

How to Influence Editorials: A Case Study

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Newspaper editorials have a mixed reputation in the public affairs community. While many previous studies have examined final editorial products as published, few have studied their actual production, and there is little research regarding the people and interests who attempt to influence editorial writing. This article takes a qualitative look at the forces that go into the production of editorials, specifically through a case study of 66 editorials over ten years in The Star-Ledger covering the debate over a sports arena in Newark, New Jersey. The arena project spanned five governors, two mayors, and had significant local, state, and regional implications. This study is unique for its access to the participants in the arena debate, and the wealth of time these elites gave us through the interviewing process. Top political, business and newspaper leaders were interviewed to discern the importance they place upon editorials, and the strategies stakeholders use to influence editorial boards. Findings suggest that at the very least, editorials force stakeholders to either be proactive or forced to react. This study suggests that those who receive favorable editorial coverage are more likely to be knowledgeable, proactive, open, honest (though skilled at exaggeration), and accessible to editorial boards.

INTRODUCTION

“No one reads them.”

“They don’t know what they’re talking about.”

“A bunch of people who have never done anything in their lives.”

“Decisionmakers foolishly think they’re important. They wouldn’t admit to it, but they call [the board] and complain.”

Newspaper editorials have a mixed reputation in the Public Affairs community. With little variation, stakeholders at first insist that newspaper editorials don’t matter and

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that they don't care what the Editorial Boards think. At the same time, however, nearly all public relations professionals have stories about editorials that helped, hurt, pleased or angered them, and indeed affected their policy objectives. As initially dismissive as many may be toward editorials, it is clear that the position of editorial boards matters in policy and politics.

While many studies have examined final editorial products as published, few have studied their actual production, and there is little research regarding the people and interests who attempt to influence editorial writing. Our contribution is a qualitative look at the forces that go into the production of editorials. We looked at editorials generally and more specifically through a case study of 66 editorials over ten years in *The Star-Ledger* covering the debate over a sports arena in Newark, New Jersey. The arena project spanned five governors, two mayors, and had significant local, state, and regional implications.

This study is unique for its access to the participants in the arena debate, and the wealth of time these elites gave us through the interviewing process. We interviewed top political, business, and newspaper leaders to discern the importance they place upon editorials, and the strategies stakeholders use to influence editorial boards. We found that at the very least, editorials force stakeholders to either be proactive or forced to react. If the stakeholder has not invested time and effort with the editorial board explaining and defending his or her ideas, that person is open to criticism from the editorial page with few options for an effective rebuttal. Consistent with the findings of Piers Robinson in *The CNN Effect* (2002), editorials seem to matter most in the midst of deadlock, when they're counterintuitive or not predicted. They matter least when advocating for predictable local interests. Although editorials may not change opinions exactly, our analysis suggests that they certainly help drive the policy agenda, and are also used by stakeholders to bolster their positions.

We found that those who receive favorable editorial coverage are more likely to be knowledgeable, proactive, open, honest (though skilled at exaggeration), and accessible to editorial boards. Several interviewees emphasized the importance of "setting the stage" with editorial boards before introducing a potentially controversial policy change, and trying to set the board's definition of success. Editorial boards may dismiss good policy if coming from someone they don't trust, or give questionable positions the benefit of the doubt if coming from someone they trust. Complaining about an editorial after it's written rarely does any good, and lying is universally frowned upon.

We open this report with a description of editorials and an analysis of their influence and readership. An explanation of our research and methodology is followed by our findings and a discussion of the Newark Arena, and we conclude with recommendations for those who seek to influence the editorial page.

What are Editorials?

Editorials¹ typically appear at the end of the main news section in American newspapers and represent the voice of the newspaper. Not to be confused with Op-Eds or columnists' articles, editorials do not carry a byline. This gives editorials a sort of "voice of God" quality which veils the level of investigation and politics that go into the writing of an editorial. Galindo (2004, p. 228) writes:

"By traditional journalistic conventions, newspaper articles report the facts along with any relevant background information surrounding an event or issue. In contrast, editorials are designed mainly to reflect their editorial boards' interpretations of an issue, position themselves within the issue's potential policy relevance, and make policy recommendations. In performing this function, editorials not only inform readers of the various elements comprising the issue but more significantly educate—if not persuade—on the merits of their point of view"

Opinions expressed in editorials are not only addressed to the reading public but also to the social and political elite in keeping with the editorial function of influencing social policy through recommendations made in the editorials (Dijk, 1991; Franklin, 1999; Jeifs, 1999; Spitzer, 1993). Although editorials formulate and express opinions to the general public, they also "attack, defend, or give advice to the authorities" (Dijk, 1991, p. 134).

James Davis (1987), a political scientist, wrote of his experience as editor of the St. Louis Globe-Democrat editorial page.

The editorial page can be the ivory tower of a newspaper. If anyone associated with a paper has time to reflect, look back, and look ahead, it is the staff on the editorial page. News reporters have no such luxury. That said, the editorial page, like the rest of the paper, has a daily deadline and there is always more to do than time available...The disadvantage is knowing that every day the editorial page must be full, even if opinions are still only half formed, or, worse, half baked... In addition to simply expressing opinion, an editorial may exhort (Give to the United Fund, Help flood victims, Vote); praise (job well done!); recognize (a local hero); comment (on the passing scene, the outcome of the series); chide (local officials, congressmen, bureaucrats, or other errant souls); analyze (Reykjavik, terrorism, the budget); or simply inform. This list is doubtless not exhaustive, but does suggest the possibilities. Editorial endorsement is a sort of Good Housekeeping seal, and may be used in much the same way (p. 247).

