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How newsroom failures limit readership gains

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The organisational structure and culture of newsrooms in Australia's newspapers militate against the effective application of readership research recommendations. A lack of communication between and within departments, fear of the loss of editorial independence, and the absence of adequate review functions in leadership roles condemns newspapers to continuing failure to implement recommended content changes.

Australian newspapers are confronted by the same visceral problem that confronts newspapers around the world — declining circulations. As circulations fail to keep pace with population growth, newspapers everywhere are forced to ask themselves: What are we doing wrong? The answers to that question are manifold and far from unanimous. Reasons proposed for falling circulation range from competition from other media (most recently the internet), to declining levels of literacy among the population in general, to the proposition that newspapers represent a "mature" industry approaching its sunset.

In an attempt to halt the circulation decline, the industry and institutions within it engage in readership research, in the hope of making the content of newspapers more relevant and more palatable to potential readers. This paper aims to show that the effectiveness of such readership research is damaged, or at least limited, by the kind of organisational structure which exists in Australian newsrooms, making the effective implementation of readership research unlikely.

The effectiveness of audience research in lifting reader interest at any Australian newspaper will depend on a range of factors, but most obviously three: the appropriateness of the research undertaken, the efficiency and skills of the researchers, and the degree to which the

research is implemented. Interviews with researchers at News Ltd and Fairfax in Sydney and Melbourne, where the bulk of audience research occurs, have revealed a wide range of research topics and methods applied with apparent efficiency by skilled researchers over the past decade. The sheer range of the audience research undertaken — News Ltd conducts hundreds of projects each year — ensures that some of it, at least, is high-quality research; the first two factors required for effectiveness, therefore, exist at the major metropolitan daily newspapers in Australia. The third factor, however — effective implementation — is not guaranteed.

For audience research to be effectively implemented at a newspaper, the research must be:

1. Clearly understood by newsroom staff;
2. Accepted by newsroom staff as valid and meaningful;
3. Supported by management controls.

Interviews with newsroom executives and researchers, and a national survey of copytasters in Australian newspapers, indicate these three conditions rarely co-exist in Australian newspaper newsrooms.

To understand why the three conditions rarely co-exist in an Australian newspaper newsroom, it is necessary to examine the organisational structures of news media organisations in general and of newsrooms in particular, and to examine management practices in newsrooms.

Most Australian newspaper organisations reflect a top-down management approach typical of large organisations. They provide a generally clear line of command, with line managers reporting upwards to their immediate superiors, and they are generally highly departmentised, as described by Lacy et al (1993, p.34-36). Ultimate authority generally lies with the owner and is delegated through a publisher to a chief executive officer, and then on to individual line managers. Although there is no such thing as a "typical" Australian newspaper organisation, the four major publishers — News Ltd, Fairfax, Australian Provincial Newspapers, and Rural Press — share many of the characteristics of a "generic" model which could be characterised by the following schema:

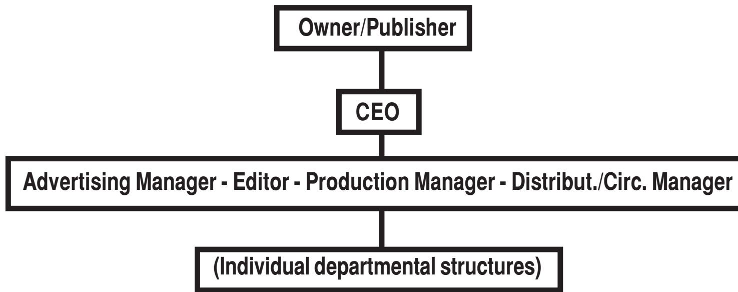

Figure 1

In a "normal" management structure, an organisation like that above would have executives in each level of management reporting to the executive in the level above. In the Editorial Department, then, editorial executives would report to the editor or editor-in-chief, if one existed. But to whom does the editor report?

