Newsroom Resistance: An Ethnographic Study of the Modern News Worker, Policies, and Organizational Dissatisfaction

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Abstract

Modern news workers see themselves pressed by digital routines, industry confusion, and their organization's loss of journalistic focus. This ethnographic study looked at the ways they resist counter-journalistic policy. Social construction theory and the hierarchy of influence model informed this study as new and forming occupational pressures push news workers ideological and professional dispositions away from their employers.

This study found friction and frustration for news workers when organizations defied the traditional journalistic tenets. Organizational directives to follow policy were overt and common. As the newsrooms in this study struggled to find effective business models, their attention was often diverted from the needs and performance of news workers. The desire to streamline information and have more content handled in the digital realm kept management from addressing news worker satisfaction and deficiencies in coverage. This study found management did not value traditional tasks like quality writing or photography and reveled those news workers slow to adapt to digital tasks were laid off. Organizations generally have the upper hand, but news workers have found a few ways to send messages up the ladder.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural upheaval in news work is not a newly minted dynamic. History has shown news workers become protective of their routines when technology threatens to change their civic function. However, the modern news machine has shed news workers at an unprecedented rate over and traditional roles have become subservient to seeking a tenable business model.

A 2008 survey in *American Journalism Review* revealed that news workers were pessimistic about their futures in the face of changing technology. The study explored loss of fellowship among colleagues and a disconnection with readers. Many news workers felt this was the result of favoring digital newsgathering and distribution (Wilson 2008). According to Linda Foley, the president of the Newspaper Guild:

> … pessimism stems from changes in the workplace. In earlier days, reporters came back to the newsroom to write stories after gathering the information they needed, and there they could bounce the story off coworkers. The resulting feeling of connection around the newsroom is missing in an age when reporters can file stories without ever meeting their coworkers (Wilson 2008, p. 3).

The lack of optimism that concerned news workers in 2008 has proved to be valid in terms of jobs. Between 2008 and 2012, the industry laid off over 38,000 workers (Smith n.d.). Those numbers continue to rise. Notably June 2013 saw the layoff of the entire *Chicago Sun Times* photo staff.

This is a challenging period for news workers as forces like digital platforms make organizations to re-create themselves. As publishers scramble to bring costs in line with thinning revenues, news platforms have broken a business model that served the new for most of the rise of the American press.

This work revisits the concept of newsroom social controls originally studied by Warren Breed (1955), but focuses on how new social controls have given rise to resistance in the workplace. This study explores the influence of news workers and how that influence is challenged under the shadow of corporate ownership, changing technology, and downsizing. This study is a snapshot of those in the rank and file of contemporary media and addresses the need to chronicle news workers as the industry struggles to be viable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many would suspect that the individuals on the front line of news production would be extremely influential in controlling the images. However, the literature related to the pressures and influences on the American news worker has indicated this is not the case.

According to Tuchman (1972, p. 298), each story a news worker produced had the potential to affect the way he/she was viewed by superiors, and their daily actions affected the ability of the organization to make a profit. “Inasmuch as the newspaper is made of many stories, these dangers are multiplied and omnipresent.”

Berger and Luchmann (1966) introduced the idea that over time social groups form a mental picture of the roles individuals play as they interact. This belief of what reality is becomes reality; thus reality is socially constructed. They also found that although reality is socially constructed, rather than a reflection of an objective reality, concrete individuals served as the agents of that reality.

Warren Breed (1955, p. 84) supported the idea of a news worker disempowered by social control. He said 'any important change toward a more free and responsible press must stem from various possible pressures on the publisher, who epitomizes the policy-making and coordinating role.' In his look at strategic ritual, Tuchman (1978), reiterated that reporters must protect themselves from dominating influences.

Social Construction Beyond the Individual

Social control has been explored in several ways as it has been used to examine pressures in news work and influences beyond the individual. Bagdikian (1990) offered insight into organizational and extramedia influences. He asserted media's pursuit of advertising dollars made them structurally dependent on business, and that dependence has restricted news content.

