

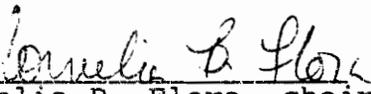
**THE FUNNIES ARE A SERIOUS BUSINESS:
HOW LOCAL NEWSPAPER EDITORS MAKE DECISIONS
CONCERNING DIVERSE AND CONTROVERSIAL COMIC STRIPS**

by
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(ABSTRACT)

Media theorists have identified five models explaining media content: reflection, media routines, personal characteristics, extrinsic forces and manipulation. This study looks at diversity and controversy in newspaper comic strips to test the models that 1) media content is determined by personal characteristics of the decision maker; and 2) media content is determined by forces extrinsic to the decision maker. It was found that in the majority of cases the personal characteristics of the newspaper editor were more important in determining which diverse and controversial comic strips he/she will publish. However, it was found that no single model completely explains how editors make decisions concerning controversial and diverse material, but instead a

variety of decision making models, including reflection, media routines, personal characteristics, and extrinsic forces, influence editor's decision making.

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CHAPTER ONE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Because people rely on media such as radio, television and newspapers to gain information, it is important to understand how the content of these media is determined. In their studies on news programs, Herbert Gans (1979) and Todd Gitlin (1980) identified five factors that may potentially influence media content. First, media content mirrors society reflecting events with little or no distortion. Second, media content is a result of the routines and work habits of the decision maker. Third, the content of media is determined by personal characteristics of the decision maker such as his/her demographic characteristics and his/her attitudes and beliefs.

Fourth, media content is the result of forces extrinsic to the decision maker -- institutional forces, the audience and economic forces. The last model asserts that people in power utilize media content to manipulate the audience.

The purpose of this study was to test the relative influence of two of these models, personal characteristics of the decision maker and forces extrinsic to the decision maker, in determining the content of a specific form of media -- comic strips in community newspapers. Instead it was found that although one of these two models may dominate an editor's perceptions of their decision making process, other models such as reflection and media routines also influence the editor's decision making concerning diverse and controversial comic strips.

Newspapers were chosen because they are oriented to a geographically defined and limited audience. Therefore community newspapers have a smaller and more homogenous audience than other forms of media such as radio and television.

Diversity and controversy were chosen as forms of media content, because many scholars believe they are essential to a community newspaper. According to Tichenor (1980), regardless of their size American communities feel they are losing control over their own future. Flora and Flora (1990)

found that in communities where controversy is covered in the newspaper, the people are "prepared to mobilize to control their own destinies" (p. 204). These communities accept controversy as normal, and the local newspaper readily includes controversial items. "Since conflict is a central component in community life and social change" (Tichenor 1980:17), these communities are able to adapt and change in order to survive.

Tichenor (1980) also recognized diversity as an essential component of the community newspaper. Information in the newspaper is generated and disseminated as a result of joint activity of newspaper professionals, such as the editor, and members of diverse groups within the community that wish to have their interests present in the newspaper. When diversity appears within a community, it should also appear in the newspaper with material that "appeals singly and in combination to different groups" (Tichenor 1980:15).

Previous research (See Tuchman 1973; Tichenor 1980) on newspaper content focussed primarily on only "hard" news items. This study will expand research on newspaper content by looking at an entertainment item -- comic strips. Comic strips are a unique newspaper item, because along with columnists they are one of the only forms of content, other than horoscopes and puzzles, whose themes remain unchanged

from day to day. Regular news items change daily according to what is happening in the community, and the topic of columns can also change daily. Even other entertainment items such as *Ann Landers* and *Miss Manners* change their subject matter daily. The main characters and themes in comic strips rarely change. This means questions regarding diversity and controversy can be asked about a comic strip in general rather than for a specific day's strip.

Comic strips are also one of the most popular features in a newspaper. According to Inge (1990:xi), comic strips are "part of the reading habits of more than one hundred million people." Surveys indicate that, except for the front page, the comic page is the most widely read page of the newspaper (White and Abel 1963; Inge 1990). The *Washington Post* estimates that 73 percent of its readers read at least one comic strip every day (Jones 1991).

Interviews were conducted with four editors of local newspapers in Virginia to test which of the two sets of factors -- intrinsic or extrinsic -- the editors perceived to have the most relative influence in determining the content of comic strips. Included in the interviews were questions concerning the editor's decisions on whether or not to include "diverse" or "controversial" comic strips. Diverse comic strips are defined as those that include ethnic and racial

minorities and/or women and men in non-traditional roles. Controversial comic strips are defined as those which include political messages, or have racist¹ and/or sexist² themes or portrayals. It is hoped that understanding how an editor makes decisions about these two types of comic strips will provide further insight into how decisions are made about comic strips in particular and media content in general.

¹Racism is defined as the inferior or negative treatment of a group of persons based on the physical characteristics associated with their racial or ethnic group.

²Sexism is defined as the inferior or negative treatment of a group of persons based on characteristics associated with their biological sex.

CHAPTER TWO

DETERMINATION OF MEDIA CONTENT

2.1 Determination of Media Content

As societies continue to grow, informal face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication is no longer sufficient to keep a person informed. People rely on media such as radio, television and newspapers to gain information. Therefore, it is important to understand what determines the content of these media messages.

There is support for several models explaining what may potentially influence media content: 1) content reflects reality with little or no distortion; 2) content is determined by the routines of the decision maker; 3) characteristics intrinsic to the decision maker such as his/her attitudes and

beliefs determines content; 4) forces extrinsic (specifically the institutional structure, the audience, and economic forces) to the decision maker determine media content; and 5) "content is a function of ideological positions and a tool of the status quo" (Shoemaker 1987:2). Most of the research has found support for only one of these models and has not attempted to test the models against each other or in combination with each other.

2.1.1 Reflection

The reflection view of media asserts that content "mirrors" reality, and the decision makers are "neutral gatherers and transmitters of information" (Shoemaker 1987:5). Persons producing and distributing media simply coordinate news and information and transmit them to the audience for their consumption. There is no distortion of the "facts" despite the various channels the information must pass through before reaching the audience. The result is "that media content provides an accurate and representative portrait of the world" (Shoemaker 1987:6). Gitlin (1980) found that many journalists feel that they are impartial reporters and no biases are present when reporting information.

Revisions of the reflection view suggests that media

content "provides a fair representation of reality with minimal or no distortion" (Shoemaker 1987:6). This allows for the omission of facts and interpretation by journalists and editors, but it does not allow for the distortion of facts.

Both Borman (1978) and Scanlon, Liuko and Morton (1978) found support for the revised reflection view of media. Borman looked at articles covering science topics and found that overall there was accurate coverage of the topics, although she found that important pieces of information were omitted. She felt this was due to the prescribed length of the article and space constraints. Scanlon *et al.* (1978) looked at media coverage of crisis events. They found the general impression of the events to be accurate, but there were several mistakes in simple factual information such as the names and ages of the persons involved. They blamed these distortions in information on the faulty memory of the reporter or the reporter making his/her own interpretations to fill out a story when the factual information was not available.

2.1.2 Media Routine

The media routine view asserts that content is a result of the established "routinized" work process of the decision

maker. The way information is gathered, organized and transmitted determines what information is passed on to the audience. Media routines may include deadlines, quotas on specific types of information, availability of sources, and timing.

Tuchman (1973) studied an independent television station affiliated with a major network and a daily morning newspaper with a circulation level of 250,000. She found that several work routines influenced which news stories were presented to the public. First is the timing of news stories. "Hard news" stories require quicker investigation, because they quickly become obsolete. Because of the urgency of hard news, other news stories can be pushed aside and never reported. "Soft news" such as human interest stories do not have a deadline and can be reported at any time. News programs and newspapers appear in a set format, so to be published news stories must fit this format. The news story must arrive before the deadline, or it will not be printed or aired. Also, the reporter may have too much information on a news item to fit the space allotted in the newspaper or news program. The reporter must cut down the information to fit the space available.

