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# Management and resistance in the digital newsroom

## Abstract

What happens when there is conflict between the profit motivations of a news outlet and the professional values of its journalists? Similar questions of managerial influence and journalistic autonomy have interested media scholars from the seminal work of Warren Breed (1955) onwards. However, there have only been a handful of studies since the introduction of audience metrics which, this research suggests, allow managers to more efficiently monitor and discipline their journalists. This article presents an ethnographic case study of a Reuters newswire bureau during a time of conflict between the management and journalists. The article outlines the strategies that management used to incentivize their journalists to change their reporting priorities. These included: the strategic dissemination of audience metrics and praise, and the hiring and promotion of ‘appropriate’ journalists to positions of influence. These interventions changed who was considered a ‘good journalist’ in the newsroom, increasing the cultural capital and influence of some journalists over others. The article draws on the insights of Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory to help explain how managerial power operates, and the important role of individual journalists in producing and reinforcing newsroom norms.

**Keywords:** Newsroom ethnography, cultural capital, Audience metrics, Pierre Bourdieu, Kenya, Africa, foreign correspondents

## **Management and resistance in the digital newsroom: Making news at the Reuters newswire**

In 2007, the Reuters news bureau in Nairobi, Kenya was committed to political, hard news reporting. It focused on stories about conflict, crises, and development issues in East Africa. Two years later, the newsroom had been transformed. Operating under the banner of the newly merged “Thomson Reuters”, the bureau prioritized financial and business journalism. It reported on emerging markets and investment opportunities and it was guided, to a large extent, by the logic of the business world. One correspondent described the change:

I was here before that major transition. When we were much more what we'd call “traditional reporting” – drought, famine, conflict... The ethos of Reuters 2009 is “news that is indispensable for business and industry” [Interview, 14/08/2009].

The bureau's transformation offers an important and compelling case study. Reuters is one of the largest wholesale producers of news content in the world. Alongside AFP and AP, it is one of the ‘big three’ newswires that provide international news content to the vast majority of news outlets who cannot afford to make their own (Bielsa 2008). When Reuters changes the subjects it covers, these changes ripple through global news content. The transformation is also theoretically interesting because it involved a direct conflict between management's profit objectives and journalistic values. The journalists in the bureau were, for the most part, traditional foreign correspondents, socialized in the norms of public-interest,

general news reporting. These journalists were told to refocus their work on making financial content for business clients, a product with far less public interest value.

This article asks how the Reuters management directed their journalists to change their practices, and how the journalists responded. Similar questions of managerial influence and journalistic autonomy have interested media scholars from the seminal work of Warren Breed (1955) onwards. However, there have been relatively few ethnographic studies in recent years, despite dramatic changes in the technological and economic conditions of news production. In particular, there have only been a handful of studies since the introduction of audience metrics which, this article suggests, allow managers to more efficiently monitor and discipline their journalists. And those studies that do exist have primarily focused on domestic newsrooms in the United States and United Kingdom (e.g. Anderson 2011a and 2011b, MacGregor 2007; Petre 2015, but see Usher 2013). The current article adds to this emerging literature with a case study of a newsroom in a global for-profit news organisation.

The article draws on data from two months of newsroom observation at the Reuters bureau in Nairobi, Kenya, as well as semi-structured interviews with the ten journalists routinely working in the office. These methods pinpoint a range of strategies the managerial team used to incentivize and discipline their journalists. Notably, these included, the selective use of praise and censure, the dissemination of audience metrics about 'successful' news stories, and the hiring and promotion of 'appropriate' journalists to positions of influence. Cumulatively, these interventions changed who was considered a 'good journalist' in this bureau. Some journalists were aligned with the new managerial priorities and they rose in cultural capital.

Other ‘old school’ journalists were critical of the changes and some experienced a loss of influence.

The article draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and cultural capital to help make sense of these observations, and it highlights a number of dynamics in the Reuters newsroom that are relevant to journalism studies. These include: 1) the important role of that audience metrics can play in journalistic practice and newsroom management; 2) the significance of cultural capital as a factor that both motivates journalists, and creates hierarchy in the newsroom; and finally 3) the role that individual journalists play in the production and reproduction of newsroom norms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There are often conflicts between journalists’ professional values and the political or profit priorities of their news organisation (Bantz, 1997; Ettema, Whitney & Wackman, 1987; Hirsch, 1977; Shoemaker. & Reese, 1991; Soloski 1989:209). To give just one examples, managers may be under pressure to increase circulation and revenue, while their journalists want to pursue stories with more limited popular appeal. Doug Underwood (1995) argues that these conflicts became more common in the 1980s as media outlets became more profit orientated, and the values and motivations of journalists increasingly clashed with media executives fresh from business school.

