

# Defining Distinctiveness: The Connections Between Organizational Identity, Competition, and Strategy in Public Radio Organizations

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## **Abstract**

Because of disruption stemming from digital media products and services, radio stations across the country are enacting organizational changes to provide digital content while maintaining a strong radio broadcast presence. This study asks: How do views on organizational competition correspond with organizational identity discourse? And, how do cognitive competitor networks differ among public media organizations, and among people in similar roles across different organizations? Theories of organizational identity, networks, and strategic groups are applied to interview data from 75 people in 14 organizations. The way individuals perceived competitors encapsulated the connection between organizational identity and strategy. Descriptive network analysis of cognitive competitor networks showed that people in similar departments across organizations had similar views about competitors, but there was divergence among these role-based groups. This study demonstrates how views about competitors inform organizational identity discourse and produces dialectical tensions with regard to strategy that, if ignored, can potentially hamper innovation.

## **Keywords**

organizational identity, management communication, strategy, competition, cognitive networks

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Rapidly evolving digital media products and services have affected how individuals seek and consume information. This has disrupted the business models of media institutions in industries including print journalism, book publishing, and music distribution. Like other media organizations, public radio stations are facing pressures from technological disruption, changing consumer habits, and new threats to their business models. Many radio stations are addressing these challenges by enacting strategic changes within their organizations to deal with the changing mediascape. Public radio and television play important public service roles in the United States because their mission is to serve the public interest by providing content that is underproduced in commercial media, such as educational programming and local news (Waldman, 2011). Many public media organizations have been developing new strategic plans and redefining the structures and cultures of their organizations to keep up with challenges and opportunities that come with an increase in communication channels for distribution and audience engagement.

This study contributes to academic research by addressing a gap in literature on organizational identity and strategy; past research has shown that identity may inform or be informed by strategy but this connection has been underresearched thus far (Anand, Joshi, & O'Leary-Kelly, 2013; Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013; Tripsas, 2009). I address this gap by exploring how notions of competition are embedded within culture and structure the way people communicate about their own organizations (Riley & Howard, 1999). By drawing from literature on organizational identity, communication networks, and strategic groups, I explain how organizations develop cognitive associations with other organizations in their industry and how this affects organizational strategic change within organizations. Strategic change can be defined as "an attempt to change current modes of cognition and action to enable the organization to take advantage of important opportunities or to cope with consequential environmental threats" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 433). For public media organizations, this means how they are enacting internal changes to adapt to the changing media and technological environment.

The practical implications of this study are relevant not only to individuals within public media but also to those in industries that are being disrupted by digital media technologies (e.g., book/magazine/newspaper publishing, fashion retail, and higher education), as well as nonprofit organizations that may face similar cultural and structural issues. Through the analysis of a large body of interview data, I show how views about competitors informed organizational identity discourse and also produced tensions with regard to strategy that, if ignored, could potentially hamper innovation and change.

## Literature Review

This review of literature draws connections between organizational identity and a strategy. Previous research (Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 2011) has portrayed this relationship as an enactment cycle in which belief systems and cognitive frames about an organization feed into decision making.

The following section provides an overview of the intersection of theories on organizational identity, cognitive competition, and networks.

### Organizational Identity

Identity at the organizational level is useful for examining how people make sense of their organization. It reflects responses to the question, “Who are we as an organization?” (Whetten, 2006, p. 220). Gioia et al. (2013) build on Albert and Whetten’s (1985) classic definition of organizational identity in that it is composed of

those features of an organization that in the eyes of its members are *central* to the organization’s character or “self-image,” make the organization *distinctive* from other similar organizations, and are viewed as having continuity over time is the shared beliefs of members about an organization’s central, *enduring* and distinctive characteristics. (p. 125)

This study focuses on identity as a function, in which identity reflects the attributes that allow an organization be distinguished from others (Whetten, 2006). This perspective situates identity in the context of how people within organizations make sense of, and enact, organizational identity through communication. This differs from external identity in which outside audiences, such as customers, view an organization.

A major gap in literature lies in the relationship between strategy and identity (Tripsas, 2009). An organization’s identity can be “expressed through elements of strategy” but it is unclear how changes in strategy influence or are influenced by changes in identity (Tripsas, 2009, p. 456). Strategy can be defined as the “frameworks, techniques, and plans” used “to eliminate competitive threats to organization survival, and to exploit opportunities for increasing organization wealth and security” (Rabin, Miller, & Hildreth, 2000, p. xv). While public and private sector organizations may adopt different strategic routes, overarching goals are shared to “marshal vision, fight for survival, and exploit opportunity” (Rabin et al., 2000, p. xvi). A key element of strategy lies in decision making, focusing on competitive dynamics and organizational positioning—the way organizations view themselves in relation to other entities feeds into organizational identity.

### Discourse About Distinctiveness

The “distinctiveness” component of Albert and Whetten’s (1985) definition denotes the significance of the ways in which people perceive their organization as being different from other organizations or entities (Gioia et al., 2013). Whetten’s (2006) view of the functional aspect of organizational identity similarly positions identity in relation to views about other organizations or entities. The concept, *optimal distinctiveness*, can be used to describe how people view their organizations as similar, yet simultaneously distinctive, to certain types of organizations within an industry (Brewer, 1991; Gioia et al., 2013). For example, Gioia et al. (2013) studied

organizational identity formation and argued that this “involved an intense phase of articulating both similarities and differences between an organization and its peer organizations” (p. 163). Because of this paradoxical tension, people tend to seek identities that balance or create optimal distinctiveness between competing poles (Foreman & Whetten, 2012). Navis and Glynn (2010) further argue that “resolving the dilemma of sameness and difference in identity” is not only relevant to how organizations function internally but it can also affect their perceived legitimacy within the institutional environment (p. 441).

