TOPIC TEAMS IN THE NEWSROOM:
A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY
INTO HOW THEY WORK (OR DON'T)

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ABSTRACT

LESLIE-JEAN THORNTON: Topic Teams in the Newsroom:
A Qualitative Inquiry Into How They Work (Or Don't)
(under the direction of Patricia A. Curtin, Ph.D.)

Newspaper newsrooms in the 1990s, hard-hit by financial pressures and steady declines in circulation, sought ways to be more efficient and attract more readers. One result was the creation of topic teams: groups of journalists assigned to produce reports on topics deemed to be of interest to targeted readers. As newspapers reorganized to enable such teams, newsrooms became more participatory and less authoritarian, altering decades of journalistic routines, culture, and job descriptions.

Although the first experimenters were greeted with jeers and suspicion, topic-team newsrooms were widespread by the turn of the century. This study is the first to contextualize the adoption of topic teams in the United States in terms of history and journalistic experience. In-depth interviews with topic-team journalists yielded insights into management, professional values, newsroom practices, and the interaction of all three. Within a continuum, three types of teams emerged: negative, cohesive, and synergistic. Negative teams, which were the least functional, were associated with the highest degree of management control and the lowest degree of reward for the team member. Synergistic teams offered the highest reward with the least degree of management control. Cohesive teams were moderate in both regards. Management risk appeared greatest at both extremes. A model of topic team instrumentality, using these findings, is proposed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Perhaps every researcher feels a particular tie to people who yield rich data and compellingly personal insights simply because they were asked to in the name of knowledge. This study bursts at the seams with their generosity, but it also speaks eloquently of the participants' love of what they do, their belief that what they do matters, and their willingness to undergo rigors and challenges to continue doing their jobs. If there is any "takeaway" idea with hopeful meaning for journalism as a whole, it is that.

I owe particular thanks to Meg McGuire, who pointed the way to this doctorate, and to the Freedom Forum, which gave me a fellowship to do it. It would not have been possible without the generous help of my chair, Patricia A. Curtin; committee members Frank Fee, Steve May, Mary Alice Shaver, and Ken Smith; Susan Keith, constant friend and research colleague; Deborah Gump, who was there from the beginning; and my husband, Randy Jessee, who was the first to say, "Why *not* research topic teams?" and the one to share a whoop of joy at the end.

I am grateful to my colleagues at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University for encouragement and support. Particular thanks go to Marianne Barrett, associate dean, for protecting my time and urging me on.

I close in loving remembrance of my mother, Jean DeVoe Ptacek, and with love to my father, John C. Ptacek, Jr., and brother, John C. Ptacek, III.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When editors at the *Orange County Register* began assigning reporters to "everyday" topics as a way to attract readers and help reprioritize the newsroom, the reaction from their peers wasn't all that they had hoped. "New age" and "part of an attempt to create a feel-good-about-yourself environment" jeered *Newsweek* in a brief report on the *Register*'s innovation.[1] But the *Christian Science Monitor* saw something more. It headlined its article "Experiment at California Paper May Redefine Journalism for the '90s."

"It may be the only paper in America that covers shopping malls as a full-time beat," wrote Howard Kurtz in *The Washington Post*. "Some of these malls get 50,000 to 60,000 people a day," the shopping mall reporter, Jennifer Lowe, told Kurtz. "One mall here gets more people a year than Disneyland. We're trying to reach people in their everyday lives."[2] Soon, newspapers across the country had teams of reporters doing the same thing.

It was 1990. The *Register,* a 380,000-circulation daily in southern California*,* was locked in a fierce war for suburban readers with the 1,225,189-circulation *Los Angeles Times,*

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[1] "Periscope: New-Age News," *Newsweek*, 5 March 1990, 6. Also William Glaberson, "The Media Business: Press," *New York Times*, 10 January 1994, D6.

[2] Howard Kurtz, "Slicing, dicing news to attract the young: Florida paper aims to buck trend of declining national readership, *Washington Post*, 6 January 1991, A1. See also "Pink Flamingo Journalism," in Howard Kurtz, *Media Circus: The Trouble With America's Newspapers* (New York: Random House, 1993), 376.

as of that year the largest metropolitan daily in the United States.[3] Newspapers nationwide were in a losing competition against multiple factors that included a burgeoning cable industry, a fledgling World Wide Web, rental movies, television, computer games, video cassette recorders, niche-market publications, waning interest in public affairs, increasingly busy lifestyles, changing family and job patterns, and a near exodus from urban to suburban life.

Readership and profitability were watchwords of newspapers of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States. The quest to stanch further loss of one and to boost growth of the other led to evaluation, experimentation, and change in the industry and the profession. One 1990s innovation was a system of "topic teams," wherein newsrooms were organized into semi-autonomous story-development teams of journalists grouped by the subject on which they were to report. As the topic teams' names suggest, they focused attention on broad content areas tailored to readers' concerns – as with the *Register*'s "Getting Around," "Learning," "Cities," and "Southern California Culture" teams or the *Virginian-Pilot*'s "Body and Soul" and "Public Life" teams. But topic teams were also born of a new interest in adapting business management practices to benefit newspaper production during a time of downsizing, ownership changes, and economic challenge.

Newspaper as product

The newspaper industry relies on readership and circulation for the success of its "product" as a marketable commodity to advertisers: circulation figures are "sold" to

[3] Circulation figures for 2005 place the *Orange County Register* at 303,419 daily (371,046 Sunday), and the *Los Angeles Times* at 907,997 daily (1,253,849 Sunday). In 2005, it was the second largest metropolitan daily in the United States, trailing *The New York Times*.

advertisers as an indication of how many people will see the advertiser's message.[4] In the early 1990s, as readership figures continued a four-decade decline, the editorial and business sides of the industry jointly and separately explored ways to attract more readers. Market research was employed to determine not just who was reading and who was not. Answers to questions as to what people wanted to read in a newspaper were factored into lists of desirable topics and services. Maps of subscriber bases helped determine economically viable areas of a newspaper's geographical reach. Distribution to areas with few subscribers was often curtailed as a result, despite the technical "loss" of readers. Maps defined economically desirable readers – those who lived in the right places and were likely to shop in the advertisers' stores.

The use of "special sections," themed newspaper supplements that showcase related advertising around "advertorials,"[5] was one result; a greater emphasis on producing zoned editions[6] was another. In these ways, market research had the ability to affect content through identifying which topics most and least interested the most and least desirable readers. Management[7] had the ability to act as it wished on the information. Emphasizing certain topics of interest to certain groups, and presumably de-emphasizing others, would be one

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[4] Ramifications of the dual-market product, theorized initially by Robert G. Picard, are addressed in Chapter 2.

[5] "Advertorial" is a word that combines "editorial" and "advertisement" to reflect the marketing dimension of the article. Most advertorial copy is written in a feature style, often of a "how-to" nature, that deals with a light topic and favorably promotes the subject of the section. Advertorial copy is not expected to comply with journalistic standards in terms of credibility, sourcing, analysis, or fairness.

[6] "Zoning" is the practice of sending editorial copy geared to a particular region or group only to the target audience. A newspaper can include zoned pages, where all or part of a page is redesigned for the targeted readership but the rest of the newspaper is the same for the full distribution, or zoned sections, which are distributed along with the newspaper to selected recipients. On a simple level, a newspaper might carry a page with "Glen Allen" news for distribution in the Glen Allen region but substitute a "Midlothian" page for Midlothian distribution. The rest of the paper could be the same for both.

[7] The people who would have control of this type of decision varied widely. In some organizations, it would be up to the publisher and editor. In others, it might be a corporate mandate. More likely, the decision to adopt topic teams was made by a team whose members included, but was not limited to, top editors and the publisher.

way in which it could influence content and profitability. While powerful, however, the limitations and directions set by management were parameters. What journalists did within those parameters was up to them.

Profitability

Despite circulation losses, the 1980s until about 1988 were extremely good for newspapers' bottom lines. Profit levels reached unprecedented highs and double-digit returns became the norm. According to analyst John Morton, profits were "slipping to 17 percent by 1989, and then to 15 percent the following year."[8] Advertising sales grew in value by 78 percent in the 1950s and 55 percent in the 1960s, but by 159 percent in the 1970s and 188 percent in the 1980s.[9] The industry was hard hit, however, by a stagnation and resulting recession that began in late 1988 and lasted until 1992.[10] Its effects lasted much longer; an argument could be made that they're still felt today in the budget-conscious, bottom-line, quarterly-report, MBO culture that took firm root during that time.[11] Media economists Picard and Brody wrote:

> Perhaps the most painful and nearly constant business and management issue faced by newspaper managers during the 1990s has been the financial pressure caused by the recession in the early part of the decade, corporate restructuring and downsizing, and the cost of newsprint at mid-decade. Although newspaper managers, particularly in group-owned papers, were required to operate under fiscal controls to achieve the high profits of earlier

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[8] John Morton, "Hanging tough when profits drop," *American Journalism Review*, October 1998, 88.

[9] Robert G. Picard and Jeffrey H. Brody, *The Newspaper Publishing Industry* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), 26.

[10] For an elegant analysis of this issue, see Robert G. Picard and Tony Rimmer, "Weathering a Recession: Effects of Size and Diversification on Newspaper Companies," *Journal of Media Economics* 12, no. 1 (1999): 1-18.

[11] First-person accounts of this time include those by James Squires, Davis "Buzz" Merritt, and Doug Underwood.

decades, the decline in profits in the 1990s forced even tighter controls and more difficult decisions.[12]

As newspapers downsized and corporations regrouped, the newspaper industry kept laying golden eggs[13] in terms of profits. The business side aimed to ensure the goose's dazzling fertility, even through the crippling turn-of-decade recession. As a result, newsroom managers found themselves dealing as never before with business goals, financial restraints, and the demands of publishers who answered to stockholders and executives who were increasingly unlikely to share editors' journalistic values. As business values took a greater hold in the day-to-day management of U.S. newspapers, some management structures changed, taking on the flattened-hierarchy of team-based organizations.[14] Almost all publications imposed a "do more with less" method of cost-saving. It became routine to tie annual bonuses for top editors to circulation and financial goals, breaching the "traditional" divide – often referred to as "the wall" – between the newsroom and other departments. Financial pressures and influences found their way to the newsroom and into the "product" in ways they had not before.[15]

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[12] Picard and Brody, 157.

[13] In Aesop's fable, a goose lays golden eggs for its owner until the owner kills it out of greed. "Goose with the Golden Egg," *The Harvard Classics, 1909-1914*, http://www.bartleby.com/17/1/57.html . With regard to newspaper profitability, see "Newspaper profits down – but still high," *Editor and Publisher* 125, no. 3 (18 January 1992), 13-14, for one of many trade reports.

[14] This had the effect of bringing "lower-level" newsroom staffers, such as reporters or copy editors, into closer contact with management and business values and practices.

[15] It became common practice to leave budgeted jobs unfilled so the money could be reallocated; professional development programs were reduced or curtailed; supplies were often in short supply; experienced journalists were offered buyouts and replaced with less expensive, less experienced journalists; investigative work, which was usually expensive in time and money, was reduced or curtailed; bureaus closed, making it more difficult to cover stories from outlying areas; some newspapers instituted story counts as a way of ensuring a predictable flow of material for the paper and of monitoring the work of reporters. There are numerous accounts of these examples throughout industry publications.

Teams

The adoption of teams, many of which were interdepartmental, by the business side of the newspaper industry mirrored an international trend toward team management in business overall. And while reporters had long (and sometimes famously, as with Woodward and Bernstein) teamed up for journalistic projects of limited duration, the thought of team systems and their attendant processes – scheduled meetings, flip-chart discussions, measurements, quality control, feedback, mission statements, and the like – was close to anathema in most newsrooms. Nevertheless, in early 1999, 36 percent of daily newspaper editors responding to a national survey reported they had teams in place. Eight percent had teams in 1992, according to the survey.[16] Twenty-one percent of the editors, overall, reported their newsrooms were organized around topic teams. The survey was not explicit as to what this meant, but at minimum those newspapers had changed their organizational structure to reflect which content areas were most important to the paper and its readership.

Journalistically, the adoption of topic teams in a newsroom meant breaking with a carefully cultivated tradition of hierarchy, independence, and source- and geography-based beat structure in search of something new. Since roughly the 1930s, daily newspaper newsrooms in the United States were overseen by a city editor responsible for coverage of the newspaper's home turf. The city editor juggled assignments, matching newsworthiness with talent, space in the paper, and time before deadline. The job was like that of a sergeant, and there was nothing in the way of touchy-feely new-age experimentation about it. Reporters answered to him (it was rare for the city editor to be a woman) or to subordinate assistants or assignment editors. Organizationally, the members of a newsroom were a team

[16] Ann B. Schierhorn, Fred F. Endres, and Carl Schierhorn. "Newsroom Teams Enjoy Rapid Growth in the 1990s." *Newspaper Research Journal* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2001), 2-15.

only in the sense that they collectively produced a newspaper or were united against "the competition."

Reporters valued their independence outside the newsroom; when surveyed, journalists often cited autonomy as one of the chief allures of the job. Once assigned to a story, they had wide latitude as to how they would get it. One given of the traditional U.S. newsroom, however, was that certain beats – sources of news – would be covered, such as police, courts, city hall, and schools. Routines formed around these beats partly because many of the newsgathering opportunities were predictable: a reporter could go to the same place every day to gather news; meetings were held at regularly scheduled times. There were also designated officials who took it as part of their job to serve as authoritative sources.[17]

Topic teams

In the newsroom, the introduction of topic teams was a major event. The city editor's oversight function was eliminated, as was the job title itself in many cases. Reporters[18] and editors (now called team leaders) were assigned to topic teams, and those teams, through discussion, decided what was news in relation to their assigned topic. Teams were encouraged to involve graphic artists and photographers early in the story process so as to better "package" the story and offer visual components to the report. Beats broadened and became issue based. The former cops reporter would belong to a Crime and Safety team,

[17] There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to these routines. News organizations are particularly vulnerable to news manipulation when the source controls the timing and manner of news release; reporters are susceptible to "teaming up" with people they see on a regular basis and upon whom they depend for news; and relying on the same sources of news and authority provides a biased and narrow account over time. There are other effects as well, including conferring legitimacy and illegitimacy on certain types of news and particular people or types of people.

[18] At some papers, copy editors, photographers, layout editors, and graphic artists were also assigned to topic teams.

perhaps, in which her focus might switch from reporting arrests of the previous day to how local crime trends compared to those in other regions.

Ideally, in the new system, news assignments and ideas rose from the reporter-topic team collaboration. Once the assignment was made, it was generally logged into an updatable and generally accessible[19] computer file where it could be tracked.[20] If a story was of significant interest, the topic team leader put it on a story budget[21] for the team of editors who chose the day's main stories.

As members of a semi-autonomous unit in the newsroom organization, topic team members were responsible for maintaining their team as a work group. This meant they were involved with a number of human resource and management tasks that they had not had to deal with before, including hiring[22]; evaluating co-workers; setting work expectations; scheduling; providing accountability to others; and managing "cultural" differences among colleagues of varying skill groups.[23]

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[19] Newsroom and bureau workers would be able to read this file, the general public and those from other newspaper departments would not.

[20] The information likely included a "slug" (the file name of the story), a brief synopsis, projected length, availability of art or assignments made, whether any graphics were to accompany it, who was working on the story, its estimated time of completion by the reporter, and other relevant comments.

[21] A "budget" is a list of stories available or expected to be available for use in a designated day's paper. It will contain other items of interest, including a summary of the story and details from the computer file described above. There might be different iterations: an "A1 budget" would include possibilities for the front page, for example.

[22] "Targeted selection" was a hiring method adopted by *The Virginian-Pilot* several years after teams were introduced. Selected team members interview potential hires in a rigidly controlled process that involves predetermined and probing questions, checklists, written evaluations, and lengthy discussions. See Dan Duke, "Hiring the scientific way: Targeted selection," *American Editor,* 1 April 1998, http://www.asne.org/kiosk/editor/98.april/duke1.htm .

[23] Visual journalists, such as photographers or graphic artists, interpret news visually and have different priorities than do, for example, reporters who are word based. Spelling might be an issue, or the way in which a photo is cropped for presentation. Some, not all, topic teams included journalists from all areas of the newsroom, not just those who were word based. In the traditional newsroom, editors were both buffers and decision makers in ways that did not exist in a team-based system.

Overview

Newspapers' adoption of topic teams was a radical change symptomatic of their search for survival through finding new ways to work, both as businesses and as a medium for journalists. It is possible that their own journalists' expertise and experience can guide newspapers, which are in the midst of critical change,[24] into the new or changed venues newspapers seek – ones that may or may not include topic teams, but will surely carry the topic team experiments as "baggage." One way to tap into that expertise and experience is by talking to topic team members about journalism as they perceive and practice it, and about how they and their work are affected by the management structure of the newsroom. Media sociology scholarship and management theory suggest that through discovering what journalists value and what they dismiss about their profession and their workplace, one can gain a more rounded perspective on what works (and what doesn't) and to what effect. In short, this study attempts to discover what journalists describe as different about working within a topic team structure, and then to synthesize their reports into useful information.

The rest of this chapter provides the background for the adoption of newsroom topic teams. It relies heavily on trade literature for two reasons: little else exists, and industry reports demonstrate clearly that topic teams were a compelling industry concern. The background is intended to add context to the research that follows. Chapter 2 reviews the extant academic literature on topic teams, newsroom structure and management, journalistic routines and newsroom sociology, professional values, and team management and dynamics. Chapter 3 describes in detail the qualitative methodology used with regard to the in-depth

[24] See in particular Philip Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age*, (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Leonard Downie Jr. and Robert G. Kaiser, *The News About the News: American Journalism in Peril* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 2003); and Gene Roberts, Thomas Kunkel, and Charles Layton, eds., *Leaving Readers Behind: The Age of Corporate Newspapering* (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 2001).

interviews that form the core of this study. The results of these interviews are presented in Chapter 4. The final and fifth chapter discusses the implications of those findings and presents them in context with the background presented in Chapter 1.

Justification

Newsrooms have undergone radical transformation in the past several decades. Team management principles and market research took hold in the industry as it sought ways to better position itself in the market and react flexibly and quickly to market influences. In doing so, it echoed the shifting perspectives of other U.S. businesses as they moved away from hierarchical top-down management to the team- and feedback-focused years of Total Quality Management (roughly 1978-2000) and the participatory, inclusive, and team-based Learning Organization, which began to be conceptualized in the late 1980s and continues today. Many of those business principles have been adopted in newspaper newsrooms – including those without topic teams – for a variety of reasons that involve coping with and precipitating change.

Scholars have observed that, at a time when it is arguably needed most, interest in conducting sociological research on news organizations has diminished while attention to the importance of media has increased in many other scholarly disciplines. Eric Klinenberg, after crediting exceptional studies from the 1970s – Gans, Tuchman, and Fishman – commented recently that "in the past thirty years American sociologists have largely stayed out of newsrooms and ignored the conditions of journalistic production."[25] Timothy Cook wrote in

[25] Eric Klinenberg, "Convergence: News Production in a Digital Age," *Annals: Cultural Production in a Digital Age* (January 2005), 48-64.

1998 that "it is as if a virtual moratorium were placed on further studies."[26] Related scholarly journalism research, which in the area of news organization is rooted in media sociology, is fragmentary. The academy has not yet produced a substantively integrated body of work exploring how contemporary (those that developed over the past twenty years) newsrooms work or developed, although interest is growing in exploring a "converging" news operation and there appears to be in increase in research that, while theoretical, concentrates on data gathered from working journalists. "Lacking current research," Klinenberg wrote, "critics are left to guess about the strategies, practices, and interests that shape major news corporations; determine the content of news products; and produce the 'symbolic power'[27] of publicly defining, delimiting, and framing key issues and events."

Topic teams developed because of changes in the industry, society, and profession so profound that they have been described as paradigm shifts. Corporatism, the decline of mass media (of which newspapers were a primary information source, serving readers, and a prime resource for other media) into more personalized venues, diminished interest in civic involvement, time and economic pressures changing the way people live, the broken "contract" that once existed between employer and employee, the drop in esteem in which journalists were held: all these are well documented.

The need for a truly collaborative work environment for journalists increases as newsrooms adopt new technology and multimedia methods for reporting and analyzing news

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[26] Timothy Cook, *Governing with the news: The news media as a political institution* (Chicago: University of Chicago University Press, 1998); cited in Klinenberg, 49.

[27] "Symbolic power" refers to the ability to define and appoint what or who will have legitimate power – that recognized by society. A justice of the peace has the symbolic power, for example, to declare a couple married. Various political bodies have the symbolic power to create laws. Media have symbolic power in being able to define issues, motivate action and thought, and affect (and perhaps effect) legitimacy. Klinenberg cites the work of Pierre Bourdieu, specifically *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). Symbolic power as a concept is closely associated with Bourdieu, a French sociologist who was well known for contributions to public discourse until his death in 2002.

and other forms of information. Expectations of the collaborative process need to go beyond "plays well with others" or "will share." Understanding the process is vital to managing modern newsrooms as well as to being a productive member of a news-producing team. Finally, more fully understanding how journalists gather, synthesize, and report news, and the newsroom forces that affect them, is of great benefit to the public at large.

There are those who say newspapers are in their death spiral,[28] and there are those who say their "golden goose" quality will save them as venues (although journalists will have to save them as something worth having).[29] Journalism itself appears to be robust and already morphing into new genres and venues.[30] In April 2005, after an 18-month immersion study of newspaper newsrooms, media blogger Tim Porter wrote:

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[28] The phrase is associated with Philip Meyer, particularly after publication of *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2004). In a Webcast titled "The Vanishing Newsroom," Meyer quipped that the last daily newspaper reader will stop his habit in April 2040 if one projects General Social Survey data on a statistical chart of newspaper readership that shows "everyday" readership dropping 1 percentage point per year. His point? Newspapers would cease publication long before then. American Press Institute Media Center, 9 March 2005. http://www.webcastgroup.com/client/start.asp?wid=0840309051431&auto=true. (Webcast archive; requires registration). Leonard Witt interviewed Meyer online about the book on *PJNet Today: A Public Journalism Network Weblog by Leonard Witt and Colleagues*, 15 March 2005. http://pjnet.org/weblogs/pjnettoday/archives/000605.html. See also Philip Meyer and Yuan Zhang, "Anatomy of a Death Spiral: Newspapers and Their Credibility," paper delivered to the Media Management and Economics Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication annual convention, Miami Beach, 2002. http://www.unc.edu/~pmeyer/Quality_Project/anatomy_of_death_spiral.pdf

[29] Dean Baquet, days after being announced as the new editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, said, "It's too bad that the conversation about newspapers has been dominated by people who say we're dying, because I'm not sure that's true. … We make tons of money." He commented that the *Los Angeles Times* (as with most papers) has no top-level protection for high-quality journalism against financial pressures since it's not controlled by a family. "We have to be that kind of protection for ourselves." Tom Scocca, "The Baquet Times: L.A. Editor Bucks Budget Burden," *New York Observer*, 26 July 2005, http://observer.com/media_offtherecord.asp.

[30] Non-news organizations such as Yahoo and Google have shown interest in offering news services beyond their aggregate search functions. "Kevin Sites in the Hot Zone" debuted in Fall 2005 on Yahoo. Sites, a well known broadcast reporter for NBC who became famous over footage shot in Fallujah (and a resulting blog discussion), contracted with Yahoo to visit all areas of major conflict, worldwide, in a year. Working with two (sometimes three) others as a team, Sites files reports in online formats. He has become an example of the "backpack journalist" or "so-jo" (solo journalist). In early 2006, Yahoo announced plans to expand its news franchise. There are other examples of journalism's vitality, however, such as the blogging phenomenon, the rise of "citizen journalism" sites such as eBrattleboro.com, and participatory sites, such as OhMyNews in Korea and Wikipedia, which has a news-filing branch. For an "overview" article on Sites, see Bobbie Johnson, "A Year of Living Dangerously," *The Guardian*, 20 February 2006, 8.

> I didn't think, given the scrappy newsrooms from which I sprang, the day would come when I'd say the responsibility for the decline of newspapers as the principal platform for journalism is **shared equally by the journalists and the publishers**. But that day has come. Shame on you both. … The **obdurance and avoidance** endemic in newsrooms rests on a bedrock belief that the "problems" at their newspapers are best solved with more bodies or a return to a more "traditional" form of journalism. …[T]here are also forward-thinking reporters and editors and photographers who envision and are working to create a journalist future built on new story forms, deeper community connections and more truth-telling and watch-dogging. … I love journalism (and, I confess, newspapers, too). But if we're going to survive in any meaningful way we need to find creative solutions to our dilemma, ways to ensure the continuance of quality journalism at a time when what has been its principal platform – the newspaper business – is gravely threatened. Do I have the answer? No. But I know the solution can only be found by using the windshield and not the rear-view mirror.[31] (emphasis in original)

In the late 1980s and 1990s, when change was clearly needed, there were a growing number of newspapers that drove forward with the idea that a collaborative newsroom would be an improvement not just for the bottom line but for journalism as a service and a profession.

With topic teams, journalism and business values combined to produce a structural model that altered professional practices while defining (and consequently legitimizing) topics of "interest" to the public. The financial and professional concerns that prompted the invention of topic teams have not abated. Wall Street pressures have, if anything, increased, as has concentration of ownership, placing more newspapers in the control of fewer corporations. Newspaper circulation continues to drop as society becomes more fragmented, has more choices in information outlets, and gravitates toward other technologies. Journalism still looks to connect with the public in meaningful ways; still grapples with defining what is relevant to its readership; and still strains against budgets that value profits above journalism.

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[31] Tim Porter, "The Mood of the Newsroom," posted on *First Draft by Tim Porter: Ink-Stained Kvetches About Newspapering, Readership & Relevance,* 22 April 2003. www.timporter.com/firstdraft/archives/000442.html.

Online journalism, with its emphasis on collaboration and convergence, continues to grow in popularity. But at a time when even Knight Ridder announces it is forced to find a buyer because it can no longer meet stockholders' financial demands,[32] effecting change in the profession is critical to its survival.

Against these forces, newspapers are once again looking for ways to alter professional practices – this time through learning and incorporating new technology – while defining what topics are of interest to a public increasingly interested in defining topics for itself.[33] The conflict between journalism and business values appears as strained as ever.[34] But for both journalism and business, the focus on collaborative efforts has accelerated as multimedia journalism increases in scope and popularity and converged newsrooms become the norm. There is more emphasis on teams, not less.

The topic team has been minimally studied, but there has been some research into the fact of topic teams, the number of them, what they've produced, the way in which they were formed, manager's evaluations of their value, and staff reaction. No in-depth work is available regarding how topic team members perceive the structure as affecting their work, their values, or their thoughts about journalism as a profession.

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[32] An excellent overview, from the point of view of one of the newspapers up for sale, is "Papers in play: Knight Ridder and the Herald-Leader," an online package (February 2006) at http://www.kentucky.com/mld/kentucky/news/special_packages/papers_in_play/. One of the first editors to use topic teams, Davis "Buzz" Merritt of the *Wichita Eagle*, provided a post-retirement analysis in Davis Merritt, *Knightfall: Knight Ridder and How the Erosion of Newspaper Journalism Is Putting Democracy at Risk* (New York: American Management Association, 2005).

[33] The rise of "participatory" and "citizen" journalism through wikis, podcasting, blogs, and other Web genres has sparked discussions as to who should be defined as a journalist.

[34] In July 2005, John Carroll resigned as editor of *The Los Angeles Times* after publicly castigating the parent company, Tribune, for imposing too many financial restraints on the newspaper. In fact, he refused to impose them on the newsroom; he was replaced by Dean Baquet, who did make the cuts. In 2005, it was the second-largest metropolitan newspaper, by circulation, in the United States (trailing *The New York Times*). Its circulation was c. 843,450. The Tribune Co. bought the Times-Mirror company (including the L.A. *Times)* in 2000 from the Chandler family. Carroll, the highly regarded editor of the Tribune-owned *Baltimore Sun*, was brought in by the new owners.

The most successful topic team systems have evolved over the years. Topics have come and gone, different beats have been created, and in some newsrooms the job of general assignment reporter has been reinstated to better cope with breaking news or news that falls between the cracks of one topic and another. In 1987, when Karin Winner brainstormed one of the earliest versions of topic teams (she called them task forces, but they were topically organized) for the *San Diego Union*,[35] she was unaware of any other efforts in that direction. "Today," she wrote recently, "they're everywhere." [36]

Topic teams have proven they can be durable and flexible structures, but not in all cases or at all papers.[37] Early predictions that topic teams would turn their host newspapers into fluff machines were wrong; some of the most respected newspapers in the country are topic team papers, including the (Portland) *Oregonian*, *Miami Herald*, (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune,* and *Charlotte* (N.C.) *Observer*. In 1999, the *Columbia Journalism Review* conducted a national poll of editors to determine which newspapers were held in highest esteem by their peers.[38] The *Oregonian* placed twelfth, with the judges commenting "Coming on strong. 'Visionary thinking and a sense of community that translates into good, important

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[35] *The San Diego Union* merged with the *Evening Tribune* to produce the morning *Union-Tribune* on 2 February 1992.

[36] E-mail response to author, July 25, 2005.

[37] *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* is an extreme example. When it hired Cole Campbell from *The Virginian-Pilot* in 1996, it went to a topic-team structure with a public journalism agenda. Staff reaction to the new editor and his changes was not favorable; a staff delegation asked the publisher to fire him. Campbell, now dean of the Reynolds School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Nebraska, left the *Post-Dispatch* in April 2000. When Ellen Soeteber followed him as editor in January 2001, she soon returned the newsroom to a more traditional structure. Soeteber resigned five years later, shortly after Lee Enterprises bought Pulitzer, Inc., owner of the *Post-Tribune*. Arnie Robbins, who joined the paper in May 1997, moved up from managing editor to editor after Soeteber left. Publisher Terrence Eggers referred to Robbins as "the perfect choice … a well-known team player" in an interview. See Roy Malone, "Robbins takes the helm in stormy times," *St. Louis Journalism Review*, January 2006, www.stljr.org/current-controversy.htm.

[38] "Editors' choices: America's best newspapers," *Columbia Journalism Review* (November-December 1999), 14, http://archives.cjr.org/year/99/6/best.asp.

stuff for readers.' Great writing, and 'an energetic, creative newsroom, though not always focused.'" Other "team-player" papers also placed in the top twenty, including the *Orange County Register*. "In the forefront with new ideas about coverage and newsroom reorganization," wrote the judges. No mention of "new age"; no hint of scorn.

BACKGROUND

There are as many varieties of topic teams as there are topic-team newsrooms, but they all have one thing in common: they are groups of journalists assigned to covering subjects at least tangentially related to a particular topic. Almost all of them are part of newsroom efforts to "flatten hierarchy" by reducing the number of management levels; to increase collaboration among staffers; and to give the newsroom more flexibility and breadth in covering stories. The stated goal is usually to produce better journalism through shared expertise and talents. Often, it is hoped that by changing the thought process and the routines involved in gathering news, it will produce journalism more in keeping with a particular purpose, such as producing "reader-friendly" copy, attracting targeted readers, providing a public service, or increasing civic interest.

The topic teams at the *Orange County Register* were the first to gain wide recognition, but there were several newspapers where the concept was gestating at around the same time. At the *Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk, for example, Executive Editor Sandra Mims Rowe had been wondering how best to incorporate a team structure into the newsroom ever since attending a management seminar at Harvard in 1986. In the late 1980s, the *Houston Chronicle* felt it could produce better work if it reduced the number of reporters reporting to

particular assignment editors and then provided more contact between them. Winner's *San Diego Union* "task forces" took form at the same time.

Readership and topic teams

Readership is at the heart of the turn toward topic teams. Public-service-minded and profit-minded editors and publishers alike saw declining numbers of readers as a negative factor, whether it represented in their eyes a decline in relevance and civic usefulness or a decline in the amount of money that could be charged for advertising, newspapers' primary revenue source. It was by targeting readers' interests and ensuring that stories of interest got written by inventing and then assigning newsroom topic teams to them that newspapers hoped to win both readers and advertisers.

This is where "readership" becomes more complex. One might assume that anyone who picked up the paper and read it was a desirable reader. For newspaper strategists, however, it is the type of reader that is key. "Ms. Gotbucks" is more in demand than "Ms. Homeless"; it is more profitable for newspapers to circulate in a Gotbucks area than among the homeless. A measurement tool that reflected these distinctions was needed to provide a more nuanced "circulation" report.

Readership and circulation, while closely related, carry different meanings and consequences within the industry. On the simplest level (various formulas exist to provide more contextual measurement), readership refers to the number of people who read the daily paper; circulation is measured by the number of daily purchases.[39] Of the two, the latter is

[39] For a fine discussion of the differences, see Gilbert Cranberg, Randall Bezenson, and John Soloski, *Taking Stock: Journalism and the Publicly Traded Newspaper Company* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 90-97.

most easily quantified. It is monitored by the Audit Bureau of Circulation with tallies available every six months. The ABC, established in 1914 as a non-profit organization funded by publishers, advertisers, and ad agencies, is a voluntary service meant to provide credible, independent, and verifiable information to advertisers and media planners. It differentiates between circulation and readership this way:

> The cost of an advertisement is readily available. But any calculation of results must be based firstly, on the scope of the audience being addressed and in the case of a newspaper or periodical this is directly related to the number of copies sold. All copies which are dispatched, however, may not represent an equivalent number of genuine readers, for it is an accepted principle that there is a difference between a buyer of a newspaper and one who reads casually because a newspaper happens to come to his hand. For this reason the real measure of value is the number of copies which are purchased at prescribed cover and/or subscription prices and accordingly the Bureau lays down that the copies sold or disposed of at any other terms must be deducted from Net Paid Circulations.[40]

After World War II, circulation rose along with the country's population, but it stabilized in the 1970s, hovering around 62 million. Since 1987, it has been in steady decline. Between 1990 and 2002, circulation dropped roughly 1 percent a year for an 11 percent decline over 12 years.[41]

The overall circulation of daily newspapers in the United States reached its zenith in 1987 with 62.8 million subscribers, but that gives an overly positive view of newspaper readership at that time. A third measure, penetration, takes into account the percent of the population that either buys or reads the publication, and is usually defined by comparing the number of copies sold to the number of households in the circulation area. If circulation stays

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[40] Audit Bureau of Circulation, http://www.auditbureau.org/about/abcguide/g2.htm .

[41] "Newspapers," in *The State of the News Media 2004: An Annual Report on American Journalism* (Online: Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Committee of Concerned Journalists, 2004) http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2004/. Reports for 2005 and 2006 are also available. http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2005/index.asp and http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2006/index.asp.

the same but the population increases, readership is presumed to have weakened and the unmet potential for sales to have grown. In 1950, household penetration by daily newspapers nationwide was 123 percent.[42] By 1990, 67 percent of households bought a paper. Daily penetration was down to 53 percent by 2000.[43]

Sunday papers have a different record. Perhaps there's more time to read on a Sunday or it's more a part of the culture – or perhaps the subject matter is different enough to make a difference in sales. For some reason, Sunday sales remained stronger for a longer time than daily papers, and Sunday readership still carries a "disproportionate impact"[44] on the industry, grossing in the late 1990s some 40 percent to 50 percent of revenue.[45] The post-World War II surge in Sunday publication – not of accompanying magazines, which were separate entities and fared differently, but the actual paper in a Sunday incarnation – countered the decline in the total number of newspapers (U.S. figures). In 1950, there were 1,772 dailies and 549 Sunday papers. By 1998, there were 1,489 dailies and 897 Sunday papers. From 1950 to 1995, Sunday circulation increased 32.6 percent,[46] with a circulation high of 62.6 million in 1993, dropping to 60.1 million in 1998. Daily papers had a circulation of 56.2 million at that time.[47] By 2002, Sunday circulation had dropped to 58.8 million.[48] For

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[42] A penetration of 123 percent means that the average household bought 1.23 newspapers.

[43] In 2004, about 55 million newspapers sold each day, with 59 million on Sundays. That translates into about 54 percent of people in America reading a paper each day, with 62 percent on Sundays.
Editor and Publisher Yearbook Online Data, 1940-2003, http:// www.editorandpublisher.com; *United States Census 2000*, http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html.

[44] Felicity Barringer, "Fissures in Sunday Papers' Pot of Gold," *New York Times*, 6 November 2000, C1.

[45] Leonard Mogel, *The Newspaper: Everything You Need To Know To Make It In the Newspaper Business* (Sewickley, Pa.: GATF Press, 2000).

[46] Picard and Brody. 20.

[47] Cranberg et al., 20-23.

print journalists, the Sunday paper was a showcase where one's "best" work, whether defined by writing, depth, or appeal, found the biggest audience.

Readership studies: 1978-1991

It was easy to follow the numbers and see what was selling and when; it was far more difficult to find out why papers sold – when they did. An inability to break the code wasn't then (and isn't now) from lack of effort. Both the newspaper and advertising industries, individually and collaboratively, made numerous attempts to harness readership by finding out what readers want (or value or reject, depending on the current quest). Their methods, forms of market research, included telephone surveys, call-in polls, focus groups, in-person queries, mail surveys, and clip-out/mail-back coupons.[49]

Editors and publishers of the 1980s and 1990s both implemented and inherited the content changes that resulted from consultant Ruth Clark's early work for ASNE, the American Society of Newspaper Editors.[50] As part of the first research to be fully funded by the newspaper industry, "Changing Needs of Changing Readers" was widely circulated after its completion in 1978; 5,000 copies were distributed "to the ANPA,[51] the NAB,[52] the ASNE,

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[48] *Editor and Publisher Yearbook Online Data, 1940-2003*, http://www.editor andpublisher.com.

[49] Randal Beam, "How Newspapers Use Readership Research." *Newspaper Research Journal* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 37 (footnote 1).

[50] Ruth Clark joined Yankelovich, Skelly & White in 1970, heading up its public opinion research work as executive vice president. The firm initiated The New York Times/Yankelovich poll in the 1970s. She left the firm in 1983 to begin her own firm, Clark, Martire and Bartolomeo. Prior to joining YS&W, she was a vice president at Louis Harris and Associates. Among her many media clients were *The New York Times*, *The Daily News* and *The Chicago Tribune*. Karen Freeman. "Ruth Clark, 80, Pollster Who Changed an Industry," *New York Times*, 7 March 1997, A28.

[51] The American Newspaper Publishers Association.

[52] National Advertising Bureau.

the APME,[53] the National Conference of Editorial Writers, the Newspaper Research Council, and the Canadian Daily Newspaper Publishers Association (CDNPA)."[54] Based on focus-group findings in 12 cities (10 participants at each panel) and a series of "communication labs," Clark told editors that newspaper content should be more useful, more entertaining, "more caring, more warmly human, less anonymous."[55]

Some researchers saw deep flaws in her work; the arguments were primarily that the findings were not generalizable (due to insufficient data and unsuitable sampling methodology) and the results superficial. Chief among the critics was sociologist Leo Bogart, who at the same time was directing a large-scale quantitative readership study funded by ASNE, the American Newspaper Publishers Association, and the National Advertising Bureau. Both Bogart's and Clark's studies were part of the Newspaper Readership Project, a three- (that later grew to six-) year initiative launched by ASNE in 1977. A number of agencies did work for the Project. Bogart's statistical survey, released concurrently with Clark's findings, contradicted Clark's. Readers were clear in their preference for hard news, he found.

Soft, not hard, is heard

Clark's work carried more weight with working journalists, however. *Changing Needs* had "an electrifying effect on the news business," Lee Stinnett, ASNE executive

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[53] Associated Press Managing Editors.

[54] Leo Bogart, *Preserving the Press: How Daily Newspapers Mobilized to Save Their Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 138.

[55] Philip Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 128. Also Bogart, *Preserving the Press*, 140.

director, said when asked for a comment in 1997 for Clark's *New York Times* obituary. "She may have changed newspapers more than anybody else in this century,"[56] wrote Reese Cleghorn, former president of the *American Journalism Review* and ex-dean of the University of Maryland's College of Journalism. Several factors appear to have been in play. Clark, an executive with the well-regarded Yankelovich, Skelly and White research firm, involved editors from the start, letting them sit in on focus-group sessions. She presented the results in the clear, newspaper-oriented language that had made her popular as a consultant for proprietary newspaper research for years before the ASNE study.[57] A qualitative researcher, she used words, not statistics, to get her points across.[58] It was "research that editors could understand and control, in contrast to the studies that they saw being imposed upon them by an alien force, the Newspaper Advertising Bureau," wrote Bogart, who was then general manager of the alien force.[59] In Bogart's memoir of the project, he recalled that ASNE's project director, retired *Charlotte Observer* editor C. A. (Pete) McKnight, attended

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[56] Reese Cleghorn, "Ruth Clark Changed the World of News," *American Journalism Review*, April 1997, 4.

[57] *The Virginian-Pilot*, one of the first papers to switch to a topic-team newsroom, was a client of Clark's in the 1970s and 1980s. According to a longtime *Pilot* staffer, the information she gleaned through focus groups in the early 1980s was instrumental in moving the paper to zoned editions. The paper, while based in Norfolk, covers south Hampton Roads, a collective name for the region that also includes Chesapeake, Suffolk, Virginia Beach, Isle of Wight and Portsmouth. "Readers in one area said they were only interested in news of that area, so that's pretty much what we gave them," according to Randy Jessee, who joined the *Pilot*'s sister paper in Norfolk, the *Ledger-Star*, in 1976. The *Pilot* and *Ledger-Star* merged in 1982; Jessee was news systems editor for both papers beginning in 1979. The zoned editions gave rise to criticism that the "good" news was placed in the zoned editions (that other areas did not get), but the "bad" news made it into the general-circulation portion of the paper. When the *Pilot* reorganized into teams, much of the geographic orientation was replaced. Interview, July 5, 2005.

[58] "All those statistics – what do they tell editors about what to do (even assuming they would be credited as accurate and revealing, given their anti-quantitative biases)?" C.A. McKnight, April 20, 1981, in conversation with Leo Bogart. Quoted in Bogart, *Preserving the Press*, 139.

[59] Bogart, *Preserving the Press*, 137. The Newspaper Advertising Bureau, based in New York City, merged in June 1992 with the American Newspaper Publishers Association and five fraternal marketing organizations to form the Newspaper Association of America, the first industry association meant to "address and drive all issues in the business." Barbara Z. Gyles, "Happy Birthday, Federation Update: 5,500+ Members Strong," *Presstime,* December 1998, 24, http:// www.naa.org/presstime/PTArtPage.cfm?AID=1976.

five focus sessions, "which made her recommendations aces high with him."[60] It was presumably easier to extend credibility to a process one had experienced than to a pile of spreadsheets.

Unfortunately, the message of the research seems to have been misconstrued, possibly because it was reported without sufficient context. Editors reacted as if it were a clarion call to "soft" news; the catch phrase "News You Can Use" caught on as a sound-bite explanation of what should be published. Some editors then carried out their own informal (and nonscientific) research forays into what readers wanted and generally found their impressions confirmed. Philip Meyer, who pioneered newsroom use of computer-assisted research and was at the time a research consultant for Knight-Ridder, feels they were ill served:

> This basic notion – that readership can be gained by pushing service features – was arrived at by a lot of editors in the 1970s without any help from research models. But those who arrived at it intuitively often made a mistake from which the formal model might have protected them. These editors took off in pursuit of soft content and service features with such enthusiasm that they sacrificed traditional hard news content to make room for stories about how to paint your kitchen yellow and the like. None of the data … say that you can do that and get away with it. Indeed, their message is quite the contrary: hard news works, and you cut it back at your peril. Keep giving it to your readers, the model says, and then, if you can find the resources to give them something else, consider service features. … The prudent editor will find a way to try new things without cannibalizing the very categories that do the most for readership as identified by the formal model.[61]

Cleghorn commented that Clark's "most influential report on newspapers may have resulted in more harm than good. That was not her fault. When editors heard her message, they took it

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[60] Bogart, *Preserving the Press,* 139.

[61] Philip Meyer, *The Newspaper Survival Book: An Editor's Guide to Marketing Research* (Bloomington, Indiana.: Indiana University Press, 1985), 45-46.

out the window."[62] It was, he said, a turning point – the first popular transformation of editors into marketers in the current sense of the word. It is here that we begin to see widespread interest in altering the news mix, expanding local beats, diminishing non-local news coverage, and reinforcing the "me me me" orientation of the reader. "Local, local, local" read a bumper sticker distributed by Gannett[63] marketers in the 1980s. "Our strategy is local, local, local," reiterated Gannett CEO Douglas McCorkendale at a corporate lunch for media and entertainment analysts in March 2005.[64] Determining what readers would find to be personally relevant, however, was problematic, as later developments make clear.

But in 1978, at the meeting in Cape Cod where Clark and Bogart informally announced the results of their research, the newspaper industry was faced with two conflicting reports: hard news vs. soft. It went with the soft, to an extent that evidently surprised and discomfited Clark herself. Clark's second report, released in 1983 and based on focus groups as well as a 1,300-person survey, contradicted her earlier findings. "More hard news" was the message.

In 1989, ANPA declared at a circulation and readership conference, "Keys to Success," that 15 years of effort had failed to stop the slide. "What was required, speaker

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[62] Cleghorn.

[63] Gannett, in 1985, owned 83 daily newspapers in 33 U.S. states and Guam, a national news service, seven television and 14 radio stations, outdoor advertising operations in the United States and Canada, 21 weekly newspapers and the Louis Harris & Associates research group. Source: Ketupa.com Media Profiles, Caslon Analytics, http://www.ketupa.net/gannett2.htm . Gannett built its empire by accumulating newspapers primarily from smaller areas.

[64] Douglas McCorkindale, speech to the Gannett Lunch for Media and Entertainment Analysts of New York, 15 March 2005, New York City, www.gannett.com/go/press/Presentations/MEANY.pdf.

after speaker said, was nothing short of a fixation on what readers want: in short, a newspaper that is relevant, useful, accessible and provides impeccable customer service."[65]

Key topics

"Keys to Our Survival," a joint project of the ASNE Readership and Research and Future of Newspapers committees that was conducted by MORI Research, was released in 1991.[66] It identified four, but targeted two, kinds of readers: those considered "at risk" of being lost (13 percent) and those who were potential converts (13 percent). They had several traits in common (including that the majority of both groups was under 35), but were more dissimilar than alike. The typical potential reader was "seriously interested in events, hard news." The typical at-risk reader "wants news presented quickly, easy and fun." The problem: "The future of daily newspapers as a mass medium may depend on our ability to capture two kinds of readers who don't feel a strong commitment to the kinds of newspapers we now are producing," summarized Kris McGrath of MORI Research. But a further problem is apparent: quick, easy and fun news is not serious, not "hard" news. How to please both kinds of readers in the same publication? Would that content please the 55 percent who were loyal readers? Nineteen percent of the population was classed as a poor prospect or nonreader. Editors and publishers were faced with a conundrum. Assuming one kept the loyal readers and didn't care about the poor prospects, logic would dictate going after the largest of the two crucial market segments. With both at-risks and potentials accounting for

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[65] Mary Alice Bagby, "Transforming Newspapers for Readers," *Presstime*, April 1991, 18-25. Originally reported in *Presstime*, March 1989, 22.

[66] A total of 1,264 adults from the contiguous United States was interviewed from 22 February to 20 May 1990 by MORI Research personnel. Each interview was conducted by telephone with a follow-up mailed questionnaire and an ensuing phone call to record the answers.

13 percent of the population, however, the choice could not be made by the numbers; some other criteria would have to be called in to play.

"Keys" respondents were asked to rate their interest in each of 33 topics. Eleven of the content categories were chosen by at least 40 percent of the respondents. From strongest to weakest, they were: your own city or town; your neighborhood; national news; your region; state news; health and health care; crime news; international news; news that's helpful with everyday living; TV listings and program information; and advertising for stores you shop.

News topic clusters

More helpful than ratings, the report said, was looking at related topics as clusters as a help toward "packaging and promoting news and feature content."

> For example, if topics that have common interest are grouped together in the newspaper, readers who have an interest in those topics can be made more aware of their coverage. Packaging topics this way can create an impression of increased coverage of "my interests" even though the actual news space devoted to coverage of the topics has not increased. Grouping related topics also makes newspapers more time-efficient for readers.[67]

From the list of thirty-three options, seven "news topic clusters" were identified: parenting and personal concerns; daily home life; sports; hard news; leisure; area news; and money. The clusters were broken down into types of news. "Daily home life," for example, included food, food buying, and recipes; advertising for stores you shop; fashion; TV listings and program information; health and health care; news that's helpful with everyday living;

[67] *Keys to Our Survival* (Reston, Va.: American Society of News Editors, 1991), 9-11.

and home remodeling and decorating. "Hard news" comprised international news; national news; state news; and science and technology.[68]

These topic clusters are closely related to the topics newspapers chose in designating teams. The *Orange County Register*'s shopping mall reporter was part of the Southern California Culture team, for example. Another *Register* team was "The Way We Live." "Passages," "Quality of Life," "Community Roots," "Leisure," "Transactions," "City Life," and "Governance" were the topic clusters (in the beginning, they called them "circles") chosen by *The State* in Columbia, South Carolina, in its January 1992 newsroom reorganization. The Quality of Life team covered issues that included crime, housing, health, food/nutrition, and the environment.[69] Other topic teams at other papers selected similarly broad concepts around which to build.

In 1995, the publisher of *The Miami Herald* told his staff that the paper was to "focus its newsroom resources on nine subject areas that readers have told us are especially important and useful." They were local government, education, sports, environment, consumer news, Florida news, health and medicine, Latin America, and crime. "Sorry, Mr. Perot," observed William Glaberson in his article for *The New York Times.* "The Presidential race didn't make the cut." *The Herald*'s chief political writer, Tom Fiedler, said he thought "the net effect of this is a lot of head scratching in the newsroom." Joining national politics as missing topics, staffers noted, were religion, economics, investigative reporting, and world affairs.[70]

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[68] *Keys*, p. 10.

[69] Scott Johnson, "Newsroom Circles," *Quill*, March 1993, 28-31.

[70] William Glaberson. "*The Miami Herald*'s Nine-Fold Path to Reader Enlightenment Raises Some Journalists' Eyebrows," *New York Times*, 23 October 1995, D7.

Joseph A. Angotti, a former NBC news executive, expressed a concern many held about editors seemingly abdicating responsibility for deciding what news needed to be covered in favor of news that surveys said people wanted. Would reader research have provoked coverage of the civil rights movement? '"I think one of the problems with *The Herald* – and with a lot of newspapers – is they pay too much attention to focus groups,' he said."[71]

Missing readers

Fewer women were reading the paper, and that was of major concern in terms of advertising. Worse than that, though, was young readers were becoming ever scarcer, which presented a more complex problem. '"We are having a hell of a time catching people young enough," said James D. Squires, editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. "We have been predicting . . . that our readers are going to die and we won't have any to replace them."'[72]

Various surveys agreed: while there was little difference according to age as to who read newspapers in 1970, there was a big difference by the start of the 1990s. By 1991, 69 percent of 45- to 65-year-olds reported reading a newspaper "yesterday" (a standard poll question to reveal readership) while 53 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds replied the same way, according to NAB research. Simmons Market Research Bureau recorded a drop of 20 percent in "yesterday" reading by 18- to 24-year-olds between 1967 and 1987.[73] And while education and income correlates positively overall with newspaper readership, that was not the case for

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[71] Ibid.

[72] David Shaw, "Luring the Young; For Papers, Generation Is Missing," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 March 1989, A1.

[73] George L. Thurlow, and Katherine J. Milo, "Newspaper Readership: Can the Bleeding be Stopped, or Do We Have the Wrong Patient?" *Newspaper Research Journal* 14, nos. 3, 4 (Summer-Fall 1993), 34, 35.

younger readers. Worse, the once-young Baby Boomers[74] were clearly not following the industry's expectations that they, like their parents, would develop a newspaper habit as they grew up and settled down. Researchers began to talk about a "generational shift."[75] They noted, however, that readership levels were high for college students – they just weren't reading the local dailies.[76] Alternative and campus publications drew students' attention and loyalty, prompting two journalism scholars, George Thurlow and Katherine Milo, to ask if the industry wasn't ignoring the obvious – that efforts to draw readers might be best based on what the prized demographic was already reading?

> If daily newspapers are going to recapture readers, they may have to reinvent their products to attract these young college students. They may have to introduce products that are free, that are less government meeting-oriented and more issue-oriented, and that contain healthy sections of listings and leisure-time coverage.[77]

Women, 60 percent of whom read a newspaper daily in 1991, according to Simmons research, make up 52 percent of the population and are more likely than men to make buying decisions. Therefore, a drop of seven percentage points since 1981 in female daily readers had publishers concerned that advertising might slip. *The Wall Street Journal* reported in 1992 that major chains, including Knight-Ridder, Thomson Corp., and Scripps Howard, are "prodding their papers to be more appealing to women." Thomson, for example, "started adding more life-style news after determining last year that the category was getting only half

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[74] "Baby Boomers" are those born in the post-WWII era, with the numbers peaking in 1958-59.

[75] Albert Gollin, *An Assessment of Trends in U. S. Newspaper Circulation and Readership* (Reston, Va.: American Newspaper Publishers Association, 1991), 10. For a discussion on the relationship of age to newspaper readership, see Meyer, *Vanishing Newspaper*, 14-22.

[76] Thurlow and Milo, 36.

[77] Ibid., 37.

the space devoted to sports."[78] The need to appeal to women had been "answered" in the past by establishing separate women's sections, but there were problems with that in a time when women wanted to be not separate but definitely equal. Some people thought that the new "topic" system might be a way to incorporate women's interests into the main pages on an equal footing with men's.

Reader as Editor

Meanwhile, about eight years before topic teams made industry news and as The Newspaper Project came to a close, the largest newspaper chain in the country was preparing to put its extensive reader research into effect.

Gannett's launch of *USA Today* on Sept. 15, 1982, put topical journalism on front stage: the new paper was divided into four main areas of interest: News, Money, Sports, and Life. Self-billed as the first national newspaper, it was designed for newsstand sale, not subscription. Its vending machines were modeled after television sets, and the part of the newspaper that showed (referred to as "above the fold") was inspired by the fast-moving images and bright colors that had entranced the desirable "young" demographic as they were growing up.[79] It was news for people in a hurry, on the move, with change ready in their pockets. In a history of mass media textbook, Richard Campbell called *USA Today* a parent of "postmodern" journalism. "It incorporated features closely associated with the postmodern

[78] Daniel Pearl, "Newspapers Strive to Win Back Women," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 May 1992, B1.
[79] Television had also become the main competition in news delivery. A 1963 Roper poll found that television "had ousted newspapers as the prime news source." Michael Emery, and Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* 8th ed., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), 490.

style," he wrote, "including an emphasis on surface slickness over substantive news and the use of brief news items that appealed to readers' short attention span."[80]

Edited to appeal as well as inform, it caused shockwaves when it led[81] its first front page with the death of Princess Grace of Monaco rather than the London assassination of Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel, whose country was in the midst of a bloody war. News of the former American actress was what people were talking about, decreed Al Neuharth, *USA Today*'s publisher, founder, and de-facto editor, after taking an informal poll in the lobby bar of the Capital Hilton Hotel. Thus it was ruled the most important story and played on the front page accordingly.[82] It may have been the only U.S. paper to run the Kelly story as the lead. That was fine by Neuharth, who was looking to produce something different.

USA Today, distinguished by quick reads, eye-catching color artwork, technically advanced photo reproduction, and reader-grabbing stories, was harshly and widely derided within the industry and profession; its nickname was McPaper. "It has no serious set of priorities," Ben Bagdikian wrote.

> Stories are played up or down not because of their inherent importance but on the basis of their potential for jazzy graphics or offbeat features. If USA Today accomplishes only partly what its promotion predicts, which is to make a major impact on newspaper reading, it will be no gain for the reading public, which gets a flawed picture of the world each day from the new paper, and a serious blow to American journalism, since the paper represents the primacy of packagers and market analysts in a realm where the news judgment of reporters and editors has traditionally prevailed.

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[80] Richard Campbell, *Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 251-252.