The structure would indicate that the editor reports to the chief executive officer, as do the other line managers. In many day-to-day bureaucratic issues, such a line of reporting is efficient and sensible. But when the issue of editorial independence is raised, difficulties occur. Editorial independence is enshrined in the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance journalists' code of ethics which holds that reporting of the news must be free from any influence that might "taint" its perceived objectivity. Although it is not contained in the code of ethics, by convention a newspaper's editor is deemed to have total control over the content of the paper, ensuring a church/state type of division between the editorial functions of the paper and the commercial functions of the paper. Such a division is necessary because the "public responsibility" role of a news media organisation can sometimes conflict with its commercial aims (Lacy et al, p.43; Underwood 1993, p.143, p.166). But if the editor is the final arbiter on editorial content, that implies seniority over other line managers such as the advertising manager and production manager — and a blurring of the chain of command between the editor and those above. This blurring of the chain of command is more evident in some organisations than others and was most evident in the attempted takeover of Fairfax by Packer in 1991, when staff drew up a charter of editorial independence vesting

editorial control in the editor, and not the owner (More & Smith 1992, p.130).

The concept of editorial independence, therefore, is at odds with an organisational structure which places two or more layers of senior management above the editor and assumes a homogeneity of management issues. The fact that the conflict exists does not necessarily mean that the structure is unworkable — editors in interviews (1996, personal communications) have reported they feel free to go straight to the publisher with concerns, or alternatively that they have the option of resigning if they strongly disagree with management decisions. And Giles puts forward the following schema (p.114) as a typical organisational structure for a US newspaper, where the executive editor appears to have a much closer relationship to the publisher:

While the Australian structure might not be unworkable, it also is not optimal — and where less than optimal conditions exist, implementation of management decisions may be flawed. This is especially true when the decisions concern the character of editorial content and who has control over it.

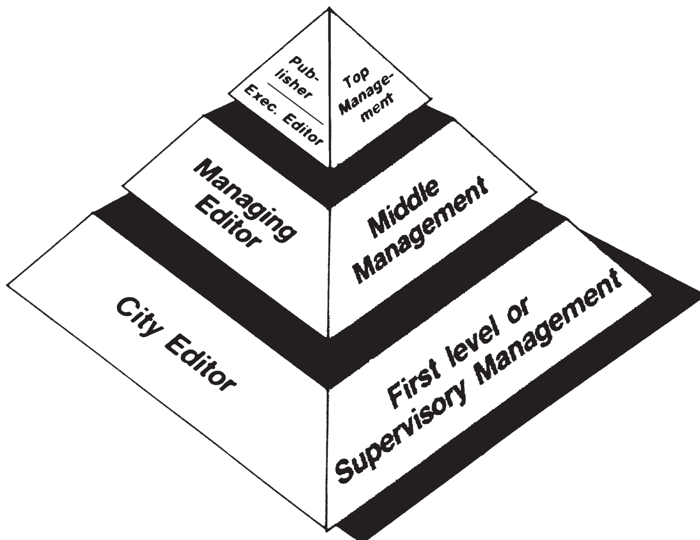

Figure 2

If the organisational structure of Australian newspapers provides the capacity for conflict upwards over editorial content between the editor and the editor's superiors, it also provides the capacity for conflict downwards between the editor and the editor's staff.

A typical newspaper editorial department could be characterised by the following schema:

Figure 3

Definition: In this paper, the term copytaster is used to describe any senior journalist who has some influence on the stories that get into print or that are discarded. It is meant to include journalists from the "rank" of chief reporter/senior reporter up through department heads for departments like Features, Finance and Sport, to chiefs of staff and chief sub-editors, to associate editors and assistant editors, up to editors in chief. The key to inclusion in the term lies in an individual having some control over the publishability of a report. It is not meant to include reporters who may decide to report or not report on an issue, or sub-editors who have control over the size or positioning of a story once it has been assigned to a page.

If an editor wants to respond to audience research findings by implementing change in the paper's content mix, that change will largely be implemented at the level of the copy-taster — the journalist responsible for deciding that a story is at least worthy of being brought to the attention of the daily news conference, or of filling a space left open on a page. But as Figure 3 shows, there can be three and even

more organisational layers between the editor and the copy-tasters. In small newspapers, where the copy-tasting function might be performed solely by department heads, or the chief of staff/chief sub-editor, the number of layers can be reduced, but even that will not improve the chances of research recommendations being implemented unless other conditions are present. One of those conditions is communication in the newsroom. Communication, according to Giles "is the vital link that influences both individual motivation and group behaviour in the newsroom" (p.79). To motivate staff to accept change and to achieve change, therefore, an editor must communicate effectively with subordinates.