2.1.3 Personal Characteristics

The third view suggests that media content is determined by characteristics of the individual, such as demographic characteristics and personal attitudes and beliefs. There is no correlation assumed between these two factors. Although it may not be sociological to assume that attitudes and beliefs are personally determined, this is the approach that previous researchers have taken.

In terms of demographic characteristics, it has been found that women will write/ publish items pertaining to women (Farley 1978), and minorities will write/ publish items that pertain to minorities (Martindale 1985). It is unclear if this is because they are assigned to cover these areas or if they chose to cover them. Stone and Mazza (1977) found that the amount of local news a publisher prints is related to the amount of time she/he has lived in a community.

Personal attitudes and beliefs such as racism appear to influence media content. Rainville and McCormick (1977) found that announcers described white and African American football players differently even when several other characteristics were matched for the two groups. Their study did not include any measure of the announcers race or their attitudes toward African Americans, so they were unable to determine why the

announcers described the two groups differently.

Although research shows a correlation between personal attitudes and beliefs and media content, these personal characteristics are only assumed to influence decision makers to include certain content in the media. Research has not shown a direct causal order linkage between attitudes and content. (See Drew 1975; Rainville and McCormick 1977; Starck and Soloski 1977)

2.1.4 Extrinsic Forces

The next model determining media content maintains that forces extrinsic to the decision maker, such as the institutional structure, the audience, and economic forces, affect his/her decision making. Institutional forces are other individuals, in the power structure of the institution in which the decision maker works, besides the decision maker that can exert control over media content.

The audience influences media content in at least two ways. First is the demographic characteristics of the audience, such as the proportion of minorities. The decision maker may include content appealing to specific groups based strictly on their presence in the community. Second, the audience can influence media content through letting the

decision maker know what they like/ dislike or want/do not want in terms of content. This is done through reader surveys or direct contact with the decision maker either in person, by phone, or by mail.

Economic forces influence decision making by determining what content the decision maker can afford to include or not include. Although the decision maker may not base his/her decisions strictly on what is affordable, costs may determine whether or not the person can actually include the content he/she has chosen. Another economic force is the editor's fear of offending or losing advertisers.

Flora's (1989) study of Latin American fotonovelas found several extrinsic forces influenced content. By demanding expanded textbook production, the state encouraged the printing industry to expand its capabilities. Through state subsidized loans and favorable exchange rates, smaller publishers were able to obtain the equipment which could be used for fotonovela production in addition to other print products. It soon became economical to print the fotonovelas locally. State policies which subsidized paper costs, as well as developments of new inks and faster presses, helped increase production of all periodicals -- including fotonovelas -- that could be produced. As all of this happened, the content of fotonovelas became increasingly

heterogeneous, and different titles, each appealing to a different type of audience, appeared.

2.1.5 Manipulation

Last is the view that media content is a tool of people in powerful positions to manipulate and exert social control over the audience. This model of media content asserts that the ideology of those in power is inserted into media content. Thus the powerless receive messages that reinforce the status quo, and they accept these messages as appropriate or true. The owners of media have a "vested interest in seeing the status quo continue, because they are part of the U.S. power structure" (Shoemaker 1987:19).

A study which analyzed manipulation by the mass media is Dorfman and Mattelart's (1975) study of Disney comic books distributed in Latin America. They argue that *Walt Disney* expressed direct and conscious control over the messages in their comic books produced to be distributed in Latin America. Dorfman and Mattelart believe comic books are a form of social control aimed at influencing children's views of persons in developing and capitalist countries. Foreign countries and foreign people are portrayed in these comic books as "lacking in intelligence, cunning, discipline, encyclopedic knowledge

and technological skills" (p. 46). People in developing countries are portrayed as child-like, and it is conveyed that they should be treated as children. This content emphasizes the control of the have-nots by the haves reminding the Third World reader that they are in a position of powerlessness.

2.2 Summary

Except for the reflection model of media content, the models of the factors determining media content can be seen as a progression from a micro level of analyses to a more macro perspective: 1) content is determined by the routines of the decision maker; 2) characteristics intrinsic to the decision maker, such as his/her attitudes and beliefs and demographic characteristics, determines content; 3) forces extrinsic to the decision maker (specifically the institutional structure, the audience, and economic forces) determine media content; and 4) media "content is a function of ideological positions and a tool of the status quo" (Shoemaker 1987:2).

The reflection model of media content simply asks what is the content of a particular form of media, and is it an accurate account of reality. Why it does or does not reflect reality can be explained by the other models of factors determining media content.

The remaining models progress from a micro level "task oriented" approach (media routines) to a macro level "ideological" approach -- manipulation (Shoemaker 1987:21). Research on media routines asks how decisions are made, personal characteristic models and extrinsic models ask who makes decisions and how decisions are made, and manipulation models ask who makes decisions, how are decisions made, and why are decisions made the way they are.

Because these models can be seen as a hierarchy, each successive model may include aspects of the previous model. However, most previous research has focussed on only one model and the questions it implies, and has not attempted to show any overlap among the models.

By studying the personal/ intrinsic model and the extrinsic model of decision making, this study will look at the questions: who makes the decisions? and how do they make these decisions?

CHAPTER THREE

DETERMINATION OF COMIC STRIP CONTENT

3.1 Production of Comic Strips

Decisions on the content of comic strips are made at two levels: syndication and distribution.

The first syndication company was created in 1912 to reduce the "likelihood of multiple versions of the same strip" appearing in newspapers under different names (O'Sullivan 1990:13) and to prevent any one newspaper from receiving all the profits when a comic strip helped to promote sales. Syndication services made comic strips available and affordable to smaller newspapers unable to buy an original comic strip. By 1915, comic strips were a regular feature in most daily newspapers, and several syndication companies had

emerged (Reitberger and Fuchs 1972).

A mutually beneficial relationship exists between the cartoonist and the syndication company. Syndication allows the comic strips to be carried in newspapers worldwide, thus guaranteeing a profit to the creator. In turn, the syndication company controls the rights to the comic strip and receives a percentage of the profits (O'Sullivan 1990).

There are several items that syndication companies require in the comic strips they represent. First they "look for a uniqueness that reflects the cartoonist's own individual slant on the world and humor." If they see this slant, they "look to see if the cartoonist is turning his or her attention to events that other people can relate to." Next, they look at the cartoonist's writing ability. King Features believes that "good writing helps weak art better than good art helps weak writing." The third item they look for is good art. They "look to see that the art is drawn clearly and with visual impact." They want the comics to be "noticed on a page." Lastly, they look for the cartoonist's ability to "sustain a high level of quality material." They want comics that "readers will enjoy for years and years" (King Features 1991).

This process shows the syndication company's efforts to appeal to the majority of their audience. They want a comic

strip that will not only entertain the readers, but one the readers will be loyal to and read over long periods of time. A comic strip that meets these standards is functional for the syndication company, because newspapers are more likely to carry it. Once the comic strip is chosen, it is likely to continue for a long period of time, thus sustaining its profits to the syndication company. If a comic strip is not chosen for syndication, it is usually because "at the time the syndication company saw the work, they did not feel that newspaper editors would buy the feature" (King Features 1991), so it would not be profitable to the syndication company.

The syndication company's role in determining comic strip content deserves separate attention. However this brief discussion of the syndication process is made to set the stage for the topic of this research -- decisions affecting the distribution of comic strips.

