The advocacy continuum: Towards a theory of advocacy in journalism

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Abstract

The goal of *advocacy* is commonly used to distinguish journalism from public relations practice. At the same time, there is a strong tradition of advocacy reporting in journalism that weakens this point of distinction. In an attempt to reconcile this apparent contradiction, this article draws on the concept of a continuum to explain extremes in journalism practice and 'contingency theory' in public relations, which posits a range of variables can influence the degree of advocacy adopted by public relations practitioners when dealing with an organization's target publics. This article contends that the degree and type of advocacy present in journalism is also dependent on a range of macro, organizational, journalism production, source and personal factors. It argues that each work of journalism falls along a continuum of advocacy, ranging from *subtle* displays at one end to *overt* at the other, where some stories might be hard to distinguish from public relations.

In the journalism and public relations (PR) literature, the goal of *advocacy* is regularly used to help conceptualize the difference between the two communications' roles. For instance, Lynette Sheridan Burns (2013) said that the argument often put forward to separate PR practitioners from journalists is that 'their text is a form of advocacy, intended to persuade rather than inform' (p. 19). Similarly, Spence et al. (2011) argued

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that the central purpose of journalism is to 'inform' in the public interest, whereas the primary goal of PR is 'advocacy' (p. 113) in the client's interest. Again, Kevin Moloney (2006) singled out 'advocacy for interests as opposed to scrutiny of interests' (p. 162) as the difference between PR and journalism. However, as will be shown, a range of macro, organizational, journalistic production, source and personal factors can influence the degree of advocacy present in works of journalism and arguably serve to undermine the use of 'advocacy' as one of the key conceptual differences between journalism and PR practice.

Defining advocacy in journalism

There is no fixed definition of 'advocacy journalism'. The term appears in a breadth of scholarship and is applied in a wide range of contexts. At its core, advocacy is about pleading another's cause or arguing in support of an idea, event or a person. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines it as 'verbal support or argument for a cause, policy, etc. The function of an advocate' (OED, 1997: 20). However, a review of related literature shows that support or argument in favour of a cause or policy through a work of journalism can occur in a number of ways and for different reasons. The most obvious examples include *overt* displays of advocacy and partisanship by opinion writers and commentators, as well as by 'advocacy', 'alternative' and 'activist' journalists who intentionally push a particular issue. However, the literature also reveals that elements of advocacy ('support or argument for a cause') can also appear in more *subtle* ways as a by-product of the selective nature of journalism, which leads to some voices and issues being included, ignored or promoted more strongly than others. In working towards a theory of continuum to explain the degree of advocacy present in individual works of journalism, this article includes discussion of both *overt* displays of intentional 'advocacy journalism' and the inclusion of more *subtle* elements of advocacy in a story as a by-product of journalistic production, macro, organizational and source factors.

Approach

The impetus for this article grew out of qualitative research into the movement of journalists between reporting and political PR. Inductive qualitative analysis (Bryman and Burgess, 1994; Thomas, 2006) of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 21 practitioners who had worked in both journalism and political media advising revealed a perception that the oppositional portrayal of journalism and political PR on the basis of *advocacy* and *informing* was a false dichotomy (Fisher, 2013, 2014). Rather than having antithetical goals, several of the interviewees perceived the two roles as sharing the goals of informing and advocacy. Based on their experience in both journalism and political PR, they did not see either the goal of advocacy as belonging solely to the role of media advising, or the goal of informing belonging solely to journalism. Instead, they said providing accurate information was central to both media advising and journalism and that some reporters and news organizations advocate on behalf of minority voices or push particular interests through their reporting. While these reflections could be interpreted as defensive on the part of the interviewees, these practitioner insights are echoed in the

literature. For instance, the perception of shared goals and values between journalism and PR (Kopenhaver, 1985; Pieczka, 2006; Sallot et al., 1998; Sinaga and Callison, 2008); the presence of 'spin' in reporting (Burns, 2013: 11; De Vreese, 2005: 59; Downes, 1998: 281; Mahoney, 2013: 130) and the role of advocacy and partisanship in journalism (Janowitz, 1975; Levendusky, 2013; Waisbord, 2008).