Studies find that, where there is a conflict, journalists are often willing to change their practices to fit with their employers expectations (Altschull, 1997; Breed, 1955, Gieber, 1964). In his seminal article, “Social control in the newsroom”, Warren Breed (1955) argues that each newsroom has a set of policies – rarely stated outloud – on the leading social and political issues of the day. Through their work and exposure

to colleagues, journalists are socialized in these policies. They then alter their practices to comply with them for a number of reasons including: the direct authority and sanctions that management can deliver; feelings of obligation or esteem for employers; mobility aspirations; and their absorption in the day-to-day tasks of collecting news (meaning there is little time to reflect on bigger, policy questions). That is to say, there are both formal, direct forms of managerial power – hiring, firing and so on. And there are also more indirect forms of coercion – journalists want to be liked, seen as be good at their job, and so on, and this incentivises them to comply.

Breed's article is a touchstone in media studies (Reese and Ballinger 2001) and it served as a jumping off point for the classic newsroom ethnographies of the 1970s and 1980s. These studies further identified routines and norms in the newsroom that lead to the production of institutionally favoured discourse (e.g. Gans 1979, Tuchman 1978, Fishman 1982, Gitlin 1980, Epstein 1974). They suggested that, because time is limited, journalists adopt a range of work routines that help them negotiate uncertainty, maximise resources and avoid conflict with their organization's power structure and policies (See also: Bantz, 1985; Bantz, McCorkle, & Baade, 1980; Eliasoph, 1988). Soloski (1989) emphasises the way that professional norms constrain journalists and make them easier for newsrooms to manage. In addition, cultural narratives around truth and journalism may constrain the ability of journalists to break moulds and challenge accepted ways of doing things (Schudson 2005).

In the last two decades, dramatic changes in the business and technological conditions of news production have raised some questions about the ongoing influence of newsroom socialization, routines and professionalism (Ornebring, Karlsson & Fast 2014; Chada & Wells 2016:3; Sivek 2010). The economic crisis in journalism has led to newsroom closures, budget cuts and the casualization of

journalistic labour. Rather than fulltime work in a traditional newsroom, today's journalists often freelance for multiple outlets, work remotely, and have "half lives" in the media alongside jobs in other sectors. They may engage with multiple (and conflicting) newsroom norms in a single day; and juggle multiple objectives for their career. In addition, increasingly fragmented or hybrid professionalisms raise questions about the ongoing influence of industry norms more generally (Ornebring, Karlsson & Fast 2014). Partial professionalism is particularly common in the international news system, which relies heavily on local stringers and fixers who are not generally trained as journalists, and who may only seek financial rewards for their work, rather than professional accolades (Bunce 2013; Murrell 2015).

Pierre Bourdieu's field theory offers a third way sociological approach to news production that can accommodate variation in journalists' news values, socialization and professional identification. Bourdieu follows Weber and Durkheim in seeing modern society divided into semi-autonomous spheres of action. Each of these spheres, or fields (for example the journalistic field, religious field, or the political field), is a "microcosm, which has its own rules, which is constituted autonomously and which cannot be understood from external factors" (Bourdieu, 1998: 44). Journalists are socialized in the values of the field, but there can be important variations between individual journalists: partial socialisations, values that emerge and change over their lifetime, values linked to their personal background and so on. Each journalist is understood to have an individual history, career, outlook, way of perceiving and doing things – what Bourdieu calls their *habitus*. In addition, individuals vary in the extent to which they believe that the 'game is worth playing': that is, their belief and acceptance of the implicit rules that govern the field they operate in.