3.2 Distribution of Comic Strips

Not every comic strip that makes it into syndication is then published in all newspapers. Syndication companies send representatives to sell new comic strips to newspapers and to maintain public relations. Comic strips are offered to the newspapers in a variety of formats. Syndication packages

contain preselected comic strips that the newspapers may buy cheaper than if they pick their own comic strips and pay for each separately. Sunday comic strips may be bought in "stock" format which includes a preselected assortment of comic strips from a variety of syndication company. Like daily comic strips, Sunday strips can be bought on a pick and choose basis from each of the syndication companies. One newspaper editor in this study reported that newspapers pay an average weekly fee of eight dollars per Sunday comic strip plus various copyright fees. According to Lee Salem, editorial director for Universal Press Syndicate the price of daily comic strips varies by package but range from "a low of four dollars a week to a high in the low three figures a week" (Salem 1991), depending on the comic strip and the circulation of the newspaper.

3.3 Research on Comic Strips

Most research on comic strips focusses on the first and fifth models of media content determination: reflection and manipulation. That research has largely explored the perpetuation of sex role stereotypes by the media. Because stereotypes remain in comic strips, researchers (See Saenger 1955; Grauerholz, Willims and Clark 1982; Chavez 1985; Brabant

and Mooney 1986; Mooney and Brabant 1987; Mooney and Brabant 1990) propose that instead of reflecting the audience, the people in positions to determine comic strip content are manipulating this content to perpetuate stereotypes. The second model -- content is a function of media routines -- is interesting to study, but requires intensive interviews and observation to fully explore.

The remaining two models -- media content as a result of personal attitudes and demographic characteristics of the decision maker, and media content as the result of extrinsic forces, such as institutional forces, the audience and economics -- are tested simultaneously in this study because they appear to be opposite approaches. One asserts that editorial decisions will be intrinsically motivated (demographic characteristics, personal attitudes, and beliefs), whereas the other asserts that the decisions are extrinsically motivated (institutional forces, audience and economics). As stated earlier, previous research has not shown that personal characteristics influence media content. To test this model, previous research compares the attitudes and demographic characteristics of decision makers to media content to show whether or not their decision making was intrinsically motivated.

This study takes a different approach by comparing

decisions concerning controversial and diverse comic strips that can be attributed to intrinsic characteristics of newspaper editors, such as demographic characteristics and personal attitudes and beliefs, to decisions concerning controversial and diverse comic strips that are attributed to extrinsic sources, such as other persons in the institutional structure, the audience, and economics.

CHAPTER FOUR

DESCRIPTION OF METHODS

4.1 Research Problem

By looking at controversy and diversity within newspaper comic strips, this study tested two models of how media content is perceived to be determined. The first model is that the personal characteristics of the editor (demographic characteristics, attitudes, and beliefs) determine whether or not newspaper editors include diverse and controversial comic strips in their newspaper. The second model is that extrinsic forces, such as institutional forces, the audience, and economic forces, determine whether or not newspaper editors include diverse and controversial comic strips in their

newspapers.

4.2 Newspaper Sample

The sample of newspapers consisted of four newspapers distributed in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Daily newspapers were chosen because they are more likely to carry comic strips than newspapers produced only once a week. A list of all of the daily newspapers produced in Virginia and their circulation levels was obtained, and the newspapers were rank ordered according to their circulation level. The four newspapers with the most similar circulation levels were chosen, because it was assumed these newspapers would have about the same number of pages and would carry the same number of comic strips. It is assumed that newspapers with close to the same number of comic strips are more likely to contain a similar number of diverse and controversial comic strips thus making comparisons easier.

Letters were sent to the editors of the four newspapers requesting their participation in the study. In the letter, I explained the project, asked for the name of the person in charge of the comic strips, and requested sample copies of a weekday and Sunday newspaper. A sample letter may be found in Appendix A. None of the editors responded to the letters or

sent samples of their newspapers. I then called each editor requesting an interview. Two of the four newspapers that were initially chosen participated in the study. The other two declined. To find the additional two newspapers needed for the study, I went down the list of newspapers with circulation levels smaller than those originally chosen and called each editor until two agreed to participate in the study.

4.3 Comic Strip Sample

Those comic strips that the researcher interpreted to exhibit diversity or controversy were chosen to test which model determining media content, intrinsic or extrinsic, most influenced newspaper editors. Although there are other diverse and controversial comic strips available in syndication, the following comic strips were chosen because the researcher felt they would be familiar to the newspaper editor in a small community.

Diverse comic strips are operationalized as strips that contain main characters that are either 1) a racial or ethnic minority and/or 2) contain a male or female main character in a non-traditional role. Diverse comic strips chosen for this study were *Cathy*, *For Better or For Worse*, and *Curtis*. No comic strips containing men in non-traditional roles were

found. *Cathy* finds humor in the exploits of a single career woman in her thirties. The main character in *Cathy* meets the criteria of diversity because of her marital status. She is in the non-traditional role of being a woman in her thirties who is more concerned with her career than with marrying and raising a family. *For Better or For Worse* centers around a modern family in which both parents are involved in careers. The mother in this comic strip, Elle, meet the criteria of diversity because she is a woman who has chosen the non-traditional role to work outside the home while she simultaneously raises a family which includes a baby. The last diverse comic strip in this study is *Curtis*. *Curtis* meets the criteria of diversity, because it is almost exclusively composed of African American characters.

Controversial comic strips are operationalized as strips that contain political messages, sexist and/or racist themes or portrayals. The controversial comic strips in this study are *Doonesbury* and *Beetle Bailey*. *Doonesbury* is a satirical look at current events and often includes subject matter relating to the U.S. national government. *Doonesbury* meets the criteria because of controversy over the subject matter in this comic strip (See Astor 1989a; Astor 1991). Several local newspapers have found the subject matter of a particular series of *Doonesbury* strips offensive enough that they chose

not to print the comic strip until the series changed. There also has been much debate over whether or not *Doonesbury* should appear on the comic strip page or with the editorials. *Beetle Bailey* humorously depicts the daily life of military personnel on a military base. *Beetle Bailey* meets the criteria of controversial because it has been labeled as both sexist and racist (See Astor 1989b). There have been complaints over the curvaceously drawn women and the stereotypical drawings of an African American male with a large afro hairstyle and an oriental male with overly exaggerated slanted eyes.

4.4 Data Analysis

The researcher interviewed each newspaper editor in person taking notes on paper. The notes were transcribed on the evening following each interview. The editors were asked why they chose to include or chose not to include in their newspaper those comic strips defined as diverse or controversial, and to describe what is their own and their readers' reaction to each diverse or controversial comic strip. This will show how the editors perceive the way they make decisions. In addition, the researcher asked each editor a series of background questions, including journalistic

background and history at that newspaper, as well as a general questions about how diversity and controversy are handled in the newspaper. A copy of the interview guide is found in Appendix B.

Personal characteristics or intrinsic factors were operationalized as answers to the interview that indicated the following or similar reasons for choosing diverse or controversial comic strips: "I like/do not like," "my spouse and/or children like/do not like." Decisions were also determined to be intrinsically motivated if they corresponded with the demographic characteristics of the editor. For example, an African American editor choosing African American comic strips or a female editor choosing comic strips with women in non-traditional role would suggest intrinsic demographic factors.

Extrinsic characteristics, such as institutional forces, the audience, and economics, were operationalized as follows. Institutional forces influenced decision making if the editor mentioned the co-editor, publisher, or owner making decisions. The audience influenced decisions if the editor mentioned doing a recent reader survey or receiving and responding to letters or phone calls from a reader. Economic factors influenced decision making if the following, or similar phrases, were said by the editor: "costs," "cheaper,"

"expense," "cannot afford."

