Print Journalism and the Creative Process: Examining the Interplay Between Journalists and the Social Organisation of Journalism

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There has been little emphasis in journalism research on the creativity of individual journalists. This paper explores how the social structure of print journalism, what creativity researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls the field, influences print journalist's creativity as well as journalists' interaction with the field and what effect this interaction has on journalists' practices. This paper is generated from the results of an ongoing project[1] that is investigating how print journalists in Australia produce their work. Csikszentmihalyi suggests that creativity is systemic and can be found in the confluence of three elements: a structured body of knowledge (domain), a social system that understands the domain (field) and an individual. These three elements make up his systems model of creativity and each are equally important for a creative outcome. The project is applying Csikszentmihalyi's systems model to print journalism to examine how cultural, social and individual influences affect how print journalists produce, or create, their work. Data analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with journalists and editors has indicated that, as per Csikszentmihalyi's proposal, the field is a crucial element in the creative production of news texts. This paper is testing out the notion of creativity in print journalists' everyday news practices and aims to demonstrate how the field supports these practices.

Keywords

Creativity, Print Journalism, Csikszentmihalyi, Individual, Field, Systems Model

Introduction

[1] A print journalist's interaction with the social and cultural structures of journalism is crucial in how they produce, or create, their texts. *Create*, in this sense, is not being used in the traditional Romantic sense where a lone genius produces Art via a Muse and creates without structures or constraints, but draws on a Rationalist approach that argues an individual is one part of a dynamic system of social, cultural and individual structures and uses these structures in the production of their work. McIntyre proposes the following definition of creativity that considers this:

> creativity is a productive activity whereby objects, processes and ideas are generated from antecedent conditions through the agency of someone, whose knowledge to do so comes from somewhere and the resultant novel variation is seen as a valued addition to the store of knowledge in at least one social setting (Macintyre 1).

[2] To break this down, and consider whether discussing creativity in journalism is relevant, McIntyre's definition states that someone (in this case a journalist) needs to produce something novel (in journalism that would be an article) by using information that the journalist has learnt (such as the rules and traditions of journalism). The article is then passed on to members of a social setting (for example subeditors, editors, news editors, chiefs of staff) to verify that the article is novel and appropriate, that is, a 'valued addition'. To paraphrase McIntyre's definition, creativity in journalism can be defined as 'both a product and process where the journalist uses prior knowledges to write an article that is different to what has been published before and presents it to a field of experts for valuation and acceptance into the domain of journalism' (Fulton and Macintyre 7).

[3] To put this proposal another way, rather than considering creativity as primarily about the individual, it needs to be examined within cultural and social milieus as well. Creativity researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi claims that creativity has traditionally been viewed and examined with the individual as the central element and this position is an injustice to the complexity of creativity. He states there must be an existing culture, with traditions and conventions in place for an individual to refer to, before a difference can be produced and that creativity is inherently social. In other words, how do we know something is creative if

we have nothing to compare it to, the antecedents in McIntyre's definition, and how do we know it is creative if it is not presented to a social group to be verified?

[4] Therefore, Csikszentmihalyi proposes what he calls a systems model of creativity, a systemic view of creativity that posits that to produce a creative text, an individual learns and draws from a body of knowledge called the *domain* (a cultural structure that includes previous works as well as the rules and procedures necessary for production). The individual produces a variation and presents it to the *field*,[2] a social system that understands the domain, for verification that the variation is novel, or creative. Csikszentmihalyi explains that the domain, individual and field are elements in the systems model and each is equally important for creative production. The model is a Rationalist theory and an example of a confluence approach to creativity, an approach that suggests a multiple of elements must be present for creativity to occur.
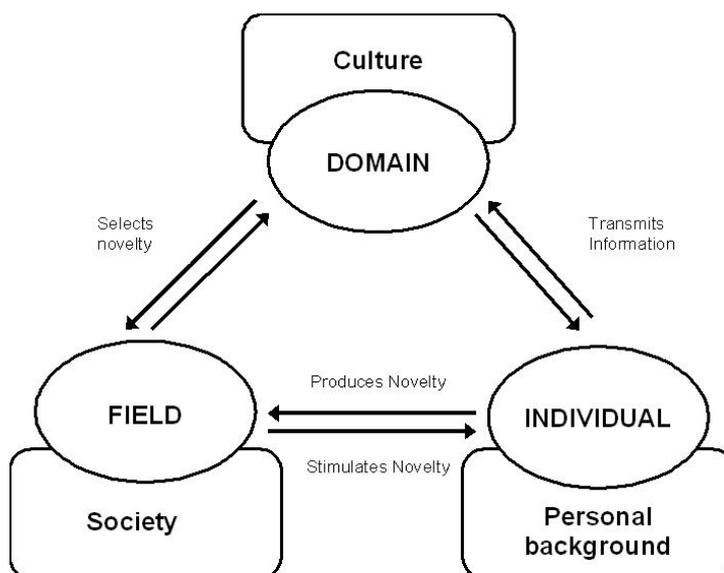