[81] To lead with a story means to package or present it visually as the most important news of the day.

[82] Peter Pritchard, *The Making of McPaper: The Inside Story of USA Today* (Kansas City: Andrews, McMeel & Parker, 1987), 6, 21.

Four years later, in 1986, *USA Today* had an audited circulation of 1.4 million, making it the second-largest newspaper in the country after *The Wall Street Journal*. It still lost money, but less of it. In 1985, its operating loss had been $102 million. At the end of 1986, it posted a loss of $70 million. Advertising and circulation continued to grow. In January 1986, Neuharth addressed the students of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, telling them that "much of *USA Today*'s success has been from listening to the reader – not editors and publishers and other so-called experts – and giving those readers what they say they want."[83]

That philosophy was evident from the start, and not just in the coverage of Princess Grace. When *USA Today* was less than a week old, Jonathan Yardley of the *Washington Post* wrote that its ability to divine what people were interested in was its "real revolution." But Yardley's article, published in the Style section and written in the first person, was hardly flattering.

> Like parents who take their children to a different fast-food joint every night and keep the refrigerator stocked with ice cream, *USA Today* gives its readers only what they want. No spinach, no bran, no cranberry juice, no liver. The world according to *USA Today* is not ordered by events but by the perceptions of its readers – as, of course, those perceptions are perceived by *USA Today*. Hard judgments about the relative weight of events go by the board; what counts is figuring out what the customers want, and coming up with an ample supply of it.

He called the approach a "radical departure."[84] TV journalist Linda Ellerbee quipped that "it doesn't rub off on your hands, or on your mind."[85] *Washington Post* executive editor Ben Bradlee said that if *USA Today* was a good newspaper, he was "in the wrong business."

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[83] Pritchard, 339-340.

[84] Jonathan Yardley, "A Paper for a U.S.A. On the Go," *Washington Post*, 20 September 1982, C1.

[85] Al Neuharth. *Confessions of an S.O.B*. (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 157.

Neuharth agreed, telling his staff "Bradlee and I finally agree on something. He is in the wrong business."[86] Seven months after the launch, *USA Today*'s circulation topped 1 million.[87] In 1986, Simmons Market Research Bureau reported that the paper had 4.8 million readers per day, the most of any U.S. daily newspaper.[88]

Changing Content and Presentation

In 1990, as the *Orange County Register* embarked on its topic-based, beat-changing experiment to reconnect with its readers, *USA Today* was flourishing. Its style had influenced newspapers throughout the country, leading to flurries of weather maps and seemingly endless debate over optimum lengths of stories; the extent to which stories should be "packaged" and "briefed" into news nuggets; the choice of which stories should run and where; the importance of including "foreign" news in domestic publications; and the extent to which news judgment should be influenced by polls, surveys, and market research and decisions. At Wharton, Neuharth boasted – as he often did – that *USA Today* was the most imitated newspaper in America. "They called us McPaper," he said in repeated interviews, "but everybody's stealing our McNuggets."[89]

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[86] *Ibid*.,156.

[87] Price Waterhouse certification recorded *USA Today*'s circulation at 1,109,587 as of 24 April 1983. Source: *Gannett USA Today Timeline*, http://www.usatoday.com/media_kit/pressroom/pr_timeline.htm.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Pritchard, 340. See also George Ritzer, "An Introduction to McDonaldization," in *The McDonaldization of Society,* 3d (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press, 2000), 15. Also John M. McGuire, "Paper Pioneer Pulls No Punches with *USA Today*: Al Neuharth Left His Mark on Journalism," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 18 May 1992, D1. Also Dan Balz, "McPaper' Makes Critics Sit Up and Take Note," *Washington Post*, 13 March 1983, F1. Also William Glaberson, "After Decade of Big Losses, *USA Today* Has First Profit," *New York Times*, 10 January 1994, D1. Also Michael Isikoff, and Sandra Sugawara, "*USA Today* Turns Skeptics into Believers: Five-Year-Old Newspaper Teaching Old Industry New Tricks," *Washington Post*, 16 September 1987, F1.

Research backs him up. Sandra Utt and Steve Pasternack, who credit *USA Today* with sparking a design revolution in newspapers, found in a late 1980s survey of 93 daily newspaper editors that nearly half used the Gannett paper for design ideas.[90] In 1991-92, George Gladney surveyed 230 large U.S. dailies to see how far they had adopted *USA Today* innovations in terms of "striking formats" and "brief, light articles to entertain its readers." He found that the large, independent papers, such as *The New York Times*, "feel that they cannot compromise on the information they provide to the public, while non-traditional papers cater to the public's fancies in order to boost circulation and profits." His research indicated that *USA Today* formats were embraced by group- or chain-owned papers as well as those of small circulations that were independent.[91]

The changes were less popular among many reporters. In 2002, the *Los Angeles Times* reported: "Still, for many working journalists, there are few things quite so depressing as poking their heads out of a hotel room and finding *USA Today* hanging on the handle."[92] The paper's nickname was "Useless Today" and those employed by Gannett papers and happy about it were impolitely dubbed Gannettoids. For journalists in the newsrooms of the 1980s and 1990s, mockery fought off the specter of what they feared could happen to them, something they defined as bottom-line journalism, marked by management practices brought over from the business side of the wall, and saw as superficiality at the cost of substance.

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[90] Sandra H. Utt, and Steve Pasternack. "How They Look: An Updated Study of American Newspaper Front Pages," *Journalism Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (1989): 621-627.

[91] George A. Gladney, "The McPaper Revolution? *USA Today*-Style Innovation at Large U. S. Dailies," *Newspaper Research Journal* 13, nos. 1, 2 (Winter-Spring 1992): 54-72.

[92] Tim Rutten, "'McPaper' at 20: A Brief List of Successes," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 September 2002, E1. See also, Anthony Violanti, "McPaper Becomes a Staple for Readers," *Buffalo News*, 8 November 2002, C4.

Toward the close of 1993, Eugene Roberts, who had quit as executive editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1990 after publicly protesting further newsroom budget cuts, told the National Press Club:

> Today, as competition diminishes and disappears, many newspapers seem to be in a race to see which can be the most shortsighted and superficial. We are relying too much – far too much – on weather maps, charts, graphs, briefs and color. If we had looked upon these devices as nothing more, or less, than desirable improvements, then our papers would have been all the richer for the additions. But in far too many newspapers, we introduced these devices while slashing newsroom budgets and news holes. The result, all too often, has been that instead of becoming additions to news coverage, the devices have become substitutes for news coverage. And this, in a word, is folly. We, of course, introduced many of the devices in order to reach out to marginal readers and non-readers. This was good. But when we started cutting back on substance, we put serious, devoted readers at risk by becoming less essential to them. And this was, and is, a very bad trade-off. I think, quite simply, that we are imperiling newspapers in the name of saving them.[93]

The 25/43 experiment

For journalists who didn't want to be seen as pandering to low taste, Knight-Ridder's 1990 experiment in Boca Raton, Florida, was a travesty. The *Boca Raton News*, newly spiffed up with a pink flamingo logo and marketed in pink vendor boxes, was the result of $2 million in research aimed at finding a solution to failing readership among 25- to 43-year-olds. Because the studies say less than half of readers continue reading stories when they jump from one page to another, jumps were banned. News briefs were shorter than *USA Today*'s, and the paper was spiced with "color graphics and fun facts and cute features like 'Today's Hero' and 'Critter Watch.'"[94] To lure women, the financial news section was

[93] Eugene L. Roberts Jr., "Substance in Newspapers," *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 December 2003, D1. The commentary, which also appeared in the *American Journalism Review*, was excerpted from a speech given by Roberts in November at the National Press Club after Roberts received its Fourth Estate Award.

renamed "Your Money" and was followed by "a spate of fluffy profiles of women who manage local department stores and resort clubs."[95]

The emphasis on brevity resulted in truncated reportage. On February 12, 1991, the lead story – "Bush: Ground War On Hold" – consisted of four paragraphs. Other stories gave rise to what became known as the Boca Jump. The story would hold to the front page, as did the lead story on January 17, 1991, the day after coalition forces launched the air war against Iraq. It was eleven paragraphs, but it referred the reader inside the paper where there were maps, charts, and stories.[96] One observer noted that

> "[n]ational and world news briefs are accompanied by numbered maps. On January 2, for example, the number 6 on London in the world map connected with item number 6, which explained that James and Charlotte had been declared the most popular first names for children in that city."[97]

An intense amount of research and planning went into the experiment. A former *News* editor, Pat Elich, recalls that "[m]embers of the 25/43 Project brainstormed with more than 200 editorial and other Knight-Ridder employees in six cities, then zeroed in on Boca Raton-area residents and advertisers. Focus groups were asked what they worry about, what they do in their spare time, and so forth." In spring 1991, after seven months of operation, the investment looked good in terms of circulation – up 4,500 to 26,500 – but readers were being lured with artificially low subscription rates. The news hole was up between 15 percent and 20 percent and the paper was about 30 percent larger.

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[94] Howard Kurtz, "Slicing, Dicing News to Attract the Young: Florida Paper Aims to Buck Trend of Declining National Readership," *Washington Post*, 6 January 1991, A1.

[95] Kurtz.

[96] Sally Deneen. "Doing the Boca: An Interim Report from a Reinvented Newspaper," *Columbia Journalism Review,* May/June 1991, 15.

[97] Ibid.

Reaction from readers appears to have been mixed and depended on what readers were looking for, as seen in this article about the *News* from *The Washington Post*:

> ‘“They’ve changed some of the emphasis to yuppie issues as opposed to bread-and-butter government issues,” said Steven Abrams, 32, a Boca Raton council member. “I’d like to see more coverage of government.” But Abrams’s wife, Debbie, 31, said she loves the new format because she is busy with their 17-month-old daughter. “I can find exactly what I’m interested in,” she said. “It’s a quick read, yet you feel you have some information.”[98]

Staff reactions varied as well. The city hall reporter said she was frustrated about having to “cover a city council hearing in 18 lines.” She said that people asked her “where’s the news?” Editor Wayne Ezall said the short stories show respect for readers’ time. Few are interested in politics, he said, and the newspaper should not shove it down their throats. “If readers said they wanted more comics and less foreign news, in a market-driven economy, I’m going to give them more comics and less foreign news.”[99]

Some of the innovations made it into other papers. The *Orange County Register* picked up on the *News*’ how-to-read-the-stock-tables guide; other Knight-Ridder papers adopted ad indexes and Page 2 digests; and the “Boca Jump” made it to the *Kansas City Star*. But as the *Columbia Journalism Review*’s reporter noted, not all the *Kansas City Star* reporters were pleased, if the lyric posted on the paper’s newsroom bulletin board was any indication. Sing to the tune of “Beer Barrel Polka”:

> Roll out the Boca, we’ll have a paper that’s quick
> Roll out the Boca, too many words make you sick
> Keep it all nice and easy
> Makin’ more money’s the trick
> Now we’re gonna roll out the Bocas
> Until the circulation numbers click![100]

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[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid.

Perhaps Boca Raton's key connection with the formation of topic teams, however, was the broadened definition of news "beyond government and crime to include stories about how people actually live their lives."[101]

Baby boomers liked "The Flamingo News." In October 1991, Knight-Ridder announced that surveys and focus groups "show that the target group of the Boca Raton makeover overwhelmingly approves." Sixty-five percent of the boomers said the paper was better than before. But while circulation was higher than expected, advertising was problematic. Single-topic tabloid sections, popular with the readers, were not popular with advertisers. Neither were advertisers as wild as the readers were about innovative changes in ad formats – offering chart-style breakdowns of information for buyers on such things as houses,[102] for example. In the newsroom, "reader-friendly" proved not to be editor-friendly; compiling all those nuggets and briefs and doing all that planning was time and effort intensive.

At the end of 1991 and nearly $3 million, Knight-Ridder ended its experiment – what Knight-Ridder chairman and chief executive officer James K. Batten called his "weapons lab"[103] – and the funding and support that went with it. Circulation dropped, reaching 17,000 in 1995 and 13,000 in 1997 when it was sold to an Alabama-based publisher, Community Newspaper Holdings Inc. The newsroom went from a staff of 45 to about half that. Skip

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[101] George Garneau, "Reading Readers: Innovations Tested at the *Boca Raton News* Are Spreading to Other Knight-Ridder Newspapers," *Editor and Publisher*, 11 January 1992, 16.

[102] Mark Fitzgerald, "25/43 Project a Reader Success: Knight-Ridder's Remake of the *Boca Raton News* Is Well Received By Targeted Baby Boomers; Advertiser Jury Still Out," *Editor and Publisher*, 26 October 1991, 10.

[103] Patrick M. Reilly, "Friendly Format: Knight-Ridder Makes a Costly New Effort to Engage Its Readers – Chain Sees *Boca Raton News* as Newspaper of Future," *Wall Street Journal*, 6 December 1990, A1.

Sheffield, a writer for the *News* for more than 25 years, said in 1998 that they "don't have the resources without Knight-Ridder. It's tough."[104] What he might also have added was that, without advertising revenue, even pleasing readers wasn't enough.

Reader friendly

For a while, it seemed as if every publication, not just newspapers, wanted to be reader friendly. Budgets, cookbooks, Bibles, histories, environmental documents. It was the marketing buzzphrase of the 1980s and 1990s, so well known that it could be used in headlines with no fear that readers would miss its meaning.[105] "City budget will be more reader-friendly," announced the *Seattle Times* in 1990. Three years later, the paper itself was the example in its headline: "Tomorrow's *Times* more reader-friendly." Next year, *The Times-Picayune*, in New Orleans, announced its "Design is 'reader-friendly.'"

"Reader friendly" crossed borders. In 1994, Tran Ngoc Chau, editor of the *Saigon Times*, explained how Vietnamese news publications had changed since free-market journalism replaced governmental subsidization in 1986. "The Vietnam press now considers the reader the king," he said. "So we have changed our methods. We choose carefully what to publish – what the reader needs, not what the government wants."[106] In Canada, a top editor at the *Ottawa Citizen* described his paper's foray into the fray.

> Every few years, newspapers suddenly develop an urge to get in touch with their readers. Usually this urge coincides with a slump in circulation, the emergence of a new competitor or the latest fad from newspaper research

[104] Michael Freedman, "The Little Paper That Couldn't," *New Times*, Broward edition, 26 November 1998, http:// www.browardnewtimes.com/1998/112698/news2.html.

[105] Missing the meaning because it was too obscure or difficult to understand would not be reader-friendly at all.

[106] Richard Dudman, "Vietnam's Journalists Now Reader-Friendly," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 13 April 1994, A6.

> centers in the U.S. For the *Citizen*, all three are relevant right now: Like that of most Canadian dailies, our circulation has suffered during the recession; the biggest competition isn't so much another newspaper as a tug-of-war with many contenders for your shrinking free time; finally, the American media gurus have pronounced that newspapers must be "reader-friendly."[107]

The definition of "reader friendly" varied from newspaper to newspaper, possibly from journalist to journalist. The subject was, in newsroom parlance, a "talker." It provoked heated discussion. For some, it was a sincere and needed effort to communicate important information in meaningful, direct, ways. For others, it was marketing hype, window dressing, and a serious threat to "real" journalism. Many newsroom changes were justified in the name of "reader friendly," including participating in focus groups, writing about different subjects in different ways and, sometimes, forming topic teams around subjects that readers were perceived as wanting covered. The mindset one had about "reader friendly" likely carried over to things one was asked to do in its service.

USA Today and the *Boca Raton News* were described by their creators as driven by readers' interests and designed with the readers in mind. They were the "poster children" of the movement, serving as highly visible examples. Less obvious and less heralded were early efforts by some of the large metropolitan dailies, including *The Los Angeles Times, The Boston Globe, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal,* and *The Christian Science Monitor*. By the end of the 1980s, *The New York Times* had phased in changes to its back sections, was beginning to run more feature stories on the front page, and was gearing toward color. *The Wall Street Journal* added a "Money" section in 1980, followed by "Money and

[107] Peter Calamai, "Your Reader-Friendly Editors Walk into the Fiery Furnace," *Ottawa Citizen*, 28 March 1992, B6.

Investing" in 1989. *Weekend Journal* debuted in 1998, *Personal Journal* in 2002.[108] "I don't degrade soft news," said Thomas Winship, retired editor of the *Boston Globe*. "It's trend reporting. That's about all that's left for us, and it's a mighty fine segment of news to concentrate on."[109]

"Editors have reacted to the whips of television and changing lifestyles," ANPA reported in 1988. "They have been prodded by *USA Today* and stimulated by high-quality color and computer-driven graphics." At the same time, it noted, they're trying to maintain their watchdog role. "We got into the business to change the world," said N. Christian Anderson, editor of *The Orange County Register*. "But we're all in the business of marketing. And in our stomachs, we have to come to grips with that concept."[110]

Not everyone could. In 1987, Bill Kovach quit as editor of the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*[111] after fighting with the paper's owners, Cox Enterprises Inc. The chain management wanted to market its papers by publishing more stories that were "lighter" and livelier and by making format changes Kovach felt edged out hard news. Kovach pushed for more investigative stories; Cox didn't consider them sufficiently reader friendly.[112] Kovach's

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[108] Lawrence J. Goodrich, "Daily Papers Undergo TV-Age Overhaul," *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 November 1989, 7.

[109] Haya El Nasser, "Newspapers Draw Fewer Readers; Publishers Brace for the Future," *USA Today*, 24 April 1989, B1.

[110] El Nasser, B1

[111] The staffs of the two newspapers merged in 1982 but continued separate publication. The *Journal* was an afternoon paper, the *Constitution* an evening. The two papers became the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in November 2001, publishing in the morning.

[112] El Nasser, B1.

two-year tenure as editor won the paper two Pulitzer Prizes, something that hadn't happened there in twenty years.[113] He was replaced by Ron Martin, first editor of *USA Today*.[114]

Some ten years later, "reader friendly" was firmly entrenched in journalists' lives – but after ten years of battling for circulation and readership, the marketing aspect of the concept was dominant in their minds, not the journalistic possibilities. Iver Peterson, of *The New York Times*, summed up many editors' relationships with "reader friendly" in 1997:

> Instead of nurturing bright young reportorial talent, they complain, editors now spend hours soothing the feelings of angry readers and advertisers. Instead of driving to the heart of the news and letting the chips fall where they may, they must listen to focus group members who want more items they can hang on their refrigerators, which generally means more articles about kids and their dogs. Instead of standing up for the independence of the editorial process, exempt from every trammel and temptation, editors these days wrangle with marketing directors who say "the product" has to be "more reader friendly."[115]

Profitability

The newspaper industry is one of the most profitable industries in the nation and has been so for decades. During the 1980s, newspapers averaged 17 percent pretax operating margins and asset growth of about 16 percent annually. Many groups averaged higher. Dow Jones and Thomson averaged about 30 percent pretax operating margin and Gannett Co. about 25 percent during that time. To maintain those profits, individual papers were often

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[113] After leaving the Atlanta papers, Bill Kovach was appointed a Nieman Fellow and remained as curator until 2000. He is the founding director of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, which began in June 1997.

[114] Ron Martin was succeeded as editor of the *Atlanta-Constitution* in 2002 by Julia Wallace, who was promoted from within. Wallace was earlier on the staff of the *Ledger-Star*, which merged with the *Pilot* to become the *Virginian-Pilot*. One of her editors was Sandra Mims Rowe, whom she credits as a mentor.

[115] Iver Peterson, "Editors Discuss Their Frustrations in the Age of Refrigerator-Magnet Journalism," *New York Times*, 14 April 1997, D9.

expected to "achieve returns on sales of as much as 45 percent and 50 percent. By the mid-1990s, those margins and returns had declined about 17 percent,"[116] but were still well above other manufacturers' results.

The expectations of the parent company – really, the directives – have discernable consequences for readers and newsroom journalists. *The Times Herald-Record*, a Dow Jones-owned (Ottaway subsidiary) daily with 82,935 circulation based in Middletown, N.Y., in three months reduced the number of pages it printed, cut back on travel and entertainment, and left job vacancies unfilled to meet its 2001 profit-margin goal of 32 percent, which was expected to be met every three months. The thinner paper "hasn't gone unnoticed by readers," its editor, Michael Levine, said, and he worried about the long-term effect on quality. '"I'm so tired of hearing about profit margins,' he laments. 'If the economy's down some, why aren't profit margins down some?"'[117]

The bulk of a newspaper's revenue – between 70 and 80 percent – is derived from advertising.[118] Most of its expenses are attributed to personnel[119] and production, of which the single largest cost is newsprint.[120] What a newspaper sells is not news, per se, but the

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[116] Robert G. Picard, "The Economics of the Daily Newspaper Industry," in Alison Alexander, James Owers, and Rod Carveth, eds., *Media Economics: Theory and Practice,* 2nd (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), 111-116.

[117] Lucia Moses, "Parental Pressure Builds at Public Companies," *Editor and Publisher*, 9 April 2001, 18.

[118] Leonard Mogel, *The Newspaper: Everything you need to know to make it in the newspaper business* (Pittsburgh: GATV Press, 2000), 150. Circulation revenue accounts for 20 percent to 35 percent of the income. J. C. Busterna, "Concentration and the Industrial Organization Model," in R.G. Picard, J.P. Winter, M.McCombs, and S. Lacy, eds., *Press Concentration and Monopoly: New Perspectives on Newspaper Ownership and Operation* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1988), 35-53.

[119] Labor costs require about 40 percent of operation revenues. Picard, "Economics," 124.

[120] Production costs account for approximately 45 percent of operating revenues, with newsprint accounting for as much as 25 percent. Picard, "Economics," 123.

attention of readers that advertisers want to reach.[121] Newspapers sell influence and access; in marketing jargon, they sell "eyeballs." When a newspaper wants to cut expenses, it looks past fixed costs – such as rent and debt service – and addresses variable costs, such as the use of newsprint and personnel. "Doing more with less" became a cliché it was heard so often during the belt-tightening years of the 1980s and 1990s.

Usually the phrase's meaning was tied to what people had to do with fewer resources – and fewer people. But it also applied to circulation where a more selective philosophy came into play. Newspapers no longer particularly wanted the low-income non-buyer as a reader to swell its circulation size. What they wanted were the cash- or credit-rich readers who would be welcome in their advertisers' stores. There's a joke that explains the concept: A tabloid owner boasted of his paper's high circulation numbers to a merchant. "Yes, but your readers are my shoplifters," the merchant replied.[122]

Nor did newspaper strategists want the readers who cost too much to serve, such as those who lived far away or in less populated regions. Robert Picard noted that "some newspapers in non-competitive markets engage in profit engineering that maximizes their revenue by lowering circulation to achieve optimal output levels."[123]

Targeted circulation

Gilbert Cranberg, an editor at the *Des Moines Register* before becoming a professor at the University of Iowa, addressed several articles to the subject of circulation. In one for the

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[121] This is referred to as the Dual Product Market theory, explored in Robert G. Picard, *Media Economics: Concepts and Issues* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1989).

[122] Gilbert Cranberg, "Trimming the Fringe," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March-April 1997, 52.

[123] Picard, "Economics," 118.

Columbia Journalism Review, he recounted how Joel R. Kramer, publisher of the (Minneapolis) *Star-Tribune*, reacted to a 4 percent circulation loss that coincided with a 32 percent higher price hike in circulation services over three years: "We are a healthier business if we are charging readers more and accepting a somewhat smaller circulation."[124] Cranberg continued:

> Indeed, the Newspaper Association of America, the voice of publishers, looks benignly on declining newspaper penetration, finding much of it "self-induced by solid business decisions," As members were advised in an NAA report, "1995 Circulation Facts, Figures, and Logic": "Good business decisions are not always volume driven. One of the newspaper's most basic and fundamental principles is changing. That is, more is not necessarily better; better is better." The objective: measure readership by "market effectiveness" instead of by penetration numbers. For "market effectiveness" read: providing advertisers with readers who possess the upscale demographics merchants fancy.[125]

The practice of excluding demographically undesirable areas on a geographic basis is derogatorily called "redlining."[126] In journalism, many consider it an ethically bankrupt circulation strategy at odds with the profession's public service aspect.[127] The public got a rare glimpse into newspapers' inner workings in 1994 when Ted Fang, publisher of the tri-weekly *San Francisco Independent*, accused the daily *San Francisco Examiner* of predatory pricing and redlining. "If you live in a black neighborhood you can't subscribe to the *Examiner*," he said. "If that's not redlining, I don't know what is." *The Examiner* replied that it was a "safety" issue because some independent carriers refused to deliver to certain areas.

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[124] Cranberg, "Trimming," 52.

[125] Ibid.

[126] "Redlining" is also a "red-flag" word; it is generally associated with illegal discrimination, on the basis of "place," against low-income, elderly, and minority people with regard to loans, insurance, hiring, and other financial matters.

[127] See, for example, James D. Squires, *Read All About It: The Corporate Takeover of America's Newspapers* (New York: Times Books, 1993).

A vocal public debate ensued, at one point involving some 150 community activists who rallied in support of the *Independent*.[128]

Targeting subscribers is but one part of the circulation picture. When those subscribers are seen as potential clients for advertisers, and the publication seeking advertisers is not *Main Street Gazette* but *Main Street Gazette*, subsidiary of Multipaper Corp., a publicly traded entity with national holdings, it is the parent company's amassed circulation that is of interest. In other words, 150,000 well-ZIPped readers at Multipaper's *Paper A* and 247,000 desirable readers from Multipaper's *Paper B* add up to 397,000 in marketable circulation and a better media buy for a large advertiser than the single papers alone could offer. Multipaper gets the stability of large-scale advertisers, the cachet and benefits of attracting "name" brands in which there is generally high interest, and possible economies of scale.

In the early 1990s, various Multipapers discovered they could benefit by owning papers in geographic proximity, a method called "clustering,"[129] which gives the parent company a strong regional presence and economies of scale and place. In 1990, 302 of the 1,611 daily newspapers in the United States were clustered (19 percent); at the end of 1997, 25 percent of U.S. dailies were clustered (372 papers). In 1998, seventy four companies controlled at least one newspaper cluster.[130] "The ultimate cost-cutting prize is having two or

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[128] M. L. Stein, "Battle for Ad Dollars Turns Nasty," *Editor and Publisher*, 21 May 1994, 9-10. Ted Fang bought the *Examiner* from the Hearst Corporation in 2000, then sold it to Philip Anschutz in January 2004 after transforming it from a paid-circulation broadsheet to a free daily tabloid.

[129] Other terms for clusters include "strategic marketing groups" and "regional groups." See Jack Bass, "State of the American Newspaper: Newspaper Monopoly," *American Journalism Review*, July-August 1999, 64.

[130] Robert Neuwirth, "Clustered Papers Hold Readers, Study Says," *Editor and Publisher*, 14 March 1998, 33.

more papers share the same printing plant," the *American Journalism Review* reported in 1999.

> But even when this isn't possible, nearby papers may share overhead costs such as accounting, they may pool their regional sports coverage or their state and regional political coverage, and (although this is rare) they may even share a centralized copy desk. … But while the economic advantages of geographic concentration become more obvious every day, the implications to readers and to journalism are less clear.[131]

The 1990s were the "busiest decade ever for newspaper acquisitions," Owen Van Essen, president of a merger-and-acquisition company, reported. "Unlike the two previous decades, the greatest amount of activity occurred between newspaper groups, rather than independently owned family papers selling to big groups."[132]

All of these circulation- and revenue-related grouping issues have direct relevance to content and, thus, to the topics that drive content, coverage and assignments. A newspaper with topic teams – staffers charged with developing coverage of designated topics – arguably would be in a good strategic position for reinforcing the manner and direction of that newspaper's content. Targeting content toward the interests of economically desirable readers is another way to manipulate circulation and, unlike some forms of redlining, it is legal. In the same way, targeting content toward a broader distribution area – like that of clustered newspapers – can be accomplished by focusing on broader, not-specifically-local issues, thereby increasing opportunities for running copy in more than one publication, requiring fewer employee resources and appealing to an increased number of national-chain advertisers.

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[131] Bass.

[132] "A Decade of Deals: Dailies Changed Hands 856 Times in the '90s; 77 Times in 1999," *Presstime*, February 2000, 33, http:// www.naa.org/presstime/0002/decade.html.

Newsroom anxiety and change

It would be hard to overestimate the angst that existed in many, if not most, newspaper newsrooms of the 1980s and 1990s in America. Daily journalists felt under attack from without and within, if the people who owned and managed the papers they worked for counted as "within." Not everyone in the newsroom was sure who counted as "family," especially as the rate of newspaper buyouts continued, driving the growth of media chains and accelerating the demise of the independent paper. For good or ill, chains – the somewhat derogatory term that had been replaced by "group" in general usage – were "bad," independents were "good" in the minds of many. For them, the profitability of a corporation counted against the creation of a happy newsroom.

Newsrooms went through many changes during this time. Computers eliminated some tasks – and jobs – and created others. Financial expectations entered a new realm and the newsroom became attuned to quarterly reports in a way it never had before. Losses that would barely faze other industries resulted in newspaper downsizings. Readers proved ever more fickle, and there was thought that journalism itself might have found itself in a wrong-headed place. Until the 1990s, the basic newsroom structure remained the same as it had for decades.

There was no dearth of oracles advocating change. Christine D. Urban, president of a market research and consulting company that specialized in newspapers, said in 1989 that "[t]here will have to be a profound rethinking (of) … all the basic conventions of the newspaper. The bulk, the size, the format, the story count, the graphics…." Gil Thelen, executive editor of *The* (Columbia, S.C.) *State*, told Carl Sessions Stepp in a mid-1990s

article on reinvented newsrooms that "[y]ou have to make structural change if you're going to sustain other changes in news philosophy and approach. The power of the old way is so bloody incredible that you've got to shake it up, hang it up, scare the shit out of it, whatever you can. And the only effective way I've found to do that is through the structural route.''[133]

Protest

Monday, March 19, 2001, a dam burst. Jay Harris, publisher of the *San Jose Mercury News*, resigned in protest over Knight Ridder's economic policies in particular and the industry's relation to its newsrooms and journalists in general. Harris, who began on the news side of journalism, spoke for many who "worry that in their quest to satisfy Wall Street's demand for higher margins, newspapers risk sacrificing their quality, their commitment to their communities and their long-term survival."[134]

Harris had no quibble with the expansion of the (San Jose) *Mercury News* staff from 376 in 1995 to 415 in 2000, or with the increase in its editorial budget from $20.6 million to $28.1 million during that same time. An overall five-year increase in newsroom staff and budget fails to tell the whole picture, however. When profits dip, layoffs and buyouts are made and corners cut. Years of recurring famine, emotional upheaval, personnel turnover, make-do routines, uncertainty, and stress take their toll in countless ways that can erode quality. But it *was* an economic pressure that precipitated his resignation. Earlier that day, Harris had received a memo from the president of the corporation's newspaper division. It

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[133] Carl Sessions Stepp, "Reinventing the Newsroom," *American Journalism Review*, April 1995, 28-33. Gil Thelen left *The State* in 1998 to join Media General. He was expected to retire in June 2006 as publisher and president of the *Tampa Tribune*. During his tenure at the *Tribune*, he oversaw the development of the News Center, a multimedia campus in downtown Tampa and the site of innovative journalism experiments.

[134] David Shaw, "Dispute Over Newspaper Chain Profit Goals Gets Public Airing," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 March 2001, A15.

said that while profit margins at the *Mercury News* had held between 22 percent and 29 percent over the past decade, "we need to move that range up in order to be in step with the goal to move KR's overall margins up." In his letter of resignation, Harris indicated that money itself, either added or taken away, was not the greatest problem. What it represented was. Referring to the corporation's mission statement, Harris wrote:

> Much greater priority is given today to the business aspects of our enterprise than is given to fulfilling our "public trust." I fear as well that we no longer sense the same level of "moral obligation" to "excel in all that we do" and that our founders' commitment to publishing "high quality newspapers" is no longer the powerful drive in the company that it once was.[135]

Harris made news, provoking comment and discussion to an extent that earlier high-profile "protest" resignations[136] had not. Harris got a "hero's welcome" at the annual convention of newspaper editors two weeks later. Outgoing ASNE President Richard Oppel declared, "As editors we have to be leaders. We must be able to protect the value of journalism. It's not business we serve, it's the public interest."[137] *Charlotte* (N.C.) *Observer* editor Jennie Buckner, during a panel C-SPAN aired in April and jokingly dubbed the "What do we do now that Jay Harris has quit panel,"[138] said that editors must know when to "tighten up" but also needed to know where to draw the line, and needed to be backed by owners against financial pressures from Wall Street. But Harris' most persuasive moments may have come during his speech to the ASNE convention, broadcast live and re-aired often on C-

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[135] Ibid.

[136] Among the dissatisfied were James Squires from the *Chicago Tribune* in 1989, Eugene Roberts from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1990, and Geneva Overholser, and David Westphal, editor and managing editor of the *Des Moines Register* in 1994. See John Morton, "Are Bean Counters Taking Over?" *American Journalism Review*, April 1995, 60.

[137] Icess Fernandez, "Oppel's Term Ends, but Not His Crusade," *ASNE Reporter 2001*, online publication, 3 April 2001, http://www.asne.org/2001reporter/tuesday/lead3.html.

[138] Mary Vuong, and Icess Fernandez, "Kalb Report Addresses Profit vs. Quality," *ASNE Reporter 2001*, online publication, 3 April 2001, http://www.asne.org/2001reporter/tuesday/kalb3.html.

SPAN, where he was given a standing ovation of long duration.[139] Clearly he had touched a nerve in newsrooms across the country. A few weeks later, more than 300 *Mercury News* employees showed their support of Harris and his ideals with a tribute ceremony – and posed for a group picture wearing T-shirts printed with "J."[140] John L. Dotson Jr., publisher of the Knight Ridder-owned *Akron* (Ohio) *Beacon Journal*, also facing cutbacks, said publicly that he respected Harris's decision.[141] Dotson, also weary of bucking the trend, told Knight Ridder in March that he would retire[142] and by June he was gone.[143]

That a debate about profits and newsroom spending could flare up around a Knight Ridder paper was not without irony. For years, Knight Ridder was a journalism success story, a place where quality was valued and the money was, if not lavish, forthcoming.[144] It was the chain that invested nearly $3 million in the 25/43 Project in Boca Raton. In the newspaper world, "Philadelphia Story" referred not to a Barry play or Hepburn movie but the stunning turnaround of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* by then-executive editor Roberts in the 1970s and 1980s. The paper in the 1960s was journalistically challenged: its editor mandated biased

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[139] Howard Kurtz, "Newsroom vs. Boardroom: Ex-Publisher Decries Emphasis on Profits," *Washington Post*, 7 April 2001, C1. Jay Harris' speech was made on 6 April 2001. It is available online at http://www.asne.org/2001reporter/friday/harristranscript6.html. Also, personal observation.

[140] "Mercury News Unit Celebrates 'J' Day," *KnightRidderWatch on Jay Harris*, Web site, 8 May 2001, http://www.knightridderwatch.org/old/Old%20Pages/jayharris.htm.

[141] "Bylines," *American Journalism Review,* April 2001, 8.

[142] Marcus Gleiser, "*Beacon Journal* Publisher Announces His Retirement," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 1 May 2000, C5.

[143] Christopher Stern, "Retired Publisher Elected to Post. Co. Board of Directors," *Washington Post*, 6 July 2001, E3.

[144] Susan J. Paterno, "Whither Knight-Ridder?" *American Journalism Review*, January-February 1996, 18. See also, "The Rise and Decline of Knight Ridder: A Merged Newspaper Company's Journalistic Aspirations Fade Under Corporate Pressure," *Special Anniversary Issue: Columbia Journalism Review*, November-December 2001, 104.

stories about people he didn't like and banned coverage of entire groups, and the paper's top investigative reporter was convicted of extortion after suppressing stories for kickbacks.

In 1969, Walter Annenberg sold the *Inquirer* and his Philadelphia tabloid, the *Daily News*, to what was then Knight Newspapers. Both Philadelphia papers were losing money, but Knight did what Knight had become known for when faced with losses: it spent more money. It hired a new editor who hired 80 additional news staffers. It brought in Roberts, who got five new foreign bureaus, a 20 percent larger newshole,[145] additional wire services, and popular comic strips. In 1982, it put the competition daily[146] out of business; Knight Ridder reacted by putting $5 million more into the *Inquirer*'s news budget. Knight Ridder's reward was that the *Inquirer* accounted for more than half of the news division's growth in 1986 and brought in 13 Pulitzer prizes between then and the time Annenburg left.[147] By the time Roberts left in 1990, the paper had won four more.

In the mid-1990s, Knight Ridder was already perceived as having reordered its priorities.[148] Gene Miller, a "near-legendary" reporter for the *Miami Herald*, a Knight Ridder property, told Stepp that he sensed a change. "I get up, I come to work, I have a good time, I work good stories," he said. "But things are different. Knight Ridder's terribly schizophrenic

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[145] "Newshole" refers to the space given over to news in the published product.

[146] The competition newspaper was *The Philadelphia Bulletin.*

[147] Matthew Cooper, "Hot Chain Nixes Wingo, Buscapades – Nabs Pulitzers, Big Bucks: Knight-Ridder Shows That Newspapers Can be Profitable – and Good," W*ashington Monthly,* September 1987, 17.

[148] For a examination of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that sees early roots in the market concept, see Edward S. Herman, "The Inky and Me: A Study In Market-Driven Journalism," *Z Magazine,* March 1997 http://www.zmag.org/ZMag/articles/mar97herman.htm.

– they speak of quality and they talk of profits. They're so interested in money, and that's not why I became a newspaper man."[149]

"Jay T. Harris' resignation is a powerful moment," Bob Giles, formerly publisher and editor of *The Detroit News* (a Gannett newspaper) and senior vice president of the Freedom Forum, and currently curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University, wrote in the profession's leading trade magazine, *Editor and Publisher*. "A moment in which editors must find their own voice to explain, very publicly, the true nature of newspapers as a business – and to explain, very publicly, why the newspaper business is different from other businesses."

There was a time, he wrote, when the overwhelming challenges of competition and economy were some justification for a fixation on profits. In 2001, however,

> [n]ewspapers are stabilizing their market shares; rebuilding reader trust; making the Internet an ally and a resource; and strengthening their dominance in most local news markets. It is an enviable position, and one that invites owners to rethink their value systems to strike a better balance between the demand for consistent growth in profits and the obligations inherent in managing a public trust. … Jay Harris, a good man, should not leave newspapers in vain.[150]

It was at this point, between April and September 2001 and in the wake of Jay Harris' protest, that the in-depth interviews with topic-team members for this study took place.[151]

The background provided context for the adoption of topic teams in U.S. newspaper newsrooms, and described a newspaper industry and journalism profession in flux. The next chapter reviews discourses relevant to understanding topic teams and their place in the continuing evolution of journalistic practice.

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[149] Carl Sessions Stepp, "The Thrill Is Gone," *American Journalism Review*, October 1995, 14-19.

[150] Bob Giles, "Has the Newspaper Industry Sold Its Soul?" *Editor and Publisher,* 9 April 2001, 20-22.

[151] No interviews took place after 11 September 2001.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Newspaper topic teams are a recent development with a scant body of research directed at them. Vast fields of research, however, deal head-on and tangentially with the concept and implementation of teams and team management as well as broader newspaper issues. These include the literature of business, sociology, psychology, journalism, and mass media communication, along with their various methodologies, theories, and histories. To narrow the search, the choice of pertinent literature was guided (but not limited) by the three broad themes that formed the impetus for this study: work and workplace; culture and values; and management and organization. This review organizes discussion of the extant literature into five categories: topic teams; newsroom structure and management; journalistic routines and newsroom sociology; professional values; and team management and dynamics.

Topic Teams

Three published studies form the core of research in this area; they are the work of John Russial[152]; Mark Neuzil, Kathleen Hansen and Jean Ward[153]; and Ann B. Schierhorn,

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[152] John T. Russial, "Topic-Team Performance: A Content Study," *Newspaper Research Journal* 18, nos. 1, 2 (Winter-Spring 1997): 126.

[153] Mark Neuzil, Kathleen Hansen, and Jean Ward, "Twin Cities Journalists' Assessment of Topic Teams," *Newspaper Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 2.

Fred F. Endres, and Carl Schierhorn.[154] Russial reported on the first topic team at *The* (Portland) *Oregonian*, Neuzil et al. surveyed newsrooms at *The* (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press* for their reactions to a new topic-team system, and Schierhorn et al. conducted a national survey to determine approximately how many newspapers had implemented teams in their newsrooms.

While not the main subject, topic teams figured prominently in Peter Gade and Earnest Perry's work on organizational change at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and Cole Campbell's tenure there as editor,[155] and Gade discovered in his dissertatation research about newspaper industry change that team-based newsroom structures appear to have had an effect on "valued traits" of journalists.[156] In a later study, Gade's findings indicated the expected empowerment of a team-based structure did not occur among newspaper journalists involved in change initiatives. He concluded that organizational change theory might be misapplied in the case of newspaper newsrooms.[157]

Kathleen Valley and Tracy Thompson also took an organizational change approach to their longitudinal study[158] of one newspaper's reorganization utilizing topic teams within a

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[154] Ann B. Schierhorn, Fred F. Endres, and Carl Schierhorn, "Newsroom Teams Enjoy Rapid Growth in the 1990s," *Newspaper Research Journal* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 2.

[155] Earnest Perry and Peter J. Gade, "When Ideas and Reality Collide: A Four-Year Case Study of Editor Cole Campbell's Organizational Change Initiatives at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch," paper presented to the Media Management and Economics Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Phoenix, Ariz., 10 March 2000. See also, Gade and Perry, "Changing the Newsroom Culture: A Four-Year Case Study of Organizational Development at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80 no. 2 (Summer 2003): 327.

[156] Peter J. Gade, "Turbulent Times: A Study of Change in the Newspaper Industry," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1999).

[157] Peter J. Gade, "Newspapers and Organizational Development: Management and Journalist Perceptions of Newsroom Cultural Change," *Journalism and Communication Monographs* 6, vol. 1 (2004).

[158] Kathleen L. Valley and Tracy A. Thompson, "Sticky Ties and Bad Attitudes: Relational and Individual Bases of Resistance to Changes in Organizational Structure," in Roderick M. Kramer and Margaret A. Neale, eds., *Power, politics and influence* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1998): 39-66. Also, Tracy A. Thompson and

full team-oriented newsroom system.[159] The researchers focused on a metropolitan daily over 13 months, from August 1995 to September 1996.[160] They sought to measure both productivity and quality, the details of which will be discussed later in this section. Additionally, Thompson contributed a guide for managers in a Northwestern University booklet on newsroom teams that included a self-reported directory of 48 newspapers that had reorganized by 1997. Listings came from 19 states and Ontario, Canada, and newsroom sizes varied from having 430 employees to 11. [161]

Among unpublished reports are a thesis that explored the adoption of topic teams at *The Star Tribune*,[162] AEJMC conference papers that were preliminary to the above publications and contained unpublished information of interest to this study, and a conference paper that reported on two of the earliest topic teams at *The* (Norfolk, Va.) *Virginian-Pilot*.[163]

Kathleen L. Valley, "Changing Formal and Informal Structure to Enhance Organizational Knowledge," in G. Hamel, C. K. Prahalad, H. Thomas and D. O'Neal, eds., *Strategic Flexibility: Managing in a Turbulent Economy* (Chichester, England: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 1998): 137-154. Also listed as *Harvard Business School Working Paper 98-060*. See also Tracy A. Thompson and Kathleen McGinn (formerly Valley), "The Range (A)" and "The Range (B)," *Harvard Business School Working Papers 9-801-330 and 9-801-331* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, rev. 29 March 2001).

[159] Topic teams coexisted in the newsroom with production and design/art teams, functional process teams that revolved around tasks rather than topics.

[160] Although the identity of the newspaper was obscured for the case study, an article profiling the McClatchy newspapers states that the newspaper in question is the *News Tribune* of Tacoma, Washington. Executive Editor David Zeeck said, '"We're trying to hold on to the parts of teams that work, and eliminate the parts that don't,' … the Thompson case study 'doesn't reflect the paper we are today.'" Susan Paterno, "Is McClatchy Different?" *American Journalism Review,* August-September 2003, 17.

[161] Gary Graham and Tracy Thompson, *Inside Newsroom Teams: An Editor's Guide to the Promise and Problems* (Evanston, Ill.: NMC, 1997).

[162] Mary Niforopulos, "The Minneapolis Star Tribune's Newsroom Restructuring," Master's thesis, University of Minnesota, 2003).

[163] Leslie-Jean Thornton, "Two Topic Teams and How They Grew: Education and Public Life at The Virginian-Pilot," paper presented to the Newspaper Division at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Phoenix, Ariz., 10 March 2000.

Focusing on one topic team

Russial, the first to publish research on topic teams in an academic venue, set the stage with a realistic assessment that suggested a deep understanding of the newsroom process. Interestingly, the same problems he noted with regard to organizational conversions to less-hierarchical structures could serve as a checklist for the challenges scholars face in studying team newsrooms. They include determining the effects of management resistance to worker empowerment; assessing performance despite impressionistic feedback; identifying appropriate performance indicators; and finding a way to produce research capable of generalization at an affordable cost and in a practical and timely manner. He is prescient in saying "one could argue that newsroom topic teams are not true teams," and then observing that "topic teams are certainly more team-like than the more rigid beat systems that preceded them."

His study's measures of success are content and play (where and how a report is displayed in the newspaper) of work produced by the *Oregonian*'s health and science team, one of several launched by the paper in spring 1994. The rest of the paper's topic teams organized in the following months, and by August all eleven were in place and working. Russial had the advantage of a task force report prepared by senior editor Jack Hart in advance of the health and science team's formation. It detailed numerous criticisms of the *Oregonian*'s pre-team coverage; it is this report to which Russial refers in the following, which is quoted for its description of how the team was to function:

> Institution of a team structure was designed to solve or contribute to solving these problems. The six reporters selected for full-time health and science beats were expected to work as a team, develop their own beats and help others at the newspaper assess the importance of wire service health and science stories. The team leader was expected to coordinate the reporters, serve as a liaison with other teams and act as an advocate for health and

> science stories in daily news meetings. The overall intent was to have the team write more and better health and science stories and to have the team stories and other health and science stories displayed more prominently throughout the paper.

Included in the pre-team task force report were the results of a yearlong content analysis conducted by Russial; that analysis was compared to a second one done after the team was in place.[164]

The results of the analysis showed a considerable increase in the number of staff-written stories addressing health and science subjects, with slightly less than half of them produced by non-team staff writers. More space (an increase of 145 percent) was given over to health and science topics after the team began, and the reports appeared across sections (Living, Food or Sports, for example) on a more frequent basis, one of the newspaper's goals for all of its topic teams.

The meaning of these results is somewhat fuzzy, however. As Russial points out, the additional space included more photos and graphics; additional staff time was allocated to the team at its inception, which would be expected to increase output; and the *Oregonian*, under new editor Sandra Mims Rowe, shifted its news values along with its structural transformation, meaning that stories that ran pre-team might not be chosen to run under the revised priorities. These factors make it difficult to isolate the effects that arose solely from team production from those that were more systemic – a shift in presentation style that encouraged larger artwork and the creation of infographics for all stories, for example. The health and science team was a visible team because of the type of subject matter it

[164] Each sample consisted of four constructed weeks. The first covered 1 June 1992 to 31 May 1993. The second covered 1 June 1994 to 31 May 1995. John Russial and Steve Woodward, one of the team reporters, determined categories and coded both samples.

handled,[165] and might have had stronger management support than other teams by virtue of being one of the first to launch. The nurturing or inhibiting effects of feedback from readers and newsroom colleagues is a factor nearly impossible to measure.

It was intriguing to note contextual comments about the inner dynamics of the overall team structure. There was confusion, Russial reported, over which team would do what story, which led to negotiation (and, presumably, delay and some missed stories). Some communication patterns had yet to be formed – a situation that led to some health and science stories appearing in print to the surprise of the health and science team members. Most interesting to this researcher was the report, albeit anecdotal, that the existence of the team led to a rise in morale. Such was not the case at many other newspapers, which leads one to wonder what factors might account for the variation.

His study necessarily suffers from its restriction to one team, an impetus for further research. Russial rightly observed that if one topic team's output increased, other subject matter suffered, but that was not measured by his study. Similarly, if the same increase took place for all the teams and the newshole held steady (no additional pages were given over to news and the ratio of news to advertising material stayed the same), then it could be presumed that some former areas of coverage were not accounted for in the topic-team realm. Nevertheless, the degree, scope, and continuity of improvement suggest that the shift to a team structure contributed substantially to coverage and play. Such measurements do not assess the quality of increased quantity, a thorny issue worthy of addressing in the future. Additionally, Russial makes a strong case for further research by arguing that topic-team

[165] Killer whale research, doctor-assisted suicide, and adult foster care were among the subjects represented in the sample issues.

formation represents a considerable reallocation of scarce resources during a time of increasingly profit-conscious operation.

Topic teams at two newspapers

Slightly more than a year after Russial's second sampling phase ended, Neuzil, Hansen, and Ward undertook a survey of the *Star Tribune* and the *Pioneer Press* newspapers in Minneapolis-St. Paul. The September 1996 census focused on whether members of these two newsrooms felt empowered (more represented in a participatory way) as a result of their paper's conversion from traditional beats to topic teams, and it solicited their views on authority and job tenure. It was distributed to 597 staffers and brought a response rate of 41 percent (244 returns). More than half of the respondents (150) wrote comments in the open-ended portion of the survey.[166] The general reaction was negative: staffers had less authority but more responsibility; more power went to the managers; and more confusion existed over chain of command and story-control issues.

Despite giving an overbroad definition of topic teams, the researchers neatly contextualized the two transformations with extensive detail. The background information clearly revealed the complexity of the change by explaining and comparing hierarchical (traditional) and participatory (team) systems and by illuminating many of the goals, anxieties, and morale-shattering situations that helped shape the time in which these conversions and assessments took place. As was true at the *Oregonian* during Russial's research, much was in flux at the Twin Cities papers, including redesigns that affected production and content at both publications.

[166] According to the authors, the *Star Tribune* employed about 360 newsroom employees and the *Pioneer Press* employed about 240 near the time of the study. Neuzil et al., 5.

Other similarities contributed to the unusual appropriateness of the dual-paper survey. There is the obvious tie: the papers are competitive with each other, circulating in the same two cities and surrounding suburbs despite being published in different, but neighboring, cities. Additionally, the *Star Tribune* and the *Pioneer Press* adopted topic teams within six months of each other in 1995 after lengthy negotiations with the Newspaper Guild. Both wanted the reorganization to help them focus on serving readers and advertisers by taking a marketing approach. Both were owned by journalistically well-regarded corporations: the *Star Tribune* by Cowles Media[167] and the *Pioneer Press* by Knight Ridder.[168]

Both had seen recent corporate changes, however, that indicated new priorities were in play for both organizations. The *Star Tribune* underwent a massive (and controversial) reorganization in 1993. Editor Tim McGuire and publisher Joel Kramer aimed to "achieve real growth in revenue and profit by serving more needs of our reader and marketer customers, with multiple products and services, in and outside the newspaper, while fulfilling the *Star Tribune*'s public service mission."[169] McGuire took on the additional title of general manager with responsibility for assuring selected profit goals. The newsroom became part of a Reader Customer Unit. In 1994, the authors reported, Kramer announced that reader focus was the newspaper's top priority; journalistic excellence ranked second. In St. Paul, the *Pioneer Press* gained a new publisher, Peter Ridder. Soon after his arrival in 1994, he "invested in a $1 million campaign to attract readers with more local, business and

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[167] McClatchy, another highly regarded company, bought the *Star-Tribune* from Cowles Media in 1997.

[168] As of March 2006, the *Pioneer Press* was owned by McClatchy, which acquired it through its purchase of Knight Ridder.

[169] Cited in Neuzil et al., 6, as Joel Kramer, "Creating our own future," *Newsmakers: For and About Star Tribune Employees, Special Edition*, 8 February 1994, 2.

entertainment news, increased amenities for advertisers, and added 11 newsroom positions and seven pages of newshole per week."[170]

There were also similarities in the changes each newsroom made during their reorganizations to topic teams. Both absorbed supervisory editors into the topic teams, usually as team leaders; provided off- and on-site training; and included copy editors in their topic teams (not true of most newspapers that went to the new structure). Neuzil et al. provided this picture of the *Pioneer Press* newsroom:

> [It] eliminated the copy desk, the layout desk, and the features and metro desks. It instituted content teams (the number has fluctuated around 15), assigned copy editors to teams, created a production hub responsible for designing the paper, and flattened the management structure from six layers to four, with about 12 senior editors and 11 team leaders who are responsible for generating content for each section. A total of 50 people changed jobs.[171]

Several findings from the Neuzil et al. study are worth highlighting here with regard to newsroom dynamics, including the observation that "tinkering and refinements" took place at both papers, "with staff concerns and grumblings occasionally breaking out into the local alternative press."[172] One reporter on a smaller-sized team (those of eleven or more members were considered large) said, "I like the interaction with other team members and – to the degree that the ideal is honored – the independence of the team." Another said that belonging to the team "is like being on a small newspaper's staff: I am surrounded and supported by professionals, who believe in me and each other, and that atmosphere has made work a place I enjoy coming to." Complaints included "There's no one minding the store!" and "Stories must be bartered." Ironically, one person reported that the team system led to an increase in

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[170] Neuzil et al., 7. See also, Rebecca Ross Albers, "Extra! Extra!" *Presstime*, June 1994, 55-56.

[171] Neuzil et al., 8.

[172] See also, Burl Gilyard, "The Big Fix Is In – Again," *Twin Cities Reader*, 12-23 July 1996, 6.

top-down story assignments. Another said the shift "caused more competitiveness, bitterness and infighting between team leaders/senior editors and all staffers."

Missing from the published work but included in the conference paper are indications that production time increased under the team system (ten times as many respondents reported so) and that "new nightmares" had been handed off to the night production team. Nearly half of the respondents said more time was spent in meetings and that "[s]imple decisions that used to take 5 minutes now require hours or weeks, plus a cast of thousands, and sometimes don't get made at all." Staffers from both newsrooms reported a "dearth of copy" at times. There were complaints about lack of privacy and the need to police colleagues. Some wanted to control their budgets (presumably the financial kind, judging from the context), hiring decisions, and the configuration of their beats. Fifty-four percent said news quality had declined.[173]

The Neuzil et al. study concluded that topic team systems might be inherently flawed for adoption by journalists or others whose jobs entail creativity and high professional standards. Like Russial, the researchers suggested that topic teams might not be teams in the business- or industry-oriented sense. Both studies indicated that newsroom topic team members have skills that are similar, not complementary, as would be the case in most corporate team structures. (Interestingly, medical and legal teams also require creativity and high standards, but are unlike topic teams in that they are complementary. Medicine and law are often cited when discussing journalism as a profession.) Neuzil et al. suggested that team systems might be counterproductive in newsrooms, basing their conclusion on findings that

[173] Kathleen A. Hansen, Mark Neuzil, and Jean Ward, "Newsroom Topic Teams: Journalists' Assessments of Effects on News Routines and Newspaper Quality," paper presented to the Newspaper Division at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, annual convention, Chicago, July 1997.

> [i]n newsrooms filled with workers who pride themselves on their creativity, staffers may perceive that the team system simply multiplies the opportunities for meddling with individual creative effort. The comments from some of respondents confirmed that the team system was perceived as a means to garner more work out of fewer people, and for managers to exert more control over editorial content.[174]

The study created a picture of staffers who felt demoralized, bossed around, anxious, and betrayed – not at all like the energized topic-teamers at the *Oregonian*. One is left wondering what factors made the difference, what causes and effects might be tied solely to topic teams, and how such assessments might be made in a precise way.

A national trend toward topic teams

The negative tone in Minneapolis/St. Paul was not echoed in the first nationwide survey on the use of newsroom teams conducted barely more than two years later. In early 1999, when Schierhorn, Endres, and Schierhorn asked 455 managing editors of U.S. newspapers what they thought about teams in their newsrooms, the results were resoundingly positive.

