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# Special Events And Community Elites: An Exploratory Study

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## Introduction

Special events are an important phenomenon in the American voluntary sector, both as a form of fundraising activity and as celebrations of the efforts of volunteers and recognition of the importance of causes and problems. Since the early years of social work in the United States, annual meetings, dinners, various fundraisers and other special events have been important aspects of the program of voluntary sector agencies.

However, very little is known about the nature and extent of special events in the United States. No public agency or other authoritative source keeps information on special event fundraising activity, and existing sources, such as the nonprofit section of the special census of services and information released by the Internal Revenue Service does not include information on the type of fundraising activity involved (campaign or special event, etc.)

With the renewed emphasis upon the voluntary sector in the political and social climate during the 1980's, it is appropriate to examine more closely the phenomenon of contemporary special events in the voluntary social services and other sectors. However, it would be expensive, as well as extremely risky to undertake a national survey of special event activities in nonprofit settings, and it is doubtful whether limited research resources could easily be obtained for this purpose. Prior to undertaking such a research venture,

therefore, some preliminary investigation of the special event phenomenon seems advisable.

## Research Problem

This paper reports the results of an exploratory study of the profile of community social elites in special events in the United States. The study reported here made use of existing data, published in a national magazine as a reputedly authoritative list of special events

Special events are defined by Church (in Liebert and Sheldon, 1972) as: "a dramatized effort to promote an idea, a cause or a program. Its purpose is to improve the relationships with an organization's public, develop understanding, and strengthen support through increased effort and contributions." Special events may be undertaken by any type of organization and appeal to virtually any audience. Some special events are intended only for members or associates of an organization, while others purposely seek wider public involvement.

One class of special events are those events specifically tailored to appeal to or attract members of economic, political or social elites (a.k.a., the wealthy, powerful and prestigious). One subcategory of such events are highly discrete, unpublicized gatherings often described in fund-raising literature about which very little is actually known except indirectly through the practice literature on fundraising. Another subgroup of this same class can be termed celebrity events, which are publicly known events identified with local and national celebrities and members of community social elites. (A celebrity, in Tom Wolfe's famous definition, is someone who is well-known for being well-known.)

A variety of agendas may be associated with celebrity special events: Socialites who "adopt" a favorite charity may host a ball or garden party to raise funds;

Charitable endeavors which consciously cultivate community elites may sell tickets for a charity concert; etc. Although the overall profile of such celebrity activities is generally recognized in urban communities of all sizes, and regularly covered in local newspaper "society" pages, no attempt has been found of any effort to profile such activities on a national basis. To do so is the purpose of this study.

## Research Procedures

For purposes of the research, a celebrity special event is defined as one which is deliberately identified as or associated with high-status social groups and those aspiring to such status. Such social elites are known by various phases: "Our Crowd", "The 400", "The Social Register", etc.

At one time, many voluntary social agencies had well-established support and patronage among such groups. Jane Addams' access to the economic, political and social elites of Progressive-Era Chicago may be the best documented instance of this phenomenon (Lohmann, 1991). However, many other settlement houses, charity organization societies, and other social work-oriented groups had similar access. Part of the purpose of this study, therefore, is to look for contemporary evidence of such relationships between social work agencies and community social elites, whether continuing or newly established.

Initially, it is not essential to establish the actual involvement of various community elites in celebrity events. We only need to identify the appearance of such involvement. It is the reputation of the special event, not its actual profile that establishes its status as a celebrity event. Many different criteria might be used to establish the celebrity of such an event: coverage by local newspaper society pages; awareness by elites in other communities.

The operational definition of such special events used in this study involves publicity for the event in a special monthly column appearing in a national magazine whose editorial format is explicitly and consciously directed at such high-status groups. The study involves analysis of a convenience sample of special events listings published in all 12 monthly issues the Monthly Chronicle column of *Town and Country* magazine in 1987. The format of *Town and Country* is explicitly directed at members of economic and social elites. Its pages are filled with advertising for \$3,000 watches and various furs and jewels and designer clothes, alongside photographs of country club balls, polo matches and other society events. And, to a considerable extent, the magazine reaches its intended audience. According to publication industry sources, the 1987 income of the average *Town and Country* subscriber was well above \$50,000. "The Monthly Chronicle" is explicitly promoted in the magazine as an authoritative listing of celebrity special events. As such, it offers at least a preliminary way to gauge the profile of such events.

A total of 738 special events were listed in the 1987 issues of the magazine. In the initial stage of the study, information was extracted from the event listings appearing in the column during 1987. All data were listed in standard form and lists were these reviewed. Categories were developed from the lists for each variable, and these categories were then analyzed. Information gathered by this means turned out to offer an interesting and useful profile of a broad range of elite special events in the US. The results of this analysis are presented below.

## Findings

Certain types of special events are conspicuous by their absence from this list. For example, celebrity golf tournaments and other televised special events

appealing to middle class or mass audiences are generally not included. Likewise, events associated with "big name" entertainers (such as Jerry Lewis and Danny Thomas telethons and Bob Hope golf tournament) are not listed. Further, relatively few special events associated with corporate or commercial sponsorship are included. Also, noticeably absent are events closely associated with "middle class" membership organizations and social welfare interest groups like Special Olympics or senior citizens groups. What remains is a listing of special events directed at community social elites in cities throughout the United States.