Figure 1 – Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity (2003)

[5] The systems model proposes that for an individual to be able to produce a creative product, they must not only learn the rules and procedures of the domain but also the preferences of the field. In other words, what the field will find novel and acceptable. In journalism, the field is comprised of, for example, editors, subeditors, other journalists, the audience and owners. That is, Csikszentmihalyi writes it 'includes all the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain. It is their job to decide whether a new idea or product should be included in the domain' ("Psychology of Discovery" 28).

[6] This paper is testing out the systems model by investigating how social structures, Csikszentmihalyi's field, affect a print journalist's creativity. The paper is examining how journalists interact with the field to create their articles and how the field contributes to the creativity of journalists. The information is based on data collected from thirty-six interviews conducted with members of print journalism's field: journalists (including experienced practitioners, cadets and a student), sub-editors and editors. The sample includes seventeen females and nineteen males ranging in age from twenty to sixty-two. They worked at a variety of publications including national, metropolitan, regional, suburban and rural newspapers and weekly, fortnightly, monthly, quarterly, niche and mass market magazines.

[7] Considering that one of Paul Cobley's fundamental questions of Communication Studies is 'How are messages created?'[3] an argument can be made that examining how cultural and social structures affect how print journalists work could give fresh insight into how they produce different articles every day. Gardner et al. contend the media has an enormous influence on our understanding of the world (125). Given that journalists are part of the media, that is, part of how we get our messages about the world, the relationship between a journalist's creativity and the social and cultural forces is a rationale for investigating creativity in journalism. Furthermore, by applying outcomes from the creativity research domain to print journalism, valuable insight about the creative processes of journalists may be forthcoming. That insight could give a different perspective to the daily tasks a journalist engages in and contribute to greater knowledge of professional practices for working journalists.

Journalists and the field[4]

[8] The field is the social structure of the domain and has also been called Sami Abuhamdeh and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi the *gatekeepers* or the *cultural intermediaries* by Keith Sawyer or Morris Stein. It is the field's role to separate valuable contributions from the eccentric. That is, it includes all the people who make the decision as to what new product, process or idea is to be included in the domain for other journalists to draw on. Sawyer contends there are more likely to be creative outcomes in a field that has structured training procedures in place, systems to identify creative young people, experienced practitioners to pass on the domain's knowledge systems, both formally and informally, and opportunities and challenges for new practitioners. Analysis of the interview data has shown that each of Sawyer's criteria can be found within print journalism.

[9] As part of the interview process, respondents were specifically asked questions about their interaction with the field including the importance of colleagues, mentoring, interaction with senior staff and training. However, throughout the interviews, the interviewees frequently referred to the field and its effect, both positive and negative, thus demonstrating that the field is important throughout the production process and analysis of the interviews has indicated how strongly the field affects journalists. But, rather than seeing this as negative and constraining, as per the Romantic view of creativity, it is important to consider this support as also a positive. As Giddens and Wolff have both argued, rather than constraining, structures can also be enabling: the field can provide the impetus and support a print journalist needs to produce a creative text.

[10] The journalists in this study noted a number of ways they interacted with the field and how the field supported their writing. The field is a source for stories, other journalists are used as sounding boards, senior members of the field are mentors and teachers, management provides training courses, there is an awards system and a journalist's work is edited before publication. The following observations are not a complete list of everything a journalist needs to know about how the field works. They are examples of the general theme that a according to Csikszentmihalyi a journalist must learn the 'criteria of selection, the preferences of the field' ("Psychology of Discovery" 47) in order to be able to produce their work.