The researcher analyzed each interview qualitatively by looking for the above items. It was then determined whether the newspaper editor's personal characteristics and/or extrinsic forces determined whether or not they printed diverse and controversial comic strips. The researcher then made comparisons between the editors and their methods of decision making.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Characteristics of the Sample

The populations of the four communities ranged from approximately 9,000 people to over 41,000. The communities are located in four different regions -- western Virginia in the Blue Ridge Mountains, southwestern Virginia near the North Carolina border, southeastern Virginia near the seaboard, and central Virginia-- and are no closer than geographically 100 miles apart.

The newspaper circulations range from 11,000 to over 20,000. Two of the newspapers are family owned. One of these has a family member as managing editor, and the other hired

the editor from outside the family. The other two newspapers are owned by larger companies, neither of which are headquartered in the community. One of these managing editors was hired locally, and the other was transferred in by the owning company. Two of the newspapers are published every day of the week, and the other two are published every day except Sunday.

The four sampled editors include two women and two men ranging in age from the early forties to mid sixties. All of the editors have a college degree, and all but one hold a degree in a journalism-related fields. The editors have held their current positions from six to eighteen years. Only one of the editors is native to the community in which they now work.

A list of the comic strips in each newspaper may be found in appendix C and appendix D.

5.2 Community A

Community A is located in southern Virginia near the North Carolina border and has a population around 18,000. The newspaper editor describes the community as an industrial, blue-collar town with an emphasis on manufacturing and production. The minority population is around twenty percent.

She believes that there is an "accent on sports" in the community. I feel this may be a reflection of the racetrack located in the county. The editor also stated that the population of the community is aging. She believed that the overall political orientation of the community can not be labeled as either conservative nor liberal.

The newspaper is owned by a local family, one of whose members serves as publisher. The circulation level of the newspaper is around 20,000. The newspaper has not conducted a reader survey in several years, and the editor is sure that even then it did not include comic strips. After receiving a degree in journalism, the editor moved to the community eighteen years ago to fill the position of managing editor. Four years ago her title was changed to editor, but her responsibilities were virtually unchanged.

The editor believes it has been at least ten years since she last changed any comic strips. The only exception is that until recently *Bugs Bunny* was a daily comic strip. When it became no longer available, the syndication company substituted *Robotman*. When the syndication company dropped *Bugs Bunny*, the editor had the chance to put in a new comic strip. Instead, for economic reasons, she chose the syndication companies replacement -- a comic strip the editor does not like. Currently the weekday comic strips are part of

a basic package offered by a syndication company. The basic package is less expensive than selecting individual comic strips from each syndication companies. If the editor chose a replacement comic strip, it would break up the package and cost more money.

Sunday comic strips are chosen differently than daily comic strips. This newspaper uses the masthead format of Sunday comics in which they select each strip, and the name of the newspaper appears at the top of the tabloid. This format is the same size as the other newspaper sections. Also available is the stock format of the Sunday comic strips in which the comics are preselected by the syndication companies and include the more popular strips from a variety of syndication companies. The stock format is one half the size of a regular news sheet, and the newspaper's masthead is not printed on the front.

This newspaper is planning changes to its Sunday comics tabloid, but the editor did not foresee the implementation of these changes occurring in the near future. The editor particularly would like to add *For Better or For Worse*, *Cathy*, and *Calvin and Hobbes*. When the editor does make these changes, she will consider using public opinion to decide which comic strips to include, but ultimately she feels the changes will be her decision, not that of the audience. She

feels that if you survey forty different people, they will have forty different ideas of what should and should not be on the comic strip page. I interpret this to mean that public opinion is not as important as the editor's personal opinion, or perhaps she does not understand the science of survey research.

The editor also believes that economics will play a large role in any changes she makes. She said that circulation at the newspaper has dropped off, so currently money to make major changes in the comic strips is not available. She did not indicate that advertising has affected the newspapers budget. The newspaper already buys one of the cheapest daily packages, so no significant reduction in costs could be made by changing daily packages. One way the newspaper can make changes and save money is to switch to the stock Sunday comic strips, which are less expensive than if the newspaper picks its own comic strips for the Sunday comic strip tabloid. However it is her opinion that her audience would not like the smaller format.

The editor believes that people are loyal to their comic strips. The newspaper previously placed *Dennis the Menace* in the classified section, and if the classifieds ran long, *Dennis the Menace* would be bumped for the day. Each time it was bumped, someone would call in and complain. Eventually

the publisher, who is present for the day to day operation of the newspaper, requested that *Dennis* be put on the comic strip page as a regular feature. Loyalty is extremely important to the editor. If just one person expresses loyalty to a comic strip, the editor will not consider removing it from the newspaper.

5.2.1 Diversity

The newspaper editor does not feel that certain comic strips should be included in a newspaper just because they include a minority character, and she does not feel a minority comic strip needs to be included in the newspaper. However, if the editor considers the comic strip to be good quality and funny, the inclusion of a minority would be a plus in decision making. If she changes the daily comic strips, she will consider *Curtis* because of its appeal to minorities.

The editor believes the most vocal portion of her audience is women between the approximate ages of thirty and fifty. This portion of the audience occasionally requests *Cathy* and *For Better or For Worse*, and she says that they complained the most when *Dennis the Menace* was excluded. Despite requests for the two comic strips, the editor has no plans to add them to the weekday newspapers. In order to add

any new comic strips, she said she would have to drop a comic strip she currently publishes. Apparently the possibility of pleasing these readers is not worth the risk of losing others who are loyal to the comic strips currently in the newspaper.

The editor would like to strike a balance in the comic page content so it will contain material appealing to all age groups -- children, young adult to middle age, and the older audience. Right now she thinks the most important addition will be a kids feature. She is not sure whether or not she will place this in the Sunday comic strip tabloid.

5.2.2 Controversy

The editor stated that in general, she does not shy away from controversy, but she does not make an effort to specifically include it in the newspaper. If she believes the news is legitimate and is fairly and accurately presented, she will print everything. She did not explain her criteria for "legitimate news" and "a fair and accurate presentation." The editor did not mention the effect that media routines such as space limitations may have on what is included in the newspaper except that room was found on the comic strip page for *Dennis the Menace* when there were many complaints. However there have been no changes to the comic strips in ten

years, so she has not made an effort to include anything new. The editor said that the newspaper does not take sides on an issue. If the editor fears a story may present a "biased slant", a non-reporting newspaper staff member is asked to read the piece to determine if there is a bias present. If the reviewer finds a biased slant, the piece is rewritten until the bias is eliminated. She said that the purpose of the newspaper is to report news, and the newspaper should "reflect what is going on" in the community. If the editor feels a column or article -- syndicated or local -- may be offensive, she will print disclaimers rather than leave it out.

Although the editor described the overall community as neither conservative nor liberal in political orientation, she said she feels that *Doonesbury* would offend more of her audience than it would appeal to. She "personally does not like *Doonesbury*." She said she believes that the purpose of a comic strip is to be funny, and she stated that *Doonesbury* does not fill this role. She thinks *Doonesbury* should be placed on the editorial page instead of with the comic strips. She also did not agree with newspapers that left out certain *Doonesbury* strips because of controversial content. She said that if she carried this comic strip, she would always print it and just print a disclaimer when the views expressed in the

comic strip were not the views of the newspaper.

Personally the editor believes *Beetle Bailey* is sexist, but she has had no complaints about the strip. There are military retirees in the community, so she believes that the military appeal is more important than the possible sexist messages. She also believes that comic strips are meant to be funny and should not be taken seriously in terms of the messages they may imply. She did recognize the possible racism in *Beetle Bailey*, but again no one has complained. Although it appears as if public opinion is important to the editor, she assumes what her public likes and dislikes rather than actually asking them. Since there have been no complaints, she has had no reason to take the comic strip out of the newspaper.