Like Breed (1955), Bourdieu sees journalists as fundamentally interest-orientated: they perform in certain ways because they seek rewards. Journalists are strategic agents who are “playing a game” in which they seek to accumulate capital, and to valorise the forms of capital they possess. This capital can be both economic (e.g. salary) or cultural (e.g. their journalism experience, education, reputation, prizes, skill set). Capital motivates agents to act; it is also a source of power and influence. Managers have power, in part, because they oversee the distribution of capital at their news organisation. They make decisions about hiring, promotions and pay (economic capital) and they can also distribute cultural capital by, for example, giving certain journalists public praise and awards, the most desirable news beats, the corner office, the best photographers to accompany them on trips, and so on. In turn, journalists with high capital have more influence in the newsroom. For example, in an editorial meeting, where there is conflict around whether a story is ‘newsworthy’ or not, the opinion of a journalist with high capital will likely have more sway than a journalist with little (Schultz 2011). A management team that is attuned to this dynamic can distribute capital in ways that will help to change newsroom culture, or operate to maintain the status quo. For example by only celebrating and promoting journalists who possess particular skills or values.

Field Theory has been widely adopted across media studies and fruitfully used to analyse journalistic production (e.g. Benson and Neveu 2005, Champagne 1993; Couldry 2003; Dickinson 2008; Hesmondhalgh 2006; Neveu 2007; Schultz 2011.), and it is used here to help frame the analysis of the Reuters newsroom. Before the case study is introduced, however, it is helpful to briefly comment on how recent technological developments around audience metrics have changed newsroom management.



### *Metrics and newsroom management*

When news content moved online, managers could more easily gather and view extensive data about the behavior of their audiences: which stories did they read? How long did they stay on each page? What articles did they share? Research has found that editors use this data when they make editorial decisions - for example, if metrics show that a particular story is popular, placing it prominently on the website homepage, and commissioning stories on a similar topic in the future (Anderson 2011a, 2011b; Boczkowski, 2004; Bright and Nichols 2014; Bunce 2015; Dick 2011; Loosen and Schmidt 2012; MacGregor 2007; Peters 2015; Tandoc 2014; Usher 2013; Vu 2013). Collectively, this research suggests that audiences are no longer the ignored or imagined quantity they once were (e.g. as described by Gans 1979). Anderson (2011a) argues that we have entered a 'new paradigm' in which the audience is extensively quantified and present in the newsroom. Research shows that the nature and use of metrics varies between news outlets: organisational culture, journalistic norms and market position, among other factors, all influence how they are collected and disseminated (Anderson 2011a; Bunce 2015; Dick 2011; MacGregor 2007; Singer 2011).

An emerging literature looks specifically at how audience metrics are used to manage journalists. At one end of the spectrum, managers can draw on metrics to directly punish and incentivize their journalists: making all audience data public, setting strict targets, and rewarding and punishing performance. Such an approach was famously employed at the now defunct *Gawker*, where journalists were individually ranked and paid according to the traffic they achieved. We know that other outlets use metrics more sparingly by, for example, only occasionally sharing the data with journalists (Petre 2015, Usher 2013). Anderson (2011a: 559) studies

several newsrooms in Philadelphia and finds that while one news outlet used the distribution of metrics as part of “a deliberate strategy” for managing their journalists, this was not the case in other newsrooms.

Regardless of how managers use metrics, the knowledge that this data is being collected and monitored may affect the way journalists work. In his famous metaphor of the Panopticon prison, Foucault argues that the possibility of observation leads individuals to self-discipline: “Individuals internalize power and therefore subject themselves to norms without the need for force” (Foucault 1991:203). This *disciplinary* power of potential surveillance and normalization substitutes sovereign force and repression, making power more effective by being less obvious (Nealon 2008:27). In short, the sense of being monitored may encourage journalists to comply with managerial priorities, without needing to be asked.

The existing literature on the use of audience metrics as a management tool in the newsroom has primarily focused on domestic newsrooms in the US or the UK (although see Usher 2013). The current article contributes by presenting a case study of a for-profit global newsroom. It explores how metrics were used as a managerial tool in one Reuters bureau, and the journalistic response to these pressure.

## **METHODS**

This article draws on data from a two-month observation period in the Reuters Nairobi bureau in 2009, and semi-structured interviews with the 10 text journalists routinely working in the newsroom. This research was conducted as part of a larger project looking at international news production in sub-Saharan Africa, completed between 2008 and 2014 [Author details]. The Reuters East Africa bureau is a modern office on the 12<sup>th</sup> story of Finance House in downtown Nairobi. During the

observation period, there were ten core staff in the newsroom: seven permanent correspondents and three freelancers (in addition to the text journalists, there is a parallel network of TV and photojournalists in the bureau; this article focuses on the work of the text journalists, who were seen as the ‘agenda-leaders’ in the bureau). The permanent text correspondents consisted of: a Bureau Chief, Deputy Bureau Chief, Chief Economic Correspondent, an economic correspondent, two general news correspondents, and a humanitarian affairs correspondent.