In addition to the organizational communication perspective on identity, strategic management literature on *strategic groups* addresses how perceptions about other organizations inform organizational and industry-level identities. *Strategic group identity* connects organizational and interorganizational levels of identity; it is defined as “a set of mutual understandings, among members of a cognitive intraindustry group, regarding the central, enduring and distinctive characteristics of the group” (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997, p. 166). Livengood and Reger (2010) similarly combined organizational identity and competitive dynamics frameworks to describe the role of *identity domains*, top manager’s most salient cognitive impressions of the competitive marketplace. Anand et al. (2013) applied social identity theory at the strategic group level in the context of organizational competition. They argued that strategic group configurations (SGCs) were the “psychological connections (such as identification) that firms (through their managers) develop with different strategic groups in their competitive space” (p. 571). Porac et al.’s (1989, 2011) work on the decline of the Scottish knitwear industry provides an empirical and historical perspective on how a segment of the knitwear industry with a very long history failed to adapt to new competitors from an increasingly globalized market. They argued that managerial views about the industry environment played a role in reinforcing myopia and a lack of innovation (Porac et al., 2011).

As organizational identity literature indicates, the way people make sense of their organizations and environments affects decision making. Riley and Howard (1999) argued that competition can be viewed as a cultural metaphor. This perspective stems from Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory, arguing that the way people think and talk about competition structures, social relations, and organizing processes (Riley & Howard, 1999). For example, the notion of competition can be used as an excuse for action to engage in organizational or strategic changes. This can lead to the danger of using competition for misguided action, including the institution of poor management practices. This metaphorical way of thinking about competition also touches on the dialectical tension between cooperation and competition. Whereas these ideas are often positioned as two extreme poles along a continuum, this oversimplifies how organizations operate within interorganizational networks, for example, through alliances and partnerships. Thus, competition is not just about the entities participating in a given market, but rather, the cultural metaphor of competition can act as a means for strategic action (guided or misguided) and as a way of categorizing interorganizational relationships.

*Communication Networks and Strategic Groups.* Past research on networks (Monge & Contractor, 2003) provided insight into the link between communication and network theory. Such networks are patterns of communication, in which communication can be thought of not only as messaging but also as flows of data, knowledge, images, or other symbols “that can move from one point in a network to another or can be co-created by network members” (Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 3). Previous social network research (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005; Johnson, 1994; Krackhardt, 1987) also points to the value of analyzing cognitive networks. Krackhardt’s (1987) work on cognitive social structures compared how people envisioned their social networks in relation to social networks based on observable interactions. Balkundi and Kilduff (2005) argued that cognitive network theory could show how networks emerged based on the way people thought about their relationships with others. By examining how people view their organization in relation to other competing entities, this networks perspective allows for a better understanding of how individuals make sense of their organization’s role in the context of the broader industry in which their organization participates.

This perspective parallels the aforementioned concepts of *SGC*, which can be viewed as cognitive networks regarding groups and competitors within one’s industry. Zaheer, Gulati, and Nohria (2000) advocated for a networks perspective with regard to strategic groups and the relationships between organizations. They (Zaheer et al., 2000) defined five different approaches for network-based scholarship that could be used for the analysis of strategic groups: (a) the structure of industries; (b) positioning within industries, for example, through the analysis of strategic groups; (c) the links among resources and capabilities; (d) coordination costs; and (e) the path dependence of costs and benefits. These network approaches can apply to strategic groups, for example, to assess the similarity between organizations within groups, or for identifying cliques in an interorganizational network. This type of positioning within industry is a topic of relevance to this study.

Together, these bodies of literature highlight the intersection of identity and strategy through a cognitive sensemaking perspective. This study uses this starting point to contribute to business communication research by further analyzing the implicit role that communication plays as the operational link between cognition and organizational action. This study applies these concepts to analyze the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How do employees’ views about competing entities inform organizational identity discourse?

**Research Question 2:** How do cognitive competitor networks differ among organizations, and among people in similar roles across different organizations?

Research Question 1 focuses on how individuals discussed organizations or entities with which their own organization competed. This question specifically focuses on perceptions about organizational positioning within the media industry, and how these cognitive connections inform organizational identity. Research Question 2 builds off

Research Question 1 by comparing views about competition among people across organizations and across roles.

## Method

### *Context: U.S. Public Radio Organizations*

The contemporary U.S. public media system was formalized by the Congressional Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. The act created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a nonpartisan funding source for public radio and television and established the mission for public media: to provide content that is underproduced in commercial media, such as educational content and local news. As of 2011, there were over 900 public radio FM stations and 365 public television stations (Waldman, 2011). Compared with public media systems in countries like Canada or the United Kingdom, U.S. public media relies primarily on funds stemming from individuals who donate to stations, as well as grants and foundation support, and corporate underwriting (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2012).

### *Public Radio Organizations*

While public radio stations share similar missions they operate independently; therefore, I conducted interviews with individuals at a purposive sample of organizations. The organizations selected share an underlying commonality: stations undergoing strategic change with regard to the production and distribution of content across digital media platforms. Organizations were selected based on interviews with industry experts and consultants, and through observations at forums about the future of public media. Some stations were included to assess differences within this population as well, such as the inclusion of two music format stations (as compared with the more predominant news format), two non-NPR stations, and the inclusion of a small market station (see Table 1 for the typology for selecting the organizations; see Appendix A for list of organizations selected).

### *Interview Procedures*

*Participants.* I conducted interviews with individuals from 14 organizations between August 2012 and October 2013. Because I was asking questions about internal organizational strategy regarding digital media, I tried to interview at least one manager and one digital/interactive media staff member from each organization. By “digital/interactive media staff member,” I mean a person on the Web or interactive teams within organizations who deals with content in the online and/or mobile spaces. A total of 75 interviews were conducted (see Appendix B for a list of interviewees). The average number of interviews conducted per station was four.

