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Avoiding the pack:

Mitigating conformity in journalism

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Abstract

This study examines journalists' tendencies to conform to the editorial decisions and news choices of other journalists. The digital society has expanded the traditional notion of "pack journalism" from the close-knit quarters of 1970s campaign buses to the wide reach of the digital newsroom. I argue that whereas journalists traditionally conformed to the editorial choices of their colleagues with the highest group status, the rise of new forms of "citizen journalism" make contemporary journalists more likely to be influenced by information provided by low-status group members. In an experiment of 120 undergraduate journalism students, I test the effects of two factors—the audiences for which journalists write, and journalists' need to actively justify news decisions to those audiences—on journalists' decisions to conform to the editorial choices of their colleagues.

Keywords: journalism, conformity, status, audience, visibility, justification, pack journalism

Avoiding the Pack:

Mitigating conformity in journalism

Media scholars and practitioners have expressed concern about the implications of "pack" or "herd" journalism (Matusitz & Breen, 2007; Sabato, 2000; Samuelson, 1997). These terms refer to the tendency of journalists to be influenced by other news workers in their editorial choices. In particular, journalists and scholars have denounced the tendency of reporters and editors to conform to the editorial decisions made by their colleagues, a practice that often results in a homogenous news environment (Maurer, 1999).

The term "pack journalism" first gained notoriety in the 1970s after the release of Timothy Crouse's seminal work *The Boys on the Bus* (1973). In his book, which detailed the experiences of political journalists covering the 1972 presidential election, Crouse argued that the close quarters of the campaign trail—in particular, the many hours spent with journalists from competing news organizations on campaign buses—caused members of the press to become influenced by information gleaned from their colleagues and competitors.

More than 35 years after Crouse coined the phrase, evidence of pack journalism remains, though the nature of the pack has changed. Contemporary pack journalism no longer requires the physical proximity of campaign buses or shared pressrooms; journalists are increasingly joining the pack from behind their computer screens by monitoring and imitating each other using the World Wide Web (Boczkowski, 2009). Wright (2003) argues that the pack reared its head in Weblog coverage of the controversy surrounding former Mississippi Senator Trent Lott in 2002. By reading their colleagues' incensed Web coverage of Lott, journalists were encouraged to write similarly inflammatory content. Examinations of journalists' inclinations to conform to the

pack in recent years have expanded the focus from political reporting to the ways that journalists cover a variety of topics, from celebrities to criminals (Breen & Matusitz, 2005, 2005).

The notion of conformity among journalists has largely been examined with respect to its societal effects (Reese & Danielian, 1989; McCombs & Bell, 1996). Matusitz and Breen (2007) argue that journalists' tendencies to conform to the news practices established by their colleagues leads to a loss of independent reporting, which in turn hinders the freedom to dissent. Additionally, conformity in the news media has been examined with regards to "agenda setting" (McCombs, 2006), the press's pack-like ability to tell audiences which events are important simply by covering them.

The present study takes a step back and examines the factors that lead journalists to conform to each other's news choices. In particular, this study examines the ways that today's digital news environment and the rise of new forms of journalism affect journalists' decisions about *which* members of the pack to join. McCombs (2006) argues that journalists traditionally looked to seemingly credible sources when deciding which news sources in the pack to emulate. Journalists pay particular attention to their colleagues at "elite organizations," such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (ibid.). In other words, journalists are more likely to conform to the coverage of news outlets that are thought to hold a high level of status in the news industry. Danielian and Reese (1989) argue that high-status outlets like the *New York Times* even have the ability to set the news agenda across media types, for example, in television news coverage.

The rise of "citizen-journalism," however, has challenged the notion that journalists conform to the press agenda of their colleagues with the highest status (Sambrook, 2005; Bowman & Willis, 2005). With the help of Web 2.0 software and new technologies such as

blogs and social networking sites, individuals who are not professional journalists now have the ability to share current events information, political commentary, lifestyle news and other information with an increasing number of online readers. News workers find that their colleagues and competitors are no longer limited to journalists at other media outlets—journalists are competing *with* readers, for readers.