Davis added that "On local matters the impact [of an editorial] may on occasion be significant, but hard to test... On national matters it is unlikely that the editorials of a regional paper have any impact at all" (p. 251-252).

¹ Also called "leads" or "leading articles" in some countries

Editorials are not often noted for breaking news or getting scoops, though one writer we interviewed acknowledged the pursuit of scoops. Most often, the issues have already been presented, and an editorial's influence is in its interpretation of preexisting knowledge.

Our theoretical framework is based upon Piers Robinson's description of *The CNN Effect*, and our research attempts to shed light on policy elites' on-the-ground attempts to take advantage of the opportunities editorials present. While focusing on foreign policy, Robinson argued that media have the greatest effect on the policy agenda when there is "Elite dissensus plus policy uncertainty within government," and when the media "take sides in political debate and coverage becomes critical of government. [In these situations] the media are now active participants influencing elite debate... Critical media coverage provides bargaining power for those seeking a change in policy or makes policymakers feel pressured to respond with a policy or else face a public relations disaster." (p. 31)

Our case study clearly contained moments of elite dissensus, policy uncertainty, and media critical of government. Favorable editorials therefore presented an opportunity to elites looking for political advantage. This study shows what that political jockeying looks like.

Kingdon's (1995) observations regarding the media's effect on the policy agenda also resemble our findings. "The mass public's attention to governmental issues tracks closely on media coverage of those issues (p. 57). Media attention to an issue affects legislators' attention, partly because members follow mass media like other people, and partly because media affect their constituents (p. 58). This is not to overstate editorials' importance, however. The media's importance has significant limits. Often there is "quite an intensive period of sensational coverage, with the policy community riding serenely above the storm (p. 58)."

Public Relations research thus far has focused on relationships with newspapers in general and particularly with reporters. Cox (1983) found that good relationships lead to good coverage in business reporting. Burger (1975) suggested "Do not argue with the reporter or lose your cool (p. 67)," and "Tell the truth, even if it hurts (p. 69)," among other pieces of advice. These skills must be taken another step with editorial members. Reporters have to listen carefully, ask tough questions, and report. Editorialists must do all this and form an opinion. At the end of this article we tailor these recommendations to those attempting to influence editorial boards.

Communications research offers rules that apply to influencing editorial writers, and again editorial writers are a particularly skilled group of listeners. Cutlip et al. (2000, p. 254) summarize strategies for communicating with receivers of different predispositions toward an issue. Wiseman and Schenk-Hamlin (1981) present four approaches to compliance through communication recommendations, of which "altruism strategies" and "argument strategies" are most relevant here ("sanction" and "circumvention" strategies are highly likely to fail with editorial boards).

Editorials have been studied to some journalistic and linguistic depth, although recent literature taking into account a public relations or policy perspective is lacking and little at all has investigated stakeholders' perspectives and lobbying efforts. Hynds and Martin examined "How editorial writers go about their work" in 1977. Philip Meyer (1978) studied "Models for Editorial Decision Making," and many (Valdeón, 2008; Alonso & McCabe, 2008; Blankenship et al., 1986; Namenwirth, 1969, for example) have performed content analyses seeking political and linguistic traits of editorials. Recently an entire edition of *Revista Electrónica de Lingüística Aplicada* (RAEL) (2007) examined linguistic traits of editorials, but there remains little regarding the people and interests who attempt to influence editorial writing.

Though hard to test, as Davis writes, we believe that editorials and the media did matter in the arena debate. The editorials maintained a steady presence in *The Star-Ledger* without a great deal of sensationalism, and certainly "acted as a communicator in the policy community (Kingdon, p. 58)" and "Magnif[ie]d movements that have already started elsewhere (p. 60)." *The Ledger's* editorials did not create the arena issue, but they did amplify the certain aspects of the issue and forced responses from key policymakers.

METHODOLOGY

Using the debate over construction of the Newark, New Jersey arena as a case study (though not limiting ourselves to discussion of the arena), we aimed to discover how those with a stake in the arena debate tried to influence the editorial board of *The Star-Ledger*, which is based in Newark and boasts the highest circulation of any daily newspaper of any in the state (New Jersey Press Association, 2008).

We chose the Newark arena for several reasons. First was the quantity and quality of the editorials written regarding the arena. From 1997 until the arena opened in October, 2007, *The Star-Ledger* wrote 66 editorials on the topic, changing and adjusting its position as proposals rose and fell. We were therefore able to track related editorials and stakeholders over a significant period of time. There was also a broad range of entry points that enabled us to speak with many types of stakeholders, including legislators, governors, mayors, advisors, editorial writers, and businesspeople, within the confines of a single issue.

Second, this was an issue of great importance and controversy at state, regional, and local levels. The construction of the arena was a major policy issue in the New Jersey state legislature, as well as affecting the Newark area, Bergen County in Northern New Jersey (home of a competing arena in the Meadowlands), and the greater New York City region as a whole. We were therefore able to study editorials' effects and influence at several different levels of politics, and at different phases in the political process.

Third, we enjoyed access to the key stakeholders in the policymaking process. Interviewees included top state, legislative, and local officials, gubernatorial staffers,

editorial board members, and representatives of the New Jersey Devils. This study is unique for its access to these participants in the policymaking that led to the construction of the arena, and the wealth of time they gave us through the interviewing process. Our contribution is therefore a qualitative look at the forces that go into the production of an editorial, made through in-depth interviews with those who had political and public relations consequences at stake.

