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From Journalism School To Newsroom: What Rite Of Passage?

Professional education does not stop at the college gate. The student then enters the organizational framework of a media institution, which provides its own lasting formative experience. By example of recently graduated journalists at an Australian metropolitan newspaper, the West Australian, this article traces the young journalists' induction process into the paper's newsroom workings and explores the adjustments they made after becoming part of an organisational unit. The qualitative interviews show that the newsroom is experienced as a very different environment from whatever simplified version may have encountered at journalism school. The newly afforded responsibility of writing for thousands of readers, working with unwilling sources and adjusting to strict deadlines were cited as the main learning experiences. These statements were backed up by senior staff. None of the young journalists said they had to undo what they had learned previously, nor did they feel their individuality subsumed by organizational constraints.

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The question 'From journalism school to newsroom: what rite of passage' was neither born out of a distrust of journalism schools, nor is it a roundabout way of casting a vote in favour of a skills orientated curriculum or a program which prefers theory, research and critical thinking. Rather, the question arose out of a wider study into (Australian) newsroom practices and the impact of organizational factors on news production.

This study, in its theoretical approach, is based on the layer model of determinants on media content. Differing however from the more stratified pattern of Shoemaker and Reese for their theories of influences on mass media content (Shoemaker & Reese 1996:64), I use a four layered sphere (Esser 1998a:27). In this model the individual sphere (i.e. journalist) is at the center. This core is surrounded by the organisational and institutional sphere, then the sphere of legal and economic determinants and, finally, the

societal sphere.

The necessity of widening the research into the influences beyond the individual journalist was demonstrated in David Weaver's (1998), overall a valuable book containing an important data collection. But Weaver himself admits that using this data as the only basis of comparison leads to inconclusive findings about journalists and their professional norms, and that "[f]urther analysis is needed to uncover some of the differences reported..." (Weaver 1998:478).

Weaver goes on to say that the divergent findings "seem to reflect societal influences, especially political system differences, more than the influences of media organisations, journalism education, and professional norms" (p.478). However, I want to argue in favour of a patient working through all layers that impact on media content. Research so far suggests that, as with the study of the individual journalist, organisational structures do not follow geographical, political and cultural patterns. (Esser 1998a; Josephi 1998; Ericson et al. 1987:97-100)

Recently it has even been suggested that newsroom routines have a far greater influence on news content than the individual journalist. In a paper given at the 1999 IAMCR conference, Pamela Shoemaker presented her findings on individual and routine forces in gatekeeping, concluding that "no individual-level force was related to the quantity of coverage the [Congressional] bills received, whereas editors' aggregated assessment of the bills' newsworthiness was positively related to quantity."

The vital influence of organisational routine, though in a different approach, has also been argued by Stephen Reese in his 1990 article about a socialist at the *Wall Street Journal* (reprinted Berkowitz 1997:420-440). This study showed that a journalist's political conviction did not make it into the paper's printed copy.

Accepting the significance of the organisational sphere, this paper looks at the early stages of the journalist's initiation into the organisational world. However, I do not want to suggest that this ought to be seen as cleanly stepping from one sphere into the next. A young journalist will always carry with him or her a set of values, and similarly he or she may already have encountered some forms of organisational environment at college or university. Especially those journalism schools with a TV or radio studio of their own can replicate newsroom structures. Student publications also try to emulate the workings of a newspaper, unlike a university radio station, which may broadcast 24 hours a day and which is subject to the dictates of time in its program and news delivery. No Australian student papers are daily operations, which provide information for thousands of readers. In the print media – which I will entirely be focussing on – entering the newsroom

Paradigm Shift

makes for a new and formative experience which this paper investigates.

Warren Breed's 1955 classic "Social Control in the Newsroom - A Functional Analysis" (reprinted Berkowitz, 1997:107-122) pits the individual journalist as the keeper of ethical journalistic norms and holder of "more liberal attitudes" against the paper's owner's/editor's/executives' policy. In this highly conflictual situation the "staffers learn policy", i.e. are taught "conformity", "by osmosis". "The recruit discovers and internalizes the rights and obligations of his status and its norms and values. He learns to anticipate what is expected of him so as to win awards and avoid punishments." (Berkowitz 1997:109)

This view which, as Breed himself acknowledges, was "suggested by the age old charges of bias against the press" presents the proprietor as the villain and the journalist as the victim. The newsroom is portrayed as the villain's convenient tool to force his free thinking scribes into subordination, preventing them from producing "a more 'free and responsible press'" (Berkowitz 1997:120).