Among the 735 events listed in the Monthly Chronicle in 1987, one or more events are listed for 38 states and half a dozen foreign countries. Four states accounted for slightly more than half (52.7%) of all special events listed: New York, California, Florida and Illinois. Twenty five percent of all listings, in fact, were for New York and most of them were for New York City. It was impossible to determine whether this is because the magazine is headquartered in New York City or because of the unusually heavy involvement of community elites in special events there. California (14.6%) Florida (8.7%) and Illinois (mostly Chicago) (4.6%). The remaining events were scattered among

Close examination of the special events listed suggests eight distinct categories of elite special event activity that occur regularly in all parts of the United States, as well as a minority of difficult to classify special events.

•Balls, dances, dinner-dances, cotillions, and other similar events not explicitly identified as "parties" or "benefits" and not otherwise described make up one category (Balls). In such events, musical entertainment and ballroom dancing are identified or suggested, with or without the suggestion of an accompanying meal. Such balls formed the largest single category of special events,

including nearly half (46.8%) of all special events identified in the column.

Further breakdown of this category revealed . . .

- Exhibitions of various types, including events listed as fashion shows, pet shows, merchandise and equipment demonstrations and other similarly identified events formed the second largest category of celebrity special events, accounting for 15.3 percent of all events listed.

- Dinners, luncheons, buffets and other events in which eating figures as the most prominent or central activity represent another category (Meals). Such meals were the third largest category, accounting for 11.7% of all celebrity special events.

- Together, balls, exhibitions and meals accounted for roughly 70 percent of all special events. Five other categories of special events each accounted for less than 10 per cent of the total. Competitions or competitive games accounted for roughly six percent of all events. Dramatic performances and musical concerts (without meals or dancing) accounted for five percent. Tours, open houses, rally's and other similar events implying travel accounted for roughly three percent of events, and auctions and sales, including book fairs, for about two percent each. The remaining 4.8 percent of events were unclassifiable due to insufficient descriptive information given about them in the magazine listings.

## Sponsorship

Information was also examined on the nature of the public sponsorship and the announced beneficiaries of celebrity special events. More than half (56%) of all events were sponsored directly by an organization which was also the presumed beneficiary, while less than 40 percent of events were sponsored by "third parties". (It must be noted that this is in part a surmise on the

researcher's part, based on the plausible assumption that an American Heart Association or Cancer Society chapter would probably not be raising funds for another charitable cause without publicizing that fact.) Seven percent of the listings did not include information on the sponsor or sufficient information to allow classification of sponsorship.

Among the listed events, 22.5 percent of the special event sponsors were arts and humanities organizations. Another 18.8 percent of sponsors were membership organizations and 13.6 percent were health-related organizations. Corporations sponsored 7.9% of these events. Special Event Committees (e.g., "the Annual Ball Committee") were listed as the sponsors of 6.1% of events while identifiable social service organizations accounted for 5.8% of the listed sponsors, with foundations, educational organizations, museums, animal protection, sports, religious organizations, private individuals and research organizations acting as sponsors (in descending order of importance.) No sponsors were listed or classifiable for 7% of the events.

## **Beneficiaries**

It was also possible to identify the beneficiaries of a large proportion of the listed events. For example, 27 special events whose public beneficiary was a local chapter of a disease-specific national health organization (heart, cancer, etc.) were listed during the year. Four types of events accounted for over 90% of the events listed: Balls (33%) Meals (29.6%); Exhibitions (18.5%) and Competitions (14.8%). Of course, this may be due entirely to the editorial philosophy of the editors compiling the monthly listings. Or, it may provide an interesting, preliminary look at the world of special events.

Events to benefit hospitals (64.7%) and 67% of the events in which the sponsor was also the beneficiary. All of the other categories were too small to analyze.

## Summary of Findings

The data reported here must be considered highly preliminary in nature. They were not collected for research purposes. No apparently. Indeed, were it not for the complete absence of any national data in this area whatsoever, they might be considered inconsequential. However, given the absence of any type of information on this topic, the approach taken in this study seems justified. These data, however, should be taken merely as preliminary, crude estimates of a phenomenon, as well as evidence of the possibilities of studying, classifying and generalizing about special events.

It was impossible to determine reliably from the published data what proportions of events listed were primarily for the purpose of fund-raising, which were primarily for recognition or celebration and which had multiple purposes. We can however, draw a number of other impressionistic conclusions based upon these data.

First, it appears to be possible on the basis of these data to develop and refine multi-dimensional classification schemes for special events. Merely by categorizing events by the type of events, types of sponsors and types of beneficiaries, certain patterns and trends begin to emerge from even relatively simple (and sketchy) information about special events.

Despite these caveats, if the trends identified here characterize special events in general,

First, and most importantly, it must be noted that the vast majority of social work concerns are noticeable by their absence from this list. In marked contrast with earlier times like the Progressive Era, in which social

workers in settlement houses, charity organization societies, juvenile programs and others had direct access to the kinds of community elites whose interests are tapped in these data, it would appear that social work has largely lost access to, or interest in, community elites.