Interviews ranged from 20-90 minutes as interviewees' time allowed. They were based on a list of questions covering the interviewees' positions and policy goals, the nature and intensity of their interactions with editorial writers (or in writers' cases, with those who attempted to influence them), their views on whether editorials mattered, and more general questions about the importance of editorials and their strategies for influencing them. All of our interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, and we have done our best to maintain that pledge while informing the research presented here.

We embarked on this project aware of the pitfalls of interview-based research. As Kramer (1990) has pointed out, oral histories suffer from gaps in memory and interviewees' new and ongoing ulterior motives. Indeed, our interviews began 11 years after the first editorials were written on the arena issue (though in some cases only two years after pertinent events took place). Although we are longtime observers of New Jersey politics, we cannot claim that we were never deceived but, to balance the information, we recorded the comments and opinions of a variety of sources, all checked against the physical record of published editorials and contemporary media accounts. We spoke with at least one executive, Chief of Staff, or Press Secretary of each governor's administration, executives from the sports teams, editorial writers, and municipal leaders in the debate. And we did catch them in contradictions.

A final note on methodology: The reader can be forgiven for thinking that our definition of stakeholder is somewhat elitist. We recognize that on many, and probably most political issues, local and grassroots organizations play powerful roles in the policymaking process. However, this was not the case in the Newark arena debate. Without dismissing the grassroots groups that did weigh in, the arena fight played out almost entirely at the elite level, between governors, team owners, mayors, and legislative leaders. As Stevenson (2004, p. 4) stated: "[Newark community leaders] agree that certain areas of the city such as the downtown business district are receiving impressive development attention, but they point out that the needs of the city's residential neighborhoods are languishing as an economic afterthought." Editorial writers could not recall interviewing any community groups or leaders as part of the arena debate.

A brief synopsis of the arena debate: *The Star-Ledger's* first editorial regarding the arena appeared in November 1997. After months of deliberations, Gov. Christine Todd Whitman proposed a state subsidy for an arena in late 1998. Donald DiFrancesco, who succeeded Whitman for a year after she left for the Environmental Protection Agency, came very close to a deal before his plan was weighed down in the state Assembly by additional earmarks and legislative maneuvering.

Gov. James McGreevey made a new legislative push for an arena deal when he took office in 2002, but it did not go very far (although transportation improvements around the arena site were completed, for a number of political reasons to be discussed later). The money that finally built the arena came from a lease renegotiation between the City of Newark and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, an independent government agency that rents land for the Newark Airport. Governor McGreevey played the definitive role in the renegotiation, and Newark Mayor Sharpe James directed the \$210 million to the arena in a widely criticized agreement with the National Hockey League's (NHL) New Jersey Devils. Ground was broken October 3, 2005. Newark's next and current mayor, Cory Booker, revised the arena deal somewhat. Although early visions of the arena included both the National Basketball Association's (NBA) New Jersey Nets and the Devils, the arena opened in October 2007 with only the Devils. Furthermore, the competing Izod Center (formerly Continental Airlines Arena) in the New Jersey Meadowlands remains open, only ten miles away and still housing the Nets.

How are Editorials Written?

Before our discussion of how stakeholders attempt to influence editorials, it is helpful to understand the process of writing an editorial. Although it is different from one editorial to another, our interviews with editorial writers offer an informative description.

Editorial boards vary in structure and responsibility across newspapers. At the smallest papers, the "board" may consist of only one person; *The New York Times'* board has 18 members. *The Star-Ledger* editorial board has eight: Six writers, a cartoonist, and the publisher (Interview). Although the board as a whole chooses the topics on which to opine, most articles are written by only one person rather than collectively by the board. "Editorial writers are like reporters; they have beats," one writer said.

Assignment of editorials begins with editorial board meetings, typically held daily. At the meeting the members discuss the issues of the day and decide what to comment upon and what the opinion is going to be. "The board almost always talks about issues beforehand," said the writer, and assigns articles to individual members. They also vote on issues, but some individuals' votes "count more." "The opinion is decided at the editorial board meeting," said one editor. "It's pretty understood where you're going to go."

Editorial writers are less specialized than reporters and have to cover a broader array of subjects. Some of the disadvantage is offset by the fact that, according to one writer, "the stakeholders are really concerned about what you'll say in the editorial." Editorial writers tend to enjoy better and faster access to sources than the reporters at their papers. When a writer receives his or her assignment, the deadline may be only hours away. "Meetings are done before noon," said one editor, "and you often have three to four hours to write." This is not to say, however, that every editorial starts from scratch. "Chances are you know something beforehand," said the editor, and because

writers have beats there is an accumulation of information over time. We shall see that editorial coverage of an issue is a more continuous process than the short deadlines suggest.

On certain big issues or for particularly powerful stakeholders, the editorial board as a whole may meet with an interviewee. Such meetings are discussed in more depth below, but on the editorial side, the board will have long meetings beforehand about the key issues to be discussed. Each writer is given assignments for research, so that they are in a position to ask questions and follow-up questions. When the interviewee arrives, he or she often does not only meet with the board. Columnists, reporters, and other staff will all be in the room.

The view of editorial boards from the outside is often not positive. "Editorials come from a certain perspective, namely white males who aren't in government and have their own interests. Most editorial board people are like-minded," said one governor's aide. "They tend to be politicians in their own way. Once they say something, they're not going to pull back," said an elected official. Others are kinder: "They'll put you through the ringer, and they're in touch politically," said one aide. "They had a hard time believing we could see the bigger picture than just to build our arena," said a sports executive. Whatever the conclusion, the strength of people's opinions suggests that editorials matter.

