Print journalism and the creative process: journalists and the organisation

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Abstract

This paper applies current research in the domain of creativity research to the domain of print journalism to illustrate how a journalist learns the rules and procedures of the organisation worked for and how important they are in the production of creative media texts. Using Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity, a Rationalist model, it can be demonstrated that it is both the cultural and social structures of the organisation, as well as those of the broader journalism domain, that supports a journalist’s production. Csikszentmihalyi claims that creativity is generated within the interaction of a system of three elements: a domain of knowledge (the cultural structure), a field (the social structure) and an individual, in this case the print journalist. The paper maintains that by learning the rules and procedures of the organisation, a print journalist can produce work that is both novel and appropriate: a creative text.

The paper is drawn from ongoing PhD research into the creative practices of print journalists in Australia. After conducting semi-structured interviews with 36 members of the field of print journalism, data analysis indicated that cultural and social structures are a crucial element in the communication of an organisation’s policies and expectations to journalists, both formally and informally. Furthermore, there is an inextricable link between the cultural structure, the social structure and an individual journalist in the creation of a media text and this is an illustration of Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity in action.

Keywords

Print journalism, creativity, social structure, cultural structure, Csikszentmihalyi, systems model
**Introduction**

Print journalists produce their work within a dynamic of social, cultural and individual influences. Within this dynamic, the organisation worked for has its own set of social and cultural structures. It is a common assumption that the structures of an organisation have a negative affect on the creativity of print journalists by constraining how a journalist produces their work (Henningham 1989; 1990; Herbert 2000; Hirst and Patching 2005). However, this is not necessarily the case. Rules and structures can also be seen as supporting creative practices and, rather than constraining, these rules and structures can also be enabling (Giddens 1984; Wolff 1993). This is further supported in a mass media context by James Ettema and Charles Whitney:

> In his pioneering work, *Administrative Behaviour* Herbert Simon argues that organisations constrain individual activity, but in an important sense, they also enhance it. Organisations do not, of course, increase the intelligence or skill of individuals, but through division of labour and coordination of effort they harness individual abilities and direct them toward the organisation’s tasks. Mass communicated creativity, for example, can only be effected in an organisational context (1982, p. 8).

Analysis of data gathered during an ongoing ethnographic study into the creative practices of print journalists in Australia has indicated that although there are negative effects, there is also evidence that the relationship between print journalists and the organisation worked for can be positive. In fact, it can be argued that without an organisation of some type, and its social and cultural structures, journalists would be unable to produce at all. This contention is supported by evidence in the literature (Grattan 1995; Hargreaves 2003; Hesmondhalgh 2002). Furthermore, data from the study reveals it can also be argued that the cultural and social structures and the individual journalist are inextricably linked, with each necessary for the production of creative texts. The rules of writing for the organisation and the expectations of the organisation are conveyed to the individual both through formal communication via written and electronic means as well as formal and informal teaching from the social structure through such things as editing, mentoring and training.

The belief that rules and structures are a constraint to creativity can be seen as an example of the Romantic view of creativity. One of Western culture’s creativity myths is that there must be freedom to create (Becker 1982; Boden 2004; Negus and Pickering 2004), meaning the absence of constraint. This myth, however, is unsustainable. Recent research into creativity
argues that without constraints, without traditions and without rules, it is impossible to produce creative work (Bailin 1988; Negus and Pickering 2004). Wolff argues that these constraints actually enable a producer to create:

“Everything we do is located in, and therefore affected by, social structures. It does not follow from this that in order to be free agents we somehow have to liberate ourselves from social structures and act outside them. On the contrary, the existence of these structures and institutions enables any activity on our part, and this applies equally to acts of conformity and acts of rebellion” (Wolff 1993, p. 9).

