination of opinion data and news coverage of Watergate.

This study will examine how the editor, or gatekeeper, for the *Crossville Chronicle* reacts to the information distributed by the public relations department of the Cumberland County Playhouse. This editor must not only decide whether or not the Playhouse material will be used, but must make editing and placement decisions, as well as decide how long an item is newsworthy with regards to the frequency of coverage of related topics.

The *Crossville Chronicle* is published three times weekly, and is circulated in Crossville, Tennessee, and Cumberland County. The current paid circulation is 8,200, with a TMC issue distribution of 18,000 on Tuesdays. The TMC is the total market coverage issue distributed free, sans the "A" section. Perhaps typical for a small-town newspaper, the editor must cover a broad range of topics. In addition to breaking news, the editor covers a variety of subjects on a consistent basis, including such regular beats as police reports, court, school board, county and city council meetings.

This presents quite a challenge for the editor with a small staff. However, it simultaneously creates an opportunity for the public relations professional. Along those lines, Cutlip (1976) suggested the following: "An ever-increasing share of news content...is coming often unchanged from the government officer's typewriter. More and more of the governmental news reporting task is abandoned to the practitioner who supplies the information in professional ready-to-use packages." (p.15)

This study intends to demonstrate a similar phenomenon occurring at the

*Crossville Chronicle* with a share of news content regarding the Playhouse often printed unchanged from the public relations office.

The research team of McCombs and Shaw (1972) recognize several groups interested in shaping, or building, the media's agenda. In fact, they define public relations as a field in which the professional's goal is to shape the agenda from a particular point of view.

Although the public relations department at the Cumberland County Playhouse strives to secure regular coverage in several newspapers within the three surrounding metropolitan areas (Nashville, Knoxville, and Chattanooga), plus other regional media (radio, television), for the purpose of this study the local paper is the only medium examined.

There are two primary reasons for focusing on the local *Crossville Chronicle*, as opposed to comparing coverage with the dailies in Nashville, Knoxville, and Chattanooga. First, the dynamics of the small town newspaper are considerably different from those of a metropolitan daily. For example, the researcher had access to the editor of the *Crossville Chronicle* on a daily basis if needed. Phone calls were returned, personal visits were accepted. However, trying to call or visit the feature section editor of the dailies in Nashville, Knoxville, or Chattanooga could often be a challenge. Phone calls were accepted if deadline permitted; however, they were not always returned. And due to daily deadlines, personal visits were not so welcome. Second, the Playhouse and the *Crossville Chronicle* have a unique relationship, which the researcher will examine through the research questions and subsequent interview.

The frequency of the submissions from the Playhouse used by the *Crossville Chronicle* was measured in an effort to draw some conclusion about the ability of the Playhouse public relations office to present a consistent message about the institution of the Playhouse and its programs. The overarching hypothesis this study sought to test is



that a public relations practitioner has a strong impact on how his or her institution is portrayed in the local, small town, weekly newspaper.

The four hypotheses tested in this research through the content analysis of press releases and *Chronicle* stories are as follows:

1. Of all the press releases and photo-only releases submitted during the period of study, a majority (51%) will be published in whole or in part.
2. The majority (51%) of the press releases will be published verbatim, with no editorial changes.
3. The majority (51%) of the published articles will be accompanied by the photo submitted with the release.
4. The majority (51%) of the Playhouse-related coverage in the *Crossville Chronicle* will be the result of a press release from the Playhouse, rather than originating from the staff of the *Crossville Chronicle*.

The secondary set of research questions this study investigated through an in-depth interview with the *Crossville Chronicle* editor is as follows:

1. How does the editor see the role of the newspaper vis-a-vis community building and coverage of community activities?
2. The editor of the *Chronicle* is also on the board of directors at the Playhouse. How does this personal relationship affect his decision-making process regarding the Playhouse's coverage?
3. How does he feel about his newspaper's coverage of the Playhouse specifically, and how does he believe his readers feel about that coverage?
4. How aware is the editor of the influence of the Playhouse public relations department on his newspaper's reporting on the Playhouse?
5. Does he believe Playhouse coverage is better or worse than similar community organizations?

In this examination of the influence of the Playhouse public relations office on the *Crossville Chronicle*, in Crossville, Tennessee, evidence will show the office was successful at building the agenda for the *Crossville Chronicle*, and ultimately setting the agenda concerning the Cumberland County Playhouse. The interview will illuminate the process through which this agenda-building occurred.

### Definitions

Terms discussed in this research are defined as follows:

Agenda: “a list or outline of things to be considered or done; an underlying often ideological plan or program.” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 1996, p. 22)

Agenda-Building: Agenda-building is the process of how press, public and government agendas are formed, and ultimately how they influence each other. Simply stated, agenda builders set the agenda for agenda-setters. (Cobb and Elder, 1972, p. 38)

Agenda-Setting: Agenda-setting “focuses on the way that media ‘set an agenda’ by telling us what is important and what to think about though not necessarily what to think about it.” (Harris, 1989, p. 10)

Content Analysis: “Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.” (Berelson, 1952, p. 18).

According to Westley (1989):

“The key to understanding content analysis and performing it competently lies in understanding the meaning of objective, systematic, quantitative, and manifest content...Objectivity is achieved by having the categories of analysis defined so precisely that different persons can apply them to the same content and get the

same results...That it is objective means that the results depend upon the procedure and not the analyst.