The practitioner perception of a false dichotomy between advocacy and informing pointed to an alternative conception of a continuum between the two extremes, rather than simple oppositional binaries. Support for this approach can be found in other studies of journalism and PR practices which also use the concept of a continuum to help explain a range of professional practices and perspectives that fall between two apparent extremes, in particular, the work of Harcup (2005), Janowitz (1975) and Cancel et al. (1997). Harcup (2005) adopted the concept of a continuum to describe the cross-over between 'alternative' and mainstream journalism based on research into the experience of practitioners who had worked in the two areas. Harcup (2005) said the data suggested 'the existence of what might be termed a continuum, with people, ideas and practices moving along this continuum, in both directions' between alternative and traditional journalism (p. 370). Rather than a binary presentation of the two practices, Harcup (2005) argued that the concept of a continuum provided a better way of representing the ability of journalists to do both. In 1975, Morris Janowitz, used the concept of a continuum to illustrate where the majority of reporters fell between the perceived-to-be oppositional models of 'gatekeeper' and 'advocate' journalism. In his view, the 'gatekeeper orientation emphasized the search for objectivity and the sharp separation of reporting fact from disseminating opinion', whereas the advocate reporter 'must participate in the advocacy process. He must be an advocate for those who are denied powerful spokesmen' (Janowitz, 1975: 618–619). Janowitz (1975) argued that social factors, such as the age, education and career experience of the reporter, helped determine the degree to which a journalist adopted the model of advocate or gatekeeper. He concluded that 'the bulk of the profession hold "moderate" views and only a small minority are polarized at each end of the continuum' (Janowitz, 1975: 621).

In PR, Cancel et al. (1997, 1999) also used the concept of a continuum to explain the varying degrees of accommodation and advocacy adopted by PR practitioners in dealing an organization's target publics. In contrast to the limited number of social factors identified in Janowitz (1975), Cancel et al.'s (1997) revised theory of contingency included 78 variables that had a potential impact on the level of advocacy adopted by a PR practitioner. In the article 'It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations', the authors argued the relationship with a client and its target public was dynamic and should be seen as part of a 'continuum from pure accommodation to pure advocacy' of a target public's interests. Simply put, at one end of the advocacy/accommodation continuum, the PR client is willing to completely accommodate the interests of its target publics by integrating 'one's self interest with the interest of the other party' (Cancel et al., 1997: 48), and at the other end of the continuum, the PR client rejects the interests of the target public and purely advocates for the organization's interests. To demonstrate the fluidity of the approach an organization might take, the authors conducted a review of the relevant literature and developed a list of 78 organizational, relational and external influences that could affect the level of advocacy and accommodation

adopted by PR practitioners on behalf of their clients as the context of events changed. They included factors such as the structure and environment of an organization, the external political and regulatory environment, technology, threats of litigation, liberal versus conservative political values of management, perceptions of the target public, congruence of beliefs and so on. Informed by Cancel et al.'s (1997) approach, an examination of literature relevant to the issue of advocacy in journalism has been undertaken to identify factors that can have an impact on the degree of advocacy present in works of journalism. The list compiled in this article is by no means conclusive. Instead, it is intended as a first step towards developing a theory of continuum to explain the varying presence of advocacy in journalism.

Literature review

The issue of advocacy in journalism appears in a range of literature beyond that clearly labelled 'advocacy journalism'. Discussions of *overt* forms of advocacy can be found in scholarship about partisanship in journalism; interpretive journalism; peace journalism; 'muckraking', alternative and activist journalism; and conflict of interest in journalism. In addition, literature dealing with the production of news and the selective nature of decision making in journalism is relevant to the presence of more *subtle* elements of advocacy in a story or news bulletin that occur through the promotion of some voices and issues over others. Given the breadth of the areas connected to the discussion, only a small selection of texts will be discussed here.

'Advocacy journalism'

The term 'advocacy journalism' is ill-defined and has come to encompass a broad church of subjective forms of reporting that promote social issues and causes, such as 'muckraking', 'crusading', 'alternative', 'activist', 'peace journalism', 'civic' advocacy journalism and 'interpretive' journalism. Two prominent texts on these overt forms of advocacy journalism have been produced by Morris Janowitz (1975) and Silvio Waisbord (2008). As mentioned in the introduction, Janowitz (1975) clearly outlined the conflict between the journalistic norm of objectivity and the practice of advocacy journalism, which he argued would damage journalism's professional standing and undermine its credibility. As part of his analysis, Janowitz (1975) discussed a range of social factors that could influence where a journalist might position themselves along a continuum from 'advocate' to 'gatekeeper'. In contrast, Silvio Waisbord's (2008) examination of the development of advocacy journalism around the world made a distinction between the traditional 'journalist as advocate' model of reporting in which journalists express their own political and personal interests, and the rise of 'civic' advocacy journalism, in which groups use the news media as a vehicle to mobilize public opinion and achieve social change. In doing so, Waisbord (2008) identified a range of macro-economic and political factors that can influence the presence of 'civic' advocacy journalism from country to country, such as the level of democracy and social activism. In countries where the news media are dependent on government and finances of individuals, Waisbord (2008) said it was 'unthinkable that journalism is anything *but* advocacy journalism' (p. 374, orig. italics).