It was not possible to obtain the same number of interviews at each station due to challenges regarding access; some stations were more willing to have a range of

**Table 1.** Typology for Organization Selection.

Typology	Rationale
Change	Station in process of undergoing change, particularly in the context of experimentation in the digital media space.
Production of content at station level	Of the 900+ public radio stations in the United States, a large percentage do not produce content. Many stations that produce some of their own content tend to be more invested in moving into the digital space in different ways. Most—but not all—such stations tend to be located in larger media markets.
Regional representation (West Coast, Pacific Northwest, Midwest, South, East Coast)	The U.S. public media system is a national system with a mission to serve local audiences.
NPR member stations	Most cases selected were NPR stations to maintain similarity among cases.
Contrasting cases: KUSC, NCPR, Folk Alley	Some cases were included to provide contrast. KUSC is a non-NPR (music) public radio station, NCPR is a small station in a rural market, and Folk Alley is an online-only music station owned and operated by an NPR station.

people speak with me than others. Additionally, in places where I could visit in person (including several stations in California and in Florida), it was easier to talk to a range of individuals during my visits. Because this study deals with strategic, communication, and technological themes, the number of interviews at each institution was less important than reaching the right types of employees such as managers and Web or interactive team members. In addition, this study does not make any claims of statistical significance based on this type of interview sampling. In terms of fieldwork data gathering, I was ultimately surprised and pleased with the openness and forthrightness of the interviewees who agreed to participate in this project.

Each interviewee was asked about the level of confidentiality she or he preferred, for example, if their names could be used or if they wished to remain anonymous. Nearly all allowed for the full use of their names and organization names.<sup>1</sup> In this study, the position of respondents and their organization names are more relevant than the names of individuals; thus, position and organization names are used throughout the article.

*Semistructured Interviewing.* I used semistructured interviewing. The question guide (see Appendix C) included questions on recent changes in the organization, digital media strategy, views about innovation and innovation constraints, and views about the competitive landscape. Interviews were conducted in person when possible, over the phone, or via the voice-over IP service Skype. Most interviews were recorded for transcription purposes.

*Interview Data.* Data analyzed included approximately 537 pages of handwritten notes stemming from the interview process and 920 pages of interview transcriptions (the average length of a transcript was 15 pages, and the median was 14). Of the interviews, 47 were fully transcribed by a professional transcription service, 20 were transcribed by this author, and 8 were not recorded or were recorded with poor audio quality and thus extensive notes were taken during and immediately after the interviews. Notes were taken during each interview and observations were denoted as soon as possible on completing interviews. All transcripts were checked and cleaned by this author.

### *Interview Analysis*

Interview transcripts and notes were analyzed in the mixed methods program MAXQDA (MAXQDA, 2014). Interview data were coded using first and second cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2009). Theory informed the design of the codebook, and emergent codes and trends (such as the prevalence of certain organizational identity frames) were permitted. First cycle coding comprised the initial coding process, which included the use of descriptive and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009). Descriptive coding involved coding based on topic, such as a phrase or topic-based story, for example, descriptions of competitors. In this social science context, in vivo coding allowed for codes to be based off of phrases used by interviewees, such as “our culture.” Second cycle coding entailed a second coding pass on the data to refine and explore patterns and emergent themes. In this process, some codes were combined under thematic headings to better capture patterns in the data. During the course of coding, I discussed results with people related to public radio institutions but who were not directly affiliated with participating organizations, such as former public radio employees, and employees at public radio stations that were not included in the project. These discussions were used to help assess the validity of findings.

*Codebook.* A codebook was designed for the analysis of interview data. The codes used in this article include those addressing identity, strategy, competition, as well as demographic indicators including station and role (position within the organization).

Coding for identity focused on statements that exemplified professional identity (I statements), organizational identity (we statements), and industry-level identity (e.g., the radio broadcast industry), though individual-and industry-level statements were less prevalent. Statements addressing organizational culture were also coded in this category.

Strategy was coded based on narratives told about past, present, and future changes to strategy dealing with digital media and technology. For example, several interviewees used narratives about changes or events from the past to contextualize their organization’s current strategic trajectory.

Coding for competition addressed the ways in which interviewees described competitors of their organization, and ways of differentiating their organizations from

other entities. A typology of competitive entities (see Results) was derived from this coding process.

### *Exploratory Descriptive Network Analysis of Qualitative Data*

In addition to the qualitative coding of interview data, I transformed some interview data into network data to visualize and compare with the qualitative coding results. One interview question asked about the entities viewed as competition for radio stations. Responses to this question were arranged into a network in which each interviewee is connected to the entities she listed as competitors. Some descriptive analyses could then be conducted to build on the qualitative analysis of this topic. Most, but not all, interviewees answered this question.

In order to create a network matrix for this analysis, the responses to this interview question on competition were categorized (see Table 2). These categories were given an identification number. The names of interviewees were also coded into numbers. A covariate matrix was created showing the connections between interviewees and competitor entities.

Attribute data for respondents were coded. Attribute data included *role*, a person's job in their organization, and *organization name*. Roles were coded to be consistent across organizations, for example, all people who were a president, CEO, or general manager fulfill similar roles.

Social network analysis was conducted in Ucinet (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). First, a matrix was created to designate connections between respondents and competitors (Respondent 1 links to Competitor 4, Respondent 2 links to Competitor 1 and 4, etc.). This bimodal matrix was graphed in Ucinet Netdraw (Borgatti et al., 2002).

The bimodal incidence matrix was then converted into a one-mode adjacency matrix in Ucinet by using the cross-product method.<sup>2</sup> Thus, links in this one-mode matrix indicated shared views of competitors. For example, Person 5 and Person 6 may have both stated that Pandora is a competitor to their respective organizations and therefore these individuals share a tie; if Person 5 and Person 7 did not list any of the same competitor entities then they have zero ties. It was possible for respondents to have more than one tie if they had multiple entities in common.

Density of dyadic relationships among (a) organizations and (b) organizational roles was assessed to test for similarity (homophily). Using the one-mode matrix (people connected to people in which the presence of a tie signifies a shared view of a competitor), the number of edges were totaled<sup>3</sup> and then divided by the total number of edges possible. This process yielded density statistics to compare between groups. The greater the density statistic, the more a dyad shared similar views about competitors. This descriptive statistic is not used to make claims regarding statistical significance but to provide further insight into the interview data.

This study also does not compare cognitive competitor networks with representations of physical networks (such as competing radio stations within a region or market). This type of comparison does not make sense here because cognitive competitor networks reflect how individuals make sense of their institutional environment and how this can affect or constrain strategic change within organizations.