5.2.3 Summary

The editor's concern over reader loyalty leads one to believe that the audience is the most important factor influencing the editor's decisions. However, the concern over the readers is only superficial. Because of reader loyalty, the editor has not changed any comic strips. However, the newspaper has never surveyed its readers to find out what comic strips they want. There is an implicit belief that if

there are no complaints, there must not be a problem. Why hassle with changes if they are not perceived to be needed?

Even when complaints have been made, as in the case of *Dennis the Menace*, changes only occurred when the publisher stepped in and made changes. This is evidence that other authorities in the newspaper at least partially influence what comic strips are published, although there was no indication of how regularly or concerning which portions of the newspaper this intervention takes place.

Economics play an important role in what gets published in community A's newspaper. To save money, half of the comic strip page consists of a basic package from a syndication company. This cuts costs for the newspaper. The newspaper is also considering a less expensive Sunday tabloid format.

In terms of including diverse and controversial comic strips, the editor sees these as her individual choices. The newspaper does not include diverse strips, because the editor does not believe they are needed. She has also decided that her audience will not like the controversial comic strip *Doonesbury*, even though she has never conducted any reader surveys to back this opinion. I believe the editor's decision not to include comic strips such as *Doonesbury* is based more on her dislike of the comic strip than any other factor.

5.3 Community B

Community B is located in the north central portion of the state and has a population of around 15,000. The general manager of the newspaper describes the community as a conservative town that in general does not like controversy, and its members avoid it whenever possible. There is a very small minority population in the town, around seven percent of the total, and the community's population is aging. The community is a manufacturing town, but the editor was quick to add that it should not be labeled as a mill town. There are high tech electronics and fabric production in the community.

The general manager came to the newspaper in 1983 when a company based in New York took over ownership. The newspaper has a circulation of around 11,000, with its main audience located within the city limits.

With the exception of *Peanuts*, *Shoe*, and *Garfield*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, and *Geech* all of the other comic strips currently in the newspaper are part of packages offered through the syndication companies. The manager remembers that since he has been at the newspaper at least one comic strip became unavailable from a syndication company. The manager did not accept the syndication's substitution but instead chose the replacement comic strip himself. This means that, unlike the

editor in community A, saving money by sticking with specific packages is not as important to the manager in community B.

Since he arrived at the newspaper, the manager has all but overhauled the comic strip page. He felt that several of the comic strips were outdated and needed to be dropped. One that he dropped was *Mary Worth*. So many readers complained, that within a few weeks the manager placed the comic strip back in the newspaper. The manager was quite surprised at the uproar and even now does not understand the appeal.

Under his management, the manager expanded the comic strip space to add more strips. He stated no specific method to decide which comic strips to drop and which to add. Two years ago he put in *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Geech* as individual comic strips, and a package which included *Eek and Meek*, *Frank and Ernest*, and *The Born Loser*. As a starting point to decide which comic strips to keep and drop, in 1986 he did a reader survey to find out which comic strips the audience liked and disliked. Because his wife enjoyed it and wanted it in the newspaper, soon after his arrival at the newspaper the manager added the comic strip *Garfield* to the newspaper. This is an example of the manager making decisions based on a personal characteristic, wishing to please his wife, rather than external forces.

5.3.1 Diversity

Although the manager recognizes that a minority population exists in community B, he feels they are not relevant to his decision making, and in general he feels that "diversity in the newspaper is not important." The manager would rather focus on the majority of his population rather than cater to minority groups. In fact the manager thinks he removed both *Cathy* and *For Better or For Worse* from the newspaper, but he can not remember. When asked why he removed the strips, he said it was to make room for new material. When questioned about these two comic strips, the manager's expression indicated that he did not personally enjoy these comic strips. The manager has never considered the comic strip *Curtis*, and the manager indicated that he would not consider it in the future either. This is not surprising since he previously stated that he did not feel the minority population was relevant to his decision making.

The manager did recognize that the community has a high portion of what he describes as a "redneck" population. He chose *Geech* because, from the samples supplied by the syndication company, he felt this would appeal specifically to this group within his audience. He has since been disappointed in the comic strip and does not feel that the

samples represented the overall content of the strip. Why he chose to include material for this diverse group but not for racial minorities and women is not clear. Perhaps he did not view "rednecks" as a minority in this community but instead as the majority.

5.3.2 Controversy

The manager feels that it is the newspaper's job to "print news not make it." Although all news items are potentially controversial, the newspaper does not seek out topics that the manager feels are controversial. When the newspaper does tackle controversy, it is exclusively at the local level. The manager does not include items covering controversy in other communities. The readers do respond to controversy and will utilize letters to the manager to express their views.

When asked about *Doonesbury*, the manager said that one reason it is not in the paper is because it was not there when he took over. However, since he came to the newspaper he has added several other strips to the comic page. He does not like *Doonesbury* because he feels it is often in poor taste, and he does not like the sarcasm. I feel it is probably the manager's personal dissatisfaction with the comic strip that

keeps it out of the newspaper.

There have been no complaints about *Beetle Bailey*, and the manager seemed surprised that some audiences consider it sexist or racist.

5.3.3 Summary

The manager's personal likes and dislikes are most important to him when he decides which comic strips to include and drop. The manager has almost completely overhauled the comic strip page, dropping at least comic strips appealing to women, and he has not considered adding other diverse or controversial comic strips. The manager even admitted that he added at least one comic strip because his wife likes it. Although the manager did conduct a reader survey, the results were used only as a starting point to decide what he should keep and what he could drop.

Although most of his decisions are personally oriented, the manager does respond to his readers when a large number complain. He also made an effort to include a comic strip for the "redneck" population in the community.

5.4 Community C

Community C is located in the mountains bordering West Virginia. The population is around 9,000 and is home of a large manufacturing plant. According to the editor, with hiring freezes at the plant the young people leave town after high school and do not return, so the population is aging. The editor estimates that twenty percent of the population is African American. Although the community is conservative, it has historically voted Democratic because of the union.

The editor's grandfather founded the newspaper, and it has remained family owned and operated. The newspaper shares about half of its 8,000 circulation with a newspaper of a larger town (population 100,000).

The comic strip page is composed of a mixture of basic packages offered through the syndication companies and comic strips bought individually. Although the editor said that the current recession affected the newspaper's budget, this has not affected the comic strip page. The paper does not run on Sundays.

Heathcliff is the only comic strip that has been added in the editor's twenty years at the newspaper, and the editor added it because it is his favorite comic strip. The syndication company has tried for over ten years to get the

newspaper to add *Garfield*, but the editor does not like it and has refused to add it to the newspaper. Ten years ago the editor tried to take out *The Heart of Juliet Jones*, but there was such an uproar from the audience that it was put back in. The newspaper owner's next door neighbor complained about the withdrawal of *Juliet*, and the editor feels that this was an added incentive to put it back in.

5.4.1 Diversity

The editor has chosen to concentrate on the majority of his readers despite the minority population. By including articles on Medicare, he provides material appealing to the elderly in the community. The newspaper also includes a mini-page for children.

The editor made no indication that he would consider adding material that appeals to minorities or women. He follows the idea that "if it is not broke do not fix it." If a sufficient number of people -- ten percent or 900 readers -- requests a new comic strip, he will consider making changes. Otherwise, there is no reason to change.

5.4.2 Controversy

The editor stated he does not believe in shying away from potentially controversial material, but he does not present this material to the audience as controversial. Occasionally an advertiser is involved in a controversial issue and expects differential treatment when the newspaper covers the issue. The newspaper will not give special treatment to any group.

The editor is not impressed with *Doonesbury* and does not find it interesting. He feels that his audience will not find it interesting given their lower education level (usually high school only). Hypothetically speaking, if *Doonesbury* was included in the newspaper, he felt it should be placed on the editorial page, because it is an editorial not a comic strip. The editor describes himself as one of the few Republicans in town, which might explain why he does not like *Doonesbury*, a liberal comic strip.

