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Airing out the Local TV News Industry's Own Dirty Laundry:
Why are Some Investigative Reports Censored or Killed?

A thesis presented

by

Michael Beaudet

to

The School of Journalism

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in the field of

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April, 2008

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Journalism
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of
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Local television news is the country's most popular source for news; however the industry may not be as forthcoming as the public believes. There is evidence that managers at some television stations water down investigative reports or prevent them from airing at all. This study examines the reasons why local television investigations were censored or killed in New England in the last five years. Journalists reveal that managers censored four stories, which resulted in a softening of the tone of the reports. The journalists also report that managers killed 19 stories and stopped them from airing on television. Much of the reasoning behind this interference points to the fact that television stations are putting their financial interests ahead of the public's right to know.

I would like to acknowledge my thesis committee for all their guidance, feedback, and support on this research project and during my coursework at Northeastern.

Professors Belle Adler, Samantha Friedman, and Walter Robinson have continually challenged me to make the most of my graduate studies.

I would also like to thank my wife Kim for all her support helping me juggle family, work, and school commitments.

Finally, I wish to thank the journalists who agreed to speak honestly about their work experiences. It is obvious they care deeply about their profession and the future of local television news.

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Introduction

Local television newscasts remain the country's most popular choice for news, beating out local newspapers and national television newscasts by a wide margin (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007). The people watching local news have a stronger interest in serious news than in years past (Radio Television News Directors Foundation 2006). Investigative journalism is one type of serious news that is widely produced by local television stations and includes stories about government waste, corruption, fraud, and criminal activity. A 2002 survey of more than one hundred newsrooms around the country reveals that seventy-five percent of local television stations do some form of investigative reporting (Just, Levine and Regan 2002).

Despite this seemingly good news about the current state of local television news and the kind of reporting it is doing, local television news operations may not always be as objective and transparent as the public believes. Investigative journalists at local television stations aim to inform the public by exposing wrongdoing, but they are also part of the news business. When the profit-driven business side of news collides with an investigative journalist's pursuit of the truth, competing interests can result in the public being less informed or even cheated out of important information. In some cases, managers may censor or water down investigative stories in an attempt to lessen the financial backlash to the television station. In other cases, managers may kill the investigative reports and stop them from airing altogether to remove any financial risk to the television station.

There is evidence that managers are interfering with local television investigations and that they are doing it for a variety of reasons. Seventeen percent of local television

news directors say sponsors have discouraged them from pursuing stories and, in some cases, advertisers have prevailed in killing investigative reports (Just et al. 2002).

Management at KARE-TV in Minneapolis allegedly killed a report about a series of car thefts at local car dealers because the station was “concerned about antagonizing dealers” (Platt 1991). An investigative story at WCPO-TV in Cincinnati was allegedly killed because it raised questions about the influential lawyer for a powerful local businessman (Linsalata 1995). Managers at WTVT-TV in Tampa allegedly killed a series about the Florida dairy business and the use of growth hormone in cows after the maker of the growth hormone threatened to sue the television station (Borjesson 2002).

It is clear that some investigative journalists working in local television are being silenced. As a result, the public may be suffering because it is not hearing newsworthy information about the community. But what are all the reasons investigative reports at local television stations are censored or killed? And how often is it happening? This exploratory research project searches for the answers to those questions through qualitative in-depth interviews with investigative journalists working at local television stations in New England who have had stories censored or killed. They may be more willing to be truthful than news managers who may be protective of the news organization’s true motives.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2000) surveyed local and national journalists across the country about censorship. While it documented its prevalence and some of the reasons behind it, it did not delve into specific examples of censorship. Other research has detailed individual examples of management killing local television investigations (Platt 1991, Linsalata 1995, Borjesson 2002). This project

examines the censoring or killing of investigative reports at all local television stations in New England that do this type of reporting. It attempts to fill the gap in the existing literature by gathering detailed information about those stories that have been censored or killed and identifying any patterns that exist. Are certain topics more likely to be censored or killed than others? Do managers censor or kill reports for one reason more than others?

Ultimately, this study intends to raise awareness that the public's first choice for news, local news, may not be as forthcoming as people believe. When that is the case, and information that should be reported is not, the consequences can be serious. The public unknowingly suffers from a lack of information.

Theory/Literature Review

In order to understand why stories may be censored or killed, it is first necessary to review the existing theories and literature on this topic. Soley and Craig (1992) surveyed newspaper editors about advertising pressures. They found that nearly 90 percent of all editors at small and large circulation newspapers reported that advertisers attempted to influence the content of stories in the newspaper. The study revealed that more than one-third of the respondents indicated that advertisers "succeeded in influencing news or features" at their papers. It is disturbing evidence that advertiser pressure can and does lead to stories being censored and killed. When that happens, news organizations put their own interests ahead of the public's right to know.

Another theory suggests that people who are well-known in the community may be able to exert their influence and prevent negative stories about them or people close to

them from airing on television. Linsalata (1995) reveals that WCPO-TV in Cincinnati, Ohio allegedly killed a story because it raised questions about a prominent lawyer for a powerful local businessman. The lawyer was suspected of giving judges political contributions in exchange for them ruling in his favor in a custody case. This appears to be more troubling evidence that some news organizations are not acting ethically or honestly when faced with pressure from an influential person in the community. It is something that contradicts everything journalism is supposed to be about. Journalists are supposed to provide checks and balances to the government and society at large, but in some situations news organizations are actually being manipulated and controlled by powerful outsiders who are interested in their own well being, not the public's.

Another theory indicates that stories may be killed because they are not in the best interest of the owner of the television station. Robertson and Guensburg (1998) examine this type of blatant corporate pressure that killed an investigative report at ABC's 20/20. The newsmagazine was allegedly prevented from reporting about lax hiring practices and pedophiles at Walt Disney World because Walt Disney Company owns ABC. Disney was able to influence the outcome because it had corporate control over ABC. Bergman (2002) reveals that CBS's 60 Minutes stopped production on a story about a National Football League owner who was indicted. The network claimed it was no longer interested in the story, but the decision to abandon the report came just weeks after CBS signed an agreement to carry NFL games on the network.