Two areas of communication are critical to mass media organisations. The first and most obvious is the mass communication between the organisation and its audience; the second is organisational communication between departments and between superiors/ subordinates within the media organisations.

The general mass communication model is well known (Lasswell 1950, Gerbner 1969), but warrants a brief description here. In the model, a newspaper (for example) communicates messages (stories/ reports) through a channel (the physical product of the newspaper) to a mass audience (its readers) to some effect. The effect can be distorted by "noise", or interference in the transmission of the messages. The model presents a closed loop by assuming the transmission is a two-way communication which includes feedback from the audience to the newspaper. If the messages are consonant with the audience's (uses and gratifications) needs, the audience will find them interesting and relevant (and continue to buy and read the newspaper).

In practice, in Australia (and elsewhere for that matter), the feedback element is largely missing from the model and specific organisational elements of noise exist to damage the working of the model.

Discussion of the role that feedback plays in affecting the content of a newspaper (its "messages") requires some description of the work of journalists at newspapers. As the studies by Altheide (1976), Schlesinger (1978) and others show, all journalists are to some extent "gatekeepers" in the flow of information from source to receivers.

What is known as "copy-flow" starts with an organisation choosing to "cover" a particular issue — that is, choosing to allow information about that issue through an initial gate and to begin to flow towards its readers. At a number of points along the production process, a variety of journalists must make decisions about continuing or discontinuing the copy flow for each story. Perhaps the most influential of all those "gatekeepers" are journalists whose role specifically includes "copytasting". Typically copytasters are senior editorial employees — editors and sub-editors — who make decisions about which stories will get into the paper and what prominence will be assigned to them. Copytasters are a small subset of the editorial team in any newsroom but they clearly wield an enormous amount of influence in "constructing reality" for a paper's audience and, just as clearly, a paper relies on their judgment to an enormous extent in addressing its audience.

Continually declining newspaper circulations represent a strong message that the copytasters' judgment is faulty. The judgment of the editor, who carries the responsibility for copy tasting and who has the power to change the copy taster, also could be faulty. Major newspaper groups, at least, have attempted to address the problem with market research to try to define the needs and wants of their audiences.

While the archetypal communication model assumes a two-way communication between sender and receiver, the capacity for a copytaster to receive and act upon feedback is limited. Feedback in Australian newspapers tends to be anecdotal, rather than empirical. In many organisations, it consists largely of reported fluctuations in circulation figures, filtered phone calls from readers, and letters to the editor. Interviews with market research officers of major Australian newspapers show that it rarely consists of carefully constructed market research which links the anecdotal evidence to audience needs and wants and/or audience psychological, sociological and demographic characteristics (Bunn 1998, Lithgow 1998, Dalrymple 1994, Balogh 1994, Trodd 1997 & Winkler 1998). Even when the feedback is so linked, organisational communication of the information to relevant copytasters is distorted in the form of gatekeeping by organisational figures and noise in the form of the psychographic profiles of the copytasters and their superiors.

A survey of Australian gatekeepers and interviews with the market research departments of major print news organisations has reinforced the author's experience (33 years in the print news industry) that market research by Australian newspapers overall (as distinct from the major metropolitan newspapers) is patchy, poorly communicated to editorial departments, and even more poorly received. And according to the survey (304 valid responses of 320 gatekeepers surveyed), gatekeepers rate their exposure to market research as low. Henningham (1988, p.173) reported similar findings in a study of Australian print and broadcast journalists. He quotes Baker as saying that in a sample of print and broadcast journalists in Melbourne, only two had ever seen audience research data. Henningham notes that managements are "generally secretive" about the audience research they commission because of its commercial nature, and he adds (1988, p.173):

> . . . from the television journalists' perspective, recommendations by researchers or consultants have trickled down to them from managment-level only selectively — for example when a particular recommendation concerned a reporter personally.

Even in the larger papers, where editorial market research quite obviously was being conducted, copytasters reported a low level of exposure to the research. Further interviews with copytasters and with market research executives suggests the reasons are three-fold: the dictum of editorial independence, editorial gates which block the flow of market research information, and the psychographic profile of copytasters.