Further to this, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi contends: “‘New’ is meaningful only in reference to the ‘old’” (2003, p. 315), that is, how would we know something was creative if we had nothing to compare it to? The domain a creator works within provides the traditions and rules. As creativity researcher Keith Sawyer argues,

… creativity researchers think of the domain as a kind of creativity language. Of course, you have to learn a language before you can talk; it’s impossible to communicate without sharing a language. In the same way, it’s impossible to create anything without the shared conventions of a domain (2006, p. 137).

Another creativity myth is that the creator is a lone genius (Petrie 1991; Sawyer 2006; Wolff 1993) who creates “in splendid or miserable isolation” (Pope 2005, p. 65) and requires no social support or verification that what is produced is creative. Csikszentmihalyi refutes this argument by stating that,

… what we call creativity is a phenomenon that is constructed through an interaction between producer and audience. Creativity is not the product of single individuals, but of social systems making judgements about individuals’ products … For if you cannot persuade the world that you had a creative idea, how do we know that you actually had it? (2003, p. 314, emphasis in original).

Both of the above myths discount any need for cultural and social structures to produce with the focus on the individual as the only source necessary for creativity to occur. However, dismissing these two Romantic myths as flawed, recent literature has focused on a Rationalist approach to researching creativity (Amabile 1996; Amabile and Tighe 1993; Boden 2004; Csikszentmihalyi 1997; McIntyre 2008; Negus and Pickering 2004; Pope 2005; Sawyer
2006), an approach that takes into consideration elements other than just the individual as the source of creativity.

It is argued that researching creativity using confluence theories, a Rationalist approach where more than one element is necessary for creativity to occur, may offer the best way to research the wide-ranging aspects of creativity (Sternberg and Lubart 2003) and allow for “an increasingly complex understanding of creativity” (McIntyre 2008, p. 41). Researchers who have investigated creativity using the confluence approach include Amabile (1982; 1993), Sternberg (2003), Feldman (2003), Simonton (1999), McIntyre (2003; 2006; 2008), Gardner (1993) and Csikszentmihalyi (1988; 1997; 2003).

During their investigation of creativity, the above researchers have also provided a Rationalist definition. Rather than the common-sense view of creativity as something that is completely new and comes from nothing, current understanding is based on the idea of novelty but it also builds on what already exists. The definition further adds that there is a need for social validation. This claim can be illustrated by McIntyre who provides the following definition:

… creativity is an activity whereby products, processes and ideas are generated from antecedent conditions by 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 human knowledge (2006, p. 215).

This current paper is drawn from a larger PhD research project investigating the creative practices of print journalists in Australia. By marrying Rationalist creativity research with the domain of print journalism, the PhD project is examining how print journalists produce creative texts within cultural, social and individual structures. Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity (1988; 1990; 1997; 2003; Feldman et al. 1994) enables the examination of creativity in print journalism. The systems model is a Rationalist model that argues creativity can be found in the confluence of three elements – a domain, a field and an individual – and each of the three elements must be present for creativity to occur.

The domain is the cultural component and “consists of a set of symbolic rules and procedures” (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, p. 27). Sawyer provides the following definition of the domain: “The domain consists of all of the created products that have been accepted by the field in the past, and all of the conventions that are shared by members of the field: the languages, symbols, and notations” (2006, p. 125). The field is the social component of the model and “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” (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, p. 28). The third component, the individual, learns the domain, produces a variation and presents it to the field for verification that it is novel and appropriate: a creative contribution. If approved by the field, the variation is then included in the domain for the cycle to continue.

Figure 1 - Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity (2003, p. 315)

It is important to recognise that the systems model is a model of circular causality, meaning “each of the three main systems – person, field, and domain – affects the others and is affected by them in turn” (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p. 329). Each element is equally important in the production of texts and therefore focusing on the organisation and its influence on journalists, as this paper does, in no way indicates that the organisation is the most important element in the production of texts.