This theory is reinforced by Turner (2004) who describes how corporate control and influence on news organizations is becoming more of a concern. Federal laws have changed that make it easier for larger corporations to own more television stations, so

there are fewer independent voices in the news business. For example, the FCC implemented changes beginning in 2003, which now allow corporations to own two stations in a television market. In addition, a single corporation can own television stations across the country as long as the station group collectively reaches no more than 39 percent of U.S. households. With fewer independent operators, Turner says, “quality suffers, localism suffers, and democracy itself suffers.” Journalists serve an important role in a democratic society by informing and enlightening the public. But if the corporation that owns the news organization interferes with that mission, it is keeping valuable information from the public and acting in hypocritical way.

The literature suggests another reason why investigative stories at local television stations could be censored or killed: fear of litigation. Borjesson (2002) tells how an investigative reporter at WTVT-TV in Tampa allegedly faced pressure to censor her story about the Florida dairy business and the use of growth hormone in cows to force the animals to produce more milk. The reporting raised questions about Monsanto, the maker of the growth hormone. After Monsanto threatened to sue the FOX owned-and-operated television station, the station allegedly caved to corporate pressure and would not air the reports. The reporter and producer say they were ultimately fired after refusing to water down their stories. Once again, this appears to be evidence of a news organization placing its own financial interests ahead of the public’s right to know. When this happens a news outlet is not carrying out its first obligation to serve the public (Radio-Television News Directors Association 2000). News organizations that withhold information about a potential health risk or public safety issue can negatively impact people’s lives.

Finally, Kohut (2000) documents another reason stories may be censored or killed: the prevalence of self-censorship in local and national newsrooms across the country. Nearly 300 journalists were surveyed in conjunction with the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. More than one-third of the respondents divulge that stories that hurt the financial interests of the news organization “often or sometimes” go unreported. Almost 30 percent of the journalists say stories that could adversely affect advertisers “often or sometimes” go unreported.

The survey also finds that local journalists are more susceptible to this type of censorship than their national counterparts. Just over 30 percent of local journalists admit softening the tone of a news story on behalf of the interests of their news organization compared with only 15 percent of national journalists. In addition, the survey finds that more than 60 percent of investigative journalists believe that corporate owners exert at least a fair amount of influence on decisions about which stories to cover. Almost half of investigative journalists believe advertising concerns influence decisions about what stories to cover or emphasize. This research provides compelling evidence that local journalists and investigative journalists are more likely than other journalists to censor themselves because of the interests of their news organizations or corporate owners.

Hypotheses

The existing literature provides the theoretical basis for my research question about why some investigative stories at local television stations are censored or killed. Below are several hypotheses derived from the review of the literature:

-Advertising pressure

Hypothesis: Advertisers will pressure newsroom managers and successfully stop negative investigative reports at television stations. This is because the loss of advertising revenue will have an impact on the television station's bottom line.

-Subject of investigation is well known in community

Hypothesis: Well-known or powerful people in the community are less likely to be the subjects of investigative reporting at local television stations because they can exert their influence on the television station.

-Story makes station or corporate owner look bad

Hypothesis: Stories that make the television station or its corporate parent look bad are unlikely to make it to air because those stories could negatively impact the television station's ability to make money.

-Fear of litigation

Hypothesis: If television stations are fearful of being sued, they will not air controversial investigative reports because they do not want to engage in costly litigation or face the possibility of paying an expensive judgment.

-Self-Censorship

Hypothesis: Investigative Journalists will decide not to pursue certain stories if they believe the report will negatively impact the television station's bottom line.

Data

My exploratory research concentrates on investigative reporters and producers working at local television stations in New England who have had stories censored or killed in the last five years. I am focusing on New England because I am from this area and had a greater chance of successfully completing interviews with the journalists. New England provides a mix of media markets of various sizes and includes small, medium, and large television markets.

First, I identified and sent a letter outlining my research to investigative journalists working at 13 local television stations in New England that dedicate resources to investigative reporting. I then followed up with multiple phone calls in an effort to determine which journalists had stories censored or killed in the last five years. I asked those journalists to participate in an in-depth face-to-face or telephone interview. Out of the 13 journalists contacted, I successfully contacted ten for a response rate of 77 percent.

I believe I had a greater chance of success by assuring the journalists that their identities would remain confidential. I did not match their names to their information and I am only identifying them as journalists working at local television stations in New England. I requested to record the interviews with the journalists so that I could more accurately analyze the data I gathered and I assured them that the audio recordings would

be destroyed after the data analysis. In another effort to maintain confidentiality, I did not include any identifiable information in my analysis about the targets of the investigations that were censored or killed. I also did not identify the number of stories a particular journalist had censored or killed since grouping them in this way could identify them to managers familiar with the pattern of censoring and/or killing.

By interviewing investigative reporters and producers on this topic, my data is gathered from rank and file employees, rather than managers. This is how Soley and Craig (1992) designed their research by surveying employees who are not subject to internal pressures from publishers. This is a strength of their design and by emulating it, is a strength of my research as well. They also provided anonymity to editors that led to a high response rate and a willingness among editors to answer questions honestly. They did this by allowing the respondents to mail back surveys without identifying who answered the survey. While I do have knowledge of who answered my questions, the steps previously outlined helped convince the journalists that I am sensitive about confidentiality. I also conveyed that I am keenly aware from my own experience as an investigative reporter at a local television station in Boston about why confidentiality is so important when discussing something like this. It is the only way to avoid retaliation in the workplace.

My study expands upon previous research by Kohut (2000) and Price (2003) that relied on surveys to measure the reasons why stories are censored or killed. By conducting qualitative in-depth interviews with journalists who have had stories censored or killed, I clearly identify any and all factors that led to the censoring and killing of these stories. By not limiting respondents to a set of answers, they reveal what they believe is

the true cause of why some investigative reports at local television stations meet this fate. This results in perhaps slightly greater levels of internal validity for this research compared to previous research.