Do Editorials Matter?

Put simply, editorials do matter. While they may not have the readership of other real estate on the editorial page, all of our interviewees admitted that they read, used, and were helped and hurt by editorials. "Even though I'd like to, I can't dismiss editorials I disagree with. I know I will be hearing from one side or the other about the editorial so I work hard to understand why the editorials take a certain approach," said Sen. Robert Menendez of New Jersey.

Much of an editorial's impact is based on expectations. A policymaker or public affairs professional with a proposal knows he or she must answer an editorial board's concerns about that policy, and so anticipates those questions in advance. All the effort occurs before the editorial is written, and for this reason policymakers can usually predict the position of a forthcoming editorial. With the arena, every stakeholder worked to answer the inevitable editorial board questions: Who will pay for it? What's the taxpayer burden? Will it compete with other area arenas? How will people get there? The exception that proves the point was Mayor James, who did very little to answer *The Ledger's* questions about his agreement with the Devils hockey team. By failing to prepare or respond to *The Ledger*, James invited harsh and repeated criticism. As a result, few were surprised by *The Ledger's* editorial attacks on James.

"You always try to address an editorial's issue, to offset criticism," one elected official told us, although our interviews suggest that reacting to an editorial is much less effective than lobbying before it is written. For one, editorial boards sometimes only

opine on an issue once. If a stakeholder's message isn't included in that one opinion piece, there may not be a second chance. Writers told us that editorial boards are also highly unlikely to reverse their positions on an issue because of new information, unless there was an inadvertent mistake regarding the facts of an issue. But over time, changes do occur as policy evolves, as we saw in the arena.

In addition, nearly everyone we interviewed advised against complaining about an editorial after it is written. An editorial writer concurred with this advice. "Once we write an editorial, we don't invite people to respond afterward." The writer went on to tell stories of the angry and, in her opinion, useless complaints the board received over the years. We note that the fact that policymakers did not want to anger editorial writers somewhat validates the editorial board's significance. Letters to the Editor are one avenue through which to publicly respond, but the letter writer runs the risk of looking like a complainer, unless there is a factual error.

Is all the effort worth it? After all, editorials seem to draw less attention than columnists and Op-Eds on the other side of the page. Our interviews suggest that editorials have a certain degree of *fiat* power; editorials matter because people say they matter. "Stakeholders think they're important, therefore they are," said one interviewee. "The 'inside baseball' group looks to editorials a lot," said an official. "They give access to the people they need to talk to." "The editorial board is one of those voices that forms a chorus of understanding," added another.

"Editorials shape the questions being asked," the second official continued. "The issues discussed shape the discussion, and what happens over time. They become tools for politicians." Indeed, at least 50 editorials were mentioned in Congress or submitted to the Congressional Record in 2008, from papers ranging from *The New York Carib News* to *The Wall Street Journal*. What editorials say moves well beyond the pages of the newspaper, sometimes even reprinted in whole on advocacy literature (Davis, 1987, p. 251).

Editorials also matter because of the board's access to stakeholders. Because so many people want positive coverage of their position on the Opinion page, editorial writers can collect information from a wide variety of perspectives. This gives them an advantage in sorting the issues and making trusted judgments. One Governor affirmed this power when talking about giving the editorial board "access to the people they need to talk to. If you've got good people in the cabinet, give them an ability to be heard." Few political entities have such extensive access.

Several people argued that editorials matter most when intervening in a political deadlock, or when taking an unpredicted or counterintuitive position. "Editorials matter in the heat of battle when the decision is close. On budget issues, for example, they can have a big effect in June [when the budget is a hot issue], though not in January or February," said one appointee. Editorials can also be useful when critical of the politicians who represent their markets. As just one example, Rep. David Dreier (2008), on the floor of the House of Representatives made special mention of a *San Francisco*

Chronicle editorial on American policy in Colombia that was critical of Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who represents San Francisco.

Similarly, “Surprises make editorials more effective. They’re also more effective where there’s no consensus.” said a communication staffer.

Some believe that national newspapers’ broad support (or at least lack of opposition) to the Iraq war made invasion much more likely. “If and when the administration gets editorial support from the elite media, it’s just about a done deal, because the public will fall in line,” said Prof. David in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (Mooney, 2004).

Editorials matter least when representing parochial interests at the expense of statewide policy, and when they’re predictable or poorly timed. An editorial writer claimed, “The effect varies widely depending on the subject, newspaper and audience.” Some argued that *The Ledger’s* editorials were insignificant when the Newark arena was a state issue. “[*The Ledger is*] expected to be a cheerleader for Newark,” said one aide. However, many of our interviewees invested great time and effort in lobbying *The Ledger* on the arena, or regretted not having done so.

In some cases, no one expects an editorial to have much effect. “We do a lot of bloviating for no good reason, to fill space,” said one writer. Unless targeted toward federal lawmakers as discussed above, local papers’ opinions on national affairs are of limited impact as well.

Editorials achieve this power despite the fact that they are admittedly reactive. “We’d like to be more proactive. To be proactive is to investigate more. With more time and more money we could spend more time on the beat,” said an editor.

Who succeeds with the Editorial Board?

The limited time and resources available to editorial boards means that they are subject to mistakes and manipulation. Although there is no substitute for advocating sound, well-planned public policy when addressing an editorial writer, some people fare better with the editorial board than others. Those who receive favorable coverage are more likely to be knowledgeable, proactive, open, honest, and accessible to editorial boards.