Schlesinger (1978) found routines to be more than just a way to meet deadlines and manage a complex world for audiences. He noted the routines of news programs were affected by political, economic, and ideological constraints that made news production akin to propaganda. Schlesinger found that news workers on the front line of production could make only cosmetic changes that appeared profound to other professionals because of their novelty.

Bourdieu (1984) explored social space in terms of peer networks and social capital as the non-financial social value of an individual. As individuals engage and interact in the various aspects of life, they develop certain dispositions toward their identities and the ways they are expected to behave. Through these dispositions, combined with other complex social behavior and expectations, they will start to understand their place in the social order and begin to embody this expectation in their habitus.

According to Herman and Chomsky (1988), consolidated ownership across media platforms leads to restrictions in discourse in the form of news choices, but the imposing hand of corporate hegemony was taken a step further by Doug Underwood (1993, p. xii). The selling of newspapers as a product as opposed to journalism as a practice and social check on power was Underwood's focus. Underwood noted 'newspaper content is geared to the results of readership surveys, and newsroom organization has been reshaped by newspaper managers whose commitment to the marketing ethic is hardly distinguishable from their vision of what journalism is.'

Foucault (1970) found discourse to be a key element in understanding a work dynamic. The idea of discourse – a systems approach to work and its organization – produces a way of thinking about individual function within an organization, and the power to define these roles becomes a means of control.

Tuchman (1972, p. 305) observed discourses of objectivity, such as presenting conflicting claims, presenting evidence, presenting the most material facts first, and carefully separating fact from opinion. 'Examining the ritualistic behaviors of professionals, we get a hint of what may be the deeper function of the art, cult, and ritual of various occupations.'

Social Control as a Collective Dynamic

Influence can also be viewed as a lateral consideration rather than in terms of being superior or inferior to more macro views. Berkowitz (1990) attempted to refine White's gatekeeping metaphor and explained that decision-making was a group process, thus content was shaped by group dynamics.

The hierarchy of influence model (Shoemaker & Reese 1996) had utility in understanding the role of the rank and file news worker. It saw the news worker's level of influence squeezed by routines, organizational controls, extra-media concerns, and ideology. In this model the levels of influence were explanative of the hierarchical structure of organizations. The individual was at the center of this model and this level of influence referred to the education and professionalism of journalists.

Rothenbuhler (1998, p. 27) offered the following definition of ritual to inform communication research: 'Ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life.' He further explained that this behavior must be logical and have affect beyond the behavior itself.

Gramsci (2000) explained how cultural hegemony found itself in all aspects of life. It was societal norms that are perceived as universal truths about the way things were. Hegemony entered all aspects of daily life and influenced work, leisure time, and interpersonal relationships and impacted creative energies, thoughts, beliefs, and desires. It created a status quo, limited alternatives, and contained opportunities.

Hallin (1985) suggested that the media were in fact disconnected from the bourgeoisie and their control mechanisms because they needed the media to confirm their legitimacy in the capitalist system.

Molotch and Lester (1974) offered a similar perspective. They argued that news gatherers could not become pure ideological instruments of those in power, as this would harm their credibility with their audience.

Tuchman (1976, 1978) found social construction only loosely related to power; moreover, he found that social construction of the 'factual world' had more to do with the strategic rituals (such as objectivity) that allowed news workers to do their jobs within the news cycle. He found this more telling of how they constructed reality.

Goffman (1974) asserted that social construction of reality was an act of participation between media performers and the audience. He used the metaphor of a theater to explain that individuals were like actors performing scenes in front of others, and the stages were mediums that allowed communication to be framed.

METHODOLOGY

As this review synthesized the theoretical underpinnings of the news workers' world it became clear that the influences of news workers were challenged but profound. Newspapers have been undergoing a dynamic shift during the last two decades. Technology and profit motive lead to layoffs and this leads to questions concerning how these looming concerns affect autonomy, performance, story choice and resistance.