The introduction of a new type of information producer to the pack challenges traditional notions of high and low status group members in the journalistic hierarchy. Though traditional news sources like the *New York Times* and CNN maintain their high status because of the familiarity of their brand-names, citizen-journalists also have credibility because users find them more believable and less biased than other sources (Johnson & Kaye, 2009). The present study examines factors that may make journalists more likely to conform to the editorial choices of less traditional, lower-status journalists instead of conforming to the choices of more traditional, high-status journalists. In particular, it explores the relevance of two key factors in media studies literature: the audiences for which journalists write, and journalists' need to actively justify news decisions to those audiences. The present research examines the effects of these factors on pack journalism:

> RQ: How does a journalist's need to justify editorial decisions to varying news audiences affect his or her decision to conform to the news practices of others (e.g. engage in pack journalism)?

I review key concepts related to conformity and pack journalism. In particular, I examine research on conformity related to informational social influence, which describes people's tendency to be influenced by information provided by others that they believe are well-informed. I then look at the relationship between group member status and the tendency to conform, noting

individuals' propensity to conform to the practices and beliefs of high-status others. Finally, I look at research concerning audience and justification through the lens of self-presentation/validity—factors that may make journalists more likely to conform to the practices of low-status group members instead of high-status members. I examine the theory of psychological reactance as a reason why the need to actively justify one's editorial decisions to others might reduce conformity. Following the review of literature, I describe a study of journalism undergraduates that tests the effectiveness of these factors in encouraging journalists to deviate from the pack.

Literature Review

A literature search was conducted in fall 2009 using PsycINFO and Web of Science. The keyword results of the PsycINFO search are as follows: "pack" and "journalism" (2 relevant results); "herd" AND "journalism" (0 relevant results); informational social influence (12 relevant results) "conformity" and "journalism" (0 relevant results); "imitation" and "journalism" (2 relevant results); "status" and "conformity" (6 relevant results); "visibility" and "conformity" (2 relevant results); "accountability" and "conformity" (1 relevant result); "individuation" and "conformity" (2 relevant results); and, "self-presentation" and "conformity" (1 relevant result).

The keyword results of the Web of Science search are as follows: "pack" and "journalism" (2 relevant results); "herd" AND "journalism" (0 relevant results); informational social influence (7 relevant results) "conformity" and "journalism" (0 relevant results); "imitation" and "journalism" (0 relevant results); "status" and "conformity" (refined for 'low-status' and 'high-status': 5 relevant results); "visibility" and "conformity" (2 relevant results); "accountability" and "conformity" (2 relevant result); "individuation" and "conformity" (3 relevant results); and, "self-presentation" and "conformity" (2 relevant results). Of these 51

articles, I filtered further for articles that are directly relevant to the constructs in the present study; 25 articles are cited.

Conforming to the pack

In his seminal conformity experiments, Asch (1951, 1955) demonstrated that individuals in a group often conform to the actions of others–even if those actions appear unreasonable or irrational. Like Asch, social psychologists have examined myriad aspects of *normative conformity*, people's tendency to conform to social influences to be accepted by members of a group (see Bond & Smith, 1996 for a meta-analysis).

Pack journalism also exhibits traits of *informational social influence*, a notion that describes people's tendency to look to others for information on things about which they are uncertain (Sherif, 1936; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Cohen and Golden (1972) describe informational conformity as people's decision to accept information from others as "evidence of reality" (p. 54). Journalists who engage in pack journalism, then, look to the knowledge and editorial decisions of their colleagues as indicators of what stories are most important, which sources are the "correct" people to approach for information and how best to frame a particular issue.

The effects of informational social influence have been noted by many scholars (Fein, Goethals & Kugler, 2007; Fisher, 1988). Kenrick and Gutierres (1980), for example, found that social influence has the power to affect people's judgments of physical attractiveness. People's tendency to believe in the validity of information provided by others, and to adapt their behaviors and thought processes accordingly, has even been found to influence health behaviors (Sussman, Hahn, Dent & Stacy, 1993). Hence, the present study seeks to examine how these powerful effects may influence journalists' editorial decisions.

Importantly, the effect of gender on individuals' propensity to be subject to informational social influence has been widely studied (Lee, 2003, 2004, 2005). In their study of conformity among high school students, Werner, Sansone and Brown (2008) found that males were likely to be influenced by informational social influences, and females were more likely to be influenced by normative social influences. Additionally, Lee (2004) found that women and men respond differently to the information provided by gendered computer characters—men were more likely to believe in information provided by a male computer-generated character about a "masculine" topic (sports) and women were more likely to trust as valid "feminine" (fashion) information provided by a female character. To control for the effects of gender in the present research, the study examines only pack journalism among male journalists; future research may compare these results with those of female journalists.

Who's Who in the Pack?