**Table 2.** Competitor Types Sorted by the Number of People Who Stated Each Entity.

Category	Example	Count
Other NPR stations or programs	Stations from other parts of the United States	12
Regional newspapers	<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	11
Content streaming services	Pandora, Spotify	10
Attention	People's time and attention	7
NPR	NPR itself	7
None	No competition	6
Local online news sources	Local news and information sites	6
Online aggregators	Yahoo, Google	5
Everything	All media	5
Tech startups	—	3
Podcasts	—	3
National newspaper	<i>USA Today, The New York Times</i>	3
iTunes	—	2
Regional TV stations	—	2
Mobile apps	—	2
Nonprofit news websites	Center for Investigative Reporting	1
Wire service	Associated Press	1
PBS	—	1
Satellite radio	Sirius XM Radio	1
Online news (commercial)	<i>LA Observed</i>	1
Local live events	Town hall meetings	1

## Results

### *Competition and Identity*

*Competition Informs Distinctiveness.* The first research question asked how views about competing entities informed organizational identity discourse. Discourse on perceived competition—a means of comparison with external actors—is a way that respondents defined organizational identity. By describing competitors, interviewees depicted a key component of organizational identity, distinctiveness. In general, competitors shared similarities such as same target audiences, the production of similar content, or similar sources of financial capital (e.g., donations or grants) so distinguishing how one's organization differed from competitors was a means of bounding organizational identity through discourse. Discussion about competitors ranged from those who stated no competition to those who stated everyone.

*No Competition.* A small number of individuals, primarily journalists and some general managers, dismissed the notion of competition. Most responses centered on the idea that the radio station was fulfilling a niche left open by other media:

I don't feel we have competition. What we are offering in thoughtful, longer format news about important issues is not being offered on other news sites. The print media and local commercial TV and radio news have abandoned our format. So we are filling a void and providing our audiences with news they are not getting from any other source. (General Manager, KPBS)

Similarly, some interviewees stated that their organizations filled gaps left open by the decline of newspapers—an unanticipated form of competitive advantage:

The Science and Environment Unit here at KQED is one of the largest reporting units in California around this particular topic. Unfortunately, that's due to the demise of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *LA Times* losing a lot of reporters. (Executive Producer, KQED)

A second theme from this category reflected the notion that because public radio was a different type of media entity than commercial media firms, there was no competition. This perspective represented an insular view about public radio. A Web and Social Media Editor/Producer at HPM stated, "We don't have to compete." Because they were the only NPR-member station in the region, she did not see any other competition. She acknowledged that they compared themselves with other public radio stations around the country but they had different audiences. An Interactivity Producer at WLRN denoted the tension between viewing public radio as a unique organizational form versus viewing it as without competition. When asked about competition she stated that at an industry level:

There isn't [competition]. That's the thing that's great for public radio stations and also what probably makes them really lazy sometimes. (Interactivity Producer, WLRN)

Similarly, the President of KUSC stated the station was benefiting from the decline of commercial classical music radio—KUSC was the only FM classical radio station broadcasting in many parts of California—but they nevertheless faced competition from other types of radio stations, from marginalization of radio in cars, and from newer competitors like Pandora.

A third manifestation of "no competition" stemmed from the nonprofit cultures of these organizations. There was a tension with regard to how competition was discussed in the context of a nonprofit environment. For example, several people said they did not face competition because they did not rely on ratings, the primary performance metric used by commercial radio stations. In this context, nonprofits "do not compete" in the way that commercial organizations compete to gain profits. One digital employee stated, "The bosses say no competition, we just serve the community." He qualified this statement to say that in his view "new hyperlocal competitors" were still important to watch. His statement demonstrated the influence of nonprofit culture on discourse about industry and competition. It also showed how organizational cultural norms served to suppress alternative views about the broader industry and organizational distinctiveness.

The President/CEO of OPB described how some in public media were not used to the concept of competition:

I think that there's also a class of people that came to public media that were probably kind of uncomfortable with that term [competition]. . . . They were intentionally interested on radio or they're intentionally in television. . . . They confuse the protection and enhancement of the underlying public service with the protection and enhancement of the means of transmission. (President/CEO, OPB)

This interviewee pointed out that the focus on transmission (radio, television) obscured the way many people thought about public radio in relation to the broader mediascape.

*Regional Competition.* The most commonly cited competitors reflected regional media entities including regional public and commercial radio stations and newspapers. Responses stating regional competitors were closely related to comments stating “none” in that several interviewees emphasized that nonprofit media institutions did not face the same battery of performance measures as commercial radio and TV, such as ratings.

Some interviewees focused mainly on radio competition. For example, in a market with two NPR stations, the General Manager of WBUR stated that they acknowledge WGBH as a competitor. In keeping with the theme of distinctiveness he described the ways in which WBUR differed from WGBH, for instance, citing how WBUR was among the first NPR stations to develop their own mobile app.

Some interviewees focused on the regional aspect of their audiences while recognizing a range of media in terms of content and platform type. One interviewee said that competition was:

Anybody who creates content in Southern California that people want to consume. That's the broad answer. The *LA Times*, local television stations, local news website, local mobile apps, local live events that involve community forums and discussions about civic issues. I think we have over two hundred competitors in our area. (Vice President of Content, KPCC, Los Angeles)

This type of response touched on the broad public service mission of service for local audiences while acknowledging different media platforms within a regionally bounded space.

*Attention and Time.* Several interviewees stated that competition was not about a particular medium or region, but people's time and attention. According to a News Director at KQED:

Competition is people's time. . . . You can't look at competition the same way anymore because [our audiences] don't look at one station or one brand versus the other. They are looking for curation. (News Director, KQED)

An Assignment Editor at WLRN also stated “people’s time.” He emphasized how WLRN was trying to differentiate itself by covering a specific set of counties in the region and by providing a “sideways take” or an angle different than other media sources. Notably, individuals in digital media roles at peripheral organizations including NPR Digital, CPB, and McClatchy mirrored this perspective.