Secondly, these data raise intriguing questions about the range of event types found in Special Events. Although there is an evident trend in these data in favor of balls, dinner dances, further investigation may not

Finally, it must be noted again that these data are clearly biased in the direction of celebrity events--particularly, the events listed in this magazine column are those judged suitable for national notice in a slickly edited national magazine. It is an open question whether other community celebrity events not publicized in this manner, and Some later follow ups for 1988 and 1989, for example, suggest that considerably more "community festivals" and fewer charity fundraisers may have been included during those periods.

Obviously, further study of special event fundraising is called for. Following this discussion are a set of tables showing more detailed breakdowns of each category. The principal implication of this study is that further research is needed on this topic.

## References

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**Table 1**

**X<sub>1</sub>: Event Type**

Bar:	Element:	Count:	Percent:	
1	ball	359	46.806	-Mode
2	meal	90	11.734	
3	performance	41	5.346	
4	exhibition	118	15.385	
5	tour	22	2.868	
6	competition	45	5.867	
7	party/benefit	41	5.346	
8	auction	14	1.825	
9	other	37	4.824	

**Table****2****X2: Sponsor Type**

Bar:	Element:	Count:	Percent:
1	Religion	6	.778
2	Sports	19	2.464
3	Recreation	0	0
4	Health	105	13.619
5	Legal	1	.13
6	Education	26	3.372
7	Social Service	45	5.837
8	Membership	145	18.807
9	Research	2	.259
10	Arts/Humanities	174	22.568
11	Corporation	61	7.912
12	Foundation	27	3.502
13	Museum	25	3.243
14	Animals	20	2.594
15	Individuals	6	.778

-Mode

**X<sub>2</sub>: Sponsor Type**

Bar:	Element:	Count:	Percent:
16	None Listed	7	.908
17	Event Committees	47	6.096
18	Gardens	8	1.038
19	N.O.C.	47	6.096

Note: This category contains 1 more elements than the intervals specified.

**Table 3**

**Special Events by Type of Beneficiary**

X5: Beneficiary Type

Bar:	Element:	Count:	Percent:	
1	Animals	3	1.345	
2	Diseases	27	12.108	
3	Handicapped	12	5.381	
4	Hospitals	17	7.623	
5	Political	4	1.794	
6	Poor	12	5.381	
7	Youth	10	4.484	
8	Fiscal Intermed.	2	.897	
9	Sponsor	125	56.054	-Mode
10	Other	11	4.933	

Note: This category contains 4 more elements than the intervals specified.

**Table 4**

**Disease Support Events By Type**

X<sub>1</sub>: Diseases - Event Type

Bar:	Element:	Count:	Percent:	
1	ball	9	33.333	-Mode
2	meal	8	29.63	
3	performance	0	0	
4	exhibition	5	18.519	
5	tour	1	3.704	
6	competition	4	14.815	
7	party/benefit	0	0	
8	auction	0	0	
9	other	0	0	

**Table 5**

**Events for Handicapped by Type**

X<sub>2</sub>: Handicapped - Event Type

Bar:	Element:	Count:	Percent:
1	ball	6	50
2	meal	0	0
3	performance	0	0
4	exhibition	3	25
5	tour	1	8.333
6	competition	0	0
7	party/benefit	0	0
8	auction	0	0
9	other	2	16.667

**Table 6**

**Events for Hospitals by Type**

X<sub>3</sub>: Hospitals - Event Type

Bar:	Element:	Count:	Percent:
1	ball	11	64.706
2	meal	1	5.882
3	performance	0	0
4	exhibition	3	17.647
5	tour	0	0
6	competition	2	11.765
7	party/benefit	0	0
8	auction	0	0
9	other	0	0

**Table 7**

**Events Benefiting the Poor by Type**

X5: Poor - Event Type

Bar:	Element:	Count:	Percent:	
1	ball	5	41.667	-Mode
2	meal	1	8.333	
3	performance	0	0	
4	exhibition	3	25	
5	tour	0	0	
6	competition	1	8.333	
7	party/benefit	2	16.667	
8	auction	0	0	
9	other	0	0	

**Table 8**

**Events Benefitting Youth By Type**

X6: Youth - Event Type

Bar:	Element:	Count:	Percent:	
1	ball	5	50	-Mode
2	meal	1	10	
3	performance	1	10	
4	exhibition	0	0	
5	tour	0	0	
6	competition	3	30	
7	party/benefit	0	0	
8	auction	0	0	
9	other	0	0	

**Table 9**  
**Events Benefitting the Sponsoring**  
**Organization, By Type**

Xg: Sponsor - Event Type

Bar:	Element:	Count:	Percent:	
1	ball	82	67.213	-Mode
2	meal	12	9.836	
3	performance	5	4.098	
4	exhibition	9	7.377	
5	tour	1	.82	
6	competition	2	1.639	
7	party/benefit	7	5.738	
8	auction	2	1.639	
9	other	2	1.639	