The East Africa bureau in Nairobi is responsible for news on Kenya, as well as 13 other nations in the region: Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mauritius, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Seychelles, Somalia, and Somaliland. Reuters has at least one stringer in each of these countries, who sometimes initiate contact with the Nairobi bureau and pitch story ideas; alternatively, Nairobi may contact them and ask for stories, information or quotes. The bureau chief estimates that the Nairobi office would compile, edit and write 12 to 15 stories on an average day, with 5 or 6 stories on a slow day and up to 30 on a very busy day. These stories are placed on the international ‘wire’ that clients access through a variety of subscription schemes.

During the observation period, I sat and worked at one of the “hot desks” in the middle of the newsroom, where I was surrounded by the journalists as they chatted, collaborated, made phone calls and went about their workdays. One of the richest sources of data during this fieldwork was the morning news meetings, where the acting desk manager (called “slot”) would summarize the big stories from around the region, and journalists would debate the news stories of the day.

The access for this observation followed from an interview with the Reuters Nairobi Bureau Chief, and had the consent of the journalists. In interviews and

newsroom observations, the journalists spoke ‘on the record’. Nonetheless, owing to the sensitive nature of some comments, the journalists’ names are not used. Their job titles are also omitted unless directly relevant.

The observations were supplemented with in-depth semi-structured interviews with journalists working in the office. These asked the journalists to reflect on their news values, relationship with management and news practices. Two additional interviews were conducted with Reuters' freelance journalists in Uganda (generally called “stringers”), who directly report to the Nairobi bureau. These provide additional perspectives on the work of the bureau.

### **The Reuters Newswire**

Over its long life, the Reuters newswire has juggled two competing goals: 1) to be a world-leading provider of fast and accurate general news for media clients, and 2) to make profit through the provision of economic services and financial news for business clients. Through most of its history, the newswire has been more famous for its general news; the name evokes images of foreign correspondents in war zone rushing to be first with the news. In 1973, however, this ‘natural order’ started to change when Reuters launched the ‘Reuters Monitor Money Rates service’. ‘Monitor’ displayed live financial data and let subscribers trade with one another in real time. It altered what the majority of customers received from Reuters: 90% of clients were now located in the world of finance, and they chiefly received financial data and information (Read, 1992: 397). Reuters maintained its media clients, but these now constituted a very small portion of revenue. General news made a loss, and it was primarily produced to maintain the company brand, which in turn helped it sell financial products (Tunstall & Palmer, 1991: 58). In 2008, Reuters was acquired by

Thomson, a Canadian information giant with headquarters in the US, and its commitment to general news waned further (Sturgeon, 2012; Wachman, 2011).

The merger would radically alter the news file at the Reuters bureau in Nairobi, Kenya - an historic leader of general news production in East Africa. Located on the peripheries of the global financial system, the Nairobi bureau had, to a large extent, been insulated from the renewed emphasis on financial journalism at Reuters that followed the release of Monitor. Up until the 1990s, Reuters received subsidies from the British government to continue making general news about sub-Saharan Africa (Read 1992: 327). Moreover, when Reuters first released Monitor, African markets were of little interest to Reuters' financial clients as there was so little foreign direct investment in the continent.

In the late nineties and noughties, however, African markets grew exponentially; between 2000 and 2011, foreign direct investment rose from \$US 9.4 billion to more than \$US 60 billion (Bremmer 2012). African consumption skyrocketed and McKinsey Consulting issued a widely circulated report stating that Africa Lions [consumers] were "on the move". It is against this backdrop that the Thomson-Reuters merger took place, with its emphasis on competing with Bloomberg in all corners of the world. No longer a symbolic product, Reuters news on Africa was re-orientated to fulfill specific, information needs of clients working in the business world. This involved listening to clients, and letting them drive news expectations. As Sean Maguire, former head of African news at Reuters News commented: "For a long time we were 'reporter-led'. And then we thought, if we want to be focused, we need to be 'journalism for customers'"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Sean Maguire, Reuters International News Editor, speaking at the Nuffield Media Seminar, Oxford University, Friday October 15, 2010