“Systematic means, first, that a set procedure is applied in the same way to all the content being analyzed. Second, it means that categories are set up so that all relevant content is analyzed. Finally, it means that the analyses are designed to secure data relevant to a research question or hypothesis. Quantitative means simply the recording of numerical values or the frequencies with which the various defined types of content occur. Manifest content means the apparent content, which means that content must be coded as it appears rather than as the content analyst feels it is intended...The person who undertakes a content analysis study must deal with four methodological problems: selection of the unit of analysis, category construction, sampling of content, and reliability of coding.” (pp. 125-27)

Crossville Chronicle: Published since 1865. Current circulation is 8,200 for Wednesday and Friday editions (paid subscriptions), and 18,000 for the Tuesday total-market-coverage edition which includes both paid and free distribution to county residents outside the city limit.

Public Relations: As defined by Otis Baskin and Craig Aronoff (1988) in their text book *Public Relations: The Profession and the Practice*, “public relations is a management function that helps to define organizational objectives and philosophy and facilitate organizational change. Public relations practitioners communicate with all relevant internal and external publics in the effort to create consistency between organizational goals and societal expectations. Public relations practitioners develop, execute and evaluate organizational programs that promote the exchange of influence and understanding among an organization’s constituent parts and publics.” (p. 4)



There are many definitions for public relations. A recent, user-friendly definition offered by Julie A. Laitin (1998) in her lecture at Folio:Midwest was: “PR equals perception plus receptivity. Publicity depends on how well you understand and service the press.” (from notes taken by researcher at live lecture)

For the purpose of this study, the public relations professional is the source of information for and about the Cumberland County Playhouse, a non-profit, professional theater.

## Chapter II

### Review of Literature

With the hypotheses of Chapter 1 in mind, the following review of related literature of agenda-building and agenda-setting is in order.

Perhaps the most well-known and oft-quoted statement describing the phenomenon of agenda-setting is that of researcher Bernard Cohen (1963), who first suggested the press may not always be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling people what to think about. The majority of communication researchers are generally concerned with applications within the political realm, particularly the media's ability to shape the general public's policy priorities.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) concluded political reality is shaped by the choices editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters make concerning not only what gets in, but where it gets in. The same study produced evidence "in line with the conditions that must exist if agenda-setting by the mass media does occur." (p. 184) They believe readers not only learn about a particular issue, but assess significance to that issue from the amount of information in a story and its position in the publication or broadcast.

In their book *Agenda Setting*, Dearing and Rogers (1996) summarized the classic McCombs & Shaw study as follows:

"The term agenda-setting first appeared in an influential article by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972. These scholars at the University of North Carolina studied the role of the mass media in the 1968 presidential campaign in the university town of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. For their study, they selected 100 undecided voters because these voters were 'presumably those most open or susceptible to campaign information.' These respondents were personally interviewed in a 3-week period during September and

October 1968, just prior to the election. The voters' public agenda of campaign issues was measured by aggregating their responses to a survey question: 'What are you most concerned with these days? That is, regardless of what politicians say, what are the two or three main things that you think the government should concentrate on doing something about?' Five main campaign issues (foreign policy, law and order, fiscal policy, public welfare, and civil rights) were mentioned most frequently by the 100 undecided voters, thus measuring the public agenda. The media agenda was measured by counting the number of news articles, editorials, and broadcast stories in the nine mass media that served Chapel Hill. McCombs and Shaw found an almost perfect correlation between the rank order of (a) the five issues on the media agenda (measured by their content analysis of the media coverage of the election campaign) and (b) the same five issues on the public agenda (measured by their survey of the 100 undecided voters). For instance, foreign policy was ranked as the most important issue by the public, and this issue was given the most attention by the media in the period leading up to the election. McCombs and Shaw concluded from their analysis that the mass media "set" the agenda for the public. Presumably, the public agenda was important in the presidential election because it determined who one voted for, although McCombs and Shaw did not investigate any behavioral consequence of the public agenda. "What was the special contribution of the Chapel Hill study of agenda-setting?...McCombs and Shaw's (1972) contribution was in clearly laying out the agenda-setting hypothesis, in calling the media-public agenda relationship 'agenda-setting,' in suggesting a paradigm for further research, and in training many excellent students who went on to carry out agenda-setting research on their own." (pp. 6-7)



According to Lang and Lang (1981), editors and broadcasters accordingly shape their audiences' perceptions in choosing the news: "The perceptions people have of a larger universe, of things they cannot see for themselves...are rarely the result of direct observation and experience. They are, as Lippmann (1922) was among the first to point out, known only secondhand, derived mostly from mass media reports." (p. 148)

Lang and Lang (1981) say various formulations of agenda-setting have implied there is a distinction between what people think and what they think about, but they don't agree they are easily separable. They understand agenda-setting to be more of a process through which an issue develops. They argue "it remains disputable that individuals have different thresholds of sensitivity and not everyone is apt to respond to the same coverage the same way." (p. 450)

Behr and Iyengar (1985) suggest Walter Lippmann's ideas, originating as early as 1922, are the basis for researchers' arguments that the changes in the public agenda are often a result of changes in the media agenda.

Cook, Tyler, Goetz, Gordon, Protess, Leff and Molotch (1983) changed the focus from the impact of the agenda-setting function on the general public, and attempted to understand how the media help to shape policy agendas of decision makers.

Recent agenda-setting studies regarding presidential politics include Cohen's (1997) look at "presidential leadership and responsiveness to public opinion in the agenda-setting process." According to Cohen, "agenda-setting is often considered the initial stage of the policy-making process. During the agenda-setting process, problems are identified, converted into issues, and issues are prioritized." (p. 31)

The lines between differing conclusions of research in this area have sometimes been a bit blurred. McClure and Patterson (1976) claimed television news coverage had no impact on the audience's perceptions of issues, even though Behr and Iyengar (1985) concluded the public agenda is indeed affected by what television journalists and editors

choose to broadcast as news, whether or not the television is the primary source of the public's view.