This review indicates little about personal values, human and social considerations, power within the newsroom, and internal stakeholders. Gans (2004) suggested American journalists share a set of enduring values that shape the nature of news.

This study asks what personalities and values are involved in the newsroom and how do they react when challenged?

The literature revealed social construction has many interpretations and posible reasons to resist organizational structures. Influences on news workers are plentiful but the literature did not reveal how influence is resisted in a modern newsroom. This study addressed how news workers acted upon unfavorable policy and explored:

> How are news values socially constructed by traditional or emerging pressures, platforms, economics, or other external issues?
>
> How are policies resisted when traditional civic roles of news workers are marginalized?
>
> How do news workers view interactions through the lens of journalism and how do directives and values resolve themselves in a functional newsroom routine?

Because this research was conducted in the natural world and relationships, attitudes, and job routines were germane; a qualitative approach was chosen. Data was cultivated from three months of observations, 31 formally shadowed informants; 45 informal informants met at the newspapers, and assorted internal documents.

Three newsrooms were chosen as field sites. They differed in size and structure, but were similarly geographically located. The observation lasted from June 2011 to Oct. 2011. The circulation at the newspapers varied from more than 150,000 to less than 13,000. All of these newspapers were within 150 miles of each other. Proximity allowed all of the newspapers to be observed in the same time period. The news managers who granted permission for the study requested that the publications not be mentioned by name.

While in the field extensive jottings were done. Jottings are the listings of topics or events used in preparation to write formal fieldnotes. Jottings were transcribed into dated and categorized formal fieldnotes. These field notes generated a binder of chronological observations. The next steps were to sort, compare, and contrast the data. Examples from fieldnotes are used herein to exemplify themes that were discovered.

FINDINGS: RESISTENCE

Organizational controls have taken on remarkable complexity in the wake of the digital paradigm and the monetary strain in the industry. Management has become committed to re-branding newsrooms as information centers. Administrators have many tools at their disposal to bring workers in line with these goals. At the same time, news workers have not abandoned their vocations as civic-minded journalists.

Journalistic autonomy is challenged in newsrooms. With management desperate to find an operational model, they do not have time for discretion, and their sanctions are much more overt than Breed observed in 1955. News workers resist unfavorable policy and challenge organizational rhetoric, especially when they see these behaviors as contrary to journalistic principles. As news workers are on the front line and the last to touch content, they are positioned to resist. Practical concerns for their livelihoods led to indirect resistance.

The Practical Nature of Self-Directed Work

Reporters are extremely self-directed. Although assignment desks will dispense work, this is often the result of the need for story quantity, or breaking news. This can take time, but it does allow reporters the latitude to find their own stories. In fact, this is an expectation. Even in the cases where stories are assigned, it falls to reporters to choose the angle, sources, and style the work will take. This dynamic is challenged by the evolving needs of management. With smaller staffs, administrators need to control and understand what information they will have up front so they can plan the day's product.

Breed (1955) pointed out that executives are not involved in the legwork of story building, thus staffers were able to use their superior knowledge to subvert policy. This is still true, but to a far lesser degree. Planning coverage before an event gives editors control of the finished product but in reality, editors confront a great deal of content. Although reporters have been laid off, the means to cultivate material for the paper has grown through citizen journalism, partnerships with other organizations, and digital sources. Line editors have been laid off as well, forcing those who remain to contend with copy and wrangle other material. Getting all of the stories edited is a challenge and controlling the elements contained within them is difficult.

Autonomy itself is a principle allows editors to manage staff and see to their own routines. Line editors have a different role in the culture than upper management. They are on the front line with news workers and often find organizational directives as puzzling as their staff. Although they must at times enforce policy, they have close connections to news workers so they do not take consistent action against news workers. They exercise their autonomy by allowing reporters to exercise theirs.

