

2-2016

Market Matters: How Market-Driven is 'The Newsroom'?

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Ferrucci, Patrick and Painter, Chad, "Market Matters: How Market-Driven is 'The Newsroom'?" (2016). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 32.
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Market Matters: How Market-Driven is 'The Newsroom'?

Abstract

This study examines whether the award-winning news show *The Newsroom* depicted on HBO practices what John McManus defined as market-driven journalism. McManus posited that organizations practicing market-driven journalism compete in the four markets he describes in his market theory for news production. This study found that *The Newsroom* depicts an organization that does indeed practice market-driven journalism, with results interpreted through the lens of market theory for news production.

Disciplines

Behavioral Economics | Communication | Journalism Studies | Mass Communication | Social Influence and Political Communication

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Market matters: How market-driven is *The Newsroom*?

ABSTRACT:

This study examines whether the news show depicted on HBO's award-winning The Newsroom practices what McManus defined as market-driven journalism. McManus posited that organisations practicing market-driven journalism compete in the four markets he describes in his market theory for news production. This study found that The Newsroom depicts an organisation that does indeed practice market-driven journalism, but journalists constantly fight to stop. These results are then interpreted through the lens of market theory for news production.

KEYWORDS:

POPULAR COMMUNICATION
TELEVISION
MARKET-DRIVEN JOURNALISM
SORKIN
QUALITATIVE
THE NEWSROOM

INTRODUCTION

McManus (1994) found that beginning in the mid 1980s, news organisations, especially broadcast ones, began a swift move toward what he dubbed market-driven journalism. He found that no longer did journalism first and foremost aim to inform the public, but rather it now placed a premium on news that would entice more viewers or readership; if this news happened to inform, then all the better. Journalism was not a service, but rather a product. The main goal of news organisations became making money. Baldasty (1992) argued that the commercialization of the press began in the middle part of the 19th century, but since news organisations earned higher profits than almost any other industry, this commercialization then did not have a large effect on news judgement (McChesney 1999). Yet, the 1980s brought with it the first substantial decline in profits for media organisations, and the increasingly corporate-owned organisations reacted by shifting more toward publishing the type of news that would result in more eyeballs and, thus, more dollars, as opposed to a better informed citizenry (Barnouw 1997; Gans 2004).

Atlantis Cable News operates in the same manner as a traditional national broadcast cable news network, according to numerous television reporters and critics (e.g., Bell 2013; Carlson 2012; Morabito 2012; Robert and Gary 2012; Thomson 2013). However, ACN is not real. The 24-hour news channel comes from the imagination of veteran television and film writer Aaron Sorkin. HBO subscribers view the behind-the-scenes drama and tension of ACN while watching *The Newsroom*, an award-winning drama that premiered on the premium cable channel on June 24, 2012. On the programme, the characters principally work on a nightly news programme titled *News*

Night. The Newsroom, which stars Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, Dev Patel, Olivia Munn and Sam Waterston, among others, is not creator Sorkin's first attempt at dramatizing the media industry. The Emmy and Oscar winner also created the critically acclaimed comedy *Sports Night* (1998-2000) and the drama *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006-2007). Before launching *The Newsroom*, Sorkin spent more than a year inside various broadcast newsrooms, with an ultimate goal of recreating the ins and outs of the cable news industry (Huver 2011).

This purpose of this study is to investigate if and how, during its first season, *The Newsroom's* ACN practices market-driven journalism. The study is significant because portrayals on television influence how viewers see the real world (Gerbner 1998). Ehrlich (1997) argued that depictions of journalists in popular culture influence perceptions in the real world, and if they see journalists influenced by financial issues and not traditional journalism ethics, this could result in negative and possibly incorrect perceptions of the journalistic industry. Unlike most fictional programming concerning journalism (Ehrlich 1997), *The Newsroom* allows viewers a look at not only the newsroom, but also the management of this station. After the analysis of the programme, the researchers will discuss these findings and investigate the implications of actions depicted, especially as they relate to the cultural conditioning of future journalists.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Portrayals Of Journalists In Popular Culture

Journalism made its first appearance in film right around the time of the first film (Ehrlich 1997). Since then, journalists played a large, positive role in many fictional films and television series. Films as disparate as 1931's *The Front Page* and 2009's *State of*

Play and television programs such as *Lou Grant* and *Sports Night* romanticized and depicted an idealized version of journalism while also providing the main storylines for fictional programming.