### Management, instruction and surveillance

The Thompson-Reuters managers based in London did not just tell their journalists in the Nairobi bureau that there was a new set of priorities: they communicated them constantly, closely monitored news outputs, and instructed journalists to collect news that would interest financial clients. To this end, the Reuters management team had a very significant tool at their disposal: comprehensive data on the view-count of every story published on the Reuters wire. They knew which stories their clients chose to read, and this data was used to guide story commissioning decisions and resource allocation. The ‘story play’ statistics were also passed on to the journalists in the bureau, who referred to them when discussing, debating, and legitimizing their story decisions. The journalists would defer to these metrics – above and beyond their ‘gut instincts’ – to decide which stories to report. In particular, if a story had received good ‘play’ [high readership rates] among clients, the journalists were more likely to write a follow up story on the topic, as illustrated in the following exchange

[13/08/09]:

Correspondent 1: The Puntland president and another official... are blaming each other for the Pakistani killings yesterday.

Correspondent 2: Well, we’ll take that!

Correspondent 1: [Pause]...yes?

Correspondent 2: Didn’t you see the play from yesterday’s story?

Correspondent 1: No

Correspondent 2: Well it was huge. And if two officials are blaming each other for the killing, it’s an obvious day two story.

Correspondent 1: Okay

Correspondent 2: Push for anything you can from Somalia, from anyone.

The London office was also able to reach the desk manager, bureau chief, slot, and entire journalistic team every day, at any time: through phone, email, the internal server and Gmail chat. One journalist described the omnipotence of communication:

We have this constant refrain – either in direct communication with the editor – or we have this daily note that goes out – a lot of people looking at what was good, what was bad. We have conference calls with the editors. We’re constantly being told what the priorities are, and where. We’re told where they want us to focus. And we’re getting the direct feedback from clients [Interview, 06/08/09].

This dialogue sometimes included instructions to produce a specific story (‘do a piece on clean energy in Tanzania’). Or it might include requests for more stories on a theme.

Management also incentivized journalists through the strategic and public use of praise and censure, which elevated some stories (and journalists) above others. Praise was presented in public emails and meetings – and it was inevitably given to journalists who wrote stories that got ‘good play’ among financial clients. As one correspondent noted: “What’s a great story for Reuters? A story that moves the markets. That’s a story that people get congratulated for now” [Interview, 02/08/09]. In one Africa-wide editorial meeting, for example, a Nairobi journalist ran through the big stories from East Africa: conflict in Somalia and political disorder in Madagascar. The London editor ignored these, and instead praised a financial item the journalist had not mentioned: ‘Editorial really like the IT story from Mauritius – the idea of IT guys on the white sands, not in Bangalore. It’s a great slant to explore’ [13/8/2009].

On the flip side, journalists could be openly censured for missing an important financial story, and criticism was particularly fierce if the journalists were slower than chief rival Bloomberg. As the stringer in Uganda relayed:

Oh yeah. Number one competitor: Bloomberg. Number two competitor: Bloomberg. Number three competitor: Bloomberg. If they beat me, I'm in trouble. Bloomberg, Dow Jones. But really, Bloomberg" [Interview, 01/09/2010].

Finally, and importantly, the Reuters management emphasized financial competencies in their hiring, firing and promotion decisions. At Reuters, a new generation of economic reporters were being hired across the African continent:

More and more. All around the region. As people go and jobs open up, it's the people with economic specialties who get the jobs. We're evolving. So we're becoming much more economically specialized [Interview, Reuters Nairobi Bureau Chief, 02/08/09].

In the Nairobi office, an additional economic reporter had been hired; a 'Chief Economic Correspondent' position was created (there was no equivalent 'Chief General Correspondent'); and a new Deputy Bureau Chief was appointed with a strong background in economics and financial journalism. The Nairobi bureau chief had been told to recruit particularly "competent" stringers in East Africa's core market countries: Tanzania, Mauritius and Uganda. The presence of skilled stringers in these countries reinforced their prominence on the news agenda, as the journalists in the bureau were more receptive to story pitches from their skilled stringers. They knew the story would arrive well written and would not require much editing. In this way, financial news content from these countries circled higher and higher on the news agenda.

### **The Journalistic Response**

On the surface, it appeared that all the journalists in the bureau had absorbed the new priorities into their practice. In morning meetings, and throughout the day, they



pursued financial news stories, and appeared to use ‘impact on markets’ as their key criterion to determine whether a story was ‘newsworthy’ or not. They asked each other: was the new issue / politician / agreement / crisis likely to have an impact on business, trade, investment or the political stability that supported commerce? If so – we should report it. As well as more financial reporting, they placed emphasis on financial frames within general news stories so they would have greater relevance to clients working in the financial sector. When discussing Somali pirates, for example, the journalists focused on their impact on international shipping routes.