And while only modest support for the theory of agenda-setting was found by Demers, Craff, Choi, and Pessin (1989), others, such as Sohn (1984) have examined independent issues and found refinements in the concept. Sohn looked at a particular paper's positive coverage of a new coal mine opening in a town, which supported the concept of agenda-setting.

In a study conducted by Brosius and Kepplinger (1990), analysis demonstrated that media coverage caused problem awareness of four prominent issues in 1986. As a result, this awareness caused media coverage on three of the four issues.

Baumgartner (1993) studied special interest groups and agenda-setting, in particular, the development of the environmental lobby through an analysis of the groups listed in the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, comparing changes in these interest groups and the related transformation of American politics.

Hill (1985) suggested there may be factors that strengthen agenda-setting effects. His analysis concluded effects are greater when viewers have some prior knowledge of a particular topic through print media.

Rule (1994) concluded news coverage tends to be highly effective in leading public opinion when stories lead or are prominently featured.

Regarding agenda-setting effects, Protess and McCombs (1991) stated: "Individuals who are most likely to demonstrate strong agenda-setting effects are highly interested in political news and are high users of the news media and interpersonal communication. Thus, individuals must be motivated to seek out information about political issues and often expose themselves to issue information for the news media to have strong agenda-setting influences on them." (p. 47)

Whereas agenda-setting may set the topic of discussion, agenda-building is the

method of influence leading to agenda-setting. Political scientists Roger Cobb and Charles Elder (1972) were among the first to emphasize the origin of issues covered by the media. Later important studies in this area include the work of Lang and Lang (1981).

As the majority of researchers in this area do, Cobb and Elder (1972) focused their study within the American political arena, addressing the function of agenda-building in their book, *Participation in American Politics: The Dynamics of Agenda-Building*. They posed such questions as “how are issues created, what are the determinants of the agenda, how is an agenda built...and who participates in it.” (p. 14)

Oscar Gandy (1982) also recognized the phenomenon of agenda-building as a process beyond agenda-setting. Gandy questioned who sets the agenda for the media, how it is set, and what impact it has on the distribution of power and values in society.

In this process of agenda-building, the focus on the origin of issues moves from the media’s choice of coverage, to how the press interacts with other institutions in society to create issues of public concern. Therefore, agenda-building is concerned with how issues originate, or a source-to-media relationship, as opposed to agenda-setting, which is concerned with a media-to-audience relationship.

Weaver and Elliott (1984) applied content analysis to city council minutes and newspaper coverage of the council for one year to compare the issue agendas of both institutions. On nearly one-third of the issues, mostly recreational and social, “the newspaper’s ranking differed substantially from the council’s, suggesting that some independent news judgements were made about the relative importance of these topics.” (p. 2) It was also noted that about 59% of all items contained in the council and committee minutes were reported in the local paper, “further supporting the active filtering role of the newspaper.” (p. 12)

Kanervo (1989) focused on the agenda-building function in her study of



community newspapers and town administrators. The research looked at the mayor's opinion of the community's newspaper role in building his or her own agenda, working under the assumption the press is more influential in building the public's agenda than it is at building the institutional agenda. Kanervo found that although city administrators believe the local newspaper is fairly powerful in determining public agenda but not their own, the data suggest that, among the mass media, the community newspaper may very well be the most influential in building the administrator's agendas.

Karp (1989) observed, "very few newspaper stories are the result of reporters digging through files, poring over documents, or interviewing experts, dissenters, or ordinary people. The overwhelming majority of stories are based on official sources." (p. 61)

Sigal (1973) analyzed 2,850 news stories that appeared in *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* between 1949 and 1969. He found nearly four-out-of-five of these stories to have involved official sources. In the political realm, these sources may include a particular representative, presidential aide, or other political insider.

Surely the agenda-building function occurs in areas of the media other than politics. It is the intent of this researcher to produce evidence of this agenda-building phenomenon taking place in the Playhouse-to-*Crossville Chronicle* relationship.

According to Lang and Lang (1981), the media do not operate in total autonomy from the political system. As with Watergate, the media's gradual saturation of news can be directly related to the political developments. Likewise, the *Crossville Chronicle* does not operate totally separate from the Playhouse public relations department with regards to coverage of the Playhouse.

As Lang and Lang characterized it, agenda-building is "a collective process with some degree of reciprocity." (p. 465) Their view of the Watergate ordeal and the media's role is that of a circular process, with media exposure, political interest, and events on



the elite level “feeding one another.”

In a summary of roles by each in the cycle, Lang and Lang (1981) said the “news media highlight some events, activities, groups, personalities, and so forth to make them stand out. Different kinds of issues require different amounts and kinds of coverage to gain attention. This common focus affects what people will think or talk about.” (p. 465)

They go on to say media play up or down aspects of situations, then link objects or events to secondary symbols. They also noted the media’s tendency to weave discrete events into a continuing story, in this case, often a political one. They also argue that a concern “to which political leaders are, or should be, paying attention is not yet an issue. Important as the media may be in focusing attention, neither awareness nor perceived importance makes an issue. However, once the above mentioned links are established, a topic may continue to be an issue even if other topics receive greater emphasis from the media.” (p. 466)

## Chapter III

### Methodology

A content analysis was conducted for this study to compare the press releases distributed by the Cumberland County Playhouse's public relations office with the actual coverage of the Playhouse (and its programming) by the *Crossville Chronicle*. The intent was to recognize and quantify evidence of agenda-building, from the public relations department of the Playhouse to the *Crossville Chronicle*.

As former Director of Marketing and Public Relations for the Playhouse, the researcher executed or administered all press releases issued by the theater. A calendar was maintained documenting the release date of all information.

The period of analysis began October 1, 1996, with the first release announcing the opening of the musical comedy *Nunsense*, and ended March 31, 1997, with the distribution of the release regarding the opening of the 1997 season.