The nonfiction book *All The President's Men* provided the source material for perhaps the most iconic depiction of journalism in popular culture (Schudson 1992). The 1976 Academy Award-winning film of the same time gave viewers a glimpse of how Woodward and Bernstein, then reporters at the *Washington Post*, investigated and ultimately broke the Watergate scandal. The film depicts an idealistic and romanticized version of journalism that showed a laser-like focus on uncovering corruption and holding powerful figures accountable to the public; this movie favorably affected the public's opinion of journalism at the time (Schudson 1992).

However, while many films and television programs provided viewers with positive depictions of journalists and the journalism industry, negative depictions abound also. Former journalist turned television producer/writer David Simon used the fifth season of his critically adored series *The Wire* to detail the manner in which he believed the media currently fails society (Simon 2011). Author (2012; 2014) conducted two analyses of *The Wire's* fifth season and found that many journalists working at a fictionalized version of *The Baltimore Sun* prioritized profit and fame over disseminating vital information, had numerous ethical lapses, and constructed news not through reporting but rather attending pseudo-events. *Shattered Glass* retold the story of Stephen Glass, the former *New Republic* journalist eventually caught for plagiarizing dozens of stories. While the film presents a positive view of other journalists on the magazine's staff, it depicts an industry that cares more about good stories than the truth (Ehrlich

2005). Aaron Sorkin's *Sports Night* depicted a cable sports newsroom overflowing with a focus on the personal and not the professional, along with a set of borderline incompetent and overemotional producers in charge (Author 2012). Whether the portrayal leans positively or negatively, fictional depictions of journalists can affect the public's perceptions of the industry as a whole (Ehrlich 1997).

Market-Driven Journalism

McManus (1994) defined market-driven journalism as the trend toward making news 'explicitly a commodity' (1). He argued that journalists in a market-driven newsroom will select for stories the 'issues and events that have the greatest ratio of expected appeal for demographically desirable audiences' (114). In a study that examined different approaches to business orientation, scholars defined a market-driven environment as one that concentrates on 'learning, understanding, and responding to stakeholder perceptions and behaviours within a given market structure' (Jaworski, Kohli, and Sahay 2000, 47). So while journalism, historically, aims to inform citizens and assist in strengthening democracy, a move toward market-driven journalism could result in something very different. Rather than inform readers or viewers, market-driven news organisations entertain while possibly informing.

McChesney (2004) argued that market-driven news organisation does not, necessarily, provide the kind of news that fosters democracy. Only occasionally, when the interests of profit and newsworthiness line up will this type of news organisation function in a manner that aims to inform the citizenry. Beam (1998) wrote that all news organisations are market-driven or, as he called it, market oriented, to an extent. To be market oriented, he wrote, is to focus on potential customers' wants and that

the successful market-oriented firm identifies a potential market opportunity, selects a group of customers that it wants to serve and develops a strategy for efficiently meeting the wants and needs of those customers. The central business assumption is that long-run success depends on a strong, organisation-wide focus on customer wants and needs (Beam 1998, 2).

Even a nonprofit organisation focuses at least minimally on the public's wants, as opposed to its needs, because it still must generate enough public interest enough to make the organisation worthwhile or sustainable. Strongly market-oriented newsrooms concern themselves more with profit; the main goal is to generate as much income as possible (Beam 2001). Weakly market-oriented newsrooms focus strongly on providing a service while also keeping the interest of its intended audience.

As news organisations moved from the early 20th century to the last two decades of that century, a shift toward stronger market orientations accelerated (Bagdikian 2004; Barnouw 1997; McManus 1994). Bagdikian (2004) and McChesney (1999), among others, cite the move from family ownership to corporate control of news organisations as the main reason for this shift. Advertising became more vital as market orientation became stronger. A typical news organisation generates the vast majority of its profits through advertising (Schudson 2003). Baker (1994) noted that need for advertising makes journalism function under a dual-product model. Only consumers purchase a traditional product, such as a toaster; however, journalism must sell itself to consumers and advertisers. When a news organisation is dependent on advertising and strongly market oriented, it is easier to affect content. McManus (1994) found that strongly market-oriented newsrooms feature more of a porous wall between the editorial department and other departments in the organisation. For example, in a strongly market-oriented newsroom, business executives will have a large say in what journalists cover. Kovach

and Rosenstiel (2007) found that one way broadcast news becomes more market driven is through the adoption of an argument culture. They argued that it is cheaper and potentially more profitable for networks to book guests that vaguely represent ideological extremes and just have them bicker back and forth on the news. In a market-driven newsroom, advertising becomes more important. Baker (1994) posited that the essentialness of advertising manifests itself in content through the news organisation's favorable treatment of advertisers' products, ideas and subsidiaries; the goal of a creating content that induces a buying mood to incline readers or viewers to react favorably to advertisements; a reduction in partisanship and controversial elements in order to avoid offending advertisers' potential customers; and a focus on middle- to higher-income audiences whose purchasing power advertisers seek.