IDEAS FOR ARTICLES

[11] When asked, 'Where do you get ideas for articles?' the respondents listed several sources such as media releases, wire services, talking to friends, other media, from 'beats' such as the court, the Council and police, scheduled events, by cultivating contacts, and by observing what is going on in society. As one journalist said, 'I guess if you're a good journalist you're never completely off-duty so you always have an antenna out there'.[5] Many of the editors said they encourage journalists to generate their own ideas and a number of the journalists agreed with this. However, the journalists also revealed how the field, for example, editors, chiefs of staff, the audience and other journalists, generated story ideas.

[12] Respondents noted that publications conduct regular, formal news conferences with the senior staff where journalists present story ideas that are either encouraged or dismissed. One journalist said the news editor and chief of staff expect each journalist to "throw up three ideas"[6] for consideration at each week's news conference. The senior staff chooses the ideas they believe suit the newspaper's style and audience. One rural editor explained how

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this process also happens informally with article ideas generated through everyday discussion between staff: "... we're always talking about things we've seen coming to work, on the news broadcast or the ABC news of a morning or when we're walking around town."[7] Further to this, journalists pass on information that is not relevant to their own rounds. For example, a journalist who specialises in business would forward information received about the environment or health to the journalist who specialises in that area.[8]

[13] The audience, as members of the field, also contributes to the article generation process. A number of respondents, particularly at the non-metropolitan publications, discussed how they receive phone calls, emails and drop-ins from the public. At the metropolitan newspapers, the public also assists in generating story ideas, although sometimes in a more technologised way.

> (*The Daily Telegraph*) wrote a story last week, the police reported it about a suburb in Sydney that had decided to set up vigilante groups because the police were ineffective and (they) got so many responses on the Internet that they wrote a second story about those responses.[9]

The above examples indicate that members of the field such as senior staff, other journalists and the audience support a journalist's creativity by providing a source for articles thus allowing for what Macintyre refers to as 'productive activity', in this case producing an article, to take place.

INTERACTION WITH OTHER JOURNALISTS

[14] The majority of journalists interviewed found interaction with other journalists to be helpful in their creative process although the level of this varied between the respondents depending on where they worked and their individual outlook, personality and experience. This provides support to Sawyer's claim that experienced practitioners are important to pass on knowledge. Apart from generating story ideas, colleagues are helpful in confirming whether a journalist is keeping within the publication's style and policies but respondents also noted how colleagues influenced the way they work and how they learnt to write. Journalists are socialised into their workplace and learn what is required of them by watching how their colleagues work. Breed's 1955 study into social control in newsrooms detailed how new staff learned a publication's policy 'by osmosis'. There were indications within this data that journalists learn from their colleagues.

> I think I owe the way I've developed to quite a number of people in terms of what they've been able to teach me, whether consciously or subconsciously; by seeing the way they've actually gone about assembling a story and then what they've written. It's been a great help in determining the rules, and determining how you can break them once you know what they are.[10]

Furthermore, the respondents in this study are all avid consumers of other journalists' work, particularly in newspapers, and this is encouraged in the workplace. In fact, one journalist noted the following:

> you know it's one of the few occupations in the world where you can have your feet up on your desk with the newspaper and have your editor walk past and say "well, he's flat out".[11]

INTERACTION WITH EDITORS

[15] It is not only in story generation that journalists interact with senior staff. At the smaller newspapers, the editor is often the sub-editor as well and respondents commented that it is from the editor that they learnt how to write.

> I suppose I was just taught. I'd send the stories up to the editor and he would change and send it back to me or he'd talk to me about it. And I suppose I just learnt that way.[12]

However, not all interaction with editors is positive. A number of respondents noted how early attempts at journalism, and how they learnt to write as journalists, included editors with a more abrasive style of teaching.

> He [editor] would also come out and say, "(*name deleted*)! This is wrong!" right in front of everyone. And yell at you. So in a way that was good because you never did that again because he made an example of you even though you resented it. So that was a hard learning school [13]

A further negative interaction with senior staff is that journalists noted how the publication they worked at directed their work, either consciously or unconsciously. This, again, is in line with Breed's contention that a journalist learns what is expected and acts accordingly.

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> At one company I worked at we weren't allowed to do stories on a certain celeb because the boss was friends with them.[14]

There were also instances where both magazine and newspaper editors requested that journalists do certain stories, which may not always be, seemingly, in the public's best interest.