The dictum of editorial independence presents a problem upwards between editors and their superiors, sideways (between departments) and downwards (with journalists' acceptance or otherwise of editorial change).

Despite the findings of Altheide, Schlesinger and others, news organisations continue to pursue the aim of objectivity in news reporting — of disinterested, unbiassed and factual reporting of the news. They purport to do this by a variety of means, but specifically by referring their news choices to a range of "traditional" news values and by maintaining editorial independence from commercial or political

influence. The dictum of editorial independence, as noted earlier, holds that the reporting of news should be free from any influence that might "taint" its perceived objectivity and as a result it vests the ultimate power to decide what should be published or "spiked" in the editorial department, specifically the editor. The dictum often manifests itself in conflict between the advertising and editorial departments of a newspaper, when publication of a negative story (or non-publication of a positive story) is seen to be harmful to an advertiser.

Interviews with staff from the market research departments of Australia's major print organisations show that it also has manifested itself in a reluctance to direct editorial departments to concentrate on specific categories of news or segments of the audience. When market research staff conduct research that is useful to copytasters in terms of feedback from their audience, they typically present the research findings to a senior editorial figure (usually the editor in chief) and the relevant editorial department head (features editor, sports editor, finance editor et al). Implementation of the findings is then left to the department head. In the interviews conducted, market research personnel were extremely reluctant to go further than simply presenting their findings and making general recommendations for change — to do more was seen as intruding upon editorial independence. In no case did a market research department at any newspaper do follow-up research to determine whether the findings has been implemented and if they had had any effect upon the audience.

The dictum of editorial independence, therefore, while it may have many admirable qualities, appears to act as a gate through which editorial market research finds it extremely difficult to pass.

If the notion of editorial independence blocks the flow of useful information between one department and another, the very structure of editorial departments provides further gates.

Newsrooms are characterised by their hierarchical structure. At the top, the editor provides a "vision" for the paper and transmits it to a range of deputy editors, day editors, night editors, associate editors, assistant editors and chiefs of staff, who in turn transmit that vision to a range of department heads, chief sub-editors, news editors and chief reporters, who then retransmit it to the next layer of journalists

below them. The capacity for reinterpretation in this process would in itself seem to be sufficient cause of any failure in the paper's mission to communicate in an interesting and relevant way with its readers — providing the editor's vision was appropriate in the first place.

While market research will help inform and shape the editor's vision, the utility of the research itself will be limited when it is presented only to a small group of editorial executives. In many cases, interviews with market researchers and copytasters revealed research findings were presented to the editor alone. The smaller the group exposed to the research findings, the greater the capacity for reinterpretation as they filter down through the newspaper's hierarchy and, hence, the greater the capacity for inefficient copytasting. In the survey of copytasters, three metropolitan department heads said they were never shown research and did not feel they needed to see it, because their editors told them all they needed to know.

Apart from the dangers inherent in the reinterpretation of information under such conditions, the political nature of a newsroom presents further problems. Organisational literature notes that knowledge is power and it may be in the interests of individuals to withhold knowledge. In this way managers retain power over subordinates — and in particular over potential competitors. Harris says members of organisations may deliberately use unclear language "to maintain the strategic advantage of being able to claim deniability" (p.112). This should be compared with the proposition that editors and others in possession of readership research findings hand on only an incomplete picture of the findings for a similar reason (deniability is useful when content changes fail to deliver the desired results) or to maintain an advantage over potential competitors in the newsroom.

Gatekeepers exist in a variety of guises in all organisations, and Harris recognises this when he addresses the problem posed by members of organisations who screen out important messages and fail to pass them on to others in the organisational hierarchy. In serial communication situations, where the information passes through a number of gatekeepers, significant distortion of the original message can occur. Harris reprints a figure from the American Management Association (1993, p.202) showing that only 20 percent of the original

meaning is received when a communication passes through six sets of gatekeepers.