It is possible that the results had something to do with editors, not rank and file, being asked to rate initiatives for which they were in large part responsible. The survey instrument, however, was prepared in such a way that hard data probably trumped bias in the responses. Nevertheless, the great value of the survey was its quantification of newspapers using teams in part or in whole, and its confirmation of a tremendous growth spurt of newsroom team adoption in the 1990s.[175]

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[174] Neuzil et al., 14.

[175] See also, Ann B. Schierhorn, Fred F. Endres, and Carl Schierhorn, "Newsroom Teams: A Baseline Study of Prevalence, Organization and Effectiveness," paper presented to the Newspaper Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, annual convention, New Orleans, 4 August 1999.

Using a census survey of newspapers with daily circulations of more than 25,000, the researchers showed not only that the use of teams was growing, but that newspapers of certain sizes had more or less tendency to try them, and that topic teams were most popular among large- and medium-size newspapers. This follows logic, in that newsrooms need to reach a certain level of staffing in order to divide that staff into teams. At that time, newsrooms tended to adhere to an industry standard of hiring one full-time employee per each 1,000 subscribers.

Thirty-seven percent of the 192 usable questionnaires from responding papers reported having some kind of formal team in place.[176] Of those, almost 41 percent of the papers with circulation above 100,000 used topic teams, which nearly matched the 42 percent using topic teams on medium-size papers (circulation 50,001 to 100,000). Only 25 percent of the smaller papers (circulation under 50,000) reported using topic teams.[177] Because the survey asked what types of teams were in use, it was able to find a correlation between newspaper size and topic-team use, and to contrast that with the absence of correlation with regard to circulation and ad hoc or project teams. The figures are less clear as to overall use of topic teams, with 21 percent reporting the use of groups of reporters devoted to specific topics, and 9 percent using on-going teams of reporters, editors, designers, and photographers. Both of these groups could be considered topic teams depending on the newspaper.

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[176] According to the authors, the returned questionnaires produced a sample error of +/- 5.1 percent at a 95 percent degree of confidence. Newspapers that reported having teams then represented a subsample with a resultant larger sample error, which was not given.

[177] According to the authors, this was statistically significant by chi square analysis ($p<.001$).

Also valuable for the study of topic teams was the ranking of topics. The most popular topic was "politics/government," with 61.8 percent of the topic teams devoted to covering it. Lowest on the ranking of sixteen topics was "science/technology" with 17.6 percent of the teams assigned to that coverage area.[178] Because the results were not segregated according to type of team referenced (ongoing topic vs. ad hoc or project), a compilation of reasons newspapers switched to a team system was less useful for topic-team research. The disparity is evident in these figures, for example: about 53 percent of newspapers above 100,000 circulation reported having a formal team structure, but only 41 percent said they had topic teams. Still, those with topic teams are a majority, and the findings can be assumed to be a reasonable guide for further research.

More than 83 of the reorganizations to teams originated with local news management, according to the respondents. The reason cited most often was to "produce more stories relevant to readers." Rated in close proximity were "use staff more efficiently" and "develop more complex stories." By a wide margin, the least important reasons, according to the managing editors, were to "increase paper's advertising" and "increase paper's profits."[179]

Other findings are similarly unable to be isolated with regard to topic teams, but the "reasonable guide" applies to them as well. These include responses about team makeup and size (median size was six members; minimum recommended size was four and the maximum was eight); time of implementation (mostly between 1993 and 1996); desirable characteristics of team members ("ability to work with others" was most often cited;

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[178] The topics, ranked in order of use from most to least, are: politics/government; police/courts; investigative/projects/enterprise; education; general assignment/breaking news; business/economics/consumerism; sports/outdoor; entertainment; medicine/health; leisure (travel/fashion); urban development/transportation/construction; family/home/food; religion; geographic area coverage; environment; and science/technology. See Scheirhorn et al., "Newsroom Teams," Table 1, 6.

[179] Scheirhorn et al., "Newsroom Teams," Table 2, 7.

"humility" was least with 1 percent); story generation (the editors estimated that teams generated 90 percent of the story ideas they took on); and team dynamics (71 percent said the teams operated by consensus with the team leader stepping in if consensus couldn't be reached).

The managing editors said top management was very positive about the team concept; they said staffers were less positive, with the strongest negative comments being that staff members saw less chance for promotion and missed the autonomy of a traditional newsroom. There was general agreement that stress had increased for middle managers, reporters, copy editors, and photographers, but overwhelmingly they said morale had increased, with only 3 percent reporting a decrease overall.[180]

Planning, writing, and interactions among staff were seen as better with teams, and the editors felt the readers got a better paper. Teams tended to put a stronger emphasis on soft news, lose stories "between the cracks," be slower in making decisions, and require "too large" a staff. Most of the editors said general assignment stories worked better with beats, but editors were split on whether teams or beat reporters responded better to breaking news.

Editors who did not use teams said their papers were too small; there was too large an area to cover, and the staff turned over too often. Editors who did not like the team concept said they felt there was insufficient accountability, an inability to adequately cover breaking news or general assignment stories, and a probability it would lower staff production and management efficiency.

The assertion that the team leader's job almost perfectly duplicates that of a city editor would benefit from context beyond that supplied in the research, however. It is true that the team leader is responsible for some assignments, for doing the first edit, for

[180] Scheirhorn et al., "Newsroom Teams," Table 3, 9.

communicating with upper management, and for enforcing deadlines. But the scope of a team leader is far more limited than that of a city editor as it has been practiced for decades, on one hand, and more demanding in other ways. The team leader oversees a team, not a newsroom (or major portion thereof). The leader is responsible for coaching and nurturing a positive team dynamic. In many teams, the leader is responsible for helping team members evaluate each other. At meetings or otherwise, a team leader may gain some insight into what other members of the newsroom are working on, but it is not the comprehensive view that was part and parcel of the city editor's domain and that helped to set coverage parameters.

The authors noted that some 40 percent of team papers had eliminated the title of "city editor." According to contemporary accounts, that was because the job as previously defined could not exist in a team-based newsroom. Subsequent to the survey, however, the title (not the job) has come back into use with a new meaning. *The Virginian-Pilot,* for example, reintroduced the title during a recalibration of its team system after 2001. The paper, which covers five cities, gradually returned in part to a less topical, more geographic, approach by creating five city teams. The team leaders of those teams hold titles of city editor. In spring 2006, the *Pilot*'s newsroom was still divided into more than a dozen teams, including the original education, business and military topic teams, which retained the "team leader" title, as did other teams. The business team, with a focus more on genre than topic, had a business editor, an assistant team leader, and an assistant business editor, a sign of evolving jobs and designations within the team structure and the development of a hybrid form.[181]

[181] Staff roster for *The Virginian-Pilot* newsroom, accessed 22 March 2006, http://welcome.hamptonroads.com/vpstaff.cfm .

Organizational change at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

The newspaper that Gade and Perry studied from 1996 into 2000 was the setting of an unusually rich confluence of team-related events and people.

Three years after the *Oregonian* began using topic teams in 1993 under the new editorship of Rowe, her successor at the topic-teamed *Virginian-Pilot*, Cole Campbell, replaced William Woo, who had been ousted, at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch.* Campbell immediately geared the newsroom toward two radical shifts: an adoption of public journalism principles (as had been done in part at the *Pilot* while Campbell was there) and a reorganization from a traditional beat and bureau structure (geographical orientation) into theme-based topic teams. Three and a half years later, after much-publicized newsroom dissension, calls for his dismissal, accelerated circulation loss, and extensive public challenges to his attempted cultural transformation,[182] Campbell resigned.[183] It was April 2000; the editorship remained open until Ellen Soeteber, from the (Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.) *Sun-Sentinel*[184] took over in January 2001. One of her first tasks, she announced, would be to return the newsroom to a more traditional organization and mission.[185]

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[182] Particularly in the *St. Louis Journalism Review*.

[183] After time at the Poynter Institute and the Charles F. Kettering Institute, Cole Campbell became dean of the Donald W. Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada at Reno in July 2004.

[184] *The Sun-Sentinel* established three teams in 1996. In a 2003 report to the Readership Institute, the newspaper noted that it used both beat and team reporting in its newsroom.

[185] The re-reorganization in St. Louis had not yet taken place at the time the interviews for this research took place in summer 2001; the occurrence was therefore not a topic of discussion for, or an influence on, interviewees although the intent to dismantle teams in St. Louis was broached by several subjects. Soeteber resigned in November 2005, a self-described victim of burnout, worn down by stress and financial pressures with regard to the newspaper. She said she was proud of getting "the *Post-Dispatch* very much on track in terms of being a really serious, credible news organization. … I think that the Post-Dispatch had gotten, for whatever reason, a little bit too self-absorbed." See Edward B. Colby, "Ellen Soeteber on Leaving the *Post-Dispatch*, Changing a Newsroom's Culture and Covering a 'Three-Ring Circus'" in *CJR Daily: Real-Time Media Criticism from the Columbia Journalism Review*, 25 November 2005, http://www.cjrdaily.org/the_water_cooler/ellen_soeteber.php. She was succeeded by managing editor Arnie Robbins, who was appointed by publisher Terrence C. Z. Egger. Robbins joined the *Post-Dispatch* in May 1997

Gade and Perry began their case study shortly before Campbell arrived; the whirlwind venture into and then away from teams and public journalism was within their four-year observation. Their interest was in employee perceptions of organizational change, the newsroom restructuring from beats to teams, and public journalism.[186] The authors grasped the heat of the industry debate over whether change was needed – or possible – and contextualized their research and findings in such a way as to raise interesting and broad questions. Just how different from other endeavors *is* this craft-occupation-profession, occasional mission, and constant business called journalism? Which guidelines for analyzing and guiding other workplaces and organizations are appropriate for understanding newspapers?

As the authors made clear, reorganization was more than a new organizational chart; it was a profound change. Forming into teams meant a loss of "routines, some values, and the emotional loss of destroying what was." Workers in the United States, "especially professionals, value individualism and often express it in counterproductive ways," so resistance was for some a rational response. The *Post-Dispatch* responded to industry turmoil by hiring Campbell to create a "cultural transformation" at the paper; it underestimated the backlash that could (and did) result.

The restructuring took a year. Consultants led seminars; interdepartmental teams tackled readership, branding, and personnel issues; most reporters and editors were required

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after spending 13 years at the (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune,* which was organized into teams in 1995, as discussed above. In announcing Robbins' new job, Egger referred to Robbins as "a well known team player." See "Arnie Robbins Succeeds Ellen Soeteber as Editor of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*," news release, Lee Enterprises, 4 November 2005, news release, http://www.lee.net/newsreleases/news-2005-11-04-stlpd.shtml. . Soeteber's resignation took place nine months after Lee Enterprises negotiated to buy Pulitzer Inc., parent corporation of the *Post-Dispatch*.

[186] Peter J. Gade and Earnest L. Perry, "Changing the Newsroom Culture: A Four-Year Case Study of Organizational Development at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80, vol. 2 (Summer 2003): 327.

to reapply for jobs as team members or leaders, a lessening in status for some; teams drew up goals and mission statements; and newsroom leaders explored different ways of gathering and producing news. *Imagine St. Louis* launched in April 1999, replacing the Sunday news analysis section. Gade and Perry described the topic-oriented replacement:

> Each week, the section front page led with a story about an issue identified as a pressing priority; examples included illiteracy, immigration, the St. Louis arts community, and plans for a new bridge across the Mississippi River. Section features included a "Conversations" column of reader letters, an "Issues Map" with key questions and citizen perspectives on the issus, and a "Who Calls the Shots" listing of decision makers and resources for citizen involvement. … Campbell envisioned *Imagine St. Louis* as a vehicle for citizens to affect news coverage and community action.[187]

The first of four near-annual newsroom surveys was administered the week before Campbell began; the last took place six months after his departure but before Soeteber took over.[188] The 1996 survey revealed optimism and open-mindedness about anticipated changes, but the optimism was eroding by the 1997 survey. The 1998 survey took place as team formation was about to begin. In 2000, there were "consistent and strong negative responses" about the organization, and "for the first time in the study, the staff indicated it was no longer open-minded toward change, and the strongest disagreement was that the editor was sensitive to employees' concerns and valued the experience and knowledge of veteran journalists." For the first time, respondents were significantly negative about changes in the newsroom structure. The researchers noted that "It becomes clear that journalists liked the idea of working in teams until they actually restructured into a team-based newsroom."[189]

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[187] The authors drew on Cole C. Campbell, "Imagine a New Way of Thinking About What Matters Most," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* 11 April 1999, B1.

[188] The number of responses by years were 1996, 74; 1997, 124; 1998, 108; 2000, 121. (There was no survey in 1999.)

[189] Gade and Perry, 337.

Six statements about teams were added into the 2000 survey; negative attitudes were recorded for all of them. Specifically, the teams failed to provide more authority or autonomy, and were seen as being of no help in getting story ideas into the paper. There was disagreement over whether story development was better, more breaking news was published, or quality improved.[190]

The researchers concluded that

> Campbell's vision of a collaborative, team-based newsroom practicing public journalism confused many journalists and failed to win broad-based support. … It appears an important question is whether the newsroom culture – rooted in individualism that values personal resourcefulness, skill, and creativity as measures of professionalism – lends itself to the collaborative demands of a team-based structure. … The idea that an integrated, team-based news organization is perceived by newspaper journalists as a threat to their journalistic values and autonomy helps explain why journalists have been labeled resistant to change and suggests their resistance is indeed rational.[191]

Their case study, they note, joins "a small body of research that suggests the benefits of integrated, team-based organizations are not apparent to newspaper journalists."

Organizational change at the "*Range*"

The West Coast newspaper studied by Valley and Thompson in 1995 and 1996 restructured into topic teams more than three years earlier than the *Post-Dispatch*. Unlike the St. Louis paper, it did so with little industry attention and was not involved with a public journalism initiative, although it was looking to become reader centered.

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[190] The results with regard to public journalism are not reported here, but in general it was not seen as improving journalism or contributing to newsroom morale.

[191] Gade and Perry, 339. The authors number this as footnote 74 and cite George Sylvie and Patricia Witherspoon, *Time, Change and the American Newspaper* (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2002), 41-42, 59-63; Alicia Shepard, "Consultants in the Newsroom," *American Journalism Review,* September 1996, 19-23.

During a yearlong study, the researchers explored whether prior relationships within the newsroom affected resistance to the new structure, and whether the organization achieved some of its objectives in terms of changed content and productivity as a result of topic teams. They surveyed members of eight of the nine primary topic teams (one team was excluded because it had only two members), compared stories published before and after the topic teams were established, interviewed team members, and conducted focus groups with readers.

There was a sharp increase in productivity after the *Range* – later revealed to be the (Tacoma, Wash.) *News Tribune* – went "literally overnight" into topic teams in September 1995. That was not the case with regard to the quality of work produced after the reorganization, a matter of interest because refocusing content[192] was one of management's stated goals. It was hoped that the new process would refocus articles from what the reader "needs to know" to what he or she "wants to see." According to the findings, there was no significant change.

The researchers were also interested in how team members' relationships with others in the newsroom would affect how they adapted to teams. Intuitively, ties to people who were not on their team would increase resistance (these were referred to as "sticky ties"), and prior ties to team colleagues ("greasy ties") would diminish resistance.[193] The researchers,

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[192] Elements of the content were identified and quantified as a way of defining "quality." Analysts were then able to compare and rank chosen articles in terms of how the articles were perceived.

[193] This would be in keeping with evidence cited in other organizational research. See, for example, L. L. Cumming and Chris J. Berger, "Organization Structure: How Does It Influence attitudes and Performance?" *Organizational Dynamics* 5, no. 2 (Autumn 1976), 34; James W. Dean and Daniel J. Brass, "Social Interaction and the Perception of Job Characteristics in an Organization," *Human Relations* 38, no. 6 (June 1985), 571-582; Herminia Ibarra and Steven B. Andrews, "Power, Social Influence, and Sense Making: Effects of Network Centrality and Proximity on Employee Perceptions," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (June 1991), 219-244; and Ronald E. Rice and Carolyn E. Aydin, "Social Worlds, Individual Differences, and

however, felt that there would be too many structural and social changes during reorganization to be able to predict directionality. What they found was that

- On the team level, those who had preexisting (greasy) ties to fellow team members found it easier to adapt; it was more difficult to adapt when the new job placed the person among team members with whom there were no or few ties.
- On the newsroom level, prior ties meant an easier acceptance of the new structure, but only for those with positive attitudes. Those with ties and negative attitudes were more resistant, perhaps finding "anchors" who reinforced their feelings.

Which suggests that

- Those who are more central in the task-based network are more likely to have a positive attitude about the change,
- Those who resist working closely with their new team members also tend to resist working within the dictates of the newly organized larger structure, and
- Management can alter some routines, but is limited by "resistance rooted in the deep structure of the organization."[194]

Further examination suggested that strong ties with one's new teammates had a mitigating effect on individually held negative attitudes. Interestingly, the most negative individuals showed the least resistance to being on the team. It was evidently not the "buy in," of which there was none, but the ease of working with known others that made the difference. In some cases, however, the higher identification with team members meant more of a sense of isolation from the newsroom. In terms of whether job change affected

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Implementation: Predicting Attitudes Toward a Medial Information System," *Information and Management* 20, no. 2 (February 1991): 119-136.

[194] Valley and Thompson, "Sticky Ties," 61.

resistance, the researchers were surprised. The journalists in the survey reacted positively to being asked to do new tasks. Overall, there was strong support for the contention that resistance stemming from both individual and relational sources interact to shape the emergent social structure within the organization.

Smith joined Valley and Thompson in creating a case study out of the newspaper's experience. Various other aspects of the restructuring became apparent here.

In 1997, the word "teams" became a problem in the newsroom. Management began stressing the benefits of working in "small groups," not "teams," rather than set off negative associations. Team members reported that while some teams worked well unto themselves, there was little teamwork in evidence *between* teams or top editors. One reporter said "it feels like we're carved up into little fiefdoms. Each team cares only about its own little universe and problems." Another said that the team system "alters office politics from 'beat' turf to 'team' turf. [I see] more line sympathy with/for team leaders and more distance between line staff and upper management." Nor was there a sense that the flattened hierarchy of the team structure had lessened the "top down" approach, although some reporters noted that the situation was possibly exacerbated by staff shortages and turnover.

Another frustration appeared to be training that began ten months after the switch to teams – too late, according to at least one team leader. That leader said that during a training session, it became obvious "that the TL's [team leaders] didn't know what they were supposed to be doing, so all but one of them had wasted ten months because they didn't know what behavior modifications they and their team members should have been making." Being asked to follow business-tested exercises, such as creating mission statements and goals, for promoting team growth also rankled:

> [W]e fought over them, we resented the time it took to write them, and we don't feel like it improved our lives at all. Now that they're done, we hope to forget them. … But we resent being ordered to work on them and fight about them. It feels disrespectful of us, like we're children in school being made to write on the blackboard.

Budget constraints and staff departures affected morale and efficiency among team members. An absence was more keenly felt by a team than a newsroom. "We seem to be in perpetual survival mode," said one reporter. Another wrote, "We feel chronically understaffed, unable to devote enough personal time to any phase of the job to meet our own personal standards, much less any devoted or expanded standards that the mission statement might suggest." Still, the editor pointed to three situations he called success stories: a failed attempt to re-unionize the newsroom; a suggestion from the newsroom to disband a team and reassign the members as a way to alleviate staff shortages on other teams; and a surprisingly smooth reception to the termination of several individuals, a reaction that was credited to good communication with team leaders.

Building on Thompson and Valley's work, it would be interesting to investigate how sticky and greasy ties within the journalism profession, not just the newsroom, affect resistance and acceptance of new structures. The *News Tribune*, like the *Orange County Register* and other newspapers, was ribbed in print by colleagues. The *Seattle Times*, in reporting the reorganization under a headline that read "In Tacoma, newspaper pledges 'fun,'" began:

> In Tacoma, it's goodbye "Front Page" and hello "Fun Police." The *News Tribune* is reorganizing its reporting staff into teams with cute working titles like "Body and Soul" (religion and health), "Public Life" (political reporters), "Fun Police" (arts and entertainment) and "Rainier Team" (mountain, forest and trees). … "Of course, there's no skepticism in the newsroom," [editor David] Zeeck said jokingly.[195]

[195] Jean Godden, "In Tacoma, Newspaper Pledges 'Fun,' *Seattle Times*, 30 June 1995, B1.

Summary and related terminology

Three broad research methods are evident in these works: immersion, content quantification, and survey. They yielded longitudinal case studies, valuable benchmarks, and insight. The Schierhorn et al. survey, for example, was the first quantitative verification that team adoption was a fast-growing trend. While the Neuzil et al. survey indicated a generally negative reception for teams at the two Twin Cities newspapers, there were indications the team system also provided enrichment. This was seen in comments such as: "I like the interaction with other team members and – to the degree that the ideal is honored – the independence of the team" and "The bright spot is my team – it's the ONE thing in the last six or seven years that has made a positive difference in my work life." In their four-year study, Gade and Perry discovered that one newsroom's attitude toward reorganization was linked to the person effecting the change, not simply the change itself – a finding that felt intuitive to many experiencing such change but one that appeared to have escaped consultants and corporate directors of change initiatives. The concept of team dynamics being connected to quality was explored by Russial, Thompson, and Valley, although "quality" was variously defined. Thompson and Valley offered intriguing insights into the power of prior relationships to affect what are, in effect, professional standards.

In reading the literature, one of the most difficult challenges, in both industry and scholarly writings, was to find a consistent definition of "topic team." Several researchers applied generic "team" functions to those of topic teams, which are a specialized type of team organized not around function per se but interest or theme (hence, "topic"). Neuzil et

al., for example, equate Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith's definition of "team"[196] with the definition of "topic team." They also write that topic teams may be called "pods, clusters and other names,"[197] which is not true (at least in the United States) with regard to pods and clusters, which exist for other reasons than do topic teams.[198] More often, the same word(s) are used but mean different things.[199]

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[196] Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 45.

[197] At *The Virginian-Pilot*, for example, the "A1 pod" meets each evening to decide the makeup of the front page of the paper. It is informal; the participants gather around the page designer, who is seated at his or her computer monitor to show versions of the page under discussion. The "pod" includes such people as the page designer, the news editor, the night editor, the copy desk chief, team leaders involved with stories under consideration, a deputy managing editor and possibly a graphic artist or copy editor involved with one of the stories. The "pod" exists solely for the length of time it takes to decide on the tone, execution and scope of the page and then it disperses.

The term can also refer to a newsroom "pick-up" meeting ("let's pod on that") and is an outgrowth of the maestro concept devised by Buck Ryan in the mid-1980s to coordinate efforts between workers in the newsroom.

Clusters, in newspaper parlance, have occasionally referred to topic teams working together or to "beat clusters." They more often refer to groups, similar to quality circles, that bring people (often from more than one department) together on a regular basis to discuss issues of workplace quality. A cluster generally is interdepartmental and managerial in nature. A cluster group or team might target diversity or circulation concerns, for example. While it might be assigned a topic on which to focus, it is not concerned with deploying resources to cover that topic journalistically, or with producing content for publication.Several Canadian newspapers were among the early adopters of newsroom team management, which they inaugurated as "cluster systems." One instituted at *The London Free Press* in May 1992 was described as "a radically different approach to the way stories are developed, reported, and presented. … [U]nder the cluster system, editorial employees belong to one of a half-dozen or so small groups, each of which generates stories under broad themes: 'work/wealth,' for example, or 'applause.'" Allison Rose, "Team Dispirited," *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, March 1994, http://www.rrj.ca/print/189/ .

[198] Finding a consistent definition for "topic team" is complicated by newsroom culture and practice, however. Newspaper journalists lack a consistent vocabulary for titles, tasks, and things they use or create. As one *Arizona Republic* journalist pointed out, the "three print newsrooms he worked in each had 'their own language. There are words I use here,' he said, referring to the *Republic*, 'that I could use at the [*Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*] and they would mean nothing to anybody.'" B. William Silcock and Susan Keith, "Translating the Tower of Babel? Issues of Definition, Language, and Culture in Converged Newsrooms," *Journalism Studies* 7, no. 4 (2006): 610-627.

[199] Topic teams were, however, known by other names in some U. S. newsrooms. "Circles" was the term used at *The* (Columbia, S.C.) *State*, for example, where circle editors "led five to eight reporters per circle, covering topics such as the workplace, religion and kinship (family issues)." Carl Sessions Stepp, "Reinventing the Newsroom," *American Journalism Review*, April 1995, 28-33.

Newsroom structure and management

The Changing Newspaper

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, industry writings made it clear that newspaper journalists sensed change, liked it little, and feared the toll it would take on journalism as service, craft, and profession. In general, they looked at the industry's new fascination with management innovations with suspicion, if not derision and scorn, and worried that they would soon be producing "product" designed to sell or please, not reporting news meant to inform. If what many saw as the writing on the wall came to pass, articles that discomfited those who used power and authority to the detriment of those without similar clout would be rare indeed. In this light, it makes sense that early newsroom conversions to topic teams, which were tied to management, business, and readership goals, were not automatically praised as worthy or positive efforts.

By 1999, newspapers had undergone massive changes in terms of purpose, organization, management, and popularity. In that year, Cranberg, Bezanson, and Soloski characterized it this way:

> News is a business. It has always been so. … The business of news is news. The growth of the newspaper industry in America has been driven by the public's appetite for news, for information of current moment upon which people in communities and in a nation could make political, social and economic decisions, large and small. … News was the product around which the business was shaped. … Dramatic change is now afoot, however. Today the business of news is business, not news. … [N]ews has become secondary, even incidental, to markets and revenues and margins and advertisers and consumer preferences. … News is shaped by the audience, rather than the audience being shaped by the news.[200]

[200] Gilbert Cranberg, Randall Bezanson, and John Soloski. *Taking Stock: Journalism and the Publicly Traded Newspaper Company* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001), 1-2.

Two strong business forces helped spark reevaluations of content and content objectives for newspapers in the 1980s and 1990s: increased attention to bottom line growth due to corporatization and dramatically altered competition from broadcast media in the wake of FCC policy change.

Bagdikian documents the concentration of media companies into a handful of huge, diverse corporations with many holdings. Some of the subgroups had conflicting interests, but all had in common a dependence on stockholders and the resulting need to curry favor among current and potential funders. As Redmond and Trager described it, "As stock is acquired by small and large investors, it makes the newspaper chain a monkey on the quarterly dividend string, where investors charge into a stock or sell it based on the quarterly profit projections."[201]

Demers provided almost the lone voice against the many who despaired of the consequences of corporatization. If the corporate newspaper is such a menace, Demers asked in the mid-1990s, why does it continue to be the dominant form of newspaper organization? He argues that most of the pervasive criticism is "more myth than fact." [202] "The corporate newspaper is no messiah," he maintained, but most of the empirical research fails to support charges that corporate management is "inimical to good journalism and democratic principles." Evidence appears to refute that "more emphasis is placed on profits and less on product quality as an organizational goal." There are also strong suggestions that corporate newspapers are more editorially vigorous than entrepreneurial papers. Editors at corporate

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[201] James Redmond and Robert Trager, *Balancing on the Wire: The Art of Managing Media Organizations* (Boulder: Coursewise Publishing, Inc., 1998),17.

[202] David Pearce Demers, *The Menace of the Corporate Newspaper: Fact or Fiction?* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, 1996), 11.

papers appear to have more autonomy than editors at non-corporate shops, and journalists at corporate newspapers have indicated they have more job satisfaction than their non-corporate brethren.

Demers believes the rise of the corporate newspaper in the United States has been misunderstood. Countering the critical model, Demers conceptualized an alternative theory of effects to

> hold that corporate newspapers place less emphasis on profits as an organizational goal and more emphasis on producing a high quality product and other nonprofit goals (eg., innovation, maximizing growth). The managerial revolution also explains this process. Corporate newspapers are more heavily controlled by professional managers, who are less concerned about profits than owners because they do not benefit directly from them; rather, managers obtain most of their income through a fixed salary. But even if professionals earned all of their income through profits, they still would place greater value on product quality, knowledge and expertise than the owners, because performance criteria (e.g., "doing the job well") are highly valued in professional circles and are deemed to be crucial for long term survival of the organization.[203]

In the sense that topic teams were a way to respond to readers' perceived interests so as to increase targeted readership, they were indisputably market oriented.[204] Still, whether such organizations developed topic teams or not, they were increasingly aware of the lure of specific topics. Beam, in exploring the characteristics of market-oriented daily newspapers, found strong indications that newsrooms with stronger market orientation were more committed to special-interest content. Against expectations, Beam commented, they reported that they were also more likely to encourage adversarial roles for journalists, state they were aiming for journalistic excellence, provide traditional content, and publish public-affairs

[203] Demers, *Menace*, 21.

[204] Topic teams may also have offered a cost-effective way to broaden the media organization's competitive response to other media. Without having to create a separate publication for each topic, which would entail added expenses, publishers could realize some of the goals of niche marketing, a strategy that had proven successful in many venues.

content. He suggested that the senior editors surveyed might have come to define good newspapers as those that incorporated market-oriented values, which he defined as paying attention to what readers wanted to read. He further suggested that the editors' evaluations might differ from those of other newsroom personnel.[205] One might also question whether an analysis of editorial pages was sufficient to measure dedication to taking adversarial roles, especially since editorial staffs are frequently segregated from news staff. The publication of an investigative report is also "adversarial" in terms of holding authority to a higher standard or questioning the status quo, but it would not have been seen as evidence. Additionally, the newspaper responsible for the investigative journalism might have a timid editorial policy, which would also remove it from the sample or skew the results.

Later, after building on the same survey, Beam found that while editors seemed to agree that good journalism and market-driven journalism were "incompatible," editors at newspapers with a stronger market orientation reported their organizations valued high quality. Beam suggested here, too, that the senior editors might have internalized features of market orientation in defining "quality." He concluded that "[s]ome news organizations may embrace market-driven journalism in the pursuit of higher profits, while others may do so in the pursuit of better journalism."[206]

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[205] Randal A. Beam, "The Characteristics of Market-Oriented Daily Newspapers," paper presented to the Newspaper Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, annual convention, Chicago, July-August 1997. Later published as "What It Means to be a Market-Oriented Newspaper," *Newspaper Research Journal* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1998). Beam analyzed the responses of 406 senior editors from 183 newspapers (an organizational response rate of 85 percent).

[206] Randal A. Beam, "Size of Corporate Parent Drives Market Orientation," *Newspaper Research Journal* 23, nos. 2, 3 (Spring-Summer 2002), 60.

Underwood and Stamm's 1989-1991[207] survey of 12 daily newspapers (of varying size and ownership structure) on the West Coast substantiated the view that newspapers are becoming more market driven and reader oriented and that there was a difference between what family- and chain-owned newspapers emphasized. Group newspapers were particularly likely to have market-oriented management and showed a greater propensity to emphasize profit and business values than did family newspapers. The surveyed journalists paid particular attention to two policies: management change in the newsroom and an increased emphasis on producing market-oriented, reader-friendly journalism. "Efforts to reorganize newsrooms have become a top priority," they found.[208]

The results of Coulson's 1989 study of journalists at independent and group-owned newspapers had been less clear-cut in terms of ownership differences. Nearly half of the total (47 percent) – a pool that included journalists from both ownership structures in equal proportion – felt quality superseded profits. Nevertheless, 39 percent disagreed and the rest remained neutral, which suggests the issue was a point of ideological tension within journalism at that time. There were, however, significant differences in how editors and reporters regarded the editorial quality of their papers. Editors were "less critical of bottom-line pressures on journalistic performance." Although reporters were closer to the day-to-day

[207] The survey dates are not included in the published findings, but a reference to the time the authors developed and implemented the survey is included in the introduction to Doug Underwood, *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom: How Marketers and Managers Are Reshaping Today's Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), xxii.

[208] Doug Underwood and Keith Stamm, "Balancing Business with Journalism: Newsroom Policies at 12 West Coast Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (Summer 1992), 301-317.

operation, Coulson commented, "the caliber of local news coverage is better understood by examining the organizational constraints within which all journalists must function […]."[209]

The adoption of teams by newspaper companies is associated with business trends and market forces. The creation of topic teams, a distinct newsroom phenomenon, is more associated with attempts to create a reader-oriented focus, and the precedents for that approach appear to come from broadcast. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a model for market-driven journalism was developed by McManus, a veteran broadcaster.

Deregulation of electronic media had the effect of redefining television content as being less concerned with public service and more with entertainment – public interest became whatever the public was interested in.[210] "Marketplace business principles would determine electronic media courses of action, not federal requirements for specific categories of content,"[211] Redmond and Trager observed. Gans concluded that stories are shaped or chosen based on the "particular requirements of each news medium,"[212] so broadcast would rely on visual elements as opposed to analysis or non-visual stories, both of which had been traditional strongholds of print journalism. As electronic media captured more and more of the available audience, it represented greater competition to print media. As a result, its entertainment values became more influential as the print medium sought to offer similarly attractive and quickly appealing content in its fight for audience share.

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[209] David C. Coulson, "Impact of Ownership on Newspaper Quality," *Journalism Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 403-410.

[210] P. Boyer, "Under Fowler, FCC treated TV as commerce," *New York Times*, 19 January 1987, C15.

[211] Redmond and Trager, *Balancing*, xx.

[212] Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 157.

Although newspapers were using focus groups to determine reader reactions and potential sales strategies as early as the Clark studies in the late 1970s and 1980s, they were behind the broadcast industry in applying the results. "By the 1970s," Redmond and Trager wrote,

> Television newscasts had become advertising revenue profit centers of stations with increasing entertainment programming values. News had evolved into slick packaged products that were designed as much to attract viewers to the program commercials as to inform the public of significant events or movements. … Everything from basic content to the pro-produced (sic) evening news program opening sequences was fodder for focus group testing.[213]

The identification of broadcast journalists with both entertainment values and the use of research groups, both aspects of the topic team rationale, and the uneasy relationship between broadcast and print journalism cultures undoubtedly contributed to the challenge of making topic teams acceptable to print journalists.

Allen[214] and Hallin[215] both suggest that the trend toward market-driven journalism began in local television news in the late 1960s as broadcasters bargained that research-directed newscasts tailored to pull in viewers could both win big profits and satisfy FCC requirements for public service. "The result was a different kind of news, much more responsive to popular demand than the traditional journalism newspapers were peddling," McManus noted in his in-depth study of the subject.[216]

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[213] Redmond and Trager, 16. After several queries, it appears clear that "pro-produced" was supposed to be "pre-produced."

[214] Craig Allen, "ABC's News Advisory Service and Local TV News: 'Eyewitness' to Change in the 1970s," paper presented to the Broadcast Educators Association annual convention, Las Vegas, April 1992.

[215] Daniel C. Hallin, "Sound Bite News: Television Coverage of Elections 1968-1988," *Journal of Communication* 42, no. 2 (1992), 5-24.

[216] John H. McManus, *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994), 6.

> Adopting a sensitivity to audience ratings similar to that of local television news, newspapers have diminished the traditional role of "professional" journalists as arbiters of which events and issues are newsworthy. Managers are telling journalists to let the public decide what becomes news by paying attention to what kinds of reports are most highly valued in the marketplace.[217]

Pleasing the public and playing for profits might seem harmless, but serious consequences are probable. Some possibilites include the following: Coverage favorable to one side might cause a loss of viewers or readers; a chilling effect could cause reporters to dismiss some stories and favor others, politicize sources, or refrain from synthesizing appropriate arguments and reflecting their relative worth in news reports. Investigative reporting would likely diminish. Journalistic activities not resulting in an immediate story – such as taking time to develop beats – would be particularly vulnerable to time, budget and resource constraints. Findings that compromised economic goals might well be suppressed from the daily report. All of these were reported to McManus during the course of his research.

McManus envisions a constant state of tension between business and journalism pressures. Economic rationalism[218] has increased in both broadcast and print news production, he argued in 1992, but the debate has been largely atheoretical and anecdotal. He proposed two models, one economic (market-driven) and one journalistic, to use as theoretical bases for analyzing news as a commercial product. The economic theory posits:

> The probability of an event or issue becoming news is
> - inversely proportional to the cost of uncovering it…
> - inversely proportional to the cost of assembling a narrative, and…

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[217] Ibid., 7.

[218] Economic rationalism is defined as a market orientation toward financial matters. It is a politically charged phrase, often used in arguments against free-market economic policies.

- directly proportional to the expected appeal of the narrative to audiences advertisers will pay to reach.

The purely journalistic theory states:

> The probability of an event or issue becoming news is
> - proportional to the expected consequences of the narrative and…
> - proportional to the audience for whom it is consequential.[219]

Picard, in 2004, states unequivocally that economic pressures are the primary forces shaping contemporary American newspapers. Further, he notes,

> [i]t is increasingly clear that the responses of some newspaper managers are affecting journalistic quality, producing practices that diminish the social value of newspaper content and that divert the attention of newspaper personnel from journalism to activities primarily related to the business interests of the press.[220]

The path to this current state has been one of no limits and no thought-through goals. This has led newspapers to a "fork in the highway," he concluded. One leads to "unrestricted commercialism and unbridled self interest" and the other is governed by the needs of quality, public service, and "responsibilities that extend beyond the shareholders." For the latter to occur, newspaper firms must develop corporate responsibility and appreciate the harm visited by current practices. But for that to occur, there must be pressure from journalists and the public.

Structural ties between topic teams and public journalism

The growing pressure to make newspaper content more enticing to readers, and to target that content to particular segments of readers, was made more complex in the 1990s by

[219] John H. McManus, "What Kind of Commodity Is News?" *Communication Research* 19, no. 6 (December 1992), 787-806.

[220] Robert G. Picard, "Commercialism and Newspaper Quality," *Newspaper Research Journal* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2004), 54-65.

a concept known as public journalism. The movement, which quickly became identified with early proponents Davis "Buzz" Merritt, editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, and Jay Rosen at New York University,[221] caught the attention of some within the industry and quickly became a topic for heated discussion. Rosen described the goal of public journalism as a way to "strengthen the community's capacity to recognize itself, converse well, and make choices."[222] It was quickly apparent that newsrooms would have to restructure in some unspecified way to make that happen. If journalists were to lessen their reliance on "authority" sources, for example, beat structures that emphasized close contact with authorities would face modification. This, in fact, was one point at which public journalism and topic team conceptualizations converged.

Three aspects of public journalism make it particularly difficult to separate the movement from topic teams in an analysis. First is the vagueness of the concept. Philip Meyer, a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina, told an IRE conference in 1995 that

> [p]art of the blame for the confusion [over what public journalism is] must go to the early promoters of public journalism who have steadfastly refused to give it a definition or anything more than a vague theoretical structure. Because it is an idea in development, they say, a definition would needlessly limit it. Maybe so. But one consequence is that debating public journalism is like arguing over a Rorshach test. Each sees in it the manifestation of his or her fondest hopes or worst fears.[223]

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[221] Davis Merritt, known to most as Buzz, turned his growing disenchantment with Kansas politics to devising new ways to cover elections, select stories, and work with their tone and framing beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, well before the term "public journalism" was coined. Jay Rosen was director of the Project on Public Life and the Press from its founding in 1993 until 1997. The project was funded by the Knight Foundation and housed at New York University; the seeds of the project germinated at a conference in 1992 at the Kettering Institute in Ohio.

[222] M. L. Stein, "A catalyst for public awareness?" *Editor and Publisher*, 15 October 1994, 11.

[223] Philip Meyer, "Public Journalism and the Problem of Objectivity," paper based on a speech to the IRE conference on computer-assisted reporting, Cleveland, 1995, http://www.unc.edu/~pmeyer/ire95pj.htm.

Second is that many of the newspapers associated with topic teams – including the *Wichita Eagle*,[224] *Virginian-Pilot*, and *Charlotte Observer* – were leading experimenters in the public journalism movement.[225] Finally, both public journalism and topic teams are outgrowths of a participatory mindset (which further cemented the team aspect) and of attempts to make journalism more responsive to its audience. Where they differed in intent – topic teams were to focus attention on what the public wanted to hear in order to improve coverage and readership; public journalism was to improve civic discourse – they often merged in practice. This happened, for example, when the public service mission of journalism rose to the surface, as it did with the Public Life team at the *Virginian-Pilot,* and with many early projects to improve election coverage.[226] These were usually projects that relied on team coverage, sometimes involving more than one topic team. Charity inadvertently described some of the research difficulties in this passage:

> *The State*'s daily grind has integrated other public journalism tenets, too. With his eyes on both *Meaningful Chaos* and management theory, for example, editor Gil Thelen broke up the old beat system. Traditional beats like "the statehouse" and "city hall" simply aren't organized the way ordinary Americans think about public affairs; they follow institutions rather than issues. So he regrouped his reporters into new beats and teams clustered

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[224] For extensive coverage, see Carol Dykers, "Making Journalism Public: A Case Study of Change at the Wichita Eagle," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1995. See also John Bare, "Toward a Definition of Public Journalism," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1995.

[225] For extensive coverage of *The* (Columbia, S.C.) *State*, see Rebecca A. Payne, *Connecting in Columbia, S.C.: A Case Study in Public Journalism*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1998. Another dissertation examines public journalism practices at the *Charlotte Observer*, the *Wisconsin State Journal*, the *Kansas City Star*, the (Sioux Falls, S.D.) *Argus Leader*, and the *Dallas Morning News*, and concluded that "a unified public journalism role conception emerges only in Charlotte." Paul Riede, *Public Journalism in the Newsroom: Constraints on Content and Journalist Role Conceptions at Five Award-Winning Newspapers*, Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1999. See also, Arthur Charity, "What is Public Journalism? Five Communities, Five Examples," *National Civic Review* 85, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1996): 14-19.

[226] See, among others, Philip Meyer, "The Media Reformation: Giving the Agenda Back to the People," in Michael Nelson, ed., *The Elections of 1992* (Congressional Quarterly, 1993).

> around interdisciplinary ideas like "governance," "leisure," "quality of life," and "community roots." Public journalism's egalitarianism suggested tinkering with the hierarchical, wheel-and-spokes, editor-tells-the-reporter structure of assignments, too. … So at the *State* each reporting team has reorganized its coverage from the bottom up, asking itself why it's covering this subject or that, and trying to develop a collective sense of what information citizens might really want from it. … [There were] similar innovations at the *Virginian-Pilot*.[227]

Corrigan, in a "Public Journalism Lexicon," defines "Public Life Team" as very much a structural issue:

> Mainstream journalism gives reporters specific beats such as schools, courts, city hall, police, and the environment, while public journalism sometimes does it differently. Public journalism might reconfigure these reporters into teams to cover problems and to look for solutions. James Fallows notes this technique in his book, *Breaking the News*, when he describes how *The Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk took reporters and editors off beats and assembled them into a public life team. Fallows writes, "The mission statement for the team was, "We will revitalize a democracy that has grown sick with disenchantment. We will lead the community to discover itself and act on what it has learned."[228]

Meyer and Potter in 1999 discovered a paradox with regard to management and public journalism: "Strangely, the intent of newspapers to practice public journalism was a stronger predictor of voter trust and knowledge than was their actual performance." They posited that there might be a pre-existing factor that led them to want to "do" public journalism. In search of that link, Loomis and Meyer investigated whether evolving management styles, an issue in public journalism, might have had such an influence. In speaking of public journalism, they observed that "[u]nlike other reform movements, such as

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[227] Arthur Charity, *Doing Public Journalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 93. Reference was made above to Harwood Group, *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation, 1993). For a description of how public journalism influenced the formation of the Public Life team at the *Virginian-Pilot*, see Charity, 97-98.

[228] Don H. Corrigan, *The Public Journalism Movement in America: Evangelists in the Newsroom* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1999), 201-202. Referenced above is James Fallows, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (New York: Vintage Press, 1997), 257-258.

precision journalism or computer-assisted reporting, its implementation has generally been pushed from the top down rather than springing spontaneously from the level of reporters and copy editors."[229]

That shift would put the predisposition toward public journalism at odds with the participatory movement that fostered team management – but in keeping with an observed industry resistance to the concept of topic teams – and would suggest that a widely heralded business shift to empower those lower on the hierarchical levels had not yet made a substantive impact on newspapers in the last part of the twentieth century despite some structural appearances to the contrary.

Newsroom structure

Newspaper newsrooms of the 1980s and early 1990s were not very participatory, and few newspapers had yet revamped any part of their newsroom structure to encourage such a change.

Sylvie and Witherspoon, in their interdisciplinary view[230] of the changing industry, place newspaper newsrooms in what have become increasingly postmodern corporate structures.[231] This is a substantive argument, but it is also true that newsrooms of the 1990s – even those involved in participatory or team-oriented change – more resembled structures

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[229] David Loomis and Philip Meyer, "Opinion without Polls: Finding a Link Between Corporate Culture and Public Journalism," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 2000), 276-277. See also, Philip Meyer and Deborah Potter, "Hidden Value: Polls and Public Journalism," in Paul Lavrakas and Michael Traugott, eds., *Election Polls, the News Media and Democracy* (Chatham, N. J.: Chatham House, 2000).

[230] George Sylvie characterizes their partnership as "a cooperative effort between two scholars who study different phenomena: The operation and management of newspapers and the leadership of change in organizations." In George Sylvie and Patricia D. Witherspoon, *Time, Change, and the American Newspaper* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 1.

[231] Sylvie and Witherspoon, *Time,* 15.

that developed post-Civil War in the United States. In the late 1800s, newspapers grew large enough that they began requiring specialization among news staffers and additional managers to oversee them. (Literature exploring the competitive beat system that developed during this time and helped shape newsroom structure, newsgathering, and news will be discussed in the next section.) Newsrooms began to resemble department stores, also a development of the times, with their features, sports, and news departments. It is significant to our discussion that "features" were not considered news, or at least "hard" news. They were "soft," as were the writing genres associated with them, and within the newsroom they were segregated to a place of their own, out of the way of daily grist. Sports, as a department, was gritty enough (and, one might observe, masculine enough) to be considered another kind of hard news, probably because of its reliance on nervewrackingly tight deadlines and "urgent," time-is-of-the-essence reports. Still, journalistic prestige came from slugging it out on the hard news side, even if that was writing obits as opposed to writing a more subtly hard-hitting report on a need for a new hospital wing or the ravages of a current epidemic. Topic teams, by abolishing those departments (except for sports) and allowing topic-team reporters to choose the most appropriate writing genre for the story, represented another distinct challenge for the evolving newspaper.

The linchpin of that older, segregated structure was the city editor. From about the turn of the century through the 1980s, the city editor (or the "city desk" if the paper employed assistant and night city editors) was often the functional point of power in the

newsroom.[232] Stanley Walker, city editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1928 to 1935, provided a composite description that captures the non-participatory magic of the job:

> The boss of the city room is supposed to be a rather learned but consistently brutal curmudgeon, as insensate to the more mellow aspects of life as a Mergenthaler linotype, the possessor of deep inside information which if divulged would make the blood run cold, and the recipient of psychic tips which enable him to humiliate his less fortunate rivals. He invents strange devices for the torture of reporters, this mythical agate-eyed Torquemada with the paste-pots and scissors. Even his laugh, usually directed at something sacred, is part sneer. His terrible curses cause flowers to wither, as the grass died under the hoofbeats of the horse of Attila the Hun. A chilly, monstrous figure, sleepless, nerveless, and facing with ribald mockery the certain hell which awaits him.[233]

Williams, whose newspaper management text had been available to students and newsroom managers since 1954, confirmed in the 1978 edition that "[a]ll general news is either prepared or processed in the newsroom. The world, national, and state news is brought in by wire for editing either by hand or through electronic editing terminals. The city editor assigns reporters to cover local news stories."[234] Organizational charts through the 1990s showed the city editor as high in the hierarchy and overseeing most newsroom functions exclusive of sports, the editorial staff (on a small or medium-sized paper, this might be the editor or one editorial writer), and the photographers, although assignments originated most often from the city editor's desk. On some papers, the copy desk was under the city editor's jurisdiction although that was increasingly rare. On larger papers, there were normally wire and state editors, both with important but significantly less widespread authority, and

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[232] For a discussion on the evolving role of the editor, see Loren Ghiglione, *The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1990), 108-115. See also, Carl Sessions Stepp, "A Dying Breed," *American Journalism Review*, December 1993, http://ajr.newslink.org/ajrcarl.html .

[233] Stanley Walker, *City Editor* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 1. The book was originally published in New York by the Frederick A. Stokes Co. in 1934.

[234] Herbert Lee Williams, *Newspaper Organization and Management*, 5th ed. (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1978), 10.

numerous sub-editors would oversee coverage of special beats, such as business or arts. [235] An excellent description of the city editor's job as of the 1970s follows:

> Next in importance [to the managing editor and news editor] is the city editor, who sees that the community news is covered. This key person carefully lists all coming events and at the proper time directs reporters to cover them. The city desk is constantly open for "news tips," to which reporters may be assigned to run down the facts. Some reporters cover regular "beats" for news. Rewriters, who handle copy that has been previously used or fresh copy that needs revising, and suburban correspondents, who send in news from outlying neighborhoods, also are under the city editor's supervision. On large city newspapers, the city desk is covered 24 hours a day, which requires a night city editor as well as a day city editor.[236]

Even before the advent of newsroom teams, however, change was beginning to occur in the city editor's job, which had long required the need for near-omniscient oversight.

Hohenberg noted that suburbanization and the subsequently changing readership and geographic coverage area had the odd effect of diluting the city editor's function, despite a seemingly wider responsibility, on the largest newspapers. In those cases, the city editor had been transformed into a metropolitan editor, responsible for both city and suburban news. "It is curious, therefore," he wrote, "that the old awe-inspiring image of the city editor is now preserved only in ancient stage comedies about the newspaper business and droll reminiscences by exjournalists." Nevertheless, the "top local news executive still controls the work of most of the news staff."[237]

When newsrooms reorganized into topic teams, the "linchpin" system was replaced by a network of team leaders and various high-level newsroom personnel such as managing

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[235] Williams, 10. See, for example, Leonard Mogel, T*he Newspaper: Everything You Need to Know to Make It in the Newspaper Business* (Pittsburgh: GATV Press, 2000), 46-48.

[236] Williams, 32-33.

[237] John Hohenberg, *The Professional Journalist,* 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1978), 52.

or deputy managing editors. More emphasis was placed on group meetings, which happened often as part of daily and weekly routines, and computerized forms to which there was wide access. There are many industry accounts of this process, but little in-depth study currently exists in the academic oeuvre. Underwood, writing about the *Seattle Times* (where he was a reporter before entering academe), said in 1988 that "[s]trict oversight of the entire newsroom operation is maintained through countless editorial meetings and memos and by using computers to check out each staff member's lists of projects, which must be constantly kept up to date."[238] The *Seattle Times* was one of the earliest team proponents.

Newsroom management in practice

There was little in the way of journalistically attuned guidance for editors or publishers during this time of change. Texts that did address the management of newspaper newsrooms usually restricted that focus to a chapter or less; often the scope of the chapter was helpful but far from analytical, sometimes drawing on personnel lists and job descriptions, with the bulk of the book addressing economic and production concerns.[239] Two books were notable during the late 1980s and 1990s.

Willis, who helped establish the country's first masters program for news media management at Northeastern University and was an editor at the *Dallas Morning News*, provided a cogent and comprehensive text, but it was geared toward students and did not focus on newsroom management. Giles, who was still heading up a newsroom when he

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[238] Doug Underwood, "When MBAs Rule the Newsroom," *Columbia Journalism Review* 26, no. 6, (1988), 25. See also, Doug Underwood, *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom: How the Marketers and Managers are Reshaping Today's Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[239] See, for example, Herbert Lee Williams, *Newspaper Organization and Management*, 5th ed. (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University: 1978) and Jim Willis, *Surviving in the Newspaper Business: Newspaper Management in Turbulent Times* (New York: Praeger, 1988).

researched and wrote his book, created the rare guide for newsroom managers. It was his book, not the Willis text, that was likely to have guided editors planning or implementing newsroom reorganizations during the 1990s. Its importance to this discussion, however, is not its probable presence in the crowded bookshelves of newspaper executives, but its insight into the mindset of concerned and forward-thinking editors of that time – almost all of whom, at some point in the 1990s, would become acquainted with at least the option of topic-team structures.

When R. J. Berg & Co. published Giles' *Newsroom Management: A Guide to Theory and Practice* in 1987[240] (research began in 1983), it was somewhat of a landmark. When it was republished by Media Management Books the next year, the thick book became a quick staple on many editors' desks.[241] Part of its appeal was undoubtedly that Giles had earned his management stripes in newspaper newsrooms. During the time the book was gaining notice, Giles was executive editor of the *Detroit News* and an active member of APME and ASNE, the two major organizations for newspaper newsroom executives. In the text, Giles addresses the management of newsroom groups and teambuilding, but even in later editions does not write specifically about the then-leading edge (in fact, barely conceived) adoption of topic teams within a team-managed environment. He does, however, discuss various forms of groups with which managers must contend.

> "Groups are a fact of newsroom life, either as part of the formal newsroom structure or in the informal clusters of staffers known as peer groups. Power, status, influence, conflict, cohesiveness, discord – all are products of the

[240] Robert H. Giles. *Newsroom Management: A Guide to Theory and Practice*. (Indianapolis, Ind.: R.J.Berg & Co., 1987). Later published by Media Management Books. Detroit.

[241] By 1990, it was in its fifth printing by its second publisher, and in 1995 there was an eighth printing, an indication that the book held its value during these years of great change. In January 2006, a check of amazon.com's used and new book section showed 12 copies of *Newsroom Management* for sale with prices ranging from $29.99 to $65.49.

> group dynamic. The nature of groups and how groups affect the operation of the newsroom are topics of high interest to editors."[242]

Giles used a standard definition of a work group as "any set of two or more people who are working toward a common objective and are in physical proximity to one another."[243] He then distinguished between formal and informal groups, describing the city desk as a formal group, organized by management, and copy editors as a formal group likely to also be an informal or peer group of people who bond through common challenges, close proximity during work hours, related interests and various shared elements of the job. More than one peer group can form in an organization. "In each case, individual and collective self-interests are involved. Perception plays an important role in the creation of informal newsroom groups: If the individuals see themselves as a group, then a group exists."[244]

Giles reported on an early teambuilding exercise at the *Charlotte Observer*. In 1982, a group of metro editors sought help in forming a new management team.[245] As Giles described it, it was the type of teambuilding exercise where managers go off-site (often more than once; in this case, there were six sessions) to focus on self-awareness, trust issues, revelations, and discussion toward effecting constructive change in the workplace. One member of the group called it the most valuable exercise he'd experienced in twenty years of

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[242] Robert H. Giles. *Newsroom Management: A Guide to Theory and Practice.* (Detroit: Media Management Books, 1995), 15.

[243] Giles, *Newsroom*, 18, citing Jerry L. Gray, *Supervision* (Boston: Kent, 1984), 203.

[244] Giles, *Newsroom*, 19-20.

[245] Giles, *Newsroom*, 424-429. Dolly King, then manager of training and development for the *Charlotte Observer* and a consultant for KPC Management Consultants, led the teambuilding program. One of her later clients was the *San Jose Mercury News*, according to Giles's report.

newspapering.[246] What was evident, though, was that this was not routine practice or a familiar endeavor. It would become far more familiar a decade or so hence.

Giles, who in 1999 confessed he was "not a fan" of newsroom team management,[247] warned in his book against groupthink. He wrote:

> In the examination of the phenomenon of participation, researchers have discovered a tendency in which the group's effort to concur becomes so dominant that it overrides any realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action. This concept is called groupthink … The analysis found numerous examples in which the group norms favored improved morale at the expense of critical thinking.

Willis addressed teams, but not as understood by later team-based managers. Of "team coverage," he wrote, "This is a good practice, but it is also a luxury only larger dailies can afford. The *Dallas Morning News*, for instance, has often assigned two or more reporters to cover police at the same time." The teams he describes are not permanent structures but "usually reactionary practices" called into being when "more news than usual [is] coming out of a particular beat."

He did, however, make note of a system he called "module reporting" that sounds remarkably like a forerunner to topic teams. "Several newspapers have probably experimented with it in some form or another," he wrote, noting that the *Dallas Times Herald* tried it on its city desk "several years ago," which would put it around the mid- or early 1980s.[248]

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[246] Giles, *Newsroom*, 429.