In the context of this paper, the relevance of the above discussion on creativity and the systems model is that a print journalist uses the cultural (domain) and social (field) structures both of journalism in general and within an organisation to produce work that is both novel and appropriate. Analysis of the data gathered in the research shows that journalists learn the rules and procedures of the domain both through formal communication such as style guides, emails and Internet and/or Intranet sites provided by the organisation as well as both formally and informally from the field, through cadetships, internships, mentoring and day-to-day editing.
The data analysed is from a series of interviews conducted with 36 newspaper and magazine journalists and editors from a range of Australian publications as well as interviews of, and publications by, members of the field of journalism. Analysis of this data has indicated that, although there are challenges for journalists, working with an organisation, and working within an organisation’s expectations, also supports a journalist’s work practices. By learning what is expected of them, journalists are able to ‘do without thinking’. This contention is supported by Herbert Gans who noted:

> Because medium and format considerations are virtually built into story selection and production, journalists do not often have to give them much thought (1980, p. 167).

The classic ethnographic studies into news production from the 1970s and 1980s (for example Gans (1980), Tuchman (1978) and Fishman (1980)), whilst providing valuable insight into what news is selected, how journalists select the news and how work routines, work methods, newsroom influences and news values affect news production, do not deal with the creativity of print journalists. Fishman attempts to describe his research as an investigation into the “creation of news” (1980, p. 13) but states he is reluctant to use ‘creation’ “because of its pejorative connotations and because it suggests the fabrication of news” (ibid.) and reverts to the more comfortable term of ‘news production’. Here is an example of the common-sense, Romantic view of creativity and how there is a bias against creativity in some forms of print journalism (for further discussion of why journalism is not typically seen as a creative activity see Fulton and McIntyre 2009). It is also an example of how researchers typically use ‘creativity’ without understanding or explaining what the term means (Fulton 2008; McIntyre 2006; McIntyre and McIntyre 2007). Domingo (2008) further argues that these studies were primarily aimed at investigating how organisational influences shaped news while this study argues something slightly different, that is, that organisational influences are one part of a confluence of elements that affect news production and Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model is a model that encompasses these elements.

**The cultural structure**

Using Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity, the cultural structure a print journalist works within is the “set of symbolic rules and procedures” (1997, p. 27) of the domain of print journalism. Rules include such things as how a story is written – language, style and length – legal and ethical obligations, news values and ideological rules such as the notion of the Fourth Estate. Examples of procedures include working to a deadline, using technological tools, knowing how to submit a story and knowledge about the organisation’s expectations. It
is the understanding of these rules and procedures of the domain and, on a micro-level, the familiarity with the expectations of the organisation worked for, that allows a journalist to create their work. As Mark Fishman recognises:

… newworkers do not invent new methods of reporting the world on every occasion they confront it. They employ methods that have been used in the past; they rely upon the standard operating procedures of their news organisation and of their profession (1980, p. 14).

The following rules and procedures are not a comprehensive list of what journalists need to know to practice journalism. They are simply examples of the general theme that a journalist needs to learn the rules and procedures of a domain before being able to produce a creative product, that is, an article that is both novel and appropriate to the context it is written for.

Firstly, on a domain level, Niblock (1996) contends there are three golden rules to good writing: accuracy, conciseness and clarity. Each of these rules was mentioned by the study’s respondents as important to know. Other rules discussed included writing in the active voice, using few adjectives in hard news and writing in the inverted pyramid style.

… the reality is with news, you are putting your most, you are building a reverse pyramid. You are putting your most important fact in the intro. This is fact based writing. This is who, what, how, when, where and why and this is short sentences; this is very little descriptive terminology; this is, for most papers, past tense; this is very strictly governed rules on how material is written (J6 2007).