Harris says (p.208) although it is difficult to prove "a direct causal link between information adequacy [information passed from management to employees] and performance, there clearly is a correlation. In better performing organisations, he says, employees are more satisfied with the quality and quantity of information supplied. He says:

> As long as the downward communication is put into the context of the impact of the organizational culture, it would be correct to conclude that effective downward communication is a vital part of any organisation. (p.208)

Argyris (1974) characterised the "living system" he found, in a study of one US newspaper, as "competitive and low in trust" (p.32):

> It seems fair to suggest that in this living system, the factors supporting ineffectiveness in problem-solving, decision-making, and implementation will tend to be greater than the factors supporting effectiveness. (p.33)

He further added:

> It will tend to be difficult for participants to provide the valid information needed for solving important problems. Any search for alternatives will tend to be narrow in scope, any exploration of alternatives will tend to be brief, and any choice will tend to be influenced significantly by incomplete and distorted information. (p.33)

The problem of downward communication also is addressed by Simon (1976), who says (p.106) that "communication . . . is essential to the more complex forms of cooperative behavior". He adds that no step in the administrative process is "more generally ignored or more poorly performed, than the task of communicating decisions". He asks:

> The question to be asked of any administrative process is: How does it influence the decisions of these individuals? Without communication, the answer must always be: It does not influence them at all. (p.108)

Simon acknowledges that superiors withhold information from subordinates in all organisations:

> . . . the superior may use his exclusive possession of information as a means of maintaining his authority over the subordinate. It is hard to see that [this practice], which is usually a symptom of an incompetent and insecure executive, has any constructive function in organization. (p.163)

Harris also examines the use of goal-setting, leadership and power in organisations, and his conclusions are relevant to the operation and management of Australian newsrooms.

Although the quantification of circulation effect achieved by using readership research is inexact, it can nevertheless be seen as a form of goal-setting when applied to the work done by gatekeepers in newsrooms. If the output of readership research is seen as worthwhile — and it must be, because newspapers continue to conduct it — then it is reasonable to require gatekeepers to make use of it. But Harris says goal-setting in most organisations is "leader centered". (p.447)

> Unless the goals are discovered, and accepted mutually, managers still retain the power to accept or reject an employee's work based on the manager's perception of quality.

Harris's description of goal-setting as "leader-centered" is applicable to the use of readership research in newspapers. Where research is actually editorially driven (as distinct from advertising or circulation-driven), interviews conducted by this author showed department heads in metropolitan daily newspapers were not involved in decisions about the content of the research or, indeed, in decisions about whether to conduct research at all. Further, some department heads volunteered the opinion that it was not their prerogative to participate in such decisions and that they would be told all they needed to know by the editor. Such an attitude suggests a lack of leadership on the part of senior management which could, perhaps, be attributed to a preference for management, rather than leadership. (Harris describes the attributes of leaders and managers and says both functionaries have important roles to play in organisations. But he says that "leaders work towards empowerment of subordinates whereas managers concentrate on developing power rather than people" (p.373). When combined with Harris's earlier statement about the desire for deniability, it is possible that he is describing potent reasons for the lack of clear communication

about the application of readership research findings in Australian newsrooms.)

The third reason for copytasters' low level of exposure to market research lies in journalists' perception of the need for editorial independence and in the attitudes of journalists in general and copytasters in particular.

The dictum of editorial independence is related to journalism's perceived role of social responsibility — its mission to inform the public on issues of social consequence, no matter what the commercial or political consequences might be for the news organisation itself. Such a mission could be perceived as being at odds with the mandates of market research and, when journalists believe they perceive such a contradiction, they will feel free to ignore the research findings. Some journalists will take the issue further and decide to ignore all research findings as a matter of principle, an attitude noted by a number of journalism researchers. Robinson & Levy (1986), in particular, note that among US television journalists, even a limited, demographic knowledge of the audience is not deemed necessary — or even desirable — by a great many journalists (p.164). They point out that some journalists perceive a dichotomy between giving an audience what it says it wants, and the editorial freedom of the communicator. In other words, even basic demographic research work could impinge on journalistic freedom of expression and is therefore at best to be regarded with suspicion or, preferably, ignored all together. Gans (1980) also notes differences between gatekeepers and their audiences, saying they represent the upper middle class professional strata in society's hierarchies and they defend them via their story selection against the top, bottom and middle strata. Henningham (1988, p.185), also found that Australian broadcast journalists' "estimates of viewer interest are related much more closely to their own preferences than they are to actual viewer interests".