'Peace journalism' can be included in the overarching category of 'advocacy journalism'. Articles written by Thomas Hanitzsch (2007) and Wilhelm Kempf (2007) about 'peace journalism' go right to the heart of the issue identified in this article. That being, the presence of advocacy in journalism can blur the distinction between journalism and PR, and thereby weaken the use of 'advocacy' as the central point of differentiation between the two roles. Because 'peace journalism' combines journalism with the goal of peace, Kempf (2007) argued that a conflict arises for reporters who can all 'too easily become recruits for the propaganda war … and a peace journalism that crosses the border to propaganda does not deserve to bear the name of journalism' (p. 2). In an attempt to define that border, Hanitzsch (2007) developed a taxonomy to locate peace journalism in relation to advertising, PR, journalism and entertainment. In his analysis, he argued 'the interventionist mode of peace journalism … is situated closely to public relations and may occasionally cross the line to PR when journalists start to actively engage in conflict resolution' (p. 4). In his concluding comments, Hanitzsch (2007) said that a new niche of 'peace PR' (p. 7) might better describe the work of some peace journalists. Although some proponents of the genre reject the framing of peace journalism as 'peace advocacy' (Galtung and Lynch, 2010: 17), the described set of aims for peace journalism – such as being 'solution focussed', giving voice to the 'voiceless' and focusing on the invisible human effects of violence – ensure preference is given to those perspectives. This is in contrast to mainstream 'war journalism' which is described as being focussed on conflict, victory, the visible impacts of war and elite perspectives (Keeble et al., 2010: 2). In doing so, peace journalism's mission is to target particular types of issues, stories, angles and voices over others and thereby give non-mainstream perspectives an opportunity to present their views.

'Muckraking' and 'crusading' journalism also fall under the banner of 'advocacy journalism'. Serrin and Serrin's (2002) *Muckraking: the journalism that changed America* documented an ongoing tradition of advocacy journalism in the United States, which has led to significant social and political reforms. Judith Serrin and William Serrin (2002: xxi) argued that the strength of muckraker journalism lay in the fact that the reporters discarded the disguise of objectivity and followed their own agendas. Unlike 'muckraking', 'alternative' and 'activist' journalism is often produced outside of the mainstream media because the activists feel the mainstream media represent their issues poorly and unfairly (Atton, 2012; Forde, 2011; Wall, 2003). Based on an historical overview of alternative media, Forde (2011) said one of the characteristics that distinguished alternative journalists from mainstream journalists was 'belonging to the campaign or movement for which they write or broadcast' (p. 53). However, Forde (2011) stressed that does not mean that all alternative media comes from amateur activists. On the contrary, Forde (2011) argued that alternative journalism is also produced by professionally trained reporters 'often in the form of advocacy journalism' (p. 54).

'Interpretive journalism' also falls under the banner of 'advocacy journalism'. Like the latter, 'interpretive journalism' is also a broad term with ill-defined boundaries (Salgado and Strömbäck, 2011), but roughly encompasses opinion, analysis and commentary journalism where the reporter leads the agenda instead of the source. A perceived rise in interpretive journalism in the place of news reporting has raised concerns about a blurring between opinion and straight news, particular in politics, making it more

difficult for citizens to tell the difference between fact and opinion (Johnston and Graham, 2013; McNair, 2000). In response to this concern, Salgado and Strömbäck (2011) proposed seven variables to be used in quantitative analyses to determine the degree of interpretation present in a story. One of those variables included identifying the format of the story, such as hard or straight news, commentary, opinion, news analysis or feature, and whether that was clearly signalled to the reader. Another variable asked whether the journalist had injected overt commentary into his or her story. Both of these factors are useful in discerning the degree of advocacy present in a story.