The above are seen as general rules within the domain of journalism. Further rules mentioned by the respondents included ideological rules such as fair and balanced reporting, truth, the duty to inform the public and the public’s right to know, rules mentioned in the industry’s Code of Ethics (MEAA 2008). However, the journalists interviewed are also well aware of the rules and procedures of their organisation. For example, most respondents discussed a formal style guide, which provides such information as how to spell words, how to use punctuation, when to capitalise letters, how to use titles, how to write numbers, etc. Interestingly, although aware of the style guide, most of the respondents claimed that after a while they rarely referred to it. As they gained experience, they knew the expectations of the organisation and produced their work accordingly. This is in line with Niblock’s contention: “Having worked in the environment over time, they [journalists] internalise the ideals and aspirations of their news organisation and can apply them swiftly and confidently” (2005, p.
74). Furthermore, a number of the respondents recalled using a style guide but were unable to produce it or did not know where it was.

We had a style guide 15 years ago and I think we’ve got copies of it somewhere but very seldom does it come out. It’s basically on the job we say, ‘No, we don’t do that. This is the way we do that’. So it’s just on the go (E9 2008).

Journalists and editors in this study noted that different publications had different ways to communicate the style requirements. News Limited’s style guide is a book (Lockwood 2005) that is also available to the general public, whereas Fairfax generally supplies their style guide to staff only. A number of magazine editors said they provide a document with style requirements via email to contributors whilst others include it on a website.

Tying in with the style guide is the idea of writing to a format. A format allows for economic considerations to be managed within an organisation (Fishman 1980) by saving time but it is also a way to let the audience know what to expect (Tiffen 1989). Ward argues: “News organisations marketing to different audiences clearly adopt different formats … A format entails a systematic way of structuring the presentation of information” (1995, p. 104) and as one respondent said, “a community newspaper is totally different to a daily which is totally different to a trade magazine” (E2 2007). It is what Conley calls house style: “It gives uniformity to newspaper articles and news broadcasts. It is about laying down a clear set of rules that all journalists who work for a particular organisation must abide by” (2006, p. 147).

A tabloid newspaper is much more pictorially, pictures are much more important. So when you’re thinking in stories, you have to think of that page in a tabloid newspaper, you really do … my task as a tabloid journalist is to write very bland, objective reportage with very few adjectives. Just report the facts. You have a bit of licence in the first par for a tabloid journalist because your first par has to have punch (J4 2007).

Another rule noted in the interviews was ethics. The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) – the journalists’ union – provides a Code of Ethics to guide journalists in their reporting (MEAA 2008) and several respondents referred to this as guiding how they report. However, it was also mentioned that it is another rule that can become part of the ‘doing without thinking’.

I know the MEAA Code of Practice. I mean that’s the kind of one, you don’t sit down and people go: ‘You must learn this’. It’s kind of just instilled. How is it instilled?
(my question) Just the way other people around you work and when you first start and you have a problem, the editor says this is how you should deal with it and that sort of thing (J7 2007).

Further to this, it was noted that organisations can also have a Code specific to the organisation.

I think [publication name deleted] does have its own code of ethics. Actually, I’m a little embarrassed because I can’t really answer that question definitively. I’m fairly certain that there would be a, in fact I am quite certain that there is one, probably as part of the style manual we use and probably articulated in other documents we’d have that would be on general release. I think once you’re experienced they expect you to know it (J1 2007).

This last quote from a journalist reiterates the notion of absorbing the organisation’s rules and drawing on this knowledge to create a text. Another respondent agreed but also provided evidence of how the organisation communicated its message to its workforce.

… a lot of that stuff is absorbed by osmosis … although I think when it [the organisation’s Code of Conduct] was written, in fact I’m sure when it was written, there were all these emails sent out by [name deleted] or whoever was there at the time saying: ‘This is our new policy’ – it might even have been [name deleted], our CEO – ‘this is how we’ve got to do it and you’ve all got to read this and you’ve got to be on the ball’ and of course none of us read it. We were like, of course, who do you think we are? Everybody was really up in arms that they thought we were being unethical anyway (J17 2008).

Giddens (1984) points out that within any structure there are both written and unwritten rules. When asked, respondents from this study were able to provide instances of rules not provided within a style guide but were expected of them by the organisation.