One of our interviewees was responsible for reforming New Jersey’s troubled EZ-Pass system for paying tolls on roads. “I knew the plan would be controversial, so before the public ever knew anything, I set up meetings with all the big editorial boards. I sat down with them, made sure they understood the plan, why it worked, and why they should support it. When I did the press conference announcing the plan they knew all about it and supported it right away. The whole thing passed easily after that.”

Of course, the process is rarely so easy. Conversations with the editorial board are seldom restricted to one issue, and relationships evolve between writers and stakeholders. When the relationship begins, setting expectations is important. “When I took [my] job, I set the stage, before even starting the job,” said one appointed official. “One month before. I kept expectations low. I made the place sound like a disaster, which it was, but I absolutely manipulated it” (The official must have been convincing. One writer said “[That person] came in a lot, was very straightforward”).

Aides to two governors also stressed the benefits of building expectations. “We made clear it’d be a legitimate governorship, not caretaker,” said one press aide to an acting governor. “We were open and honest and responsive. We met with the editorial boards. The governor’s tour and contacts with the editorial board after the previous administration gave him legitimacy as a real governor instead of a caretaker.”

As the relationship develops, said one press aide, “Be accessible, friendly, useful, be reliable.” It is possible to talk to writers too often: “Don’t try to over-handle editorial board writers. Know when it’s important, and when it’s not. Don’t use up your access, and know the timing.”

There was some disagreement as to the connection between reporters, editorial writers, and stakeholders. “Good relationships with reporters lead directly to good relationships with the editorial board,” said a press aide at one extreme. At the other end, an editorial writer: “We get information from reporters, but not like people think. Reporters aren’t our main source of information.” The truth is probably somewhere in between. “Success has to do with the relationship with the reporter at the paper AND the editorial writers. But it doesn’t always transfer,” said one aide.

There certainly seems to be less separation between the news and editorial desks than many imagine, particularly for meetings with top officials or candidates. “The editorial board, reporters, the publisher are all there for the newspaper. There’s no wall of separation,” said one governor’s aide. “When we go in to speak, the editorial board and reporters are all there,” said an elected official.

Who Fails with the Editorial Board?

While some people in the public sphere tend to get favorable coverage on the editorial page, others seem to fare consistently poorly. Interviewees from both categories offered their ideas of how to fail with the editorial board.

Nearly every respondent first warned, “Don’t lie.”

“I’ll never lie,” said one. “Omit many times, exaggerate, but never lie.” There is, as this line suggests, some room to maneuver. “I could bulls___ the financial figures. If I said we made \$15 million, they wouldn’t dig. But it was BS, not lies.”

Another mistake is to come unprepared. “One candidate came in unprepared; the other knew the topics, knew our positions,” said an editorial writer of an endorsement interview. A press aide seconded the importance of preparation. “You can’t make them go contrary. Pick up clues, know their endorsements. Know their hot buttons and anticipate the questions.”

There was strong criticism for those who spent too much time reacting to editorials. “Avoid reacting. [My boss] reacted all the time, would call writers and tell them they got the story wrong.” Another elected official was well-known for writing long, angry letters in response to negative editorials. “Once it’s written, it’s written,” said one interviewee. “There’s nothing you can do about it.” If one insists on protesting an editorial, it seems best to tread respectfully. One writer complimented a governor who “knows how to disagree without being nasty.”

Similarly, two interviewees lamented not having been more proactive with the editorial board. One said, “In hindsight I should’ve reached out. But I failed; I ignored the beast and got bitten.”

Meeting the Editorial Board

Discussions with editorial board members can be formal or informal, depending on the issue and the stature of the person being interviewed by the board.

In informal situations, the conversation is much like that with a reporter, and can be instigated by either party (although many of the people we consider successful with editorials proactively called writers first). The writer has the questions he or she wants answered, and the interviewee pushes his or her message and the important supporting points. “We kept trying to keep them on point about how the arena would help Newark. It was a battle to not get caught up in larger state issues,” said a sports executive. Some people work to build relationships with just one or two people on the editorial board, and our interviewees said these relationships were very important. Some were reluctant even to initiate contact with a writer with whom there was no relationship. “Use surrogates to call editorial writers if you don’t know them personally,” said a governor’s aide.

The most formal meetings involve much more preparation on both sides. If meeting with the governor, for example, the board will have long meetings about the key issues to be discussed. Each writer is given assignments for research, so that they are in a position to ask questions and follow-up questions. When the governor arrives, he or she does not only meet with the board. Columnists, reporters, and other staff will all be in the room.

On the governor’s side, preparation involves policy, political, and press staff. Staff comb through past editorials, discuss each writer’s likely questions and positions, and work to avoid surprise questions. “We were never surprised by a question,” said one advisor. “The object is not to make news,” said an elected official.

The amount of preparation that goes into a meeting with the editorial board is sometimes very thorough. “We would have big meetings to prepare, with the governor, media staff, chief of staff, other advisors,” said one governor’s advisor. “We made sure we knew their past positions.”

The meetings are not straight question-and-answer sessions, but involve a great deal of interaction. Both sides have agendas. “In the meetings, there’s too much interaction between the editorial board members and the interviewee,” one official said. “It tips you off, so you can know where they’re going. I viewed meetings as an open discussion.”