A dictum which gives journalists the freedom to ignore all or part of the market research produced by their own organisations would be, intuitively, congenial to many journalists because it is consonant with their attitude towards society in general. Studies show journalists to be small-l liberal in their political and social attitudes. In Australia,

studies in 1988, 1995 and 1996 by Henningham support evidence from around the world that journalists see themselves as being at least slightly left of centre in their political leanings and liberal in their views on a range of social issues. A 1996 study by Henningham compared the attitudes of journalists with those of members of the general public on a range of social and economic issues, finding journalists "significantly more liberal than the general public".

This liberalism and streak of independence is also remarked upon by Harris, who notes the publishing, advertising and television industries are characterised as macho/tough guy-gal management cultures (p.70). Characteristics of such a culture include a high-risk business environment, with expensive outlays for risk; an environment of quick feedback on the success of decision-making; shared values of youth, intense pressure, fast pace, early rewards; extensive use of rites and rituals, bordering on the superstitious; and an individualistic attitude among employees.

Some of these characteristics are obvious in the newspaper industry. The call for quick feedback, for instance, is satisfied by supplying the daily circulation figures and referring to anecdotal evidence from reader phone calls. It is not, however, likely to be interested in feedback from market research which takes considerably longer to produce. High staff turnover could be a contributing factor to the blank spots identified by survey in copytasters' knowledge of readership profiles for their papers. And the individualistic attitude of employees helps explain copytasters' disregard for research findings.

Henningham (1997, p.616) comments on the public's perception of journalists: "Popular perceptions of journalists indicate a particular personality. They are commonly seen as gregarious, nosy and thick-skinned." He quotes social scientists Lichter, Rothman & Lichter who cite a number of factors which could produce a "collective personality style, by weeding out the meek, the timid, and the self-conscious". Applying a personality test developed by H.J. Eysenck, Henningham found (p.621), among other things, that Australian journalists were, on average, more extroverted than the general public.

Paradoxically, the existence of group norms within newsrooms may help to reinforce individualistic attitudes towards outside influences

like market research. White & Vroman (1982, p.280) describe the apparent paradox by saying group norms

> are standards against which the behaviors of individual members are compared . . . Over time, group member ideas, sentiments and views melt into shared ways of looking at their world. Individual beliefs and patterns influence norms and vice versa.

White & Vroman say that group norms give rise to Groupthink, which they explain as follows:

> As members become more cohesive, the group can develop a "clubby" atmosphere that emphasizes exclusiveness and superiority. New information brought to the group may be seen as inappropriate or even threatening and therefore may be ignored (p.283).

There are several recognisable behaviours in groupthink:

> Members ordinarily have a high esprit de corps and may characterize others as "quacks" or "cranks". They feel so secure in their decisions that they nurture an illusion of invulnerability. These groups are quick to rationalize their bad decisions and to cloak that rationalization in an "illusion of morality" (they have only the highest goals in mind . . .). Self-censorship minimizes the likelihood that members having contrary views will manifest them, ensuring yet another "illusion of unanimity". (p.283)

Anyone with more than a passing experience of an Australian newsroom will recognise the characteristics described by White & Vroman — which ensure that individuality, or at least a perception of it, is enshrined and outside interference is minimised. That such characteristics should exist in Australian newsrooms is hardly surprising or, indeed, sinister. An esprit de corps, involving the development of Groupthink, arises because newsroom executives work long hours under extreme deadline pressures. Moreover, they tend to work hours not worked by the population at large — night and weekend shifts, afternoon shifts, no public holidays — so their social contact can be limited to contact with each other, or at least to others who work in similar conditions, increasing the chances of the development of a "club" mentality and the rejection of new information. Not only do these conditions support the rise of Groupthink, they also provide an environment in which journalists are likely to lose touch with the needs and wants of their audiences. Henningham's 1996 study reveals

significant differences on a number of scales between journalists and their audiences. The study shows "that journalists and the public in Australia have different ideological values, with the public significantly more conservative than journalists". (p.95) It is worth noting that differences between journalists and their audiences were remarked upon by David Manning White in his seminal 1949 study (p.390).