This period was chosen to examine because all facets of Playhouse programming take place during this time. Press releases were issued publicizing theater productions in both indoor theaters of the Cumberland County Playhouse; the Dickens Christmas Feast, an annual fundraising dinner produced by the development and public relations departments; auditions; and the announcement of the 1997 season. Other news and feature stories were written and distributed as well during this period of analysis, including the findings of a Playhouse economic impact study conducted by Middle Tennessee State University and a feature story about the lifestyle of a young married couple who work on theater stages together around the country.

The *Crossville Chronicle* is published three times each week (Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday). During the period of analysis, 78 issues of the *Chronicle* were published (26 Tuesday, 26 Wednesday and 26 Friday editions). Although the editor only runs a page under the "Entertainment" heading on Friday where the majority of Playhouse releases can be found, all issues were considered in this study. And,

Playhouse coverage occurred on days other than Friday.

To test the four hypotheses in this research the researcher compared the press releases (and photo-only releases) submitted during the period of study, with stories based in whole or in part on those releases. He checked whether the press releases were published verbatim or with editorial changes. The researcher noted whether the published articles were accompanied by the photo submitted with the release. He also counted which of the Playhouse-related stories in the *Crossville Chronicle* were the result of a press release from the Playhouse and which originated from the staff of the *Crossville Chronicle*.

The units of analysis in the methodology were:

- release used verbatim, with photo
- release used verbatim, sans photo
- release used verbatim, no photo submitted
- release edited and used, with photo
- release edited and used, sans photo
- release edited and used, no photo submitted
- release not used
- photo-only release used
- photo-only release, not used
- Playhouse coverage not originating with the public relations department

The units of analysis lend themselves to reliability, since a direct comparison was made between the release from the Playhouse and the corresponding article in the *Crossville Chronicle*. This researcher was responsible for all coding in the analysis.

In addition to the quantitative comparison of press releases and photographs sent out by the Playhouse and run in the *Chronicle*, an in-depth interview was conducted with the editor of *Crossville Chronicle* to gain specific insight into this particular

agenda-building relationship.

To investigate the research questions posed in this study, the interview covered topics such as the editor's perception of the newspaper's role with regards to the community; how his personal relationships affect his decision-making process; his perception of his newspaper's coverage of the Playhouse and other non-profits; and his awareness of the agenda-building influence of the Playhouse.

The intent of this study was to measure the success of the Cumberland County Playhouse public relations office in building the agenda of the *Crossville Chronicle* and to discover the editor's views about that agenda.



## Chapter IV

### Results

A content analysis of 78 issues of the *Crossville Chronicle* was conducted over the six-month period of study to produce the following results. From October 1996 through March 1997, the public relations department of the Cumberland County Playhouse issued 25 press releases and photo-only releases to the *Crossville Chronicle*.

Of this sum, 21 were used in some form or fashion by the *Crossville Chronicle*. Two were actually used more than once, and only four of the 25 submissions were not used at all during the period of study. In addition, the content analysis yielded seven units generated by the staff of the *Crossville Chronicle*.

The first hypothesis stating “of all the press releases and photo-only releases submitted during the period of study, the majority will be published in whole or in part” was convincingly supported with the content analysis. Of the 25 submissions, 84% were used in either whole or in part, with only four releases not used at all during the period of study.

Part of the success of the Playhouse public relations department in shaping the portrayal of the Playhouse in the pages of the *Chronicle* is directly attributable to the workload of the editor and his staff. In a June 11, 1998, interview (see Appendix A), editor Mike Moser pointed out that he is “a short-sleeve editor.” He explained, “That means I roll up my sleeves and go out and do the same work that everybody else does.”

Moser described his typical week as follows:

“When I leave the house in the morning, I go by and pick up the police reports, everyday. Two days a week I also go by the sessions court and pick up the court news. I take assignment requests and hand them out to the staff or cover them myself. We have a department heads meeting once a week and staff meeting twice a week. This is just editorial staff, where we try to keep up with

what's going on and keep a handle on what needs to be covered and what does not. I have to do payroll for the editorial staff, keep up with story inches, story counts, who's doing what work. Right now I'm covering the county commission and all their sub-committees, school board and their sub-committees, the courts, and I also monitor the police scanner for what they call spot news, wrecks and fires and things that come up without notice, which you can't plan for. When that [spot news, or breaking news] happens, that just disrupts the whole chain. Then I paginate; we scan in our own negatives and our own film now, as opposed to the old PMT style. Of course I typeset." (Appendix A)

Moser also pointed out that the last University of Tennessee audit suggested the *Chronicle* had the smallest staff in the state of newspapers in their circulation size category.

The second hypothesis expanded on the first, stating "the majority of the press releases will be published verbatim, with no editorial changes." This was also supported, with 17 of 21 press releases (81%) used verbatim by the *Crossville Chronicle*. This figure does not include photo-only releases submitted.

In the interview *Chronicle* editor Mike Moser said he handles all Playhouse press releases himself and that he edits them. To clarify this apparent discrepancy between the results of the content analysis and Moser's comment, the researcher must point out that Moser was referring to the releases he is currently receiving from the Playhouse—not the releases he received from the researcher during the time of this study.

Moser said "We always re-write [press releases from the Playhouse]. We didn't use to when you did it [when the researcher/interviewer was the public relations director for the Playhouse]. But we have to re-write them now because if we didn't the most

important thing that would be happening would be the fact that they had a sponsor.” (Appendix A)

The third hypothesis of “the majority of the published articles will be accompanied by the photo submitted with the release” was supported with 82% of all accompanying photos of published articles used, or 14 of 17. This total (17) included releases-with-photos and photo-only releases.