It’s not written anywhere but the idea that you can get too far advanced without actually quoting someone else, there’s a pressure to get quotes in there. Even if you could say it better yourself. I would probably challenge you to get to the second par of anything I’ve ever written without finding a quote (J12 2007).
Other instances of unwritten rules mentioned within the interviews included not taking someone else’s story idea and not encroaching on someone’s ‘round’ (or beat) through to style points such as not repeating a word in a sentence and capitalising the first word of a story.

The social structure

The social structure, or field, “has the power to determine the structure of the domain. Its major function is to preserve the domain as it is, and its secondary function is to help it evolve by a judicious selection of new content” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 206). This explanation of the field is an example of the circular causality (Csikszentmihalyi 1988) of the systems model and is borne out by results from this research: the rules and procedures, the “creativity language” (Sawyer 2006), of the domain of print journalism and the organisation worked for are crucial to provide support for a journalist’s work, but the field is the structure that teaches that language, assesses the creative outcome and also, importantly, decides what is included in the structure of the domain, what rules, procedures and work is to be included for others to draw on.

Within the domain of print journalism, members of the field include other journalists, sub-editors, editors, chiefs-of-staff, owners and the audience. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the individual must learn “the criteria of selection, the preferences of the field” (1997, p. 47) to work effectively. Print journalists learn what is expected of them within both the organisation worked for (e.g. from subeditors, editors, and chiefs-of-staff) and the broader social structure (e.g. the audience and media workers in other domains).

Respondents noted that, although the organisation may provide written communication to inform journalists of what is needed to produce, rules and procedures of their organisation were primarily learnt via the social structure of the publication. Although most journalists in this study had formal training in journalism, such as tertiary education, via a cadetship or internship, in a post-graduate course, or through short courses provided by the organisation, the majority of respondents stated that learning on the job was the most valuable way to pick up what was required of them in their production.

I mean you think you can pick it up at Uni, and know what it is you’re doing, but I don’t feel that I was in any way taught particularly well what to expect … Editors will (send) back your work with big red marks when you’re first learning your thing, and that’s hard work and I certainly got a lot of that (J1 2007).
This comment is in line with a number of theorists who claim journalists are socialised into the workplace (Berkowitz 1997; Breed 1955; Harcup 2004).

An important part of that socialisation into journalistic practice is gaining an understanding of the editing process, which is an accepted part of a professional journalist’s work (E7 2007). In the editing process the formal rules of the organisation are communicated to the individual journalist.

When she [a cadet journalist] first started here, her writing style was pretty good, it still is good, but as style points will come up, I’ll just say, ‘Hey, this is how we do it here, don’t ever forget your active voice’. I mean we have things like rather than saying ‘the Governor General of NSW’ we would say ‘the NSW Governor General’. So just things like that I’ll point out to her (E1 2007).

Learning to write is also carried on informally as experienced journalists discuss their own methods of writing with new journalists.

I remember my editor used to say, when I was writing I could never get the structure of the news story right, he said, ‘If you read your story and it sounds like you’re telling somebody in a pub – try and tell the story, the paragraphs should be as simple as possible, as if you’re telling a mate in a pub. And if you can’t do it in that very first line that you tell your friend, then it’s not right’ (J10 2008).

When a journalist is first ‘socialised’ into a workplace, one of the informal ways of learning is through observing other journalists. This is true in both learning how to write and in becoming confident in the expectations of the organisation. After interviewing cadet journalists, Mandy Oakham concluded that cadets attached a high level of importance to learning through interaction with senior member of the field and “experiential learning” and “emulation” (Oakham 2004, p. 178-179) were the preferred methods of learning. This observation by Oakham is evident throughout the responses in this study.

When I was on the [publication name deleted], I was a business reporter, my business editor there, who is now the editor of the [publication name deleted] was a guy called [name deleted] who when I got there, talking to other people, got the impression that he was the best, he was basically said to be the best business jounro of his generation.