The Senior Vice President of Radio for CPB denoted the challenge that stations faced in terms of brand confusion from external audiences:

Sometimes [stations] see other public stations as their competitors and we’re trying to say no! The public sees us as one thing. They all think we’re PBS or something! (SVP Radio, CPB)

His point was that other stations may be competitors, but the bigger issue was that stations were not paying enough attention to how audiences viewed them. This has important ramifications for when stations must ask audiences to donate funds to the stations themselves (a critical source of revenue), as compared with entities with potentially better name recognition (e.g., NPR, PBS, or individual programs like *This American Life*).

**Coopetition.** Some spoke of “coopetition” meaning the combination of competition and cooperation. This discourse focused on complex competitor/partner relationships with other institutions. This was emblematic of changing perspectives about the public media landscape. For example, the President/CEO of OPB stated that in the recent past, public media organizations like OPB would have viewed newspapers and other local news sources as competition; sharing content with such entities was viewed as harming the market share and brand identity of the public media station. Today, sharing content through partnerships with newspapers and other entities has started to become an increasingly accepted option for public media in some locations (OPB, KQED, WLRN, Cleveland). For many there is still tension inherent to these partnerships.

**Disconnect Between Competition and Strategy.** For some interviewees, there was a tension between how they described strategic changes occurring within their organization, and their own views about competition. For example, the General Manager of WLRN described the station’s strategy:

The digital strategy is very important to us because that’s where young people for the most part are getting all their information from . . . what we have learned is you can’t talk for the most part to people the same way you do in television and radio and Web involved. You have to talk to them in the environment in which the consumer uses it. (General Manager, WLRN)

When discussing competition he stated:

Obviously, some of the other radio outlets in the market that do news. That’s really about it. (General Manager, WLRN)

These quotes represent a discrepancy in terms of the emphasis on a digital media strategy and the view that the organization competed almost exclusively in the regional broadcast space. This type of misalignment in discourse pointed to a tension between sustaining a new strategic direction for the organization and maintaining existing organizational priorities; for example, if one is concerned primarily about broadcast radio competition, this could limit one's motivation to put limited resources into digital endeavors.

### *Exploratory Analysis of Cognitive Competitor Networks*

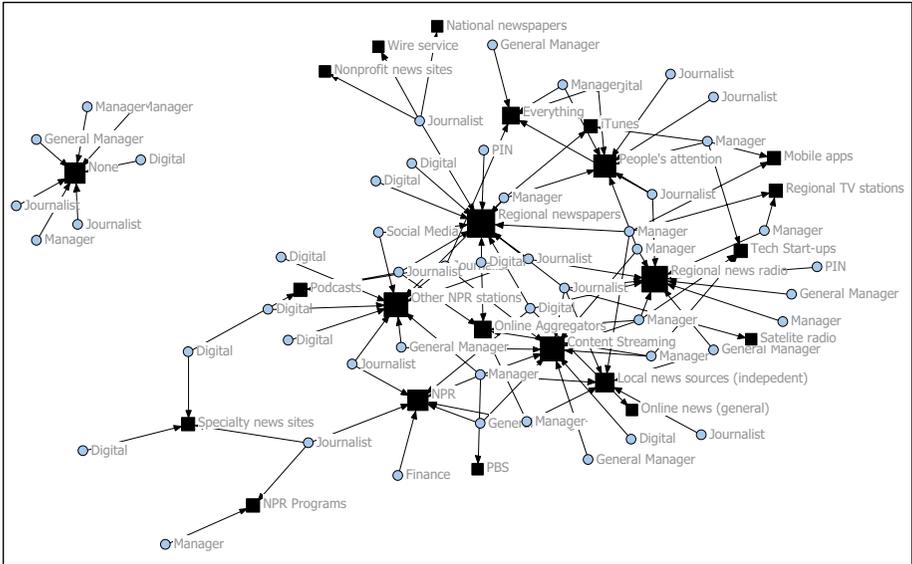
Research Question 2 asked: How do cognitive competitor networks differ among public media organizations, and among people in similar roles across different organizations? To assess cognitive competitor networks, I used data from interview questions about the entities viewed by respondents as competitors to their own organization. The purpose of this analysis was to draw connections between conceptualizations of competition and organizational identity.

*Connecting People and Competitors.* A two-mode matrix was graphed by mapping ties between interviewees and perceived competitors (see Figure 1). Graphing the competition network revealed two components, one large and one small. The small component consisted of individuals linking to "none." Because these individuals said "none" they did not list any other competitors. The most central (based on in-degree ties<sup>4</sup>) competitors in this network included the following: NPR stations or programs, regional newspapers, content streaming service, people's attention/everything, and NPR itself.

### *Density Among Organizations*

Density for shared views of competitors between organizations was assessed. I calculated density of dyadic relationships: among WBEZ members and other WBEZ, between WBEZ members and WLRN members, between WBEZ members and KPCC members, and so forth, for all the organizations for which these data were available. For example, a density of 0.4 signifies that 40% of possible links exist between the individuals in the network. This use of the measure of density can show evidence for the degree of homophily (a network term for sameness) that exists among people within their own organization and between organizations. First, I examined the density of shared opinion among people within organizations (Table 3). These results show the degree to which interviewees shared opinions about competitors with others in their organization.

I then examined the density of shared opinions among people between organizations. As Table 4 indicates, KPCC and HPM had the highest density measure of 0.75, showing evidence of shared views about competitor types. KPCC and HPM are both NPR-member stations with relatively large staff. Interviewees at both stations tended to emphasize regional competitors or a lack of competitors. KCRW and HPM had the lowest density score, followed closely by KQED and KPCC, and HPM and WBEZ.



**Figure 1.** Visualization of the two-mode network showing how individuals connect with competitors graphed in Ucinet Netdraw using the Spring Embedded layout algorithm. Note. The smaller component on the left shows the individuals who listed “none” (no competitors). The larger component on the right shows the network of people connected to different types of perceived competitors. Round nodes are individuals; black square nodes are competitor entities. The circle labels represent peoples’ roles in their organization; the square labels represent the competitor entity type. The size of the square nodes represents in-degree ties, so the larger the square the more people stated that it was a competitor.