This use of submitted photos was addressed in the interview. When asked how much photos helped in securing coverage, Moser responded: “A lot. If I—and I do this a lot—if I have to make a decision because of space where I must either run a story or a picture, I run the picture every time.” (Appendix A)

The fourth hypothesis predicted “the majority of the Playhouse-related coverage in the *Crossville Chronicle* will be the result of a press release from the Playhouse, rather than originating from the staff of the *Crossville Chronicle*.” This final hypothesis was supported with 78% of the Playhouse coverage originating with the theater’s public relations department.

During the period of study, the *Crossville Chronicle* ran 32 articles that included news about the Cumberland County Playhouse. Of this sum, 25 were the direct result of press releases submitted by the theater. However, seven articles were generated solely by the *Crossville Chronicle* staff, including critical reviews and columnists’ features about particular productions. The Playhouse also received coverage in four other news items generated by the *Crossville Chronicle* staff in which the organization was involved. These articles were also independent of information from the theater’s public relations department.

To gain further insight into this particular agenda-building relationship a secondary set of research questions was addressed in an in-depth interview with Mike Moser, editor of the *Crossville Chronicle*. The first question was how the editor



perceives the role of the newspaper vis-a-vis community building and coverage of community activities. Moser said he believed the *Chronicle* had “a vested interest” in the community. “We do a lot of home [town] promotion.” (Appendix A)

“We try to get everything in, as much as we can. What we try to do is to obviously promote our [local] things first, and then things you can drive to and drive back home in a day.” (Appendix A) Moser also revealed in the interview that the newspaper has two cameras that they loan out to service clubs and to schools, enabling those groups to take their own photos and submit their own stories. This not only demonstrates a willingness to cover local organizations, but it is a clear indication of the challenges of a newspaper with a small staff. Regarding the loaner cameras, Moser stated: “We couldn’t survive without that.” (Appendix A)

The second question concerned the editor’s decision-making process. The editor of the *Chronicle* is also on the board of directors at the Playhouse. How does this personal relationship affect his decision-making process regarding the Playhouse’s coverage?

“In honesty, sometimes I’m harder on the Playhouse than I would be if there wasn’t any relationship at all. A lot of professional journalists, especially in the larger fields, would consider it a conflict of interests for me to be associated with the Playhouse and also be in the authority of deciding what runs on the entertainment page. But when you’re in the weekly field, and you live in the community where you work, you can’t avoid conflicts. You’re in a conflict everyday when you go in the office. Your neighbor or the people you go to church with or if you belong to a service club or whatever, you know, that’s just part of it.” (Appendix A)

The third question asked how the editor feels about his newspaper’s coverage of the Playhouse specifically, and how does he believe his readers feel about that coverage? Moser stated: “I think the public perception is it’s too much. In honesty, I



don't feel bad about the coverage we give the Playhouse because of what the Playhouse gives to the community in tourism tax dollars. The way I look at the Playhouse is, it's an industry that brings in a lot of people who spend a lot of money here and because of that it keeps our property taxes low." (Appendix A)

When asked if the tax revenue for local economy constituted newsworthiness, Moser offered this explanation: "I think so. Tourism is our number-one industry, so obviously it's the biggest thing we do. And I think we should put our best effort forward to [support] the hand that feeds, so to speak." (Appendix A)

The fourth question dealt with the editor's awareness of the influence of the Playhouse public relations department on his newspaper's reporting on the Playhouse? The editor is fully aware of the Playhouse public relations department's agenda-building success with the *Chronicle*, indicating in the interview that all Playhouse releases filter through him: "Yes, I handle them all, and I edit them." (Appendix A) The editor clarified that he did not edit the releases submitted by the researcher in this study.

The fifth question asked if the editor believed other similar community organizations received comparable coverage to the Playhouse. Moser replied in the affirmative: "Oh yeah. Rotary clubs, chamber of commerce, public schools." (Appendix A)

Further along this line, Moser was asked if he believed the Playhouse receives more coverage than it deserves in relation to its importance in the community. Moser stated: "Not really. I try real hard to be careful of that because of my relationship with the Playhouse [board member]. I feel like people watch to see how much coverage they get." (Appendix A)

How does this affect his objectivity? "In honesty, sometimes I'm harder on the Playhouse than I would be if there wasn't any relationship at all." (Appendix A) Moser explained that he now edits sponsors from the cutlines submitted by the Playhouse;

however, he admitted he is more lenient with the Playhouse on deadlines.

This content analysis suggests the public relations department of the Cumberland County Playhouse is indeed effective at building the agenda of the *Crossville Chronicle* where the non-profit theater is concerned. And the interview provides insight into the specific media relationship between the Playhouse and the *Chronicle* editor. It suggests the editor is fully aware of the influence the Playhouse public relations efforts have on his newspaper. However, he maintains his role of gatekeeper.

## Chapter V

### Analysis and Conclusions

The content analysis produced evidence of a consistent agenda-building relationship existing between the public relations office of the Cumberland County Playhouse and the *Crossville Chronicle* during the six-month time frame of the study.

Of all the press releases and photo-only releases submitted to the *Chronicle* during the period of study, 84% were published in whole or in part.

The first hypothesis stated “of all the press releases and photo-only releases submitted during the period of study, more than half (51%) will be published in whole or in part.” A total of 21 of the 25 submissions were used.

With this evidence in mind, the Playhouse public relations department should strive to provide a steady stream of information to the *Chronicle*. The support of this hypothesis is assurance the *Crossville Chronicle* will consistently run Playhouse releases, often verbatim, thus providing an open gate that would allow the theater to not only build the *Crossville Chronicle*’s agenda, but in turn set the public agenda regarding the theater.