Extra-Newsroom Resistance

News organizations have goals beyond the confines of the newsroom. News organizations are members of a business community, and as such, must show civic responsibility and interest in the welfare of the communities in which they operate. In general, news staff need not directly support these efforts, thereby giving news workers another opportunity to show dissatisfaction. Consider the following passage:

* * *

The United Way and Non-News Tasks

> *Emmett worked as a copy editor at a daily newspaper. He considered his compensation modest but he thoroughly enjoyed his work. Emmett felt that because the organization did not recognize him on an equitable financial level, there were limits as to how the company should engage him. One area of particular resentment was the United Way fund drive. Once a year he would find a donation form asking how much he was going to donate. On the week of the fund drive, there would be breaks in routine where employees would play carnival games and participate in raffles or silent auctions. Emmett found this insulting and considered charitable giving a private matter. Emmett*

would not in any way acknowledge the campaign, although pressure, was put on him to do so. At the same time his work was above reproach. He said that invariably a executive would seek an explanation, to which he would say he could not afford it.
Emmett also would not play games on employee appreciation day, nor would he volunteer to work at the newspaper's information booth. Because Emmett was recognized as a consummate professional, his outside-profession protests had little adverse effect on him and he was always pleased he could send messages to the administration.

* * *

Emmett resisted an obligation being placed upon him, and although administrators did not find this favorable, they had little recourse in sanctioning him. A United Way donation drive is clearly an organizational directive but is not related to news work. Publishers will overtly command that policy be followed. However, giving remains beyond the executive's ability to enforce. In this instance, dissatisfaction travels up the ladder with no direct sanction returning. Even though a publisher can require news workers to work at an expo booth, he/she must pay them. When policy does not result in sanctions, the policy is resisted to the organization's detriment.

Reacting to Big Picture Decisions

One company gave a million dollars for a development plan to beautify an urban waterway. Some news workers were glad the company was helping beautify the city; others were shocked they would do so during difficult economic times and in close proximity to layoffs. Overall, this action caused divisive rhetoric. The feeling was corporate was lying about the company's financial health. On top of this, reporters were asked to write stories about the generosity, none of which could mention adverse opinions or tax incentives.

When big picture decisions are made, resisting amenities is one way news workers send messages of dissatisfaction. Amenities come in the form of cafeterias; break rooms, gyms, or gym memberships, group rates on cell phone plans, allowances for equipment, or continuing education. Amenities may start at the corporate level or be site specific, but in both cases, executives must extrapolate what packages will be most favorable to the broadest range of employees. This works well at a macro level, but becomes difficult to predict in individual newsrooms as news workers have an assortment of values and personalities. Note the passage below:

* * *

Civic Duty Beyond the Newsroom

As one operation began to consolidate its broadcast and print operations into one building, a line editor had concerns. Barry was a native of the town, had earned his journalism degree locally, and felt a great deal of loyalty for his organization. He would align himself with most directives and was respected by staff and superiors alike. He did not participate in grousing, and in the face of layoffs he kept his

opinions to himself. Still, as a native, Barry was concerned about the number of buildings being left vacant in the downtown. Barry believed that the absence of businesses would lead to urban decay and crime.

The new facility his organization built was located away from the downtown. It also had a new cafeteria, gym, and room for the business to grow. Barry agreed, but was disturbed by the lack of responsibility the organization showed for the building downtown. It was not repurposed, but sat empty as the trend Barry feared came about.

Crime in the area increased, more buildings sat vacant, and even the newspaper considered the city proper to be a secondary coverage concern. Barry promised himself that he would not buy into the enticements promised with the new building. He did not use the gym or the cafeteria. He did not announce the reasons why, but he did not keep them secret.

* * *

It is doubtful that Barry saw this as resistance at all. There is little indication that resistance in the form influences change in policy or operations. However, it does indicate that news workers feel the need to reach administrators with concerns. It further indicates that news workers will take action and offer resistance in subtle ways when they feel repressed.

The Personal Brand

Historically, staffers who were considered stars were able to sidestep policy much more effectively than younger news workers. Now seasoned workers face the ax as administrators look to save money. A number of audience-engagement techniques exist in the digital world. Many news workers, without prompting, maintain Facebook and Twitter accounts. They promote stories and build social-media webs of sources and community followers. This is done separate from the organization's efforts. Digital specialists representing the organization will "friend" reporters and other news workers on Facebook and comment, along with the public, to their posts.