To account for how a market-driven environment manifests itself into the production of news processes at a news organisation, McManus (1994) developed a market theory for news production, which transforms traditional market theory into a model more germane to both print and broadcast news organisations.

Market Theory For News Production.

In his book *Market-Driven Journalism*, McManus (1994) presents a theory combining classic elements of market theory with fundamental characteristics of how news organisations produce news. This theory says that market-driven, 'rational news departments should compete with each other to offer the least expensive mix of content that protects the interests of sponsors and investors while garnering the e-largeslargest audience of advertisers will pay to reach' (85).

Traditional market theory posits that when markets work correctly, they possess certain characteristics. Main and Baird (1981) stated that in a market economy, consumers define quality and value; producers will respond to consumers' needs and desires; a market will self correct if not fulfilling fulfilling those needs; consumers possess a freedom of choice; the market allocates society's resources efficiently; and producers possess a motivation to succeed and innovate.

In the United States, corporations own and control the vast majority of news organisations and outlets (Bagdikian 2004). The corporations adhere to market philosophies in most circumstances (Barnouw 1997). McManus (1994) argued that commercial news organisations in the United States trade within four markets concurrently: the market for audience, in which firms compete for readers and viewers; the stock market, because most firms trade stock of their corporations and desire higher valuations; the advertising market, as most firms compete for advertising revenue; and a market for sources, as the firms compete for information to disseminate from sources. According to market theory, if these four markets operate efficiently and consistently, news outlets should produce high-quality and immensely interesting news products because of success in the market for audience; successful news outlets should increase stock prices through the stock market and then make their product even stronger; entice numerous advertisers lured through large consumer numbers and a quality product; and a large amount of sources providing information because they desire the most thorough dissemination of their information (Barnouw 1997; McManus 1992; McManus 1994; Meyer 1987). However, news organisations and news consumers would agree this desired outcome so far eludes both parties (Gans 2004).

The market theory for news production introduced by McManus (1994) acknowledges the inherent tension between traditional market theory and the predetermined goal of journalism, which, he argued, allows for market failure for news organisations and news consumers. McChesney (2004) and other scholars posit that this tension alleviates when newsworthy and information of interest to the public aligns. However, often, information only satisfies one of those conditions. And therefore, McManus (1994) argued that serving the market could conflict with the serving the public.

Aaron Sorkin and The Newsroom

Aaron Sorkin's *The Newsroom* premiered on HBO on June 24, 2012. Sorkin has a long had a fascination with journalism, creating the critically acclaimed *Sports Night*, and often depicting journalists at work in *The West Wing*. Sorkin also presented a media organisation in his short-lived series *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*. For *The Newsroom*, Sorkin wanted a show based around journalists and news executives 'who are very good at their jobs and less good at everything else. Reporters used to be the good guys in popular culture, and I wanted to write them that way,' said Sorkin (Rice 2012). While television critics met early episodes of the series with consternation, media scholars appreciated the drama's realistic focus on the news production process (Association 2012). The journalism industry currently suffers from financial cuts and a strongly negative public perception, with cable television news accounting for the brunt of this criticism (Pew 2011), but Sorkin created *The Newsroom* because he believed cable news could still provide for the public's needs (Morabito 2012). With the journalists on *The*

Newsroom, ‘Sorkin makes it clear that these men remain the standard bearers of good journalism’ (Andersen 2013, 14).

The Newsroom depicts an entire news organisation, from the executives in charge of the conglomeration that owns ACN, to the journalists in the newsroom (Rose 2013). However, on previous programmes, Sorkin explored both journalists and, in some minor cases, media executives. On *Sports Night*, Sorkin only occasionally gave viewers a glimpse beyond the newsroom and into the executive offices (Author, 2012). In *Sports Night*, Sorkin primarily focused on the interplay between the journalists working on the fictional sports show, but occasionally the conglomerate that owned the fictional channel broadcasting the show received a mention (Author, 2012). The journalists on *Sports Night* constantly worried about the conglomerate’s bottom line and eventually experienced a change in ownership. While executives created drama for the journalists, they were never shown and Sorkin showed only journalists and consultants. On *The West Wing*, journalists broke stories and acted as watchdogs of power, specifically concerning Washington politics, but the economics of journalism received nary a mention (Holbert, Pillion, Tschida, Armfield and Daulton 2003).