**Table 3.** Density of Ties Between People in the Same Organization.

Organizations	Number of ties	Number of ties possible	Density
KPCC × KPCC	4	6	0.67
Marketplace × Marketplace	4	6	0.67
WBUR × WBUR	4	6	0.67
HPM × HPM	11	21	0.52
KPBS × KPBS	1	6	0.17
KQED × KQED	1	6	0.17
WLRN × WLRN	6	36	0.17
WBEZ × WBEZ	1	10	0.10
KUSC × KUSC	0	17	0.00

Interviewees at KCRW, KQED, and WBEZ tended to emphasize digital competitors more than regional or no competitors.

**Table 4.** Density of Ties Between People in Different Organizations.

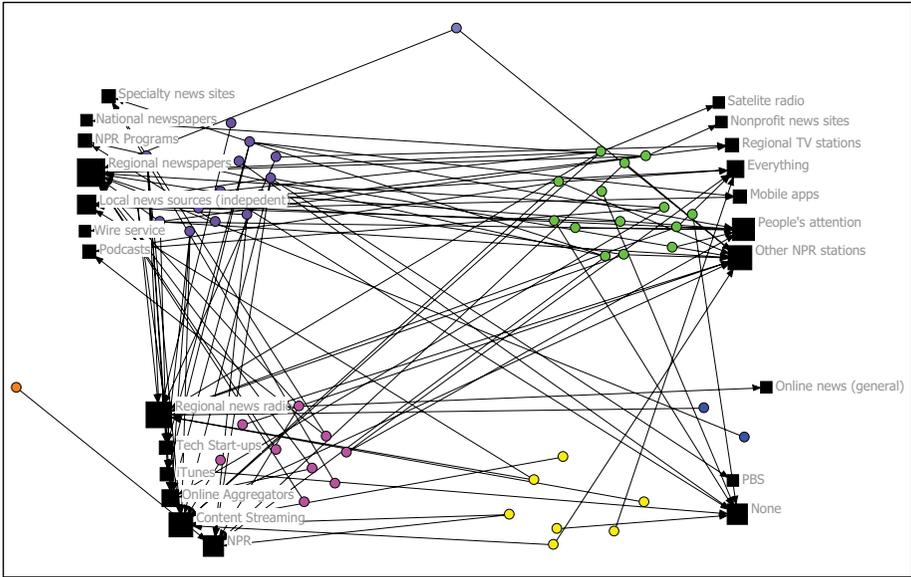
Organizations	Number of ties	Number of ties possible	Density
KPCC × HPM	21	28	0.75
WBUR × KPCC	12	16	0.75
WBUR × HPM	14	28	0.50
Marketplace × KCRW	2	4	0.50
WBUR × KCRW	2	4	0.50
WLRN × KPCC	18	36	0.50
HPM × WBEZ	16	35	0.46
KQED × KPCC	7	16	0.44
KCRW × HPM	3	7	0.43

**Table 5.** Density of Ties Between People With Similar Roles in Different Organizations.

Roles of interviewees	Number of ties	Number of ties possible	Density
General manager × Top manager	20	61	0.33
Top manager × Top manager	29	91	0.32
Journalist × Top manager	29	93	0.31
Digital × Journalist	18	71	0.25
Journalist × Journalist	22	91	0.24
Digital × Digital	15	72	0.21
General manager × Journalist	11	53	0.21
General manager × General manager	4	21	0.19
Digital × Top manager	11	77	0.14
Digital × General manager	3	33	0.09

### *Density Among Roles*

Table 5 displays density of ties based on role similarity. For example, general managers from different organizations were compared with digital media personnel, and with people in other roles to assess the degree to which views about competitors were shared. These results indicated that leaders in these organizations tended to share views about competitors, for example, the relationships between general managers and top managers ranked highest in terms of density. The least dense networks included those between digital employees and managers. Because these data are not part of a random sample or whole population data, statistical differences between these groups would not be meaningful, however, these results do add to a pattern ascertained in interview data that shows a divide between the way many leaders view competitors and the ways in which digital employees, in particular, view competitors. Figure 2 visualizes how the views of people in similar roles tended cluster around certain types



**Figure 2.** Visualization of the two-mode network grouped by the attribute, role, in Ucinet Netdraw.

Note. Round nodes are individuals; black square nodes are competitor entities. The ties show relationships between individuals and competitor entities. This layout shows how each role-based group clusters around certain types of competitor entities. The upper left quadrant contains mostly Managers; the upper right, Journalists; the lower right, General Managers; the lower left, Digital media personnel. The square labels describe the competitor entity type. The size of the square nodes represents in-degree ties, so the larger the square the more people stated that it was a competitor.

of entities, for example, managerial nodes tended to cluster around local and regional entities, whereas digital media nodes tended to cluster around online-oriented competitors. As this figure and the previous results indicate, no group held entirely homogenous views but there were observable patterns of opinion in relation to role. This fits with past literature in that members of a group may share a collective identity, but there can still be variance as well as deviance from total conformity to that identity (Navis & Glynn, 2010).

## Discussion

### *Competition and Distinctiveness*

The theme of distinctiveness underlies findings about perceived competition and organizational identity. Discourse on what makes an organization distinctive was key to how organizational identity was defined. Whetten’s (2006) concept of the function of organizational identity highlights the importance of how an organization is distinguished from other entities. Public broadcasters are facing new forms of competition yet there was

resistance to the concept of competition stemming from nonprofit organizational cultures and the somewhat insular nature of this unique media industry. Rather than pursuing optimal distinctiveness in a way that took into consideration a comprehensive view of the complex media environment, cultural and communication patterns fostered an inward-looking identity. As nonprofit public broadcasting organizations, these ways of deliberately not thinking in terms used by commercial entities were used to help bound organizational identity, yet as Picard (2010) argued, public broadcasters must deal with competition in ways they did not have to in the past:

Technological changes, combined with an ideological shift about the role of the state in Markets, have led regulators to dramatically increase competition in broadcasting (Murdoch & Golding, 2001; Iosifidis, Steemers, & Wheeler, 2005 as cited in Picard, 2010) and shifted the focus of policy discussions to issues of consumption and individual needs rather than collective concerns. Public service broadcasters no longer play the clear and protected roles they did in the past and must compete with the new players. (p. 367)

This fits with findings from previous research (Porac et al., 2011) describing *myopic enactment* in which the institutionalization of legacy organizations led to boxed-in ways of viewing a changing industry and prevented innovation. Thus, the ways in which individuals think about competitors and the notion of competition have implications for organizational strategy and decision making.