The second hypothesis was also supported, with a majority (51%) of the press releases being published verbatim, with no editorial changes. In fact, 81% of the releases, not including photo-only releases, were published verbatim. Again, this presents an incredible opportunity for the Playhouse to communicate all aspects of the non-profit organization via the filter of the *Crossville Chronicle*. In addition to the obvious promotion of the theater’s programming, the medium is available to publicize fundraising efforts, goodwill news stories of cooperation with other area non-profits, the economic impact of the theater on the city and county budgets, the educational benefits of the schoolday matinees and the opportunities for volunteers.

The third hypothesis was supported with the majority of the published articles accompanied by the photo submitted. In fact, 82% of the releases met this criteria.

Most journalists and graphic designers agree art or white space will help pull the reader's eye, and in effect, increase the chances of the story being read. Again, this presents a unique opportunity for the Playhouse to strengthen its presence in the local paper, as well as control the visual image associated with the story. Were a reporter to attempt to take an available-light photograph during a performance or dress rehearsal, chances are the photo would be of poor quality due to the theater lighting. Subjects would blur with movement, and the depth of field would be limited. The public relations office has the luxury of setting up photos, balancing the lights, and posing the actors to capture the scene as close to reality as possible while still being a setup photo opportunity. This allows the photographer the chance to capture the scene of his or her choice, plus control the quality of the photograph so that the final print is complimentary of the director's and designer's intentions regarding the scenery, costuming and lighting effects.

All of these factors contribute to the theater being able to project a professional image. Although a non-profit organization, the productions are professional, with actors, scenic artists, lighting designers, and technicians hired from across the United States.

The fourth hypothesis stated the majority (51%) of the Playhouse-related coverage in the *Chronicle* will be the result of a press release from the Playhouse, rather than originating from the staff of the *Crossville Chronicle*. This hypothesis was supported, with 78% of the Playhouse coverage originating from the public relations office. The researcher was pleasantly surprised at the coverage generated by the *Crossville Chronicle* staff. There were a total of nine stories generated by three writers during the period of study. Also, the Playhouse was incorporated into two additional pieces by two other writers (though the articles were not primarily about the theater).

Of the nine original pieces, five were performance reviews by Roger Robbenholt (3) and Jan Boston Sellers (2). One was a season preview written by Sellers, and two



were features by Cheryl Duncan on the Playhouse's involvement with the local library's reading program.

The interview with *Chronicle* editor Mike Moser provided insight into the unique media relationship between the Playhouse and the *Crossville Chronicle*. The first question asked how the editor sees the role of the newspaper vis-a-vis community building and coverage of community activities. It is evident that the editor is community-oriented in his decision-making process, stating "we have a vested interest in our community." (Appendix A)

The Playhouse should appeal to this community consciousness by increasing the community awareness in their materials. The unique history of the theater, the community involvement of literally hundreds of volunteers, the economic impact on the local economy, and the outlet the Playhouse provides for local performing and visual artists should all be recurring themes in Playhouse materials.

The second question concerned the editor's personal relationship with the Playhouse. The editor is also on the board of the directors at the Playhouse, as well as a volunteer actor. How does this personal relationship affect his decision-making process regarding the Playhouse's coverage?

Moser believes he successfully balances the relationship, stating "In honesty, sometimes I'm harder on the Playhouse than I would be if there wasn't any relationship at all." Moser did concede he was perhaps more lenient with the Playhouse regarding deadlines, and he elaborated on the unique dynamics of a small community newspaper.

"A lot of professional journalists, especially in the larger fields, would consider it a conflict of interests for me to be associated with the Playhouse and also be in the authority of deciding what runs on the entertainment page. But when you're in the weekly field, and you live in the community where you work, you can't

avoid conflicts. You're in a conflict everyday when you go in the office. Your neighbor or the people you go to church with or if you belong to a service club or whatever, you know, that's just part of it." (Appendix A)

This provides further knowledge of the challenges the community newspaper editor faces. With this knowledge, the public relations practitioner is armed with the professional considerations one must employ when serving the local editor.

The third question asked the editor for his perception of his newspaper's coverage of the Playhouse specifically, and how he believes his readers feel about that coverage? Moser stated "I think the public perception is it's [the coverage] too much. In honesty, I don't feel bad about the coverage we give the Playhouse because of what the Playhouse gives to the community in tourism tax dollars."

A followup question asked if that fact [economic impact of tax revenue] made the Playhouse newsworthy. Moser replied "I think so. Tourism is our number one industry, so obviously it's the biggest thing we do."

With this understanding of what the local editor deems newsworthy, the Playhouse should take note to communicate the economic impact of the theater on the local economy. Perhaps a yearly release with updated figures, and timely seasonal releases that highlight the number of tourists attending the theater would be appropriate.

The fourth question sought to understand how aware the editor is of the influence of the Playhouse public relations department on his newspaper's reporting on the Playhouse. It is evident he is fully aware, disclosing the fact that all Playhouse releases filter through him. Moser stated: "Yes, I handle them all, and I edit them." (Appendix A)

The editor's awareness should lend itself to a complimentary relationship with the Playhouse's public relations efforts. The Playhouse now knows the editor himself is

making the coverage decisions and what he considers newsworthy. This should create the ideal environment for the public relations professional to maximize the agenda-building effect.

The final research question asked the editor how Playhouse coverage compares with similar community organizations. Moser confirmed the idea that the *Chronicle* gives the same treatment or coverage to other area non-profits and/or arts groups: “Oh yeah. Rotary clubs, chamber of commerce, public schools. We do a lot of home [town] promotion.” (Appendix A)

This further supports the idea that the local editor is consciously making decisions with the community in mind. Again, the public relations professional should consider this when preparing materials, striving to create a sense of community awareness and therefore, newsworthiness, to the *Crossville Chronicle*.