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But *The Newsroom*’s cast includes both Jane Fonda and Chris Messina, actors who portray the CEO and president of the fictional network’s parent corporation, AWN. Other corporate executives also appear occasionally. Sorkin made this decision because he wanted viewers to understand that journalists do not make all news-related decisions at a network (Carlson 2012). In this study, the researchers will analyze the actions of both the journalists and non-journalists depicted on *The Newsroom* through the lens of market theory for news production. Sorkin contends he aimed for a heightened

sense of realism with *The Newsroom* and sought for viewers to understand some of the good done by journalists (Thomson 2013). Sorkin may view his characters as ‘the standard bearers of good journalism,’ but McManus (1994) argued that if a news organisation practices market-driven journalism, it only provides quality news some of the time. And since viewers will form opinions of journalists based on what they see on the programme, it is important to understand how *The Newsroom* depicts this intersection of journalism and economics.

RQ: Does the news show depicted on The Newsroom practice market-driven journalism?

METHOD

To probe the question of whether *News Night* practices market-driven journalism, researchers conducted a textual analysis of the first season of *The Newsroom*. Both text and video of the 10 episodes from the season that aired between June 24 and Aug. 26, 2012, provided the unit of analysis for this study. For this textual analysis, the researchers focused on narrative aspects of *The Newsroom*, primarily conducting an analysis as defined by Toby Miller (2010) in his book concerning television studies. Narratives induce people to make decisions about aspects of the programme and an analysis of narrative also makes people make decisions about the artifact they are consuming (Foss 2004).

Textual analysis allows researchers to understand what people produce on television (Berger 1998). Scholars utilize textual analysis when examining television programming because it helps ‘unearth the meaning of individual programs and links them to broader social formations and problems’ (Miller 2010, 23) and ‘identify the ideological tenor of the content’ (Miller 2010, 32). Researchers can conduct a textual

analysis of television programming in two main ways: one using a grounded theory approach, and one manner that examines content through the lens of a particular theory (Berger 1998). For this study, researchers used the latter approach by analyzing the data through market theory for news production.

For this study, two researchers independently viewed the entire first season of *The Newsroom* over a 10-day period. Both researchers took notes on how aspects of market-driven journalism affected news production on the show. After comparing notes, both researchers independently viewed the first season of the show once again, this time taking copious and close notes pertaining to all tenets of market-driven journalism established by McManus (1994). These notes were then combined and analyzed. During the analysis, researchers identified themes and subsequently categorized the data into these themes, as often done in qualitative analyses (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Then, finally, one researcher wrote the findings section for this study. Miller (2010) argued that ‘television has become an alembic for understanding society’ (145), and this study looks to *The Newsroom* to, at least in one small way, understand how society views that interaction between the corporate and editorial goals of a news organisation.

FINDINGS

Since this textual analysis incorporated market theory for news production, researchers examined data concerning elements of said theory. The theory identifies four markets that market-driven newsrooms compete in: the market for audience, in which firms compete for readers and viewers; the stock market, because most firms trade stock of their corporations and desire higher valuations; the advertising market, as most firms compete for advertising revenue; and a market for sources (McManus 1994). Researchers

examined the data for influences at the macro, meso and micro levels. At the macro level, business executives, investors and corporate officers make decisions that affect news. At the meso level, it is advertisers that place pressure on news organisations, and at the micro level, consumers themselves exert some control on how a news organisation operates.

Market For Audience

News organisations compete for readers and viewers, and the fictional Atlantis Cable News is no exception. This competition, or need to compete, can be seen clearly beginning with a conversation between Executive Producer MacKenzie McHale and Anchor Will McAvoy in Episode 1, 'We Just Decided To.' McHale wants to change the format of the within-the-show news program, *News Night*, to focus on serious news while McAvoy has consciously chosen to stop doing serious news because he thinks fluff news leads to a bigger audience. McAvoy clearly is trying not to upset his audience so he can drive ratings for advertising.

McHale: You're terrified you're going to lose your audience, and you'd do anything to get them back. You're one pitch meeting away from doing the news in 3D.

McAvoy: This isn't non-profit theater. It's advertiser-supported television. You know that, right?

McHale: I'd rather do a good show for 100 people than a bad one for 1 million, if that's what you're saying.

McAvoy: What is it that you're talking to me about right now?

McHale: I've come here to produce a news broadcast that more closely resembles the one we did before you got popular by not bothering anyone, Leno.

McAvoy: I think Jay and I would rather be employed if it's all the same to you.

McHale: It's not all the same to me, you punk. I've come here to take your IQ and your talent, and put it to some patriotic fucking use. And where does it say that a good news show can't be popular.

McAvoy: Nielson ratings.