He was absolutely inspirational. I mean, just watching how he worked, watching how
he conducted interviews and every so often he’d sit down and he’d give me a mentoring session and watching the, picking up the responsibility with which he conducted his work, how he approached it culturally was inspiring (J2 2007).

However, it is important to point out that regardless of positive support and teaching provided by the field, there is also the opposite. A number of respondents noted how the stereotypical ‘yelling editor’ was a very real way they learnt how to write within the expectations of the organisation.

There was a proof-reader, no he was a sub-editor, and he also used to sub-edit for the Telegraph, and he would put red pen through things. He 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 (E14 2008).

Further to this is how a journalist learns to write within the policy of the organisation. In line with Breed’s (1955) assertion about socialisation into the workplace, journalists learn through editing what will not get published. Ian Ward supports this assertion by stating that journalists “will quickly learn what is appropriate from the way in which sub-editors run, cut, rewrite or ‘spike’ their copy” (Ward 1995, p. 104). Evidence of this was found in the data.

I am however aware that certain stories are of no interest to my bosses because they’re pitching at this particular audience. So there’s stuff that as a journo you simply won’t attempt … So there isn’t censorship but there is effective censorship because they won’t put everything in there; they’ll only put certain things in the paper. So it’s not that you spend a whole day on a story and they just chuck it back in your face, they just won’t put it in the paper so you stop writing stories that you know won’t get put in the paper. And that’s true for every paper.

*How do you think that you’ve learnt what articles will get printed and won’t get printed? (my question).*

I think you become quite sensitive to it fairly quickly – the kind of stories that are in the paper. And when you start off you might file stories and just see they’re not going to get anywhere (J2 2007).

The above contention can be verified by support in the journalism literature. Edgar provides the following observation:
So it is not the unusual event of suppression, alteration or manufacture of news stories that generates bias in our news coverage in the main. Nor is it proprietorial interference or conspiracies which shape the news, although all these things do occur from time to time. Rather it is the socialisation of journalists into a profession where they need only to apply the rules of the game their organisation plays – the seeking out of particular stories, the self censorship which means you do not waste time chasing stories that papers do not want to run or stations do now want to broadcast because it does not suit their ‘style’ (Edgar 1980, p. 10).

This suggests that journalists learn by osmosis what is expected by the organisation but there are also instances when the pressure to write to policy is more overt. Michelle Grattan maintains “it is undeniable that media organisations – managements, editors – usually handle their proprietors’ interests with more sensitivity than they accord other stories” (1995, p. 12) and one magazine journalist interviewed concurred with this contention: “At one company I worked at we weren’t allowed to do stories on a certain celeb because the boss was friends with them” (E15 2008).

Conclusion
The empirical evidence from this ethnographic research shows that, in line with Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity, the domain, the field and the individual are inextricably linked. The individual learns the rules and procedures of the domain and uses these to produce an article that is novel and appropriate to the context it is written for. The article is presented to members of the field for verification that it is novel and appropriate for inclusion into the domain of knowledge. This conclusion suggests that print journalists can be creative producers of media texts and investigating journalists’ procedures and how they learn and communicate within an organisation illustrates the systems model of creativity in action.

Furthermore, this evidence provides an underlying theme in regards to print journalists and the organisation worked for, that is, it is essential to learn the rules and procedures of the domain and organisation before meaningful work can be produced. Data shows that organisations communicate this to journalists both formally and informally via both the domain and the field. The organisation provides formal rules and procedures via written and electronic communication as well as unwritten rules absorbed by the journalist. It is the task of the field to also know these rules and procedures in order to teach journalists how to produce work that is novel and appropriate: a creative text. Following Giddens’ (1984) and
Wolff’s (1993) argument, it can also be seen that socialisation into these rules and procedures supports creative practices and, rather than being seen as constraining, they can also be enabling.

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