The Newark Arena and Star-Ledger Editorials

Applying these lessons to analysis of the editorials regarding the Newark arena proved enlightening. We spoke to at least one senior representative of each gubernatorial administration involved in the arena debate and saw the effects of stakeholders’ involvement with the editorial board. A disclaimer is in order: We did not learn enough about the development of any one editorial to be able to read perfectly into any specific editorials. At the risk of excessive speculation, however, our discussions with the players and corresponding readings of *The Ledger’s* editorials reveal important knowledge.

Our analysis follows:

Governor Christine Todd Whitman was first to try to reach an arena accord in the legislature, offering \$75 million in state money in 2000 for a complex housing both the Devils and the Nets. Whitman received only mixed coverage from editorials in *The Star-Ledger*. Most criticism came from *The Ledger’s* view that Whitman wasn’t doing enough to move legislation forward. Another factor, however, was the Whitman did not engage the Editorial Board sufficiently in defending her position. She “didn’t do enough to massage the issue,” according to one interviewee, and “didn’t give *The Ledger* the scoops. In hindsight it wasn’t the smartest move; they were kind of annoyed by it.”

It’s impossible to prove, but *The Ledger’s* words seem to reflect Whitman’s lack of investment. “She has stayed above the fray long enough. It’s time for her to show leadership.” “Whitman remains seated firmly on her hands, making no enemies and choosing no sides. This isn’t leadership — it’s neglect (1999/07/11).” “Newark’s boom needs Whitman’s help (1999/11/21),” “She has been indifferent about the Newark plan all along (2000/03/19),” “Whitman must make a call on arena funding (2000/07/16).” Whitman may have had a strategy, but she did not make it known to *The Ledger* and endured a great deal of criticism as a result.

The contrast in coverage between Whitman and her successor, Acting Governor Donald DiFrancesco, is striking, and in our view was partly the result of DiFrancesco’s strategy with *The Ledger’s* editorial board.

The Ledger's first arena editorial after DiFrancesco took office in 2001 reflects interaction between the two sides. "The new governor, Donald DiFrancesco, is known as a skilled deal maker. Now he has the chance to prove it (2001/02/04)."

"That editorial was written knowing DiFrancesco was serious," said an advisor. "*The Ledger* knew he was committed, and they were in the game together."

DiFrancesco did make more progress in arena talks than Whitman, and editorial coverage was disproportionately favorable. The governor was clearly more involved with the editorial board than Whitman had been. DiFrancesco's administration would give a "heads up" to *The Ledger* if they knew *The Ledger* would be supportive, and it is tempting to read editorials from the time and envision the conversations that led into them. "DiFrancesco is bringing in heavy hitters (2001/03/22)," "DiFrancesco knows...(2001/03/22)" "DiFrancesco has brought new energy to the talks (2001/03/22)." "The outline Acting Gov. DiFrancesco presented this week seems almost bulletproof (2001/06/08)."

The DiFrancesco plan ultimately failed in the legislature, and the next governor, James McGreevey (who took office in 2002), pledged to the city of Newark that they would get an arena, while also promising that no state money would go to sports teams.

The administration admittedly fudged the issue with editorial boards, however. McGreevey directed substantial transportation infrastructure improvements to be made around the arena site, and explained it in different ways to different boards. "To the non-Newark papers," said one aide, "it was 'legitimate needs, legitimate transport. This doesn't violate our policy.' But we could say to *The Ledger*, 'Look, we're helping.'"

McGreevey dropped his legislative plan for an arena fairly quickly, and in the end the arena money came from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. In 2003 McGreevey stepped in to make the money available to Newark, and James directed the \$210 million to an arena deal. *The Ledger* editorial board curiously never criticized the Port Authority deal. "There was less pressure from the editorial boards than you'd think," said one appointee. "[The Port Authority deal] suited *The Ledger's* purpose. If *The Ledger* called attention to the money source, they would have lost the money altogether. Other papers weren't paying attention. The *New York Times* was preoccupied and had no incentive. The *Record* was preoccupied with the Meadowlands ("We missed it," said a *Record* writer). If the Gannett papers had tried and uncovered something, they could have influenced it. But there's gotta be a drumbeat."

The Ledger did direct criticism toward Mayor James and his arena deal. James had a notoriously poor relationship with the newspaper "He would write letters disagreeing with us. The larger the signature, the madder he was," said a writer.

When Cory Booker replaced James as Newark's mayor in 2006, he set out to renegotiate the arena deal, even threatening to scrap it. *The Ledger's* response to the renegotiation was mixed: "It is hard to judge the deal that Newark Mayor Cory Booker

just cut to finish building a downtown arena in partnership with the New Jersey Devils hockey team. The old one was so bad that almost anything would be better.”

That was basically the mayor’s line. “The message to *The Ledger*,” said one aide, “was, ‘It’s a s__tty deal, but the thing’s halfway built. We made it better, the deal improved modestly.’”

Although ground was broken and the arena built under the administrations of acting Gov. Richard Codey (who took office after McGreevey’s 2004 resignation) and Gov. Jon Corzine (elected in 2005), the two were almost never mentioned in *Ledger* editorials regarding the arena. Gov. Codey, a native of Essex county where Newark is located, was generally a longtime supporter of a Newark arena, but there was little to be gained politically from promoting it while Mayor James was getting beaten up by the editorial board. By the time Corzine came to office in 2006 construction was well underway, and although it was an issue in the gubernatorial campaign there was little Corzine could do to change the agreement. There is no indication from the record or our interviews that Codey or Corzine pursued the issue with *The Ledger* editorial board.

Ten Recommendations for a Successful Editorial Board Visit

Given our experience in analyzing editorial boards from both the political, public relations, and journalistic perspective, we recommend the steps that follow to ensure a successful presentation. There are 10 factors that any editorial board participant should keep in mind before requesting the opportunity to meet.