McHale: We're going to do a good news show and make it popular at the same time.

McAvoy: That is impossible.

ACN Executive Editor Charlie Skinner later tells McAvoy that he cannot be afraid to lose viewers by having an opinion. Skinner references Murrow and McCarthy, as well as Cronkite and Vietnam. His implication is that news is more important than viewership. A news organisation cannot think about viewership, Skinner argues, only about doing the news well. Ultimately, McAvoy agrees and *News Night* switches formats to concentrate on serious news.

This switch, consequently, does hurt ratings. Other cable and network news programs continue to report less-serious news, and *News Night* loses its audience, which catalyzes the show to focus on updates concerning the Casey Anthony trial as a means to increase ratings. In Episode 8, 'The Blackout Part 1: Tragedy Porn,' Skinner, McAvoy, and McHale meet with Reese Lansing, the vice president of ACN and son of its owner. Lansing is upset *News Night* has lost about half of its audience because it is not covering the Casey Anthony trial. After the meeting, Skinner and McAvoy decide to start covering Casey Anthony, dedicating 20 minutes per show to the trial. Skinner admits that he hates having to sink to the level of ACN's competitors, but he is still going to do so because half of *News Night*'s audience is changing the channel. Clearly, the audience matters. Sorkin and the writers implicitly let viewers know that at a news network, ultimately the drive for profit is stronger than the drive to disseminate serious news. *News Night* is losing to HLN and Nancy Grace, and they are competing heavily in this market, so they need to do something. Because they are losing audience, and subsequently advertising rates, Skinner and McAvoy decide that Casey Anthony is more important than serious news. McHale later tries to reach a compromise by suggesting that *News Night* cover the

trial differently than other stations, but McAvoy says, ‘What’s the point of covering this if we don’t cover it in a way that gets the audience back?’ McAvoy basically is acknowledging not only the market for audience but also that the consumer can influence how, and not just if, a story will be covered.

Stock Market

News coverage also might have a direct or indirect effect on the larger organisation. Many news organisations are owned by parent companies that trade on the stock market, and news coverage on a particular ~~programme might~~ programme might have larger implications for the parent company. *News Night*’s parent company, AWN, did trade in the stock market, and the switch to serious news did not sit well with the company’s owner, Leona Lansing. In Episode 3, ‘The 112th Congress,’ Lansing holds a meeting with Skinner to tell him to cool the rhetoric on *News Night* regarding the Tea Party.

Skinner: (in boardroom, just him and Leona) Leona, you can’t possibly expect us to tailor our news coverage to what best suits our corporate...

Lansing: (putting up hand to silence Charlie) Let’s start over, and, this time, disabuse yourself of the idea that this is a conversation between equals where I make an argument, you make a counterargument, and we agree to disagree. Our cable news division accounts for less than three percent of AWM’s annual revenue. (Pointing finger at Charlie) You don’t make money for stockholders, which I have a fiduciary responsibility to do. Well, last night, the voters ousted 21 percent of Congress, including seven members of the House Subcommittee on Communications and Technology. Three of those seven are AWM’s most reliable friends on the Hill. Now, the Congressmen that will be replacing them are the same people that Will has been making look like fucking morons for the last six months.

Skinner: They’ve done a pretty good job making themselves look like morons.

Lansing: I have business before this Congress, Charlie, and whatever you may think of these people, which is the same thing I think of them, they hold the keys to the future of AWM. Anything more than a pack of gum,

and I have to go to Congress for permission. I don't make the rules, but I do abide by them.

Lansing threatens to fire McAvoy, telling Skinner that the news division does not make money for stockholders, but it sure can lose money for them. Lansing basically is arguing that Skinner needs to consider how *News Night* can hurt the parent company's bottom line when he decides what to cover on his program.

The conversation continues in Episode 6, 'Bullies,' when Lansing again threatens to fire McAvoy unless his programme stops costing the parent company money. Lansing argues that the loss of tax loopholes, which has hurt the bottom line and the stock price, is a direct reaction to McAvoy's broadcasts. She tells Skinner that such broadcasts will stop, or she will create a context where she can fire McAvoy even though he has good ratings.