[247] Personal communication, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, annual conference, New Orleans, August 1999.

[248] Willis, 142.

Shifting managerial roles

While a discussion of organizational theory is beyond the scope of this inquiry, it is relevant to examine how various theoretical views relate to changes that have taken place within the newspaper newsroom. Perhaps the most relevant discourse in this regard involves the concept of managerial revolution (also known as the managerial hypothesis), or the rise of the professional manager, and its effects on the role of the editor and, thus, the newsroom. Reports of the editor's additional or shifting responsibilities form an appropriate touchstone for understanding the heated debates that have taken place over corporatism[249] and its effects – assumed, potential, real, and feared – on news content and professional values. Overholser and Underwood provide two accounts.

"Once upon a time," Overholser wrote, "an editor was the paramount figure at a newspaper." As documented in interviews with 50 current and former editors, and as the results of a nationwide questionnaire revealed, that princely perch is no more. The editors of the 1990s were still "pivotal," but had become "replaceable faces in a management constellation."[250] The change had been steady and gradual:

> Corporatization didn't rock editors' lives suddenly. It began with cost-cutting campaigns in the '70s and '80s, then gathered speed as computers gave bean-counters new clout to pressure newshole and payroll. As readership fell and bottom lines flattened out (or worse), corporate headquarters in distant cities stepped up their memos and publishers turned up the heat. Bit by bit the editor's autonomy was eroded: from the overall budget to the newshole, from personnel policies to new sections, from job tenure to the shape and size of stories. Stress fractures appeared everywhere along the traditional wall between business and editorial…. It's almost a new article of faith: Investors demand quarter-to-quarter profit increases. When the local economy does not

[249] The corporate newspaper is characterized by absentee ownership, a complex division of labor, emphasis on written rules, and efficiency in decision-making. See various research by Demers.

[250] Geneva Overholser, "Editor Inc.," in Gene Roberts, ed., *Leaving Readers Behind: The Age of Corporate Newspapering* (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 2001), 159.

> promote or permit growth, profits have to be squeezed up by cost-cutting. In so doing, the journalism is diminished. Thus can public ownership undermine the basic newspaper imperative – public trust.[251]

The contradiction between "necessary" cost cuts and healthy or soaring profits created a cognitive dissonance for many journalists, not just editors. A November 1994 memo from the newsroom administrator (who calculated the numbers) at the *Des Moines Register*, reads, "There are times when our budget is finalized that I feel like I've taken out its heart and soul. This time I took out a lot of other giblets as well." The cuts were encouraged by a memo from the Gannett newspaper division president that began, "1995 will be a difficult year … Newsprint prices will be going up, and we still have the responsibility to produce a return for our shareholders." Another $63,000 was taken out of newsroom spending. "In January," Overholser wrote, "we learned that during the months we were engaged in these hope-withering negotiations, Gannett earnings were up 22 percent over the previous year's fourth quarter."[252]

The editor of the *Bradenton* (Florida) *Herald* told Overholser that he spends, at most, 30 percent of his time "on journalism. The job of being an editor 'is just a lot harder than it used to be. Corporations are cyclical, and we're at a high point of publisher influence. There are a lot of people who think anybody can do content. And it's not going to work.'" He planned to retire.[253]

The editors' reports reveal that journalists are caught between meeting their MBOs (management-by-objective goals) to ensure benefits and bonuses, and upholding journalistic

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[251] Overholser, 161-162.

[252] Overholser, 168-169.

[253] Overholser, 173.

values that demand appropriate time, staff, and resources. The editors of the 1990s spend time in meetings with other department heads, not their own staff. They've lost autonomy: other departments want to control content; corporate controls spending. Sometimes corporate controls content, too, as with Gannett's News 2000 paperwork-producing formulas for increasing minority voices, reflecting First Amendment values, and representing community interests. Editors advance by moving from paper to paper, which means they rarely know their communities very well and their personal lives suffer.

Underwood called the "customer-driven" or "reader-friendly" marketing-oriented approach that swept through the newspaper business in the 1980s "MBA journalism." Topic teams made it onto his radar as a phenomenon of 1990s micromanagement and market research. "In today's newsrooms," he wrote,

> you will encounter team journalism, where editors, reporters, and graphic designers work together to produce a slick and stylized editorial product; a meeting culture where newsroom managers spend hours planning the news and issuing instructions to reporters; newsroom hierarchies restructured around trendy new concepts such as "circular management" and "newsrooms without walls" and editors with new titles such as "change facilitators"; and a system of tight newsroom oversight where employees can't forget they are working in service to the newspaper's circulation and marketing goals. There are … new beats with snappy new names such as the "Real Life Team" and the "911 Jump Team"; fad-driven coverage of workplace, family, and other issues perceived to be of interest to a changing readership….[254]

Underwood charts the strong management system to the late 1970s and early 1980s by noting the use of such devices as management-by-objective goals, personality tests, productivity and efficiency measurements, performance evaluations, formulaic design and content, and other outgrowths of bureaucratic control. Rarely does he report a positive

[254] Doug Underwood, *When MBAs Rule the Newsrooms: How the Marketers and Managers Are Reshaping Today's Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). The first printing was in 1993.

interpretation for their use, citing mounting anecdotal – and often angry – evidence that such methods cripple journalism and put undo stress on the newsroom. Perhaps the overriding complaint of the many people Underwood quoted is that the substance of the news had become secondary to marketing concerns.

The fear that news was no longer of top priority to many modern editors gained additional substantiation from a study by Sylvie about how news, advertising, and circulation department heads ranked themselves in terms of importance and cooperation in terms of "total product" quality goals. Editors were the only group that did not rate their own department's concerns as most important, putting circulation highest. They, too, were most likely to see a need for cooperation, leading Sylvie to conclude that news managers have a "surprising sensitivity" to "total newspaper" and market-oriented concepts.[255] Gade contextualized these and similar findings as evidence the newspaper was evolving into a postmodern structure, one where readiness for change, fluid definitions, and team concepts would replace strict hierarchies and departmental separation. He concluded that the old and new can co-exist, and that "[d]ualistic (either-or) thinking denies the complexity and relativism of the postmodern world, and for newsroom managers and journalists this approach is both self-defeating and professionally paralyzing."[256]

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[255] George Sylvie, "Departmental Influences on Interdepartmental Cooperation at Daily Newspapers," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1996): 230-241. See also J. Coyle, "Now, Editor as Marketer," *Columbia Journalism Review,* July-August 1998, 37-41; and G. Mitchell, "Two-Way Street," *Editor & Publisher*, 4 December 1999, 20-21.

[256] Peter Gade, "Postmodern Journalism: Redefining Newspaper Leadership in a Chaotic World," paper presented to the Media Management and Economic Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, annual convention, Kansas City, August 2003.

Underwood and Stamm were among those investigating "wake-up calls" issued by such newspaper executives (or past executives) as James Squires,[257] Gene Roberts,[258] and Overholser.[259] Among them, the consensus was that newsroom executives were increasingly charged with meeting business and financial goals with which they or their predecessors had not had to deal. Nor did they have sufficient sway within the organization to ensure an adequate supply of resources to the newsroom to produce top-quality journalism on as wide a plane as they felt was responsible – if at all. Roberts, in the mid-1990s, was sufficiently concerned about the lack of journalistic coverage of industry changes that he lobbied foundations for funds to cover a book of investigations by prominent journalists. In the introduction to the book, published in 2001, he wrote, "In between the first and last story … the writers showed us the toll that a never-ending drive for corporate profits is taking on the news."[260] That toll, the book made clear, was paid by readers in terms of diminished content that was caused, in part, by newspapers' lessened emphasis on hard news and traditional beats.

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[257] James D. Squires, who began as a reporter in 1962, was editor of the *Chicago Tribune* from 1981 to 1989. He was previously editor of the *Orlando Sentinel*. In addition to numerous articles, he is the author of *Read All About It:The Corporate Takeover of America's Newspapers* (New York: Random House, 1993).

[258] Eugene Roberts Jr. began in newspapers as a child helping his father print the local weekly. After college, work at several papers in North Carolina and Virginia, and a Nieman Fellowship, he returned to the *Goldsboro News-Argus*. The *Detroit Free Press* hired him away, as did *The New York Times* after that. He was editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* from 1972 to 1990, when he left. Although he was mild in his public statements at the time, his battles with Knight-Ridder over corporate demands were well known. As detailed earlier, the *Inquirer* distinguished itself by the number of Pulitzer prizes it won under Roberts' leadership – 17 in 18 years.

[259] Geneva Overholser, also a Nieman fellow, was editor of the *Des Moines Register* from 1988 to 1995. The *Register* won the 1990 Pulitzer for public service. The National Press Foundation named Overholser Editor of the Year in 1993.

[260] Gene Roberts, Jr., "Foreword," in Gene Roberts, Thomas Kunkel, and Charles Layton, eds., *Leaving Readers Behind: The Age of Corporate Newspapering* (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 2001), xiii.

Summary of literature on newsroom structure and management.

Scholars chronicled that U.S. newspapers in the late 1980s and 1990s underwent vast change in terms of who or what owned them and what they were expected to do. Research suggested that while the goals changed economically and journalistically, the driving forces were not always clear and there were conflicting indications as to whether corporatism was a positive or negative power. "Market-driven journalism" became controversial during this time, and studies showed conflicting results in this area as well with regard to editors' acceptance or understanding of the principle.

An interest in topical journalism may have been tied to increased competition from niche publications and the deregulation of electronic media, which had the effect of coloring news with entertainment values, scholars noted. Efforts to "please the public" were echoed in market research that determined topics of interest to particular readers. They were also evident in the public journalism movement that brought beat structure under consideration. Several researchers tie public journalism experiments to beat restructurings at topic team newspapers, but scholars noted that public journalism, as a top-down directive, was at odds with the participatory nature of the team management principles that guided topic team installations.

It was noted that the post-modern tendencies of modern newsrooms included a tendency toward "soft" rather than "hard" news topics and a drift away from the stalwart center of the "traditional" newsroom: the city editor. This shift was attributed to suburbanization and changing readership patterns. As newsrooms changed, however, there was little in the way of management guidance. Giles' management handbook was one of few to address hands-on newsroom situations. It stressed the ability to work together, but the

topic team system was barely envisioned at the time of the book's publication. Giles does, however, comment on the power of groups. Several scholars address the changing role of the editor into a managerial job having increasingly less to do with journalistic values and goals and more to do with changing corporate responsibilities.

Journalistic Routines and Newsroom Sociology

This section addresses routines, which develop from various organizational, newsroom, and journalistic needs, and influences that have been seen to affect newsroom journalists in terms of behavior, news content, and story selection. The two aspects are closely related; many routines are coping mechanisms for influences that originate both within and without the organization, and routines influence news content and selection. Routines are also an integral part of how journalists evaluate their job in terms of intangible qualities such as satisfaction, autonomy, and morale. Many sociological studies focus on these issues, which include work schedules, writing conventions such as the inverted pyramid, deadlines, the hard news/soft news dichotomy, and objectivity. This section focuses on the organizing principle most clearly connected with topic teams: the beat. Many of the observations derive from Fishman's assertion that "[n]ews is the result of the methods newsworkers employ. Were different methods used, different forms of news would result and publics would know the world outside their direct experience in a very different way."[261]

[261] Fishman, *Manufacturing*, 14.

Organized reporting: the beat

The heart of topic-team reorganization, with regard to the newsroom, was the reconceptualized beat structure, which was intended to alter how journalists did their jobs. It is instructive to summarize what is known or hypothesized about the beat structure and other reporting systems that were established before topic teams were adopted.

The roots of modern reporting techniques and goals descend to the penny press newspapers established in the 1830s and 1840s in northeastern U.S. cities, beginning in New York.[262] Those journalists – who were ridiculed, dismissed, and scorned by the establishment press of the day – created a new conception of news and pioneered ways to get it. In 1833, *The New York Sun* was the first to hire a reporter to make routine visits to the courts and to write regular reports, thus constituting a beat.[263]

Day's competitor, *New York Herald* publisher James Gordon Bennett, developed the first organized system of reporting – one that continues today. Lorenz and Vivian noted that Bennett "assigned reporters to cover the police, the courts and other sources of news regularly. Bennett's thorough beat system assured him that the *Herald* would not miss big

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[262] This discussion is with regard to reporting techniques in the United States. Other styles emerged in other countries. "Penny Press" refers to a group of papers that began in the 1830s and 1840s with the purpose of selling affordable – cheap – newspapers with wide popularity. The "traditional" papers of the day typically carried financial news and were of interest to business owners or managers and those who were wealthy. They often sold for six or seven cents. The new papers were often sold by vendors and newsstands rather than subscription, and pioneered marketing and distributions tactics – most notably the use of the newsboy. Scholars are usually referring to a small group of papers that were published from the 1830s through the 1850s, particularly the *Sun, Herald, Tribune*, and *Times* in New York; the *Public Ledger* in Philadelphia; and the *Sun* in Baltimore. For a summary, see John Nerone, "Penny Press," in Margaret Blanchard, ed., *History of the Mass Media in the United States: An Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), 503-505.

[263] Benjamin H. Day, editor and founder of the New York *Sun*, hired George Wisner to cover the courts for $4 a day. For a full discussion, see Mott, Frank Luther. American Journalism: A History: 1690-1960, 3d ed. Toronto: Macmillan, 1962. See also, Michael Emery, Edwin Emery and Nancy L. Roberts, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media,* 9th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), 99, specifically "A Press for the Masses," chapter 6, for general discussion.

events."[264] Beats assured a steady supply of news; developing reliable sources of news; positioning the reporter as a recipient of news; creating enough news to sustain a set ratio between advertising and editorial content; and offering a way for reporters to gain expertise in a complex coverage area. Beats made economic sense. Putting reporters in the way of news minimized the costs of gathering it. Creating predictable patterns and cycles of news allowed production and other work issues to be scheduled more reliably and efficiently.[265]

In describing the "golden age of journalism" in the United States of the 1880s and 1890s, Smith wrote that "the dynamics of the new popular journalism lay in the struggle between great city papers to be first with the news, in the pursuit of 'beats' and 'exclusives' to accompany the material provided by the cooperative news-gathering agencies."[266] Historians report that by the 1870s, "each leading metropolitan daily had a chief editor, a managing editor or night editor in charge of the news, a city editor to direct a staff of perhaps two dozen [beat and general assignment] reporters, a telegraph editor to handle the increasing volume of wire and cable news, a financial editor, a drama critic, a literary editor and editorial writers. As the years passed and reporting staffs grew, the city editor's job took on more importance."[267]

The structure remained essentially the same. "A reporter from the newspaper newsroom of 1901 would have been right at home in most newspaper newsrooms of the late

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[264] Alfred Lawrence Lorenz and John Vivian, *News: Reporting and Writing* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 481.

[265] For a full discussion, see Lorenz and Vivian, "Covering news with beats," chapter 21, in *News*. See also Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1973), 127, and Bernard Roshco, *Newsmaking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

[266] Anthony Smith, *The Newspaper: An International History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), 159.

[267] Emery, Emery, and Roberts, 179.

1960s or early 1970s," Strentz observed.[268] In 1980, Fishman wrote that the beat had been the predominant organizing form of covering news for at least the past hundred years in the United States.[269]

Lorenz and Vivian trace the evolution of beats by defining them in terms of four stages: place, subject, issue, and experimental beats.[270] Early beats were defined by where the reporters did most of their work.[271] Hess found that "[t]his geographic division of labor – the assignment of reporters to buildings – has advantages. It minimizes jurisdictional disputes between reporters. It is easy to administer. It divides the work into manageable proportions. Geographic beats provide some assurance that the bases will be covered."[272] Gans refers to these types of beats as "locational."[273]

Subject beats, such as sports or business, were the next iteration.[274] Lorenz and Vivian noted that subject beats were a way to deal with an increasingly complex world. Reporters on these beats still made regular rounds outside the newsroom but had a base in the newsroom. Some subject beats evolved into substance beats in which it wasn't the *place*

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[268] Herbert Strentz, "Reporters and Reporting in the Twentieth Century," in Margaret Blanchard, ed., *History of the Mass Media in the United States: An Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998),.588.

[269] Fishman, *Manufacturing,* 17.

[270] Their work, published in 1995, does not describe topic teams but alludes to them as an experimental form.

[271] Beats in the 1830s involved making regular rounds to sources of news, particularly police stations, courts, and city halls. James Gordon Bennett, realizing the time costs of transportation and the challenges of communication equipment, soon found it more efficient to station reporters outside of the newsroom near their beat sources. Other newspapers followed suit. The practice became so engrained that government buildings began to include press rooms that included desks, typewriters, telephones, and other equipment – a tradition that continues today. Lorenz and Vivian, 483.

[272] Lorenz, 483. See also, Stephen Hess, *News and Newsmaking* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1995).

[273] Gans, *Deciding What's News,* 131.

[274] Subject beats accompanied the "invention" of special sections in the later 1800s. "Sub-beats" were also used for particular sports or teams.

where news was generated that was a focal point but rather what the news represented or became. The Treasury beat became the economics beat; the State Department beat became the diplomacy beat, for example.

Issue beats, representing such subjects as minority, gender, or environmental issues, evolved as news coverage expanded beyond events. Although no dates are suggested for the inception of this kind of beat, the authors note that a reporter was assigned to a "gay" beat, their example of this genre, at the *Detroit News* in 1991.

Experimental beats included the shopping mall beat at the *Orange County Register* (although the paper wasn't named in their study) and a Chicago beat based in O'Hare Airport. They noted that special project teams were occasionally formed and that beat reporters might collaborate on a story that affected both beats, such as health and environment. Topic teams were not mentioned, but the research was published just as topic teams were beginning in widespread use; the research would have been done when they were still rare.

The earliest beats – police, courts, and city hall – have remained important for more than 170 years, but other beats have become standard as well. In 1985, McGill found from a national survey that newspapers of all sizes "devote a fairly constant 70 to 80 percent of the news staff" to nine news areas: general assignment; sports; local government; education; family/home/living/fashion/food; arts/culture/entertainment; courts; police; and business. Newspapers of all sizes except the smallest (under 10,000 circulation), some of which had only two reporters dedicated to full-time beats, assigned the largest number of reporters to sports beats.[275]

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[275] Lawrence Thomas McGill, *Priorities in News Coverage and the Role of Beats in the Careers of U. S. Newspaper Editors*, Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1987.

In 1998, Becker, Lowrey, Claussen, and Anderson compiled a list of beat assignments at three newspapers as part of case studies. The lineup of existing beats was similar to those on McGill's list, but medicine; science; health; energy; and development had been added, and arts; family; business; and general assignment had dropped off. The comparisons between the two compilations, however, are for rumination only. McGill's survey included 146 papers; Becker et al. studied three. There is, however, an interesting change in terminology over the course of thirteen years. In 1998, one beat is described as "growth and development" and another is "juvenile justice." While it is not stated whether the papers were "team" papers, the beat names and the lack of a general assignment designation suggest a topical approach and the beat names imply by their scope that more than one person would be assigned to the topic.[276]

The majority of the research in this area has been done on geographic / space / locational beats with little attention paid to subject, issue, or experimental beats. Most of the data collection has been from the 1960s and 1970s, a time when suburbanization was having a strong effect on newspapers, bureaus were established in outlying regions, and reporters filed their stories from that site, causing a resurgence of location-based beats until suburban newspapers expanded and drove many of the urban newspapers' bureaus away. No contextual note of that has been made, however. Becker et al. observed that "the classic literature" on news construction treated (space) beats as an invariable characteristic of

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[276] Lee Becker, Wilson Lowrey, Dane Claussen, and William Anderson, "Why Does the Beat Go On? An Examination of the Role of Beat Structure in the Newsroom," *Newspaper Research Journal* 21, no. 4 (Fall 2000), 2-16.

newsrooms, essential for the creation of news, but that explanations of the nature of beat structure were missing from the literature.[277]

In current literature, topic teams are often incompletely understood or described. In a 2002 publication, Sylvie and Witherspoon describe beats under a "team structure" as an improvement. However, the structure they describe is not one of topic teams but of a job-sharing arrangement for a traditional beat: "That system typically relies on the journalist to perform routine, daily canvassing of the people and information relevant to a certain area of local life. … Often one reporter performs this job; in the case of two or more, the duties classically tend to be sharply defined and divided."[278]

Fishman discussed the difficulties in defining the concept of a beat and the challenge of distinguishing it from an area of expertise. Key concepts include

- a beat has a history in the news organization that outlives the organizational histories of the reporters who work the beat;
- superiors assign reporters to their beats;
- the beat is a complex object of reporting consisting of a domain of activities outside the newsroom;
- connected activities form topics that arise again and again within the beat, as with prostitution cases on the police beat;
- beats may be territorial or topical, but both forms represent a "genuine duality": "This distinction is apparent in the two ways newsworkers talk about their beats:

[277] Becker et al., 3, 12.

[278] Sylvie and Witherspoon.

as places to go and people to see or as a series of topics one is responsible for covering."[279]

Beat-related influences on news content

In the late 1980s, Shoemaker and Mayfield[280] and Shoemaker and Reese[281] provided comprehensive summaries of newsmaking theories. Shoemaker and Reese developed a hierarchical model on influences on media content, ranging from the individual (core) to the ideological level. Second and third in importance were the media routines and organization levels.[282] Tuchman[283] casts a wide shadow on this area of interest. Her work throughout the 1960s and 1970s pioneered study of the construction of news, and she rooted her research in the reality of newsrooms and their enduring traditions, making her findings applicable some 35 years later. This section draws on all of these studies, but restricts discussion to aspects related to beats. It then examines more current literature.

Tuchman was curious as to how "newsmen routinize the processing of unexpected events."[284] She found that they interpret and categorize information and events according to

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[279] Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), 14-29.

[280] Pamela J. Shoemaker with Elizabeth Kay Mayfield, "Building a Theory of News Content: A Synthesis of Current Approaches," *Journalism Monographs* 103, June 1987.

[281] Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content* (White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, 1991).

[282] For a chart, see Shoemaker and Reese, *Mediating*, 64.

[283] See, in particular, Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978). Also by Tuchman, "Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected," *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (July 1973): 110-131; "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity," *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (January 1972): 660-679.

[284] The concepts Tuchman defined from her research included routine as a "negotiated process"; "happenings in everyday world"; "accounts and explanations of events presented by news organizations"; "classification of objects according to one or more relevant characteristics ruled salient by the classifiers"; and "classification in

how they would be handled by the organization as well as by the resources available for processing reports about the information or event. The difference between spot and developing news, for example, depended in part on whether reporters were near the occurrence and with what technological equipment. The choice of the day's top story depended on whether there was sufficient material to create a report or presentation, and enough reporters, photographers, and editors to create it. Whether news was noticed, sourced, and processed could depend on whether there was a beat reporter in place to catch it; the quality of the report was related to the quality of the reporter. "Making news," she theorized, "is the act of constructing reality itself rather than a picture of reality." News, she concluded, is a frame. Newswork is how occurrences are transformed into news. The power, in this view, resides with newsworkers and the routines they create.

Beats were particularly important because of the positioning of the reporter. "[T]here were several logical locations where stories might be expected to occur …. There, reporters might hope to learn systematically of occurrences that could be shaped to fit and thus to define the emerging conception of popular news." Tuchman described these systematic locations as forming a news net to catch news. The more tightly woven the net, the "smaller" the bits of information that could be caught. "Today's news net is intended for big fish," she observed in the late 1970s. The reporters transforming the fish into news often competed for assignments, front-page placement, attention and other rewards, all of which influenced what the public read as news. They do this in accordance with their editors' and their perceptions of what the readers consider news or want to read about.

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which the relevant characteristics are central to the solution of practical tasks or problems at hand and are constituted and grounded in everyday activity." Tuchman, *Making News,* 111-117.

A "web of facticity" governs behavior and content. Journalists must verify or assume verification of information according to time and available resources. Beat reporters save time and resources by repeatedly contacting the same sources, but to the detriment of news depth and diversity. These "known" or pre-established "facts" serve as a web of reassurance, allowing suppositions as to the validity of other "facts." The danger of this process is the elimination of information as credible if it doesn't conform to previous knowledge or suppositions.[285]

One of the main considerations with regard to beats is the close relationship that forms between reporter and source(s) and the ways in which that might shape or skew the news. One need look no farther than the tangled case of former *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller and her reports on alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq for a modern illustration of some of the dangers. Although there are still conflicting accounts, the consensus is that a reporter, too involved with her sources over a long time on the beat, either protected them or was supplied with false information that resulted in news articles that influenced public reaction with regard to war and Iraq.[286]

Sigal, in the 1970s, argued that unequal relationships form between beat reporters and their sources, who control the reporter's access to information and have the power to not only filter but frame it.[287] Gans agreed, noting that "beat reporters must frequently calculate the

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[285] Tuchman, *Making News*, 15-38, 82-103.

[286] For *The New York Times*' full report, see Don Van Natta Jr, Adam Liptak, Clifford J. Levy, and Janny Scott, "The Miller Case: A Notebook, a Cause, a Jail Cell and a Deal," *New York Times*, 16 October 2005, A1. For other reports, see James Rainey, "Reporter's Strength May Also Be Her Weakness; With Friends in High Places, *The New York Times*' Judith Miller has Sources Galore – but She May Have Trusted Them Too Much," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 October 2005, A22; Todd Gitlin, "All the President's Friends," *The American Prospect*, January 2006, 47; and Lynne Duke, "The Reporter's Last Take: In an Era of Anonymous Sources, Judy Miller Is a Cautionary Tale of the *Times*," *Washington Post*, 10 November 2005, C1.

[287] Sigal, *Reporters and Officials*, 60.

costs and benefits of displeasing their sources with a story, deciding whether to report it or to pass it up so as to maintain the relationship for another day, when a much bigger story may come their way that will justify the disruption of the rapport."[288]

The general assignment reporter and the beat reporter face different challenges, Gans argued, since they must have different levels of knowledge, forge different kinds of relationships, and handle different kinds of information. The beat reporter nurtures ongoing, sometimes intense and complex, relationships.

> Being on the inside enables beat reporters to gather information that lends itself to dramatic inside stories; but at the same time, they must concentrate on stories that please their sources, since angering them may endanger their closeness or rapport, thus ending the reporter's usefulness on the beat. As a result, beat reporters are drawn into a symbiotic relationship of mutual obligations with their sources, which both facilitates and complicates their work.[289]

It's a constant balancing act, deciding what to hold and what to print; if other reporters have the story, the fear of breaking the source's trust might be secondary: an editor's ire at getting scooped could be worse than holding back information. As a precaution, many editors keep the beats in rotation to avoid the danger of reporters being co-opted by sources.[290]

"Substantive beat reporters," who specialized in broad subject matter, were more likely to be found at news magazines than at newspapers in the 1970s and 1980s. They, however, approximate the type of reporter who might be a member of a topic team in the 1990s and 2000s. They deal with many "agencies" (institutions) and sources, so are

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[288] Gans, *Deciding*, 134.

[289] Gans, *Deciding*, 133.

[290] Gans, *Deciding*, 136.

precluded from being participant-observers in a non-newsroom place. They are unlikely to develop intense relationships with sources, and the type of sources they nurture usually supply parts of larger stories, not the stories themselves, and as a result wield minor power over the reporter. "Inside dope" is generally so localized or specialized that it is of little or no interest to the editors or readers. The reporters, in fact, pick up a limited "ambassadorial power" as their sources, who are usually specialists, rely on them to introduce the sources' work to the lay world.[291]

General-assignment reporters, by contrast to all kinds of beat reporters, rarely come to their stories with a developed sense of context or a ready set of sources. Their job does not place them in the way of symbiotic relationships, and they are outsiders, not insiders. "This affects what they observe, the questions they ask when they interview, and the stories they produce." They also tend to talk over their stories with other reporters from other publications, which gives them added context as well as a group decision-making power as to what constitutes newsworthy material. At its worst, this is categorized as the "herd instinct," and it affects beat reporters as well. It serves to reduce uncertainty, but it can be a powerful filter.

Officials and familiar figures are often sources for the time-pressed general assignment reporter because using them is efficient and reliable, and because, unlike on a beat, there is little or no time to locate or develop alternate sourcing. Nor is there usually adequate time to assess the information, as there would be on a beat. There is a danger in the reporter having too much of the kind of information that cannot be synthesized in the time the reporter has available. A lack of prior information means general reporters are vulnerable to seeing what others want them to see, and they may take note of dramatic incidents at the

[291] Gans, "Substantive beat reporters," in *Deciding,* 137-138.

expense of more explanatory or accurate processes. Time pressures, limited sourcing, and attention to drama contribute to conflict-based reports.[292] Because general reporters operate "on the fly," their questions often reflect their personal or professional values, and can be antagonistic when addressed to a source who does not share those values. They can, however, ask more pointed questions than a beat reporter since maintaining rapport with the source is not an objective. General reporters are more vulnerable to inaccuracies; many story details – names, affiliations, dates, and places – are familiar to beat reporters but must be ascertained and confirmed by the general reporter, meaning heavy front-end work for a one-time story.[293]

Bagdikian maintained that beats were responsible for a distortion of the news overall.[294] This charge of bias has had wide concurrence among researchers, particularly Fishman[295] and Tuchman,[296] who claim readers are presented with views of the world that are promulgated by existing authorities, sources and organizations are legitimated, and less popular ideas that come from untested or controversial sources tend to be ignored or treated as less than legitimate. In the early 1980s, Lacy and Matustik brought some context to beat-effects research through a study of four newspapers and their beat reporters. Overall, their

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[292] See also Charles Bantz, "News Organizations: Conflict as a Crafted Cultural Norm," in Dan Berkowitz, ed., *Social Meanings of News: A Text-Reader* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997), 123-154.

[293] Gans, *Deciding,* 138-141.

[294] Lorenz, 481.

[295] See Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).

[296] See Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978).

findings supported common criticisms, but suggested that individual characteristics deserved further study as influencing factors.[297]

In the mid- to late 1980s, Brown, Bybee, Wearden, and Straughan were among scholars who extended the dimensions of beat-effects by reinvigorating the study of source diversity.[298] They found the status quo little changed since the mid-1970s: "Elite sources still supply most of the information found in both national and state newspapers. Male government executives were typical sources. Over half of the sources are not identified," a form of "veiling" that diminishes the information the reader can use to assess validity, credibility, and bias.[299] They concluded that the "findings suggest that the media may have less control over the agenda they present than they would like to think."[300]

In the early 1990s, with the introduction of computerized archives into the newsroom and a surge of interest in computer-assisted reporting, there were suggestions that source diversity would increase through search capability. Hansen, Ward, Conners, and Neuzil found that, while reporters said computerized morgues and databases made it easier to include multiple sources in stories, a content analysis showed that the reporters relied on the "same types of sources representing the same institutional and social power structures as in the classic newsmaking studies." In effect, the archives served to reinforce routines embedded in the beat structure as journalists continued to rely on proven and readily

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[297] Stephen Lacy and David Matustik, "Dependence on Organization and Beat Sources for Story Ideas: A Case Study of Four Newspapers," *Newspaper Research Journal* 5 (Winter 1983): 9-16.

[298] For earlier studies, see Sigal, *Reporters*, and Hugh M. Culbertson, "Veiled News Sources – Who and What are They?" *News Research Bulletin of the American Newspaper Publishers Association*, May 1975, 2-23.

[299] The granting of anonymity can be a bargaining tool between reporter and source.

[300] Jane Delano Brown, Carl R. Bybee, Stanley T. Wearden, and Dulcie Murdock Straughan, "Invisible Power: Newspaper News Sources and the Limits of Diversity," *Journalism Quarterly* 64 (Spring 1987): 45-54.

available sources.[301] It might also indicate that the option of altering perceptions as to who constituted a reliable source did not occur to the reporters. Perhaps a chilling effect resulted from hidebound editors proving story credibility by checking new copy against stories of the past, giving greater validity to what had gone before.

Newsroom sociology

Two classic research studies from the 1950s shaped much of the research that followed. In one, Breed explored the concept of social control in the newsroom. In the other, White examined gatekeeping with regard to the news editor and content selection. Breed suggested that power lay with newspaper owners, who set policy that was enforced by top newsroom management knowingly and unknowingly through overt and covert means. Those methods included written and unwritten policies, rewards and punishment, and social pressures.

The lessons were rarely subtle, as one latter-day reporter recalls, and they could be memorable. The first story covered by Seymour Hersh, an investigative reporter perhaps best known for breaking the story of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, took place in South Side Chicago: a suicide-murder by a man who shot his family and himself. As Hersh was excitedly dictating the story at the scene of the crime to a rewrite man at the City News Bureau newsroom, an editor interrupted:

> He said: "Ah, my good dear energetic Mr. Hersh. Pardon me for interrupting but these, alas, poor unfortunate victims, do they happen to be of the American Negro persuasion?" And I said yes. "Will you please then cheap it

[301] Kathleen A. Hansen, Jean Ward, Joan L. Conners, and Mark Neuzil, "Local Breaking News: Sources, Technology, and News Routines," *Journalism Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 561-572.

> out?" Which meant one paragraph. You learn a lot about the newspaper business that way. It wasn't a story because they were black.[302]

Breed, a sociologist researching newspaper organizations in the 1950s, concluded there was a social control that let newsmen – the profession was predominantly male at that time – know what was acceptable in terms of a story or subject and what was not. That control was exercised through communicating limitations in many ways, some of which were overt, as in the Hersh experience, and some subtle – perhaps conveyed by a tone of voice, a gesture, a silence, or "coincidental" consequence, such as missing out on a coveted assignment or being detailed to writing obituaries for awhile. Breed suggested that one of the strongest missteps a journalist could make would be to question a "sacred cow," a subject or person about which only one way of thinking is or is perceived to be "correct."[303] If Hersh had questioned why news about blacks was considered less worthy of a full story than one about non-blacks he would have been on "sacred cow" territory of a high order.[304]

There are many ways newspapers can signal what content is wanted for their pages. Perhaps the most obvious method is by determining which jobs are available. If a paper hires a golf reporter, for example, it wants golf stories. If it hires half a dozen golf reporters, it wants many golf stories. If it hires a sports reporter, and only one sports reporter, than that reporter will have to cover a wide ground; if golf dominates that reporter's coverage, chances

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[302] Scott Sherman, "The Avenger: Sy Hersh, Then and Now," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July-August 2003, 34-44, refering to an interview with Joe Eszterhas in *Rolling Stone*, 1975. See also, David Barsamian, "Sy Hersh," *The Progressive*, April 2005, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1295/is_4_69/ai_n13760502.

[303] See Warren Breed, "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis," *Social Forces* 33 (1955): 326-335. See also Breed, *The Newspaperman, News and Society* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), a publication that derived from his dissertation for Columbia University in political science in 1952.

[304] Other "sacred cow" violations might include reporting unfavorable news about a large advertiser, reporting favorable news about a competitor, antagonizing various business interests, or investigating a story that was perceived as "untouchable" by other newsroom staffers.

are that reporter will not last at that paper because other sports have been less covered as a result. Content is affected by a newspaper's resources as well as its goals, but the manner in which scarce resources are deployed is always telling.

American mainstream newsrooms of the 1950s and early 1960s were predominantly white, male, and hierarchically structured, much like a military model. Popular research has focused on the "organization man,"[305] and some sociologists turned their attention at this time to journalism to see how much influence was exerted by the organization in the newsroom. In the mid-1960s, alternative newspapers become widely read and often featured the writing of those not employed by mainstream newspapers. Those papers tended to focus on issue-oriented topics, unlike their "traditional" contemporaries,[306] and to avoid routines, such as beats, that were associated with establishment papers.[307]

In the process Breed called socialization, new journalists internalized the media organization's policies, discovering by osmosis the norms and values of their profession. In

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[305] "If the term is vague, it is because I can think of no other way to describe the people I am talking about. They are not the workers, nor are they the white-collar people in the usual, clerk sense of the word. These people only work for The Organization. The ones I am talking about belong to it as well. They are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the bows of organization life, and it is they who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions. Only a few are top managers or ever will be. In a system that makes such hazy terminology as 'junior executive' psychologically necessary, they are of the staff as much as the line, and most are destined to live poised in a middle area that still awaits a satisfactory euphemism. But they are the dominant members of our society nonetheless." William H. Whyte, *Organization Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1956). In popular culture, the extent to which Whyte's observations resonated with the public is suggested by the success of another book of the same name and an ensuing 1956 film, also of the same name. For a fascinating follow-up, see also Amada Bennett, *The Death of the Organization Man: What Happens When the New Economic Realities Change the Rules for Survival at Your Company* (New York: Touchstone Book, 1990). Bennett, who wrote this when she was a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, became editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2003 after working with the *Oregonian* and the *Lexington* (Kentucky) *Herald-Leader* in intervening years. She has twice been a member of Pulitzer-winning newsrooms, sharing the prize for national reporting with her colleagues at the *Oregonian*, which later won for public service.

[306] Mitchell Stephens, *The History of News: From the Drum to the Satellite* (New York: Viking, 1986).

[307] Fishman, *Manufacturing*.

his conceptualization, reward came from within the organization, not from readers, sources, colleagues within the profession, or other potential influencers.

In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars examined the role of journalists' personal values. The newsroom at this time was still hierarchical and discouraged any display of personal viewpoints. Assignments were given by line editors overseen by a city editor or were developed "in the field" by reporters from beats or breaking news, a powerful motivator in those pre-Internet days, although its power appeared to diminish as newspapers faced with other newspaper competitors decreased.[308] Teamwork existed for specific projects of limited duration, and team management was not yet an influence in U.S. newsrooms. Scholarly interest in whether journalism was or was not a profession was evident.

Flegel and Chaffee[309] observed that reporters' stories were influenced more by their personal opinions than by their editors and readers and found that the influence was apparently conscious. Their findings supported the "lone cowboy,"[310] individualistic descriptions of journalists, and suggested a high level of autonomy in the job. At about the same time, in fall 1971, Johnstone found that increasing centralization and bureaucratization

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[308] The dearth of competition for most U. S. daily newspapers dampened the need for breaking news coverage, as did real-life broadcast and cable coverage. Only in the early 2000s did newspapers begin to incorporate Internet reporting into their daily newsroom routines and, at that time, it appeared that breaking news was once again becoming a powerful motivator.

[309] Ruth C. Flegel and Steven H. Chaffee, Jr., "Influences of Editors, Readers, and Personal Opinions on Reporters," *Journalism Quarterly* 48 (Winter 1971): 645-651.

[310] An example of this characterization is seen in Rebecca Ross Albers, "Profiles in Journalism: The 'Lone Cowboy' Gives Way to the Modern Journalist," *Presstime*, April 1996, `http://www.naa.org/Home/PressTime/1996/April/PressTimeContent/Profiles-in-Journalism.aspx`.

in the news industry and newswork had increased job dissatisfaction because of decreased autonomy.[311]

Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman deepened the emerging characterization in ways that suggest journalists' behavior is shaped by multiple influences. They analyzed a comprehensive occupational study (see previous footnote) and identified two types of journalists: neutrals, who are channels of information, and participants, who sift through information to find and then develop the story. Neutrals value speed in getting the story out, using verified information, reaching the widest audience, and entertaining it. Participants investigate, analyze complex problems, discuss national policy, and develop intellectual and cultural interests. The researchers concluded that two competing professional orientations existed and that although the determinants varied, the educational background of the journalist was "perhaps the primary source of the current segmentation."[312]

Sigal found that a "context of shared values" resulting from socialization to an organization's policies "shape[d] the context in which events are viewed and the selection of the aspects of each event that will become the news."[313] Gans found that routines and constraints imposed by the media organization may negate the influence of personal attitudes, values, and beliefs. In recent scholarship, Donsbach found that news routines,

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[311] John W. C. Johnstone, "Organizational Constraints on Newswork," *Journalism Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 5-13. The findings were based on personal interviews conducted with a national probability sample of 1,313 journalists in fall 1971 by the National Opinion Research Center. The journalists represented print, broadcast, wire, and radio from a sample stratified by region and industry sector with probabilities proportionate to size. Results were stratified by job title; more than twice as many "media elites" as "rank and file" journalists were interviewed.

[312] John W.C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski, and William W. Bowman, "The Professional Values of American Newsmen," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1972-Winter 1973), 522-541. The findings of this and other studies based on the NORC research were published as Johnstone et al, *The American Journalist: A Sociological Profile* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

[313] Sigal, *Reporters and Officials,* 3.

organizational constraints, and current models and theories of news definition and selection failed to fully explain the underlying processes leading to news judgments. He applied psychological theories and concluded that two general needs or functions were explanatory. They were "a need for social validation of perceptions and a need to preserve one's existing predispositions."[314]

Summary of journalistic routines and newsroom sociology. Newsroom routines are influenced by life within and without the organization. In turn, routines influence news content and selection. As Fishman asserts, different methods produce different forms of news and different ways in which the public experiences the world. As topic teams reconfigured the beat systems, it altered newsroom practices of some 170 years' standing. Lorenz and Vivian found four stages of beat evolution: place, subject, issue, and experimental. The latter two stages have close connections to topic teams, but all four stages are in current practice. Little research has been done on subject, issue, or experimental beats, but in general, scholars find that certain topics are always in evidence, even if the scope has broadened. Current scholarship on topic teams in terms of beats provides inadequate or inaccurate descriptions. The work of Shoemaker, Reese, and Tuchman point up the connections between beats and news. Tuchman enlarges the discussion, however, to concentrate on the connection between beats and the construction of social reality using news as a frame. The positioning of the reporter is key, she argues – an important consideration when focusing on topic teams and the necessary repositioning of the reporter in terms of subject matter and physical contact with sources. Sigal and Gans elaborate on the relationship between sources and reporters,

[314] Wolfgang Donsbach, "Psychology of News Decisions: Factors Behind Journalists' Professional Behavior," *Journalism* 5, no. 2 (2002), 131-157.

another journalistic aspect affected by the introduction of topic teams. So, too, is there a difference between general assignment and beat reporters. One is there for quick information; the other builds relationships.

Classic studies from the 1950s examine gatekeeping and social control. While the specifics have changed, the larger point is that news and journalistic practice is shaped by dynamics and understandings, not all of them necessarily accurate or intended. Further scholarship revealed ways in which personal values affected work. Some of the latest scholarship suggests that journalists have a need for their perceptions to be accepted by others, and seek to preserve their own worldviews.

Professional Values

Professionalism is one way in which groups of workers and thinkers seek to define, limit, and control the bounds of responsible practice. In journalism, professionalism proves one has mastered routine models of processing news. Through institutionalization, professions take on lives of their own.[315]

The view of journalism as a profession is not universal, and there is justification for classifying it as profession, occupation, trade, or various other designations[316]; it fits none of

[315] Shoemaker and Reese, *Influence of Media Routines*, chapter 6. For a full discussion of how professions arise in an industrialized society, see Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkely, Calif.: University of California Press, 1977). See also, Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), chapters 5-11; and Harold Wilensky, "The Professionalization of Everyone?" *American Journal of Sociology* 70 (September 1964), 137-158.

[316] The terms "professionalizing occupation" and "craft" are used as well. See, for example, Penn Kimball, "Journalism: Art, Craft, or Profession?" in K.S. Lynn, ed., *The Professions in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1963), 242-260; Douglas Birkhead, "News Media Ethics and the Management of Professionals,"

these exactly. The concept of professionalism, however, has been helpful in typifying the evolution of the newsroom and corresponding values. Nerone and Barnhurst produced a timeline of U.S. newspaper types and ideals, ranging from the "printer's paper" of the 1700s to the "corporate paper" that began angling for ascendancy in the 1980s. Its competition is the "professional paper" that arose in the earliest part of the 20th century and dominated the industry until recently. "It's hard to discern just where the caesura will rest," the authors wrote in 2003. "But it is clear that the ideals of the modern newspaper and the ideologies of the professional reporter require a consensus and a level of monopoly that no longer exist."[317]

By that reckoning, topic teams entered newsrooms as professionalism was being dealt a heavy blow not just from outside sources – changing readership, changing mores, demographic shifts, economic pressures, and ownership structures – but from a changing newspaper paradigm that threatened journalists' core values. This section deals with the essential elements of those discourses.

Characteristics of the profession

Certain differences define journalism, no matter how it is categorized[318]; "profession" appears the most appropriate designation to this researcher in terms of conveying a blend of idealistic and functional goals. According to Greenwood's model, an occupation qualifies as

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Journal of Mass Media Ethics 1 no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1986), 37-46. For a summary of professionalization, see Randal A. Beam, "Journalism Professionalism as an Organizational-Level Concept," *Journalism Monographs*, June 1990, 1-43.

[317] John Nerone and Kevin G. Barnhurst, "U. S. Newspaper Types, the Newsroom, and the Division of Labor, 1750-2000," *Journalism Studies* 4, no. 4 (2003), 435-449.

[318] Most journalism research has utilized a structural-functional approach to defining journalism, which allows the conceptualization of an "established profession, the professional orientation of an individual, and the professionalizing occupation" as well as a classification of the profession according to its adherence to a set of attributes. Marianne Allison, "A Literature Review of Approaches to the Professionalism of Journalists," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 1, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1986): 5-19.

a profession if it is based on a body of systematic theory; serves clients, not customers; produces authorities with understanding of complex relationships; has community sanction of the power and privileges of a professional; has a regulative code of ethics; and has a professional culture defined as "a network of formal and informal groups through which the professional operates."[319] Autonomy is the deciding factor for Moore, who also stipulates that a profession must be a full-time occupation, and that the journalist consider his or her work "a calling" and exhibit a public-service orientation.[320] Orzack noted that journalism is a "central life interest" for many professionals, serving as a self-identification.[321] Those referring to journalism as a profession most often cite the value placed on autonomy; commitment to service; strong codes of ethics; and the sense of journalistic calling.[322]

Some researchers indicate that a full professionalization has not yet occurred. Birkhead suggests that

> Professionalism reduced to its central ideal involves the autonomy of an occupation to control its own practice. This ideal coincides with the most fundamental prerequisite of ethical behavior: the freedom to make ethical choices. …[P]rofessionalism has not provided journalists with the appropriate kind of autonomy for fully meaningful ethical behavior.[323]

Hodges argues that there is no way to compel accountability within journalism, such as with licensing or sanctions, as there is within law or medicine, two professions often cited in

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[319] Ernest Greenwood, "Attributes of a Profession," *Social Work* 2 (1957): 45-55. See also, Jay Black and Ralph D. Barney, "Toward Professional, Ethical Journalism," *Mass Comm Review* 17, nos. 1, 2 (1990): 3-5.

[320] There are other criteria as well, but these three elements build on the previous concept in ways relevant to the discussion of topic teams. Wilbert E. Moore, *The Professions: Roles and Rules* (New York: Russell Sage, 1970).

[321] Louis Orzack, "Work as a 'Central Life Interest' of Professionals," *Social Problems* 7, (1959), 125-132.

[322] Allison, 9.

[323] Birkhead, 37.

comparisons.[324] Black maintains there are six characteristics that are lacking; as summarized by Merrill, they are

- an extensive and complex body of knowledge;
- knowledge not only of the what and the how but also a theoretical grasp of the why;
- a definite and practical goal:
- agreement with other professionals about the ends to be served and about education necessary for practice;
- common criteria or standards for practice – agreed upon entrance requirements; and
- a motivation that is altruistic, not self-enhancing or based on a profit motive.[325]

Others counter such assertions by arguing that, in essence, some of those qualities do exist, but are so contextualized to the profession as to become nearly invisible to outsiders. Keith, for example, notes that news organizations have internal and external mechanisms that include (but are not limited to) codes, memos, correction policies, journalism reviews and media coverage, nonprofit organizations, university-based projects, and academic research. The mechanisms, however, too often carry little influence[326] (effectiveness is weighed most heavily toward internal actions). She suggests looking to other professions and trades for models. One mechanism that holds promise, she writes, is the regularly scheduled

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[324] Lisa H. Newton, Louis Hodges, and Susan Keith, "Accountability in the Professions: Accountability in Journalism," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 19, nos. 3, 4 (2004), 166-190.

[325] John C. Merrill, "Challenge: Journalism Is Not a Profession," in Everette E. Dennis and John C. Merrill, *Media Debates: Issues in Mass Communication* (New York: Longman, 1991), 201-206. See Jay Black, "Professionalism in Journalism," *World Media Report* (Spring 1987), 13-15. The six characteristics are credited to Abraham Flexner, 1915, according to Merrill.

[326] See, for example, recent research on the impact of journalism reviews on journalistic behavior: Frank Fee, "Connecting with the News Culture: Trade-Press Readership Among Copy Editors and Their Supervisors," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Southeast Colloquium, Columbia, S. C., March 2001; Susan Keith, "Ethics and Newspapers' Final Gatekeepers: Work Conditions and Copy Editors' Role Conceptions," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003; and David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

postmortem meeting of the medical profession.[327] Interestingly, that mechanism is similar to quality-control practices advocated by team management systems. Dennis argues that characteristics of a profession should be measured by intensity, not absolutism. The public service component of journalism should hold particular power in ranking journalism as a profession, he wrote.[328]

Merrill makes a dramatic hypothetical argument against professionalizing: individualism would be lost; autonomy would be subjugated to "the Collective Will of the Profession"; diversity of voice and viewpoint would be seriously diminished as "non-professionals" are excluded from practice; and journalists would be forced to conform to professional expectations. He warns against the tyranny of mediocrity (as does Ayn Rand, he notes) and the development of vested interests and mechanisms of self-protection that can circumvent public responsibilities.[329]

Journalism is characterized by a tension that exists between organizational and professional goals and values. It manifests in many ways, but perhaps the most pervasive is an "understanding" that there is or should be a "wall" between the business and journalism functions of a newspaper. Merritt (and many others) decry the lessening of this separation; he explains what he sees as the hazards:

> If a newspaper was thought of, by its owners, as just another way to make money, the wall was an impediment; the enterprise's financial success could be maximized only if the wall did not exist. Maximizing a newspaper's income is not a difficult process if there are no concerns about public service and intellectual honesty: Write only stories that please advertisers and potential advertisers; allocate newsroom resources to the subjects that surveys

[327] Newton et al., "Accountability," 180-189.

[328] Dennis and Merrill, 207.

[329] John C. Merrill, "Professionalization: Danger to Press Freedom and Pluralism," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 1, no.2 (Spring-Summer 1986), 56-60.

> tell you people say they want to read; ride the partisan winds in editorial policy; don't rock the boat.[330]

A very public illustration of the hazards of wall-breaching had the profession volubly aghast in October 1999 in what became known as the Staples affair. The *Los Angeles Times* devoted a special issue of its Sunday magazine to the new Staples Sports Center. By prior agreement, the *Times* split the profits from the advertorial section[331] with the arena. Approximately three hundred editorial staff members petitioned for an apology[332]; former publisher Otis Chandler publicly chastised the newspaper; publisher Kathryn M. Downing apologized; "and the paper ran a brilliant and extensive dissection of the episode by its media reporter, David Shaw. A few months later, the Chandler family sold Times-Mirror to the Tribune Co., and both Downing and Editor Michael Parks left the scene."[333]

In November, *Editor and Publisher* magazine analyzed responses from 105 editors and 60 publishers to an in-depth survey about "issues surrounding the editorial/business Wall." The survey revealed that, despite long-held journalistic beliefs in the value of "the wall," breaches were "common, perhaps even daily, occurrences at many newspapers." Fifty-one percent of the publishers said the arena deal was acceptable compared to 19 percent of the editors; answers to other questions showed a similar split between editors' and

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[330] Davis Merritt, "Breaching the wall," in *Knightfall: Knight Ridder and How the Erosion of Newspaper Journalism is Putting Democracy at Risk* (New York: American Management Association, 2005), 121-131. See also, Michael Hoyt, "When the Walls Come Tumbling Down," *Columbia Journalism Review* (March-April 1990), 35-41.

[331] For a comprehensive analysis of the use of advertorial products in the United States, see Mary Alice Shaver and Regina Louise Lewis, "Role of Special Advertising Sections and Subsidiary Publications in a Competitive Environment," *Newspaper Research Journal* 18, nos. 3, 4 (Summer-Fall 1997), 16-30.

[332] Richard A. Oppel, Jr., and Felicity Barringer, "*Los Angeles Times* Staff Protests Magazine Deal," *New York Times*, 28 October 1999, C5.

[333] Leo Bogart, "Church and State: Finding the Courage to Maintain Integrity; Profiles in Journalistic Courage, Part 2," *Media Studies Journal* (2001), 141-149.

publishers' responses.[334] Unfortunately, no previous surveys exist with which to compare the results. "Rank and file" members of the newsroom were not polled; in light of "MBA editor" discussions, it would have been interesting to see if a rift existed within the newsroom as well.

Another wall exists between those who deal with comment (the editorial department) and those who deal with news (the newsroom). Ideologically, both of these segregations rise from an attempt at intellectual autonomy and safeguards against bias. Merritt argues that the wall between business and news protects credibility. Bantz[335] and Soloski[336] argue that it maintains integrity and avoids conflicts with professional journalistic norms.[337] In practice, the wall may also be an artifact of management and control strategies; evolving post-modern organizations are not characterized by strict divisions and favor more collaborative work arrangements. Nevertheless, the divisions have been a long-standing tradition in the profession (although not in pre-professional days) and are recognized by many, if not most, practitioners as guiding principles.

Journalism in other countries has developed differently: In Germany, for example, *redakteurs* – journalists – perform a wide variety of tasks that include reporting news as well as writing editorials[338] (far more like the journalist of an independent weekly or small

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[334] Greg Mitchell, "Two-Way Street: Gatekeepers Still on Guard, but Editorial, Advertising Talking More Than Ever and "the Wall" Came Tumbling Down," *Editor and Publisher*, 4 December 1999, 20.

[335] Charles R. Bantz, "New organizations: Conflict as a Crafted Cultural Norm," in Dan Berkowitz ed., *Social Meanings of News: A Text Reader* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.:Sage, 1997), 123-137.

[336] John Soloski, "News Reporting and Professionalism: Some Constraints on the Reporting of News," in Dan Berkowitz, ed., *Social Meanings of News: A Text Reader* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997).

[337] Alyssa Eckman and Thomas Lindlof, "Negotiating the Gray Lines: An Ethnographic Case Study of Organizational Conflict between Advertorials and News," *Journalism Studies* 4 no. 1 (2003): 65-77.

[338] Frank Esser, "Editorial Structures and Work Principles in British and German Newsrooms," *European Journal of Communication* 13, no. 3 (1998): 375-405.

community newspaper in the United States), representing a more holistic notion of news and a correspondingly lower bureaucratic involvement. But while advertising placement tends to be more prominent than in the United States, distinctions are still drawn between ad copy and news.

The urge to professionalize was not isolated to journalism or this country. Many trades began to organize toward the end of the nineteenth century, and not just in the United States. Industrialization was a motivating force in North America and Europe through enlarged work forces, increased technological capacities, and an increased focus on mass communication, advertising, and competition.[339] The American Newspaper Publisher Association was founded in 1887; after about four decades of organizing, newsworkers formed The Newspaper Guild in 1933. Other signs of professionalism included the adoption of various codes of ethics and behavior[340] and the founding of journalism schools.[341]

At the turn of the century, American journalism was criticized as being "focused on the excesses of an unrestrained market-oriented journalism" that followed a "libertarian" philosophy of the press.[342] In reaction,

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[339] Svennik Hoyer and Epp Lauk, "The Paradoxes of the Journalistic Profession," *Nordicom Review* 24, no. 2 (2003), 3-18.

[340] For historical context, see Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

[341] The University of Missouri founded a school of journalism in 1908; Columbia University began its school in 1912; The University of Oregon had a journalism department in 1912 and a school in 1916. For historical context that places interest in academic journalism earlier than previously thought, see Stephen A. Banning, "The cradle of professional journalistic education in the mid-nineteenth century," *Media History Monographs. An Online Journal of Media History* 4, no.1 http://www.scripps.ohio.edu/mediahistory/mhmjour4-1.htm (accessed 10 April 2006; this address is a change from previous published citations). See also, Stephen A. Banning, "The Professionalism of Journalism: A Nineteenth-Century Beginning," *Journalism History* 24, no.4 (Winter 1998-1999): 157-163.