There have been no complaints over the possible sexism or racism in *Beetle Bailey*. Many World War II veterans live in the area, as well as what the editor describes as "die-hard flag-waving Americans" who he believes find *Beetle Bailey* appealing. The newspaper carries the comic strip *Redeye*, whose main character is a stereotypical native American. Despite the recent national concerns over the portrayal of

native Americans, no one has complained about this comic strip.

5.4.3 Summary

I was allowed to look at the comic strips in the old newspapers from each decade starting in the 1930s. It is my observation that the only changes that have been made to the comic strips is when the strip is no longer available from the syndication company. With the exception of finding space on the comic page for his favorite comic strip, there is no indication that the newspaper editor tries to make changes and update the content of the comic strip page. The editor has not surveyed the audience to see what they want in their comic strips and stated that audience influence would only result from an influx of complaints or requests.

The newspaper editor is not concerned with including diversity (as defined in this research) in the comic strip page, despite the presence of a significant African American population (twenty percent). Overall the editor remains neutral in controversial matters, and he is not keen on including controversial material.

5.5 Community D

Community D is located in the southeastern portion of the state and has a population of 41,000. The town is 78 percent African American but is bordered by an all-white suburb. The community is aging. The kids are "looking to leave" and are not returning after college. The community is mostly conservative.

The editor describes herself as a non-traditional journalist. After a career as a para-legal, she went back to school and graduated in 1984 with degrees in English and psychology. Upon graduation she took the position of managing editor at a small family owned newspaper in Missouri. Her husband transferred to Virginia, and community D's newspaper hired her as lifestyles editor. She moved up to features editor and became managing editor in 1986.

The newspaper is locally managed but is owned by a Toronto based company. The newspaper has a circulation of 21,000 and covers two incorporated cities as well as parts of three counties. The editor describes the people in this area as including low middle income, middle class military retirees, upper middle, and upper class "yuppies." The readership area includes rural areas, urban cities, and smaller bedroom communities.

Currently the newspaper has both daily comic strips and a Sunday comic strip tabloid. The daily comic strips are packaged on an entertainment page which also includes crossword puzzles and horoscopes. The newspaper includes both basic packages from several syndication companies and comic strips picked individually by the editor. The newspaper buys the stock Sunday comic strip tabloid which is a joint production by several of the syndication companies.

5.5.1 Diversity

The newspaper editor is aware of her large minority population and actively tries to include material that will appeal to them. Within the next month, the newspaper will begin to run a special women's section once a week. The editor chose to include the comic strip *Where I'm Coming From* in this section. This comic strip is about African American women and does not have separate cells (several separated pictures in one comic strip) like most comic strips. It is about twice the size of a normal comic strip and includes a series of pictures of just the heads and arms of the characters. The main emphasis of the strip is on the dialogue among African American women. When the editor chose to put a woman oriented comic strip in the new women's section, she

decided that this particular comic strip involving African American women would be ideal. The editor did not choose one of the more established comic strips with non-traditional female characters, such as *Cathy* or *For Better or For Worse*. That is because a competing newspaper publishes these on a daily basis. The competing newspaper is published in the morning, and community D's newspaper is distributed in the afternoon, so the competition over those comic strips would be too great. Instead the editor chose a comic strip that appeals not only to women but to African Americans. The decision to include this strip was based partially on the fact that she has not found an African American comic strip that she considers suitable for the regular comic strip page. *Where I'm Coming From* can not be used on the current comic strip page because of its odd size. Because of competition from another newspaper, community D's newspaper is paying the syndication companies for an exclusivity clause which ensures that the syndication company will not sell *Where I'm Coming From* to the competing newspaper.

The newspaper does not regularly conduct reader surveys, but the newspaper has a reader advisory board composed of an even mix of African Americans and whites, males and females, and different age groups. When the newspaper makes any changes or additions, it first presents the editor's ideas to

the advisory board, and then their decisions are presented to the general reader population for a call-in vote. After decisions are approved by the general readership, they are implemented in the newspaper.

The editor feels she is ignoring her minority population, and she has a standing letter at all the syndication companies requesting that as soon as a new African American comic strip is syndicated it be sent to her immediately. She presented several African American comic strips including *Curtis* to the reader advisory panel, but they felt the comic strips did not express the African American experience, and they did not like them.

Once she finds a new comic strip, she will drop one of the comic strips currently published. She will first present the options of what can be dropped to the advisory board allowing them to choose two alternatives. Then she will utilize the newspaper's toll free call-in line allowing the readers to vote between the two comic strips.

5.5.2 Controversy

Even though the conservative readership does not like controversy, the editor feels she must include the issues anyway. Whenever there is a controversy, subscriptions drop

off, but rack sales pick up. Eventually the readers pick their subscriptions back up. Controversy does not affect advertising. In general the newspaper tries to present "both sides" of an issue, but they do take strong editorial stands. All of the editorials in the newspaper will support the same side of the issue.

The newspaper never has controversy problems with the comic strips. The readers and advertisers have never complained about *Beetle Bailey*. In fact the only comic strip complaints received by the newspaper are when something gets left out. There is a military base in the community, and the editor said there are also a large number of military retirees in the area, so she thinks *Beetle Bailey* is quite popular with them.

The editor would like to include *Doonesbury* in her newspaper just to see how the conservative readership would react, but currently she has no plans to put it in the newspaper. *Doonesbury* is currently carried in the larger neighboring newspaper. Because of the competition, the editor has not put it in her daily newspaper. The newspaper does carry *Doonesbury* in its Sunday newspaper, but the content of the Sunday *Doonesbury* strip is usually not as controversial as the content of the daily strip. The readers have not reacted to this comic strip.

In this community diversity may become controversy. The editor noted that she would expect some flack once an African American comic strip is put in the newspaper because of the active KKK population within her circulation. The editor will continue to include diverse content despite any controversy.

5.5.3 Summary

The audience for community D's newspaper has the most influence on comic strip content. The editor consults a reader advisory board whenever changes are . Once the advisory board makes a decision, the editor then presents the idea to the general readership population who make the final decisions by a call-in vote. The editor's role is strictly to make suggestions and organize. Although she suggests alternatives to the advisory panel, they are not obligated to choose between them. They may reject the editor's ideas or suggest new ones of their own.

The editor says she is not afraid to include controversial material but chooses to stay away from the comic strip *Doonesbury* because of the competition from a larger newspaper. Any controversy in *Beetle Bailey* is overridden by the large military population in the area. By including

Beetle Bailey the newspaper is actually appealing to a minority group -- military and retired military personnel.

The newspaper editor in community D acknowledges the large number of African Americans in the community and actively seeks to include material that appeals to this group. The editor would like to include an African American comic strip as a regular feature, but she and her reader advisory board has not found one that they like. Included in the new women oriented section of the newspaper is a comic strip appealing not only to African Americans but to women. Although it is not on the comic strip page, the newspaper includes material designed specifically to appeal to women.

Overall the editor said she does not base her decisions on her personal characteristics or beliefs. Instead she feels her decisions are based on the likes and dislikes of the newspaper's audience, and factors of competition.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Discussion

Even though the sample in this research consisted of only four newspaper editors, there is still variability in how editors choose the content of their comic strip page. (See Table 1 for community comparison chart.) The four communities can be described as a progression from no changes, to a decision making model that is predominantly intrinsic to one that is predominantly extrinsic.