Under these surface practices, however, there were considerable tensions and fracture lines in the bureau. At the most general level, the journalists could be divided into two groups: 1) ‘new hires’ who wanted to pursue financial stories, and supported the new managerial priorities and 2) ‘old hires’ who did not like / understand the new values and either struggled to adjust or engaged in subtle forms of sabotage. It is worth teasing out the differences between these two groups, as it illustrates important variation among journalists, and shows the impact this variation can have on newsroom culture.

### *New Hires*

Two journalists in the newsroom – both new hires – possessed what Bourdieu terms *illusio*: they believed that the ‘game’ [financial journalism] was worth playing. Both had undergraduate degrees in economics / commerce and had financial journalism experience before joining Reuters. They instinctively saw issues and events in terms of their impact on economic markets. In addition, they wanted to do well in the company: to advance in their career, and secure further economic and symbolic capital (promotions, respect etc). One of the ‘old’ journalists described a new hire:

[He] had only just come, and he found it very easy. He was ambitious and he wanted to produce lots of stories and get approval. So he just went for it. [Interview, 11/08/09].

These new hires had a disproportionate impact on the newsroom culture for a number of reasons. First, because they gave feedback and training to the journalists around them: one actively trained stringers – voluntarily showing them how to handle the financial data because he thought it would be ‘good for their career’. Second, the work of these ‘new entrants’ was frequently praised by management, and this increased their cultural capital and influence within newsroom decision-making. When in doubt, the ‘old journalists’ were more likely to defer to their opinion (discussed further below).

Thirdly and finally, the new hires worked (consciously or otherwise) to push their financial news to the top of the news agenda. When the new economic correspondent was running the morning news meeting, for example, he would start with the financial market reports, even though this broke with the convention (followed by all the other journalists) of starting with the biggest general news story.

Economic correspondent [acting as desk manager]: Right. We’ve got the corporate results. And there’s a new entry to the Tata story.

Senior Econ correspondent: Yes, it’s about capacity doubling over the last 30 days.

Economic correspondent: What do they do?

Senior Econ correspondent: They're a wholesaler. We can talk about this later, I think it's boring for everyone else.

Economic correspondent: Tea records are high for 2<sup>nd</sup> week running. Coffee crop estimates for the season... [Morning news meeting, 27/08/09]

By starting the meetings with the business news, he moved his work to the top of the agenda, underlining its importance. This behavior exemplified Bourdieu's contention that agents do not simply work to accumulate capital; they also seek to valorise the forms of capital they possess (Maton, 2008:54).

### *'Old School' foreign correspondents*

Of the ten journalists in the Nairobi bureau, only the two news hires had a set of news values that seemed to fit, seamlessly, with the 'New Reuters'. The remaining eight were experiencing a clash between their professional news values, and those of the organization - what Bourdieu (somewhat dramatically) calls a state of *hysteresis*: the sense of being a 'fish out of water'. In interviews, these correspondents articulated a deeply ingrained set of 'public interest' news values; for example, the desire to hold power to account and raise awareness of important political and humanitarian issues. These journalists did not believe that financial news – or financial clients – were as important as general news and media clients. One journalist articulated a common complaint: 'they're [Thomson Reuter's management] just looking at the bottom line. This whole investor-driven news is purely financially driven for them, making more money for shareholders. There's no greater goal' [Interview, 02/08/09]. A fairly representative journalist described himself as a 'correspondent of the old school.' He was trained at a local newspaper in the UK and had spent twenty years doing political and conflict reporting around the world. When asked, 'what is a good news story?' he

identified 1) stories about injustice, and 2) human interest stories that shed light on a wider political or social issues. He believed these constituted ‘journalism at its best’ – and that they no longer had a place at Reuters. As a result, he had become increasingly cynical and unhappy in his work.

Although unhappy, most of these traditional journalists tried to comply with the new managerial priorities. In interviews, they made it very clear that they did so for financial reasons: they needed money and wanted job security. As one commented:

I love journalism and my colleagues but have no love for the company. None for the corporate point of view at all... I'd change tomorrow, but there are other considerations, my family... But yeah, I've thought of leaving hundreds of times [Interview, 02/8/2009].