Partisanship

Discussion of partisanship is also relevant to the issue of advocacy in journalism. Up until the late 19th century, political partisanship played a significant role in journalism in the United States as newspaper proprietors used their publications as vehicles for political campaigning and influence. At the same time, Silvio Waisbord (2008) explained, social advocacy in journalism also began to emerge promoting issues such as women's suffrage, the rights of workers and 'turn-of-the-century muckrakers who criticized political corruption and business practices' (p. 372). However, following the commercialization of the press in the 20th century and the rise of new professional journalistic norm of 'objectivity', partisanship became less prominent (Bedingfield, 2013; Schudson, 2003; Waisbord, 2008). At its core, the ideal of objectivity requires the journalist to 'be a neutral and detached recorder of "reality" producing a fact-based, reliable account of events for the reader' (McQuail, 2013: 210). After the First World War in the United States, Michael Schudson (2003) argued the 'objectivity' norm was eagerly adopted by journalists to 'disaffiliate themselves from the public relations specialists and propagandists who suddenly surrounded them' (p. 83), and it did not take long for this new ideal to become the 'chief occupational value of American journalism' (Schudson, 2001: 149). Despite the commitment to objectivity in the United States, Waisbord (2008) said 'advocacy journalism' flourished in the alternative media in the 1960s and 1970s and has more recently experienced a resurgence 'in mainstream news organisations with clear right wing editorial sympathies, as well as progressive publications that continue the tradition of alternative and radical news' (p. 373). Levendusky (2013) said this can be seen in the contrasting ideological perspectives offered to the American public via the cable networks, FOX News and MSNBC, with 'Fox News a right-wing outlet, and MSNBC, a left-wing one' (p. 11). He argued that the presence of strong oppositional partisan news organizations allows people to consume 'ideologically congenial media that matches their partisan outlook' (Levendusky, 2013: 4) and in doing so is polarizing the audience as consumers increasingly seek information that supports their political worldview. In contrast to the United States, journalistic 'objectivity' was not embraced with the same fervour in Western Europe, where the presence of partisanship and advocacy in the media has been seen as less problematic (Waisbord, 2008). However, in the United States and Australia where the objectivity norm was readily adopted, the debate over the appropriate role of objectivity in journalism – and concomitantly the appropriate role of advocacy – continues among practitioners and academics (Keller, 2013; Markson, 2014; Post, 2015; Schafer, 2013; Taibbi, 2013).

Personal factors

In addition to the influence that a proprietor's partisanship might have on the level of advocacy in a story, the literature also identifies a journalist's personal partisan interests as a factor. Donsbach and Patterson's (1996) five nation study found that a journalist's political beliefs can also have an impact on his or her news decisions. As they go about their work, a reporter's 'partisan predispositions affect the choices they make, from the stories they select to the headlines they write … it flows from the way they are predisposed to see the political world' (Donsbach and Patterson, 1996: 466). Their research revealed that a journalist's partisanship had a 'modest impact' in all areas of news, but was more pronounced in newspaper reporters than broadcast and more prominent in news organizations that were openly partisan. Whether the reporter adhered to the professional norm of objectivity or not, Donsbach and Patterson said evidence of 'hidden bias' was detectable in the news decisions of reporters. In a similar vein, a study conducted 20 years earlier by Starck and Soloski (1977) concluded that a journalist's conception of the role of journalism and his or her predisposition towards the story subject were indicators of the degree of impartiality present in their work. In their study, Starck and Soloski said reporters who conceived their role as involving high participation in the presentation of an issue tended to produce stories that were less impartial than reporters who saw their role as involving low participation. The potential impact of a reporter's partisanship and predisposition towards a story is also discussed in ethics literature to do with conflict of interest and bias in journalism. Borden and Pritchard (2001: 74) explained that a conflict of interest in journalism occurs when a reporter's judgment and performance is influenced by personal interests outside of their primary obligation to provide the public with reliable information on which it makes decisions. Those personal conflicting interests can include financial interests, such as share holdings, but they can also include loyalties, such as to an employer or a source, or a political party or other organization. Although different, conflicts of interest can also result in expressions of bias in a journalist's reporting, not just political bias or partisanship as discussed above, but by favouring issues, people and events as found by Donsbach and Patterson (1996).