A potential weakness of the study design is that some investigative reporters and producers may not actually be aware of the real reason why a story airs or does not air since that is a decision made by their managers. The managers may give the journalists one explanation, when there is really another one. Conversely, the journalists may believe there is a sinister motive when management is simply not interested in the topic of the investigation. These weaknesses could be a threat to the internal validity of the study.

While my sampling size is limited to New England, there is no evidence that the results would not be the same in other parts of the country. Newsrooms in every city across the country are under similar financial pressures that could cause managers to censor or kill stories. However, further research on a larger sample of investigative reporters and producers is needed to verify the external validity of this exploratory research.

Methodology

My unit of analysis is at the story level, focusing on individual stories that have been censored or killed. My questions of the journalists were designed to get at the competing explanations of why stories are censored or killed. I tried to minimize any influence my questions could have on their answers and began by asking general questions about each story that was censored or killed. Here are some examples of the questions that were asked:

*Tell me about the story that was censored or killed. What is it about?

*Take me through the process of gathering the information you collected on this topic.

*When did you first suspect the story might be censored or killed?

*What led you to believe this would be the outcome?

*Why do you think your story was censored or killed?

*What makes you believe that?

I asked about any people or companies named in their responses to determine if a relationship exists with the television station:

*Is it an advertiser?

*Is it someone who is considered powerful or influential in the community?

I then asked other sets of questions depending on which hypothesis seemed to be supported by the journalist's answers.

Most of my data is qualitative. However I did gather some quantitative data in order to provide a count of the number of stories censored or killed. After transcribing the interviews, I searched for key words said by the journalists that related to the topic of the report that was censored or killed. This allowed me to identify the types of stories managers are censoring or killing. Here are some examples of the key words that help establish the types of stories impacted:

-Stories about advertisers

Key words: advertising, client, money

-Stories about businesses

Key words: business, company, powerful

-Stories about person or business with ties to the station

Key words: relationship, connection, friend

-Stories about public officials

Key words: public, official, elected

-Story about prominent institution

Key words: community, respected

-Story about charitable organization

Key words: charity, charitable

Once I established the types of stories censored or killed, I searched for key words that would support my hypotheses as well as other explanations about why stories are censored or killed. Here are some examples of the key words that enabled me to do this:

-Concern about upsetting advertiser**Key words:** “lose money or account”, “can’t afford it”**-Threat to pull ads****Key words:** “call from advertiser”, “sales department”**-Concern about getting sued****Key words:** lawyer, lawsuit, expensive**-Threat of litigation****Key words:** “call from attorney”, “file a lawsuit”**-Concern about straining relationship with person or business with ties to the station****Key words:** business, relationship, connection**-Concern about making station look bad****Key words:** “not interested”, “not do it”

These key words helped provide a systematic approach for analyzing the data.

This is a strength of the design of the research project because it reduces the chance that I am simply deciding what hypothesis is supported based on my interpretation of what was said in the interview. The key words provide evidence to support the hypotheses.

However, I also needed to be aware of emerging key words and patterns that I did not identify so they could be included in my analysis.

Results

Eight of the 13 local television investigative journalists from New England contacted for this research admit having a total of 23 stories censored or killed in the past five years. Only two journalists say this has not happened, although one of those journalists acknowledges that management killed a story at an earlier date not covered by this research. The remaining three journalists did not respond to repeated requests to be interviewed on this subject. It is not known whether that is because they have not had investigative reports censored or killed, or whether they are reluctant to talk about this sensitive subject.

The interviews with the eight journalists who have had investigative reports censored or killed reveal that managers are regularly interfering with local television investigations. The respondents indicate that stories are more likely to be killed outright and prevented from airing at all, rather than be censored and watered down in some way. In the five-year period covered by this study, the journalists report that their managers killed nineteen stories (83 percent) and censored four others (17 percent).

The journalists uniformly and repeatedly expressed their frustration about this management interference on the investigative news reporting process:

“It’s just everything that journalism does not stand for. Journalism is supposed to be the fourth estate. Journalists are supposed to be watchdogs and they’re supposed to expose wrong and they’re supposed to promote change. It’s just crippling.”

“The United States is the birthplace of modern journalism, but yet because we’re based on a capitalist society there are some serious pitfalls to it.”

“It’s very discouraging. It’s demoralizing. If those types of institutions or people are off limits then what the hell are we supposed to be doing? Little low impact, no impact stories? That’s not what I want to do.”

“What are we really about? Are we really doing our jobs?”

Types of stories censored/killed

The results show that there are certain types of investigative stories at local television stations that are more likely to be censored or killed than others (see Table 1). The most common type of story censored or killed by management involves an advertiser. Nine stories were killed and three others were censored for this reason (52 percent). Managers killed another four stories about people or businesses with ties to the television station (17 percent). Even businesses that do not advertise or have some other connection to the television station flex their muscle, in some cases threatening to sue the station. This resulted in management killing two stories and censoring another (13 percent). In addition, two stories about public officials were killed (nine percent). Management also killed stories about a prominent institution and a charitable organization (four percent each).

TABLE 1: TYPES OF STORIES CENSORED/KILLED			
TOPIC	REASONS	NUMBER KILLED /CENSORED	EXAMPLE EVIDENCE
Stories about advertisers	a) Concern about upsetting advertiser	6 Killed	“(The manager) said (the company) is a big advertiser. I don’t think you should do that story.”
		2 Censored	“(The journalist) couldn’t identify (the advertiser). It was an issue of not wanting to offend the advertiser.”
	b) Threat to pull ads	3 Killed	“(Management) said this story is not going to air. This is a lot of money for us.”
		1 Censored	“(The advertiser) called up the (manager) and said look, I won’t do any more advertising. (The story) got done, but (management) trimmed it like crazy.”
Stories about people or businesses with ties to the station	a) Concern about straining relationship	3 Killed	“(The manager) said we’re not doing the story. Never got an answer (about why), but I knew it was (the relationship).”
	b) Concern about making station look bad	1 Killed	“I was told, ‘We’re not interested in doing that story.’ Instead of putting the brain power and the insight into how to deal with it ethically, it’s easier to just not do it.”
Stories about businesses	a) Concern about getting sued	1 Killed	“We thought for sure they were afraid there was going to be a lawsuit.”