Organizations see this as advantageous, as it builds a synergy. However, no news worker in this study said they felt pressure to maintain a social media presence. Organizations have digital specialists who formally perform those functions. The freedom of social media for journalists resides in expressions that have historically been taboo. A news worker can, for instance, endorse their religion on social media. Social media is personal, so most organizations have not introduced policies. An individual can allude to a religious bias without recourse.

The Soft Organizational Directive

Organizational directives can be resisted by not taking action in the hope that the policies will blow over, or the organization is not wholly serious about them. Often organizational directives are often not strongly enforced, but contain ideas that are left

for news workers to act upon. Organizations have adopted several ideas in the last few years that are associated with the digital world, but responsibilities and personnel associated with those tasks are often loosely defined.

With a jammed news cycle, news workers are often given the latitude to choose which assignments they will give their full attention, whereas other assignments will be given only perfunctory treatment. In the case of photographers, video production for a website is a relatively new responsibility. Some enjoy the challenge, others resent it, but video never replaces the need for photographs. Photographers are able to justify doing the basics of video production or simply not finding the time to do it at all. Other photographers enjoy making video. One photographer was observed editing a video piece until most of his workday was consumed.

News workers are sometimes able to use blind spots to build their own agendas and drive their own workdays by presenting preferences favorable to them as being most favorable to the audience. They then keep alternatives to themselves. One news worker called this, "driving the bus without being behind the wheel."

Planning and Time Management as Control

Organizations are required to pay workers for time and some newsrooms have added time clocks to keep overtime under control. This control has been justified by the organization because they often issue mobile technology for their workers. Even so, reporters will routinely clock out so they have the time to finish a work without going into overtime. Editors say this practice is unacceptable but do not monitor it. Much information needed for stories is available online, reducing the legwork required. The removal of travel time has increased productivity, decreased the need for staff, and kept staff in the office. Editors can certainly reach workers whenever they wish, but many in the rank-and-file believe editors more likely to assess their needs differently if a reporter is not close by. Some reporters have found technology to be a blessing and a curse in controlling their day. For instance:

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Kelly and the Art of Breaking News

Kelly was on the breaking-news beat. Her day started from home at 4 a.m. and she was efficient. Her shift started while her children were asleep and, from her home, she checked the police blotter and fire runs. She watched the television news to make sure nothing was missed overnight, listened to the scanner and made breakfast.

Kelly was prolific. She Tweeted headlines when information was confirmed by police, she called for details of an alleged rape case, and gathered information for a story about a theft. Kelly filed six stories online by 4:45 a.m., updated her Facebook and Twitter accounts, and informed editors of her work.

After she filed the stories, she continued to monitor the broadcast news and scanner, cleaned the kitchen and made her children's lunches. Her children were up by 7 a.m. Kelly carried her Blackberry for mobility,

and texted her editors with updates as she put her daughter's hair in pigtails.

Kelly identified the rape case as the story of the day. She planned to visit the location where the crime occurred to conduct interviews before filing a longer story. She hoped to avoid the office altogether because of the "depressing environment." However, her editor called her in to work on an unrelated story about a heat advisory.

At the office she was asked not only to write the weather story, but also to finish a story about a smoking ban, and update a missing-person report from the week before. Kelly filed a total of nine stories in less than six hours.

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Technology allowed Kelly to manage her time in a way she found beneficial. Internet, scanner, and smart-phone allowed her to be efficient and split her days in ways to manage her personal and professional obligations. There were some issues that made her uncomfortable. She was not able to elaborate on the stories she broke and she found this to be a dangerous precedent as all of the information came from official reports. Also, no one edited her online copy.