Journalistic production

In addition to overt acts of intentional 'advocacy journalism' in which the reporter, proprietor or editor consciously promote an issue, more subtle or 'hidden' elements of advocacy can also appear as a result of the intrinsically selective norms, routines and processes of journalistic production. As Sheridan Burns (2013) detailed in *Understanding Journalism*, journalism is a process of decision making that requires the reporter to make choices about what story to pursue, who to talk to, what angle to take and how to package it all together. Much of that selectivity stems from a range of technical, production constraints and journalistic routines that result in the inclusion, exclusion and emphasis of particular issues and perspectives over others. Gaye Tuchman (1978) examined the selective nature of journalistic production in *Making News, A Study in the Construction of Reality*, which documented the processes of news creation and how they influenced the way stories were framed. Tuchman (1978) described news as a window on the world,

the view through which was determined by the shape of the frame around it and the perspective from which the window was seen. Tuchman examined organizational influences of news work on the framing of stories that resulted in the inclusion of some stories and voices over others. Robert Entman (1993) described the framing process as 'selecting some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (p. 52). In doing so, the reporter not only facilitates the advocacy of sources and issues, but also engages in the process of advocacy by promoting certain elements through selective framing. Entman (2007) described this in terms of framing biases, including 'content bias' when one side is 'favoured' rather than 'equivalent treatment', and 'decision making bias' which refers to the 'motivations and mindsets of journalists who allegedly produce biased content' (p. 163). In addition, Boudana (2016) points to 'gatekeeper bias', 'statement bias' and 'coverage bias' as described by D'Alessio and Allen (2000). 'Gatekeeper bias' refers to the selections editors and reporters make about which stories will and won't be covered. 'Coverage bias' relates to the amount of coverage given to different voices and 'statement bias' refers to whether the coverage is favourable or unfavourable.

Central to the selection of stories and framing is the journalistic concept of news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Hall, 1973; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001, 2009; Schudson, 2003; Tiffen, 1989). News values help determine the salience or newsworthiness of a story and form a 'system of criteria which are used to make decisions about the inclusion and exclusion of material' (Palmer, 2000: 45, in Harcup and O'Neill, 2009: 161–162). Although widely referred to by educators and scholars, there is no definitive or fixed list of news values. They change over time and are dependent on the target audience and the medium. In choosing stories, editors are attempting to reflect the interests and concerns of the audience. Depending on the target demographic, certain stories are going to be given more prominence or ignored providing some voices and issues greater opportunities for advocacy than others. Depending on the media platform, news values will also vary. For instance, in video or television journalism, 'visuals dominate' the story selection process (Harcup and O'Neill, 2009: 165; Tiffen, 1989: 24). Brooke Gladstone (2011) calls this 'visual bias' (p. 65) in broadcasting, where stories with strong pictures will be promoted over stories that might be important, but are visually dull. Each of these selective decisions involved in the journalistic production process influence which issues and voices are promoted and ignored.

There are a range of other elements of journalistic production that also have an impact on the degree of advocacy in a story. In, *News & Power*, Rodney Tiffen (1989) focused on the impact that organizational imperatives and news gathering processes have on the stories and voices heard in the media. Two key factors he identified were deadlines and space (Tiffen, 1989: 3). Deadlines, Tiffen explained, shape which voices and stories are heard by only allowing material to be published that can be gathered in the time permitted. For instance, a story might not include a balancing perspective because the source did not respond before the publication deadline. Available space, he said, also has an impact on what voices and issues are heard. Limited space means some stories will be published instead of others and thereby give some issues and voices greater exposure than others. In a digital environment, the pressure of deadlines has only increased the

demand for more stories across more media platforms. Reich and Godler (2014: 613) argued that being stuck on the 'hamsterwheel' (Starkman, 2010) of constant journalism production has only served to increase journalists' reliance on PR, not only as an 'information subsidy' (Gandy, 1982) but 'primarily as a time subsidy'. In the pursuit of meeting increasingly frequent deadlines, Phillips (2012) argued that journalists 'prioritize known and therefore "safe" organizations' (p. 95) and thereby favour certain voices over others.