Nowadays descriptions of the organizational and institutional sphere are no longer imbued with such Orwellian overtones. All the same, much of US research in this field, including McManus, Reese and Shoemaker, still pictures the organizational sphere as one, in which journalists' values are forcibly modified by powerful determinants within the newsroom.

Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1987) offer one of the numerous subsequent critiques of Breed's view. Their detailed study of newsroom organization in Canada led them to the observation that "while news organization has systemic features, it is not tightly rule-bound in the manner suggested by previous researchers" (p.347). Ericson, Baranek and Chan acknowledge conflict, but posit this among the journalists themselves. "Contrary to the dominant normative view in the academic literature that journalism is characterized by consensus among its practitioners, we found persistent and pervasive differences, divisions and conflict." (p.348) Their immersion into newsrooms as a means of establishing the forces shaping content made Ericson, Baranek and Chan conclude that a "journalist's sense and sensibilities do not come from consulting definite professional texts", because such texts do not exist. "What journalists learn, and use to guide their work, is a vocabulary of precedents." (p.348)

This observation is similar to the one made by Gaye Tuchman in her seminal study. She described "news as reproduction of the status quo", in that news workers, by

identifying centralized sources of information as legitimated social institutions, wed themselves to specific beats and bureaus. (Tuchman 1979:209-210) This argument is also reiterated by Turow in his brief look at the socialization process in the media industries. (Turow 1992:157)

Ericson, Baranek and Chan's major point about the power of precedents is not unlike Niklas Luhmann's later postulation in his *Die Realität der Massenmedien* (1996) that news, or the selection of information, is a "systeminterner Prozess" [system internal process] (Luhmann 1996:40). In this, and without reference to each other, Ericson, Baranek and Chan and Luhmann concur. To quote the former,

"The vocabulary of precedents or knowledgeability peculiar to any occupation tends to be self-limiting. In journalism, the themes and expectations of news work tend to reinforce the news media's view of themselves and their work more than the events they report on. News comes closer to mirroring the social and cultural reality of its own organization than to mirroring the events it reports on." (p.350)

Though Luhmann does not look at newsrooms as such, his analysis of mass media communication is identified throughout as a "self referential system".

"All selection is based on a coherence of condensation, confirmation, generalization and schematization that does not exist in the outer world which is communicated about ... Sense-making, themes, objects become the 'self-inscribed components' of the mass medial communication system." (my translation) (pp. 74-75)

This paradigm shift reflects the wider debate currently engulfing journalism studies. It can be seen in the difficult redrafting of Siebert, Schramm and Peterson's *Four Theories of the Press* which is being attempted under the auspices of the IAMCR Professional Education Section by Professors Karle Nordenstreng, Denis McQuail, Clifford Christians and Robert White. As reported at the 1998 IAMCR conference, the major hurdle in reaching a consensus on a new theory – or new theories – is deciding on how normative – or merely descriptive – such a theory should be.

When looking at young journalists entering the organizational sphere, we similarly have to ask, can or should we describe this process in system-theoretical terms, as Luhmann does? Or should we discuss the induction by including normative aspects, as Turow did. He asked, "What of the people who work in these organizations? Do they accept those values, or do they simply follow formulas and other approaches to content without

caring?" (p. 163) Since this paper looks at a part of professional education, and any teaching embraces values *per se*, the questions asked had to include a quizzing of possible changes in ethical and other standards. All the same, these questions were not phrased with an assumed intrinsic dichotomy of journalists' interests versus news organization's interests in mind.

This study follows Soloski's (1989) assertion that journalism "cannot rely just on controlling professional education to achieve cognitive standardization necessary for professionalism. It is through formal professional education, on-the-job professional training or, as is usually the case, a combination of these ... that journalists come to share the cognitive basis of news professionalism." (reprinted in Berkowitz, 1997:138-154)

However, unlike Soloski, I would not want to see these shared professional norms as a way of minimizing "the problem of how news organizations are able to maintain control over journalists" (p.143).