[342] John W.C. Johnstone et al., *Professional Values,* 522. See Fred Siebert, "The Libertarian Theory," in Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1956).

> [T]he principal direction of American journalism during the first half of the twentieth century was toward establishing itself as a profession, and it was this era which saw the proliferation of professional schools, the articulation of codes of professional ethics, and the maturation of the ideology of "objective" reporting.[343]

Defining the role of journalism was an enduring theme throughout the twentieth century, however. Even a cursory glance at trade literature and journalism reviews reveals that, for newspaper journalists, it was a particularly engrossing subject during the changes of the 1990s. A passage written in 1972 (describing "the professional values of American newsmen") inadvertently presents discourses related to topic teams in the 1990s:

> A long-standing debate has raged within American journalism over the definition of responsible journalistic practice. Although the focus of this debate has shifted from decade to decade in reaction to changing social and political climates, the essence of the controversy can be identified in competing definitions of the functions of the news media in American society, conflicting assessments of the public's need for and right to information, and divergent images of the nature of news itself. The debate on these issues has been reflected in disputes about the proper role of the journalist in gathering news.[344]

Nerone and Barnhurst offer this description of the professional journalist:

> The professional reporter combined the skills of the reporter with the intelligence and autonomy of the correspondent. The professional reporter would record facts with care and fidelity, and would arrange them so that the facts would comment on themselves. In this fashion, the professional reporter would display a kind of scientific and politically neutral expertise beyond the capacities of ordinary citizens, whose intelligence did not allow them to understand the ever more complicated social world without guidance. The professional reporter would be a super-citizen. … As experts, they deserved a byline, not to lay claim to authorship, but to reassure the public that their authorship didn't matter.[345]

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[343] Johnstone et al., 522.

[344] Johnstone et al., *Professional*, 522.

[345] Nerone and Barnhurst, "U. S.," 439.

It is a passage laden with nuance (as in "super-citizen," which implies arrogance and paternalism), but it serves to identify some key elements: intellectual acumen (an ability to synthesize); a degree of autonomy; neutral expertise; access to contextual knowledge; a sense of public service; and a non-boastful attitude.

An overview of values

Exploring the literature on journalistic values is important to the discussion for two reasons. Both supporters and detractors of topic teams based their arguments, in large part, on whether topic teams embodied or challenged those values. Several of the journalism figures in the forefront of topic-team adoption were themselves prominent in discussing core values, including Cole C. Campbell (formerly of the *Virginian-Pilot* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*), Tim McGuire (formerly of the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*), and Davis Merritt (formerly of the *Wichita Eagle*). Further, the very public resignation of *San Jose Mercury News* publisher Jay Harris, which sparked widespread debate over values among journalists, took place shortly before interviews for this dissertation took place. The events and rhetoric of that time might well have been influential in shaping the interviewees' responses; a contextual background offers greater validity to the analysis of those interviews.

"Objectivity" and "autonomy" are two difficult and defining concepts closely associated with news values; both are functions, as well, of routines and professional needs – meaning they have origins that are practical (some say strategic) as well as ideologic. Other values tied to professional attitudes involve accuracy; fairness[346]; a commitment to recording

[346] For a full discussion of fairness from a media ethics perspective, see Deborah Gump, "The Fairness Factor: Exploring the Perception Gap between Journalists and the Public," paper presented to the Media Ethics Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, annual convention, August 2001, Washington, D. C.

"reality"; truth-telling; and an ability to recognize newsworthiness and report a story in an appropriate manner.[347] That many of these concepts are observed in the absence; derive from near-mythological origins[348]; and are at variance with what academic observers suggest is the real role of journalists does not, in fact, matter in terms of what influences hold sway over journalists and their performance. Values are a way to make sense of the world, as Tuchman wrote.[349] Or as Wieck, who is known for his development of sensemaking theory, summarized: "Sense may be in the eye of the beholder, but beholders vote and the majority rules."[350]

Fee, in exploring forces that create and sustain the work culture of journalists, suggests that the stories journalists tell might offer insight into the

> … changing social context and the material realities of the profession. For instance, is it just happenstance that in late 1996 there were stories running through the profession about fights in newspaper newsrooms? Or, had profit pressures and economic straits over the past few years raised the stress levels in newsrooms to a dangerously high level?[351]

Fee illustrates his point (and connects mythmaking and the creation of heroes to the expression of values) with the example of Walter Cronkite, who "represents a highly visible

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[347] For a classic and practical book on journalism values see Edmund B. Lambeth, *Committed Journalism: An Ethic for the Profession*, 2nd ed. (Indiana University Press, 1992).

[348] A particularly good example of this is Richard Harding Davis's objection to inaccuracies that appeared under his byline in the *New York Journal*'s coverage of the "Cuban situation" of 1897. Publisher Hearst allowed a correction to be printed (on A2, headlined "Mr. Davis Explains"), and the incident has served as a model of good guy/bad guy behavior. It presents an unfair picture of the journalism of the 1890s, Schudson argues, in terms of a general devotion (or lack of devotion) to accuracy. Michael Schudson, *Discovering*, 61-67.

[349] Gaye Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity," *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (January 1972): 660.

[350] Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995), 6.

[351] Frank E. Fee, Jr., "Heroes, Villains and Twice-Told Tales: The Normative Power of Journalism's Worklore," paper presented to the Qualitative Studies Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, annual convention, August 1997.

embodiment of journalism's supreme value: objectivity." He cites Pach, a historian, who wrote, "Walter Cronkite did not earn his reputation as the most trusted man in America by making partisan, gratuitous, or controversial comments about the news, but by reporting it 'the way it was.'"[352] In this passage, objectivity is clearly portrayed as a laudable trait; the assumption that "the way it was" is an accurate recording of reality, untarnished by bias, viewpoint, manipulation, juxtaposition, context, or any other force is also clear. Heroes of a professional culture, Fee concludes, become such "not for being at extremes but because they exemplify the culture's core values and beliefs."[353]

Weaver and Wilhoit found that most ethical learning takes place through anecdotal knowledge of past cases – parables of the newsroom.[354] Christians et al. suggest these company stories reinforce company ideology, thus serving a hegemonic function.[355]

Objectivity is a workplace talking point, as Johnson et al. observed. "Within journalism, the debate revolves around objectivity versus subjectivity, detachment versus advocacy, observer versus watchdog."[356] Tuchman inferred that more is at play, however, by observing reaction when the talk became personal: "Attacked for a controversial presentation of 'facts,' newspapermen invoke their objectivity almost the way a Mediterranean peasant

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[352] Chester J. Pach, Jr. "And That's the Way It Was: The Vietnam War on the Network Nightly News," in David Farber, ed., *In the Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 97.

[353] Fee, *Heroes*.

[354] Weaver and Wilhoit, *American Journalist*.

[355] Clifford Christians, Kim Rotzoll, and Mark Fackler, *Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning*, 5th ed. (New York: Longman, 1998).

[356] John W. C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski, and William W. Bowman, "The Professional Values of American Newsmen," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1972-1973): 522-540.

might wear a clove of garlic around his neck to ward off evil spirits."[357] Objectivity is a defense as well as an aspiration, and as such gave rise to various professional norms that include verification of facts; multiple sourcing; independence from sources; specific criteria for determining newsworthiness; and a hierarchy of editorial review, all of which help protect the reporter, the editors, the newsroom, and the organization from libel, conflicts of interest, attacks of bias, manipulation, and personal involvement.

Some researchers have found that objectivity as a professional value supercedes personal values in influencing content, as Shoemaker and Reese noted:

> Not only is the suppression of personal attitudes, values, and beliefs part of the professional communicator's role; the exertion of personal will within a mass media organization takes more power than most communicators can wield. … Professional roles, on the other hand, determine what the communicator thinks is worth transmitting to his or her audience and how the story should be developed.[358]

They conclude that because of mixed research findings, they are "unable to make any sweeping statements about the influence of communicators' personal attitudes, values, and beliefs on media content."[359] They distinguish between those and professional roles and ethical frameworks by stating that personal influences are primarily shaped outside the job or related activities. Gans concurs, arguing that personal values affect work only in unusual circumstances. Journalists "try to be objective and leave their values at home."[360]

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[357] Gaye Tuchman, "Objectivity as strategic ritual: An examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity," *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (January 1972), 660-679.

[358] Shoemaker and Reese, *Mediating*, 80-81.

[359] Shoemaker and Reese, *Mediating*, 72.

[360] Gans, "Face-off," 31.

Autonomy, which Merrill deems necessary for independent ethical decisions, is in some ways related to objectivity – in its call for separation between reporter and source, for example. In the sense that it's often used by journalists, it refers more to an independence with regard to story choice and ability to set one's own work schedule. Both of these factors are highly constrained by newsroom needs, however, and newspaper journalists are intensely socialized to recognize certain bounds in terms of what stories are worth pursuing and how one might go about it.

Those who have graduated from journalism schools with an eye toward practice can probably recite the main criteria by which, they are taught, news is judged "worthy." It is a relative scale that includes weighing the story's timeliness, significance (effect or impact), geographic proximity, human interest, local relevance, prominence of people involved, and connection to the common good. The time factor (how much time there is to report the story as well as when the subject of the story takes place) also affects newsworthiness, as previously discussed, and often divides hard news from soft, with hard taking the higher priority since it usually involves events for which there is some urgency or deadline with regard to timely publication. Tuchman uses the *New York Times's* treatment of the Pentagon Papers as an example of a hard news story for which there was urgency because of the content; the investigative report was held for three months for processing but was of the utmost importance when it was published and the journalists were pressured to prepare it quickly as information became available. Soft news, by comparison, rarely carries such pressure and the news organization usually controls both the timing and flow of work required to process it. Obviously, soft news presents less of a challenge for budgeting

resources and scheduling work.[361] The journalistic valuation of hard news over soft is another way in which professional values are often at odds with the organization's emphasis on resource management and profitability, and it is a prime battle ground in some of the assumptions journalists made about topic teams – for example, that hard news would lose out to soft.

Autonomy, broadly recognized as having control of one's workplace, is at odds with professionalism, which is a control mechanism as much as a standard. "Bringing journalists firmly under newsroom management was part of the professional solution," Birkhead noted. Weaver and Wilhoit's 1992 survey indicated that while a professional mood still existed in newsrooms, it was newsroom specific and had eroded over the past decade as an occupational norm. Demo, who considered professionalism in legal terms, concluded that

> Editors who wish to have their reporters considered professionals will have to give them a higher degree of autonomy…. That means allowing newsroom journalists more room to decide what stories to pursue, to write more interpretive stories and to, in short, take control of their professional mission.[362]

The survey method of indexing the professional orientation of journalists began with McLeod and Hawley in 1964. The researchers developed criteria associated with elements of professionalism – autonomy prominent among them – and asked journalists to respond to them in terms of their desired occupational setting. Those who wanted implementation of professional values were rated higher in professional orientation. The responses were then analyzed to find connections between other data and their classifications. The researchers, for

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[361] See, for example, Gaye Tuchman, "Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected," *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 1 (July 1973), 110-131.

[362] Lori Demo, "Craft or Profession: Court Rulings Leave Room for Journalists to Decide the Question," paper presented to the Law Division of Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, national convention, August 1998.

example, found that those with higher professional orientations were likely to be more critical of their newsrooms than their less-oriented colleagues. In another finding, one that might be problematic for advocates of market-driven journalism,

> …a professional orientation seemed consistent with moving away from the public in judgments about news and the occupational role of the journalists. This might be viewed as a desire for freedom from dictation by the public about the journalistic role, a tendency noted in professions.[363]

In 1982, newsroom journalists were no more inclined to let the public infringe on their autonomy. In general, the public was not held in high regard, Burgoon, Burgoon, and Atkin found, and the journalists reported it was their responsibility to decide what the public needed to know.[364]

Autonomy on the job was often a reward for good work; star reporters had considerably more freedom in doing their job than less distinguished reporters.[365] Pollard found that autonomy was a key factor in job satisfaction among Canadian journalists in 1994 and that print journalists reacted negatively to the possibility of increased job codification as a threat to the autonomy they had.[366]

Contrary to expectations, autonomy and satisfaction were the same or higher among corporate journalists than their counterparts at entrepreneurial newspapers, Demers found in 1994. Top editors reported higher levels, but reporters "did not report having lower levels of

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[363] Allison, *Literature,* 9-10.

[364] Judee K. Burgoon, Michael Burgoon, and Charles Atkin, *The World of the Working Journalist,* research conducted under the auspices of the Newspaper Readership Project, American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1982.

[365] See Lee Sigelman, "Reporting the News: An Organizational Analysis," *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 1 (July 1973): 132-151.

[366] George Pollard, "Job Satisfaction Among Newsworkers: The Influence of Professionalism, Perceptions of Organizational Structure, and Social Attributes," *Journalism Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 682-697.

autonomy than reporters at entrepreneurial newspapers, even though editors and publishers widely agree that stories at corporate organizations are more highly controlled and edited." Role specialization appears to give editors more control over the news production process. The paradox appears to lie in the expectation that, because corporations are more profitable, they also put more emphasis on profit goals. Demers suggested that organizations put stronger emphasis on "producing the highest quality news product" and "being innovative," two aspects likely to increase journalistic satisfaction. In his conclusion, he wondered "whether the findings for editors may be generalized to reporters who have specialized roles at newspapers." He suggested that corporate papers, being less susceptible to local pressures than small, entrepreneurial papers, might produce content that is "more critical of established authorities and dominant [societal] values and belief systems." [367]

Orientation of the 1990s

During the changing 1990s, the lone cowboy gave way to the team player as the desirable newsroom hire at many newspapers,[368] the Readership Institute gave advice on how

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[367] David P. Demers, "Autonomy, Satisfaction High among Corporate News Staffs," *Newspaper Research Journal* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 91-111. Research in this area is far from conclusive. Studies finding less journalistic freedom include those by Johnstone et al., Weaver and Wilhoit, and Coulson. A major study by the American Society of News Editors found more freedom, especially with regard to local autonomy for editorial positions. Conflicting evidence has been found with regard to homogeneity of endorsements. See Daniel Wackman, Donald Gillmor, Cecilie Gaziano, and Everette Dennis, "Chain Newspaper Autonomy as Reflected in Presidential Campaign Endorsements," *Journalism Quarterly* (1975): 411-420; Cecilie Gaziano, "Chain Newspaper Homogeneity and Presidential Endorsements, 1972-1980," *Journalism Quarterly* (1989): 93-98; and John C. Busterna and Kathleen A. Hansen, "Presidential Endorsement Patterns by Chain-Owned Papers, 1976-84," *Journalism Quarterly* (1990): 286-294.

[368] Rebecca Ross Albers, "Profiles in Journalism: The 'Lone Cowboy' Gives Way to the Modern Journalist," *Presstime*, April 1996, `http://www.naa.org/Home/PressTime/1996/April/PressTimeContent/Profiles-in-Journalism.aspx`.

to make "reader-oriented" hires,[369] and a name was coined for a "25-year-old disease": Journalist Anxiety Syndrome.[370] Many trade, professional, and institute reports, accompanied a spate of surveys probing job satisfaction, credibility, First Amendment issues, values, media changes, professional roles, diversity, and more. In the early 1990s, researchers sought journalists' assessments of how professional reality compared to journalistic ideals. The result was a cumulative portrait of expectations and realizations – essentially, values – during the time in which topic-team reorganizations were taking place. Demographic information and qualitative comments contextualized the data. Because several of the surveys were replications or extensions, time-change analysis was possible.

The most significant surveys during this time were the third and fourth of the American Journalist series, these from 1992 and 2002, continuing to chronicle change in the profession every ten years.[371] This section of the review summarizes selected findings from the most recent survey. By comparison with the previous survey, it provides an overview of

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[369] "How to Hire 'Reader-Oriented' People," Readership Institute/Media Management Center at Northwestern University.

[370] "Consider it: Our own anxiety not as an effect of our industry's slide, but as the direct cause of it. A situation in which the anguish itself has become the issue, a cancer now with a life of its own, a sort of victimization pathology that must be reckoned with on its own terms, years after the causes have become distant memories." Phillip J. Milano, "Has Our Own Malaise Reduced Our Relevance?" *The American Editor,* October 1997.

[371] Findings of the four surveys, respectively, are published in: John W. C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski, and William W. Bowman, *The American Journalist: A Sociological Profile* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1973); David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist in the 1990s: U.S. News People at the End of an Era* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996); and, in press, David H. Weaver, *The American Journalist in the 21st Century: U.S. News People at the Dawn of a New Millennium* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006 forthcoming). Available online at Indiana University and the Poynter Institute.

the decade of interest. Note is made of salient aspects of surveys from 1993 (APME)[372]; 1995 (Pollard)[373]; 1996 (Voakes for ASNE)[374]; and 1997-1999 (Pew Research Center).[375]

According to the 2002 decennial survey, the American journalist takes work and reporting ethics more seriously than a decade ago; is older (up five years to 41); is more likely to have a college degree (89.3 percent do, with the highest proportion of journalism majors among print journalists); is less likely to be a Democrat (37.1 percent, down 7 percentage points); and still has a one-third chance of being female and, therefore, earning less than a man in the same job – unless the woman has less than 15 years of experience. Job satisfaction rose, up 6 percentage points to 33.3 percent, but still falling short of the peak, in 1971, of 49 percent.

The study was based on 1,149 extended telephone interviews (50 minutes) during the summer and fall of 2002. The journalists, who were chosen randomly, worked full time for a wide variety of daily and weekly newspapers, radio and television stations, and wire services and news magazines throughout the United States. The adjusted response rate was 79 percent; the maximum sampling error at the 95 percent level of confidence is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Journalistic values persisted despite profit pressures, the researchers reported. Three in four respondents said owners of news organizations think high profits are very important;

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[372] "Journalist Satisfaction Study," Associated Press Managing Editors Association, September 1992.

[373] George Pollard, "Job satisfaction among newsworkers: The influence of professionalism, perceptions of organizational structure, and social attributes," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 682-697.

[374] Paul S. Voakes, "The Newspaper Journalists of the '90s: Who They Are and What They Think About the Major Issues Facing Their Profession," American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 1997.

[375] "Striking the Balance, Audience Interests, Business Pressures and Journalists' Values," Pew Research Center, 30 March 1999, http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=67.

three in five said journalistic quality was rising. Only 32 percent said that high employee morale was very important to organization owners. Fifty-two percent said newsroom resources were shrinking, and 38 percent said that profits were valued over good journalism.

Most of the journalists said that investigating government claims is extremely important (the watchdog role). Fewer felt that it was important to get news out quickly or to reach the widest possible audience. Journalists also felt that news organizations were putting a lower priority on providing entertainment or relaxation. The researchers reported that civic (public) journalism was being cautiously embraced. "The idea of giving ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs and motivating people to become involved in issues was supported by a wide majority of journalists," according to a summary. They were unsure, however, of the best way to do that.

In an order consistent over the past twenty years (since the 1982-1983 survey), the influences on their concept of newsworthiness, from most to least, were journalistic training; supervisors; news sources; and peers in the newsroom. Missing from the response options was a category for professional peers outside of the newsroom, an omission that ignores the influence of e-mail, listservs, and other Internet-related networks.

There was a dramatic drop in the number of journalists who rated reaching the widest audience as extremely important. In 1971, it was 39 percent, dropping to 36 percent in 1982, 20.2 percent in 1992, and 15.4 percent in 2002. This, and other findings, led the researchers to suggest that the

> core group of general-news journalists is showing signs of increased professionalism – not only with such indicators as more college graduates, but also somewhat increased endorsement of the journalistic roles of investigating

> government claims, analyzing complex problems, and being skeptical of business actions.[376]

In 1992, the researchers warned that a serious retention problem might be near, particularly at newspapers. More than 20 percent of those surveyed (in the overall sample, not just print journalists) said they planned to leave journalism within five years, twice the 1982-1983 figure. Employment figures had stalled. The growth rate from 1982 to 1992 was 9 percent, down from 61 percent between 1971 and 1982. Little overall difference in journalistic roles was noted when compared to previous surveys, but a large change was noted with regard to job satisfaction at newspapers. Some 20 years of being "comparatively happy in their work" now shows up as a "considerable" decline in job satisfaction. An analysis of the open-ended responses revealed:

> Of those who are unhappy, a little more than half point a finger at management. The criticisms tend to cite management's tightfisted policies on covering the news with too few resources, or too much concern about audience appeal at the expense of substance. … About 15 percent of the dissatisfied newspaper journalists say their news staffs are not large enough now to cover the news properly.

Newspaper journalists who say they are very satisfied point to autonomy as a key reason. Also:

> Newspaper journalists who place a high value on the analytic and interpretive role of journalists in explaining complex problems to their readers seem to respond to their jobs somewhat differently than do their colleagues who see that as less important. That attitude, stress on the analytic role, appears to predict higher job satisfaction. … An adversary stance toward either government or business, which some critics see as characteristic of journalists, is a high value for only a few daily newspaper journalists. The reluctance of daily newspaper journalists to identify strongly with an activist role also is

[376] David Weaver, Randal Beam, Bonnie Brownlee, Paul S. Voakes, and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, American Journalist Survey for 2002. The book has not yet been published, but some of the findings are available online at the Poynter Center's site, http:// www.poynter.org. The survey was conducted by researchers at Indiana University's School of Journalism and was sponsored by the Knight Foundation.

> suggested in the finding that only a few say setting the political agenda is very important.

Factors that appeared to have no influence on satisfaction levels included the ownership structure of the organization, gender, race, and income levels.[377]

The APME Journalist Satisfaction Study of 1993 included 627 employees of 29 newspapers nationwide – and it included a section on "Team Qualities." The six questions in this cluster dealt with aspects of inclusiveness and participation. Three of the questions were about "empowerment," or having a voice in management decisions. Majorities (two questions received 69 percent, the other 75 percent) gave them negative answers. Forty-seven percent said they did not find their company's goals to be in line with their own. Forty-one percent said they did not support the editorial policies of their organization. Thirty-three said they were not well informed about issues affecting their newspaper. Those who were particularly likely to respond negatively to the "team"[378] questions were minorities, women, young people, newcomers to the field, reporters, and copy editors. The comments indicated three different reactions to "team" efforts (or non-efforts):

> Many respondents complained that their opinions are never sought. Others complained that their opinions are sought but are given no more than lip service. This second group appeared to be even more frustrated than those who were not asked for their opinions at all. A third, much happier, group said that their opinions were sought and that they made a difference.[379]

Pollard's study began with the premise that journalists contend with dual control centers – organizational and professional – and a resulting tension. His examination of job

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[377] David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, "The American Journalist in the 1990s: An Advance Report," November 1992. It was released by the Freedom Forum, which funded the study.

[378] The word "team" is put in quotation marks throughout the report.

[379] *APME Journalist Satisfaction Study* (Minneapolis: MORI Research Inc., 1993), 33-34.

satisfaction was an attempt to identify intrinsic and extrinsic influences. Professionalism is associated with intrinsic rewards, such as service, meeting intellectual challenges, or enjoyment of work. Organizations can inhibit professionalism by emphasizing extrinsic or intrinsic rewards (remuneration, promotions, corner offices, etc.). Organizations can increase job satisfaction by nurturing intrinsic rewards associated with the profession: increased participation in management decisions, for example. Organizations can "subvert job satisfaction by excluding professionals from the decision process and relying on hierarchal authority and strict rule enforcement. The newswork literature implies news organizations are generally perceived to adopt the former, not the latter, management style."

Pollard found that more professionalism did, as expected, lead to greater satisfaction; greater rule enforcement led to less – also as expected. What was not expected was that greater job codification led to less satisfaction, possibly because newspaper journalists have a great deal of freedom as to how they use their time and where they do their job and view codification as a threat and a restriction to their autonomy. Second, it was found that the more professionally oriented newsworkers were more satisfied – but for a shorter period of time, after which professionalism eroded, job satisfaction decreased, and most left the occupation. Pollard suggested that the effects of this process on news and the newsroom dynamic would be fruitful future research.[380]

Two shifts are particularly interesting in the 1996 "snapshot" that Voakes oversaw for ASNE. For the first time, most of the degrees of the college-educated journalists (89 percent) were in journalism (54 percent), and the newspaper internship had become a standard feature of the degree. The percentage of journalists who rated their paper as

[380] Pollard, "Job Satisfaction."

excellent and improving shrank dramatically compared to a past survey – it was now 14 percent, down from 34 percent in 1988. Eighty-four percent graded their paper as "fair" (27 percent) or "good" (57 percent). Newsroom supervisors were most likely to give the higher ratings; copy editors were least likely. Teams were mentioned in at least one comment:

> By going to a team structure, the newspaper's top management has taken away nearly all the jobs to which many of us once aspired. Once you reach team leader, there's little place to go. And I'm a big believer that when you take away goals and things for people to reach for, their enthusiasm is quick to follow, along with the quality of their work.[381]

By 1998, there was clear evidence that journalists were disturbed by the quality of the profession's work, particularly by the blurred lines between entertainment and news, commentary and reporting, and by what appeared to be growing inaccuracies and sloppiness indicating a relaxed adherence to some of journalism's high standards. Respondents to the Pew study "Striking the balance: Audience interests, business pressures and journalists' values" (published in 1999) believed credibility was the most important issue facing news media. Majorities of working journalists said coverage had been, and continued to be, damaged by bottom-line pressures. Top executives tended to disagree; majorities said that economic pressures changed the way things were done but did not affect quality. Print journalists at national news organizations were the strongest in recording positive views of their leadership, with 47 percent saying their bosses "share their values a great deal," far more than the 29 percent recorded by national television journalists. Despite all of this, there was "near unanimous agreement on the core principle that define journalism – getting the facts right, covering both sides and refusing to publish rumors."[382]

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[381] Voakes, "Newspaper," 9

[382] The Pew Research Center survey included 552 top executives, mid-level editors and producers, and working reporters and editors from national and local news media. The poll was conducted in association with the

An interesting discrepancy shows up in how owners and upper-level managers viewed the degree to which they shared values with members of their staff. At the national level, 60 percent of print executives felt a common bond, compared to 47 percent of their staff. For all media, at the local levels, 30 percent of executives felt their staffs shared their values, but 26 percent of the staff reported this is so. For all media at the national level, the split was 53 percent for executives compared to 38 percent of their staff.[383]

Prior to this survey, in 1997, twenty-five top journalists calling themselves The Committee of Concerned Journalists met to figure out how to rescue a profession they felt was in serious trouble. "They barely recognized what they considered journalism in much of the work of their colleagues," summarized two of the participants. "Instead of serving a larger public interest, they feared, their profession was damaging it."[384] The public mistrusted the press, barely more than half would support the press's watchdog role, and less than half thought the press protected democracy.[385] The group set out to see what other journalists and the public thought were core principles that needed to endure, and what needed to change.[386] The extensive research distilled nine principles:

Committee of Concerned Journalists from 20 November 1998 to 11 February 1999. The journalists worked in print, broadcast, cable, online, and radio.

[383] Few of the newspapers involved with team initiatives were among the twelve papers classified as national in this survey. The "local" papers were drawn from the top 100 newspapers ranked by circulation and excluding those pulled for the national sample.

[384] Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect,* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 10.

[385] The figures (21 percent, 58 percent, and 45 percent, respectively) are from Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ) and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Striking the Balance: Audience Interests, Business Pressures and Journalists Values," March 1999, 79.

[386] The outreach took place over two years and is reputed to be the "most sustained, systematic, and comprehensive examination ever conducted by journalists of news gathering and its responsibilities." It included 21 public forums for 3,000 people; testimony was recorded for more than 300 journalists; more than a hundred three-and-a-half hour interviews with journalists about their values; two surveys of journalists about

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
- Its first loyalty is to citizens.
- Its essence is a discipline of verification.
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
- It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
- Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.[387]

The survey grew out of this initial meeting; a book, *The Elements of Journalism*, records those and related efforts.

Summary. The imposition of a corporate-based management system on journalists, who at least aspire to professionalism if they haven't already attained it, raises interesting questions. Many scholars place journalistic values in opposition to those who are driven by finances. Some of the characteristics of a professional are an importance placed on autonomy; a sense of mission; a public-service orientation; and the capacity to place the profession as a central part of one's life. A key discussion with relevance to topic teams is the value placed on a separation between business and journalistic practice: "the wall." Merritt, and many others, argue persuasively that it should be maintained but is indeed crumbling. Various studies bear this out. "The Wall," however, would be a post-modern anomaly in a paradigm that fosters connection and collaboration. Still, scholars have documented other journalistic systems that operate well without such a separation.

Banning and others point out that the urge toward professionalization was a reaction against perceived market orientation in the early 1900s. Supporters and detractors of topic

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their principles; a summit of First Amendment and journalism scholars; content studies; and histories of participating journalists. Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements*.

[387] Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements,* 12-13.

teams disagree as to whether topic teams embody or reject the anti-market values that are at the founding base of the profession. Whether they are or not may be moot. Scholars, including Tuchman and Weick, contend that it matters less what exists in actuality than what exists in the mind. Fee urges one to listen to the stories journalists tell for therein may lie essential truths with explanatory power.

Many researchers explored the power of autonomy in journalists' job performance and satisfaction. In the 1990s, newsroom hires were judged by their abilities to work with others. Other than speculation, little has been written exploring this seeming challenge, especially as it is connected with topic teams and their promised self-governance.

Recent surveys report that journalistic values are strong in the face of profit pressures. A 1993 satisfaction study included questions about teams, but did not address topic teams (it would have been too early in their development to do so). Voakes discovered that team systems removed jobs and affected professional career aspirations. By 1998, researchers saw clear indications that journalists were increasingly dissatisfied with the journalism being practiced.

Team Management and Dynamics

The success of the early reader-oriented papers of the 1830s and 1840s, coupled with technologies that improved press production, communication, and other newsroom processes, made possible the mass newspapers serving the rapidly expanding cities of the 1880s and 1890s.[388] An extensive newsroom management hierarchy grew out of a need to supervise not

[388] Between 1870 and 1900, the U. S. population doubled, and the number of city dwellers tripled. The number of daily newspapers quadrupled in that time, and circulation increased six-fold. Emery et al., 157.

only reporters in and out of the field but deskbound staffers such as copy, rewrite, and telegraph editors.[389] As with any successful movement, powerful "enforcers" developed to keep the troops on target toward unified goals. Production of news is a systemic, complex, entrenched process, as has been demonstrated[390]; managers are responsible for "the attainment of organizational goals in an effective and efficient manner through planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational resources."[391]

Organizational and professional goals are essentially at odds, but there are ways in which they are complementary, too. They often conflict over "the exercise of autonomy, the right of workers to control their own work,"[392] and they can meld when "[a]mong reporters, professionalism is knowing how to get a story that meets organizational needs and standards."[393] And the overriding shared goal is the production of news.

To that end, routines and specific newsroom structures and cultures have developed. It's been shown how beats and source designations are resource efficient and help define working roles; the hierarchical system of editors clarifies lines of command, particularly when critical decisions must be made, and particularly on deadline; and the city editor function provides comprehensive oversight in terms of what papers have traditionally defined as their most important news coverage. Reporters are individualistic, hoarding sources and information to protect their professional turf. "Sharing, through invoked collegiality, is more

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[389] For a fuller discussion, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: HarperCollins Basic Books, 1978), 12-60.

[390] Sylvie and Witherspoon, 8. See also, McManus, *Market-Driven,* and Tuchman, *Making News.*

[391] Richard L. Daft, *Management*, 5th ed. (Fort Worth, Texas: Dryden Press, 2000), 7.

[392] E. Friedson, "Professions and the Occupational Principle," in E. Friedson, ed., *The Professions and Their Prospects* (Beverly Hills and London: Sage, 1971), 19-38. See also, Tuchman, *Making News,* 65.

[393] Tuchman, *Making News*, 66.

likely to be done with the competition in attempts to winkle out more information."[394] Still, the newsroom culture (and news production) – especially at small and medium newspapers – relies on interchangeability of jobs, with reporters able to cover for each other no matter what the story. The "instant expert" talent is highly favored in the pressure-cooker, deadline-oriented life of the newsroom. Editors – managers – are promoted from within the ranks of the profession, if not at the same publication; it is rare for them to be trained as managers and they are therefore likely to perpetuate the work environment and rationalizations they have seen modeled and under which they have worked.

These were the people being asked to give up or alter their beats; share responsibility with certain of their colleagues for their own assignments in a newsroom no longer centrally organized; share resources and information with colleagues with whom they now shared a topical beat; become more specialized (less interchangeable) while also broadening the scope of what they covered; and retool their writing and thinking to become more reader-oriented for a market segment clearly defined by business interests. Line editors were asked to become coaches, nurturers, and facilitators within small groups, and to accept that there would be fewer options for advancement in a newly flattened hierarchical system. These were the people who were expected to welcome and understand complex, innovative, and challenging managerial roles with little or no training or exposure to those roles.

In this light, one wonders why or if anyone ever thought teams – much less topic teams – would find ready acceptance from newspaper journalists. It speaks to several concerns evident in the late 1980s and 1990s, including flags raised by journalists and some academics over the effects of journalism as it was currently practiced; growing awareness

[394] Tuchman, *Making News*, 75.

over the vulnerabilities of journalism to financial pressures; the desire on the part of media owners to have more business-oriented managers and leaders at the newsroom level, and more interaction between newspaper departments; a continuing decline in readership; a perceived drop in relevance; and a pervasive and troubling decline in newsroom morale. "Angst and anxiety are pandemic across American newsrooms, as newspaper people collectively sense the end of an era," Stepp reported in the *American Journalism Review* in 1995.[395]

Team management in general, and topic teams in particular, showed potential for alleviating some of those pressures, although the ease, by its nature, could not be universal. By this point, there were too many conflicting interests involved. The worst strike against a team-management system, from a newsroom staff point of view, was probably its association with corporate management, profit interests, and trendiness. There were no promises it would work, and no precedents on which to base predictions of how a professionally oriented cohort would react. Nevertheless, a great many newspapers thought it was worth a try.

A business perspective

In the late 1970s and 1980s, competition from Japanese corporations led U.S. businesses to adopt more participatory management styles[396] and systemic methods of quality improvement.[397] Teams were a feature of both concepts. By 1985, 78 percent of all U.S.

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[395] Carl Sessions Stepp, "The Thrill Is Gone," *American Journalism Review* (October 1995).

[396] See, for example, Daft, *Management*, 23-28.

[397] The popular leader of quality management was W. Edwards Deming. For a full explanation of his work, see Mary Walton, *The Deming Management Method* (New York: Perigee, 1986).

businesses were using team management in some form.[398] And by 1989, teams were so pervasive that Schrage concluded that "the word team has been so politicized, so ensnared in the pathology of the organization, that we don't really know what it means anymore. Is a team a medium to manage value? Or a mechanism to play politics? … It is, however, the popular management metaphor of the moment."[399]

On a deeper level, many scholars pointed to the growing complexity of society, technology, economics, industry, and globalization as constituting a need for greater collaborative efforts in sustaining and understanding the complexity, and fixing the problems that occurred within its mazes. "Even in endeavors in which autonomy seems great and individual responsibility for action might be presumed commonplace, complexity and the need for collaboration are becoming irrefutable facts of life," observed Larson and LaFasto.[400] Changes to facilitate collaboration would be major. Bennis and Nanus concluded that "[l]inear information, linear thinking, and incremental strategies are no match for the turbulence of today's business climate." In the early 1990s, Hammer and Champy called for retiring "a set of principles laid down more than two centuries ago" in favor of a new set, a process Champy termed "reengineering." He explained that

> At the heart of business reengineering lies the notion of discontinuous thinking – identifying and abandoning the outdated rules and fundamental assumptions that underlie current business operations. … Unless companies

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[398] Stephen P. Robbins, *Organizational Behavior: Concepts, Controversies, Applications*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: San Diego State University, 1998), 284.

[399] Michael Schrage, *No More Teams! Mastering the Dynamics of Creative Collaboration* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), xi.

[400] Carl E. Larson and Frank M. J. LaFasto, *Teamwork: What Must Go Right, What Can Go Wrong* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1989), 16.

> change these rules, any superficial reorganizations they perform will be no more effective than dusting the furniture in Pompeii.[401]

For organizations, changing the rules meant more than restructuring; it meant either changing a deeply entrenched mindset or helping employees accept a seemingly contradictory workplace worldview. The United States is an individualistic culture. It mythologizes the rags-to-riches-through-hard-work narrative and maintains proudly that the dream is realized "only in America."[402] Katzenbach and Smith caution that resistance to teams "is powerful because it is grounded in deeply held values of individualism that neither can nor should be entirely dismissed."[403]

Companies of the 1990s practiced management philosophies formulated in the wake of the industrial revolution, when the workforce was meant to produce vastly less expensive goods for a mass market. This was accomplished through fragmenting the workers through specialization: the assembly line concept, under which work is produced incrementally by a series of workers.[404] Under Taylorism (also known as scientific management),[405] employees were divided into "heads and hands, thinkers and doers" for a philosophy that modeled work on the machine. Around 1973, things began to change. Japan had taken to W. Edwards

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[401] Michael Hammer and James Champy, *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1993), 4-5.

[402] For a discussion of the individualist culture in America, see W. B. Gudykunst and S. Ting-Toomey, *Culture and Interpersonal Communication* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1988).

[403] Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 20.

[404] The concept dates back to Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776.

[405] Although the movement is most associated with Frederick Taylor, who focused on solving labor problems with management solutions, there are others who helped develop scientific management. Henry Gantt devised a way to measure production against time. Frank B. Gilbreth pioneered time and motion studies. His wife, Lillian M. Gilbreth, focused on industrial psychology and human resource management.
For a summary, see Daft, *Management*, chapter 2.

Deming and his quality theories in the 1950s and 1960s, and their companies thrived. In the 1970s, U.S. businesses experimented with reengineering, Total Quality Management (TQM),[406] quality circles, teams, and employee empowerment. Some of the practices associated with these approaches include zero-based measurement of goals (meaning total attainment is sought regardless of previous performance); benchmarking (determining best practices to serve as incentives) and continuous improvement feedback, indicating a perspective that (at its best) aims high, casts its net for ideas beyond the organization, and encourages meaningful communication. In the 1990s, many newspaper newsrooms experimented with these approaches as well, often as part of a management package that combined methods.[407]

In the United States, team management has its roots in the human resources movement and the Hawthorne studies that took place in the 1920s.[408] Researchers found that workers did not respond well to classic motivational approaches; they were more interested in the rewards and punishments of their own work group. The movement focused on motivating workers by allowing them to develop their potential. During this time, Abraham Maslow developed a hierarchy of needs that began with physiological needs and progressed to self-actualization. Douglas McGregor, building on Maslow's work, formulated Theory X

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[406] Total Quality Management focuses on managing the entire organization to deliver quality to customers. It emphasizes employee participation and is based on the ideas of W. Edwards Deming.

[407] Non-news-oriented departments in newspapers were acquainted with these approaches years before they were broached for editorial workers. In fact, by the time newsrooms considered some of these techniques, they were under attack as mere fads. An article that challenges that criticism with regard to TQM is Rahul Jacob, "TQM: More Than a Dying Fad?" *Fortune* 128, no. 9 (18 October 1993): 66.

[408] European experiments with autonomous work groups are a strong influence as well. See Kelly, 1992, and Eric Trist, "Referrent Organizations and the Development of Inter-Organizational Domains," *Human Relations* 36, no. 3 (March 1983): 269-285. The Volvo plant in Kalmar, Sweden, was the site of research that resulted in a sociotechnical school of thought, which held that jobs should be participative with minimal constraints. Herbst, 1976.

and Theory Y to illustrate the limitations of current thought on human behavior in the workplace and to encourage a more realistic view that allowed companies the benefit of employees' imagination and intellect.[409] TQM, based on Deming's work, relies on employee participation to assess and improve the quality of the product delivered to the customer. All of these reflect a new participatory paradigm in which teamwork and collaboration are to be encouraged by structure and culture.

Copious research details the advantages of team structures. In an abundance of books and articles, one reads that they are more flexible, better suited to fast-paced situations, and "typically outperform individuals when the tasks being done require multiple skills, judgment and experience."[410] They serve a motivational purpose, as well, in that they involve employees in operating decisions; sometimes they are said to democratize organizations (which helps explain their appeal with regard to public journalism and reader outreach). Still, in newsrooms, their value had to be sold and it wasn't an easy task. "In many cases, reporters see teams as a business-oriented mandate, so editors not only face the challenge of organizing such teams, but also of selling them to reporters as journalistically sound endeavors that will improve quality of work life."[411]

Groups, teams, and networks

Groups and teams are not interchangeable, either as concepts or personnel clusters. Katzenbach and Smith are adamant:

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[409] An interesting overview is supplied by Charles M. Carson, "A Historical View of Douglas McGregor's Theory Y," *Management Decision* 43, no. 3 (2005): 450-460.

[410] Robbins, 286. Almost the exact wording is found in Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), 9.

[411] Sylvie and Witherspoon, 150. See also Hansen et al., and Neuzil et al.

> A team is not just any group working together. Committees, councils, and task forces are not necessarily teams. Groups do not become teams simply because someone labels them as teams. The complete workforce of any large and complex organization is never a team. Entire organizations can believe in and practice teamwork, but teamwork and teams differ.[412]

Researchers and theorists have developed many distinctions for groups, which is the larger classification and includes teams. Many of the relationships and dynamics significant to groups are therefore applicable to teams. Communication scholars classify organizational groups as formal or informal, and acknowledge formal groups as subdividing into those that organize, such as senior management "teams," line function (production) and support groups, and primary work groups (neonatal nurses in a department of nursing, for example); those that coordinate, such as a project team or ad hoc task force; and groups that direct, such as boards of trustees or standing committees. One would presumably locate topic teams within the category of primary work groups, although they also coordinate, set direction, oversee projects within their purview, produce, and offer support.

Definitions are called for. An oft-cited definition for a team is Katzenbach and Smith's: "A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable."[413] Robbins offers these distinctions:

> A **work group** is a group that interacts primarily to share information and to make decisions to help each member perform within his or her area of responsibility. [They] have no need or opportunity to engage in collective work that requires joint effort. So their performance is merely the summation of each group member's individual contribution. There is no positive synergy that would create an overall level of performance that is greater than the sum of the inputs.

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[412] Katzenbach and Smith, 21.

[413] Katzenbach and Smith, 45.

A **work team** generates positive synergy through coordinated effort.[414]

Networks, which are also groups, can be centralized or decentralized. Those that are centralized tend to be more efficient at routine tasks[415] while decentralized networks are better at more complex tasks and those that involve more ambiguity.[416] System theories focus on connections formed between members of emergent (non-formal and self-selected) networks.[417] Davis, in 1953, observed that the "grapevine" disseminated information faster and more accurately than any formal means of message dissemination.[418] Cliques and clusters, also self-selected, are influential.[419] "One should think twice before breaking up a clique or changing a person's role in such a way that their informal power base is significantly altered or eroded," Brass cautioned in 1984. He identified four roles: that of an isolate, group members, bridges, and liaisons. The latter, liaisons, he saw as keepers of the culture's core. They, he said, had the power to transform a message and, as such, were key determinants of failure and success of organizational goals.[420]

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[414] Robbins, 286.

[415] Harold J. Leavitt, "Small Groups in Large Organizations," *The Journal of Business* 28, no. 1 (January 1955): 8-17.

[416] Sid Scott, "The Design Group in Action," *Training and Development Journal* 35, no. 4 (April 1981): 70-72.

[417] As in the communication network paradigm and various social mapping techniques and theories. See Everett M. Rogers and Lawrence D. Kincaid, *Communication Networks: Toward a New Paradigm for Research* (New York: Free Press, 1981). See also, Peter R. Monge and Eric M. Eisenberg, "Emergent Communication Networks," in Frederic M. Jablin, Linda L. Putnam, Karlene Roberts, and Lyman Porter, eds., *Handbook of Organizational Communication* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1987), 304-342.

[418] Although this was long before computerized message-sending became possible or popular, the theory may still hold – and may possibly be reinforced, which would be an interesting topic for future research.

[419] Terrance L. Albrecht and B. J. Hall, "Facilitating Talk about New Ideas: The Role of Personal Relationships in Organizational Innovation," *Communication Monographs* 58 (September 1991): 273-288.

[420] Daniel J. Brass, "Being in the Right Place: A Structural Analysis of Individual Influence In an Organization," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 29 (1984): 518-539. For more on the roles people play in networks, see Eric M. Eisenberg and H. L. Goodall Jr., *Organizational Communication: Balancing Creativity and Constraint,* 3d ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 276-279.

The particular constituents of a network or group are not the sole concern, Richards noted, because the interactions of those members produce "sense": it is a sense-making process that develops shared meanings of which management (and researchers) should be aware. Monge and Eisenberg refer to semantic networks (based on shared values, understandings, and beliefs) and urge that those groups and people who are "isolated from mainstream values and beliefs or connect disparate subcultures" not escape notice or consideration. They also note that, unlike formal organizations, the informal organization is in a constant state of reorganization.[421]

Weak ties, those people who have few ties to networks or superficial ties to groups, are also important to the organization, providing a counterbalance to "groupthink" and an incentive for colleagues to more deeply examine issues and solutions.[422] Weick, in the mid-1970s, argued the benefits of "loosely coupled systems," organizations in which groups make decisions and take action independently of each other, even to the point of redundancy. He saw such situations as fostering flexibility, creativity, competitiveness, and adaptation.[423]

In 1993, Eisenberg and Goodall commented on the "explosion in the use of teams" over the past ten years. It was, they said, a major shift and

> … an explicit attempt to involve and empower individuals from all levels of the organizations to do "more with less" in an era of shrinking resources and increased competitiveness. In this way, a team-based organization is more radical than either the idea of teamwork or any of the formal organizational groups described above.[424]

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[421] Eisenberg and Goodall, 277.

[422] Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (May 1973): 1360-1380.

[423] Karl E. Weick, "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (March 1976): 1.

[424] Eisenberg, 279.

Others noted that alternative forms, such as self-managing work teams and high-involvement management, were replacing traditional hierarchy.[425]

As with groups, there are types of teams. Project teams are the most familiar form and have been in use for many years.[426] Team members of this kind might design a new product or investigate an in-depth news story. Another kind of project team might address a sole issue or problem (this could be an investigative team, too). The third kind of project team is cross-functional with members reporting to two or more "bosses." They address the "white space between the functions."[427] Work teams are an intact group of employees responsible for a whole work process and are closest to the newsroom topic team model. Eisenberg and Goodall argue that empowerment – discretion and autonomy – is so central to effective work teams that the teams can be classified according to the degree of empowerment granted:

> Notice that teams begin by doing things like running their own meetings ("housekeeping"), training each other ("cross-training"), and scheduling. As empowerment increases, they may take responsibility for continuous improvement of their processes, selecting new members, electing the team leader, and making decisions about capital expenditures. Finally, at the top … lies the self-directed or self-managing work team, which in addition to all the above duties is also responsible for performance appraisal, discipline, and even compensation.[428]

They note that training managers to deal with empowered work teams had become the "largest growth area in management training." Above all, they report, managers of both

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[425] Eisenberg, 280. See also, Thomas G. Cummings and Walter H. Griggs, "Worker Reactions to Autonomous Work Groups: Conditions for Functioning, Differential Effects, and Individual Differences," *Organization and Administrative Sciences* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1976-1977): 87. See also, Edward E. Lawler, "Human Resource Productivity in the 80's," *New Management* 1 (Spring 1983): 46-49.

[426] For examples, see E. Sundstrom, K. P. De Meuse, and D. Futrell, "Work teams: Applications and Effectiveness," *American Psychologist* 45, no. 2 (1990): 120.

[427] Eisenberg, 283.

[428] Eisenberg, 283.

project and work teams must "value, understand and create a climate for honest yet supportive dialogue. Such a shift requires an enormous transformation in management and nonmanagement roles; the communication skills necessary to perform such roles are formidable." Understanding how teams work is crucial.

Group and team dynamics

The well known model of group development, later used to describe teams as well, is educational psychologist Bruce Tuckman's four-stage conception. Some who have gone through team training recite it by memory without knowing its origin: forming, storming, norming, performing. Later, a fifth stage was added for non-permanent teams: adjourning.[429] Interestingly, in the mid-1960s, research cast doubt on the premise of stage-development theories, indicating there is no standardized pattern of group development.[430] Nevertheless, in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a surge of popular interest in Tuckman's model as a guide to teambuilding.[431] The following is derived from Robbins's overview:

- The first stage, forming, is characterized by uncertainty about the group's purpose, structure, and leadership. Members "test" to determine what behaviors are acceptable. This stage ends when members begin identifying with the group.

[429] See Bruce W. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequences in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin* (June 1965), 384-399; Bruce W. Tuckman and M. C. Jensen, "Stages of Small-Group Development Revisited," *Group and Organizational Studies* (December 1977): 419-427; and M. F. Maples, "Group Development: Extending Tuckman's Theory," *Journal for Specialists in Group Work* (Fall 1988): 17-23; and Joann Keyton, *Communicating in Groups*, 2nd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 65-75.

[430] Robbins, 241.

[431] The model was part of the training provided by, among others, the Miller Consulting Group during its work with *The Virginian-Pilot* in the early 1990s. It is also the focus of a recent book: Donald P. Egoff, *Forming Norming Storming Performing: Successful Communication in Groups and Teams* (Writer's Club Press, 2001). The book was self-published.

- Storming refers to intragroup conflict and resistance to constraints on individuality. Conflict arises over who will control the group. This stage ends when an in-team hierarchy emerges.
- There is a strong sense of identity and camaraderie in the norming stage. This stage ends when the group structure solidifies and the members have a common set of expectations with regard to behavior.
- Group energy at this stage moves to performing. The team is fully functional.

Group development is more complex than the model acknowledges; organizational context is ignored.[432] Nor does it account for turnover in membership or reactions to outside forces. A similar stage model is called Cog's Ladder. Charrier termed its stages polite, why we're here, power, cooperation, and esprit. Both Tuckman and Charrier's models are similar to Piaget's stages of cognitive development where each stage must be completed before moving on.

Challenges to the stage model include Poole's assertion that the stages are more various and complicated (in 1981)[433]; and Poole and Roth's 1989 observation that teams have unpredictable periods of disorganization, don't follow unitary phase models, sometimes repeat stages two or more times or in a cycle, and manage multiple threads of activity that are not always coordinated.[434]

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[432] Robbins, 241-243.

[433] Marshall Scott Poole, "Decision Development in Small Groups I: A Comparison of Two Models," *Communication Monographs* 50 (1981): 321-341.

[434] Marshall Scott Poole and J. Roth, "Decision Development in Small Groups V: Test of a Contingency Model," *Human Communication Research* 15 (1989): 549-589. Another approach, the punctuated equilibrium model, applies to nonpermanent groups. It describes an unusual burst of energy precisely halfway between the group's inception and its deadline.

Hirokawa and Rost reported in 1992 that effective groups are more attentive to group processes. Their vigilant interactive theory maintains that groups must assess four areas: the nature of the task; the standards for evaluation; the positive qualities of various choices; and the negative qualities of those options.[435]

Certain characteristics of groups affect team behavior and performance. Size is a factor, for example. Smaller is better than larger for getting things done, an odd number of members is better than an even number, and five to seven appears to be an optimal number of members.[436] Teams with dissimilar individuals tend to be more effective.[437] Teams must develop skills in interpersonal relationships, problem-solving, decision-making, and doing their jobs. Teams must be committed to a common goal and have specific performance goals.

Members take on typical roles within the team.[438] In 1948, Benne and Sheats identified three types of roles: task, maintenance, and self-centered. A task role might be the summarizer/evaluator, for example. Someone who tells jokes to relieve tension might be performing a maintenance role. Dominators and clowns are examples of self-centered roles.[439]

Members develop informal role identities, which can shift according to context – a change in job status, for example – through interacting with other members. Roles can be

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[435] Eisenberg and Goodall, 268. See Randy Y. Hirokawa and Kathryn M. Rost, "Effective Group Decision Making in Organizations," *Management Communication Quarterly* 5 (1992), 267-288.

[436] See Katzenbach, 45-47.

[437] Robbins, 262-262.

[438] H. L. Goodall, "Interpretive Contexts for Decision-Making: Toward an Understanding of the Physical, Economic, Dramatic, and Hierarchical Interplays of Language in Groups." In G. M. Phillips, ed., *Teaching How To Work in Groups* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1990), 197-224.

[439] Eisenberg and Goodall, 263-264. For lists of roles, see H. L. Goodall, "A Theater of Motives and the 'Meaningful Orders of Persons and Things,'" *Communication Yearbook* 13 (1990), 69-84. See also, K. D. Benne and D. Sheats, "Functional Roles of Group Members," *Journal of Sociological Issues* 2 (1948), 42-47.

highly specific to the team, sometimes acting as a balance to each other. One's role perception – the understanding of how one is to behave – is interpreted from many stimuli, from pop culture to stereotypes to nonverbal cues among colleagues. In journalism, socialization to the work environment plays a large part. Role expectations refer to how others believe a person should behave. In the workplace, there is an unwritten psychological contract about roles that is enforced by rewards and repercussions. Within the team, roles solidify as other members accept or reject repeated actions, thereby shaping the behavior.[440] Group effectiveness depends on how complementary the roles are.[441]

Role conflicts exist when compliance with one role challenges compliance with another, such as might happen to someone torn between professional and organizational expectations, or when members compete for roles. Role conflicts are sources of tension and frustration for which there are a number of behavioral responses. One can rely on rules, negotiation, stalling or withdrawal, or one can redefine the situation or facts to make the conflict appear congruent. Role-playing experiments have proved all too successful at showing how quickly people in groups can adopt alternate mindsets and manifest behavior appropriate to those roles.[442] Formal roles are necessary to help the team communicate effectively; they include such positions as leader or recorder.

The expectations that grow out of these roles create team norms. Team meetings might "as a norm" be contentious, for example, or energizing. Blowing deadline by just a few

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[440] Ernest Bormann, "'Empowering' as a Heuristic Concept in Organizational Communication," *Communication Yearbook* 11 (1988): 391-404.

[441] Keyton, *Communicating*, 51.

[442] Zimbardo's simulated prison experiment, in which emotionally stable college students were told to behave like prisoners or guards, was halted after six days because of the pathological reactions of the participants. See Robbins, 252-255.

minutes might become a norm. Norms shape how team members believe the group will behave and therefore shape behavior. When behavior is tolerated, it becomes part of an acceptable norm. Barker argues that organizational culture is

> a creative set of discursive formations that we use as needed to help us make our work life meaningful, sensible, and rational. … [We use these formations – the culture] to create a systematic mechanism that will effectively control our behavior. In participative organizations, such as [a] team-based structure, we call such a systematic mechanism concertive control because it represents the organization's members acting in concert with each other discursively to control their work behavior.[443]

The question of control is central to management. Edwards defined three kinds: simple control (direct, authoritarian, personal); technological (arises from physical demands of the plant, operation, or tools); and bureaucratic (hierarchical social relations, rules, rewards, and punishment). Bureaucracy tends to overemphasize rules, giving them more power than they should have.[444] Weber referred to this as the "iron cage," and argued that depersonalization gives rise to "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart." Control becomes hidden in seemingly natural rules and hierarchy.[445]

Barker saw a fourth strategy: in the movement toward more participative and democratic organizations, control arose from the concertive, value-based actions of the group's members. He called the combination of culture and control in a participative environment "generative discipline," a means for producing regular, recurring and functional behavior. Barker likens it to a marching band working in concert to produce a coordinated musical show. Because the discipline is based on the team's shared values and enforced

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[443] Barker, 41-42.

[444] Edwards, 1981.