Organizational identity is the mechanism through which managers imagine their competitive space. Whereas Anand et al. (2013) asked, what are the psychological mechanisms for the connection between organizations and groups? This study examines what these connections tell us about the organizations in question. There was unexpected variety in terms of how interviewees discussed perceived competition. The descriptive network analysis results further show that people in similar roles tended to have more in common with regard to their perceptions than a comparison among organizations. These results point to divergence in views about strategic groups and networks related to the roles of individuals within organizations, particularly with regard to the divide between digital media employees and managers.

The extreme variety of views about competition points to tensions about organizational identity and the influence of technological change on organizations. Those who stated regional competition reflected a spectrum ranging from a narrow focus on similar radio stations to a more expansive but geographically bounded view of multiplatform, regional competitors. Although this view may be partially attributable to the community-oriented mission of public radio stations, it deemphasized the impact of Web-based and mobile media including content from other public radio stations and NPR itself.

Those with the most expansive—and potentially overwhelming—views of competition focused on people's time and attention. This view expressly accounted for digital media competitors as well as a wide range of commercial media entities. It was also notable that interviewees in digital roles at peripheral organizations (nonstation entities) like CPB and NPR Digital also strongly supported this view. These cognitive

perceptions further defined how people made sense of the distinctiveness and identity of organizations, and pointed to the connection between organizational identity, strategic group identity, and organizational strategy.

### *Practical Implications*

These results point to practical implications for the managers and employees at public radio stations as well as for personnel in industries facing similar changes. Some dialectical tensions emerged from this study including views about competition versus institutional cultures that discourage discourse about competition and industry-level managerial cognition versus organizational strategy.

*Competition Versus Institutional Cultures.* First, when there was no recognition of competition, this indicated a potentially inward, broadcast-focused perspective. By avoiding the notion of competition, there was the potential for ignoring organizations that presented similar, better, or complimentary products. Both the relative uniqueness of public radio and nonprofit cultures contributed to this view. This matters because views about competition can be used to reconsider and expand notions of competitive threats to the public media audience, as well as for rethinking ideas for partnerships that could help maximize resources while aiding the public service mission. For example, WLRN's content sharing partnership with the *Miami Herald* was touted by several interviewees as an innovative but surprisingly rare relationship that capitalized on the size and resources of the newspaper devoted to breaking news, and the analytical skills of the radio news department. In the recent past and even in the present, interviewees noted that regional newspapers were more likely to be regarded as competitors for the same market audience. As different types of partnerships become more common, a greater awareness of competition or the tension between cooperation and competition among partner organizations may be useful to help manage mutually beneficial partnerships.

This recognition of competition is an important way people define distinctiveness and identity of organizations. Yet, as Riley and Howard (1999) denoted, this cultural metaphor can be used ineffectively as an excuse for poorly thought-out change. Thus, a further tension to be managed is striking the right balance between the potential pitfalls of using competition as an excuse for ill-informed actions, and the recognition that people think about competition in different ways. This recognition may help make visible employee opinions and ideas that may otherwise be ignored or unintentionally suppressed.

*Industry-Level Cognition Versus Intraorganizational Strategy.* Another tension lies in aligning industry-level views about competition and organizational identity with internal strategy. In some instances the way individuals described their organizational strategy for digital media conflicted with their views about who was—and was not—competition. This discrepancy calls into question how strategic decisions get prioritized, particularly when resources are scarce. For example, if broadcast competitors are at the forefront of managerial cognition, then it may be that much harder to commit limited

resources to experimentation in digital media (nonbroadcast) endeavors. Improved communication about how managers and employees (particularly those working in digital and social media) view their organization in relation to other entities can help make visible tensions that could impede the implementation of strategic endeavors in the digital space or other forms of innovation. This requires the translation of cognitive industry-level assumptions to organizational-level strategic goals, and increased or improved cross-departmental communication.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, I show how the ways in which people talk about competitors illuminate perceptions of organizational identity, and how this can affect the way value is placed on strategic choices, such as the expenditures of resources on analog versus digital projects. The theme of distinctiveness cuts across the literature and findings in terms of its role in defining organizational identity, particularly with regard to the notion of competition and strategic group identity. This study has implications for those within public media, as well as for others in industries undergoing disruption including those in the publishing and retail industries. Insights about the cultural and communication barriers that can limit discussion about competition and SGC may also pertain to some nonprofit organizations.

Furthermore, this study makes a contribution by assessing data from people in different departmental roles in organizations rather than solely with managers. Most research on strategic change privileges a managerial point of view (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012) argue that more research should address how employees affect the enactment of strategic changes. This study provides insight into strategy and communication by examining views between departments in organizations, as well as among organizations.

## ***Limitations and Future Research***

The use of purposive sampling and qualitative interviewing are methods that provide an in-depth look at a sample of unique and influential organizations. That said, this approach lacks the breadth that other quantitative methods provide such as surveying the opinions of a wider range of employees at each organization. Future research can build on this project by approaching organizational identity and conceptions of competition from different methodological angles.

This study also focuses on U.S. public radio; expanding to address public television or commercial media entities could provide a comparison of how industry characteristics inform reactions to disruption and change. Cross-cultural comparisons with media systems in other countries such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation or the British Broadcasting Corporation could also address how differences in national media systems inform organizational changes and perceptions about identity. In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of how strategy is tied to organizational identity and how communication can play a role in moderating dialectical tensions that can potentially affect innovation and organizational change.