	b) Threat of litigation	1 Killed	“Even though the lawyers have said you’re fine, you’re fine, I think they see it as possibly the station getting sued and that means they’re going to have to pay to fight a lawsuit.”
		1 Censored	“The lawyer contacted my station and said they’re going to sue us and then we backed away from the story... It finally aired once, but (with restrictions).”
Stories about public officials	a) Concern about getting sued	1 Killed	“(The story) sort of just died. They wouldn’t deal with it.”
	b) Threat of litigation	1 Killed	“I was shocked that (the station) would bow to a lawyer... they pulled the story.”
Story about prominent institution	a) Concern about getting sued	1 Killed	“It just never got approved. They didn’t want to take that risk.”
Story about charitable organization	a) Concern about getting sued	1 Killed	“The (manager) just shook (his/her) head no. They were afraid. And I presume because they don’t want to get sued.”

*Stories about advertisers

The data suggests strong support for the hypothesis that pressure from advertisers is the most likely reason stories are censored or killed. But a closer look at the results, and the reasons behind the decisions to censor or kill stories, reveals something more complex. Only one-third of the 12 stories about advertisers that were censored or killed met that fate because the advertiser actually pressured the television station and

threatened to stop advertising. Management is much more likely to censor or kill a story because it does not want to upset an advertiser and risk losing advertising revenue, even if that advertiser has not tried to influence the decision.

For example, six journalists report that managers kill stories and tell the journalists to stop investigating the subject if the topic involves an advertiser. (Three examples are outlined here.) One journalist describes looking into illegal activity involving an advertiser.

“We knew we were going to be putting (management) in an uncomfortable position because (the company) is a major advertiser.”

The journalist recounts hoping that the television station would pursue the investigation anyway, given the alleged criminal activity. But instead management killed the story and the illegal activity involving the advertiser continued without being exposed by the television station.

“That’s a big story, so money was the bottom line there. It’s obvious. No other explanation because they’re a huge advertiser.”

Another journalist relays a similar experience with an investigation about an advertiser allegedly taking advantage of customers.

“We brought that up as a potential topic to look into. We were pretty much told just to stay away from that because they did quite a bit of advertising and regardless of the number of complaints we should stay away from that.”

In another example, a journalist says managers took steps to protect a lucrative advertising account and killed a report that focused on complaints about one of the

advertiser's products. The advertiser was aware of the report, and at least to the journalist's knowledge, had not tried to stop the television station from airing the investigation.

“The story was factually sound. They weren't threatening to sue, they weren't threatening to pull advertising, they weren't doing any of that.”

The journalist believes the fear of losing advertising revenue led to the decision to kill the report, even though management would not acknowledge that.

“Nothing was ever said. They would never come out and say this is the reason why we're doing it—because of advertising.”

Despite the story not airing, the problem the report aimed to expose did not go away.

“We had lots of consumers in the area who complained. Then you've got to deal with all the people you interviewed wanting to know when they're going to be on. It puts you in a bad position.”

Sometimes advertisers do fight to have stories killed and threaten to pull advertising if they are not. The data shows management killed three of the twelve investigative stories about advertisers after the advertisers pressured the television stations. (Two examples are outlined here.) One journalist describes preparing an investigative report about an advertiser who had admitted deceiving customers. When the advertiser discovered a photographer videotaping the business, the advertiser called the television station. Within minutes, the journalist heard from someone at the station.

“All of a sudden I got a call from the station. Somebody had called the sales guy, who called our promotion guy who knew them and (called me and) said what are you doing? What are you doing out there? And I said I’m doing my job, buzz off.”

Despite this show of defiance, the journalist soon learned the story would not air that night as expected. In fact, the story would never make it on the air.

“When I got back, the national and local sales managers had gotten calls from (the advertiser). It’s the classic dilemma. I never heard the conversation from them. But it was clear the threat was there, that they might pull advertising if we ran the story.”

But management at the television station did not admit caving in to pressure from an advertiser. Instead, the journalist says management tried blaming the killing of the story on the report itself by questioning its legitimacy.

“I gave (the manager) a script, and (the manager) said, ‘You know I just don’t see a story here.’ You don’t see a story? And I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It literally stopped me. I had no response to that. I said, ‘So we’re not going to do a story?’ And (the manager) said, ‘Well I just don’t see it.’”

The research reveals that some aggressive advertisers will do almost anything to stop a negative story from airing. Bullying words succeeded in stopping a story about an advertiser from airing at one television station. The journalist says the advertiser made a veiled threat to have the journalist fired.

“(The advertiser) said I got to warn you, you could be risking your job if you go forward with this story. We spend a lot of money with advertising and we will pull our advertisements so quick if you even do anything.”

The journalist says the threats from the advertiser soon reached management at the television station, which promptly backed down and decided to shelve the story.

“(Management) said this story is not going to air. This is a lot of money for us. I had all my ducks in a row and basically they were like, ‘We can’t have you air this story. This will really kill the (advertiser).’ And the story never aired.”

A troubling outcome for the journalist who believes the topic of the investigation is important to viewers because it involves a potential risk to consumers and alleged deception on the part of the advertiser. The journalist calls the backing down by management in the face of a threat by the advertiser disappointing.

“It was awful because you see something that’s going to blatantly affect a consumer and I saw the problem and I couldn’t do anything about it. The reason why I’m in this business is to serve the public, to do a community service. I feel my job is a community service by helping people. And I felt that I let people down by not being able to do that story.”

In some cases, television stations do not stop the stories from airing altogether. Instead they censor the reports in an effort to water down their negative impact on the advertisers. The data shows two examples of this happening because the station did not want to upset the advertiser and another case in which the advertiser threatened to pull advertising.

The first example involves one journalist’s report that delved into complaints about an advertiser’s product. While the story still aired on the newscast, the station made efforts to limit the damage to the advertiser. Many companies manufacture the type of product that was the subject of the investigative report, but the complaints centered only

on the particular brand of the product manufactured by the advertiser. The station decided not to associate the problem it exposed in its report with its advertiser.