I conducted my research at *The West Australian*, the only daily newspaper in Perth, Western Australia. It was founded in 1833, has undergone numerous transformations, and has been in tabloid format since 1949. *The West Australian's* print run, according to recent circulation audit figures (June 30, 1999), is 220 000 on weekdays and 390 000 on Saturdays. *The West Australian* has the highest market penetration of any metropolitan newspaper in Australia (Price 25 Nov. 1999:6)

I conducted qualitative interviews with six young reporters and six senior staff at *The West Australian* in May 1999. Of the young reporters, all except one were last year's cadets. They were asked eleven questions, of which the first two aimed at finding out what they had learned in their journalism courses, and what they had learned in the newsroom. The next two questions directed at the learning process, whether this was structured teaching or learning by watching and/or imitating. Two questions about ethical decisions inquired whether what happened on the job differed markedly from what was taught in journalism ethics' courses. The following three questions were trying to gauge organisational and institutional pressure – from time constraints to being potentially issued with a particular picture of certain people and matters. This was to find out how strongly established news routines – from ways of writing (style manual) to suggestions of news sources and the reading up of previous reports – determine a young reporter's approach to a task. The last two questions asked how the young reporters saw their individual freedom and individual responsibility within the organisation.

The senior staff was asked a matching set of six questions.

The staff interviewed were: the then Chief-of-Staff, Robert Taylor; then former deputy Chief-of-Staff, Grahame Armstrong; night editor, Alison Wakeham; then senior writer, now Chief-of-Staff, Tony Barrass; cadet counsellor Lucille Fisher and former cadet counsellor Peter Beck. The questions inquired what young reporters have to learn most and about the ethical decision making process. The staff were asked about whether they are teaching the young journalists a way that suits their paper best or is good journalistic practice anywhere, whether views on politicians etc. were strongly conveyed to the young journalists, and how much journalism courses at university prepare young reporters.

A number of phrasings grew out of the literature cited earlier, especially the questions regarding the socialization process and autonomy. As far as the ethics questions were concerned, I had accepted Herscovitz and Cardoso's Brazilian finding that 85% of journalists learn journalistic ethics from newsroom routines (Herscovitz & Cardoso 1998:427). However, the main question, of what constitutes the main learning curve when entering the newsroom, was left wide open.

The six young journalists formally interviewed were in total agreement on one point: "It is impossible to realize how different the actual newsroom is from journalism school." Journalism school, in their view, can at best offer a simplified version of the actual work processes. The main variants are: working to strict deadlines, having an entirely different degree of responsibility due to the fact that the story is read by several hundred thousand people, and that you frequently have to work with unwilling sources.

The initial period in the newsroom is even harder for those who have graduated in another discipline, like law. Those coming from journalism school at least know how to write a story, have a budding news sense and are aware that their story has to be attractive to the reader. But the amount of work going into a 200 word article, the ringing around, the checking and rechecking, is very different in the real newsroom. The demand on the level of accuracy is a heightened one.

The West Australian takes in six cadets a year who, since 1993, have to be graduates and who are given a year's training. This begins with shorthand and a stint in each of the paper's sections, news, business, sport, *Inside Cover*, features and again news. It includes meeting the major players and institutions in the state, from politicians to police, from the judiciary to visiting prisons, from leaders of the Aboriginal community to major industries, like the mining industry. As soon as the cadets are

Findings: The Young Reporters

placed in a section, they are assigned stories.

Much of the shock of entering the newsroom can be attributed to this being the first real job. The law graduate was particularly struck by the entirely different demands in time-management made on her and the far more boisterous atmosphere of yelling and shouting in the newsroom. On the other hand, she described it as a place "with no walls between people", with good communication and everyone being accessible.