Adhering to Expected Tasks and Forceful Personalities

Many news workers resist their organization by doing what is expected of them. The ability to digitally retrieve information is not new, but often administrators have no idea what is available online. Reporters who prefer a gumshoe journalism experience need only be ambiguous enough about the day's activities to leave the office. This allows them to maintain the relationships needed to find stories. In light of the complexity of news work, in some cases minimal work is expected. This is certainly contingent on the day and the specific culture, but some news workers can do the basics of their jobs and still be considered productive. This is yet another blind spot for executives, but the culture itself is perpetuated by middle managers that also enjoy an occasional easy workday. The root of this approach goes back to a culture that does not value its employees through monetary compensation, job security, or collegiality. Moreover, many workers remember a time when this was not the case, exacerbating the situation.

News workers are often able to circumvent policy by citing or ignoring precedent, which has not been formally set. News workers need not make a case regarding policy to challenge it. They move forward when similar circumstances have set an ambiguous precedent and decision-making favors the news worker who initially chose how to address the material in question. Even when a conflict is forced, often a news worker with a forceful personality will get their way. This dynamic has a cumulative effect. If a news worker has a reputation for being difficult, approaching them about their news judgment or changing their work will be avoided.

"Sunshine" Blogs

Many executives depend on a code of silence among themselves and other stakeholders to keep sensitive plans from news workers while details are worked out.

This control is called a "black ceiling," but while it is opaque, it is not impenetrable (Schulte 2013). News workers are keen observers of their environments, and although they are rarely privy to operational decisions, they often find trends unfolding above their heads. One way they learn plans is through independent blogs. Like sunshine laws that allow journalists to make government operations transparent, these "sunshine blogs" are set up for news workers to connect and make their companies more transparent. They are new clearinghouses for company information. It is not always known who contributes to the blogs that spill information about plans, but news workers find certain blogs to be remarkably accurate. They have warned of layoffs and personnel changes, added clarity to directives, and explained mystifying acquisitions. This information is compiled to create a more complete picture of events for news workers, but other substantial contributors must exist above the black ceiling. Many news workers believe that contributors are those working at corporate offices or are themselves executives sympathetic to the problems news workers face. At the same time, many executives are not fans of these blogs, and some find them positively galling and have sanctioned news workers for looking at them on company time.

CONCLUSION

The deck is stacked against news workers in nearly every policy and personnel decision, but news workers are a resourceful group. Although the digital paradigm has closed many of the doors that made traditional skills favorable, it has also opened others. The autonomy of blogers has allowed news workers to peek around the black ceiling executives use to plan policy changes. Sunshine blogs have sprung up around the industry as a tool to understand and control the news worker's reality, control corporate spin, and connect with others trying to do the same. At the same time, pressures on administrators have forced them to look at big-picture decisions. This allows some staff the latitude to circumvent policy, exploit ignorance, and choose the tasks they wish to pursue. This distraction has also allowed news workers to build a hybrid personal/professional presence in social media.

News workers have little guilt with regard to these activities. Loyalty is challenged as news workers have become keenly aware that their fealty is unlikely to be rewarded, and administrators are often working against them. The desire to resist is clear each time the organization asks them to go the extra mile, buy into new projects, or give to their causes. This behavior is not confined to a few disgruntled news workers, but has burgeoned and become naturalized in many consummate professionals. Directives will be challenged by those with forceful personalities and will be relentlessly tested to see how committed the organization is to them.

The damaged business model has changed relationships and moved those in the press away from collegial relationships. Executives have exploited the distance between themselves and news workers in a number of ways, but they are not the only ones exploiting this distance.

Media organizations introduce directives to control the social and professional values inherent in newsroom culture, but the more desperate they become to remain financially viable, the more transparent their controls. As news workers experience

this, they resist in interesting but mostly ineffective ways. This may sound like a victory for organizational control, but it is not that simple. Journalism does not exist in a static state. It is a linear endeavor that exists in a cycle of decisions and countless human choices. Journalists are uniquely positioned to make those continual choices in relation to each other and their products. Berger and Luckman (1966) explained social construction is the result of those choices, and those dynamics are pointed and specific, but they are not permanent and fixed for all time.

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