Advertising Market

Baldasty (1992) argued that news values have been commercially redefined to include a concern for the bottom line, and news itself has been defined as a commodity to be shaped and marketed with an eye for profit. In Episode 2, '*News Night 2.0*,' Skinner tells Reese Lansing that there are two possible conversations: How to do the best possible news, and how to get the most audience. Skinner wants a clear separation between news and advertising content; he does not want those two possible conversations to have anything to do with one another. This sentiment is furthered by McAvoy with an on-air apology in Episode 3, 'The 112th Congress':

McAvoy: The reason we failed isn't a mystery. We took a dive for the ratings. In the infancy of mass communication, the Columbus and Magellan of broadcast journalism, William Paley and David Sarnoff, went down to Washington to cut a deal with Congress. Congress would allow the fledgling networks free use of taxpayer-owned airwaves in exchange for one public service. That public service would be one hour of airtime

set aside every night for informational broadcasting, or what we now call the evening news. Congress, unable to anticipate the enormous capacity television would have to deliver consumers to advertisers, failed to include in its deal the one requirement that would have changed our national discourse immeasurably for the better. Congress forgot to add that under no circumstances could there be paid advertising during informational broadcasting. They forgot to say the taxpayers will give you the airwaves for free, and for 23 hours a day you should make a profit, but for one hour a night, you work for us.

McAvoy is apologizing for market-driven journalism. He is saying that he and the *News Night* staff are clearly separating the two possible discussions. They will concentrate on how to do the best possible news, not on how to get the most audience.

McAvoy shows in Episode 4, 'I'll Try to Fix You,' that he is serious about separating news from advertising and ratings. He is anchoring breaking coverage of the Gabriel Giffords shooting in Arizona, and Reese Lansing is pressuring the *News Night* team to announce that she is dead because other organisations already have.

Lansing: (storming into newsroom, shouting to Charlie) Why hasn't he called it yet?

Skinner: (walking away) I don't have time right now.

Lansing: (walking into the control room, to MacKenzie) CNN, MSNBC, and Fox say she's dead.

McHale: They're all going off the same NPR report. I'm not satisfied.

Lansing: I don't give a shit if you're satisfied (walking toward Will at news desk)

McHale: What the hell is he...hey!

McAvoy: (after leading into a taped interview, turns to Reese, Charlie, and MacKenzie) What's going on?

Lansing: (to Will) Every second you're not current, a thousand people are changing the channel to the guy who is. That's the business you're in. MSNBC, Fox, and CNN all say she's dead.

Lansing here is putting ratings, and the advertising that comes with them, ahead of the news and the traditional norms and ethics of journalism such as verification. Of course, Giffords is not dead. A reporter is told that Giffords is being prepped for surgery, and McAvoy immediately announces the news on the air. *News Night* is right, while NPR,

Fox, MSNBC, and CNN are wrong. By not caving to Lansing and his ratings demands, *News Night* actually is more current than the competition, but the entire scene implicitly acknowledges the power of advertising. The parent company's executive cares enough about ratings and the ensuing advertising dollars that he himself visits the newsroom to pressure journalists on what to report.

Market For Sources

News organisations also compete for information to disseminate, and *News Night* is trying to differentiate itself from the competition. When *News Night* shifted to a serious news format, more and better guests wanted to come on the show. In Episode 2, '*News Night 2.0*,' McAvoy is going to interview Arizona Governor Jan Brewer about an Arizona immigration bill. Producer Jim Harper is surprised that the programme scheduled such an in-demand and elusive guest.

McHale: We've got the governor for nine minutes.

Harper: Just us. She's only talking to Will.

Unnamed reporter: How did you swing that?

McHale: By telling her about *News Night 2.0*.... I convinced her she's not going to have to outshout a crazy person. That studio is a courtroom, and we only call expert witnesses. Will is the attorney for both sides. He examines the witness and reveals facts. You'll be amazed at the guests we'll book using that unbelievably simple template.

The implication is that better-informed and more-prominent guests will want to come on the show because of its serious news format. Guests will not 'have to outshout a crazy person,' a clear knock on cable news and ratings. This new *News Night* will have discussions that citizens can use, not just an argument culture.

News Night does get the best sources. In Episode 1, '*We Just Decided To*,' *News Night* is the only programme going big with the BP oil spill story. Consequently, the program's bookers are able to line up interviews with several in-demand experts. The

show makes it clear to viewers that these sources would not appear on any other network.

This happens continuously while the programme reports quality news.

However, the quality of guests drops significantly when Skinner and McAvoy decide to abandon journalistic principles to chase ratings by covering the Casey Anthony trial. The implication is that if journalism organisations succeed in the previous three markets, it may hurt it in terms of the market for sources. In Episode 8, 'The Blackout Part 1: Tragedy Porn,' the *News Night* team gets a primer from producer Don Keefe on how to find people to interview about nonsense stories such as Casey Anthony and Anthony Weiner.

McHale: How do we get the best guests?

Keefe: There's a guy you're gonna have to deal with named Dylan Kagan. He's like the Broadway Danny Rose of tabloid suffering.