> sometimes they get a bee in their bonnet about ATMs and carjacking. I had to do a feature on that because the editor had his car jacked.[15]

However, although journalists need to act within these expectations, this is not to suggest that these structures are totally deterministic. It is important to remember that within these structures a journalist has agency and can use these expectations to enable their action and generate work that is both novel and appropriate, thus producing a creative text.

MENTORING

[16] Sawyer notes that one of the ways the field can support creative endeavours in a field is through mentoring. In line with this, Oakham found cadet journalists placed high importance on the interaction with mentors and senior journalists. While none of the respondents in this study discussed a formal mentoring program within their workplace, the majority had informal mentoring relationships with older journalists, editors and trainers.

> My first ever editor at [*publication name deleted*] was a great mentor and a really beautiful writer himself and was the person who gave me the sense that I could be a journalist.[16]

TRAINING

[17] Apart from formal University education, which a number of journalists dismissed as unhelpful ('Learnt a bit at school, nothing at Uni, and mostly on the job from other journalists'[17]), the field also provides on-the-job training to maintain journalists' skills. Organisations provide ongoing in-house training as well as professional development. Journalists from Rural Press[18] discussed this:

> we get training about three times a year he'll [*the respondent's editorial trainer*] come down with us and go through individually what we need to know.[19]

News Limited and Fairfax also have courses to update their journalists' skills 'ranging from Media Law to Management training'.[20] Academic and "mojo" expert Stephen Quinn, for example, is teaching newspaper journalists about social media and how to use new technology tools such as Twitter, RSS feeds, blogs and Google tools in their practice. The Australian journalists' union, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), also runs courses on how social media can improve a journalist's skills. The structured training improves the likelihood of a creative outcome by preparing journalists to practise in an evolving domain. It could even be argued that these new technologies provide opportunities and challenges for new practitioners, which Sawyer notes is an integral part of a field's likelihood for creativity.

[18] Training for new journalists is provided via cadetship and internship programs. Cadetships are not as prevalent as they were,[21] but Rural Press, for example, hires University graduates as third year cadets and provides a weeklong orientation and training seminar to instruct cadets on how to work under the Rural Press banner. This includes training in media law, photography, shorthand, layout and sub-editing, and writing articles.[22] Amy Forbes explains that internships in newsrooms are typically undertaken by students during their University degree and give the opportunity for graduates to be workplace ready. Both of these opportunities for training offer a way for the field to encourage young people into the profession. As Sawyer noted: 'A field is more likely to experience creativity if it has systems in place where potentially creative young people can be identified and selected by older members of the field' (308).

AWARDS

[19] The Australian Walkley awards provide a peer-voted process to reward Australia's best journalism. Other awards include the Excellence in Education Journalism award, Northern NSW Journalism Awards (the PRODIs), the JEA Ossie Awards for Student Journalism and the Melbourne Press Club's Quill Awards. These are all examples of the way the field encourages journalists. One respondent discussed how his employer, News Limited, has in-house awards (*News Awards*) and how this encourages journalists in their work:

> We have an in-house award system. We have a yearly prize, as well as the
> external prizes like the Walkley Awards, we have an internal News Limited system
> … People get overseas postings and all sorts of things.[23]

EDITING

[20] It is in the editing process that journalists have a large amount of interaction with the field. Sub-editors, or editors at smaller publications, check a journalist's copy and corrects mistakes, check the story is appropriately written for the publication, cut out unnecessary information, and reduce or reorganise the story if necessary. The majority of journalists interviewed depend highly on the editing process and these journalists believe it is this collaboration between the field and the individual that assists them in their creative production. As one freelancer said: 'This is life in newspapers. If you don't want your work altered, become a sub-editor. I don't mind, they make my work look even better'.[24] Interestingly, several respondents noted that experienced journalists expect to be edited and it is novice journalists who can find it difficult to accept.

> I always say, when I hand something to my contributing editor – 'Make it good!' … journalists expect editing and in fact would be quite astounded if you let one of their spelling errors get through.[25]

[21] It is interesting to note that one of the reasons journalism is not seen as a creative profession is because of the editing process. One creativity myth is that a creative person produces their work with no support or input from others. A number of creativity researchers has disputed this (Boden; Negus and Pickering; Bailin; Wolff). Furthermore, a research project by Elizabeth Paton who used Csikszentmihalyi's systems model to examine fiction writers in Australia found similar results in relation to how important the field is in that domain. Fiction writing has the Romantic image of solitary creation and Sawyer notes that writing would seem to be a domain that is isolated from social influences. However, Paton's work noted the importance of agents, editors, critics, the media, the audience and other writers and how these members of the field of fiction writing shape and support a writer's work in a similar fashion to the field in journalism.