Overall, the interview deepens the understanding of the local media. The more public relations practitioners are aware of the challenges of the media they are serving, the more effectively they can provide information and hopefully secure coverage.

In conclusion, this study supports the works of key agenda-building theorists such as the Langs, McComb and Shaw, et. al. Applying White’s (1950) analogy of the gatekeeper, it would appear there is an open-gate policy at the *Crossville Chronicle* as far as the Cumberland County Playhouse releases are concerned.

The unique history of the Cumberland County Playhouse and its organizational standing in the community could conceivably contribute to this open-gate policy. The theater is a source of community pride, started by literally hundreds of community volunteers in 1963. Today the theater attracts an annual audience of over 90,000 to a community with a population of 8,000 and a county population of 35,000.

Although the majority of the actors are young professionals from across the country, several area volunteer, semi- and professional actors participate in the 10+



annual productions. And, there are over 200 regular volunteers that usher, assist with bulk mailings, build scenery, construct costumes, etc.

The theater performs schoolday matinees for over 20,000 school children each year, and there are 175 students enrolled in the dance program. There are entire families involved on a regular basis, and on occasion, three generations involved in a single production together. These facts, coupled with the theater's consistent regional and national recognition, could contribute to perceived validity/newsworthiness to the editor of the *Crossville Chronicle*, as well as other publications.

A number of questions remain regarding the Playhouse and its relationship with the *Crossville Chronicle*. A natural progression from this study would be to make a quantitative comparison of the *Crossville Chronicle*'s coverage of other area non-profit organizations, in particular, arts organizations. Also, is there any correlation between the amount of Playhouse coverage in the *Crossville Chronicle* and the success of each individual production at the theater? If not, should coverage in the *Chronicle* remain a priority? Is the audience aware of the coverage in the *Crossville Chronicle*?

Where does the Playhouse audience get their information about the theater, and how does that information compare to coverage in the Playhouse?

At the very least, the public relations practitioner should take two suggestions from this and similar studies: one, always be aware of open-gate opportunities and capitalize on them to maximize the message to the intended audience. This is simply doing one's job. Second, strive to quantify and qualify the communications distributed. This measures one's job performance, something that could only be good PR for the practitioner with management.



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## Appendix A

### Interview with Mike Moser, Editor, *Crossville Chronicle*

All source-to-media relationships are unique, therefore, an interview with the editor of the *Crossville Chronicle* was conducted in an effort to gain a more complete understanding of the relationship between the newspaper and the Cumberland County Playhouse.

The editor was made aware of the intent of the study before the interview, and he offered the following insight into the editor's job of "gatekeeping," the challenges of working on an under-staffed weekly newspaper, and his personal and professional relationship with the Playhouse.

Q: How long have you been the editor of the *Crossville Chronicle*, and what is the *Chronicle's* current circulation?

A: I've been the editor since February 20, 1984. Our current circulation is 8,200, with a TMC distribution is 18,000. [TMC is "Total Market Coverage," free distribution of the B-section to county residents] We publish three times each week, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday.

Q: Tell me about your responsibilities as editor of the *Crossville Chronicle*.

A: They call me a short-sleeve editor. That means I roll up my sleeves and go out and do the same work that everybody else does.

When I leave the house in the morning, I go by and pick up the police reports, everyday. Two days a week I also go by the sessions court and pick up the court news. I take assignment requests and hand them out to the staff or cover them myself. We have a "department heads" meeting once a week and staff meeting twice a week. This is just editorial staff, where we try to keep up with what's



going on and keep a handle on what needs to be covered and what does not. I have to do payroll for the editorial staff, keep up with story inches, story counts, who's doing what work. Right now I'm covering the county commission and all their sub-committees; school board and their sub-committees; the courts and I also monitor the police scanner for what they call "spot news," wrecks and fires and things that come up without notice, which you can't plan for. When that [spot news, or breaking news] happens, that just disrupts the whole chain. Then I paginate; we scan in our own negatives and our own film now, as opposed to the old PMT style. Of course I typeset. I do not copy edit. I do no copy editing, which is probably the one thing I should do.

Q: Tell me about the size of your staff. In your opinion, is the size of the *Crossville Chronicle* staff typical for papers with your circulation.

A: The University of Tennessee audits newspapers about once every four years. The last time they came through they said for our size [circulation] we had the smallest staff in the state.

I have an assistant editor who does the bulk of the pagination and the design work. He does all the art work, the graphics, that kind of thing. When we have our [editorial] meeting I will tell him what news stories are in the folder and tell him basically what I want put where, and what has priority and what can wait.

Cheryl, who is the Lifestyles Editor, is responsible for feature writing and all the soft news, weddings and engagements, that kind of thing. Ed Grief, sports; Margaret does all the copy editing, editorial and advertising, and is our obituary editor; and I have one freelancer named Jim Young. He works out of his home.

He covers city commission and city council for us. He pretty much covers all those meetings. When he can't cover those meetings, then I have to cover it for him. And I've got one high school intern.

Q: How much of your content is generated by non-paid, freelance articles—not including press releases?

A: One thing we do is we have two cameras that we loan out to the service clubs and to the schools. A lot of those folks will take their own pictures and submit the stuff. We couldn't survive without that. In fact, South Elementary does all of their public relations for us. They have a PTO president who does it. Crab Orchard does the same thing.

Q: Does the publisher attend both meetings (department heads and editorial)?

A: She is only in the department head meeting. Those can be painful. Chase rabbits. I leave those meetings thinking, 'what was I there for?'

Q: Even though the publisher does not attend the editorial meetings, what sort of influence does she have on the content?

A: In honesty, her pet projects. Church musical, rotary club, golf tournament. We put out a golf tab [tabloid] this week that we didn't know anything about last week at this time. I said tab, it was broad sheet, 12 pages. We found out the day before it was to be to the press.