Given the manifest differences in ideologies and the continuing circulation decline in newspaper readership in Australia, the need for change is critical. Robinson and Levy say journalists need to know more about the cognitive effects of their news choices upon their readers. Journalists, they say, need

> . . . information concerning the needs, knowledge levels, cognitive maps, and information processing capabilities of their audiences . . . If "informing the public" is really a sine qua non of the news profession, how much better informed does the public become as a result of the newscast? (p.164)

Such information will come only from the market research divisions of the major newspapers and broadcast organisations and, indeed, much relevant data is being produced by them even now. But until newsrooms can be convinced that it is in their interests to use that information, little hope can be held out for change.

An organisation's culture is so fundamental to the way it operates, Harris says, that changing it is extremely difficult. Yet the culture exhibited in many newspapers in Australia is clearly inefficient. A culture in which senior journalists say they are largely unaware of the editorial market research done by their companies (survey findings 47.5 percent) and in which they say their organisations' policies on using editorial research are poorly set out (mean response 1.85, std dev. 1.06 on a scale of 1 to 4, where 4 indicates research policy is easy to understand) militates against effective news decision-making. Further, a culture in which many copy-tasters listed their own advertising department as the entity most likely to abuse market research, and in which a fear of poorly constructed readership surveys is a recurring theme, is a culture clearly in need of change. Desired changes would include a greater understanding of and, perhaps, participation in the readership surveys by the copy-tasters themselves — a change likely to be achieved through greater contact between market research employees and copytasters.

But the need for change goes beyond a mere rapport between market researchers and copytasters, however difficult that may be to achieve. Both structural and newsroom leadership style changes are required. Newspapers serious about overcoming declining circulations must consider adding a review function to market research presentations, to check on or achieve compliance. Simon lists four functions for the review process and the first and second, at least, are absent from administrative procedures in newsrooms. Simon says the first function of review is to determine whether "work is being done well or badly at the lower levels of the hierarchy". The second function is to influence subsequent decisions. Clearly, these functions are not occurring with relation to market research use by copytasters. Management practices in Australian newsrooms, for example, do not include any procedures to measure the extent to which readership research recommendations are complied with — hence editorial executives have an imprecise idea of the efficacy of editorial research.

Further, newspapers need to consider their management styles and training. Management training schemes often divide individuals into four categories of personal effectiveness, and recommend management use techniques of interpersonal communication to achieve the most effective performance from employees. Harris notes the four classifications of "supervisors" are: conscious competent; conscious incompetent; unconscious incompetent and unconscious competent (p.298) (classifications used by Australian Institute of Management courses attended by "line managers" — including editors — of Provincial Newspapers (Qld) during the 1980s). Briefly, the conscious competents are people who are aware of the reasons for their competence and so can replicate any successes and correct failures; conscious incompetents are people who are aware of their inadequacies and so are able to grow and learn; unconscious incompetents are people who are unaware of their inadequacies, assume they are competent, and hence are incapable of improvement; unconscious competents do many things right in their work, but do not know why they are successful and so are unable to replicate successes.

When these concepts are applied to Australian newspaper gatekeepers, many of them would appear to be unconscious

competents — competent professionals who recognise from audience reactions (circulation movements, letters to the editor, phone calls, commercial photo sales, commercial use of editorial database) that they have somehow connected with their audience, but are unable to pinpoint the exact reason why. Evidence for pressing the "unconscious competent" definition for gatekeepers exists in their professional competence in areas like news value recognition, rewrite capability and local knowledge, allied with a high survey rating for the value of readership research (mean 3.33, std dev. 0.93 on a scale of one to four). In answering a survey question about the importance to them personally of readership research, copytasters consistently volunteered the view that "it would be nice to know" if they were on the right track with their news choices. This uncertainty in the minds of gatekeepers is strong evidence that they belong in the "unconscious competents" category.

Their superiors, on the other hand, exhibit the characteristics of unconscious incompetents in their function as managers/leaders. The evidence for this lies in the lack of administrative procedures to ensure directives are carried out, in the lack of effective participation in decision-making by some department heads, and in a possible preference for management rather than leadership (developing power rather than people) allied with a lack of impetus for change.

Organisational management theory aims to lift all employees, ultimately, into the conscious competent class, where individuals are aware of the reasons for their successes and hence are able to repeat them, improving overall efficiency within the organisation.

For this to occur in Australian newspaper newsrooms, to the extent that gatekeeping choices reflect market research findings and contribute to the larger battle to reverse circulation losses, significant changes would have to occur to newsroom management practices.

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