1. **Be Proactive.** Most policy issues do not appear suddenly. Legislative debate and votes as well as regulatory consideration are typically scheduled far enough in advance that a savvy participant can arrange an editorial board meeting to have an impact at the appropriate time. Requesting a meeting after an editorial has been written is unlikely to be effective
2. **Timing and Access.** Short of being the governor or another prime government official involved in the policy process, know that access is limited and aim for the moment of maximum influence. This is always a judgment call, and understanding the policy process is crucial to timing the request.
3. **Coordination.** On a significant policy matter, editorial writers will typically consider views from the various sides in the debate; but only on rarest occasions will they schedule meetings with two organizations supporting the same position or agree to separate meetings with an organization and individual members. It is important to coordinate requests among allies.
4. **Be Organized and Prepared.** Presentation skills are at a premium. Be knowledgeable about the board’s previous positions on the issue or similar matters, and know how to present your position in a way that will appeal to the

editorial board. It is useful to be conversational and also bring materials to help illustrate the policy points.

5. Don't Whine. Editorial writers are not particularly receptive to people complaining about articles after they're written. If you challenge an editorial's position do so respectfully, without expecting an apology. Emotionalism is a negative.
6. Acknowledge others' arguments. If the issue is important enough for the editorial board to meet with one side it is highly likely a representative of the other side will be in as well. Know all opponents' positions and be prepared to discuss the subtleties.
7. Never Lie. Remember that editorial writers are journalists. They will do their own research to verify points made in the presentation. Be open and acknowledge weakness in arguments if challenged, without upending the policy perspective.
8. Disagree Without Being Disagreeable. Editorial boards are debates. But as important as policy discussion is, so is human interaction. Being disliked will not help in convincing the participants to support your position.
9. Proper Follow-Up. If questions are unanswered or there is a request for further information from the editorial board, be prompt and thorough in responding. Keep in contact to inquire of any further information needs prior to the editorial's publication.
10. Build Relationships. Even when there is not an editorial imminent, stay in touch with editorial board members. Without abusing your access, phone or email them with insights on editorials they have written, even if they don't specifically pertain to your policy matter.

Suggestions for Further Research

There is a shortage of literature concerning the lobbying that affects editorials, in addition to a shortage of research about the present and future role of editorials in the public sphere. In this article we have focused on an issue as it evolved on the editorial page over a decade and 66 editorials; an equally informative project would study just one or a few editorials and achieve knowledge of every source of influence affecting those editorials.

While editorials are unlikely to disappear anytime in the near future, they will have to adapt to the changing newspaper economics brought about by the Internet. It is worth studying whether editorials can maintain their present readership, find a niche among the multitude of new information sources, and what sort of changes they must undergo to do so.

Even if reduced readership is inevitable, could editorials still have the same influence and access to stakeholders? We were somewhat surprised that editorials have so much influence even though they are not considered the most popular space in the paper. It's conceivable that the "Voice of God" approach will continue to maintain outsized influence.

Determining who gets access to editorial boards is worth further pursuit. The Newark Arena debate was fought in the editorial pages almost entirely by the elite. This may not be the case in other debates, but either way it is worth studying why some have access and some do not. Upon answering that question, researchers should address whether and how that access influence editorial positions.

On any given day there are many issues that compete for attention, but only one or a few issues earn editorial coverage. What determines whether an issue is addressed in an editorial? Are certain policy areas, conflicts or levels of governments more likely to be addressed?

Finally, more research into the nature of editorial boards is in order. Given the common complaint among our interviewees that editorial writers were a homogenous bunch, a survey of the structure, demographic, income levels of editorial boards and their members, and how that affects their product, would be informative.

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Stakeholders in the Newark Arena Debate

Gov. Christine Todd Whitman (1994-2001)

Acting Gov. Donald DiFrancesco (2001-2002)

Gov. James McGreevey (2002-2004)

Acting Gov. Richard Codey (2004-2006)

Gov. Jon S. Corzine (2006-present)

Newark Mayor and State Senator Sharpe James (1986-2006)

Newark Mayor Cory Booker (2006-present)

Ray Chambers, philanthropist and Nets Co-Owner

Timeline of the Arena Debate

- 1997** Informal discussions of an arena for Newark begin. Philanthropist and Nets co-owner Ray Chambers and Newark Mayor Sharpe James are early supporters.
- 1998** Newark tentatively offers land, cash, and tax incentives for an arena for the Nets and Devils. Gov. Christine Todd Whitman prefers that the teams stay at their current home in the Meadowlands; Devils owner John McMullen favors a move to Hoboken.
- 1999** Whitman declares support for a new or renovated in the Meadowlands rather than Newark. *The Star-Ledger* runs a large, four-part editorial series supporting the Newark site, and criticizes Whitman through the year for inaction.
- 2000** The Nets and Devils are brought under one owner, the YankeeNets holding group. Whitman agrees to \$75 million on infrastructure to support an arena in Newark, but no final deal or legislation is agreed upon
- 2001** Donald DiFrancesco replaces Whitman as Acting Governor. DiFrancesco agrees to divert \$190 million in tax revenue to construction bonds for the arena. Despite wide support for the plan, it is never brought to a vote in the State Assembly. In November, Governor-elect James McGreevey drops his support for the arena subsidy, citing budget constraints
- 2002** McGreevey takes office in January, and Sharpe James is re-elected mayor of Newark after a close election in May. At the same time McGreevey proposes an arena funding arrangement similar to DiFrancesco's. The plan fails to pass through the legislature.
- 2003** The City of Newark receives \$210 million from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, an independent agency, as part of a lease renegotiation for Newark International Airport.
- 2004** Jeff Vanderbeek purchases the Devils from YankeeNets. Newark agrees to put up \$200 million in Port Authority money for construction of an arena that would house the New Jersey Devils (but not the Nets). Mayor James comes under intense criticism for the deal, and a petition circulates advocating a referendum on the spending.
- 2005** Groundbreaking for the arena is held October 3.
- 2006** James decides not to run for re-election, and Cory Booker is elected mayor in May. Booker renegotiates parts of the arena deal with the Devils and the Corzine administration, altering the spending formula and winning job and other considerations for Newark residents.
- 2007** The arena opens on October 25 with a series of Bon Jovi concerts. Owned primarily by the New Jersey Devils along with the city, it houses the Devils, the Seton Hall men's basketball team, and an indoor soccer team. The basketball Nets continue to play in the Meadowlands, with plans to move to Brooklyn in the future.