Many studies have noted the importance of status in groups and its effect on conformity (Jetten, Hornsey & Adarves-Yorno, 2006; Stein, 1982; Dino, Reysen & Branscombe, 2009). Because group members with high status set group norms, they are less likely than low-status group members to be conforming (Dino et al., 2009). Additionally, high status members of groups are more likely to be thought of as authority figures (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Stafford (1966) found that group members were most likely to conform to the thoughts of the group leader—the individual that had the highest level of attractiveness, expertise and network centrality. Because people tend to internalize the information provided by sources that they deem credible (McGuire, 1969), they are more likely to conform to the decisions made by individuals with high status. This research supports the notion that journalists from news outlets with lower

status will be more likely to conform to the news decisions of journalists from higher status outlets.

H1: Low-status journalists presented with information from high and low status colleagues will conform to the editorial choices of individuals with high status instead of individuals with low status.

Deviating from the pack

The primary purpose of this study, however, is to examine factors that may influence expected conformity decisions. The amount that one's choices are made visible to others may affect their willingness to conform to the group. Burnkrant and Cousineau (1975), for example, found that people whose evaluations about a new brand of coffee were anonymous were more likely to conform to the evaluations of others than people who knew that their evaluations would be made visible to others.

This may be explained by the theory of psychological reactance, which posits that individuals will work to reassert their freedom when they feel that it has been challenged (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). In other words, the participants in the coffee experiment who had to make their evaluations visible may have felt compelled to assert their individuality by not conforming to the decisions of others, whereas the participants in the anonymous condition felt no such challenge to their autonomy (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). This is consistent with literature that argues that people's desire to appear unique or individualistic (Imhoff and Erb, 2009), as well as feelings of personal accountability (Quinn and Schlenker, 2002), may thwart conformity. Hence, I hypothesize that journalists' tendencies to conform to the editorial decisions of high-status others may be mitigated by their need to justify their own editorial choices:

H2: Low-status journalists who must actively justify their editorial decisions to their audiences will be less likely to conform to the decisions of others than low-status journalists who do not have to actively justify their decisions.

Still, of those journalists who *do* conform even when asked to justify their decisions, I hypothesize that they will make decisions based on the audience to which their choices are visible. Because some contemporary news audiences view less traditional, low-status sources of information as credible (e.g. blogs, Johnson and Kaye, 2009), journalists may feel compelled to conform to a new pack—one without high status—depending on their perceptions of their audience.

H3a: Low-status journalists who must justify their editorial decisions to a high-status audience will be more likely to conform to high-status colleagues than low-status journalists who must justify their editorial decisions to a low-status group.

H3b: Low-status journalists who must justify their editorial decisions to a low-status audience will be more likely to conform to low-status colleagues than low-status journalists who must justify their editorial decisions to a high-status group.

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty undergraduate journalism students (all male) will participate in the experiment as part of course credit for a media and design course. Twenty participants will be randomly assigned to each of six experimental conditions.

Experimental design

The experiment is a 3 (audience: high-status, low-status, no-status) X 2 (justification: yes, no). The no-status-no justification condition is the control group.

---Table 1 about here---

Procedure

The experiment will take place over the course of two consecutive weeks. The first part of the experiment is a 30 minute lesson on newspaper design to be administered in a regular class session. All 120 participants receive the same lesson. Using standard newspaper design programs, Quark Xpress and Adobe In/Design, participants learn how design an effective front page following the guidelines of *The Newspaper Designer's Handbook* by Tim Harrower.

The lesson includes the following: instruction on basic page layout and design; the decision-making that goes into deciding which stories to place in various page positions (above the fold or below the fold); and, instruction on how to size photos and headlines. Because eye tracking research suggests that readers usually look at the information in the top left corner of a news page first (Outing & Ruel, 2004), participants will be advised that the story placed in the top-left position of the front-page should be the story of greatest importance. This position will be referred to as the "primary spot" for the remainder of the experiment.

In the class session following the front-page lesson, all participants will participate in the second part of the experiment. The participants will randomly be assigned to one of six experimental conditions, described later in this section.

Before the manipulations, participants will be told that they are to assume the role of newspaper editors and that their task is to design the front page of a newspaper. The participants will each be given a list of five stories that they must use to create a sample front page. The participants will all receive the same five stories. The five stories will all be about non-political and non-controversial topics (a story about the president, for example, might confound the experiment because participants are likely to choose it as the most important story).