“So you’re doing a story about (the advertiser’s product) with serious problems and everyone’s complaining about it. (The journalist) couldn’t identify (the advertiser). It was an issue of not wanting to offend the advertiser.”

In the second example, a journalist remembers discussing with management about how to proceed with a negative story involving an advertiser. The advertiser put some of its customers in a vulnerable situation. The journalist says the station never suggested killing the story. However, when it came time to get the advertiser’s side of the story, a decision was made that the journalist should not walk into the business with the camera rolling for a confrontational interview. The advertiser avoided what a non-advertiser may have been subjected to: being put on the spot about the situation. The advertiser was allowed to give the journalist a statement that explained the advertiser’s side of the story.

“We still did the story. I was not prevented from doing the story. If this were not a client, would I have gone in there with cameras rolling? I don’t know. I may not have been as aggressive going in there with cameras rolling.”

In the third case, another journalist remembers an investigation that involved an advertiser that threatened to stop doing business with the television station if the report aired. The advertiser was not the focus of the investigation, but the journalist planned to include videotape of the advertiser in the televised report because of the advertiser’s prominent role in the bigger story. This did not sit well with the advertiser or the television station which censored the report.

“(The advertiser) called up the (manager) and said look, I won’t do any more advertising. (The story) eventually got done, but (management) trimmed it like crazy.”

In trimming the story, the television station prohibited the journalist from focusing on the name of the advertiser in the report. The report mentioned the advertiser only once and it did not show the name of the company on television.

“(The advertiser) absolutely did get special treatment from the station. If this was not an advertiser the story would have been done exactly the way I wanted to do it. I saw no editorial reason why there should have been a restriction. The story got done, but it didn’t get done in the way it should have. It was almost as if I was shackled in doing the story. Bottom line, it was a financial issue.”

*Stories about people or businesses with ties to the station

The data also provides evidence that an existing relationship between a television station and the target of one of its investigations can impact whether that report actually airs. The results show that relationship is not limited to the advertiser/client connection. In some cases, journalists explain that managers at their stations have personal or professional relationships with people or businesses that insulate those people and businesses from becoming the targets of investigations. Even if an investigation is launched, this relationship may stop the report from making it to air. An investigative journalist could go after someone else for the same offense with no connection to the television station and the report would be on the news, but when the target becomes a person or business with a tie to the station, that target may become off-limits.

The research uncovers four examples of management killing stories about people or business with ties to the television station. In three of the cases, management appears

to be concerned about straining that relationship. The fourth example is complicated by the fact that the investigation could also make the station itself look bad. To the knowledge of the journalists, none of the targets of the investigations threatened the station with legal action or asked that the reports not air. In two of the cases, the targets of the investigations may not even be aware the journalists worked on the stories.

One journalist whose subject was aware of the story describes attempting to do a report about a businessman who is the relative of a close friend of a manager at the television station. The journalist videotaped the businessman in a compromising situation and considered it a newsworthy item. But when the journalist informed management about the report, management balked.

“(The manager) said, you don’t have the story. And I argued on the phone. (The manager) said we’ll talk about it later. I later went to (the manager’s) office and (the manager) said we’re not doing the story. Never got an answer (about why), but I knew it was (the relationship).”

The journalist is convinced the connection between a manager and the target of the report prevented the story from airing. The killing of the story leaves the journalist questioning the television station’s ability to do serious investigative work when certain people are untouchable.

“There’s no way the station can do true investigative work because it will be vetted through the filter of (management).”

In a similar case, a journalist reveals that a television station effectively killed a report about a person who has a relationship with a manager at the station. The target of the investigation was accused of wrongdoing that could impact the public. But when the

journalist, who knew about the relationship between the manager and the subject of the story, pitched the story, management was silent.

“(The manager) never responded. And it was ultimately a story done (later by another media outlet).”

The journalist says the fact that another media outlet chose to go with the story proves the topic is newsworthy. It is another example of an investigative journalist working in local television feeling restricted and confused about what is an acceptable subject to investigate.

“Well you enjoy the fact that I’m a pit bull, but you want me to be a pit bull on your leash and you want me to go after who you want me to go after. And as a pit bull I go after anyone.”

Another journalist describes management effectively killing a story because the television station had a business relationship with the target of the investigation. The journalist received multiple complaints about the company and believed the story would be well received by the public given the large number of people who use the business.

“We were getting a lot of complaints from people. We wanted to look into that because we thought that would be a good promotable story. At the time we were told to hold off. Not not do it, but just to hold off.”

Weeks turned into months, and the journalist says the story never went anywhere because management never gave the go ahead to pursue it. Once again, a connection between a television station and a target of an investigation results in the killing of a story and leaves a journalist discouraged.

“It was kind of disappointing in the sense that a news organization is supposed to be independent and here we are supposed to be this big investigative watchdog unit and we can’t do stories about companies that are generating lots of complaints from consumers.”

In the final case, a television station killed a story because of concerns the station would also look bad as a result of the investigation. The journalist says the report would have exposed special treatment for powerful people in the community. It turns out that some of those powerful people have ties to the television station. After the journalist pitched the story, management quickly shot it down.

“I was told, ‘We’re not interested in doing that story.’ Instead of putting the brain power and the insight into how to deal with it ethically, it’s easier to just not do it. And it was disheartening to me because I think there’s a way to still do the story. It’s downplayed like it’s not a big deal. It was disappointing for me. It was disappointing.”

The journalist says it is not surprising management refused to go forward with the story and calls it a reminder that the news business is, in fact, a business.

“We often forget that we’re a business. We are a business. This whole building I’m in is built on capitalism and capitalism and journalism don’t get along. I think all of us as journalists are reminded of that from time to time.”

This example provides support for the hypothesis that a story that makes a station look bad will not air. All of the stories about people or businesses with ties to the station bolster the hypothesis that people who are well-known in the community will not become targets of investigations. But another, more defined hypothesis is emerging and finding support in this data. That hypothesis suggests that people or businesses with ties to a

television station will not become the subject of an investigative report because station management does not want to strain that relationship.