The socialisation process in the newsroom has been described as the major determinant on ethical standards (Herscovitz & Cardoso 1998:427), and I had framed my questions with this in mind. However, in their answers the young reporters painted a different picture, saying that the ethics' rules they had been taught did not have to be modified when entering the newsroom. This may be due to Australian specifics. In Australia, the one and only code of ethics for journalists, which recently received its second update since the code's inception in 1944, is well known and taught thoroughly at journalism schools. Most newspapers, including *The West Australian*, do not have in-house codes. They adhere to the Australian Journalists Association's code. This code, of course, requires interpretation on a day-to-day basis. But serious problems seem to arise rarely, and if they do, they are handled by the Chief-of-Staff or the editor. Different to my expectation, ethical norms and their application proved to be the area of least difficult transition from journalism school to workplace.

Asked about pressures to view -- and consequently report -- politicians and businessmen in a certain way, the young reporters stressed that they are under no institutional pressure and were never formally issued with a mindset. But they could very well see how this would work informally through, what Ericson, Baranek and Chan call, "the vocabulary of precedents" (p.348).

The young journalists are strongly urged to use the paper's library (available on screen), and get an idea of the context of the story they are working on by looking up what has been written in the past. As one of them said,

"If businessman XYZ in the past has been reported as a crook, then, without knowing him, my view of him is always going to be tainted. That's partially because of what has been written on him and partially because my colleagues, who I have respect for and whose judgement I trust, say that person is a crook."

The memory bank of old stories produces what Luhmann calls a "self-referential system". But the walls of this system appear sufficiently flexible to the young reporters. To quote, "once you meet the people yourself you form your own view. Precedents

perform your opinion -- but then you have to decide in which direction you take it." Bearing in mind that the newspaper continually has to produce new stories with new information about new twists and turns (Luhmann 1996:42), it follows that, from the paper's point of view, it is important to have young reporters come in with a fresh view to sustain the element of newness. But, at the same time, the new angle is rarely a radically different one. Even "the routines of objectivity", as Turow observes correctly, have a "particular view built into them" (Turow, 1992:158).

Where the organizational constraints come in, are in timelines, space allocation and following the house style manual. Several of the young reporters acknowledged that they would write differently at another paper, notably a broadsheet or a "real tabloid".

The steepest learning curve in the rite of passage from journalism school to newsroom was in learning how to get the story. The young journalists would have liked some training in telephone manners, which they are not provided with. They have to learn from senior colleagues how to be persistent without being impolite, how to push for answers without burning the contact once and for all and, if one line of questioning does not produce results, how to think of alternatives.

When the Chief-of-Staff assigns them stories in the morning, he also issues them with the approach he wants to have taken, and he suggests to them contacts and possibly some questions. This may seem prescriptive, but not to the young journalists. As one of them said, "When you first begin, you haven't much of an idea and you get stories assigned. Later this constraint falls away."

The occasional feeling of constraint in the newsroom is tempered by the degree of responsibility afforded to the young journalists. Their stories, as much as anybody else's, are run on the front page (and *The West Australian* has only two stories on the front page) or are given prominence in the front part of the paper. They have to vouch for the accuracy and quality of the story, take the subsequent phone calls of complaint or praise from the public, and realize that it is their credibility as much as the paper's that is on the line.

Whereas the young reporters were in agreement in most questions, the replies given by senior staff were more divergent. Being asked about the training of young journalists, they very much tended to see this education from the perspective of their particular specialization. None of the senior staff dismissed journalism school, but emphasized to varying degrees that certain

**Senior
Staff**

crucial learning processes can only occur on the job.

For the Chief-of-Staff (Assigning Editor), they have to be taught persistence and toughness.

People come in here, they have a good academic background, they're smart. But if they are not able to deal with people they have to deal with on a daily basis who are used to dealing with them [reporters], believe me, when they get an inexperienced kid on the line, they'll wipe the floor with them. So that kid has to be taught to be tough, has to be persistent, has to be aggressive within the bounds of what is acceptable and be prepared to go back and get that story and get the answers to the questions. Intimidation is what most young journalists fall prey to. (Robert Taylor, 5 May 1999)