As mentioned above, story formats also influence the degree of advocacy present in an act of journalism because formats 'actively shape content' (Tiffen, 1989: 64). For instance, an opinion piece by its very nature is going to include the subjective opinion of the writer advocating his or her perspective. Whereas, a hard news story will contain the most interesting and important information known about the event at the time. To give another example, in radio news the format of a *copy and grab* story means only one voice is heard in the audio grab, whereas a radio story format known as a *wrap* attempts to include a balance of voices and overview of the story. By its very nature, the format of a *copy and grab* means only one voice will be heard per story advocating a position, even if other contextual information is included. The type of language used in a story can also colour the way an issue is presented. For instance, Boudana (2016) argues that the type of adjectives and verbs used to describe an issue or a person's behaviour can influence who the audience sympathizes with:

> The journalist's assignment of praise and blame lies in the nature of the deeds attributed to the actors and the connotations of the words used to refer to those deeds. (p. 9)

Logistical considerations also determine who and what issues get to be advocated in a story. Until the development of digital portable technologies, distance and technology have often meant that some voices were excluded, or that a story was not covered at all, particularly in remote areas. Finally, the cost of a story can also influence which events and issues will and will not be covered by a news organization and often the cheapest story will prevail (Allern, 2002).

Source influences

The influence of sources is one of the key factors in determining the level of advocacy in a story. The simple act of including a source in a story introduces an element of advocacy into it. Not only does the use of news sources lead 'toward a particular news agenda that either favours or excludes some issues over others' (Berkowitz, 2009: 102), but the selective nature of the editing process engaged in by reporters, such as which comment to include, what facts to include and how they are combined, can also result in one perspective being advocated more strongly than another. To illustrate that, Tewksbury et al. (2000) made a distinction between news frames (news telling and straight information formats) and advocate frames (explanations and arguments intended to persuade). This is important because it points directly to the unavoidable inclusion of elements of advocacy within a piece of journalism. The role of sources in shaping the presentation of a story has been widely examined in the literature. One of the consistent findings has been

the reliance of mainstream reporters on institutional sources, such as people in authority, to the exclusion of minority voices (Berkowitz, 2009; Ericson et al., 1989; Sigal, 1973; Tiffen, 1989). Another focus of research has been on the growing influence of PR on reporting and a corresponding loss of journalistic independence (Bacon and Pavey, 2010; Davis, 2002; Furlan, 2009; Johnston, 2013; Macnamara, 2012; McNair, 2004, 2006; Moloney, 2006; Phillips, 2012). One form of journalism where this is prevalent is in the reporting of medical news 'which can be partly attributed to reporters' lack of training in the medical/scientific area, which encourages a reliance on expert sources' (Furlan, 2009: 61). The greater the specialist knowledge of the reporter, the greater scrutiny he or she can apply to the information provided because 'their experience helps inoculate them against manipulation by sources' (Tiffen, 1989: 30). However, reporters with a dedicated round can also fall victim to 'beat parochialism' and be 'prone to advocacy' when there is no demand for alternative perspectives from the audience or employer (Tambini, 2010; Tiffen, 1989: 45). Other factors include the diversity of sources available on a given a topic, that is, whether there is only one source, such as the police in crime reporting, and whether the publicity goals of the source mean they want to give access to the media or not (Tiffen, 1989: 37). Geographic location can also play a big role in the visibility of an advocacy group in the news. Results of a study recently published in this journal by Kim and McCluskey (2015) found that advocacy groups based in the US capital of Washington D.C. had a much higher presence in the news than those in outlying areas. Their study found that

> journalists do not merely latch onto organizational resources as important, but instead weigh 'availability', 'national importance', 'national impact on policy discussions', 'nationally important and interesting events', and 'political legitimacy' in assessing newsworthiness. (Kim and McCluskey, 2015: 805)

The two researchers also noted that the strategy adopted by the advocacy group to garner media interest will have an impact on its success. Events, like a public rally, are likely to be more successful in receiving media attention than issues, and groups using colourful and persuasive language are also likely to attract more coverage (Kim and McCluskey, 2015). Other source factors include the level of trust between reporter and source and the rules of engagement agreed upon by the reporter and source (Davis, 2009; Fisher, 2014; Mancini, 1993; Van Dalen et al., 2011). Competition with other news organizations will also influence how a story develops and what angles and voices are included. Rather than introduce greater diversity in coverage, paying heed to what other news organizations are doing can also lead to increased conformity (Tiffen, 1989: 60).

Summary of factors identified in the literature

Macro-factors

1. Political climate;
2. Economic climate;
3. Social climate.

Organizational factors

4. Partisanship of the proprietor;
5. Commercial interests of the proprietor;
6. Financial resources of the journalism organization;
7. Editorial orientation of the journalism organization – public interest journalism/ independent media/alternative or activist/tabloid/broadsheet/public broadcaster;
8. Type of media platform: Video, TV, newspaper, online, audio, social media.