[445] Weber, 1958.

through peer pressure, such control is remarkably effective: what is done is done for the team's own good. Participants are, in effect, building a team-based community, and Barker speaks to the emotional component of that relationship:

> [T]eam is much more important for its metaphorical and rhetorical value than for any other purpose. Who wants to be branded as "not being a team player"? Who among us fears the shame of "not making the team"? The bond we create through our identification with our team community is exceedingly powerful because it is so meaningful for us. If we break that bond, we lose a part of ourselves.[446]

This powerfully implies that team members must invest themselves in the team in order for the team to work. Ezzamel and Willmott reported in 1998 that some team members deeply resent the expectation that they relinquish some autonomy and individual identity to the team.[447] The potential consequences of concertive control are dramatic and serious, Sewell argues. When concertive discipline is mixed with elements of hierarchical (managerial) control, the effect is even more powerful. With increased capacity for technically assisted monitoring and the push for increased participative structures, "the potential for oppressive and tyrannical control methodologies dramatically increases."[448]

This section on group dynamics began by describing Tuckman's four-stage model, and reference was made to a fifth level: adjourning. Team members often have emotional reactions when a team dissolves, a project ends, or the relationships decay with the group

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[446] James R. Barker, *The Discipline of Teamwork: Participation and Concertive Control* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1999), 171. See also Tom Peters, 1988, and Peter Drucker, 1988, and Tompkins and Cheney, 1985, who extended Edwards' theories to incorporate concertive control.

[447] Mahmoud Ezzamel and Hugh Willmott, "Accounting for Teamwork: A Critical Study of Group-Based Systems of Organizational Control," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 43 (1998): 358-396.

[448] Graham Sewell, "The Discipline of Teams: The Control of Team-Based Industrial Work Through Electronic and Peer Surveillance," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 43 (1998): 397-428. See also, A. McKinlay and P. Taylor, "Power, Surveillance, and Resistance: Inside the 'Factory of the Future," in P. Ackeres, C. Smith, and P. Smith, eds., *The New Workplace and Trade Unionism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 279-300.

going through a de-norming, de-storming, and de-forming process.[449] There can be pleasure over the experience, sadness at its loss, and an attempt to stay close to former teammates; after a bad experience, the reaction is opposite.[450] Keyton observed that the interaction climate during dissolution will affect members' future reactions to teams.[451] In his research, Barker attests to the power of teamwork to effect action and affect its members, a force that can be negative or positive:

> [P]articipation is like nitroglycerin, a highly volatile rhetorical concoction: good and productive in some contexts but devastatingly destructive in others. … The team makes the rules by working its way through a haze of business values, social values, family values, leisure values, and everything else. … In this new era of participation, we must do well, *and* we must do good.[452]

Teams in practice

Case study and anecdotal observation power most of the team how-to and "reference" material in the popular market, a voluminous cache.[453] Despite the abundance, little of it contributed to an understanding of teams, as Drucker noted in 1995.[454] Many of the authors are consultants; some are scholars; some are journalists; some are a bit of each. A few have

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[449] John F. McGrew, John G. Bilotta, and Janet M. Deeney, "Software Team Formation and Decay: Extending the Standard Model for Small Groups," *Small Group Research* 30, no. 2 (1999): 209-234.

[450] Rose, 1989.

[451] Randy Hirokowa and Joann Keyton, "Perceived Facilitators and Inhibitors of Effectiveness in Organizational Work Teams," *Management Communication Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (May 1995): 424. Also, Keyton, *Communicating*, 71.

[452] Barker, 191.

[453] Of wide influence are the books of Tom Peters, Steven Covey, John C. Maxwell, and Ken Blanchard, often written in partnership with another author.

[454] "We will have to learn to understand teams – and this is something to which, so far, very little attention has been paid. The understanding of the performance capacities of different kinds of teams, of their strengths, their limitations, the trade-offs between various kinds of teams – these considerations will increasingly become central concerns in the management of people." Peter F. Drucker, *Managing in a Time of Great Change,* (New York: Truman Talley Books/Plume, 1998), 241.

indeed contributed to an understanding and have produced extensive and substantive information about teams through close observation over meaningful stretches of time. The work that will be reviewed here is in that category.

Katzenbach and Smith studied forty-seven teams and made their stories the focus of a book that became a bestseller. Although written for top management, *The Wisdom of Teams*[455] is a clear primer for forming and understanding teams and may have been the one book just about all newsroom reorganizers, and many of the reorganized, consulted. The aim for their book is to divide the obvious from the subtle and explicate both. They write from the team, not the organizational, perspective. By concentrating on the team as the unit of investigation, they were able to identify conditions for team performance across a wide range of organizational and functional contexts. The diversity of teams studied might appear a drawback in understanding topic teams, but the findings are useful in at least two regards. First, they allow one to understand the expectations held by non-newsroom managers, owners, and executives with regard to newsroom team performance, and to understand the motivations behind newsroom executives' goals for the teams. Second, they identify approaches that are applicable in a wide range of settings and circumstances, meaning they would likely be useful in the operation of topic teams as well. The following points are derived from their findings.

- Teams must have a clear, shared purpose.
- A demanding performance challenge tends to create a team and is necessary for team existence. It must, however, be meaningful to those involved.
- Rigorous attention must be paid to team basics: size, purpose, goals, skills, approach, accountability, and empowerment. Good leadership and supportive members are vital.

[455] Katzenbach, *Wisdom.* A subsequent book was not reviewed for this work since it was primarily a workbook. See Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, *The Discipline of Teams: A Mindbook-Workbook for Delivering Small Group Performance* (New York:Wiley, 2001).

- Although shifting emphasis from individual to team accountability is difficult, it must be done. This in no way precludes the necessary element of individual contribution and earning distinction in that way.
- Companies with strong performance standards seem to spawn more "real teams" than those that promote teams per se. No single element is more important than clear and consistent standards.
- High performance teams are extremely rare.
- Hierarchy and teams go together well and need not threaten each other.
- Teams naturally integrate performance and learning, a practice that creates enduring knowledge.
- "Real" teams are deeply committed to their purpose, goals, and approach. High-performance team members are very committed to each other. "Wisdom" comes from focusing on collective work-products, personal growth, and performance results.
- Teams provide a social dimension that enhances the economic and administrative aspects of work.
- Teams have more fun, and that fun is integral to their performance.
- Behavioral change occurs more readily in the team context.
- Teams require time to develop and sustain themselves and usually risks must be taken in overcoming the constraints imposed by individual, functional, and hierarchical boundaries. Team members must depend on each other.
- Each team must find its own way to meet its own performance challenge.
- "Stuck" teams should revisit the basics, go for small wins, find new approaches and information, consider outside training or a facilitator, and change the membership (including the leader).

Larson and LaFasto's first book, *Teamwork*, was motivated by its authors' conviction that, while we as a society have the technological and intellectual means to solve problems of global significance, we can't seem to work together for a collaborative solution. It is the result of a three-year in-depth study of leaders and members of diverse teams that included the McDonald's Chicken McNugget team, mountain-climbing and cardiac surgery teams, the Challenger investigation team, and the 1966 Notre Dame championship football team. They had in common uncommon success. As with the Katzenbach and Smith teams, they were diverse in kind and subject, and they predated newspaper topic teams. Through this research, the authors found surprisingly consistent characteristics of effective team formation. They

then created performance measures to monitor and give feedback to 32 management teams. The results allowed them to develop a testable theory of team functioning.

They identified the characteristics of effective team formation as:

- a clear, elevating goal
- a results-driven structure
- competent team members
- unified commitment
- a collaborative climate
- standards of excellence
- external support and recognition
- principled leadership.

The book is an extended discussion of those eight items. LaFasto and Larson continued their own collaborative research on teams in another book, *When Teams Work Best,*[456] a synthesis of more than 6,000 interviews with team members (about 600 teams) and leaders over fifteen years. The book analyzes essential elements of teams from the team member's perspective to the organization's. Most useful, from a topic-team perspective, are the discussions of effective team members and team relationships.

Among the top predictors of a team's success, they found, "are the qualities of the individuals who make up the team." In analyzing 15,000 assessments of team members by their fellow teammates, Larson and LaFasto determined six key factors. Teammates with working knowledge, the first factor, know both the business and ways to solve problems. Problem-solving ability is the second. The last four factors are related to teamwork and are the ability to be open, supportive, oriented toward action, and to have a positive personal style. They call one of the great dangers to a team's effectiveness the "passive conspiracy."

[456] Frank LaFasto and Carl Larson, *When Teams Work Best: 6,000 Team Members and Leaders Tell What It Takes To Succeed*, (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2001).

This refers to a shared, usually unvoiced, agreement to not address something, and that avoidance becomes a team norm.

Not everyone welcomes a collaborative arrangement: "Some can, some can't, some won't." In analyzing 35,000 responses to relationship-based questions, the researchers found that two behaviors are consistent problems: giving feedback and receiving feedback. These go back to relationships and varying abilities to work with other people. "Heaven forbid if any shareholder of any company or any donor to any institution should ever quantify how much money is wasted in organizations on relationship disorders!" was one of their reactions, neatly summing a major problem. In short, people think they're better at relationships than they really are. The respondents cumulatively indicated that the two most important behaviors are openness and supportiveness. Finding a remarkable consistency, the scholars conducted a meta-analysis of the past 20 years of studies related to such measurements. Again, the most desirable behaviors were openness and supportiveness.

The biggest problem? Dealing with contention – which is hindered by the pitfalls of openness and supportiveness. Openness can be painful and is usually accompanied by tension, which most people prefer to avoid. The genuine wish to support is sometimes in conflict with one's survival-wired tendency to be defensive. Feedback can be a gift – or an attack. The best answer lies in preparation: hone the team's ability to integrate feedback and solicit and manage differing perspectives. These are the highlights of what resulted in the Connect Model, a schematic guide to building relationships in a constructive way. The main points are

- Commit to the relationship,
- Optimize safety,
- Narrow to one issue,
- Neutralize defensiveness,

- Explain and echo,
- Change one behavior each, and
- Track it – find out the most useful way to monitor progress.

There are groups and there are great groups, Charles Handy observed in his introduction to Bennis and Biederman's book about creative collaboration, *Organizing Genius*. Great groups "hope to make a dent in the universe." They flare for a while, then vanish, leaving behind a creation. The thrill of the game is what matters. Talent needs its own niche; roles in great groups are not interchangeable. Could efficiency, productivity, and the desire for immediate pay-offs occasionally be roadblocks on the way to greatness? Can the excitement of the task drown out any objectivity about its consequences? "The more I learned," Bennis wrote,

> the more I realized that the usual way of looking at groups and leadership, as separate phenomena, was no longer adequate. The most exciting groups – the ones … that shook the world – resulted from a mutually respectful marriage between an able leader and an assemblage of extraordinary people. Groups become great only when everyone in them, leaders and members alike, is free to do his or her absolute best. … In today's Darwinian economy, only organizations that find ways to tap the creativity of their members are likely to survive.

Bennis notes, along with so many others, that the myth of the lone hero is deeply ingrained in the American psyche. The need for cooperation and collaboration grows more important daily. As a society, we advocate teamwork, citing the Japanese approach to management, but do so in a culture in which people strive to distinguish themselves as individuals. Still, collaboration is all around and always has been.

After extensively visiting and analyzing six clearly stellar teams, he concluded that people in Great Groups (Bennis capitalizes the words) are intrinsically motivated and rarely have morale problems. They may work in Spartan surroundings; they may exist in Peter Pan

land. “Knowledge workers can’t be managed,” he maintains. But that means that while they don’t need to be told what to do, they may need to be nudged.

He, too, provides a list, one he calls his “Take-Home Lessons”:

- Greatness starts with superb people.
- Great Groups and great leaders create each other.
- Every Great Group has a strong leader.
- The leaders of Great Groups love talent and know where to find it.
- Great Groups are full of talented people who can work together.
- Great Groups think they are on a mission from God.
- Every Great Group is an island, but one with a bridge to the mainland.
- Great Groups see themselves as winning underdogs.
- Great Groups always have an enemy.
- People in Great Groups have blinders on.
- Great Groups are optimistic, not realistic.
- In Great Groups, the right person has the right job.
- The leaders of Great Groups give them what they need and free them from the rest.
- Great Groups ship [get the work where it needs to go].
- Great work is its own reward.

In extensive research, Bennis focuses much of his attention on the role of the leader, a role that has dramatically changed since the 1960s when participatory management was a radical idea. The new leader, he maintains, is a facilitator and an appreciator of ideas. “The generals are being ousted and the poets are taking charge – adopting a democratic model that not only tolerates change, but creates it.”[457]

Summary of team management and dynamics. Topic teams as an innovation faced an entrenched management system that rewarded individualistic behavior despite a highly routinized system of “teamwork” for producing the newspaper. Stepp and others reported on a pervasive anxiety and depression in U.S. newsrooms of the 1990s. Scholars pointed out that

[457] Warren Bennis, *Managing People Is Like Herding Cats,* (Provo, Utah: Executive Excellence Publishing, 1999), 219-220.

an increasingly complex society called for greater collaborative efforts. Numerous business scholars wrote of the need for collaborative work environments. Several research teams concentrated on studying teams, including Larson and LaFasto, Bennis and Nanus, and Katzenbach and Smith. They concluded that the team structure had great power, and that there were ways to create and manage workable teams. Teams were part of "reengineering" and quality control processes, as well.

When scholars focused on dynamics, it was found that teams and groups were not interchangeable. They also discovered indications that personal ties often overrode group considerations. A certain category of team, the "hot group," "great group," or the "high-performing" team, was found to be rare but wildly effective in realizing group goals, which was either a boon or disadvantage. Once again, the "sensemaking" aspect arose as Richards, Monge, and Eisenberg explored the power of shared meanings. Eisenberg and Goodal researched the "explosion" of teams in the 1990s, a time in which Tuckman's team model – forming, storming, norming, and performing – became popular as a way to explain life cycles of teams.

In the midst of this team "explosion," there was a relative explosion of team-care books. While they were trite and formulaic, they mimicked greater works. Bennis, Biederman, Larson, LaFasto, Katzenbach, and Smith had in common an analytical and case-study approach that tended to manifest results in prescriptive lists. The anecdotal approach and the lists evidently appealed to mass-market consultants, but tended to cast a pall of superficiality and jargon over the team movement.

Summary of the literature

Sometimes the literature speaks loudest by what it fails to address. In this case, that silence leaves unexplored the experience of being on a topic team; the viewpoint of those who work as members of topic teams; and some explication of the consequences of topic-team experience on professionally oriented practices and values. Three very strong conclusions arise, however: that the work environment has undergone change, even dramatic change, from non-participatory to participatory management, and from a "traditional" hierarchical model to one that mixes hierarchy with mutual determination and a team-based structure; the publishing paradigm has undergone change as business no longer exists to support or complement journalism, and journalism exists (in this view) to support business; and that journalism's core premises and practices are and have been under review and sometimes attack.

It is also apparent from group studies that teams, to some extent, take on lives of their own, setting up mini-communities with their own dynamics, norms, values, sensibilities, and disciplines. These teams are not microcosms of the larger organizations within which they exist, but are reactive and reflective bodies that can best be understood in the context of their parent or a parental viewpoint. Topic teams, for example, must be seen as constructs for changing journalistic routines, building readership, and energizing or economizing newsrooms during times of heightened attention to resources: that is what their "parents" created them to do. We do not know that topic teams accomplished their assigned tasks, however. Has there been a shift in topic-team members' content orientation and information gathering through organizational definition of topics and concomitant allocation of resources? And if so, how much is "show" and how much is substantive?

Researchers have identified common attributes of successful teams and have isolated characteristics that predict whether teams will "take" as teams or remain simply groups of people, unable to achieve the synergy and productive capabilities of team-bonded colleagues. Literature suggests that some organizational theory may be inappropriate for application to newspaper newsrooms; research is highly inconclusive (and minimal) with regard to whether teams are appropriate mechanisms for newsrooms.

This study examines the consequences of applying teams, and topic teams in particular, to newspaper newsrooms. It does so by eliciting insights from the perspective of the topic team member through qualitative in-depth interviews. Three broad research questions, derived from the literature reviewed in chapters 1 and 2 as well as the summary above, guide the qualitative exploration and the analysis that follows.

Research questions

The work environment of the U.S. newspaper journalist is important because of the social and civic role played by the press in the United States. Evidence suggests that those roles have been under increased pressure from perhaps necessarily conflicting sources: the public service mission and the market imperative or, put another way, the tension between business and journalistic values. Constructive pressure has been brought to bear on the heart of journalism itself by theorists and practitioners who question the role journalism has, will, could, and should play in determining and interpreting public life. Topic teams are the embodiment of an approach to merge market and journalistic goals to produce knowledge for public consumption. Although readership of print publications continues to wane, the content produced by topic teams for print forms a substantial part – perhaps the bulk – of what is

consumed online, a market delivery system that continues to increase its readership at a rapid pace. Understanding both the phenomenon and reality of topic teams is not solely of "historical" interest; it is vital to appreciating current and future journalism. Therefore, the first research question asks:

1. How do topic team members perceive their current work environment as being different from a non-team newsroom?

To deepen the focus on the workplace, related questions are posed:

1a. How do topic team members see the current newsroom structure as being beneficial or harmful in terms of their producing content for publication or doing their jobs?

1b. What attributes do topic team members perceive as contributing to both successful and unsuccessful topic teams in terms of working together?

1c. What do topic team members like or dislike about working as part of a topic team?

Leaving the workplace, the inquiry extends to the relationship between journalism and the industry that makes it possible. The second research question asks:

2. How do topic team journalists perceive the topic team in terms of serving business and journalism goals and values?

And similarly:

2a. From the perspective of a topic team member, what are the opportunities, possibilities, and limitations of a topic team system?

From there, journalistic routines and professional values are explored through the following question:

3. How do topic team journalists perceive the team system as having created, eliminated, or changed long-standing elements of newspaper reporting and editing?

One of the primary goals of topic team creation was to affect content. Therefore, a related question is:

> 3a. How do topic team journalists perceive the creation of topic teams as having affected news content?

Their answers are necessarily subjective and are shaped by their professional values. Therefore:

> 3b. How do topic team journalists perceive the role played by professional values, and what are some ways in which those values are defined?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research procedures: Qualitative methodology

John W. Creswell defines qualitative research as "an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting."[458] The qualitative mode of inquiry best addresses the "how" and "why" questions driving this research: How is being on a topic team different from working as a traditional reporter or assignment editor? Why are there differences? How does work on a topic team relate to being a professional journalist? How does the existence of topic teams relate to the type of news that is covered or the way in which it is covered?

The information sought is highly interpretive and relies on context for subtle changes in meaning. The goal is to obtain a broad range of responses that arise from the respondents' original thoughts. What are not wanted are answers that might have been suggested or limited by the kind of direct questions used with a quantitative survey or poll. This research is meant to identify areas of change or conceptual concerns, not measure activity or thought. Further, the study is undertaken in a new research area. In such circumstances, qualitative

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[458] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998).

research is not only useful in its own right, but serves to "give the intricate, most relevant, and problematic details of the phenomenon," data that can be formulated into quantitative studies that test, verify, and extend the qualitative hypotheses.[459]

Because the goal of the research is to establish participants' experience as topic team members and to elicit the participants' perspectives on that experience with regard to professional norms and ideology, the research employs the analytic induction method to uncover meanings, patterns, and processes. Theory is used as a non-restrictive guide in this method. The long interview method developed by Grant McCracken[460] is utilized to obtain data for qualitative analysis. The snowball technique as formulated by Michael Patton[461] is employed to obtain a purposive sample of interview subjects.

Analytic induction

Inductive analysis, generally defined as moving from the specific to the general, has been more fully defined as "immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important categories, dimensions, and interrelationships; begin by exploring genuinely open questions rather than testing theoretically derived (deductive) hypotheses."[462] With this approach, data analysis begins with observations and builds toward the identification of general patterns. Categories, or dimensions, of analysis are determined by the emergent patterns evident in the empirical world under study. Contrary to the hypothetical-deductive

[459] Barney G. Glaser, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis: Emergence vs. Forcing* (Mill Valley, Calif.: Sociology Press, 1992), 12.

[460] Grant McCracken, *The Long Interview,* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1988).

[461] Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 2nd edition (New York: Sage Publications, 1990), 176.

[462] Ibid., 40.

approach, there is no statement of definitive research hypotheses and no determination of specific variables prior to data collection. The naming of research hypotheses based on explicit theoretical framework (as in a deductive approach) would mean that the understanding of specific observations or cases would be framed in a particular set of dimensions. By relying more heavily on inductive analysis, the theory is allowed to emerge. "The strategy of inductive designs," Patton wrote, "is to allow the important analysis dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be."[463]

Rather than a hypothesis, a rough formulation of the phenomenon to be explained and an initial explanation are prepared. These guide the interview questions, which are open-ended. As described by Patricia Curtin, "A small number of cases are then studied to see if the explanation fits the cases. If it does not, either the explanation or the phenomenon to be explained is reformulated to account for the case. The procedure continues, with the researcher examining cases and producing reformulations, until all cases can be explained."[464]

In this research, it is provisionally posited that since newsroom topic teams, which are variously defined in the industry, are both based on a business team-management model and new to the newsroom, the participants' perspectives on journalistic norms and routines will change. Team members are presented with new challenges and opportunities as a result of

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[463] Ibid., 44.

[464] Patricia Ann Curtin, "Market-Driven Journalism: A Test of Two Models and Their Implications for Public Relations Information Subsidies and Journalist-Practitioner Relations," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1996, 117.

team dynamics, organizational expectations and control, and the need to produce professional work.

The focus of this research is on individual perspectives of change in journalistic work as seen through topic-team experience. The analysis therefore begins with the full understanding of the individual experiences of the participating individuals as expressed in the interview data. To this end and to provide context sensitivity,[465] profiles of the individual's work experience and of the management and newsroom structures of the various newspapers involved were assembled prior to commencing the interview and, therefore, the analytical process. By placing the initial focus on the individual cases before the findings are aggregated, the findings are grounded in specific contexts and the theories that result are based in real-world patterns.[466]

In-depth interview

The long interview, according to McCracken, is the method of choice when cultural categories, assumptions, and themes are objects of investigation and when total immersion in the studied environment is impractical or impossible, as it would have been in this research. He described it as "one of the most powerful techniques in the qualitative methodology" and said the "long interview gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves."[467]

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[465] Patton, 40.

[466] Ibid., 41, citing Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

[467] McCracken, 9.

For a researcher trained in the journalistic interview, as in this instance, the formal process of the long interview is a distinct variation in technique (in McCracken's terms, the qualitative interview is "non-directive," unlike most journalistic forms) but carries the same goal of attentive and careful observation. Both interview forms are tailored, however, for different needs. A journalistic interview is overridingly framed by its need to be incorporated into material that is contextually appropriate for journalistic publication. The academic interview in qualitative inquiry seeks to open the field of interest and elicit information that may or may not aid in the discovery of experiential patterns. As a result, the information-gathering techniques are different. The qualitative in-depth interview relies on a guide wherein questions and topic areas are delineated so that consistency may be maintained among related interviews; it is designed to be used in more than one interview. An in-depth journalistic interview tends to be specific to the person interviewed or the subject for which that person serves as a source.

The academic interview as characterized by McCracken might be described as "hands off," whereas the journalistic interview is "hands on." Journalists are encouraged to offer feedback and to engage in "active listening," while academics are not, for example. While the interview is in process, the journalist is expected to take notes, challenge statements, and prod for answers. Much of this behavior is the result of time pressures and other publication constraints under which the journalist most often works. Time constraints may also pressure the academic, but the research norm is for the gathering of information to take precedence over deadlines.

The journalist is not usually steeped in the interviewee's area of expertise and is advised to watch for conflicts of interest. The scholar prepares for the interview through an

immersion into the interviewee's subject area, and there are often personal ties to the subject (area of research) as well. McCracken states that the investigator best fulfills qualitative research goals through using a broad range of personal experience, imagination, and intellect. He advocates a "rummaging process"[468] by which the totality of the interviewer's experience enters into the detection phases. Through understanding what the interviewee is saying, he advises, comprehension will follow. If, however, there are no experiential matches – what the interviewee is saying seems foreign – then McCracken advises the researcher to adopt wholeheartedly the subject's point of view. This suspension of disbelief helps the academic interviewer bypass bias and preconception and can open the way to new thinking. Journalists are trained away from such methods.

In this inquiry the participants are journalists, which presents a possible strategic and psychological advantage. Using the McCracken interview form with subjects who are by profession attuned to a different format may add the element of surprise to the interview in terms of what the respondent expects to say or be asked and may allow the respondents to consider their own views from a different perspective. By definition, it is in surprise that expectations are confounded. Nevertheless, the interview form, no matter what the format, is a familiar enough device to journalists to set them at ease and encourage candid and forthright responses and reactions to the interview questions.

Construction of the interview guide or questionnaire began with a set of biographical questions with which to open the interview. The purpose of these questions is to have contextual material with which to interpret the interview and to have the information readily

[468] Ibid., 19, 33.

available during analysis.[469] The remaining questions were constructed with the aim of letting the respondents "tell their own story in their own terms." Questions were purposefully phrased in a general and nondirective manner. "In no instance may a question supply the terms of the answer it solicits," McCracken admonishes. These questions are termed "grand-tour" questions. They are supplemented by the use of "floating prompts" that encourage the respondent to elaborate on certain aspects of the testimony. These prompts may be as simple as a raised eyebrow indicating interest or the repetition of a key word used by the respondent. "Planned prompts" are used sparingly, if at all, and are called into use when a subject area under investigation has failed to spontaneously emerge. Such a prompt might be to ask the respondent to "recall exceptional incidents in which the research topic was implicated," or to ask the respondent to comment on an object related to the research. In studying topic teams, the object might be a newspaper in which a story created by the respondent's team has been published.

Reflexivity and reactivity

In qualitative inquiry, the instrument of research is the researcher. Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln point out that the interviewer is affected during the course of the research by environmental change as well as by the interviewer's physical state. The level of instrument skill is determined by ability, training, and experience. "But this loss in rigor is more than offset by the flexibility, insight, and ability to build on tacit knowledge that is the peculiar province of the human instrument,"[470] they concluded. Patton insists that a qualitative report

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[469] McCracken, 34.

[470] Patton, 14, quoting Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Effective Evaluation: Improving the Usefulness of Evaluation Results Through Responsive and Naturalistic Approaches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981), 113.

include information about the researcher, including the experience, training, and perspective the researcher brings to the field; what personal connections the researcher has to the people, program, or topic studied; and who funded the study and under what arrangements with the researcher.[471]

This researcher brought more than twenty-five years of experience as a reporter and editor to the study. As copy desk chief/team leader for *The Virginian-Pilot* in the late 1990s, I was directly involved with topic teams, which were, at this point at the newspaper, firmly established. Previous experience was with both daily and weekly newspapers. Most of the newspapers at which I served, until the *Pilot*, were traditionally structured. As the top editor at four smaller newspapers, however, I sought to find alternative newsroom structures – hence my interest in observing topic teams. While that experience gave me insight into the work and needs of the journalists I interviewed for this study, it also meant I needed to be careful about assumptions. On guard, I was mindful I needed to probe for the participants' meanings, not mine.

A reactive effect takes place in interviews, meaning that the presence of the interviewer can make a difference in the interview process and in the outcomes. The interview subject may be on best behavior as a result of being the focus of intense interest or may be nervous to the point of distraction. Additionally, the rapport of the two people involved may enhance or challenge the effectiveness of the process. Denzin offered this advice: "It is axiomatic that observers must record what they perceive to be their own reactive effects. They may treat this reactivity as bad and attempt to avoid it (which is impossible), or they may accept the fact that they will have a reactive effect and attempt to

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[471] Ibid., 472, 473.

use it to advantage. … The reactive effect will be measured by daily field notes … and also in daily observations."[472]

To this end, a field journal was kept with reflective and summary entries made as soon after the interview as practicable. They were referenced by interview time and date and utilized a coded shorthand for the interview subject and the subject's newspaper affiliation as a confidentiality precaution. I was struck by how forthcoming all of participants were. All were eager to talk, and the sense (sometimes clearly stated) was that they wanted their "stories" to be heard, and didn't feel that they had been. I was uniformly welcomed into the conversations. Oddly, it was more as a "former" peer; several clearly expected to be directed toward comments – as they would have been if they, as journalists, were doing the interviewing – and appeared quite pleased to be allowed to go on with their chosen trains of thought. All invited me to contact them again if I had any questions, and they wished me well in the research.

The sample

In snowball (or chain) sampling, information-rich subjects are located through referral and expertise. In the first phase, participants were selected after consulting people who were well placed to offer knowledgeable suggestions. The selected participants were asked to recommend potential participants. Not all of those people were selected; some served as references for those already in the sample, although they were not aware of their role, thereby confirming the appropriateness of the selections. In other cases, the people suggested were invited to participate in the study. The goal was to ensure a wide

[472] Ibid., 473-474, quoting Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 200.

representation of viewpoints and experiences. Existing research concentrated on case studies and quantitative surveys; the snowball sample and the resulting broad perspective filled a hole in the literature. The selection-and-referral process continued until saturation was reached and no further interviews were needed. Those who were interviewed were required to have direct experience with topic teams as a reporter or team leader.

The question of sample size is often raised when discussing qualitative as opposed to quantitative inquiry. Because the focus is on depth, and because the long interview process is lengthy on a case-by-case basis, the need to finish the project in a reasonable time and to have samples that are taken in near-time proximity to each other compels a smaller rather than larger sample size. McCracken takes the view that less is more, stating that it is more important to work longer and with greater care with a few people than more superficially with many of them. For many research projects, he states, eight respondents are "perfectly sufficient"[473] and even admonishes against using more.[474] The issue, he points out, is one of accessibility, not generalizability. "The purpose of the qualitative interview is not to discover how many, and what kinds of, people share a certain characteristic. It is to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world."[475] It is the categories and assumptions, not those who hold them, that matter. It is left to further study of a quantitative nature with far larger sample sizes to decide how widely what is discovered is held by the rest of the world.[476] Nevertheless, the results of qualitative work, and of this study, are definitely representative of the range of perspectives gathered. Since

[473] McCracken, 17.

[474] Ibid., 37.

[475] Ibid,, 17.

[476] Ibid.

data saturation was reached, the findings likely resonate with much of the general feeling about topic teams.

This research employed eighteen in-depth interviews. Curtin, using similar methods, found that twenty-one interviews were needed.[477] Carl E. Larson and Frank M. J. LaFasto, in three studies using similar methods, found that interview pools of thirteen, twelve, and six were appropriate.[478] Lois Boynton, using similar methods, analyzed fifteen in-depth interviews for a study of public relations practitioners.[479]

The interview subjects for this study were journalists employed at U.S. daily newspapers that had converted their newsrooms to a team-management structure. There were no exclusion criteria other than employment status and the participant's perceived knowledge and experience with newspaper topic teams. All participants were at least 18 years old. All were current members of topic teams with one exception, and that journalist had been a member of a topic team until the newsroom disbanded it shortly before the interview took place.

Initial contact was made through a phone call in which the researcher introduced herself and the study and invited participation. After the oral consent, an e-mail confirmation of the scheduled meeting date and a thank-you was sent. To be helpful but still protect the participant's privacy, the e-mail contained contact information and a general reference to the study, but the area of interest was not specified. (The complete and approved Institutional Review Board proposal, which includes communication templates and consent forms, is

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[477] Curtin, 121-124.

[478] Carl E. Larson and Frank M.J. LaFasto, *Teamwork: What Must Go Right, What Can Go Wrong* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1989), 20-23.

[479] Lois A. Boynton, "Navigating Rocky Shoals in a Leaky Boat: A Qualitative Analysis of the Ethical Decision-Making Process of Public Relations Practitioners," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 2001).

Appendix A.) To secure privacy and confidentiality, code names were assigned to each newspaper and interview subject and used throughout the research.

Analysis

The data were analyzed from transcripts of digitally recorded interviews (a tape backup was also made to protect against equipment failure) using the open, axial, and selective coding schema formulated by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss[480] and later redefined by Strauss and Juliet Corbin.[481] Microanalysis is defined as "[t]he detailed line-by-line analysis necessary at the beginning of a study to generate initial categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories; a combination of open and axial coding."[482] During this stage, the data are fragmented, meaning that bits of data are subjected to intense scrutiny. The level of analysis may isolate single words, phrases, or sentences. "Doing microanalysis compels the analyst to listen closely to what the interviewees are saying and how they are saying it," Strauss and Corbin wrote. "This prevents us from jumping precipitously to our own theoretical conclusions."[483] They describe the process:

> Doing analysis of a word, phrase, or sentence consists of scanning the document, or at least a couple of pages of it, and then returning to focus on a word or phrase that strikes the analyst as being significant and analytically

[480] Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

[481] Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998).

[482] Ibid., 57.

[483] Ibid., 65.

> interesting. Then, the analyst begins to list all of the possible meanings of the word [phrase or sentence] that come to mind. With this list in mind, the analyst can turn to the document and look for incidents or words that will point to meaning. … It is up to the analyst to discern which interpretations are most accurate by looking to the data and doing a comparative analysis. … We might find that none of these meanings holds up to scrutiny when we make comparisons against data. But at least when looking at the data, the analyst has some ideas of what to look for rather than simply staring into space with nothing emerging because the analyst has no idea what he or she is looking for.[484]

Open coding is defined as "[t]he analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data."[485] Once the discrete units of data are examined (as above), they are compared for similarities and differences. Those that are conceptually similar or related in meaning are grouped into a more abstract classification called categories. The characteristics of a category are its properties. The extent to which a property is manifest is its dimension, which is located along a continuum or within a range. If the discrete units were, for example, bumblebee, fighter jet, and spitball, the category might be flying objects or flight. A property of flight might be the time the object can be suspended in air. The spitball would likely lie along the lower dimensions of the category while the bumblebee is next along the continuum but well below the jet, which is in a higher range. In the context of the proposed research on topic teams, categories might be discovered for constraint, opportunity, or reward. Patterns are noted when properties align themselves along various dimensions.[486] Subcategories, which become important in axial

[484] Ibid., 93.

[485] Ibid., 101.

[486] Ibid., 117.

coding, "specify a category further by denoting information such as when, where, why, and how a phenomenon is likely to occur."[487]

Axial coding is defined as "[t]he process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed 'axial' because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions."[488] It is in this stage that the data that were fragmented for open coding begin to be reassembled and new categories might be found. For example, by noting a property of the bumblebee, one might establish a category for living objects. Other forms of life might be found listed under other categories so a cross-index or linking begins to develop. In this way, a texture of relationships is built up in an "axis" around the category. Linking categories to the concepts and subcategories within them leads to provisional hypotheses. Perhaps living beings are not as capable of long flight as objects that are operated in some way by a living being. One might hypothesize that living beings can increase the length of their flights by piloting flying objects.

When a point has been reached in the research where no new information seems to be forthcoming, productive, or possible, the categories are considered to be "saturated."[489] At this stage or somewhat before, the researcher integrates and refines the categories, a process referred to as selective coding.[490] The first step in selective integration is defining a central or core category,[491] which represents the main theme of the research. Among the criteria for choosing the central category are that all other categories must relate to it; it must appear

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[487] Ibid., 119.

[488] Ibid., 123.

[489] Ibid., 136.

[490] Ibid., 143.

[491] Ibid., 146-148.

frequently in the data; the explanation that evolves must be consistent and logical; the name or phrase used to describe the central category should be sufficiently abstract that it can be used for research in other substantive areas, leading to a more general theory; as it is integrated with other concepts, the theory grows in depth and explanatory power; and the concept is able to explain variation or contradiction in terms of that central idea.[492]

Once the theoretical scheme is outlined, it is refined. If more information is needed for a poorly developed category, theoretical sampling is employed. The theory is validated by comparing it to raw data or by presenting it to respondents for their reactions. Patton also advises a process of triangulation or confirmation through member checks. He suggests "comparing the perspectives of people from different points of view"; checking documents "that can corroborate what interview respondents report"; and triangulating historical analyses and participant observations.[493]

The theory that emerged from the proposed research was discussed with several participants, sources knowledgeable about team management at newspapers, and several well-known and respected editors of topic-team papers. The historical component of this study, as well as the literature review, were a large part of the triangulation process. An audit trail of methodological and analytical memos was maintained throughout the research as a check against bias and interpretive memory.

The in-depth interviews were conducted in the late spring and summer of 2001. With the exception of two, which had to be conducted by telephone because of travel and time restrictions, all interviews took place in person. Some were at the newspaper at which the

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[492] Ibid., 147.

[493] Patton, 467.

interviewee was employed; all took place outside the working area of the newsroom; and almost all were in a neutral place off the newspaper premises, including a park, quiet coffee shops, a university office, and restaurants. The sites were chosen for the interviewees' convenience and comfort level and with an expectation that the interview would not be subject to interruption, scrutiny, or disturbance. To the best of this researcher's knowledge, privacy and attention were maintained.

The results of the analysis of the interviews follow in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter describes the results of open, axial, and selective coding of interviews with eighteen journalists involved in writing/reporting and editing/coaching on topic teams at U.S. newspapers.

The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the journalists interviewed for this qualitative study. It is followed by analysis of the three main categories that emerged: team effectiveness; individual ramifications; and professional dimensions. Chapter 5 describes a model of topic team instrumentality that emerged from the data analysis and discusses the findings and explores applications, limitations, and future research as a result of the study.

PARTICIPANTS

The eighteen journalists who took part in this study as in-depth interviewees are part of a diverse group in terms of topic expertise, newspaper experience, educational background, cultural background, age, and range of interest. At the time of the interviews, the ten men and eight women represented ten newspapers; as a group, their experience represented newsroom staff time on more than forty newspapers, the Associated Press, a financial wire service, and more than twenty weekly and community newspapers throughout

the country (including Hawaii), representing all major U.S. regions. The longest time any participant served at one paper was 21 years; the shortest was slightly less than a year, but that person came from another team paper. Two of the participants were Pulitzer Prize finalists, one was a winner, and another edited two winning entries and a finalist; all did their work for different newspapers. One participant was a Guild representative; others took active part in national/international journalism organizations related to their topics. There was one participant with a doctorate in mass communication, about half with master's degrees (most of which were in journalism, one of which was in physiology), and all had a bachelor's degree with majors that included journalism, English, political science, sociology, international studies, archeology, Arabic, and music. Top-ranked journalism schools were among those represented.

The journalists, who ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties, had experience (reporting or editing) in the following topics in addition to general assignment reporting: education; social and family issues (specializing in adoption and census); religion; business; county government for a Metropolitan Team; housing and riverfront development for a Neighborhood Team; state government; agriculture; health; environmental health for an Environment, Natural Resources and Science Team; health and health policy issues; sports; crime; immigration issues and charities for a Social Justice Team; cops and courts for a Public Safety Team; government; assisted suicide for Health; aging for Family and Education; special projects for an Enterprise Strike Team; town hall; city hall for a Government Team (formerly Public Affairs); local news; personal finance and workplace issues for a Money Team; science; modern cities as leader of the "Mod Pod"; labor; and the arts. Several had been copy editors; many reported having internships and having worked on

their campus newspapers. Three specifically mentioned having lived overseas, although that was not one of the questions asked of them.

Management editors of the ten newspapers for which the interviewees worked were not necessarily aware that this study was in progress, which was by design. Two were visited openly (while protecting the participants' anonymity) as a researcher, and free access was granted to the newsroom and staff meetings, including those above the topic-team level. Top editors of those papers spent time in conversation with this researcher, formally and informally. The names of the newspapers remain undisclosed in this context to prevent identification of those staffers who may have taken part in confidential interviews. The other newspapers were visited without disclosing the research goal to anyone other than the participants; both team and staff meetings were attended at three of those papers. The ten newspapers ranged in circulation from about 80,000 to 503,000.[494] Newspapers below this circulation range are unlikely to have team systems because there aren't enough people to divide into topical teams. Newspapers somewhat above this range have not shown an interest in full conversion, but some have adapted aspects of topic-team operation. Exploring those adaptations is beyond the scope of this inquiry; no attempt was made to find interview subjects from the largest U.S. newspapers, but two of the participants had prior experience with national-circulation newspapers and were able to offer relevant comparisons.

All of the interviews took place between June and the end of August 2001. After receiving IRB approval, initial contact with the journalists was made variously through e-mail and telephone calls; care was taken that the subject's involvement in the research was not identified in e-mail or any voicemail telephone messages sent to or left for the

[494] These figures vary by year, generally decreasing, but the size ratio remains relatively constant. The circulation figures cited are from *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook* (New York: Editor & Publisher Co., 1998).

participant. All of the interviews were digitally recorded with the subject's consent and later transcribed; pseudonyms were assigned to protect the participants' privacy. Similarly, because of the extremely close nature of the newspaper profession, in the discussion the participants are not linked with their beats or the circulation category of the newspaper for which they work unless the information is needed for context or meaning. Field notes were taken during and as soon as possible after the interviews. Two of the interviews took place by telephone; the researcher had earlier visited the newspapers for which the journalists worked and was unable to schedule in-person meetings with these two because of their schedules. Those interviews were also recorded by mutual consent.

ANALYSIS

The concepts revealed in open coding resulted in three axial categories that suggest three ways in which topic teams and their effects are viewed by topic team journalists (see Figure 4-1). The categories vary in their levels of abstraction. Team effectiveness, the first category, is the most practical of the three and deals with team members' assessments of eight aspects of their jobs, detailed below. The second axial category, synthesized as "individual ramifications," explores a range of personal experiences related to being a member of a topic team in terms of connection, challenge, and reward. The third axial category, professional dimensions, is the most abstract, dealing with intangible aspects that involve expectations, aspirations, and worth. The principal coding began with emic notations, drawing on the journalists' own words and phrases and acknowledging their viewpoints. Several team members used the word "leftovers" to describe how their topic team was composed, for example, so "leftover" was considered a charged word worth isolating. As

data accumulated and categories emerged, the coding included etic "summations" to capture additional meanings of various communications. "Leftovers," for example, is also a statement about being dismissed, and about being asked to do something that doesn't appear to make sense, although those concepts are not necessarily stated in that way by the person expressing them. As such, they were seen to be related to other expressions of worth and rationality. The following section explores properties and dimensions of the emergent open coding levels. A brief summary follows each coding point.

Team effectiveness

The emergent axial category of "team effectiveness" refers to a cumulative phenomenon encompassing eight aspects identified at the open coding level: content orientation, story generation, feedback, story play, system rationality, structure and routines, tone, and resources.

Content orientation. This is an important area; the impetus for "topic teams" was to focus staff efforts on the particular content area for which the topic team was named. Assuming that simply assigning people to work in a content area would produce the desired results would provide little in the way of insight or reliable information. However, an exploration of the dynamics, mechanics, and interpersonal forces that form an orientation offers rewarding prospects.

Sharing and related concepts, such as collaboration, brainstorming, and "bouncing ideas" off each other, were pervasive in the findings and surfaced, in one way or another, in all three of the axial categories. In terms of story generation, there were several elements:

sharing story ideas, creating stories to go with each other (sharing a story package), sharing sources, sharing a focus, and sharing knowledge.

As can be seen in Robert's comments, these elements are closely related:

> There's more story sharing, because I'll hang up the phone and say, I heard this, and the city hall reporter will hang up the phone and say so-and-so says this, and she'll get ideas on it. She'll get topics on my beat and I'll get – I'll get – I'll get tips on her beat. Or I'll notice things when I'm out in the neighborhood, and she'll say, um, so-and-so has a lot more lawn signs out.

"I had a lot more resources available to me, the ideas, people, experience," Yasmin said.

> And because they're all specialists in this area and I'm relatively new to the beat, they had a lot of historical and background knowledge and a wealth of sources. … If somebody was working on something on your beat, or if there was some project somewhere, there was just a lot more collaboration and communication.

"We share information all the time," Sam said. "About everything – both in the standups[495] but also just in an informal way whenever we're working on something. I think almost daily I'm asking somebody about this or that." Robert mentioned that his team pooled contact information for sources. "Rather than pawing through people's Roladexes we, as a team, set up sort of a source list. It has the mayor's home number, the mayor's car phone number … And those things might have been available in the past, if you knew where – which Roladex to look into … but it was much faster with the team."

In addition to focusing attention and resources on a topic, teams forced a new way of reporting by broadening the area. Beats went from cops to crime, issues instead of events, trends instead of process stories. "We restructured our crime team," Drew said,

> because the whole idea was to get away from that stuff [the type of breaking news now covered by television] and to cover more meaningful trend stories

[495] "Standup" is a newspaper term for the daily team meeting. It is named to reflect the quick and transitory nature of the meeting: no time to sit and get settled. (In reality, there was much draping of bodies across desks and leaning against walls – and indeed some sitting – in the standups attended. The standups often led to smaller work-related conferences between two or three members.)

> that have had some public policy implications and that suggested things that thoughtful readers and citizens could actually do about it, other than just be assaulted by stories of assaults day in and day out.

Lindsay spoke of broadening school coverage to education by

> thinking about children's whole lives. That, I think, opens some doors that may be ignored usually. You know, what they do after school as well as what they do in school. Where usually it's the classroom that gets the attention – well, maybe you should write about race relations at the mall or something like that. Where it's, it's not just, you know, 8 to 3.

The effect of topic teams, James said, "is to encourage reporters to go deep on a subject, um, by being with likeminded folks." Other effects included being able to come up with complementary approaches, as described by Robert:

> They can bounce ideas off of, not just an assigning editor, but if I have something that's happening out in the city, but I wonder if it's come up in city hall, and I ask the assigned writer if she's interested in this – in the topic – or not, or maybe she wants to come at it from a commentary perspective, and I may want to come at it from a straight news perspective and we talk about how we can work that together. … I think we have a little bit more chance to talk about the advisability of doing a story.

"We were able to really bounce ideas off each other," Megan said.

Summary. Participants were enthusiastic about collaborating, saying it increased the number of stories of which they were aware as well as provided extra sources and resources. Being assigned to a topic rather than a beat broadened their scope, they said, and gave them opportunities to create content packages.

Story generation. Where did the stories come from? How did they come about? In what ways might they be different from stories produced in a non-topic team environment? Without addressing these questions directly, the participants nevertheless provide insight into these areas.

Some teams were given guidance about what stories to pursue. Megan said that the topic teams at her newspaper "were told that in order for it [a story] to be newsworthy, it had to be about an issue." Some were expected to bring their stories to meetings and simply report on them. Others found their story ideas emerged through regular brainstorming with the topic team members together as a group.

Megan said the stories at her newspaper broadened once topic teams were instituted. "I don't know that this was necessarily just because of teams or because of our editor's concept of teams. It came away from more of the local-through-geography focused coverage into more issue pieces." Alena described her team as "a very self-driven group, so we usually come in – we're expected to come in prepared with story ideas of things that we're working, and we kind of tell our editor what we're working on, rather than her telling us what we should be doing." That applied to about "90 percent" of the time, she said. "There are instances where the editors will call the story, you know, off the news, if they – if there's been some event and they want us to localize it or something like that, instead of something that we didn't initiate ourselves. But for the most part, we initiate our stories."

John recalled a time when the team leader handed him a press release. His reaction was that the information it contained was not normally considered worthy of a story. His editor replied, "Just remember – that's a critical area for us to get in circulation." John said, "I thought about it. I was kind of disturbed by that." About an hour later, John stopped by the editor's desk and invited him into the hallway to talk. When there, he asked, "Do you expect me to take into account the paper's marketing goals when I decide whether something's news or not? Because if that's so, I need to know about that." The editor reportedly said, "Uh, uh, uh, no."

Nicole said her topic team sets the parameters both within the team and as a team of what is to be covered:

> The team gets together and assesses now and again, you know, well, are the beats what they should be. And we brainstorm about that as a group. And, and then with the individual reporters we certainly talk about that. You know, I like to think that every year or so we are looking at the beat mission statement and thinking about the priorities for coverage.

And in some cases, the team leader had a clear vision of the type of stories that were wanted. "My idea was to take it beyond just school reporting," Lindsay, an education team leader, said.

> It was to, you know, add up youths' lives and incorporate all that, but that might mean … We had a person devoted to youth's lives, but that was a part of their beat. But now it's evolved more into education and schools rather than youth's lives. I guess if I had a crystal ball, that's where I would like it to go, is to unite the education. You'd have to enlarge the team and I'm not sure that's a good thing. But to really package the whole child together.

Some noticed that stories are nurtured by a focused buildup of knowledge. As Sam said, "You get this expertise, this exchange of ideas going on all the time. I think that's where it's really effective." Lindsay concurred. "People really did become very knowledgeable in their fields."

The choice of who should be included in the formative stages of a story affects content as well. Part of the "team" philosophy is to solicit and include as much information as possible at the beginning of the process. And much of that is related to how one defines "story." "I like the notion that we have that we try to tell stories the best way; that it's not always a narrative," Nicole said.

Marie described the process she had taken that day as an example of how dynamics and support played into the creation of a story. She had been planning a story about a program that gave seniors vouchers for the farmer's market.

> One of my colleagues who covers health – I cover aging – says 'I really see a story here about the nutritional aspect of how important it is for seniors to have good nutrition, and how much of a struggle it is sometimes, as you get older, to get fresh vegetables and fruit, and to really make that part of your diet.' So she and I and our assistant team leader kind of batted that around a little bit.

Marie said her colleagues gave her good ideas:

> It expanded my view of the story. And now I'm going to call a nutritionist and add that to the mix, and it'll make it a fuller story and a better story for readers. And that was possible because we're colleagues, and we're right there, and we have this natural ability to have a discussion about a story, even in just a small group.

Deciding what stories to cover is the flip side of deciding what stories go uncovered. Lindsay's education team worked for a newspaper that included more than 100 school districts in its coverage area. Their solution was to allocate certain types of stories to the topic team and to assign other stories – routine coverage of school boards, for example – to stringers (part-time, per-assignment reporters). "School board meetings are not where our focus is," Lindsay said.

> We decided to carve up all of our territory by turf and by topic. The turf is the traditional geographic beats. … The topics are themes or issues or trends that we see in education – early childhood issues, with brain research, literacy, student achievement, transportation, that kind of thing. So we did both. We assigned, and everybody had a beat and a topic, which really worked well. I think that was part of the problem of some of the other teams that didn't drive, that they didn't do that. They kind of had vague beats that you couldn't really see in the paper.

Coaching, a one-on-one nurturing process for thinking through the creation of a story, is a major tenet of topic team practice, with coaching built into the topic team leader's job. Drew called the collaborative process essential in terms of having editors involved in planning, reporting, organizing, and shaping a story at the idea stage, before a draft is produced. "The team system works better than any other model that I'm aware of," Drew

said, “to encourage that kind of a coaching relationship between editors and reporters. So for someone interested in good writing, it has demonstrated its value.”

As he explained, the attention that causes the improved writing is made possible by destroying the old system and replacing it with the teams. No longer tasked with production concerns, the editor-turned-leader/coach can focus on the stories.

> And if they’re doing their job, they’re not falling into the trap that was so characteristic of the traditional model of having, you know, some assistant city editor hand out the assignment in the morning. The reporter went off on her own all day long, came back with this *fait accompli,* which is handed in to a different assistant city editor who has really no concept of what the first editor’s conception of the story was, and who just does sort of a cursory line edit which polishes a little here and buffs a little there, but which doesn’t address the core qualities of the story at all. Impossible to get very good writing or very well-developed writing under that kind of a system for the most part.

Summary of “story generation.” Some topic teams were told to stick to “issues.” Others were left to determine appropriate coverage as a team. Still others were essentially abandoned, with members left to figure out coverage for themselves without the support of a functioning topic team. The most enthusiasm was voiced for collaborative efforts and knowledgeable exchanges of ideas on a continuing basis. Topic teams were hailed as particularly good at providing coaching and benefiting the writing process. The traditional “local” or “process” stories tended to be assigned to stringers or others outside the topic team, if at all.

Feedback. Under the topic team structure, increased access to editors (as team leaders) and the proximity of colleagues appeared to facilitate both the possibility and reality

of closer working relationships, allowing for feedback that could be timely and more substantive.

Sam said:

> Before we went to the team system, it was just hard to get any time with an editor. It just seemed like the system – the editors were just swamped all the time, and like I'd get five minutes with them maybe in a day to just tell them briefly what I was doing and then, you know, they had enough of me. They just said, "Go do what you're doing. Leave me alone. I've got too much to do." That was sort of the feeling. So it was really refreshing to get to the team, where you had actually time to talk with the editors who, in time, knew a lot about what you were doing because they were just focused on that.

Envision the way it used to be, Jeff said, with editors clustered in one part of the newsroom and everyone else removed from them. Then think about the new team arrangement.

> Now all of a sudden the reporter comes back from the story and is just whipped, you know, and you're right there to talk about it. Well, what happened? What's going on? And it's not like, I'm standing here telling you [something] and in one minute I'm gonna go back to my desk. It's like – we're just here, and I'm gonna tell you all afternoon if I feel like it, but that's okay, because we get to know each other a little bit.

The feedback appeared to improve the quality of the writing. Jeff estimated a "10 percent improvement," and tied it to "a lot more first level copy editing and pre-editing" and "a lot more communication with the editors," which led to "a lot more ability to negotiate over stories after the rough draft."

The structure to encourage peer feedback was in place through regular team meetings – the morning "standup," for example. They didn't always work. For some, there was very little feedback from colleagues, as Alena noted: "Team members never read my stories before they go in [to the meeting], or very rarely, unless I ask them to … which, unfortunately, doesn't happen very often. So, you know, we're not – we don't have – I don't

know. I mean, we don't really work. It's like journalism is ultimately a kind of a lonely job. You're mostly on your own."

Feedback came from external sources as well, such as from focus groups, consultants, readers, and community visitors to the paper. Yasmin reported that her paper had monthly community panel meetings to critique the paper. E-mail summarizing the comments would later be distributed to the staff. "This is what the people on the panel liked; this is what they didn't like. This is what they wish they could've seen, and this is what we gave them." Amanda indicated that her team was untouched by market research; "I don't know of any market research. I looked – how is that connected to teams?"

The team did, however, visit with a group of district public relations representatives to assess the accuracy of a school guide and assessment of test scores that the team had prepared. It was "just to get their feedback on what worked for you as far as how we gathered the information. But we haven't ever really done a formal reader focus group," she said.

When there is market research presented to the team, some of that information can be misleading because it isn't sufficiently descriptive or analytical. Nicole said her team "would like more market research" for the "top line" information, but more development would be needed to more fully understand what was being said.

> Thirty percent of the people surveyed say they are interested in personal finance. And what does that mean? Is that my relationship with my bank? Is it my retirement account? Is it my job prospects? I think we take a look at some of those things – at topics that we think people are interested in – whether it is the statistical research or the focus groups or whatever. I wouldn't say we take that list of topics and then immediately transfer them into beats. So I think it plays a role, but not a dictatorial role.

Feedback has another component when it is used as part of the job evaluation process. Some topic teams incorporated regular feedback sessions. Marie characterized the annual

lunch sessions her team used as "what you want to make of it," but pointed out that it creates a "structured environment" for discussion of what's been done, what needs to be done, what could have been done better, and what frustrations might exist. Marie's feedback "wish" was that team leaders could regularly evaluate upper management. "There's a lot that could be said that could lead to changes that I think upper management doesn't see. I mean, they can't see because they're all looking this way around to the back of themselves."

Summary of "feedback." Increased access to editors and a close proximity to colleagues as a result of topic teams were endorsed as excellent influences on story creation. The structures and routines that allowed for the access, however, didn't always work in terms of feedback, however. Uninterested leaders and colleagues who were team members in name only frustrated those who wished to be more collaborative. Market research appeared to have little influence on the topic teams, and one participant pointed out that the data were inadequate. Appreciation was voiced for the "structured environment" that made various kinds of feedback an option.

Story play. Part of the topic team leader's job is to coordinate production and story play with the team leaders who oversee the kind of production that takes place after material leaves the topic team. This includes layout, page assignment, copy editing, and the creation of headlines and other design-oriented content. All of the interviewees alluded to or described the process. At Nicole's paper, there was a daily 10 a.m. meeting of team leaders to discuss the stories of the day and the ones they expected to "pitch" to senior editors for publication or prominent play. This follows meetings the team leaders would – or should –

have with their topic team. “Anybody can come to that 10 o’clock meeting, but reporters rarely do,” she said. “They just, you know, are kind of allergic to having to listen to what the wire reported, so that [their earlier meeting] is just a stand-up, casual meeting.” At 2:15, the team leaders meet again with designers and review the list of stories.