*Stories about businesses

Not all businesses that influence the content of local television investigations have a relationship with the television station. The data shows that management killed two stories about businesses and censored another. In all of the cases the threat of legal action or the concern about getting sued played into the decision to censor or kill the stories. These findings support the hypothesis that the fear of litigation will stop an investigative report from moving forward because station management does not want to defend a costly lawsuit.

One journalist says the threat of legal action stopped an investigation about a business and its questionable business practices from airing, even though a lawyer representing the television station reviewed and approved the story. The station's lawyer decided the story was fair and legally sound, but the journalist says management did not want to take any chances since the business threatened to file a lawsuit if the story aired.

“Even though the lawyers have said you're fine, you're fine, I think they see it as possibly the station getting sued and that means they're going to have to pay to fight a lawsuit.”

The journalist says the station caved to pressure by not airing a legitimate news story. It is an outcome the journalist worries other targets of investigations will learn about and try to use to their advantage.

“It’s almost a secret you don’t want the companies to know that they might be able to get a story killed by calling and yelling.”

Another business succeeded in preventing a critical investigative report about its business practices from airing. It is not clear if the business actually threatened the television station with litigation, but the journalist believes the station’s fear of a lawsuit led to the killing of the story.

“A lot of times we don’t talk to the person behind the curtain, so to speak. And we’re just told no, without a reason. But we have a pretty good idea what the reason is. We thought for sure they were afraid there was going to be a lawsuit.”

Another journalist describes a television station delaying the airing of a story about a business accused of ripping off a customer. The journalist says the report was well researched and thorough, and the journalist believes the investigation proved the allegations against the business.

“It was just so clear that there was something wrong here.”

The journalist says management’s initial excitement about the story quickly changed after the station heard from an attorney representing the business owner.

“The lawyer contacted my station and said they’re going to sue us and then we backed away from the story. It was just about being sued. There was no worry about whether I had dotted my Is or crossed my Ts.”

Months later, the story finally appeared on the news, but the journalist says management censored the story by taking steps to try and limit the number of people who would see it.

“It finally aired once, but (with restrictions).”

*Stories about public officials

Businesses are not alone in turning to the threat of litigation to try and kill a story. The data shows one public official used this tactic to kill a story. The study also reveals that a television station effectively killed another story about a public official because the station worried about the possibility the official would sue. Both examples add more support to the hypothesis that fear of litigation results in the killing of reports.

The journalist whose story was killed after the threat of litigation describes the investigation as one that would have exposed a public official’s criminal past. It is a past that is unknown to the public at large. The journalist says the station was about to air the story when a lawyer representing the official contacted the station and warned that a lawsuit would be filed if the station proceeded with its plans to run the report.

“So my management backed down. I was shocked that (the station) would bow to a lawyer because you know how many times you get those kind of threatening letters from lawyers. In my mind, we were on solid legal ground. And they pulled the story. Never ran.”

The journalist believes management was especially worried about financial losses at the time the report was supposed to air and that this contributed to the decision to kill the story. The journalist also says management did not want to admit it killed the story. Instead, management tried to question the legitimacy of the story. But the journalist points out management only raised doubts about the content of report after the lawyer contacted the station and threatened litigation.

“(A manager) played it that I have concerns because we might not be on solid legal ground. We never even went out to consult lawyers on it. It was pretty clear I was getting the rug pulled out from under me. I was kind of surprised that (the manager) backed down, but I realized kind of read between the lines. There are larger forces at work here.”

The scrapping of the story leaves the public official’s past a secret and the journalist questioning the television station’s commitment to exposing the truth. The journalist also worries about the message it sends to lawyers representing people who are targets of investigations.

“What really irked me the most is that the lawyer is laughing, kind of like ‘oh they backed down.’”

Management at another television station effectively killed a story about a public official because it worried about the official suing the station. The journalist says the story raised questions about the official’s connections to people tied to criminal activity. The journalist believed the station would allow the story to air.

“I thought we’d be able to do it. I knew that there’d be concerns. It seemed to me that if it was a good story, if it was solid, if it was vetted legally, then it would air.”

But the journalist says management repeatedly put off making a decision about whether the journalist should pursue the story. The journalist says the continuing inaction sent a clear message that the story was not going to happen.

“It wasn’t rejected. (The story) sort of just died. They wouldn’t deal with it.”

*Story about prominent institution

In one case, management effectively killed a local television investigation about a prominent institution in the community. The data reveals that the journalist blames the killing of the report on a concern by managers about getting sued by the institution. The journalist describes the investigation as one that would have exposed allegations of special treatment for institution.

“We pitched the story. They didn’t say they didn’t like it. They seemed to recognize that it was newsworthy. It just never got approved. They didn’t want to take that risk.”

While the station weighed whether or not to go with the story, another media outlet reported the allegations. The journalist says this is evidence the information about the institution is newsworthy.

“Hopefully if (the story) is big enough, it’ll get out anyway. Maybe not that news outlet, that TV station, but it will get out somehow.”

*Story about charitable organization

Finally, the data shows that a television station killed a story about a charitable organization. Once again, the journalist believes the reason is a concern on the part of station management about getting sued. This story, along with the last example add even more support for the hypothesis a station will not pursue an investigation if it is fearful of litigation. The journalist describes the charity as one that is well known in the community. The investigation would have reported about a person connected with the charity and that person’s alleged involvement in criminal activity.

“That’s very newsworthy. So we pitched that. (The manager) just shook (his/her) head, no. They were afraid. And I presume because they don’t want to be sued.”

While the alleged criminal activity remains unexposed, the journalist does not believe the television station will ever agree to report the information. The journalist says the station does not have the fortitude to pursue this type of story.

“I can’t conceive of them agreeing to air a story on this topic. It’s a controversial subject, but if you’re afraid of controversy, why do you have an investigative unit? That’s what we do.”