Table 1: Community Comparison

	COMMUNITY A	COMMUNITY B	COMMUNITY C	COMMUNITY D
CIRCULATION/ POPULATION RATIO	20,000/18,000 =1.1	11,000/15,000 =0.73	8,000/9,000 =0.88	21,000/41,000 =0.51
OWNERSHIP	Family	Corporation	Family	Corporation
INTERPRETATION OF EDITOR ORIENTATION	Status Quo-keep things as they are; No changes	Changes for personal reasons	Changes for personal reasons	Audience makes decisions
SURVEYS READERS	No	Yes	No	Reader advisory board
INFLUENCES OFFERED BY THE EDITORS	1. Space constraints 2. Different age groups in audience 3. Publisher 4. Economics 5. Reader loyalty 6. Military personnel	1. Space constraints 2. "Redneck" population in audience 3. Reader complaints 4. Wife's likes	1. Space constraints 2. Elderly population in audience 3. Competition 4. Personal likes 5. Audience complaints 6. Owner 7. Economics 8. Military personnel	1. Space constraints 2. African Americans in audience 3. Women in audience 4. Competition 5. Military personnel
DIVERSITY/ CONTROVERSY	Not included	Not included	Not included	Included

Community A's editor takes a status quo approach. She keeps things as they are, makes no changes herself, and does not survey the audience. She described such influences on her decision making as space constraints, different age groups in the audience, mandates from the publisher, economics, and reader loyalty. The editor does not attempt to include diverse or controversial comic strips in the newspaper. This newspaper has the highest circulation to population ratio of 20,000 to 18,000 or 1.1 and is family owned.

In community C the editor appears to make changes primarily for personal reasons, and he also does not survey the audience. He described such influences on his decision making as space constraints, competition with another newspaper, his personal likes/ dislikes, the elderly population in the audience, the owner, audience complaints and economics. The editor does not attempt to include controversial comic strips in the newspaper. He said he does attempt to include material for the elderly, a diverse group not included in this study. The circulation to population ratio is 8,000 to 9,000 or .88, and the newspaper is family owned.

Community B's manager appears to make changes primarily for personal reasons, but he does survey his audience. Influences on his decision making which he described include space constraints, the "redneck" population in the audience,

reader complaints, his wife's likes, and his own likes/dislikes. The manager said he does attempt to include diverse comic strips but not as defined for this research. The manager chose a comic strip that he thought would appeal to the "redneck" population in the town. The circulation to population ratio is 11,000 to 15,000 or .73, and the newspaper is owned by a corporation.

In community D decisions concerning controversial and diverse comic strips are by the audience in the form of a reader advisory panel. The editor said that she serves only in an advisory position. Influences she described include space constraints, competition and African Americans and women in the audience. The editor said she actively tries to include the diverse group of African Americans in the newspaper, and she said that the newspaper presents one side and one side only of a controversial issue. For example when the incorporated town attempted to annex portions of the county, the newspaper supported the annexation in their coverage. The circulation/ population ratio of the newspaper is 21,000/41,000 or .51.

6.2 Conclusions

Progression from no changes, to changes for the editors

personal reasons, to changes by the audience follows the circulation/ population ratio of the newspapers. As the ratio decreases the editor is more likely to include a diverse group (although not necessarily as defined in this research), more likely to survey the readers, and the audience exerts more control over the decision making.

There are several ways to interpret this finding. One is when the audience has more influence on newspaper content (either because the editor includes material for the diverse groups in the audience in response to their demographic characteristics, or because the audience has direct input for content selection through surveys and a reader advisory board) the circulation/ population ratio of the newspaper is smaller. As the newspaper circulation level matches or exceeds the population of a community the newspapers earning potential is maximized. This could mean that economically it is better for the newspaper if the editor has sole input into content.

A second and more realistic explanation for this progression is that newspapers with lower circulation/ population ratios need to increase their circulation level to become more profitable, so they include their audience in their decision making in order to provide appealing material that will increase sales. However, the editors in this study did not mention a need to attract more readers.

Another explanation concerns ownership. The newspapers

with family ownership have a higher circulation/ population ratio, and the audience is not involved at all in decision making. The newspapers that are corporate owned have lower circulation/ population ratios, and the audience is involved in the decision making. That could be the result of a decision making model not tested in this study -- media routines. Perhaps editors in family owned and corporation owned newspapers have different sets of media routines that encourage or discourage them from utilizing their audience when making decisions.

Although the communities do fall along a continuum of decision making, Community D is still noticeably different from the other three communities. This was the only case in which an editor attempted to include diversity as defined for this research. The editor was actively looking for an African American comic strip and had recently added a weekly women's section to the newspaper which will include a comic strip about African American women. The editor's attention to the African American population is most likely because African Americans are the major ethnic group in the community (78 percent). It is undetermined why the editor chose to include material that appeals specifically to women.

This is also the only community in which the newspaper includes a controversial comic strip (*Doonesbury*), and the editor recognizes that the comic strip is controversial. This

strip only appears in the Sunday newspaper, but the editor stated that if competition from a nearby paper were not so great, she would include it daily, even though she did not think that the majority of her audience would like it. This is also the only newspaper that takes a stance and presents one side and one side only of a controversy in its editorials. This community may be more willing to include controversy than the other communities in the study, because its population is almost twice as high as the next most populous community. Perhaps the more people there are in a community, the more likely controversy will be overt. The editor also stated that the newspaper's circulation covered two towns and parts of three counties. With this many different groups of people, and a larger population we know that there is an increased likelihood for controversy and diversity. With the inclusion of diversity and controversy, this community is more equipped to survive in our changing world (Flora and Flora 1990).

It was found that in addition to the two models included in this research -- personal characteristics and extrinsic forces -- support was also found for the reflection and media routine models. No support was found for the manipulation model of media content. However, this research was not designed to measure all five of the models.

Support for the reflection model was found in all communities by the inclusion or desire to provide material for

special groups within the audience. In community A it was different age groups and military personnel. In community B there is a "redneck" population, and in community C it was the elderly and military personnel. In community D the editor is concerned with the African Americans and women.

Personal characteristics that influenced media content included personal likes and dislikes (communities B and C), and a spouse's likes (community B).

Extrinsic forces influencing decision making included other persons in positions of power at the newspaper and economics (communities A and C), diverse populations in the community (although not necessarily as defined for this study) (all communities), reader loyalty (community A), and audience complaints (communities B and C). This shows that editors are not acting independently but instead as part of the social structure in which they exist. Not only do they affect the social structure by making decisions about media content, but how they choose media content is also affected by the structure in which they exist.

Media routines influencing editors' decision making included space constraints (communities A, B, C, and D) and competition (communities C and D).

Since the aim of this study was to test only two models determining media content, it is impossible to conclude that any one of the four models that evidence was found for in this

study dominates the newspaper editors' decisions concerning diverse and controversial comic strips. According to the editor's reconstruction of the situation, of the two models tested in this study, personal characteristics of the editors appear to dominate their decision making concerning diverse and controversial comic strips.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

I regret that I did not have adequate time to more fully develop my ideas before beginning my data collection. As a result my theoretical framework was not completely developed and could not fully guide my research. Therefore my interview guide did not facilitate data that exactly "fit" the research design.

The method I chose for data gathering, interviews, was limited in many ways. Most importantly the only data I collected was information that the editors chose to give me. By relying only on what they said, I have no way to know if the information I received was correct and nothing was omitted. For future research, this problem can be at least partially resolved by not relying solely on face-to-face interviews but instead supplementing the interviews with a variety of other data gathering techniques such as participant

observation, surveys of the editors and the audience, and interviews with other persons at the newspaper. Since the interviews were not recorded on tape, it was not possible to search for key words or phrases stated by the editors' to determine their method of decision making, and only a few direct quotes from the editors can be used as support for my findings. Instead I had to rely on my notes and memory, so my conclusions are based only on my own perceptions of the interviews and the editor's decision making process. The data gathered in the interviews may also be limited by the interview guide. The questions were not designed to measure the editors overall method of decision making and may have limited the data I could receive about the two models under study -- intrinsic and extrinsic models of decision making. Also, it is possible that in the interaction with the newspaper editors I presented my own biases which in turn affected what the editors chose to tell me.