Q: How do you view the *Chronicle's* coverage of the Playhouse? Too much, too little?

A: I think the public perception is it's too much. In honesty, I don't feel bad about the coverage we give the Playhouse because of what the Playhouse gives to the community in tourism tax dollars. The way I look at the Playhouse is, it's an industry that brings in a lot of people who spend a lot of money here and because of that it keeps our property taxes low.

Q: Does that make it newsworthy?

A: I think so. Tourism is our number one industry, so obviously it's the biggest thing we do. And I think we should put our best effort forward to [support] the hand that feeds, so to speak. The one thing that I think we do an overkill on is their sponsors. We had [a recent release from the Playhouse] a nine-line, one sentence, first paragraph that listed every sponsor in every show that's going on right now. That amazes me. If the most important thing that's going on at the Playhouse is the fact that Dave Kirk is sponsoring a dance show, that doesn't speak well to what's going on there. The dance show and the glitz, that's what's important, that's what people want to see. They don't care who sponsors what. Now it's just all-out prostitution. They send us a whole press release that's nothing but 'we [Playhouse] gave Stonehaus a copy of the playbill because they sponsored so-and-so.' If there's something we run too much of, I think that's [typical of] what it is.

Q: Do you think the *Chronicle* gives the same treatment or coverage to other area non-profits and/or arts groups?

A: Oh yeah. Rotary clubs, chamber of commerce, public schools. We do a lot of home [town] promotion.

Q: Do you see increasing competition for space, in particular, for Friday's Entertainment page?

A: There's more going on now than there's ever been. You know we've got the new theater in town. The Tennessee Valley Theater, which is doing "Smoke" [a play entitled *Smoke on the Mountain* that has been playing at the Cumberland County Playhouse off-and-on since 1994].

There is a lot of competition, because there is so much out there. We try to get everything in, as much as we can. You know Big South Fork has got a lot of things going on there, Historic Rugby, so...we fill up the page and always have stuff left over every week.

What we try to do is to obviously promote our [local] things first, and then things you can drive to and drive back home in a day. We don't promote regional stuff beyond a day trip, southeast U.S., etc.

Q: Do you believe the Playhouse gets more coverage than it deserves in relation to its importance in the community?

A: Not really. I try real hard to be careful of that, because of my relationship with the Playhouse. I feel like people watch to see how much coverage they get. I'll



give you an example: [the show] *Charley's Aunt* has been running for three months now, and we've probably promoted them maybe, in a picture feature or story feature, once a month during the course of that three months. In the other three [entertainment] pages that month it was never mentioned.

Openings are always big, but we do it for everyone else, too. [coverage of show openings] We do it for Tennessee Valley Theater. We don't review any theater. [the *Chronicle* staff does not do reviews; all reviews are by freelance writers]

Q: Do all Playhouse releases filter through you?

A: Yes, I handle them all, and I edit them.

Q: Why do you choose to run things verbatim?

A: The only thing I run verbatim are the reviews [submitted by Rogger Robbenholt]. We always re-write [press releases from the Playhouse]. We didn't use to when you did it [when the interviewer was the public relations director for the Playhouse]. But we have to re-write them now because if we didn't the most important thing that would be happening would be the fact that they had a sponsor.

Q: What roles do photos/art work that you get help in securing coverage?

A: A lot. If I—and I do this a lot—if I have to make a decision because of space where I must either run story or a picture, I run the picture every time.

Q: Describe the relationship between the Playhouse and the *Crossville Chronicle*. Since you have both a personal and a professional relationship with the

Playhouse (occasional volunteer actor and current board member), how tough is it to be objective?

A: It's a very good relationship. I've had some conversations with Jim [Crabtree, Playhouse Producing Director] about how the paper makes decisions [regarding coverage], and after that he seemed to understand.

In honesty, sometimes I'm harder on the Playhouse than I would be if there wasn't any relationship at all. And then I'll turn right around, in another case...like I look harder at the sponsorship thing for example, they put it in the first paragraph and I bury it or don't mention it at all. There's a lot of pictures and cutlines changed, drastically. But then, on the other hand, they can come in on Thursday at 11 o'clock [deadline] and bring in a picture of a special event that's happening that weekend, and chances are it will get in, where with somebody else it probably wouldn't. So that's where I'm more lenient with them, on things like deadlines.

Q: Do you get any feedback from anyone about the amount of coverage the Playhouse receives, for example, from major advertisers who are not corporate sponsors of Playhouse and perhaps don't like seeing the publicity Playhouse corporate sponsors receive in the editorial copy.

A: I've never had that problem. Now, we've had internal discussions regarding sponsorships. My personal position is that we shouldn't publish them. The publisher, however, says it doesn't hurt and that it brings goodwill, and a lot of the sponsors are our advertisers anyway and there's nothing wrong with stroking them every once in a while. She's the boss so she wins.

Q: Is there anything you would like to add in conclusion?

A: A lot of professional journalists, especially in the larger fields, would consider it a conflict of interests for me to be associated with the Playhouse and also be in the authority of deciding what runs on the entertainment page. But when you're in the weekly field, and you live in the community where you work, you can't avoid conflicts. You're in a conflict everyday when you go in the office. Your neighbor or the people you go to church with or if you belong to a service club or whatever, you know, that's just part of it.

The folks that work in the ivory towers in Nashville that never leave the building and do all of their reporting over the telephone don't understand that. To me, we're practicing real journalism, because we have a vested interest in our community, and we're out in the trenches. We have to look people in the eye every time we make a decision. They don't. They have a guard [at the front door]. You can't even get in the front door. There's not a person in Cumberland County who can't walk in the door and see Mike Moser.