Reasons stories are censored/killed

It is worthwhile to closely examine the reasons why investigative stories at local television stations are censored and killed and see how those reasons provide support for the hypotheses derived from the literature (see Table 2). Advertising pressure remains the overarching reason stories are censored or killed, with twelve stories impacted (52 percent). Another explanation is not far behind. Fear of litigation accounts for the killing or censoring of seven stories (30 percent). There is also some support for the hypothesis that a story that makes the station or corporate owner look bad will be killed. One story fell into this category (four percent). Another hypothesis emerged from the data. Management killed three stories because of a concern about straining the relationship with a person or business with ties to the station (13 percent).

TABLE 2: REASONS STORIES ARE CENSORED/KILLED		
REASONS	NUMBER CENSORED	NUMBER KILLED
Advertising pressure	3 Censored	9 Killed
Fear of litigation	1 Censored	6 Killed
Concern about straining relationship with person or business with ties to the station		3 Killed
Story makes station or corporate owner look bad		1 Killed

The reasons outlined reaffirm that stories about advertisers are most likely to be censored or killed and provide the most support for that hypothesis. They also show that regardless of what the investigation is about, the threat of litigation or fear of being sued is the second leading cause of television stations censoring or killing reports. This finding provides substantial support for the hypothesis that fear of litigation leads to the censoring and killing of investigative news stories. It is something that is not lost on the journalists:

“The second they hear lawsuit, they back away.”

“They don’t want to have to pay for a lawsuit. If there’s the threat of a lawsuit and even if you know that you’re right, they don’t want to face a long, drawn-out legal battle.”

“Anyone can run you through the court system and it’s expensive. They don’t want to pay that. And what’s it get (the station) in terms of viewers? People just hear your station is being sued and then they think black eye. It affects (the station’s) reputation and they lose money from it.”

“Even if (the targets of your investigations) are absolutely wrong, absolutely guilty, and you exposed them. And you did a good thing for the public. They can still sue you because that is the American way and we have to pay for the defense of that story.”

Self-censorship

This study also reveals that as a result of management censoring and killing investigative stories, some journalists are now choosing to censor themselves. Self-censorship happens when a journalist believes that management will not find the topic of a particular investigation acceptable and the journalist chooses to ignore the story, rather than report on it. Half of the eight journalists who admitted having stories censored or killed say they have censored themselves in the wake of management disapproval of their stories. Two of those journalists even acknowledge that self-censorship is now a routine part of their jobs.

One journalist explains how the killing of a controversial story by management made the journalist shy away from pursuing another controversial report.

“I can’t say that the station killed it, because I never pitched it. But the reason I never pitched it because I knew that they’d reject it.”

The journalist blames the root of self-censorship on unsupportive managers at television stations.

“If you’re an investigative reporter and you can’t scrutinize, then someone’s not doing their job right. And in this case, I think it’s station management.”

Another journalist recounts backing off from an investigation and not pitching it after learning management killed a report on the same topic before the journalist worked at the television station.

“Some of the folks in the station were like, before you do that you might want to run it by the powers that be. Kind of at that point, we said, why bother?”

For two of the journalists who acknowledge censoring themselves, the self-censoring has become a routine part of their job. Both say this is an unfortunate byproduct of the censoring and killing of their stories.

“When I get an email from someone saying (an advertiser) screwed me. I don’t even bother. I honestly don’t even bother. There’s no point in me going through the process when I know that it’s never going to happen.”

“It’s a constant filter that we have to put on when we’re considering stories. In fact, sometimes people will call with some tip about something and we’ll laugh and say yeah, that’s not going to go on our air. It’s incredibly frustrating because sometimes good stories aren’t told because of those constraints.”

Censoring vs. killing

Managers censored four of the 23 stories (17 percent), allowing them to air instead of killing them altogether. In three of the four examples, the data suggests that when stories are censored, rather than killed, managers may be struggling with the decision to interfere with the story. In some cases, the managers are feeling pressure from upper management, which would like the controversial stories to disappear. In those cases, censoring a story appears to become a more acceptable alternative to killing it.

A journalist, who was only allowed to mention an advertiser once in a story because of a threat by the advertiser to pull advertising, recalls a manager fighting with another manager to allow the story to air.

“My news director went to bat quite a bit. The general manager wanted the story completely pulled. (My news director’s) argument to me was, look, you got your damn story. You’re going to do it. I had to fight to get it for you. So do it. And just mention (the advertiser) once.”

Another journalist witnessed the censoring of a story in which the advertiser’s name was not allowed to be associated with the particular product that was the subject of the report. The journalist believes managers with consciences know censoring a report is unethical, but that managers think killing a report is an even worse offense. Because of that, the journalist believes censoring becomes the lesser of two evils.

“I think deep down the managers knew it was wrong, but they did it anyway.”

The inner turmoil facing some managers who direct journalists to censor or kill reports is evident in a story about a business that was censored because the business threatened litigation against the television station. Management held the report for months, before finally allowing it to air with certain restrictions.

“Basically my boss didn’t want to be sued. (My boss) was really worried about it. Maybe I should work on other stories. This story will air eventually. Let’s just be patient with it.”

No response equals killing

Another notable finding in the data shows that with six of the 19 stories that were killed (32 percent), managers effectively killed the reports by not dealing with them. This

provides additional evidence that managers struggle with decisions to censor or kill reports and do not want to acknowledge that this is what they are doing. By not responding to journalists, or by putting them off, managers effectively kill the reports. The journalists who have seen their stories killed this way believe it is clear what managers are really doing.

“(The manager) never responded.”

“(The story) just sort of died. They wouldn’t deal with it.”

“So instead of saying we’re killing the story, just being up front, nothing was ever said.”

Discussion

In sum, the findings prove that managers are regularly censoring and killing investigative reports at local television stations. The response rate by journalists (77 percent) confirms that most local investigative journalists in the sample have encountered this type of internal pressure from managers that interferes with their ability to do their jobs and pursue certain stories. While there are different types of stories that are censored or killed, they all have something in common. They all involve powerful people or businesses, from advertisers to public officials. In some cases those people and businesses have exerted their power. In other cases, the television station’s concern about upsetting the powerful people or businesses leads to the censoring or killing of the report. The data also reflect a unifying pattern in the different reasons why stories are censored or killed. Managers censored or killed almost all of the stories (87 percent) because they would or could have a negative financial impact the television station.