McHale: He's an agent?

Keefe: You ever ask yourself why, of all the missing kids and murdered coeds, most of them go unnoticed and some become national scandals?

McHale: Sex appeal.

Keefe: Right, but someone's gotta find Lana Turner sitting at the drugstore counter. Dylan Kagan gropes through the trailer park of American jurisprudence for what he calls 'oh my God stories,' then he drops in on the victims, the accused, the jurors, the cops, whoever he can sell to the press, the networks, and the studios. He packages the missing white girl.

The quality of guests subsequently suffers. Congressmen, scientists, and activists are replaced by Sandy Wittles, a woman who got sexual tweets from Weiner. The implication is that serious journalism is rewarded by important and informed guests, but market-driven journalism is punished by airheads who can provide titillation but no real content that can help viewers become more-informed citizens.

DISCUSSION

This study's findings strongly illustrate how journalists on *The Newsroom* practice the market-driven journalism described by McManus (1994), even when they

clearly do not favor it. Creator and main writer Aaron Sorkin depicts a news organisation in crisis, one that previously adopted market-driven journalism, but, with the addition of new Executive Producer MacKenzie McHale, aims to treat news as a service rather than a product. In essence, season one of *The Newsroom* focuses on journalists' struggle to separate economics from journalism, the antithesis of market-driven journalism.

McManus (1994) identified, through market theory for news production, the four markets that market-driven news organisations compete in. ACN, the network that airs *News Night*, clearly competes in these four markets, some more than others. Throughout the first season of *The Newsroom*, the tension between the editorial department and business executives over ratings and gathering the largest audience possible is palpable and consistent. This tension climaxes over the editorial department's initial refusal to cover the trial of accused murderer Casey Anthony. Network executives noted that other news organisations that devoted vast amounts of coverage to the trial earned significant ratings increases, while *News Night* lost almost half of its audience during the same time period. Business executives ultimately and essentially forced journalists to cover the trial and ratings increased significantly; this showed the importance placed on the market for audience. This particular instance is a microcosm for the entire season, and it illustrates the influence both business executives and consumers have over news production at ACN. Sorkin commented to the press he wanted to depict journalists producing high quality journalism (Huver 2011), yet what he does depict is ultimately powerless journalists that must acquiesce to the wants and beliefs of corporate overseers and, less overtly, consumers themselves.

As part of the implied very large corporation AWN, the journalists employed by ACN and, specifically, *News Night*, also compete in the stock market. AWN owns numerous different types of companies and including other media entities. During one episode, CEO Leona Lansing makes it clear that while she does not expect ACN and *News Night* to deliver large profits, it cannot hurt the corporation's stock prices either. When the news organisation begins airing stories critical of the Tea Party and specific Tea Party candidates, it directly affects how AWN conducts its other businesses, which hurts the stock price of the company. It is then that Lansing tells Skinner he needs to direct editorial to be less critical of certain politicians. The company's stock price is very important, more important than airing the kind of news journalists believe is important for society.

Overlap exists between the market for audience and the market for advertising. The larger the audience, the more advertising the shows earns. This relationship is implied several times during the season, basically during each and every conversation between editorial and business executives. In one particular conversation, the manner in which ACN competes in the market for advertising becomes explicit. During a scene where AWN President Reese Lansing walks with *News Night* anchor and managing editor Will McAvoy, he mentions that reading surveys of audience preferences will drive up ratings and make certain advertisers happy, which will all in turn increase McAvoy's popularity. Throughout the season, AWN's focus on ratings and the resulting advertising dollars are a topic of conversation.

Finally, ACN's competes with other networks in the market for sources. On *The Newsroom*, it is clear that depending on the organisation's market orientation, different

sources will agree to appear. ACN and *News Night* want, like any other news organisation, the best sources possible. However, a scene in Episode 2 clearly articulates how Sorkin and the writers feel about the source market. It is explicitly mentioned that to get ‘the best sources,’ ACN cannot practice market-driven journalism. If a news organisation practices market-driven journalism, they end up with uninformed sources who cannot share new, important information and therefore just ‘yell’ at the viewers. Fundamentally, Sorkin is making the point that if an organisation is market driven, it will promote the argument culture Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) described and then, because of this culture, good sources will not appear. The market for sources is the only market a news organisation competes in that directly affects the makeup of journalistic stories. Sorkin’s implicit message to viewers remains clear: A focus on profit and consumer wants results in less expert sources, which directly and negatively affects the quality of stories produced by journalists and thus poorly contributes to the knowledge attained by viewers.