One of the reasons these meetings were needed in topic-oriented newsrooms is because of a fundamental shift in story generation. Before team reorganization, there was a features department producing sections of the paper devoted to feature-genre stories and presentations. When the newsroom organized around topics, genre-specific departments were dissolved. Instead, topic reporters were encouraged to report stories in the most appropriate genre, which sometimes produced a feature as opposed to a hard-news story. “You have a lot of shades of gray,” Nicole said. “I like that we look at topics to cover and less about sections. You know, if the story really is best in Accent [a less formal, “style”-type section], then it should go there. If it’s best in local news, then it should go there as opposed to just thinking that you are, say, the business section.”

Helene, however, saw the dismantling of a separate features department as a problem with the topic-team structure.

> For all the talk in the world about working across departments and bleeding from metro into features, into business, features always end up getting hurt, and almost all of them [newsrooms] go back to a free-standing feature staff, or at least some part of a free-standing feature staff, and features ends up not getting taken care of in the same way that the other parts of the newspaper do, page one, local, metro, business. … Along the way, they learn that features stories can come out to page one, and sometimes page one stories can go back to features. So that ends up, I think, over time, strengthening.

Story play often relies on a team's recognition that a story is more than words; it's a presentation that originates with an idea and incorporates a number of appropriate ways to tell the story. Nicole said:

> So if I knew the assistant has a good idea or wants to write a story, we try and make that happen. If a reporter wants to work with the Web people or get together with a graphic artist, then the two of them go out and do some reporting together and come up with something that conveys information. Ah, we try not to get as hung up, I think, about – with this is a graphic artist, and this is a reporter, and this is a news assistant, but having a responsibility as a team to produce something.

Good story play is also a validation, proving that a story is worth showing off. "I think we got pretty good play," Lindsay said, "just because sometimes we felt like we were constantly being, having the stories held because we were pretty prolific."[496] At some papers, it was clear that what went in the paper was in the hands of team leaders, but "section editors controlled the real estate, as they like to call it – the space." One paper expected to restore aspects of the city editor function. "They'll get to control some more of the shots," Lindsay predicted. "The city editor probably won't be badgering us about things every day as long as we're producing – and we are. And we're producing the right mix of stories."

Summary of "story play." There was a wide range to this category, with "story play" referring to how effectively the team leader lobbies for placement of the story in the newspaper as well as to the validation that comes from a well-placed story. Topic teams created the need to assign or "win" a story's placement since the way the story was written no longer guaranteed it a particular spot. The lack of a features department meant that the features genre was no longer "protected" and nurtured, one participant said. However, the

[496] Having a story held, while usually a frustration, was in this sense a sign that the production and top editors felt publication of the article should be delayed until a good position opened up, or that other material should go with it and would need time to create.

freedom to write in a style that best suited the story's content was obviously valued as a benefit of the topic team system.

System rationality. It is not unreasonable to assume that things that make sense or are perceived as logical would be more acceptable as routines, proposed changes, or policies. Rationality was a major consideration for these journalists. While that is an important management factor, however, the reasons cited for finding ideas rational are revealing of the journalistic culture.

One area in which many, if not all, of the journalists interviewed found common ground was in wanting their topic teams to make sense in terms of the grouping of sub-topics or beats. Michael, who was deeply disappointed by the makeup of his topic team, said, "I'm on the specialty team, which is pretty much everyone who is left over…. The team kind of wonders what the hell we're doing here, you know. It's really sad." Alena said she was on a "topics" topic team that included religion, the legal system, health, science, environment, and family issues. Amanda, on a previous paper, was on a topic team the staff called "Fruitopia." Officially named "Mind, Body and Soul," the topic team encompassed education, environment, religion, and health. "So they just all kind of sit together in it," she said. Chris, on yet a fourth paper, used one of the strongly descriptive words Michael had also chosen:

> They were kind of leftovers. … That's something you will kind of find in topic teams. You know, there will be a budgeted beat that still won't fit anywhere else. So you put them together and that's what this – yeah, this team became called – the specialty team. That team did not come together because somebody said, "Oh, let's put environment and religion together." It came together primarily because they didn't really fit anywhere else. And those reporters knew it.

"When everybody's already got a separate responsibility, it's sort of a false promise to think that everybody's suddenly gonna merge into this one wonderful creation," Jeff said. Alena suggested that these odd groupings benefited the editor most, especially when meetings were less frequent than daily. Her team met weekly. "The editor gets the most use out of getting us all together," Alena said. "She can take notes and kind of schedule when the stories are going to run and whether there's art with them or not. … Although, you know, it's interesting for me to know what my colleagues are doing, but it's not integral to what I'm doing because our subjects are so wide, so far apart."

The overall "topic" of the team needed to make sense to its members, too, some said. David was a member of the Social Justice team – "and the very name made me cringe." He said the point of the team was never fully explained. "We had the sense it was supposed to be [name of top editor]'s marquee team, because he's big on solving the world's problems, but he never really could convey to anybody just how we solve the problems."

For some, the reorganization into teams made such little sense that it was a personal affront. Jeff recalled an example from when he was a team leader. Here, he speaks of a reporter on his team. "The religion writer has always had all of the week just to cover religion, and he was a kind of anal, perfectionist guy who wrote these long, beautiful stories, and handled all the little briefs and all the crap that comes in every day with the press releases from all the different churches," Jeff recalled. The writer was a "neat" person with an organized and tidy desk. "And he's got this great fence built around his beat. And now somebody tells him you have to be on a team."

> This is not easy, and this is a middle-aged guy. This isn't a kid and he just built this beat up in the last year and a half. He worked his way up from copy editor and he's real proud of what he's done. He's getting a lot of good stuff back from the community. He feels like he's really adding meaning to the

> community, and now people are saying you've got to start helping out over here on higher education, and we should allow other people to help you out in religion. And it was like, No! No! I don't want you guys blowing my beat up. Don't want you guys talking to these ministers who I've been working for two years so they'll finally talk to the paper because they think we're all a bunch of secular animals.

"Measurement" and accountability are hallmarks of corporate team management; many papers looked for ways to quantify productivity and improvement. One of the most popular methods was known as "Continuous Improvement," or CI, and it utilized frequent measures. The number of stories produced daily or weekly by team members was one approach; tracking corrections was another; evaluating stories for types of sources or interest group appeal was yet another of many. One journalist, Chris, shuddered and recalled his experience at his previous team paper: "CI. Gosh. Still – the hair on my neck still rises when I hear the word." He indicated there were cultural problems with this approach: "CI was a corporate thing," he said, somewhat scornfully, then elaborated:

> So at one point the publisher, who's not a bad guy, sent down this memo saying that all team leaders shall post charts on a bulletin board. All teams shall have quantifiable goals and chart our progress on all of those quantifiable measures. I still have the memo. I spent the day thinking about, okay, how do I reconcile that with what an editor does? You know, the questions I ask are things like "Does the story make sense? Are we on top of this beat? Are we penetrating the veneers of this organization and writing something that's truly news? Are we making the right judgments? Are we using our time well? These are not quantifiable things. They're just not.

Then, the lack of rationality with regard to measurement enters a new dimension: it becomes an attack not only on what journalists do, but perhaps who they see themselves as being:

> They believed that the quantifiable measures themselves would become motivation. They had us go to training where they were actually showing the videos suggesting that if you put something on a chart on the wall, your workers will just work so much harder to try and – widget factoring. The blue collar widget guy says, "Boy, I'm really proud you got an 82. Let's go for an 84 next month." An idea of translating that to the journalist was lunacy. It was lunacy.

That Chris, a highly respected computer-assisted reporting "guru" completely at home with a spreadsheet, would feel this way meant it wasn't the numbers and measurements that offended him, but an approach that made no sense in his culture in terms of expectations, motivation, or creative process.

John recalled his interview days at his current paper. He asked one of the reporters, "So what's the worst thing about working here?" And the reporter said, "How much time CI takes up." With time a precious resource in newsrooms, wasting it made no sense at all.

One thing that didn't make sense under the city desk system but did make sense with topic teams, evidently, was the close involvement of the team leaders with reporters as the stories developed. "It just makes so much more sense for the person who's going to be reading the stories to be in on all the discussions and the nuances and the twists and turns that the story may take during the day," Lindsay said.

Maybe there are misunderstandings about what "teams" mean, Nicole suggested. "[An editor] used to say that it's not really a democracy. I mean, it's not one vote across the board. I mean you are supposed to arrive at 'excellence, not consensus' I think is one of those catch phrases that a lot of people use in – in describing the work of teams. And I think it is what we try to do here, too. Things aren't a popularity contest and it is not about making everybody happy, but it is about giving everybody input."

Initial training sessions, offered as topic teams were adopted, attempted to offer a rational basis for the reorganization. Marie recalled that "when we were forming the teams, there was a lot of discussion about the formation and what we were trying to do. We all had this training and all this kind of stuff. And you needed that because you – you have to have a

base by which to understand it." Helene said that when her newsroom restructured, "we all went through three days of team training. We had the manual. We had to do the readings, and we went through a formal building process where we first dismantled the newsroom and then put it back together, according to teams."

Another reaction to training was dismissive. "We had this group discussion about how to work as a team, what were our goals. But we kind of felt like, as the education team, we had already been doing a lot of this. So I guess we've always felt like we've got this down and some other team has need of it. God! I'm so elitist." There were jokes in her newsroom, she said, about the management consultant who had come in to advise staffers.

> He always had a flip chart. … He was really good as far as, like, planning and thinking about things. But they had all these different prototypes and meetings, and I think that may have been too warm and fuzzy. I don't know why you have to do all that. You can still have teams; you don't have to, you know, spend twelve months staring at your navel making sure we're all – there was kind of this feeling that, like the joke about, oh, the flipcharts, all these awful scary corporate terms. They sent out something about the alignment and empowerment one time. It was bizarre. But again, I don't see why that has to be exclusive to teams. Why can't you have a team system and still do it but, you know, cut all the bizarre lingo and the preparation?

Lindsay, whose topic team (she was a team leader) was highly successful in terms of production, quality, and spirit, was actually the initiator of her team four years earlier.

> I was looking around at the newsroom and…noticed that I was editing one education reporter and several other editors had other education reporters under their hierarchy, structure, it wasn't a team then. And it just seemed like that was, you know, right to pull together that beat. And so I proposed that we do so and, at the same time, [name of top editor] was wanting to form, to start thinking about, teams.

Lindsay wrote a proposal, and soon the editor announced an interest in forming an education team.

> So then there was a summit with people from across the newsroom pulled together for I think it was like a two-day session on planning how this team

> might form and what it might cover and how it would be different from other workgroups. You know. So it happened. That was in the beginning of summer and I guess by August we were a team. … And that was kind of tough because we were the only one in the newsroom [at that time].

Some team members were confused about what being on a team meant, she said, and the top editor "set the tone" in interpreting it. "He came along with the, you know, the management speak." The way he described it, she recalled, "it's not just a matter of being organized under one editor, it's the idea of interdependence and independence from the rest of the newsroom. … It's the idea that we all pitch in."

There was also puzzlement expressed over why journalists wouldn't take to topic teams or would abandon them. "I don't understand why newsrooms have gotten away from teams," Amanda said. "People tend to think of them as this bad thing, and – I don't know. It seems like in the corporate world people never give something long enough to work. I think it shouldn't be a choice between a team and a traditional system." Why must it be all or nothing, she asked. "I think it can really work – if you want it to." But then, she said, she really didn't know a lot about what other newspapers were doing, although she'd heard some reports of extreme techniques. "Like Wichita; apparently they went kind of far with circle teams and they had all sorts of bizarre things."

Summary of "system rationality." The system has to make sense, participants said. Topic teams organized around cohesive inner beats worked well and inspired their members, evidently, while "leftovers," teams composed of reporters whose beats were unrelated, presented a frustrating challenge. "Make-work" and what participants saw as bureaucratic or corporate-inspired policies had a deadening effect on morale and productivity, according to several accounts. Teams were unquestionably beneficial in the eyes of those for whom they

made sense. Teams were unfathomably inappropriate for newsrooms, according to one reporter, and yet other participants thought teams made sense and wished they were part of one that worked. Team members took it personally when something was required that didn't make sense.

Structure and routines. The topic team structure did two things: it brought team members closer organizationally and physically in the workplace, but it divided topic teams from each other and hindered coverage of certain types of news. The "isolation" aspect surfaced again and again in the interviews. "The downside to teams is how segmented it makes the newsroom, and the lack of communication between teams is just stunning," Marie said. "These people who literally sit almost next to you, but they're just in another pod. … We'll sometimes end up working on the same story and not knowing it." There was, she said, a "tendency to say, "Well, that's not our team who should do the story. … Everyone's responsible so no one's responsible."

The journalists also identified problems with how breaking news was handled and tied the limitations to the team system, which no longer had general assignment reporters or a city editor or centralized system to mobilize forces. "What's tougher is when it falls between teams," Marie said. In one example, a man who had been put into a psychiatric hospital until he could be properly placed acted out and the police responded. The patient was shot and killed in the ward. The officers hadn't understood the Spanish the man was speaking. Identifying which team or reporter should cover the incident as well as the broader follow-up was difficult because it cut across so many topics: crime, mental health, and public safety chief among them.

The newspaper adapted its system, having the managing editor take immediate control in such situations, later turning control back to team leaders. "You need that in a newsroom," Marie said.

> That was difficult initially because the teams were supposed to have that autonomy that we decide what's the story. Not somebody from above. But we have to have somebody who can take over, particularly in a breaking news situation. There's no other way to do it. … That was a big, big problem when we first got started, that we didn't have that structure.

Drew, who began as a team leader on one of the early topic teams and has since seen a development of the system, agreed that coordinating a team newsroom was a big challenge.

> One of the objectives in going into this was to reduce the hierarchy, to reduce the levels of management between the top editor and the reporter, and we overdid that going into it so that there were – it was – it was difficult finding somebody to step forward and take responsibility for some stories. The planning process, I think, suffered as a result of that. The idea that the team leaders were going to work among themselves as some kind of a meta-team that would take care of some of those traditional management functions, I think that was a little naïve.

The solution, he said, was to "restore a good deal of the hierarchy" to a group of managing editors who handle a good deal of planning and placement. The paper also established a coordinating team with GAs and rotating GAs and editors for the weekends. "It's sort of a rump city desk, if truth be told." Senior reporters are part of the rotation (and he named two Pulitzer winners who took part).

Helene had been part of several restructurings.

> Every newspaper I have either been part of or studied that has gone from a traditional newsroom organization to a formal team-based organization experiences, very quickly, two things. One is they stumble for quite awhile, maybe even a year, uncovering fast-breaking, traditional news. And … features get hurt. … The lack of a fast-twitch muscle ends up either, over time, people get it back … But the other thing that happens is those papers, if they want to create or retain a team-based structure, create a team that's designed to do breaking news.

The creation of topic teams brings with it two possibilities, she said.

> You run the risk of beat-based teams that do enterprise but don't have a fast-twitch off their beats, and then, a GA team that maybe moves fast but doesn't have the expertise of the beat reporters. And, of course, the goal is to get your beat reporters to both break news and scoop news off their beat, and then to also do the big enterprise. And that's the thing that I think team-based newsrooms find the hardest to achieve. I don't know if that's a structural issue or if the truth is because it's a talent or skill issue. It is the rare reporter, quite frankly, who can do breaking news, enterprise, backgrounders, explanatory pieces, profiles, and investigative pieces equally well.

Addressing the problem of news falling "between the cracks" or, more to the point, between the teams, by reinstituting general assignment reporters is not without other topic-team-related problems. One newspaper, at one point, decided that all topic reporters should consider themselves general assignment reporters as well as topic specialists. But by having created specializations by which the reporters or editors (leaders) were known, the broader issue of identification had to be addressed. "People want to have an identity," Marie said. "That's how they know if they're succeeding or failing. And if my identity is to cover aging, if I'm then pulled off to write another story one day, because we're all supposed to be GAs, I wouldn't necessarily feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing because I'm not covering aging." One attempt at a solution was to have a Coordinating Team of, essentially, GAs.

Then there's the issue of changing "back" to something that had been identified as somehow "broken." "We've been feeling, somehow, that if we have GAs at all, that we've somehow failed," Marie said. On another paper, Lindsay said, "We haven't had GAs for the past three years. But I'm not sure we'd want that kind of help anyway. We really kind of thrive on our own knowledge and being able to help each other."

A lack of communication between teams prevents the collaboration that might result in unexpected stories and insights. Amanda wished her paper had had more time to work on that aspect. "Say there was a story on lead poisoning and how it affects how kids learn," she said. "Maybe that's something where the social justice team – there used to be, like, housing and racial issues, social justice topics – maybe we should have collaborated on it."

For team-based newsrooms, meetings are a way of life. Some journalists adore and some abhor them. Sometimes they worked, and sometimes they didn't. Jeff describes a less than effective experience:

> Well, what would happen is we'd have a one-hour meeting, and it would be so – just the team, and it would be so abstract, about, we really ought to be covering this, and we really ought to be covering that, and I'm saying hey you guys, we've got twenty minutes, we've got to figure out what we're writing about for this weekend. And we're just philosophical and big and talking about teams and complaining about that, and not getting to it very fast.

Nicole also addressed productive and non-productive meetings.

> It seems that we can't get people together to talk about things without having meetings. I try to distinguish in my own head – and I encourage the staff to – is, well, are we getting work done or are we meeting to meet. … If everybody's eyes are glazing over, then – then we are probably just meeting.

The maestro system, which advocates the ten-minute meeting as a way to keep current, often "walks hand in hand with team systems," Helene noted.

> You can talk about making that a ten-minute meeting as much as you want. The truth is, you have to get everybody in the room at the same ten minutes, which is almost impossible, and then I defy six journalists to ever get in a room together and talk for ten minutes, because they've all got to, you know, express their opinion, and they've all got to be right, and next thing – next thing you know, forty-five minutes have gone by. … In a team system, you have to constantly run around and have conversations, and pull people together. Every time you do that, you stop the forward momentum of the production side of the work. And, you know, face it. We're a manufacturing industry. We produce a product every day, and when you stop the assembly line, that slows things down.

Several journalists noted that the structure – having routines that brought them together on a regular and frequent basis, working in close proximity, and being identified as a team – resulted in better work.

> We've got a lot more rigor to our editing and rewriting, and it's more focused on quality with a better understanding of what quality is.… It certainly has a lot to do with us working together. There's times we all talk about writing in our standup, where we will talk about good leads and give examples and, you know, because there's that constant effort to improve. We talk about our stories and where they're weak and where they're strong, how we could have done this better. It's gotta help if you're doing that every day.

The physical structure of the workplace, attention to which is a tenet of team management in the sense of keeping the team together, also improved communication. Robert, echoing others, said he liked

> the proximity. I mean, your being within ten or fifteen feet of the team leader means communication is relatively constant, and it's a lot of chatter back and forth. And before, I was probably from here to maybe five pillars down from – from my assigning editor. All the assigning editors sat in a clump around the city editor. They were known as assistant city editors. … That works well if you don't particularly want to be close to your assigning editor.

Summary of "structure and routines." While proximity to team members is a plus, a drawback to topic teams is the segmentation and isolation it produces between teams in the newsroom. Stories "fall between the cracks," and teams fail to collaborate with each other. Sometimes they are not aware of stories that call for more than one topic team's attention. Other times, territoriality gets in the way. Several participants said, "Everyone's responsible so no one's responsible." Several newsrooms were attempting to find mechanisms to cover breaking news. It was clear that some participants found identity and pride in covering topics and were loath to be pulled from them. There was an appreciation that team-based routines resulted in better work, but it was clear they slowed the process, too.

Tone. The interviews indicate that the psychological "tone" or affect of a team plays an important part in how well one functions within that team. The ability to get along was often cited. On the high end, Marie said: "And I think one of the things that's been incredible about having teams is just the collegiality. It's amazing, and I'm particularly very happy on the team where I am now." Sam said, "You know, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. There's a dynamic there that allows you to do more than if you just had that group of people spread around the room somewhere." And Nicole was already tuned into a team state of mind: "The notion of getting a lot of input and – and giving people a voice in what is going on and not being tremendously hierarchal and sharing the responsibilities is something that I have always embraced." Marie said that success was tied to "the extent that people feel a sense of ownership on the team."

A good spirit among team members was obvious as Nicole's team looked to fill positions on the team. "When we were interviewing job candidates, other reporters would come up and say – you know, really want to see the resume and have questions about the person and be very committed to talking with them, and not only conveying a sense of what the team did, but also trying to assess whether they would be a good match to the team."

Marie's topic team was eager to be about the team's business: "We have a good dynamic. It's very infectious. People are motivated. They work hard and, I mean, our team members are often in on the weekends or staying late because they want to do their job well. And that is – it creates a great work ethic and – that's just been great. I am very positive about it." Amanda characterized her team colleagues as "really good at rolling up their

sleeves. Even [the team leader]. If there's been a really short-staffed day, she's written stories, too, and some editors won't even do that."

But there was a "low" end, too, when some communication went too far. Michael's newsroom used team critiques as a way to increase quality, but the technique backfired by creating a negative climate. The team picks a story. "At the time, we had a very experienced team, and there are some people who feel very strongly about critiques: they hate them. So they were forced to do it and, you know, we don't like it… It's all very 'kind' because we all know the ground rules. … And some team's critique was a bloodbath because of that."

Marie recalled a team she had been on previously

> where there's been more of a negative dynamic… The team leader will come back from her ten o'clock meeting and here, you know, our team needs to get a story out on such-and-such, and there's a lot of moaning and whining rather than – rather than "How can we do this story," and, "How can we not do this story," you know? … That experience bothers me … because you want to sort of fit in. There's a kind of a conformity, you know, dynamic that happens on a team.

It affected her: "I would tend to also be negative … because that's what everybody's doing and so you all start feeding this negative dynamic. I thought [that] was really destructive. That doesn't mean we didn't do some great work on that team, but – that really bothered me."

Initial distrust of a new system marked some of the reorganizations, Megan noted:

> In the newsroom there were huge amounts of distrust about the whole concept. There was a – this is a sort of a funny place where, you know, none of that newfangled stuff, you know, get away from that stuff, and that wasn't going to come here and, you know. The funniest thing is that we expected it so much more from the people who had been here for twenty years, and I think we got it even more from the people who had been here for twenty minutes. You know, "What are you trying to *do*?"

Helene concurred.

> There's an enormous amount of skepticism among reporting and line editing staffs about the purpose of teams. Reporters, journalists, are cynics anyway. Trends and gimmicks don't do it for them. And it's very hard not to look at a team-based system and see that what they are – what one of the things it does is it tries to get more work out of fewer people. … And the big flaw in all of this is that the team system came into being at the very same time newsrooms were cutting back and reducing support, and reducing resources rather than adding them.

Some of the newly formed topic teams discovered there was a short honeymoon, where all things were possible, followed by unexpected demands. Jeff described one reaction that suggested a sense of betrayal and frustration:

> The main challenge, for all the team leaders, was that we really didn't have the autonomy we were promised. You know, they brought in a consultant who gave us the big pitch about teams and what they can do, and what this really is is a decentralization, and we're taking the power away from the top and putting it in the bottom, and everywhere that this has been applied, the first six months are hell, but after that, things start to blossom and it's great. We had about four days of sunshine before all of a sudden, in the editorial meetings, they're saying, well come on you guys, we gotta have more stories here, how come we're not getting this, how come we're not getting that? I gave your reporter this story idea, she didn't do it, how come? Well, we said, is that what teams are about? I thought the idea was that we decided what the stories were, and at least we have a chance to negotiate them. They used to use this word "storming"; have you heard of this? Storming. At least we should be storming over this; you shouldn't just tell us what to do.

And Michael, who loves being a journalist, described what happened when his topic team, the "leftovers," stopped meeting:

> The [newspaper he works for] is not a democracy. It is sort of some little monarchy. And we have our own fiefs, and we pay tribute to those above us and hopefully we'll be spared by the rampaging barbarians that are our editors, and, the corporation's still a money-making enterprise and someone has to take responsibility for decisions, and with teams, anyway, there's the illusion or the practice, hard to tell which, that they're interested in what we have – what we thought and what we had to say. And the fact that we don't meet anymore tells me they don't give a shit.

When one team worked and others didn't, there appeared to be a frustration that bordered on betrayal on the part of the successful team. Amanda said, "We would feel

sometimes we were the only group that really functions truly as a team, in terms of making decisions in collaboration. I think that's the strongest thing. … Everyone that's on the team puts in a lot of effort, there are no weak links. I'm really happy."

It would be hard to miss the sense of censorship that marked the beginnings of two of the interviews. John doublechecked about how the research would be used, and what would happen to the transcriptions, and whether his name would be used in them. After he was assured it would not, he said,

> Okay. Yeah. I'm just kind of curious as to how careful I have to be and how I phrase things. I doubt I'm going to say anything that would offend Uncle Frank [the publisher], but you can never be too careful. … Maybe you get like, uh, you know, a trade magazine article out of it sometime. And Uncle Frank'll pick it up and say, "Hey, look. They think team management's bullshit. Fire that guy."

David said that without having anonymity, "I don't imagine I could say too much. It's dangerous."

Suggestions of a "disconnect" between team leaders and upper management surfaced in the interviews. Marie characterized it as a "fear" among team leaders and tied it to a lack of feedback, support, and nurturing from the leaders' bosses.

> The team leader job is extremely difficult, extremely stressful. It's pretty big – you have a big team, and you're handling a lot of copy and a lot of people and a lot of personalities. You're getting pulled in every direction from all your team members, and then, the higher ups are making all kinds of demands, and whereas the team leaders often are nurturing of us, in terms of, you know, your goals – What are your goals? How do you see yourself? What would you like to work on? and How's your personal life, by the way? … I feel I have that support, but team leaders don't get that kind of support from anybody. … Instead, there's fear. I think some people feel intimidated, that they can't talk about things openly.

The tone, however, is highly contextual: it depends on the people creating the tone, and the nature of people who go into journalism could provide a challenge. "You can't put

out a good newspaper if you don't have a bunch of competitive pit bulls working for you," Helene said. "And then, you bring them in the newsroom and you say, 'Oh. Now. Let's all kind of sing and dance and roast weenies together.' Hard to do. Great theory, but hard to do."

Sometimes, evidently, the newsroom just stops trying – but essentially hides the fact. John, who went into great detail about the many time-wasting aspects of team-theory-sanctioned meeting styles, said that when he arrived at his paper in 1995,

> everybody was organized into teams, and we had those CI meetings. But over the years, it's – that's almost entirely disappeared. I think that's unofficial, like if someone were to tell a publisher, he'd get mad – and there are probably some editors who are big, strong advocates of it who probably still follow it, but all that other stuff dropped off. But we still have teams.

Summary of "tone." The range of characteristics contributing to "tone" suggested it wasn't an aspect to be dismissed. Negative, "toxic," attitudes were seen as contagious – as were those on the upper end of the scale. Collegiality was valued. It was suggested that a sense of "ownership" was tied to success. Not being given enough time to cohere as a team, and not being given guidance or training in how to behave as a team, were cited as serious problems. Not being taken seriously as a team produced a sense of betrayal. Criticism of teams by team members can carry negative repercussions in some newsrooms, and that chilling effect can cause duplicity. Respect for the difficulty of changing into a team player was voiced.

Resources. From a newsroom perspective, time, money, people, and leadership surfaced as resources with a strong impact on topic-team systems.

Time

The pressure to adapt rapidly to the changeover to topic teams was portrayed by some as an irritant that went beyond bounds. Jeff, for example, said that "there's a slow process of growth, I think, for teams to recognize what they need to do" and that wasn't allowed to happen.

> They (management) just wanted immediate results, and you can't blame them, because they've got somebody above them, who, their jobs are on the line. He's saying, shake it up, give me better. And he's not saying give me better in six months, he's saying give me better now. So it was kind of a vulgarized system from the start.

Helene pointed out that a balance needed to be attained, over time, between telling teams what do to – called for in some situations – and allowing the team to be self-directed.

> The truth is, those things aren't in conflict. It just takes a long time, I think, to work through the different discomforts and opinions, and ideas, that come out the other end, and most newspapers I know don't have the patience or fortitude to hang in during the bad patches so they can come out the other end. One of the things Portland has done right is it has hung on.

The time-wasting potential of meetings was evidently realized all too often. Some of those meetings were characterized as "stupid," "pretense," "useless," "gossip," and "slave to process." John, if asked, would say that most of these words apply to a team situation he experienced. In 1995, he said, his topic team met weekly.

> We had agenda-sheet reviews, and the agenda sheet would say things like, okay, who's the team leader. We had coaches for a while who were like, different managers from throughout the company who had been assigned for a year to be a coach for a team – to help people focus on team management, teamwork. And so you'd have an agenda, and it would say at the top team leader/coach. And then there was like a gatekeeper. … A gatekeeper was somebody who was supposed to keep – who was – one of the team members was assigned to be a gatekeeper each week, and their job was to make sure you stayed on the subject that you were supposed to be talking about, so you don't wander off and start talking about your vacation or whatever. And then there was an action record keeper who was supposed to keep a record of what decisions were made at the meeting. And there were forms for all this, like the

> action record keeper would have a form saying what action was decided, when it was decided, who was the owner of that action – somebody would be assigned to follow up on it, and they were the owner. And you would follow up on it again later. … The agenda would have a certain amount of minutes, too, depending on how anal the editor was. You were supposed to set aside, okay, five minutes at the beginning to make sure the agenda was okay, or even two minutes. … Depending on the team, you might go around and discuss what stories you were working on or, you know, problems the whole team was having. … Sometimes you'd assign committees… and there was always – recognition was always at the beginning of the meeting. You know: "I'd like to recognize so-and-so for doing a good job at, uh, keeping their desk clean," or they did a good story on such-and-such.

He cited a positive example, however, where the top editors and the team members disagreed on what their goals were. The discrepancy arose because the topic team lost members but the mission statement to outperform a competing newspaper had stayed the same, providing the team with unrealistic challenges. The meeting "was a mechanism, or a structure, through which we could discuss a legitimate issue for our coverage," he said.

Money

Much of the debate about journalism in the past two decades has been over just how precious financial gains are to newspapers and how that affects newsrooms and content. "This has been a very bad year," Alena said,

> and the news hole is shrinking. We've been told that stories should not be longer than 25 inches now unless, you know. There's plenty of room for longer stories, but they would have to receive kind of prior approval. You just can't write as long as you wanted to. In the past, if you had a good story and you wanted to devote 35 inches to it, go right ahead. But now, there has to be some kind of coordination with the editors saying, "OK – is this more than a 25-inch story?"[497]

[497] Newspaper stories are measured in column inches: one inch equals the amount of space taken up by words filling the width of a column of type at a depth of one inch. The column measurement is based on the width used most frequently by that newspaper. Two double-wide columns, two inches deep, would equal eight column inches. Newspaper journalists internalize this measurement and can gauge roughly how long a story needs to be by referring to inches rather than word counts.

A less direct effect of finances on personal work could be tied to a drying up of professional development funds – an issue that affects the profession as a whole, but has a particular impact on topic-based newsrooms that aim coverage beyond basic beats and profess to nurture staffers who are not only multi-talented but capable of appreciating what newsroom colleagues with different expertise can contribute to coverage.

A clearer connection to content and the team staffer's daily job sometimes existed between a topic team's "mission" and corporate profit. When John referred to "mission creep," he had something like this in mind – the company's mission to "out-local the locals" and to provide "value-added" coverage had overwhelmed the shrinking topic team, but up until that point, the goal was to "get every little story; do the value-added kind of story where we could get a bigger perspective than a small paper could do."

Number of people

The size of the newsroom had an effect on how well topic teams were able to function. Jeff said the topic teams at one paper at which he worked "were a mixed bag. It wasn't really a big enough paper to have more pure teams. When I look back on that now, I realize that that was fundamentally a problem of going to such a pure team system in a mid-size paper."[498]

There were indications that a reduced staff also played into a newsroom's acceptance (or non-acceptance) of topic teams. Helene noted:

> "If I'm sitting there … and I'm writing the headlines and the cutlines in a system in which I used to not (write them), all of a sudden, "Gee, I'm getting the same amount of money and I'm doing two other people's work." … If you create a team system and eliminate resources, it's very difficult to get people to go, "Oh. I see that this is the best thing for journalism and for creativity," as opposed to, "Oh, great. Now I'm writing the headline, too? And you're having

[498] Jeff was speaking of a newspaper with a circulation of about 90,000.

> me now taking my own pictures, and when do you just want – Why don't I just walk over and paginate the page myself?"[499]

Several examples previously cited for other reasons express the suspicion or concern that topic teams were a device to increase the workload as overall news staff declined.

Leadership

Almost everyone indicated that a strong leader is one of the most important resources a topic team could have. Marie said that a leader must be able to "articulate a clear ethic, and a clear vision of what this team is going to be about. And a clear sense of expectation. That can really help, because then people understand where the bar is." Among the other desirable qualities cited were the ability to be a defender, a nurturer, an explainer, a colleague, and a knowledgeable editor. The most prized trait, however, appeared to be the ability to take charge when needed. "You can end up with this need for consensus," Marie said, "and that, to me, is absolutely crippling, because you need somebody to take charge and say, 'We are going to do this. I don't care if you don't want to do this,' you know?"

> I don't want to be treated like that, but if that's what it comes to, I think you need somebody who's strong enough to do that. If not, then you end up spiraling into sort of, you know, unable to do much of anything because you're not … I just don't think that works. I think you need a strong team leader.

David described it as needing "a boss with some oomph to say, 'No, we're not doing this. We're doing that.'" Structurally, he said, that was unsupported because there was no

[499] Headlines and cutlines (also known as captions, these are the words that accompany a photograph or illustration on a newspaper page) are usually written by copy editors, but some team papers urged or required team members to write their own depending on how much the copy editors were included in the topic team's daily routines. For a while at *The Virginian-Pilot*, for example, reporters were required to write "suggested heds" on the stories they submitted to the copy desk for editing. The suggestions were to be used as guides by the copy editors as they wrote headlines in keeping with the design of the page and content of the story. Pagination refers to the computerized process of designing newspaper pages – also a job performed by copy editors or designers.

powerful person to whom team leaders reported. When the team asked the top editor about that, "his answers would always be very clinical." He would say:

> 'Well, you tell me a story idea and I can tell you what team and what reporter should have it, and I defy you to tell me that I can't do that.' Well, that's all well and good, and when we're in a meeting room, but as you know, in the practice of things, you have a guy on vacation, and two people working on a story about some dead kids, and then you fall back to journalism, which is catch-as-catch-can, which I've never found dishonorable. In fact, that's what I – one of the things I like about the trade.

Amanda was full of praise for her team leader. "She's great. She's really good at kind of defending us … sort of a blocker, fighting to say, okay, they've got this big project they're working on, they need the time to get this done." When Amanda came to interview for her job, the leader picked her up at the airport and, the next day, came and took her to the team office where Amanda interviewed with the team.

> They had, like, a holiday pot luck, which I was there for, too. Then after I was on the staff and we were hiring somebody, [the leader] had all the resumes, and she … put them on the table and let [us] take a look at them. So even though she would have the final say, it was a team decision on who to hire… I hadn't seen that before and I really treasure that about [the leader]. Her attitude.

David switched teams, he said, when it became obvious that the new team leader "wasn't going to get it." But he had similar bad luck with the top editor at his paper. David was used as an object lesson for getting across the editor's message:

> There was a teenage girl who was beheaded … and a 20-year-old boy and a 17-year-old boy did it. It was all very sick, and they sent me out to help out there, and a bunch of us were writing stories about it and doing research. And [the top editor] supposedly, a couple or three days later, was having one of his council sessions to impart wisdom and is said to have said that lazy reporters write about headless girls.

Summary of "resources." Topic teams might be a fine idea, but wasting team members' time, cutting back on their training, making them do the work of several employees instead of just their own, and giving them an ineffective leader are side effects that are unacceptable in terms of running a functional topic team, participants said.

Summary of the axial category of Topic Team Effectiveness. Eight areas (open-code categories) related to the effectiveness of topic teams in the newsroom (the axial code) emerged from the interviews. Four in particular are interrelated: content orientation, story generation, feedback, and story play. The participants paint a rich picture of how news is chosen and reported, but the establishment of a topic team did not guarantee any one way of choosing or covering stories. The most effective teams made sense, utilized the structures and routines that enabled collaboration and feedback, nurtured a positive dynamic, and enjoyed adequate resources.

Individual ramifications

The second axial category, individual ramifications, developed through the interrelatedness of four key aspects that surfaced in open coding: propensity, connection, challenge, and reward. This section deals with the participants' observations about the type of person who works well (or not so well) in the topic team environment, and how the topic team system affects those who work in topic teams.

Propensity. Whether it is true or not, there is a perception that certain types of people are more suited to working in topic teams than are others. "It depends on the personality a great deal," Jeff observed. Among the characteristics that were credited in the interviews to people who found teams to be smart and beneficial are

- Loving to talk and "bring up big issues" (Jeff)
- Dealing well with stress and an ability to "share stress" (Jeff)
- Being "communicative and sharing by nature" (Jeff),
- Being flexible, "willing," and probably young (Jeff)
- Being a people person (Jeff) or social person (Marie)
- Having the ability to modulate your personality (Robert)
- Having the ability to "stretch within own job titles" and adapt (Lindsay)
- Being able to share responsibilities and be comfortable with less hierarchical structure (pervasive)
- Being comfortable with close connections. "It feels like a family, and I sorta like that." (Marie)

Those not naturally suited to teams were credited with being

- Territorial; treating beats as possessions; "digging trenches" (Sam, Jeff, Nicole)
- Busy rationalizing why they were "protecting" their beat (Jeff)
- Older people who "dragged their feet a little bit more" (Jeff)
- Like a "lone wolf" (Megan).

One perspective that surfaced was that if topic teams don't work, it is not necessarily because the idea is flawed. "It's because human beings are involved, and human beings are messy," Helene said. "Human beings within newsrooms have big egos, and fragile egos. … You can't get a reporter to do the kind of work I did for years and years without having that person have a huge ego and be fairly individualistic because, by God, it was my story and my byline and I want to do it my way, and I didn't want anybody in my way. That's not like Little Miss Teamplayer."

Michael observed that there was a place in the team structure for individualists: "Some people, obviously, are probably not team players, but they're still here. They may not

do very much work, but when they do, the effects are really good. They just don't write anything, or they're just not very good, but they still help make me better."

Despite natural propensities for or against teamwork, creating and maintaining a team was seen to be a purposive activity requiring care and effort. "Teams are really dear to my heart. I'm a disciple," Lindsay said. There was a sense of indignation when she added:

> But when people say that teams failed I just think that some people didn't even try. They sat back and they said, "Well, we're just going to wait until this goes away." And they didn't put out an effort to, to organize their teams correctly or their beats correctly. They didn't structure themselves properly; they didn't adapt. People didn't stretch within their own job titles to fill the voids that they saw. They just said, Huh, that's not my job, or this is all that I can do, or boy isn't it a shame that that's not getting done. But nobody stepped in to do it. And I think that that was a shortfall.

Summary of "propensity." This open code property contributes to the axial category of personal ramifications by describing the type of person who is most likely to succeed in a topic team system.

Connection. The degree to which ties formed or contact occurred, and with whom, surfaced as a multi-dimensional factor affecting the journalists interviewed. They cited both internal and external relationships in terms of benefits and limitations.

Marie acknowledged how a close working environment can require additional care and effort to maintain the dynamic. "Some people don't want all that," she said. "They don't want to have to sign a birthday card every week for somebody … kick in money for so-and-so's baby shower and all that and would prefer to be more of a Lone Ranger, but I – I excel with having these connections with other people, so it's a good situation for me."

In the sections on story generation, routines, and feedback, there was a strong sense of approval for the collaboration made possible because by the topic team structure. Here, approval is seen to have a personal affect, providing a sense of camaraderie and comfort.

Lindsay said, "If we were to go to a city desk model where the assistant city editors are sitting around in a group, separate from the reporters… I don't think I would like going back to that model. I really like being part of the group, the brainstorming, you know, when the situation arises." Amanda pointed out that, "Some people are really good – like, they can work in their bureau by themselves and be very self sufficient. But I think just the way I am, I like to have, you know, feedback and communication with people. Just to kind of check in." Michael found that, "The team concept helps. We're competing together."

Nicole intimated that she was relieved she had connected with teammates who genuinely shared her sense of teamwork: "Well, a lot of people give voice to it, but I don't know that everyone is quite as committed as we are to having people – having the best ideas bubble up and trying to be less hierarchal and less defined by our roles. Oh certainly, that is one of the things I associate with teams."

The connective tissue among team members meant some members could have more range to their jobs than they would have had otherwise. Drew commented that, "More is made of the internal dynamic of teams and of team members supporting one another. I mean, those are real benefits." Yasmin recalled that, "Last summer, I was able to spend big chunks of time on a school reading project, a summer reading project that I really wanted to do. And because there are people to pick up the slack, I mean, it was okay. … Without that, it would have been really hard to get that time."

While some people pick up the slack, others slack off or "hide out" in what can become a cycle of deficit and compensation. "I don't think we ever confronted our issues, so to speak, you know, as a team," Marie said.

> You have to realize that there's a limit to the amount of energy that people want to have to bring to that kind of thing in the work setting. We've got a job to do. Do we also want to psychoanalyze each other and our team dynamic? And, you know, I mean, I think, for the most part, people would rather go home and have a life.

Finally, "connection" through being with each other on a frequent basis was addressed as a necessity. As Marie put it, "you can't have a team when nobody comes into the office! … [On the national listserv] I'm just always amused and confused when they start writing about, oh, you know, we have a team and we meet twice a year. Sorry. That's not a team."

Summary of "connection." Those who value being connected are likely to reap benefits from the topic team environment, but the connection requires personal investment in terms of time, caring, and professional contribution.

Challenge. Being part of a topic team can take on the aspect of a personal challenge. According to participants' observations, it can be a call for better work, a chance to work to potential, a spur to creativity in the work process, and a limitation, depending on other factors.

Sometimes the challenge is not obvious and exists more in the sense of a gravitational pull. In some cases, the same situation can challenge some team members to do better and others to stay as good as they were. Marie commented on the tendency for topic teams to meet at the center in terms of achievement and effort.

> I have seen it happen where you are more likely to go towards the middle, and so the higher achievers, you know, kind of slack more, and the low achievers, maybe they move up a little bit, but you're meeting in the middle somewhere, that isn't, you know, as much as it could be, particularly for the higher achievers. They higher achievers may feel less challenged.

Between the expectations of the team system and the different dynamics, there was an overall heightening of the energy level, which could be both good and bad. Jeff said that

> what the teams really did was they added – they turned up the stress in the room greatly. And people who could deal with the stress, people who could share the stress, I think benefited. Survived. People who couldn't handle the stress, tended to become more selfish, or dropped out, just sort of emotionally dropped out. And there weren't too many of those really, just a few.

Helping to shape a group reality was a responsibility that could stress out one person while just as likely thrilling another. "Just coming to work every day and just knowing that you control your destiny is a wonderful thing," Lindsay said. The possibility of change wasn't always an incentive. Amanda said, "There's a lot of people who have been here for a long time, and I think they're used to doing things, you know, the traditional way. I get the feeling that people weren't excited about teams at first. The people just didn't like the whole style." But Jeff was delighted by the possibility of more collaboration, finding it the "single, best thing" about teams.

Summary of "challenge." It appeared that the mere fact of being part of a topic team presented the need for personal adaptation or accommodation on the part of the members. For some, that was stressful in a negative way, and for others it was positive.

Reward. Among the expressed benefits of being a topic team member were having a place to belong, have fun, meet challenges, learn, grow, and draw on your best skills. There

was a sense that team success could also be a personal reward and a way to see and be important to a bigger picture.

Sam said that, “It just gives you a place where you sort of belong, fit in, and you’re part of a – I mean, you start seeing what your team is doing for the newspaper, not just what you’ve done for the newspaper. You kind of take credit. You feel some sort of ownership.”

Robert referred to the benefits of feedback, but took it further by tying the benefits to pleasure. “And it really helped in terms of developing stories, and talking them over before you went out, and then spending time together and then we would be talking about what each of your had and whether you needed to go out again,” he said. “It’s fun. And it – it’s got a certain amount of yeast to it, and fun, yeah.”

Again, the idea that not everyone could appreciate some of the benefits of teams surfaced. Jeff said, “I’m a people person at heart. I like to interact with people. So I was pretty comfortable in a team structure. … I’ve always thought of myself as someone who could interact in a group, and enjoy the rewards of it – enjoy the rewards of sort of sharing the triumphs as opposed to solo victories, maybe.”

Pleasure and fun are motivators and liberators, freeing people to work to high potential and even coach or teach others toward a mutual goal. Robert elaborated: “It was just an example of the sort of thing you can do when everybody’s contributing, and brainstorming and – and having – having fun. Because it drew on the – I think, the best skills of a lot of us.” There was, he said, “something of a skills transfer.”

Helene observed something similar: “[The team system] forces people to work with each other more closely in a way that does, over time, allow individuals to gain more skills or experiences that they wouldn’t have had otherwise.” She used the craft of writing headlines

as her example; in her team, each member was asked to write "suggested headlines" for the stories they wrote, adding them as an aid to the copy editors (who could then determine whether the story bore out the reporter's vision for the story and do something about it if not) and as a way to focus their own thoughts. Those who had had experience writing "heds," a surprisingly difficult task, shared what they knew with the others. Lindsay noted the joy that comes from teaching: "We really kind of thrive on our own knowledge and being able to help each other." She also spoke of the satisfaction of doing a job well, not just as an individual, but as a team.

> There was a day when, I think there was something like four reporters and everybody was working on their own stories and one reporter was pretty new and he was out on an assignment and something was hopping on his beat. And so I had to beep him, call him back in, put him on the other story. The higher ed reporter said, "What can I do?" So I gave her one of the K-12 stories; she was working on that. Something else happened and I put myself on it. You know, and there were, I think we had four reporters and five stories that day and we did them all. You know? And I just thought, yes, this really works! So that was kind of exciting and we were all very pleased with ourselves.

Summary of "reward." Some topic team members found they learned new skills and that the collaborative environment helped them produce at the top of their form. The fun of collaboration and doing a good job served as ample compensation, even a bonus, for being part of the team.

Summary of the axial code of Individual Ramifications. There are personal consequences to being a member of a topic team. Those that emerged in the interviews included being a natural or awkward "fit" simply because of one's personality; finding the team to be either a "home" or an irritation; accepting that being a member would present a challenge and require

effort; and feeling that certain joys of topic team membership were regarded as forms of reward.

Professional dimensions

The third axial category to emerge encompasses topic team members' evaluations and conceptualizations of the impact of topic teams on the profession and on their identities as professionals. The findings are subdivided into three areas: expectations, aspirations, and worth.

Expectations. Not knowing what to expect of topic teams was a strong component of the participants' experiences. Some feared the worst; others thought it would be a logical evolution in how journalism was practiced. At no time was there an implied or expressed expectation that a topic team system would not be a change. Similarly, at no time did any of the participants refer to the topic team system(s) with which they were familiar as not having caused change.

Helene, who had a natural interest in systems and was an outspoken advocate of high professional standards, commented on how journalists were asked to accept topic-team journalism at a difficult time for the industry. "And the big flaw in all of this is that the team system came into being at the very same time newsrooms were cutting back and reducing support, and reducing resources rather than adding them," she said. "Reporters, journalists, are cynics anyway. Trends and gimmicks don't do it for them. And it's very hard not to look at a team-based system and see that what they are – what one of the things it does is it tries to

get more work out of fewer people." She referred to what many in the profession referred to as a "team success story": the reorganization at the (Portland) *Oregonian* under editor Sandra Mims Rowe. "Sandy had a pretty unlimited checkbook to work from for a long time," Helene said. "She could create a team system and add resources at the same time."

And which evaluations were to be trusted? Many of the people being quoted in professional journals had a vested interest in either decrying or lauding the new approach.

> If somebody creates a team-based newsroom and is invested in it as part of who they are, what they are, it's almost impossible to get them to not promote team journalism because they're attached to it. … So I was trying to look for the, you know, look for the wizard behind the curtain in some of those cases. … Would somebody really say, "Oh, gee. We tried this and we didn't really think it worked," as opposed to, "Oh well, now we're evolving to a new stage." Well, bullshit. Sometime these things just don't work. And why can't you say, "You know, we tried this, and you know what? It didn't work."

There were strong statements about expecting change to be constant, as in Amanda's experience: "This is the fourth newspaper I've worked at so, to me, I've seen so much change at every paper that I just think, okay, whatever, go with the flow." Drew took a broader view and saw change as inevitable for the profession if it were to thrive; the topic-team system seemed a logical attempt to meet changed needs.

> The traditional city desk setup for a newsroom is designed to cover spot news in a traditional newspaper. It doesn't make any sense in the modern era. Look at our paper today. It's 99 percent enterprise, even something like a spot news event like moving the dry dock ends up having huge enterprise elements to it. So to have a city desk with a bunch of GAs, we would not be producing a terribly competitive newspaper, particularly in a market like this. There's not a whole lot of spot news in a town like this. We have to go out and find it. If you look at what was in our paper this morning, a huge amount of it was social trends.

"The whole media ecology has changed out there," he summarized. "It's a different niche."

As Jeff saw the reorganization at his newspaper leading to a strengthening of professional standards, he seemed relieved, or at least in tune with the changes:

> It became clear that the purposes were to improve performance and to become more flexible as a staff and as a newsroom, as a news editorial area. And I think improving performance breaks down into subcategories. One is to do greater things. Journalistically. The other one, I think just as important, was to lift the performance of those people in the room who were lagging. … Either you should make them not weak, or you should get rid of them, because we're not going to have weak people if we can't afford it, it's not good, it doesn't make for good news. We're not being as good a paper as we can be if we have people we have to apologize for.

There was also a sense that the business or corporate influence was accompanying the reorganizations, and there was recognition that this was a difference – one that would likely put more responsibility for professional values on the staff. "Let's face it," Helene said. "A lot of smaller papers, or some of the chain papers, the people who are in top management are there increasingly because they're good budget managers. They're very good bureaucrats, and I don't say that as a 'dis,' but that's very different than being a conceptual, visual leader." Jeff, referring to the newspaper's first publisher (there had been general managers, but this was a new position), observed that, "Suddenly someone from outside the newsroom has administrative control over the newsroom."

Anxiety over how teams would affect individual control over one's work surfaced in several ways, from bylines to the ability to name one's stories. "A lot of people think that if you're on a team, it means you're basically going to write double- and triple-byline stories, which is just plain silly," Marie observed with the benefit of hindsight. As far as being able to determine her own work, she described an option where she was able to detach somewhat from the topic team to pursue a story, but also attested to autonomy while fully a member of the team:

> I've had some success with high-profile beats and all of that, but I'm able to call my shots in the way that I really like. I was just … really away from the team for about four months to work on this project, and now that I'm on a real enterprise beat, I'm able to say, 'Here's what I'd like to do.'… I do feel that I have autonomy if I want it. I don't know if everybody would feel that way.

John also felt he had autonomy: "I do, but that's because I've been here a while. I think it probably varies from reporter to reporter within teams."

One of the reasons for going to topic teams and a team system overall was reportedly to give the topic team reporters far more say in what they produced and reported, although within a focused topic range. Reports from the journalists show varying degrees of compliance with that expectation. "The idea that they [topic teams] were self-managed little entities, I think, maybe is – is overblown," Drew said. Lindsay credited the newspaper's highest management with "protecting" the teams' ability to function professionally:

> [The top editor] really focused on this idea that through our knowledge and expertise we should decide what gets covered and what doesn't get covered. And that seems so much more satisfying than having, you know, a city editor walk in and say that morning, "Well, this is what happened at my kid's school so that's what I want you to write about." So, you know, from that angle it really was professionally satisfying.

Alena covers religion. Occasionally, the reporter said, editors at that reporter's paper said they would like the beat to include ethics.

> But I've never really gotten any kind of quota or story ideas that are given to me, so I really do operate with a large degree of autonomy. … I think they just think it's an area worth exploring that might allow people to connect with the news more. … It's something that they think will be – it'll generate the kinds of stories that people will want to read and, um, that maybe we aren't covering.

Summary of "expectations." Participants' ideas of what to expect from topic teams was complicated by the novelty of the system; by not knowing whose evaluations to

trust; and by their own biases with regard to teams and journalism. What they did expect was that reorganization would mean change – a concept they had come to expect within the industry. How this would affect the profession or their working lives was not something the participants professed to know.

Aspirations. "Doing good" and "making a difference" are two phrases from the interviews that help summarize why the participants chose journalism as a profession. Topic teams have both helped and hindered these aspirations.

Michael said it would be nine years that Labor Day, a few months away, since he became a journalist. "And it's just a great gig," he said. "I mean, you write all the time and publish three times a week and, um, you know, get to do good." What he likes about teams is the collaboration, support, and brainstorming. His team let him down, he said, in not providing enough of it. And the newspaper fell flat by treating his subject as if it weren't important.

Nicole, who is happy with topic teams, feels they allow her to do what attracted her to journalism.

> I was one of those kids who always liked to write and read and my family traveled a lot. We moved about every two or three years. And so I was always writing letters to relatives or describing to them new places. And that just seemed like a lot of fun. And so as I grew older, I guess I thought going out and seeing different things and meeting new people and writing about them and explaining concepts to other people was pretty nifty and, ah, so I became a journalist. … I wanted to make a difference and I wanted to help people do their best. I think as a reporter, particularly, and this is going to sound so corny, but I – it seems that people struggled and that we didn't always bring out the best in people and that we didn't listen to people. … That was one of the things that drew me into editing. To try and help people blossom. In that sense, I have more or less success depending on the day or the week.

Amanda, as a child, felt

> [i]t would be really cool to get paid for, to like, have people tell their stories. … My mom always said I loved to ask questions, and I always wanted to be a writer, and I had an internship with the [name of large paper] Washington bureau in college that just made me decide. It was so much fun because you're learning something new, you always get to meet people. The thing that's so cool, too, is that you do something and, like, your work has a direct impact. And then your name is in the paper the next day and … people will make decisions based on what you'll write in the paper. So it's a lot of responsibility. That's kind of cool. I can't imagine doing anything else. I love it.

She says she feels "like I have a discussion with the community, that I give them information that helps them understand their world." What she likes about teams is that "people blossom" and everyone is heard from.

Marie is "particularly very happy on the team," and she, too, is idealistic.

> This is going to sound sort of over the top – Pollyanna – which is sort of what I'm accused of at times. But, I was sitting there [at an annual retreat for the topic team] looking out, and here's this, you know, team of really committed journalists. We're having this incredible brainstorming session and I'm thinking this is the height of journalism. I can't imagine being anywhere else. This is so great. And that – I mean, I don't think it's just teams that does that, but it certainly does create a cohesive unit that you identify with and – and I think that can be really cool. … This profession is a real gift.

John has had bad experiences with teams and found the team system produced too much dogma. He entered journalism because he was conscientious, he said, and admired that journalists told it straight – an endeavor contradicted by the "dogma." In referring to a previous newspaper, also organized into topic teams, he said,

> That was a very unhappy time for me because I came to feel like the things I valued were not the same things that the management valued. And it became almost a guerilla war to get things I thought were important in the paper and not have my time wasted on things that I didn't think were important. And it also made me feel sort of cheapened and foolish, especially as a young reporter. Like I somehow was resisting the wisdom of these older, wiser editors.

David said he really likes the "catch as catch can" aspect of journalism – being able to manage shifting news with whatever you've got in the way of resources and people. Teams aren't practical enough to allow for "reality"; he thinks they're way too regimented.

Summary of "aspirations." For the most part, topic teams have allowed the participants to continue doing what they came into journalism to do: write, edit, inform others, and do good. Disappointments in this area were tied to value conflicts with management.

Worth. Several dimensions emerged pertaining to the concept of "worth." One aspect weighed the type of journalism being produced in the topic team system and whether it was "worthy" of the participants' efforts and aspirations. Recognition from colleagues in the profession boosted the participants' self-worth and made their efforts more worthwhile. At the same time, the feedback boosted their sense of connection with the profession. Interwoven with some of the reactions, there's an expressed sense that newspaper management isn't living up to the profession's ideals, which threatens to diminish the respect or value (worth) of the profession and, perhaps, the participants' jobs. Finally, a strong argument emerged for respecting each newsroom's culture and makeup, and devising a team system tailored for that environment and purpose.