Serrin (2000) writes about the business of journalism and its pitfalls saying, “because it is a business, journalism is far less than the independent, courageous force that generations of journalists—reporters, editors, publishers, journalism educators—and journalism folklore claim it to be.” This research about local television investigations in New England confirms that finding and expands upon it and other anecdotal evidence of censoring and killing in the existing literature. It provides nearly two-dozen examples of a television station’s financial interests clouding its independence and judgment.

It is particularly striking to contrast these results with excerpts from the Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for the Radio-Television News Directors Association (2000), the world’s largest professional organization for the electronic news profession:

INDEPENDENCE: Professional electronic journalists should defend the independence of all journalists from those seeking influence or control over news content.

Professional electronic journalists should:

*Gather and report news without fear or favor, and vigorously resist undue influence from any outside forces, including advertisers, sources, story subjects, powerful individuals, and special interest groups.

*Determine news content solely through editorial judgment and not as the result of outside influence.

*Recognize that sponsorship of the news will not be used in any way to determine, restrict, or manipulate content.

*Refuse to allow the interests of ownership or management to influence news judgment and content inappropriately.

While journalists do not have to be licensed or pass an exam like lawyers, the RTNDA created its code of ethics to “promote public understanding of and confidence in electronic journalism.” The mere creation of the code suggests that electronic journalists

are well aware of the potential of outside forces interfering with news content. The research contradicts these ideals set up by leaders in the television news industry. It also raises troubling questions about whether words about independence in a code of ethics adopted at a conference actually translate into real independence in a newsroom.

The findings expand on what Borjesson (2002) documented in which journalists shared their experiences about “the myth of a free press.” Local and national journalists working in print and television described managers censoring and suppressing stories. By talking to journalists working in local television newsrooms in New England and tabulating a count of the number of stories censored or killed (23 over a five-year period), a troubling pattern of censoring and killing local television investigations is established. The numbers reveal that, on average, each journalist has seen three stories censored or killed in the last five years. If you factor in the five additional local television investigative journalists who did not participate in the research, the numbers still show an average of two stories censored or killed per news organization in the last five years.

Perhaps most troubling is self-censorship as defined by Kohut (2000) and how it relates to this research. The earlier analysis about self-censorship focused on the journalists who had stories censored or killed and how they now avoid pitching stories that they believe management will find unacceptable. But the research also provides a window into the broader view of self-censorship as outlined by Kohut. He reported on a survey of local and national journalists and found self-censorship to be “commonplace and insidious” and that “market forces are seen as the primary reason why worthwhile stories are not pursued.” Kohut (2000) defines self-censorship as any time a news organization chooses on its own not to pursue a story. Using this definition, self-

editorial censorship accounts for a majority of the local television investigations that were censored or killed (70 percent) in this research. This provides more evidence that television stations are pro-actively censoring and killing reports to avoid controversy and protect profits.

Turner (2004) argued that democracy is undercut “when media companies dominate their markets.” He quotes Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black’s ruling in a 1945 media ownership case as saying, “The First Amendment rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public.” This research illustrates another threat to democracy and the ideals of the First Amendment. When local television investigations are censored or killed, the truth is replaced with a skewed version of reality. The more this happens, the more comfortable people will become censoring or killing reports.

This research builds on the existing literature by identifying a disturbing pattern of managers censoring or killing investigations at local television stations in New England and providing detailed reasons why this is happening. Previous research did not delve into what led to the censoring or killing of reports (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2000) or only identified isolated examples (Platt 1991, Linsalata 1995, Borjesson 2002). In-depth interviews, as opposed to survey questions, allowed the journalists to explain the circumstances surrounding their investigations and why they believe management censored or killed them. However, the study is limited to New England. Additional research involving investigative reporters and producers working at local television stations around the country would verify the problem is widespread.

Conclusion

This research provides explanations and emerging patterns regarding the censoring or killing of investigative stories at local television stations in New England. After conducting qualitative in-depth interviews with the people who are intimately involved with the reporting of investigative stories and systematically analyzing the data, this research sheds a harsh light on a problem that is largely a mystery to the public.

The investigative journalists working at local television stations worry about the future of their industry:

“I have great fears about that because they’re just a bunch of bean counters now. I started out in journalism years ago to be a reporter and not to worry about the business side. It’s just depressing for me because the business side now is really encroaching.”

“I think the niche of investigative journalism for (medium and small) television markets is in grave danger. It’s an economic anchor around the neck of the television station sometimes.”

“I’m a firm believer in working hard and pushing. But at the end of the day, I don’t think me, as a single person, will change the industry. Maybe in a way I’ve given up on some level because I just think I’m not going to get anywhere with it.”

“Everything is about the bottom line these days. They’ll tell you otherwise, that they’re committed to doing this kind of work, and they are to an extent, but at the same time, if it’s going to hurt the bottom line, I do think it’s discouraged.

“How many stories out there are not being told because of this pressure? It’s frightening.”

But there is also reason for some optimism. Local television investigative journalists continue to produce reports that win regional and national awards. Their work can and does impact their communities with positive results that affect change. In an industry that is already facing accusations of sensationalism and questions about its

relevance, local television investigative reports can provide substance to an audience craving serious, enterprising news.

“I think a lot of the stations recognize the importance of what we do because it gives them fresh content that they can promote.”

“The fact is, if ratings still matter to stations, I’m a firm believer that the way to do that is investigative reporting.”

“I’ve known a lot of people who’ve gone into the business for the right reason which is to be the fourth estate, to expose wrongdoing or expose corruption that’s not being exposed.”

“You get those victories. There are those moments when you feel very proud to do what you do.”

There is much at stake, including the integrity of local television news. With so many people turning to local television news for information, the public should be aware that news organizations are sometimes putting their own interests ahead of the public’s right to know. When the public is educated about the inner workings of the television news industry, the public may demand transparency and make television stations less likely to censor or kill reports. By airing out its own dirty laundry, the local television news industry can ultimately gain more credibility and strive to live up to its full potential.

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