Journalistic production factors

9. Story format: that is, opinion and commentary writing, hard news, feature, TV news or current affairs, and so on;
10. Story selection: choosing what is or is not a story;
11. Story angle;
12. Information selection – what to include or exclude;
13. Selection of sources – who to include or exclude;
14. Strength of comments selected for inclusion in the story by the reporter (advocate frames);
15. Language used by the reporter in a story;
16. Audience interests/demographic;
17. Cost of the story;
18. Deadline constraints;
19. Location constraints;
20. Staffing constraints;
21. Medium specific constraints and demands: for example, the dominance of pictures for TV/video;
22. Strength of pictures and sound used – whether emotive or neutral;
23. Space constraints: that is, length of TV or radio programme, size of the 'news hole' in a newspaper or magazine;
24. Competition with other journalism organizations.

Source influences

25. Location/availability of the source;
26. Legitimacy of the source;
27. News salience – the issue being advocated and its level of importance;
28. Diversity/monopoly of sources;
29. No challenge to source perspective from audience or employer;
30. Strategy and goals of the advocacy group – do they want to be interviewed by the media or not?
31. Strength and resources of the source;
32. Level of trust between reporter and source;
33. Arrangement with source – that is, an exclusive story in exchange for no scrutiny.

Personal factors

34. Age of the reporter;
35. Education of the reporter;
36. Journalism career experience of the reporter;
37. Beliefs and values of the reporter;
38. Political leanings/partisanship of the reporter;
39. Personal support for a particular issue;
40. Reporter's adoption of the 'objectivity' norm/or 'gatekeeper' model;
41. Reporter's knowledge of the topic he/she is reporting on – thereby increasing or decreasing source dependency.

Discussion and conclusion

As mentioned earlier in this article, the factors identified in the reviewed literature (above) that might have an impact on the presence of advocacy in journalism are not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it is intended as a first step towards developing a theory of continuum to explain the varying degrees of advocacy present in works of journalism. Informed by the work of Cancel et al. (1997, 1999) and their revision of 'contingency theory', this article has identified an initial 41 macro, organizational, journalistic production, source and personal factors from the reviewed literature that can have an influence on the presence of advocacy in journalism. What those factors demonstrate is the many ways in which elements of advocacy can arguably permeate a story. Those factors range from overt and intentional displays of 'advocacy journalism' on the part of the reporter or proprietor, through to unintentional and/or subtle elements of advocacy resulting from the selective processes of journalism production.

Whether intended by the reporter or not, the news decisions he or she makes may result in certain stories, voices and perspectives being included or excluded and thereby given a greater or lesser opportunity for advocacy than others within a story. As the OED (1997) says, advocacy is the provision of 'verbal support or argument for a cause or policy' (p. 20) and a reporter provides a vehicle for that support or argument through the selective process of creating stories. Even unwittingly, the simple inclusion of a comment or perspective from a source by the reporter may inject a degree of advocacy to a story. This stems from the very nature of the reporter–source relationship which relies on sources to advocate their perspective through the media to the public. In return, reporters seek out sources who will strongly and clearly advocate a position in order to make the story as engaging as possible for the public. The stronger and more passionately the sources advocate, the stronger the story. Beyond the influences of the source lie a range of other contextual factors. At a macro-level, the political and economic environment helps determine whether media organizations operate with autonomy or become the vehicle for partisan political interests. At the micro-level, the personal biases and beliefs of the reporter have an impact on the story selection and framing process. At the organizational level, the commercial interests, partisan interests, editorial orientation and resources of the media organization can also have an impact with deadline pressures, space, cost and logistics ultimately determining if and how a story is covered and which voices will be included.

When each of these potential influences from the literature is considered, it becomes clear that elements of advocacy are present in all works of journalism, whether intentional or not. The question cannot be about whether advocacy is present in journalism, but to the degree of its presence. Depending on the wide range of macro, organizational, journalism production, source and personal factors, a story might contain subtle elements of advocacy or it might be a vehicle for an overt display of advocacy and difficult to distinguish from PR. In acknowledgement of this diversity, this article argues that every work of journalism – from strident opinion or activist reporting at one end to straight news reporting at the other – falls along a continuum of advocacy from 'overt' to 'subtle'. In doing so, the concept of a continuum provides a flexible framework to explain the varying presence of advocacy in journalism by accommodating the constantly changing contextual influences that can influence journalism production and the diversity of the individual practitioners engaged in that process.

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