Although they wanted to comply with the new priorities, some found this difficult. They did not instinctively view events in financial terms, or automatically grasp the newsworthiness of financial phenomena. One described the challenge:

I still have the older news values... When I started, I didn't care about the markets. Nobody did. Something small like that would come along and we'd say, who cares, it's not important. Now the things we would have called rubbish are being taken by the desk [Interview, 11/08/09].

Being able to predict what the desk wanted was considered a central component of being a ‘good journalist’ and it was widely agreed that being ‘spiked’ (having a story removed from the newswire because London did not think it was newsworthy) was reputationally damaging. This created a stressful work environment for journalists who struggled to predict the desk's interest. This pressure was intensified for the

journalists by the knowledge that readership metrics were closely monitored and this led some journalists to self-police their reporting:

- Correspondent 1: It's not my fault that there's no Kenyan financial news, is it?  
Should I make some up?
- Correspondent 2: No, cause then I'd have to cover it too. Do you really want to open that can of worms?
- Correspondent 1: Let me put in a headline from *Business Daily* – that'll make it look intelligent [Newsroom exchange, 20/08/09]

Journalists who felt they did not intuitively understand the new priorities would sometimes look to the news metrics for guidance. Alternatively, they might defer to the 'new hires' who they felt had a better sense of what the London desk wanted. One senior journalist, for example, described not always 'getting it', whereas a junior new hire did:

...Me and him still disagree on stories. I'll say it's not a story, he'll say let's do it, and the desk will lap it up. I'll think something is a story and they won't want it. He gets it more than me [Interview, 11/08/09].

A final response among some 'old hires' was to engage in low levels of subtle sabotage; they would attempt to 'smuggle' general news stories past the London desk, as a means of "keeping themselves sane". As one journalist commented:

So if we're covering drought in Uganda, it's no longer: this woman had to walk for 300 km with a child on her back, personalising the plight and so on. We're much more: this is what's happened, this is the implication for markets, wheat prices, political stability, exports and so on. But of course you can be sneaky, and put some of the other things in [Interview, 14/8/2009].

In another example, the bureau chief wanted to convince his managers to let him send a journalist to Eritrea because he was interested in political oppression and human

rights issues in the country. But this was not what he told his bosses: “There’s also a lot of interest in the gold and mining there. So I made sure to tell my bosses all about that – that was the card I played” [Interview, 02/08/09]. Finally, some journalists had identified preferred editors in London: those who were trained in the ‘old way’, who might be more inclined to approve general news, particularly on a slow news day.

These observations are reminiscent of Chan and Lee’s findings that journalists in Hong Kong sometimes employ ‘weapons of the weak’ (James Scott’s 1985 term). That is, daily tactics of resistance that do not directly challenge power but they may make a difference to a specific news story, and can help journalists to maintain their sense of professional identity and integrity (Chan and Lee: 2009: 131). These strategies offer a (limited) way for the journalists to pursue the stories that align with their habitus, and which are more likely to bring them the cultural and reputational capital they seek from peers outside the newsroom.

In addition to the responses described above, some of the old journalists had decided to retrain: one was looking into studying Economics part-time at the University of Nairobi. Others had committed time to learning to handle market data and financial reports. Still others were exploring ways to depart or move sideways in the organization (and indeed, the Bureau Chief did shortly after this study was concluded, to be replaced by his economically-savvy deputy). Where these journalists departed or retrained, they contributed to the changing culture of the newsroom.

## **Discussion & Conclusion**

The above description offers a snapshot of a news bureau in time. By now, different priorities and practices almost certainly dominate the newsroom. Moreover, it is

important to note that the merger of Thomson and Reuters was a dramatic event in the journalistic field. The new managerial goals were unusually official: they came from the board level down, and were articulated and emphasized by all senior managers<sup>2</sup>. Although Reuters' specific situation may be unique, dramatic changes within news organisations are not. New technologies frequently disrupt news practices, and economic pressures can prompt news outlets to experiment with their news offerings. Given the volatility and dynamism of the journalism market, how managers attempt to discipline and change journalistic practice, and how journalists respond to these pressures, is a key question for journalism studies. A number of findings in this case study of Reuters are relevant to future studies and theorizing.