The Star-Ledger's Arena Editorials

Title	Date	Day of Week	page	Word ct.
Newark Nets?	1997/11/15	Saturday	014	400
A change of venue	1998/07/03	Friday	022	278
Homeward bound?	1998/08/25	Tuesday	014	295
Newark's No. 1	1998/11/21	Saturday	023	394
Paying to play	1999/01/09	Saturday	014	325
Hoops, hockey and hope	1999/05/09	Sunday	003	1463
Go big or go broke	1999/05/10	Monday	013	2483
Handicapping the arena stakes	1999/05/11	Tuesday	015	2436
How to make the Newark plan work	1999/05/12	Wednesday	019	2737
End the game over a new arena	1999/06/01	Tuesday	010	715
Arena plan stands up to comparison	1999/07/18	Sunday	002	537
Time to get behind a Newark arena	1999/07/11	Sunday	002	491
Newark's boom needs Whitman's help	1999/11/21	Sunday	002	777
Ice the deal for the Devils and a Newark arena	2000/01/14	Friday	032	458

Newark's neighborhoods must not be left out	2000/01/18	Tuesday	010	505
For a Newark arena, the devil's in the details	2000/03/19	Sunday	002	574
Removing an obstacle	2000/03/27	Monday	014	280
Avoid a struggle over an arena site	2000/04/02	Sunday	002	524
The arena's promise	2000/04/06	Thursday	016	499
Whitman must make a call on arena funding	2000/07/16	Sunday	002	514
It's the Governor's move	2000/07/30	Sunday	002	546
A good, but late, start	2000/08/27	Sunday	002	800
Progress on the arena	2000/10/09	Monday	018	410
A Meadowlands alternative	2000/10/13	Friday	030	439
Newark headed up	2000/10/14	Saturday	018	387
A handout to malls	2000/11/19	Sunday	002	839
Take action now on the Newark arena	2001/01/07	Sunday	002	311
Strike a bargain and build the arena	2001/02/04	Sunday	002	799
A winning strategy	2001/03/22	Thursday	014	471

The best spot to celebrate	2001/06/08	Friday	026	169
The Newark arena deal looks like a winner	2001/06/08	Friday	026	704
Nets get an assist	2001/06/30	Saturday	024	294
Make time for the arena	2001/07/02	Monday	014	513
Change at the Meadowlands	2001/07/11	Wednesday	014	517
Shortsighted Schundler	2001/08/22	Wednesday	014	775
Jack's back	2001/11/09	Friday	022	472
No new spending	2001/11/20	Tuesday	016	447
Patience on the arena project	2001/12/22	Saturday	008	310
The makings of a good deal for a Newark arena	2002/05/09	Thursday	022	940
A better day for Newark	2002/05/15	Wednesday	014	543
Do right on the arena	2002/06/24	Monday	014	386
N.J. needs the Newark arena	2002/07/08	Monday	016	391
New life for Meadowlands	2002/09/23	Monday	014	537
The only logical step for a strapped city	2002/10/08	Tuesday	022	891
Losing game on arena	2003/03/12	Wednesday	014	347

Put arena plan to rest	2003/03/26	Wednesday	014	522
Meadowlands mass transit	2003/04/17	Thursday	020	568
No to YankeeNets	2003/04/24	Thursday	014	309
Try another arena pitch	2003/08/08	Friday	014	357
Jersey's blocked shot	2004/01/23	Friday	026	535
The deal with the Devils	2004/02/12	Thursday	018	761
Fog shrouds Newark arena	2004/02/27	Friday	022	567
Don't rush arena decision	2004/05/03	Monday	014	270
The key arena questions	2004/07/14	Wednesday	014	321
Planning downtown Newark	2004/08/16	Monday	014	442
Wrong pick for the project	2004/09/17	Friday	028	329
Guarantees, not promises	2004/09/28	Tuesday	016	292
Putting city oversight on ice	2004/10/07	Thursday	020	296
Looking out for No. 1	2005/03/22	Tuesday	020	358
Fire and ice	2005/06/01	Wednesday	014	202
Probe the housing agency	2005/07/22	Friday	018	338
Newark's unreasonable risk	2005/09/10	Saturday	014	175

The Devils vs. deadlines	2006/01/14	Saturday	012	257
Helping the arena survive	2006/10/31	Tuesday	014	445
Make a choice on the arena	2007/02/05	Monday	018	487
Rooting for the arena	2007/10/25	Thursday	018	488