## Appendix A

Cases: Participating Organizations.

Organization	Location	No. of interviews	Station type and format	Market rank <sup>a</sup>
American Public Media/Minnesota Public Radio (APM/MPR)	Saint Paul, MN	2	NPR member, news	11-25
Marketplace (owned by APM)	Los Angeles, CA	8	Radio content organization	1-10
Folk Alley (part of WKSU)	Kent, OH	1	Music, internet only	51-100
KCRW	Santa Monica, CA	3	NPR member, news and music	1-10
KPBS	San Diego, CA	7	NPR member, news	11-25
KPCC (Southern California Public Radio)	Pasadena, CA	5	NPR member, news	1-10
KQED	San Francisco, CA	4	Dual license, NPR member, news	1-10
Houston Public Media (KUHF)	Houston, TX	7	Dual license, NPR member, news	1-10
KUSC	Los Angeles, CA	4	Music	1-10
North Country Public Radio	Canton, NY	1	NPR member, news	101+
Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB)	Portland, OR	3	Dual license, NPR member, news	11-25
Chicago Public Media (WBEZ)	Chicago, IL	6	NPR member, news	1-10
WBUR	Boston, MA	4	NPR member, news	1-10
WLRN	Miami, FL	10	NPR member, news	11-25
WNYC	New York City, NY	1	NPR member, news	1-10
Individuals from entities including NPR, CPB, PRI, and public media consultants/experts		8		

a. Market size stems from the Arbitron Metro Market Rank, 2012 report (Arbitron, 2012). The lower the number, the larger the market, so a market of Size 1 represents one of the largest radio markets in the United States.

## Appendix B

List of Interviewees.

Organization	Role
American Public Media/Minnesota Public Radio	Vice President, Digital Media
American Public Media/Minnesota Public Radio	Chief Operating Officer
Center for Investigative Reporting Independent Consultant	Chief Strategy and Operations Digital Strategy Consultant
Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB)	Senior Vice President, Radio
CPB	Executive Vice President and COO
Folk Alley	Senior Director of Content
Houston Public Media (HPM)	Reporter, State Impact Project
HPM	Former CEO
HPM	Former Director of Communication/Interactive
HPM	Director of News Programming
HPM	Web Developer
HPM	PIN Analyst and Multiplatform Specialist
HPM	Web News Editor, PIN Analyst, Social Media Editor and Producer
KCRW	Program Director for News
KCRW	Program Director for Talk
KCRW	General Manager
KPBS	Associate General Manager
KPBS	Video Journalist
KPBS	Education Reporter
KPBS	Interactive Product Specialist
KPBS	Interactive Product Specialist
KPBS	Director of News and Editorial Strategy
KPBS	General Manager
KPCC	President and CEO
KPCC	Reporter for <i>Off-Ramp</i>
KPCC	Managing Editor, Newsgathering
KPCC	Executive Editor
KPCC	Vice President of Content
KQED	Manager, Content Strategy and Board Relations
KQED	News Director
KQED	Executive Producer, Science and Environment
KQED	Vice President, Digital Media and Education
KUSC	President
KUSC	Web Developer
KUSC	Consultant for KUSC
KUSC	KUSC Board Member

(continued)

## Appendix B (continued)

Organization	Role
Public Media Futures Forums	Director
Marketplace	Senior Editor
Marketplace	Senior Digital Editor
Marketplace	Former Vice President and General Manager
Marketplace	Digital Director, Marketplace
Marketplace	Financial Analyst
University of Southern CA/ Marketplace	Assistant Professor of Professional Practice, Marketplace Consultant
Marketplace	Manager, Audio Production
Marketplace	Former Employee
NCPB	Station Manager
NPR Digital Services	Editorial Director
NPR West/USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy	Formerly Managing Director/Editor of NPR West
Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB)	Vice President, Digital Services
OPB	Senior Vice President, Chief Content Officer
OPB	President and CEO
Public Radio International	Vice President, Interactive
University of New Mexico	Journalism Professor of Practice
WBEZ	Chief Operating Officer
WBEZ	Web Producer, Reporter
WBEZ	Director of Digital Product Management
WBEZ	Managing Editor, Public Affairs
WBEZ	Director of Digital Content
WBEZ	Former Radio Host
WBUR	General Manager
WBUR	Executive Editor, New Media
WBUR	Social Media Producer
WBUR	Managing Editor, Digital
WLRN	PIN Analyst
WLRN	Editorial Director
WLRN	Information Technologies Administration Director at Friends of WLRN, Inc.
WLRN	Interactivity Producer
WLRN	General Manager
WLRN	Reporter
WLRN	Programming and Operations Manager
WLRN	Assignment Editor
WLRN	Formerly News Director
WLRN/McClatchy	Vice President, News & Washington Editor; former Executive Editor at Miami Herald
WNYC	CEO

## Appendix C

### Interview Guide

- Describe your role at \_\_\_\_\_. How long have you worked here?
- Talk about any recent changes at this organization. (structural, leadership, strategic)
- Tell me about the digital strategy of the organization.
  - E.g., online, mobile, social media
- How is strategy communicated throughout the organization?
- What organizations or entities do you view as competition? Why?

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### Notes

1. This study, including the interview guide and protocols used, was approved by the Institutional Review Board. This study did not ask individuals to provide any personal information; data gathered pertained to the study of organizations.
2. This process “takes each entry of the row for actor A, and multiplies it times the same entry for actor B, and then sums the result. Usually, this method is used for binary data because the result is a count of co-occurrence. With binary data, each product is 1 only if both actors were ‘present’ at the event, and the sum across events yields the number of events in common—a valued measure of strength.” (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005, p. 233).
3. Number of edges was calculated in Microsoft Excel using the *CountIf* function (CountIf cell > 0) rather than summed because it was possible for respondents to list multiple competitors and therefore share more than one edge with another person. The purpose of the density measure is to assess the ratio of existing to possible connections between people.
4. The most central nodes based on in-degree ties are the entities that were named as competitors by the greatest number of interviewees.

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