First, the case study draws our attention to the important role of audience metrics in news production. It lends further support to the conclusions of research in other media contexts (e.g. MacGregor 2007, Berkowitz 2010 and Anderson 2011a) - that the journalistic process of 'deciding what's news' is increasingly influenced by quantitative audience measurement techniques, in addition to the 'gut instincts' of journalists. This is the case in the bureau of global newswires, just as it is the domestic newsrooms of the United States and United Kingdom.

In addition, the article adds to our understanding of how metrics can be used as a management tool. At Reuters, managers paid close attention to the metrics, and issued directives and praise based on these figures. This direction, as well as the knowledge they were being monitored led some journalists to self-police their practice for fear of censure. These observations echo Michel Foucault's argument that surveillance and control are intertwined; the simple act of collecting this data may make managerial priorities more present and influential in the newsroom. Journalists

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<sup>2</sup> This contrasts with David Ryfe's (2009) study, for example, where a single manager acting alone, attempted to change the practices of journalists in the newsroom and ultimately failed.

– and particularly those in precarious employment - may worry they are being monitored, and alter their journalism for fear of reprimand, or in search of pay / praise. The case study suggests that we must pay attention not just to the obvious use of metrics in the newsroom, but the more subtle influence of data collection itself. Audience metrics are an important area for further research, particularly as their measures become ever more granular and sophisticated (e.g. see Cherunini & Neilsen 2016).

Second, the analysis has suggested that capital plays a central role in news production. The management at Reuters adopted direct, explicit managerial techniques – instructing their journalists to change their reporting, and hiring new journalists from a financial background. They also utilized a number of more symbolic strategies: selectively issuing praise to stories and journalists that fitted the new priorities, and censuring those that did not. Journalists complied with managerial priorities because they sought this economic or cultural capital. Some journalists shared their habitus with managerial team, and sought both the economic and cultural capital that the newswire could offer, while others only sought economic security. These latter journalists were more inclined to deviate from management priorities – either because they didn't know how to follow them, or they simply didn't want to. The distinction between journalists and the capital that motivates them, may prove ever more relevant in an era of casualised journalism, where journalists often work as freelancers, piecing together projects: some jobs may pay the bills, while some offer symbolic goods and reputational advantage.

Capital is more than just a motivational factor, however. The analysis has illustrated the connection that Bourdieu draws between the possession of capital (both cultural and economic) and hierarchy or influence in the newsroom. The merger of



Thomson and Reuters led to a downgrading of the status of general news in the eyes of management; the communication of these new priorities disrupted the various forms of cultural capital that had structured the organisation in the past. New journalists rose in status and old journalists, recognized this, deferred to their judgment. Similar processes may take place at any news organisations experimenting with new technology or their news offerings. Robinson's (2011) study, for example, of a newsroom as it adopted new online technology found that the 'old journalists' who did not use the technology lost influence in the newsroom:

the new class of journalist, their digital tools, and their ability to meld physical and virtual worlds baffled some of the print-world employees, who became isolated. Slowly, the power of these individuals diminished... Where those who had the most seniority once held the most sway, technologically driven individuals were gaining authority in the newsroom hierarchy (2011: 1136).

Capital offers a helpful analytical tool for examining how newsrooms change. As seen in the case study of Reuters, the redistribution of cultural capital is both a symptom of change (the managers started to value different things) and a factor that helps drive change (the journalists deferred to those with capital). Moreover, attending to the role capital plays can help the ethnographer draw connections between the values and traits that are rewarded within a news organisation, and the position of that news organisation in the wider field of journalism (see also Benson 1998).

Finally, the case study shows that individual journalists can play an important role in the maintenance or change of organizational norms. At Reuters, the managerial team used a range of techniques to change reporting priorities in the newsroom. But it was the journalists who helped made these interventions effective – by changing their practices, deferring to their peers who they felt were more aligned with management, and by retraining or departing. In addition, we saw that there were important

differences between journalists and how they responded. For the two new hires at Reuters, following managerial dictates was second nature. The ‘old journalists’ in the bureau, however, were experiencing significant habitus mix-match. Most tried to comply with the newsroom policies because they wanted job security, but their core news values had not changed. Rather, their workday often felt like a form of performance or even risk management. Sometimes their efforts were not enough, and they failed to follow the new priorities because they didn’t know how. For others, the performance felt empty, and they were tempted to deviate, ‘smuggling’ general news into the final copy. Organisational approaches to media studies often depict journalists as a fairly homogenous group, who are socialized into the values and routines of daily journalism, and modify their own personal values to fit. This study suggests we must pay attention to the important differences between journalists as well.

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