The entire first season of *The Newsroom* deals with the internal fight, by journalists, to stop practicing market-driven journalism. Executive Producer McHale and anchor and managing editor McAvoy personify both sides of this struggle. When viewers meet McHale, they are introduced to an executive producer that hopes to rage against the machine and ‘change the way television news does things.’ The implication in this statement is that she would like to stop focusing on finances and start focusing on producing quality news. As she says, ‘I’d rather do a good show for 100 people than bad one for 1 million.’ McAvoy, on the other hand, is introduced as a character obsessed with his popularity with audiences and the show’s ratings. He meets secretly, against the

wishes of his boss Charlie Skinner, with President Reese Lansing to discuss how to increase ratings and popularity. He consistently talks about what viewers want out of the news. Even after relenting and doing the show McHale proposes, when ratings slip, McAvoy is the first to change course and return to market-driven news. In many ways, the battle between McHale and McAvoy, at first, and then McHale and business executives personifies the struggle facing many journalists of the day: While they would like to produce news and the 'good show for 100,' the fear of job loss influences them enough to rationalize the show 'for 1 million.'

The action on *The Newsroom* also mirrors, in a way, the history of journalism. Baldasty (1992) and McManus (1994) both discussed the commercialization of the press and remarked on how in the early days of a commercialized press, business executives allowed journalists to, basically, produce news with little interference because profits remained very large. When profits first began to decrease around the early 1980s, at the same time corporations began buying up newspapers and television stations, more interference occurred. On *The Newsroom*, ratings increase significantly very briefly after McHale's vision of a news programme is put into action. The journalists receive very little feedback from the business executives because ratings increased. Once a decrease begins, that is when interference increases.

In its totality, the clear reading of *The Newsroom* suggests that journalists lack the same power as business executives, even while doing their own specific job. The journalists at ACN could produce, without interference, the news show that they wanted while ratings remained high and the content did not affect the parent corporation's stock prices. When threatened with diminishing ratings or lowered stock prices, executives

stepped in and against the wishes of journalists, forced the news department to practice market-driven journalism. The world of broadcast news that McManus (1994) found and described almost two decades earlier proved omnipresent at ACN. Increasingly as McManus (1994) noted, journalists continue to lose agency to produce the news they deem important and are instead forced by corporate entities to cover stories such as the Casey Anthony trial.

Miller (2010) argued that researchers study and analyze fictional television programming because ‘television has become an alembic for understanding society’ (145), and because it allows researchers to understand how the audience understands the world around it. A viewing of *The Newsroom* would reinforce the public’s negative perception of journalism as found by the Pew Research Center (2011). In that survey, the Pew found that Americans believed that journalists were failing the public and prioritized profit and acclaim over informing the public. *The Newsroom*, for the most part, absolves journalists of the blame for its depiction of the sorry state of broadcast cable news, but it still depicts this sorry state. Overall, creator Aaron Sorkin’s point is that journalists are out there trying to perform to their jobs with eye toward quality, but the profit motive that owning corporations prioritize and the market-driven journalism then enacted make this impossible. A viewer of the programme may come away feeling that regardless of journalists’ intentions, the news produced does not directly aim to inform viewers, but rather earn parent corporations more profit. Occasionally these two interests may align, but, more often than not, news remains strictly a product to further enrich the wealthy and not inform the citizenry.

McManus (1994) defined market-driven journalism as practicing journalism with an eye toward profit and not service. He argued that market-driven journalism organisations compete in four markets: the market for sources, the market for advertising, the stock market, and the market for audience. *The Newsroom* lets audiences know that if news organisations could ignore the markets for advertising and audience and the stock market, it would become exponentially successful in the market for sources and deliver a top-quality service to viewers. However, ACN and cable broadcast news in general cannot do this because of ownership structure. Therefore, according to Sorkin, these news organisations fail to give citizens what they need because, as MacKenzie McHale laments, they are ‘in business with the advertisers’ and not ‘in business with the viewers.’

While Sorkin claims to have wanted to depict a group of journalists producing quality work, or ‘the good guys’ as he called them (Huver 2011), instead he provides viewers with more evidence of the failings of the journalism industry. A viewer with an already negative perception of the industry would come away believing that journalists, ultimately, produce news meant to prioritize profit. This, of course, negatively affects the perception of journalists and the journalism industry. Even the less-informed viewer of the programme would more than likely have knowledge concerning the negative financial situation the journalism currently faces. After watching *The Newsroom*, viewers will come away feeling that the industry is heading toward a scenario where journalists only report news that people want, not need. According to a read of *The Newsroom*, market-driven journalism is current, prospering and, ultimately, negatively affecting the news delivered to viewers.

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