Clearly, in Drew's estimation, the reorganization to topic teams was beneficial:

> The old functions that were performed out of a structure like a city desk are what local television news is doing now, this cheap, cheesy lineup of crime and any shots they can get from the helicopter of a traffic tie-up or a hostage-taking or something like that. And we've surrendered the field on that stuff. We don't even want that stuff anymore. … My big thing is writing, and I think the team system is the best system we've come up with yet for encouraging good writing at a newspaper. And part of the reason is simply the fact that there's a good editor-to-writer ratio. I mean, the ideal team around

> here is eight reporters, a team leader, and an assistant team leader. And maybe some support people.

Lindsay concurred about the beneficial aspect: "I hope that in whatever I do in the future that I would really try to replicate kind of what we've had in this team."

When told that journalists at other newspapers had spoken of her team with praise, Amanda replied, with obvious joy, "Wow! People know about us." That team members were connected to reporters on other newspapers by topical online associations was a strong finding throughout the interviews. "It's gotten to the point where if you're not on the listserv covering education, you're really at a disadvantage because it's so helpful," Sam said. "I think almost all the major reporters that cover education in the country are on that." Lindsay said, "We were all on the education writers listserv so we were tuned in to what was going on nationwide, and we really do feel like we've got a handle on things." Yasmin reported that one member of the team would post team members' stories to a Web site for a national organization that posted stories of the day. "So we would get national feedback on our stories," she said. "Quite a bit of feedback. And it's good. I mean, that's why, you know, you hope someone's reading your stuff."

Amanda identified a group called the Education Writer's Association and NICAR,[500] a group that held conferences she attended. Echoing Yasmin, she said, "There's also a Web site called *Education Week*, and they have a Web site where they post stories from around the country. So we'll check to see if we got stories on there. … [It's the] top stories from around the country."

Three other topic-based listservs were mentioned as being particularly busy and useful. One was organized around religion, another other focused on environmental issues,

[500] The National Institute for Computer Assisted Reporting.

and the third was for business writers.[501] "With the Internet, people are more aware of what other papers are doing," Amanda said.

> You go online and read someone else; you can check on [information and angles for your own stories]. … People are always asking, how does your paper do this? Or, I have some ethical dilemma, how would you handle that? And sometimes people get annoying, and they ask for too much help. They should just be doing their job.

Because of resource constraints, in-person communication at conferences, in contrast to online activity, is less than it once was. Amanda, speaking of her newspaper's professional development budget, said

> It's been frozen this year. I think every paper is going through cuts on it. …There's a group called Education Writer's Association, a national group. A bunch of us went to Chicago two years ago, and then there was only money to send one person last year. This year, we couldn't send anybody. But I've gotten to go to NICAR – National Institute for Computer Assisted Reporting – last year and the year before that. I've been invited to speak at a couple of the conferences, so they've let me go to that. In the past, they've been really supportive.

John also spoke of budgetary constraints, but in a way that expressed his displeasure in the conduct of management, which was not following "team" procedure (or adhering to ethical standards) for filling a vacancy on a topic team. "We have a hiring freeze," he said, but

> [a]pparently, there are ways around it. … I had an editor yesterday tell me he was going to try to hire an African-American police reporter because you could get around the hiring freeze if you hire somebody black. Like, the last two times we tried hiring somebody solely because of their race, we ended up kicking both of them out the door, which is true. I mean, I'm not saying that they weren't trying to seek out good candidates. … I've always been distrustful of authority.

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[501] Some of the topic-based organizations active online during the time of this study are the Society of American Business Editors and Writers (Business Beat); Criminal Justice Journalists (CCR-l for cops and crime reporters); Education Writers of America (HigherEd-L for higher education and EWA-L for K-12 school coverage); Society of Environmental Journalists (daily digest of news stories at SEJ-Beat); National Association of Science Writers; Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families (KidBeat); Foreign Correspondents (Correx-l); Religion Newswriters Association (JREL-L); and the National Institute for Computer Assisted Reporting (Census-l for census and mapping issues and NICAR-l).

John's larger point was that management that did not serve or follow journalistic ideals could harm the profession, and that details matter – even if you're talking about management jargon for team practices. "If you start with – if you're changing the names of – of people's jobs and teams and stuff like that, you know, does that undermine our skepticism of when the government does it or when business does it? Or worse, are we just being hypocritical?" he asked. Nicole had given some thought to this as well and saw less harm resulting from the nomenclature: "The way the papers operate matters a whole lot more than the names."

Mission statements, associated with team management and famous with regard to several topic teams, evoked a variety of responses, from dismissal to approval. Marie said, "We don't spend a lot of time talking about how to do this [work as a topic team]. We try to just do it – but that's really the dynamic of our team. In past teams, we've spent a whole lot more time, literally, crafting a mission statement out. I couldn't tell you what the mission statements were. I really couldn't." More important and worthwhile, she said, is a clear sense of what you want to do, a "sense of vision."

Are topic teams worth preserving or advocating for in the profession? Helene offered her viewpoint, one that was not contradicted by any of the other participants' views:

> You need to figure out what a newsroom is, and what kind of mindset it has. And then, take the best elements of both the traditional and a team-based system and create your own system within each newsroom, that works for that newsroom. … What kind of leadership do you have? What kind of talent do you have? If you have a newsroom full of really young, green people, you have to run it differently than if you have a newsroom full of 45-year-old veterans who are getting burned out. … I don't know if people don't get it or if they're being ordered to do something from on top because somebody really has decided it works, and they want a cookie-cutter approach. I think you need to take newsrooms and figure out – each newsroom has its own culture.

Summary of "worth." There were strong beliefs that the value or worth of journalism was set in the day-to-day actions of journalists and management and that management was not performing to high enough standards. Current management was generally seen as detrimental to professional values. Topic teams were not seen as "good" or "bad," but as vehicles for professional work. They were appropriate for some newsrooms and not others, and in some but not all contexts. Participants' professional worth was seen to be enhanced by contact and collaboration with like-minded colleagues.

Summary of the axial code of Professional Dimensions. The elements of this axial code – expectations, aspirations, and reward – have in common an unstated but sure acceptance of journalism as a profession and worthwhile endeavor. Topic teams are seen to have furthered not only the participants' interest in being part of that profession, but have led to a strengthening of professional bonds regardless of whether the topic team member was part of a successful or unsuccessful topic team. Networks formed along topical lines appear to unite topic team journalists with colleagues in both topic team and non-team newsrooms. Communication within these networks often furthers members' understanding of how journalistic challenges have been met; acquaints them with the limitations and opportunities of various techniques; and offers a venue for professional validation and recognition. Top management was seen to be out of accord with professional values.

Summary of axial and open coding

The three axial categories – Topic Team Effectiveness, Individual Ramifications, and Professional Dimensions – emerged from aspects of the participants' interviews that were at

the open level of coding. Those categories are given depth and breadth by other aspects of the interview that identified or suggested properties and dimensions, thereby creating a range of perspectives or experiences.

Eight of the subject areas discussed by the participants related to a broader category of "Topic Team Effectiveness." Looked at another way, the effectiveness of the participants' topic teams appears to be qualitatively assessed by participants' consideration of eight criteria. These are: content orientation, story generation, feedback, story play, system rationality, structure and routines, tone, and resources (that include time, money, number of people, and leadership).

The axial category of Individual Ramifications is shaped by four open-code categories: propensity, connection, challenge, and reward. All of these qualities shape the individual's experience with topic teams and are derived from the participants' observations.

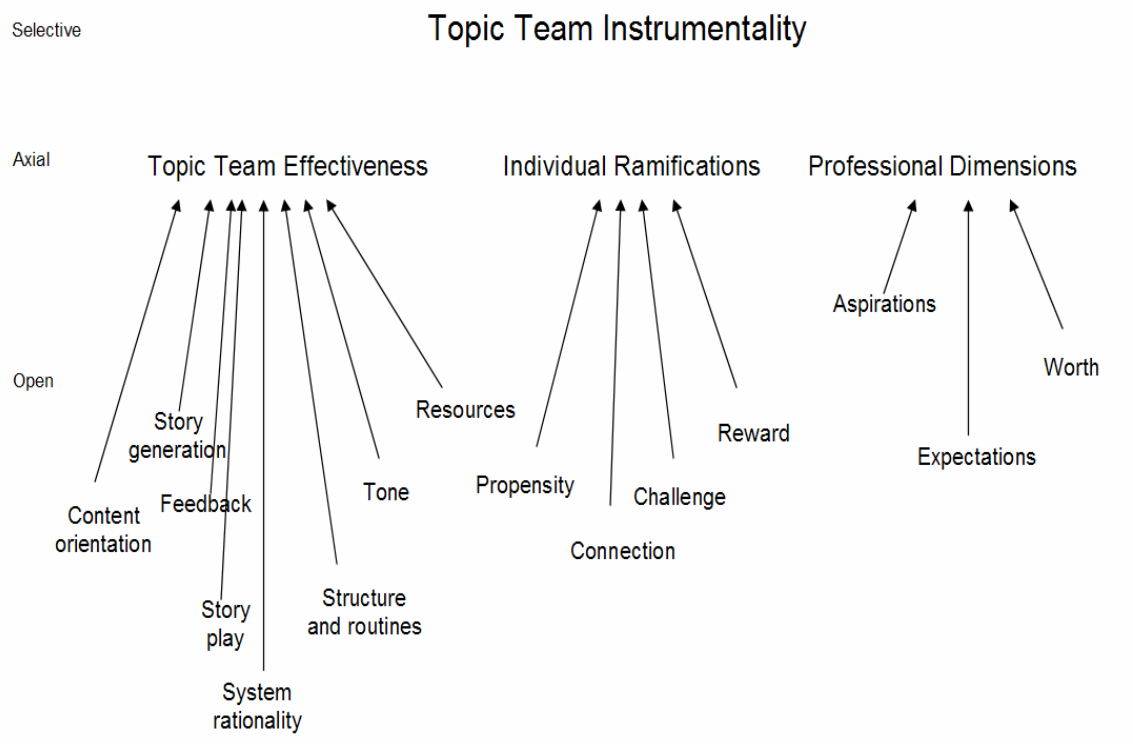
The axial category of Professional Dimensions is shaped by three open-code categories: expectations, aspirations, and worth. These are multi-dimensional assessments that encompass such abstractions as dreams, goals, judgments, credibility, and validation, all having to do with the journalist's relationship with other journalists in terms of forging professional identities and protecting common ideals and opportunities.

The participants' involvement with topic teams emerged as a three-fold study. They assessed the effectiveness of the new system against systems they knew in terms of the requirements of their jobs. They probed the topic team system to find what it could offer them as individuals, and then to see how it affected their professional lives and the profession itself. Nothing unilateral emerged from the different interviews other than a firm support of journalism as a worthwhile endeavor. The wide range of expressed assessments and

synthesized experiences allows for consideration of a continuum against which topic teams can be measured.

Chapter 5 discusses how the selective code emerged and ties the findings from Chapter 4 to the research questions and literature review; discusses limitations of the study; proposes a model of topic team instrumentality that emerged from the selective coding; discusses implications of the study for management, the profession, and educators; and suggests future research as a result of the findings.

FIGURE 4-1


Selective
Topic Team Instrumentality
Axial
Topic Team Effectiveness
Individual Ramifications
Professional Dimensions
Open
Content orientation
Story generation
Feedback
Story play
System rationality
Structure and routines
Tone
Resources
Propensity
Connection
Challenge
Reward
Aspirations
Expectations
Worth

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter synthesizes the results of eighteen in-depth interviews that were guided by three research questions. Those queries explored, from the viewpoints of topic team members, how topic teams changed those members' experiences in three areas. The first addressed the topic team members' work environment. The second focused on their views on the relationship between business, management and journalism; the third explored their perceptions of how the topic team system affected them as professionals and how it related to the profession as a whole.

In the coding and analysis process, the results of the in-depth interviews were examined at close range, deriving meaning from words, phrases, sentences, and context. The results yielded a nuanced and dimensional look at the targeted three areas. In this chapter, the findings are related to the research questions and the literature to find confirmation, disputation, and new contributions to the discourse.

Selective coding, providing a unifying category of topic team instrumentality, emerges from the findings and the discussion. A model of topic team instrumentality is proposed as a result. The model emerged after noting that the axial categories of team effectiveness, personal ramifications, and professional dimensions belonged to an overarching selective category of instrumentality that could be used to gain insight into the topic team process and provide a theoretical basis for explaining some aspects of topic team

behavior and viability. The final sections explore implications for management, the profession, and educators; offer suggestions for future research; and provide a conclusion.

Limitations of the study

As a qualitative study with a limited number of participants, the results are representative but not generalizable. As is appropriate with qualitative work, the inquiry sought to identify a wide range of experiences and describe them in multidimensional detail through viewing their component parts. It is hoped that the saturation experienced by the researcher provided sufficient range, but it is always possible that cases exist beyond the range described. The qualitative nature of the work also prevents one from determining a "typical" topic team, or gauging which types of topic teams are more prevalent or rare.

The data were gathered during the spring and summer of 2001, which means that the findings are contextualized by that time frame and may not have direct applicability to current newsroom conditions. Nevertheless, the interviews draw on an experience pool that reflects at least a decade of newsroom experience with topic team consideration and adoption, and the participants' experience encompasses membership on topic teams of varied stages of development and duration.

Further development of the study should focus on whole topic teams and feature in-depth interviews with each of the members. This would provide more basis in determining common realities and perceptions, although the perceived (if not actual) loss of privacy assumed through the obvious identification of interview subjects (everybody would know what was going on) could limit the freedom participants felt in the current study.

That very freedom could also be viewed as a limitation: the authenticity and truthfulness of the participants' statements are taken largely on trust. One might argue, however, that actuality is not an issue. "It is what we think the world is like, not what it is really like, that determines our behavior," Kenneth Boulding wrote, and the observation holds in this situation.[502] Authenticity, or the wholesomeness of the interview in terms of plausibility, consistency, and clarity, was assessed for each interview and was judged to be of high quality.

A return to case study methodology would also be useful. This study suggests parameters of topic team experience and is valuable for its wide and representative reach. It cannot elicit the type of knowledge that would be gleaned from study of a more concentrated target – one topic team, for example – and the results are likely to complement each other while expanding understanding overall.

One final limitation is that the study restricted itself to the print medium, newspapers in particular. It was, however, the creation of a news product and the dynamics surrounding that creation that were of interest. Despite these limitations, the study contributes to our understanding of topic teams in the newsroom, as follows.

Relating the findings to the research questions and literature

In this section, the initial three multi-part guiding questions are revisited and discussed, drawing on the findings and the literature review. The "responses" are organized by subject area and follow the order in which the questions were presented in chapter 2.

[502] Kenneth E. Boulding, "National Images and International Systems," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3, no. 2 (1959): 120-131.

Work environment

To review, the questions for this focus were as follows:

- How do topic team members perceive their current work environment as being different from a non-team newsroom?
- How do topic team members see the current newsroom structure as being beneficial or harmful in terms of their producing content for publication or doing their jobs?
- What attributes do topic team members perceive as contributing to both successful and unsuccessful topic teams in terms of working together?
- What do topic team members like or dislike about working as part of a topic team?

The unifying theme to participants' answers in this area was that change had occurred and that collaboration and communication were stressed, but not always successfully. The lack of an oversight function, such as the city editor once performed, was probably the greatest change and resulted in four major things: closer working relationships between reporters and the assignment editors, now known as team leaders; closer working relationships among colleagues within the topic team; isolation and separation between topic teams; and a reduced and unclear capacity for covering breaking news and stories that "fell between the cracks."

The great benefit of the topic team system was the collaborative potential, according to the participants. Team members reported greater rigor to their work, access to more resources, synergistic feedback, encouragement for brainstorming (which they found to be fun and rewarding), team identification, and high spirits as a result. Also heralded was the ability to "write across the sections" – to report or tell the story in the most appropriate writing format without having to restrict oneself to having the story published in a preordained space. Negative aspects cited included over-rigidity, which is ironic in the face

of teams' touted flexibility, and the actual loss of collaborative opportunity for stories that involved more than one team's topic area.

Most of the participants were pleased with the scope of their topical beats, which were targeted on issues and broad themes rather than breaking news, although that was also of interest. Those who valued traditional news, based on geographical beats, found topic teams too restrictive on the one hand (they didn't allow the flexibility needed for spontaneous reporting), too far removed from hard news subjects, and over-planned by too many people.

Working together is natural when the colleagues with whom one is "teamed" cover beats that are related to other beats within the "topic." There was a clear need for team-related activities, as well as the team itself, to make sense. The physical organization of workspace was also cited as a help or hindrance to topic team function, with proximity encouraging feedback, collaboration, or just quick sharing of resources. Regular meetings, if handled well and kept on-target, were valued as a communication tool and a venue for solving problems and airing concerns. Personal characteristics that favored pleasant working conditions were valued, and they were taken into consideration when the team looked to bring on new members.

The positives appeared to outweigh the negatives in terms of what participants liked about topic teams. In particular, there was overwhelming praise for the increased access reporters had to assigning editors; the opportunity for productive feedback; the collegial approach that seemed to develop in terms of helping each other for the team's benefit; and the shared emphasis on improving skills and work quality.

Russial also found a confusion over how stories would be covered in his study of the *Oregonian*,[503] and Neuzil, Hansen, and Ward reported similar problems at the *Star Tribune* and the *Pioneer Press*.[504] Their findings of politicization of the process, a slowing of the process, and a need to police team members was somewhat echoed in the study, but to nowhere near the same degree. The current study does not support their findings that teams might be inappropriate structures for newsrooms, but several reasons might explain the discrepancy. For one thing, the team members interviewed in the current study have been part of established teams and the two other studies referred to were of recent team systems. Nor were those studies solely from the viewpoint of those working as topic team members.

The Neuzil et al. research determined that fifty-four percent of those surveyed felt news quality had declined since the inception of topic teams – a finding completely at variance with the implications of the current study. Similarly, the Neuzil et al. work concluded that topic teams might be inherently flawed for use by professionals or others involved in creative work. This finding is also at variance with the current study, in which participants extolled the virtues of topic teams for providing a venue for brainstorms and other creative thinking. Far more resonant is the Schierhorn et al. survey in which editors said quality had increased since topic teams were adopted.[505]

The need for clarity, logic, and appropriateness that emerged in the study finds an interesting echo in Gade and Perry's work, particularly with regard to soured high hopes after

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[503] John T. Russial, "Topic-Team Performance: A Content Study," *Newspaper Research Journal* 18, nos. 1, 2 (Winter-Spring 1997): 126-145.

[504] Mark Neuzil, Kathleen Hansen, and Jean Ward, "Twin Cities Journalists' Assessment of Topic Teams," *Newspaper Research Journal* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 2-16.

[505] Ann B. Schierhorn, Fred F. Endres, and Carl Schierhorn, "Newsroom Teams Enjoy Rapid Growth in the 1990s," *Newspaper Research Journal* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 2-15.

the staff at the *Post-Dispatch* found itself confused by the editor's leadership and subsequently drove both the editor and topic teams from its newsroom.[506]

McGinn and Thompson reported the creation of "fiefdoms" in their "*Range*" case study,[507] supporting what has been found in the majority of the studies addressing topic teams, including this one.

Since this study is methodologically new with regard to topic-team research, it is difficult to find meaningful parallels between it and previous studies. The current study explores topic teams solely from the vantage of topic team members. It involves participants from various newspapers in a qualitative, in-depth manner, which adds to our understanding of the phenomenon. It is the first to purposefully invite comment and insight into the working conditions and team dynamics of working topic team members from established teams on newspapers differentiated by geography, circulation, ownership, and stature.

Relationship of business, management, and journalism

The research questions guiding this aspect of the study were as follows:

- How do topic team journalists perceive the topic team in terms of serving business and journalism goals and values?
- From the perspective of a topic team member, what are the opportunities, possibilities, and limitations of a topic team system?

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[506] Earnest Perry and Peter J. Gade, "When Ideas and Reality Collide: A Four-Year Case Study of Editor Cole Campbell's Organizational Change Initiatives at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch," paper presented to the Media Management and Economics Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Phoenix, Ariz., 10 March 2000. See also, Gade and Perry, "Changing the Newsroom Culture: A Four-Year Case Study of Organizational Development at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80 no. 2 (Summer 2003): 327. See also, Peter J. Gade, "Turbulent Times: A Study of Change in the Newspaper Industry," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1999). See also, Peter J. Gade, "Newspapers and Organizational Development: Management and Journalist Perceptions of Newsroom Cultural Change," *Journalism and Communication Monographs* 6, vol. 1 (2004).

[507] Tracy A. Thompson and Kathleen McGinn (formerly Valley), "The Range (A)" and "The Range (B)," *Harvard Business School Working Papers 9-801-330 and 9-801-331* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, rev. 29 March 2001).

The participants report a rift between professional and management goals, with the fault line running along business mandates. And while providing reader-friendly material targeted at specific demographics was an integral part of the topic team conception, there was remarkably little mention of that aspect in the interviews. Nor was there any suggestion that the participants were producing or planning to produce anything other than high-quality journalism. If anything, the topic team was seen to serve journalistic goals and values to a greater extent than business goals, which were not in evidence. One participant made a point of recounting how he had shot down the mere suggestion that he write a story merely to lure in a targeted readership area.

The topic team, at its best, was portrayed as a vehicle for improving skills, performing good work, interacting with peers, and providing common ground for discussions with colleagues at other papers. The system, if organized only around topic teams, is severely limited in the type of news it can cover, however. Suggestions that emerged in the interviews were strong on developing mixed newsrooms in which there were some topic teams but also groups of people dedicated to other forms of writing or reporting, such as breaking news, general assignment, features, or in-depth reporting.

Despite the rift, a hypersensitivity and antagonism of newsroom journalists toward business practices, as found in Underwood and Stamm's research,[508] was not mirrored by this study. Business practices were castigated when they wasted time or got in the way of practicing journalism, as with Continuous Improvement, but a wholesale denigration was not

[508] Doug Underwood and Keith Stamm, "Balancing Business with Journalism: Newsroom Policies at 12 West Coast Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 301-317. Also, Doug Underwood, "When MBAs Rule the Newsroom," *Columbia Journalism Review* 26, no. 6, (1988). Also, Doug Underwood, *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom: How the Marketers and Managers are Reshaping Today's Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

evident. The participants did not echo Demers' findings that corporate management tended to put more emphasis on quality, although this variable is always problematic since "quality" is a highly subjective term and difficult to define. There might be more resonance with Beam's conclusions that managers have come to define quality in market-oriented terms,[509] which suggests that staff journalists do not share that definition. Coulson's 1989 study[510] found such a dichotomy of viewpoint, as well.

The negative aspects of market orientation reported to and by McManus[511] found supporting parallels in this study. There was a clear chilling effect on voicing opposition to teams in at least two newsrooms. The time needed to develop the topic teams and their beats was constrained by budgetary concerns.

McManus, Picard,[512] and others maintain that newspapers in the current environment are driven by economic concerns. Change will come about, Picard asserts, only through pressure from journalists and the public. If so, it may be that the beginnings of a professionally based stand has been strengthened by the bonds formed inadvertantly by topic teams and associations formed along topical interests.

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[509] Randal A. Beam, "Organizational Goals and Priorities and the Job Satisfaction of U. S. journalists." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 169-185. See also, Beam, "The Characteristics of Market-Oriented Daily Newspapers," paper presented to the Newspaper Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, annual convention, Chicago, July-August 1997. Later published as "What It Means to be a Market-Oriented Newspaper," *Newspaper Research Journal* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1998). Beam analyzed the responses of 406 senior editors from 183 newspapers (an organizational response rate of 85 percent).

[510] David C. Coulson, "Editors' Attitudes and Behavior toward Journalism Awards," *Journalism Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 143-147.

[511] John H. McManus, *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994).

[512] Robert G. Picard, "Commercialism and Newspaper Quality," *Newspaper Research Journal* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 54-65.

Journalistic routines and professional values

The questions asked in this context were as follows:

- How do topic team journalists perceive the team system as having created, eliminated, or changed long-standing elements of newspaper reporting and editing?
- How do topic team journalists perceive the creation of topic teams as having affected news content?
- How do topic team journalists perceive the role played by professional values, and what are some ways in which those values are defined?

In the 1950s, Breed wrote of the social control that governed newsrooms. Reward, at that time, came from within the organization, not from readers, sources, or colleagues within the profession.[513] Perhaps one of the profound changes wrought by topic teams is that reward now comes primarily from a tight group of like-minded individuals who are one's teammates.

In addition to the absence of the city editor function and the general assignment reporter, which has been discussed at length, there is a perceived lessening of job and advancement opportunity arising from the flattened structures that accompany topic team systems. Nevertheless, as topic teams attain high standings and recognition on their own, as is evident in the interviews, there may be additional professional opportunities on a broader landscape. With regard to the acts of reporting and editing, however, topic teams have indeed created more autonomy and control over the selection and development of the story, essentially eliminating the daily assignments from an editor. Topic team members say the system has also made inroads on the type of story that is produced in a vacuum only to be sprung on a copy desk or assigning editor at the last minute. Within the topic team system,

[513] Warren Breed, "Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis," *Social Forces* 33 (1955): 326-335. See also Breed, *The Newspaperman, News and Society* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), a publication that derived from his dissertation for Columbia University in political science in 1952.

stories are far more likely to be coached through the reporting, writing, and presentation process, which should allow for a higher quality production.

The participants defined their professional values in an intensely "public service" way. They wished to "do good" and offer valuable information. As a lone journalist, the battle for such concerns is more difficult, they implied, than it is when there is support from colleagues who are involved in cooperatively setting standards for newsworthiness and quality.

News content has changed, they say, under topic teams. It is broader, more trend- and issue-based, and less local and tied to time constraints. There is more variety in the way stories are reported, a change they generally welcome. Little comment was made on the actual topics around which the stories are written other than to praise the scope some of the writers had in following their beats or to attest to having flexibility in defining what those topics mean for that newspaper's readership. Even journalists who were not supported by management felt confident that they were able to report well within the topic system.

The participants indirectly and directly defined journalistic professional values as having a sense of mission and public service, goals of high standards and ethical behavior, and networks that enforce the values of the members.

Scholars also define some of the characteristics of professionalism as having a sense of mission and public service; goals of high standards and ethical behavior; and networks that enforce the values of the members. As seen, the participants of this study exhibited all of these characteristics, especially in their use of networks that span newspaper boundaries. Within these groups, they set standards, grapple with appropriate responses to challenging

situations, provide validation and recognition, and move as a group toward improving knowledge and skills along topical or job-oriented bases.

In the mid 1990s, it appeared that public journalism and topic teams would present a potent force in bringing high standards and innovative professionalism to the journalism landscape, but that momentum appears gone. There was no mention of public journalism by the participants. It is possible that some of the projects studied from a public journalism perspective might benefit from an analysis of the team elements; some of the synergy might be more attributable to team dynamics than to public journalism theories, as Charity,[514] Corrigan,[515] and Fallows[516] appear close to suggesting. Loomis and Meyer go so far as to suggest a predisposition toward managerial innovation that predisposes some newsrooms toward success with both public journalism and topic teams.

Nerone and Barnhurst[517] propose that the end of the professional newspaper is near because the ideals of the modern newspaper and the ideologies of the professional reporter are no longer in agreement. It would be interesting to observe whether topic teams might make a difference through the control they wield in the newsroom.

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[514] Arthur Charity, "What is Public Journalism? Five Communities, Five Examples," *National Civic Review* 85, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1996): 14-19.

[515] Don H. Corrigan, *The Public Journalism Movement in America: Evangelists in the Newsroom* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1999), 201-202.

[516] James Fallows, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (New York: Vintage Press, 1997), 257-258.

[517] John Nerone and Kevin G. Barnhurst, "U. S. Newspaper Types, the Newsroom, and the Division of Labor, 1750-2000," *Journalism Studies* 4, no. 4 (2003): 435-449.

Topic team instrumentality and a proposed model

The ultimate goal of coding is to produce a unifying selective code. The three axial categories – topic team effectiveness, individual ramifications, and professional dimensions – synthesize to a selective category of "topic team instrumentality." Instrumentality, in this context, is defined as the quality of being of practical use and as a system that helps to accomplish an end.

All three of the axial categories deal with ranges that, when combined, offer a particularly well-rounded view of a topic team's general "health" and other characteristics. Effectiveness deals with the topic team's performance in the newsroom and describes the extent to which members interact and to what end. The category of individual ramifications is, as it states, concerned with the personal effects of topic teams, a subject of great interest in news sociology, especially in the light of recent research that places personal values as more influential that those of organizations or, perhaps, professions. The category of professional dimensions edges into that conceptual area that potentially shapes not only workplace behavior but, on a broad scale, society and public life.

The categories represent forces, as well. At the coded level of abstraction, they might appear lifeless. But the "individual ramifications" category, for example, is built on expressions such as "place you belong," "happy to be there," "learning and growing," "meeting challenge," "work to potential," and "reaching more readers." When seen from the bottom up, it is clearly a hotbed of human endeavor, wishes, frustrations, yearnings, judgments, and joys. To think that all these emotions and concepts are harnessed to a discussion about topic teams gives one a suggestion of the many dynamics that go into group psychology, the workplace identity, and the search for recognition or service.

When considering the categories as a whole, it is apparent that the participants have provided sufficient material to envision three distinct types of topic team experiences that, in turn, correlate with three distinct types of teams ranging from dysfunctional and non-effective at one extreme to highly functional and very effective at the other. The first type might be called "negative." The other extreme might be called "synergistic," since it operates as more than the sum of its parts. The middle-ground group works well as a team: one might term it "cohesive." It is helpful to explore the concept of negative, cohesive, and synergistic teams by describing them in terms of the three axial categories through which they emerged.

Think of Chris or Michael's "leftovers" when considering the negative team. The negative team's effectiveness is undercut, if not destroyed, by the utter lack of meaningful interaction, on a team level, between its members. ("The team kind of wonders what the hell we're doing here," Michael said. "It's really sad.") Interactions are devised to keep management fooled or thwarted. The ramifications individually are that the members feel isolated, marginalized, and devalued. ("We don't really work," Alena noted. "It's like journalism is ultimately a kind of lonely job.") There is little or no encouragement from their supervisors or newsroom colleagues; their workplace environments fail to nurture them and may have become toxic. ("You all start feeding this negative dynamic," Marie noted.) Management is likely administered with a heavy and authoritative hand, featuring edicts, mandates, and assignments that are seen as counterproductive or journalistically suspect. ("I spent the day thinking, okay, how do I reconcile that with what an editor does?" Chris recalled of one management directive. Michael called top managers "rampaging barbarians.") Professionally, reward comes intrinsically or from professional colleagues whose meaningful ties exist exclusive of the team member's own newspaper. A negative effect can occur

simply because the team member lacks pride in his or her immediate professional associations and colleagues and is, in effect, punished for working where he or she does. Members of negative teams may look to professional contacts for help in leaving their current employment, or their current situations may discourage them from staying in journalism.

The cohesive team is effective – sometimes highly effective – in getting the job(s) done. It draws on the talents and resources of its members and promotes meaningful and productive interaction, thereby signaling consideration and respect for its members. ("We all pitch in," Lindsay said. "It's very infectious; people are motivated," Marie said.) It is both cooperative and competitive with other newsroom teams; management above the team level is helpful or essential for encouraging positive results in this regard, but must not be seen as meddling or dictatorial. With cohesive teams, good management input is sought, especially in supporting team leaders. Individually, the cohesive team's members feel part of a whole. The topic team unit serves as a "family" or as a stepping stone by which to relate to the newsroom. Members feel they are doing productive and worthwhile work that is valued by others, within and without the organization, and they enjoy it. ("It's fun," Robert said.) They are recognized professionally for team work as well as for individual work done as part of the team (in these cases, the teams are sometimes seen as important "backups" or "support" that make it possible for the journalist to do his or her work). Members of cohesive teams (like Yasmin, Sam, and Amanda, who touted the advantages of professional listservs and association Web sites) are likely to have frequent contact with other journalists and with professional associations. Many of their rewards and some of their feedback will come from these associations as well as from team, newsroom, and management colleagues.

The synergistic team achieves what it wants to achieve and has the power to do it. This is not always what management intends it to do or produce. In an interesting comparison to the negative team, which is likely to "pretend" to be a team to escape management's interference, the synergistic team may keep on meeting under the radar after being officially disbanded by management. ("We went underground," Robert said, "and just kept meeting.") Self-directed, they can be management dreams or disasters and tend to thrive only under protective, hands-off supervision. (Amanda praised her team leader, calling her "a blocker" who fought management to get the team what it needed.) The synergistic team's work surpasses what could be done individually. The team and its work can be highly creative, experimental, competitive, and powerful even though its members might lack those characteristics. The team tends to have challenging goals; synergistic team members feel as if they are doing something important. They are capable of creating high profiles within the profession, and members of synergistic teams are often sought out on the basis of their team's successes for advice, collaboration, and training by other professionals.

In essence, the participants provided data that suggest topic teams populate a continuum of instrumentality – usefulness from more than one viewpoint and a sliding scale of definition – from negativity (a team in name only, causing frustration and poor performance) through cohesiveness (a "true" team that gives value, even "added value," to organizational intentions) through to synergistic (a rare high-performing team that has bonded so well that it is producing stellar work – but not always in ways the organization intended). This could be displayed as

Negative → cohesive → synergistic

This abstraction becomes the basis for a model – an attempt to describe relationships between the structures of topic teams and the behaviors and affective processes of topic team members within the context of how the topic team relates to the greater management structure of which it is a part. If developed, this could be used to define the relative degree to which a topic team operates as a team and, as a result, its relative instrumentality as a topic team with regard to managerial, team, individual, and professional ramifications.

Adding the degree of management control associated with each type of team produces a more complex picture and raises interesting questions. For example: Does management want more control or a highly functional team?

←←←Management control←←←

Negative → cohesive → synergistic

Thus far, the model displays management and team aspects. By adding the personal aspects – strongly identified with the professional aspects – the model takes on yet another layer.

←←←Management control←←←

Negative → cohesive → synergistic

→→→Team member reward→→→

If one works with the model to determine what is best for realizing company goals, for example, the answer varies according to where the topic team is located on the continuum. In terms of risk, the least risk is likely with the cohesive team; the most risk is with the synergistic team since control lies increasingly with the team, a structure that can be extremely powerful and self-directed. There's also greater risk with the negative team: the lack of control implied by the lack of team unification means that individual members are the

actors, not the team unit, which multiplies the potential for acts that benefit the individual but not the team or corporate unit.

The potential for reward, however, follows a different gradation, logically increasing in possibility from the negative team through to the synergistic, where great reward can be realized. With the model thus developed, other characteristics can be weighed. Potential for disaster can be described, for example, as greater (but possibly foreseeable) with the synergistic team; probably containable or preventable with the cohesive team; and unpredictable for the negative team. Working in reverse, through analysis of team characteristics – such as degree of collaboration, size, duration, and productivity – other potentialities may be applied to the model for further predictive utility.

Implications for management

If any aspect of topic teams was a clear "winner" in the participants' eyes, it was that the topic team structure allowed and fostered opportunities for collaboration and feedback, an option that was seen to be lacking in the traditional newsroom organization. An actual sense of betrayal was evident when the expected collaboration and feedback did not occur as a result of meetings or working in close proximity with colleagues and team leaders/editors.

It was evident that several situations that should be under the purview of management had the ability to derail cooperative and mutual exchanges. Two emerged as particularly problematic. First, mere scheduling of such opportunities counts for naught – in fact, empty meetings actually aggravate the situation – unless the material addressed helps the journalist get the job done or provides needed insight or guidance. In more than one interview, the

participant used expletives to describe his or her strong feelings about wasted time and what was seen as bureaucratic red tape, managerial posturing, or, at worst, "lunacy." In the participants' view, strong and clear leadership – something they fervently desired – protected and defended them from counter-productivity and confusion. Second, the harm done by grouping journalists who cover unrelated subtopics (or beats) into topic teams is hard to overcome. The creation of a team of "leftovers" or "Fruitopia" sends an appalling message psychologically and journalistically. "They didn't really fit anywhere else, and those reporters knew it," Chris said.

If such a situation must exist, intense mitigation should take place to help compensate for the lack of like-focused colleagues and the shared resources one would expect of a properly composed topic team. Managers might, for example, impress upon the ill-begotten team's leader that liaison efforts with other teams are not only important but must be generated contextually to fit the needs of particular stories. In the interviews, for example, it emerged that a religion writer was part of such a mismatched topic team. One can easily think of religion stories that also involve topics covered by reporters on government (laws regarding same-sex marriage), lifestyles (Morman polygamy), education (creationism), or health (life-by-machine) teams. Instead, this writer resigned herself and declared that reporters' lives were "lonely." If management makes it easier for collaborative ties to form when they are appropriate, there is more likelihood resources will be shared, stories will be more dimensional and more deeply researched, and isolation for the writer cut off from more routine or in-team collaborations will be reduced.

Cross-team involvement, however, appears to be a weakness of the topic team system. Participants referred to "silos" and stories "falling between the cracks." Part of this

relates to the team dynamic that can form, creating a sense of identity and differentiation between topic teams. The positive side of such a dynamic is seen in team-motivated efforts, sharing, and synergy. The negative side evidently creates insularity and a focus that works to the detriment of comprehensive news coverage and overall newsroom operation. “The downside to teams is how segmented it makes the newsroom,” Marie said. “The lack of communication between teams is just stunning.”

The lack of a “city editor” function and the availability (or existence) of general assignment reporters bedeviled some topic team reorganizations. Newspapers appear to be compensating for the lack, however, and devising adaptations that work for their particular newsrooms. One newspaper, at the time of the interviews, was experimenting with a coordination team described as “a rump city desk.” Another was preparing to rely less on a topical orientation and return to geographic assignments for school and crime coverage. Drew said his paper “restore[d] a good deal of the hierarchy” for some of the “traditional management functions.” Weick’s advocacy of “loosely coupled systems” appears misdirected when applied to guaranteeing full news coverage.

Evidence of a rift or “disconnect” between the team leader level and upper management was pervasive in the interviews. Beyond that, corporate management was almost uniformly faceless, financially driven, and sometimes unfathomable and fearsome: John’s conception of a powerful “Uncle Frank,” a corporate executive with a stubborn insistence on a counter-productive “Continuous Improvement” program, comes to mind. At the same time, reporters’ appreciation for the team leader role appeared genuine and widespread. Marie, for example, was sufficiently moved to say she only wished team leaders

could receive from their "leaders" the same kind of consideration and encouragement they themselves gave members of their topic teams. "Some people feel intimidated," she said.

A similar split has been detected with regard to job satisfaction. Recently published research by Randal Beam, based on 2002 data, found statistical support for a difference of opinion and reaction between supervisors and rank and file journalists with regard to whether organizations stressed business or journalistic values. "Clearly, rank and file journalists become much more discouraged than news supervisors when they believe that their employer puts great emphasis on earning high profits," Beam wrote.[518]

One of the strongest messages arising from the topic team study, however, is a positive message for managers that their news staffs are conscientious, professional, and eager to create top-quality, ethical journalism. "It's very infectious," Marie said. "People are motivated. They work hard and … our team members are often in on the weekends or staying late because they want to do their job well." If that is indeed what the managers – or, perhaps more to the point, the corporate directorate – want, that is good news. If not, perhaps there is trouble ahead.

Implications for the profession

The collaboration skills honed by membership on a topic team are likely to be among the most prized capabilities in a profession evolving rapidly toward multi-media, multi-platform production propelled by the Internet's speed and technology. In May 2006, the

[518] Randal A. Beam, "Organizational goals and priorities and the job satisfaction of U.S. journalists," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 83 no. 1 (Spring 2006): 169-185.

president of Gannett's Newspaper Division told graduating journalists that, "in my company, the historic transition away from the siloed newsroom is already under way." The "new structure of newsgathering," Susan Clark-Johnson said, "will be organized in teams."[519] Those teams, she said, will draw on the different skills of their members and will be targeted both topically and demographically. The specialization by genre is disappearing; no longer are print reporters only published in (or producing for) print venues. Newspaper journalists' first order, Clark-Johnson said, will be to report news online, with the same or other material developed for other news dissemination.

These jobs are impossible to achieve alone. Kevin Sites, the now-famous "backpack journalist" for Yahoo! News, is a star, but his Web-based reports are produced by a four-person team aided by a newsroom staff. The aid is not solely technological, but journalistic as well. In addition to editing, the team does research and provides "content development" that includes visual reports with interactive maps, sidebars, and appropriate blurbs and links for further information. And while Sites' CNN background may predispose him toward a more technologically based journalism, print-based Nicholas Kristof, of *The New York Times*, is similarly famed for his groundbreaking, topically based journalism, which is featured online as well as in print and which also requires a team to research and produce.

Could the switch to topic teams be, in some way, the intentional or providential bridge to the type of collaborative job appropriate to a new, multimedia journalism? Nelson, referring to his newspaper's reorganization to topic teams, one that included photographers, graphic artists, designers, and copy editors, said he "sort of suspected back then that the ultimate goal of this wasn't so much aimed at newspapers but all the other media" – at

[519] Susan Clark-Johnson, commencement address, 12 May 2006, Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Arizona State University.

teaching the staff how to produce competitive content while understanding the needs and possibilities of each part of the production and reporting process.

There is less "buttonholing" than there was in the past where, once someone was known as a particular type of journalist – a features writer, for example – there was little chance of working in other genres. "We try to tell stories the best way; that it's not always a narrative," Nicole said. "We try not to get hung up" on what people do. Whether one is a graphic artist, reporter, or news assistant, there is a "responsibility as a team to produce something."

Other changes may be in store. The profession may find itself strengthened by the trend toward topic teams as allegiance and control gravitates away from a particular newspaper organization and toward a more peer-centered perspective where colleagues consult with colleagues to determine how journalism should be practiced.

Flattening newsroom hierarchies and reapportioning more responsibility for coverage to the topic team level had the intended effect of increasing communication among topic team members. Decisions about news values, ethics, story generation, production, coverage strategies, and much else not only had to be made at the team or reporter level, but was. Finding opportunities to communicate with senior staff appears to have been more difficult, however, even as communication with team-level colleagues improved.

The collaboration, feedback, and team-oriented drive to produce good work pays off in more professional work, according to many of the participants. "More rigor to our editing and rewriting," "better understanding of quality," and "yeasty" were among the improvements noted.

The participants offered many indications that communication also increased with colleagues at other newspapers, enabled by Internet communication. At the time of the interviews, participants said that listservs and Web sites, many of which were organized around topics such as religion, education, environmental concerns, or criminal justice, provided daily contact for them with other journalists within their topic affiliation. These Internet networks provide immediate and long-term resources; active e-mail-based conversations helped shape decisions about conduct, story production, ethics, and other professional considerations.

The bonds, constantly reinforced in a timely manner, give power to the network or association nurturing those bonds. Professional recognition comes from having one's story posted on the network's Web site for colleagues to see. "We would get national feedback," Yasmin said. "Quite a bit of feedback." One might hypothesize that as more and more approval and influences come from beyond the newspaper, the type of control the business side of the industry has traditionally held over journalists as professionals will weaken. Already there are intimations that professional team collaboration is foreseen across organizational bounds. Amy Gahran wrote this in *E-Media Tidbits*, a Poynter Institute professional blog:

> [N]ews organizations might do better to hone their unique strengths and collaborate more with other news organizations that offer complementary strengths – similar to how weblogs support and enhance each other through cross-blog conversation. Imagine: someday a Pulitzer Prize might be awarded jointly to an enterprise reporting team spread across several news organizations. Maybe it's time to recognize and start dismantling the silos where we've unwittingly cornered ourselves in the name of "competition." Collaboration might be a way to create a more robust and distributed base of operations for traditional journalism.[520]

[520] Amy Gahran, *E-Media Tidbits*, 2 June 2006, online publication, http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=31&aid=102251. Gahran was countering a posting by Steffen Fjaervik that supported Herbert Gans' contention that competition is "endemic" to the profession.

The development of topic-based structures and networks can both challenge and allow the profession to find common ground for the benefit and development of journalism. In unprecedented ways and numbers, journalists are collaborating and connecting; their presence as network participants means they are already organized, reachable, and in search of professional guidance and high standards. As the profession becomes increasingly divorced from the changing goals and values of corporate owners, as was evident in this study, it seems it only remains for leadership and vision to provide focus.

Implications for educators

This study shows that new journalists need more than a thorough grounding in AP style and the proper use of nut grafs, anecdotal ledes, and interview etiquette, despite their importance. Today's journalists need flexibility in terms of skills, a broad approach to reporting and recognizing newsworthy topics that can interest and inform specific readers, and – perhaps most importantly – an ability to work well with others. They need to be ready for a newsroom unlike one their predecessors met even as little as a decade ago. "This is not easy," Jeff said.

The most obvious newsroom change is in how journalists operate in terms of gathering information and choosing stories from an issue perspective – but most reporting textbooks still write within the city editor paradigm and instruct fledgling reporters in beats as they may no longer be practiced. Drew spoke of now covering stories that were "more meaningful trend stories that have had some public policy implications and that suggested things that thoughtful readers and citizens could actually do about it." According to the

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http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=31&aid=102098.

participants, event, process, and police-beat stories – which are staples in most classrooms – have been de-emphasized in the modern newsroom and replaced by issue and trend articles. "The whole media ecology has changed out there," Drew said. "It's a different niche."

The new versatility may be more of a challenge for some reporters than others, which translates into more challenge for journalism professors. "It's the rare reporter, quite frankly," Helene said, "who can do breaking news, enterprise, backgrounders, explanatory pieces, profiles, and investigative pieces equally well." But this is what reporters – and editors – are expected to handle.

The participants spoke of a volatile workplace – not in the sense of random violence, but in the unpredictability that accompanies efforts to keep newsrooms afloat despite shrinking budgets and resources. Nelson described a "dramatic day – all the old titles went away. We re-applied for new jobs and were placed in these new positions." Yasmin was bothered because "whenever a new regime comes in, they have to totally reject previous regimes to make their mark." Rounds of downsizing and hiring freezes, still a constant in U.S. newspaper newsrooms, produce similarly rocky results for the staffers who remain.

The collaborative environment fostered by healthy topic teams is applicable to the type of workplace developing around online journalism, but collaboration is not a skill that comes naturally. As the participants indicated, there was training and coaching provided for the transitions. Similar care needs to be taken to prepare future journalists; when they enter team newsrooms, they are unlikely to get any training: topic teams are no longer an innovation and training resources are scarce. They need practice in such normally untaught skills as giving feedback, for example. Nobody should have to experience a "bloodbath," as Michael described it, at the hands of insensitive or novice critiquers. Nor, as Helene

suggested, can one expect a bunch of pit bulls to suddenly "sing, dance, and roast weenies together."

The participants suggested that the need for skills is higher across the board and included writing, comfort with reporting in different genres, and copy editing for one's self as well as for colleagues. Although there might be more coaching than in the past, the typical newsroom is working with reduced resources and that includes, at times, inadequate staff. Time pressures brought by newsrooms' online presence – a factor still largely on the horizon at the time of the interviews, but no longer – are a further complication. Deadlines used to occur once or twice a day; now they're constant. The Web has brought breaking news and scoops back into the daily print journalist's newspaper routine.

The intriguing concept of a "skills transfer" emerged from the study, suggesting that topic team members were able to teach as well as learn. How much better prepared students would be for the workplace if they were coached in teaching skills as part of experiencing a collaborative environment. "You have to have a base by which to understand it," Marie advised.

Implications of the model

The proposed model of topic team instrumentality, which represents topic teams as existing on a continuum from negative through cohesive to synergistic, does not indicate a progression. It provides a way to locate topic teams within a range in order to understand the relationships that are likely to exist between that topic team, at that level of development, and other structures. It is also a tool for understanding intra-team dynamics and relationships.

As such, it has potentially valuable possibilities for predictive utility. Its potential richness lies in its ability to characterize topic teams according to multi-dimensional criteria. The model helps to define topic teams. Schrage's plaint that "the word team has been so politicized, so ensnared in the pathology of the organization, that we don't really know what it means anymore" can be alleviated by applying the model to particular topic teams or topic team systems. The research questions that guided this study might be asked of members of the particular topic team under observation to provide exactly the type of rounded definition needed for most accurately determining instrumentality.

The "roundedness" of the definition is important. People are "messy," as Helene observed. The relationships they form within topic teams are predicated not only on what the dynamics texts report as likely, but on past relationships of which managers, colleagues, and perhaps the topic team member his or herself, have limited, warped, or no knowledge. Bennis and Nanus[521] concluded that "linear information, linear thinking, and incremental strategies are no match for the turbulence of today's business climate." Nor may they be the most appropriate approaches to understanding, establishing, or managing topic teams, which are also turbulent.

This study suggests that topic teams fit squarely in the participatory paradigm that the work of Maslow, McGregor, Deming, and others revealed to be a setting in which teamwork and collaboration are influenced by culture and structure. The model can be used as an assessment tool for precisely those elements.

The study suggests that the vaunted "empowerment" of the individual that was integral to early team conceptualizations is far too nuanced in reality, and far too dependent

[521] Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, "Organizational Learning: The Management of the Collective Self," *New Management* 3, no. 1 (Summer 1985): 6. See also, Warren Bennis, *Managing People Is Like Herding Cats,* (Provo, Utah: Executive Excellence Publishing, 1999).

on circumstances and personal foible, to be a useful characterization or promise. The member of a topic team that registers on the negative end of the model is, in many ways, far more empowered than a member of a synergistic topic team – although by traditional measures, the synergistic team would be considered the most teamlike in nature. The synergistic team's members are constrained by the nature of their team imperative and the powerful dynamics that have formed to propel them toward success. The member of the negative team is unlikely to feel any team-imposed limitations in his or her actions; the dynamics that have formed may be depressing, dulling, and counter-productive, but they do not constrain action. They may, in fact, inspire it – but one might posit that it is unlikely to be action beneficial to the team.

The model implies the possibility of change for topic teams. A full description of the topic team should yield sufficient variables to plot new relations, many of which can be influenced by management. Wasted time and senseless jargon are attributes of the negative team's experience, for example, but those elements can be altered. Ample opportunities for collaboration and supportive and intelligent leadership are hallmarks of the cohesive team – and can be supplied. A need or insistence on self-direction is vital for high-performing or synergistic topic teams; this can be checked or fanned, depending on desired outcomes.

It is important to recognize that a newsroom of topic teams does not have only one kind of team. The study shows that topic teams are highly individualistic, ironically. They are also subject to change, sometimes rapid, as members leave, join, or react to outside conditions that include management, readership, personal issues, and news, with which they have a necessarily close involvement, after all. Many newsrooms report a spurt in collaborative behavior and "team spirit" when faced with covering tragedies such as the

Columbine school shootings, the devastation by Hurricane Katrina, or the terrorist actions of September 11, 2001.

Directions for future research

If it is, as some say, the surprises that yield rich grounds for future research, the path leads toward exploring the participants' eager embrace of collaboration; their strong underlying sense of professionalism; and the influence of Internet-driven, topic-based networks on decisions, workplace dynamics, professional and ethical development, and on the profession as a greater community.

The study suggests, for example, that motivation and reward are more intrinsic than extrinsic, but that their manifestation is highly contextual. A member of a negative time needs to rely on intrinsic rewards since extrinsic rewards are unlikely to be forthcoming. It also suggests – even states, in some places – that collaboration is a "yeasty" reward, a "joy," and "fun." One participant called the profession "a gift." Several participants nearly crowed their pleasure in being recognized on national listservs and association Web sites. What do all these have in common in terms of motivation, job satisfaction, or reward? Is reward more associated with internalized journalistic or professional values than job-related recognition?

Such research is vital in the current climate of job upheaval and, perhaps, the beginning of a professional paradigm shift where control is renegotiated with the longtime holders of power – those who control the publication medium. The Internet, at the time of the interviews, was just beginning to assert its power. It had been assimilated into the newsroom as a reporting and research tool; a writing, editing, and archiving instrument; a "creator" of art and pages; and a means of communication. It existed somewhat peripherally as a publication medium, at least in terms of how it affected newspaper journalists' daily lives

(unless, of course, they were employed as the then-rare breed of online journalist or worked for a very large organization on the leading edge of news-oriented Web publication, such as the *Washington Post* and *washingtonpost.com*, which was a distinct news operation that relied on content from the newspaper staff).

Since that time, in barely five "short" years, convergence and its need for cross-functional teams has surfaced and seemingly fizzled, to be replaced by multimedia teams housed within a parent organization that develops "convergence," or the merging of reporting genres as opposed to media organizations, according to its own organizational culture and professional values. It is in this milieu that topic teams and information gleaned from them can most logically be applied. They spring from a common base; they are tasked with topical reporting geared toward specific readership; and they group people who may be differently skilled but work in complementary ways. It is a short leap between having a topic team with a computer-assisted reporting expert, a fabulous features writer, and a visually oriented reporter, to a multimedia team that includes someone skilled in creating Flash photo shows, someone else skilled in reporting and synthesizing the results, and another person providing related research.

One of the most useful areas of research for contemporary effect would be in applying topic team knowledge to these emerging multimedia, primarily online, teams. An extension of that would be to explore virtual teams. What would those dynamics look like? One of the participants stressed the need for people to "show up" in order for a team to exist. How important is corporality to team realization?

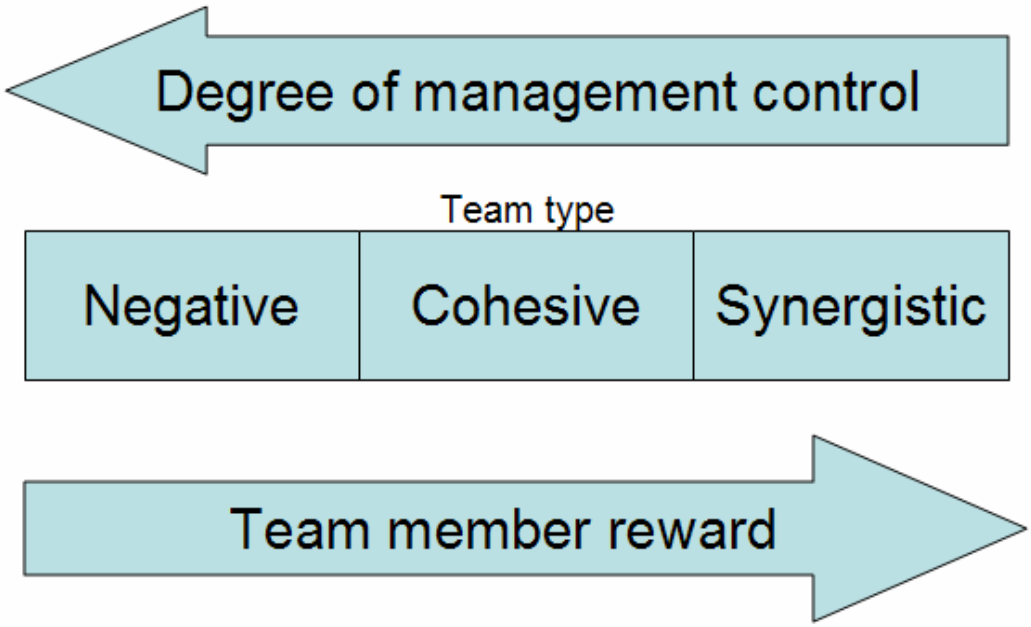
One suggestion would be to undertake a similar study to that just completed with other kinds of teams. Copy editors, for example, are members of functional teams that have

very specific stresses and dynamics associated with their jobs. They are, in general, poorly understood and in near-perennial dissatisfaction, but are essential to any professional news operation.

One hopes the model of topic team instrumentality will be useful for more than topic teams; it deserves application in various team settings to discover the parameters of its utility. Its advantage is that it emphasizes dynamics and procedures over specific settings. It can prove instructive in terms of newsroom management, as well – an area in which there is precious little guidance. It should prove durable in multimedia settings as well as in print newsrooms, and future research could well test its utility across the broad divides of professional culture – broadcast versus print, for example – to enrich our knowledge of the profession.

FIGURE 5-1

Model of Topic Team Instrumentality



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