Participants will be asked to use the same computer programs that they worked with in the lesson to design their front pages. All five stories must be included on the front page. Participants are asked to first decide on story placement, paying special attention to the story in the "primary spot." Then, they are asked to think about the design the page (the amount of space allotted to each story, the types of images they want to use, fonts, etc.). Participants are asked to write down their initial design choices before moving to the computers. They are asked to write down information about their choice of story placement (including the story that they will include in the primary spot) and to provide a general overview of their design plans. They are told that they are not constrained by these choices; they can change them as they execute the task on the computers. The participants are told that there is no time limit for the completion of the task, but in the interest of simulating a real newsroom, they should work "rapidly" and aim to finish the task as quickly as possible.

After they have finished writing down their initial story choice and design ideas, participants move to a computer to begin creating the page. Immediately after they begin, they will be interrupted by the experimenter and provided with examples of front pages created by journalism faculty members and other students. Participants will be told by the researcher that the sample pages are provided to give them an idea about other *design* techniques.

All 120 participants will be exposed to the same four sample front pages. The pages will contain clearly printed information about the person who designed it: (2) from phony faculty members that are said to be from a nearby university and (2) from phony students that are said to be from the same nearby university. The sample pages will use the same five stories that the participants are given to create their front pages. The two "faculty" created templates will include the same story in the primary spot; the two "student" created pages will include the same

story in the primary spot, but it will be a different story from the one used by the phony faculty members. To avoid suspicion among participants, the remaining four stories will be randomly assigned to the faculty and student pages.

The purpose of the study is to monitor participants' tendencies to conform to the editorial choices made by the faculty members and students, particularly the choice of story in the "primary spot."

Manipulation of independent variables

There are two independent variables in this experiment: audience (high-status, low-status, none) and justification (yes, no). The manipulations of these variables occur before participants begin their task. Participants in the *high-status audience-justification* group will be told that after completing their front-page, they will be asked to join a Web chat with a group of journalism professors (not the professors that created the templates). They will be told that they must describe for the professors their decisions about story placement and design choices using the lessons they learned in the training session (see appendix A for the scripts). The participants in the *low-status audience-justification* condition will be told that they will have to justify their editorial decisions to a group of students in a similar Web chat (not the students that created the template) upon completion of the exercise.

Participants in the *high-status audience-no justification* condition are told that their work will be read by a group of journalism professors who are interested in the editorial decision making processes of student journalists. They will not be told that they have to justify their decisions in front of the group. Additionally, participants in the *low-status audience-no justification* condition are told that their work will be read by a group of journalism students.

Similar to the high-status audience-no justification condition, they will not be told that they have to justify their decisions in front of the group.

The participants in the *no audience information-justification* condition will be told before they begin that they will also have to write a brief essay about their final editorial decisions following the exercise. No information about who will read the essay is given. In the *no audience information – no justification condition* (control condition), participants will not be told anything about audience or justification. They will be given the sample front pages and asked to complete the task following the same procedures as the participants in the other conditions.

After the front pages have been turned in, participants will be asked to turn in their initial descriptions of their plans for the design of the front pages, which includes their decisions about which story to place in the "primary spot" prior to viewing the sample pages. The participants then complete a questionnaire about the task. The questions are described in the "Tests of Manipulation" section. Before leaving, the participants are debriefed on the experiment.

Data analysis

There is one dependent variable in this experiment: conformity. This variable represents participants' decisions to change the story in the "primary spot" after seeing the templates created by the students and faculty members. There are three levels: high status conformity (the participant changed the story in primary position to the story in the same position on the faculty templates); low status conformity (the participant changed the story in primary position to the story in the same position on the student templates); and, no conformity (the participant kept the same story that he or she initially chose, or the participant changed to a story that was not in the primary position on either of the templates).

Tests of Manipulation

Tests of manipulation will be included in the post-experiment questionnaire (see appendix B). As a test of the effectiveness of the manipulation, participants will be asked a set of questions concerning who they would turn to for help in a variety of situations. Responses will include “other students” and “professors” to test for the status associated with these two types of individuals. Additionally, participants will be asked about their perceptions of the "knowledge level" of professors and students, another indicator of perceived status. Participants will also be surveyed on their thoughts about what makes a good journalist and journalists' responsibilities to their audiences.

As a test of the effectiveness of the sample front pages, participants will be asked to report the number of sample front pages they looked at, which ones they paid the most attention to and why, and whether they noticed if any of the front pages had the same article in the primary spot.