This study was designed to measure personal attitudes, beliefs, and likes/ dislikes as indicators of an intrinsic or personal model of decision making. Although previous research has assumed these items to be personally oriented, sociology has shown us that these items do not occur by chance or as a conscious decision by the individual. Instead, a person's attitudes, beliefs and likes/ dislikes are influenced by the institutional structure in which they work, the community in

which they live, the groups they participate in, etc.. Therefore, it is impossible to conclusively say that these items are intrinsically or personally oriented. In fact if a person's likes/ dislikes are a result of their position in the newspaper power structure, this could support not only an extrinsic model of media content but one of manipulation of media content.

I found that the definition of diversity I used for my research was not adequate. I defined diversity as African Americans, and women and men in non-traditional roles. In doing my interviews, I found that diversity is relative to each community. Diverse groups, as defined by the editors, included in these communities were the military, the elderly, and "rednecks." A better way to define diversity would be to ask each editor what she/he considers to be the diverse groups in his/her audience and/or to conduct a reader survey compiling demographic characteristics of each community.

The research that produced the five models determining media content focussed on testing only one model at a time to see whether or not it held true. This study assumed from this research that there was only minimal overlap among the models. This was not the case. This study was designed to test the personal characteristics model and an extrinsic model determining media content. In addition to evidence for these two models, the data also gave evidence for the reflection and

media routines models. This indicates to me that not only is their overlap among the models, but the models can not be tested independently from one another.

The five models can be tested simultaneously through a more comprehensive research design including interviews with the editors, a survey of the editor's attitudes and beliefs about specific forms of content, reader surveys, content analysis of the newspaper, and participant observation in the editor's work setting. Comparing a survey of the readers with a content analysis of the newspaper would help determine whether or not the newspaper reflects the audience. Observing the editor while he/she moves through his/her daily routine, as well as interviewing or surveying the editor about his/her routines and habits would provide data showing whether or not media routines affect the content of the comic strip page. Interviews with the newspaper editor and a survey covering their attitudes and beliefs over specific issues can show whether or not personal characteristics affect decision making. Extrinsic characteristics can be measured with 1) surveys of the audience measuring how much influence they feel they have over media content, 2) interviews with the publisher and owner as to their input into decision making, and 3) an analysis of the newspapers budget to determine economic capabilities. Lastly, manipulation can be measured by 1) interviewing editors to determine what types of content they

feel should be in the newspaper and why, 2) a survey of the editor's attitudes and beliefs, and 3) a content of analysis of the newspaper to determine what messages it carries.

Lastly, since this study tests only two of the five models of determination of media content it is unknown which of the five models best explains editor's decisions concerning comic strip content or media content in general.

6.4 Suggestions for Further Research

A study expanding this research to not only include more newspapers, but newspapers from a variety of geographic areas and circulation sizes, would allow researchers to make more definitive conclusions of what determines the content of comic strips and subsequently media content in general.

As stated earlier the five models determining media content should not be tested individually. They should be tested together utilizing a more comprehensive research design which includes interviews with the editors, a survey of the editor's attitudes and beliefs about specific forms of content, reader surveys, content analysis of the newspaper, and participant observation in the editors work setting.

Unlike many forms of mass media, comic strips pass through two stages of decision making -- syndication

(production) and distribution. Research is also needed to show how syndication companies handle diversity and controversy even before the comic strips reach the newspaper editors.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE LETTER

Kuleen McCoy
Date

editor's name
address

editor's name:

My name is Kuleen McCoy, and I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech. My masters thesis is entitled: What's so Funny About the Comics: How Newspaper Comic Strips are Chosen for Distribution. I plan to interview four newspaper editors in Virginia to find out how they decide which comic strips to publish. I would like to include the [name of newspaper] in my study.

I am interested in knowing the name of the editor in charge of comic strips, so I may set up a face-to-face interview. I would also like a sample copy of a daily newspaper as well as a Sunday newspaper, so I will know which comic strips are included.

Please let me know if the [name of newspaper] will be available to participate in my project. I can assure you that the name of the newspaper as well as the people interviewed will be kept confidential. I appreciate any help you may be able to give me on this project.

Please feel free to call or write if you have any questions.
wk: (703) 231-6878
hm: (703) 951-4628 (answering machine)

Thank you,

Kuleen McCoy

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS

Background Questions:

1. How long have you been in the newspaper business?
2. How long have you been at this newspaper?
3. How long have you been editor?
4. How long have you lived in this community?
5. Describe to me the different types of people living in the geographic area covered by your paper?

Controversy:

6. What are your feeling about including controversy (define term) in your newspaper?
7. How do you think your readers/advertisers feel about controversy?

I notice you print/don't print (name of comic strip).

8. Why do you /don't you print (name of comic strip)?
9. How did you decide to print/to not print (name of comic strips)?
10. Have the readers or advertisers ever responded to printing/ not printing (name of comic strip)?

Diversity:

11. What are your feelings about including diversity (define term) in your newspaper?
12. How do you think your readers/advertisers feel about diversity?

I notice you print/don't print (name of comic strip).

13. Why do you /don't you print (name of comic strip)?
14. How did you decide to print/to not print (name of comic strips)?
15. Have the readers or advertisers ever responded to printing/ not printing (name of comic strip)?

APPENDIX C

DAILY COMIC STRIPS IN EACH COMMUNITY

<u>COMMUNITY D</u>	<u>COMMUNITY B</u>	<u>COMMUNITY A</u>	<u>COMMUNITY C</u>
Blondie Peanuts The Born Loser Dennis the Menace Eek & Meek Frank & Ernest Beetle Bailey Garfield Heathcliff Mary Worth Snuffy Smith	Blondie Peanuts The Born Loser Dennis the Menace Eek & Meek Frank & Ernest Beetle Bailey Garfield Mary Worth	Blondie Peanuts The Born Loser Dennis the Menace Eek & Meek Frank & Ernest	Blondie Peanuts Beetle Bailey Heathcliff Snuffy Smith
	Calvin & Hobbes Geech Shoe	Far Side Robotman	Archie Hi & Lois The Lockhorns Mark Trail The Phantom Redeye Wizard of Id Heart of Juliet Jones

APPENDIX D

SUNDAY COMIC STRIPS IN EACH COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY A

B.C.
Beetle Bailey
Blondie
Family Circus
Frank & Ernest
Garfield
Hagar the Horrible
Marmaduke
Nancy
Peanuts
Shoe

Andy Capp
Berry's World
Dennis the Menace
Dick Tracy
Hi & Lois
The Phantom
Prince Valient
Snuffy Smith
Wizard of Id

COMMUNITY B

NONE

COMMUNITY D

B.C.
Beetle Bailey
Blondie
Family Circus
Frank & Ernest
Garfield
Hagar the Horrible
Marmaduke
Nancy
Peanuts
Shoe

Arlo & Janis
The Born Loser
Calvin & Hobbes
Cathy
Doonesbury
Far Side
For Better or For Worse
Mother Goose & Grimm
Walt Kelly's Pogo
Ziggy

COMMUNITY C

NONE

VITA

KULEEN O. MCCOY

BIRTH DATE: July 28, 1968

BIRTHPLACE: Dutchess County, New York

EDUCATION:

Masters of Science in Sociology, May 1992, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA; Thesis Title: The Funnies are a Serious Business: How Local Newspaper Editors Make Decisions Concerning Diverse and Controversial Comic Strips

Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, May 1990, Baylor University, Waco, TX

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATION:

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Research Assistant (for college credit), Baylor University, Waco, TX, August 1989-May 1990

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Kuleen O. McCoy