Since *The West Australian* is the only daily in Perth, nowhere else in the print media is the battle line between politics, public life and the press drawn so clearly and nowhere has this battle to be fought with greater skill. The young journalists, before coming into the newsroom, simply cannot have encountered the same degree of "deflecting, avoiding [and] snowballing" (Robert Taylor 5 May 1999). But by being told by the Chief-of-Staff to ring certain people, the young journalist will continue to go down the path laid out by precedent. "Sure. I do [tell reporters]. Go to people. It is an accumulated wisdom as to who are the 'go to' people." (Robert Taylor 5 May 1999)

As main strategy for this battle, the young journalists are taught thoroughness in preparation for interviews. This task falls to the deputy Chief-of-Staff, section editors or senior writers. The thorough preparation gives the young reporters the confidence of asking the right questions and, importantly, of having the right to ask these questions, for example by being able to confront a politician with inconsistencies of statements. This, according to the former deputy Chief-of-Staff, has little to do with which paper they are working for. "I'm talking to them [young reporters] as one journalist to another." This leads to another point, seen as not made clear enough in journalism school.

One thing we need to teach young journalists is that journalism is only 10% writing. Most of them think [that this is a job] where they can sit down and write a story - but it is 90% digging and working hard. (Grahame Armstrong 6 May 1999)

The basics of journalistic writing are seen as having been taught by journalism school, though clearly not to the level of expectation of the night editor and the cadet counsellor, whose background is sub-editing. Both have to reinforce time and again "that every detail has to be right". (Lucille Fisher 5 May 1999)

For the night editor, "it is important to remember that a lot of people read our newspaper." Though the control of stories

through the sub-editors is an irritant to the young journalists, the night editor saw it as an important protection against potential – and possibly wrongly applied – self-censorship. “We ask the young reporters to write everything, whether it is libelous or defamatory. It is my responsibility to legal the story.” (Alison Wakeham 6 May 1999) This path of deliberately expecting fewer responsibilities from young journalists – which amount to fewer constraints – comes as a surprise. But it underlines the fact that the young journalists are still seen as learners.

Indeed, the young journalists are quite overwhelmed by the degree of responsibility they – quite suddenly – hold. Writing for a high circulation paper and a wide audience carries expectations they never had to meet before. A student newspaper, by its very nature, allows more freedom than a “middle of the road, serious, family newspaper”. A student newspaper is not “a paper of record”, which has to play a major role in the fabric of society. As far as senior staff is concerned – who all were journalists before and who were not brought into middle or senior management from outside – it is this responsibility which obliges them, especially the back bench, to have controls in place.

The young journalists show understanding.

We’re all individuals out there, hunting our own stories. That’s where the middle layer of management comes in to co-ordinate, to make sure that we’re not covering old ground or overlap. That free rein is a fairly tight free rein. You can go out and do what you want, but you have to fit into the bigger picture.

This quote, in a nutshell, corroborates the theories of newsroom socialisation put forward by Tuchman, Turow and Ericson, Baranek and Chan. It confirms that there are allowances for autonomous space. But the forces of established newsroom routine are such that the young reporters get to know and accept the standards and tastes of their newspaper and shape their product accordingly. (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987: 348-9)

The initiation into the newsroom, as far as the limited study of this one sample shows, is not contradictory to the teachings of journalism school, nor does it try to undo those teachings. The newsroom experience is complementary to the theoretical preparation provided by journalism school and furthers the learning in a way no artificially or academically contrived environment ever can. The sense of responsibility, instilled by the knowledge that your article provides information to hundreds of thousands of people, cannot be conjured up but in the actual industrial environment.

The young journalists at first struggle with getting

Conclusion

information, getting the story and meeting the deadline. But they have few difficulties in being part of a bigger organization which, at the same time, subsumes their individuality and empowers them.

They accept that their credibility and that of their paper are intertwined. However much they have been made aware of the workings and the power of the media -- until the day they enter the newsroom they have never been active participants in this. In the beginning they find that, like actors, they have to grow into roles largely written for them, before they can branch out into their own individual interpretations, and add to that memory bank they drew upon when they first started.

ENDNOTE: Since completing this article, the very same questionnaires have been used for interviews with six cadets and six senior staff at Germany's national paper, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The results differ markedly, mainly due to a different journalistic tradition and work practices.

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