Future directions

As stated, future research might examine the effects of the studied factors on female journalism students. Additionally, because the present study examines the conformity choices of undergraduate students with regards to other students and professors (the latter having higher status than the students), it makes no claims of generalizability to the conformity decisions of high-status group members. Future research may seek to compare conformity decisions made by low-status group members to decisions made by high-status group members (though, as argued, high-status group members are less likely to conform than low-status members). Finally, future studies may examine the actual content of participants’ written and oral justifications for their editorial decisions to further illuminate the reasoning behind their choices.

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Table 1

Experimental design

Audience	Justification: Yes	Justification: No
High-status	A	B
Low-status	C	D
None	E	F

*Cell F represents the control condition

Appendix A

Manipulation scripts

(Standard script: all participants receive these printed instructions):

You are to assume to role of the editor of a daily newspaper for [town in which the student goes to school]. Using the lessons learned in last week's training session on front page design, please use the computer to create your own front page. Before logging into the design program, please begin by writing down notes about your editorial and design plan. Write down your decisions about story placement (the position in which each of the five stories will be placed on the page, and the story that will go in the "primary spot.") As you may recall from your training session, the primary spot is above the fold, and it is the story in the upper left corner of the page. This spot is reserved for the story of highest importance. Then, write down your plans for the design of the front page. You may include information about story headlines, text fonts, graphics, picture sizes and any other concepts learned in the training session.

Once you have finished writing down your plans, you may log into the computer program and begin designing your page. You must use all five of the included stories in your design.

(The following instructions are included in each of the respective experimental conditions):

High-status audience-justification condition

After the completion of the task, please print out two copies of your home page. Hand one copy to the experimenter and keep the other for yourself. You will then be asked to join a Web chat with three faculty members from [nearby university]; they are all journalism professors. They are interested in learning about the editorial and design choices of student journalists. Please be prepared to justify your decisions in this chat.

Low-status audience-justification

After the completion of the task, please print out two copies of your home page. Hand one copy to the experimenter and keep the other for yourself. You will then be asked to join a Web chat with three journalism students from [nearby university]; they are all journalism students. They are interested in learning about the editorial and design choices of other student journalists. Please be prepared to justify your decisions in this chat.

High-status audience-no justification

After the completion of the task, please print a copy of your homepage. Please hand it to the experimenter. Your homepage will be given to three journalism faculty members from [nearby university] who are interested in learning about the editorial and design choices of student journalists.

Low-status audience-no justification

After the completion of the task, please print a copy of your homepage. Please hand it to the experimenter. Your homepage will be given to three journalism students from [nearby university] who are interested in learning about the editorial and design choices of student journalists.

No audience information-justification
After completing your homepage, please print out a copy and hand it to the experimenter. You are then asked to write a brief essay about your editorial choices. Please describe the reasons behind your story choices and design choices. After you have completed this essay, please turn it in to the experimenter.

No audience information-no justification
(After the standard instructions). Please print out a copy of your homepage and hand it to the experimenter.

Appendix B

Post experimental questionnaire

For each of the following, circle the person(s) you are MOST likely to turn to for help with the following scenarios:

1. Difficulty with a class concept
    a. Professors
    b. Teaching assistants
    c. Other students
2. Difficulty with an assignment
    a. Professor
    b. Teaching assistant
    c. Other students
3. Difficult in understanding current events
    a. Professor
    b. Teaching assistant
    c. Other students

4. On a scale of 1(lowest) to 5 (highest), how knowledgeable would you rate journalism professors about current events?

5. On a scale of 1(lowest) to 5 (highest), how knowledgeable would you rate journalism students about current events?

6. Which of the following do you think is the MOST important task for journalists with regards to their responsibility to their audience:
    a. To provide the public with accurate and trustworthy information
    b. To inform the public about topics that are not well covered in other media
    c. To entertain and engage
    d. To provide news and information with which audiences can relate

7. While conducting the task, did you consult the sample front pages?
8. If yes, did you look at some, most or all of the sample pages?
9. Did you find them helpful?
10. Of the four pages, did you find one to be more helpful than the others?
11. Did you use the pages for help in making story placement decisions? If yes, how?
12. Did you use the sample pages for help in making design decisions? If yes, how?
13. Of the sample front pages, how many contained the same story in the "primary position" (top-left corner of the page).
    a. None
    b. Some
    c. All
    d. I don't know.