Conclusion

[13] Contrary to the Romantic notion of the individual as the centre of creativity, this research demonstrates that social influences are significant in the production of creative texts. Analysis of the data collected has demonstrated that creativity is a systemic activity and although the field is one element in Csikszentmihalyi's systems model, its influence on a journalist's creativity is highly important. Analysis of the data collected has demonstrated that a journalist's interaction with the field is a vital component for a creative outcome. A

journalist, as the individual in the systems model, learns the preferences of the field but is also supported by the structures of the field and this enables the production of creative texts. Learning these preferences and structures will help a journalist to be more efficient in their work processes. More significantly, the data demonstrates that models of creativity can be applied to a domain such as print journalism and provide evidence of creativity in a profession not typically considered creative.

About the Author

Janet Fulton is doing a PhD in Media and Communication at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Her research is an ethnographic study investigating how social, cultural and individual influences affect how print journalists in Australia produce, or create, their work. Janet teaches into the Communication degree at the University of Newcastle as a casual tutor and has worked as a research assistant in the School of Design, Communication and Information Technology. Her research interests include communication, journalism, creativity and cultural production.

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[1] The paper draws on research that is applying Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's creativity research model, the systems model, to print journalism in Australia to examine how social, cultural and individual influences affect how print journalists produce, or create, their work. Other papers produced from the larger research project have dealt with defining creativity in journalism (Fulton 2008a; Fulton 2008b; Fulton and Macintyre 2009; Fulton 2009), journalists' views about creativity in journalism (Fulton and McIntyre 2009), journalists' interplay with the organisation worked for (Fulton 2009) and journalists' reaction to technology as part of an evolving domain (Fulton 2008a).

[2] In Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity, the *field* is not the typical understanding, which, according to the Oxford Dictionary is, 'an area or sphere of action, operation, or investigation', nor is it related to field theory. Csikszentmihalyi uses *field* very specifically to describe the social structure of a domain.

[3] Paul Cobley lists seven fundamental questions in Communication theory: 'How are messages created?' 'How are messages transmitted?' 'How are messages constituted?' 'How are messages received?' 'Why is this the case?' 'Is it because of factors outside the message?' 'Or is it because of factors inside the message?'.

[4] It is crucial to note that although this paper is focusing on how the field contributes to creativity in journalism, this does not imply that the field is more important in a journalist's production than either the domain or the individual. As Csikszentmihalyi noted, each element 'affects the others and is affected by them in turn' ("A Systems View of Creativity" 329). However, it is also important to understand that a journalist's creativity is enabled when supported by the field.

[5] J18. Personal Interview. 2008.

[6] J4. Personal Interview", NSW, Australia, 2007.

[7] E9. "Personal Interview", NSW, Australia, 2008.

[8] J4. "Personal Interview".

[9] J2. "Personal Interview", NSW, Australia, 2007.

[10] E8. "Telephone Interview", NSW, Australia, 2007.

[11] J4 "Personal Interview".

[12] E12. "Telephone Interview", NSW, Australia, 2008.

[13] E14. "Personal Interview", NSW, Australia, 2007.

[14] E15. "Email Interview", NSW, Australia, 2008.

[15] J20. "Personal Interview", NSW, Australia, 2008.

[16] J17. "Personal Interview", NSW, Australia, 2008.

[17] E15. "Email Interview".

[18] Please note that the interviews done with Rural Press journalists and editors were before the takeover by Fairfax.

[19] J14, "Personal Interview" NSW, Australia, 2007.

[20] J6, "Personal Interview" NSW, Australia, 2007.

[21] Barbara Alysen's study into entry level employment in journalism found that News Limited Sydney, which includes *The Australian, The Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, MX* and *The Sportsman*, appointed ten cadets in 2001 and one cadet in 2005.

[22] J9, "Personal Interview" NSW, Australia, 2007.

[23] J5. "Personal Interview", NSW, Australia, 2007.

[24] J11. "Email Interview", NSW, Australia, 2007.

[25] E7. "Telephone Interview", VIC, Australia, 2007.