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**How to Lead Innovation and Still  
Keep the Newsroom Working**

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# 1. Introduction

Like so many editors, I never meant to become a manager of any kind. When I started in journalism in the beginning of the 2000s, I did it because I loved writing, I loved meeting new, exciting people, and I loved seeing my name in the paper. (After all, we are all narcissists, as my old journalism professor Kaarle Nordenstreng often used to say.)

Thus, when I first drifted into managerial positions at *Helsingin Sanomat*, the major Finnish newspaper I still work for, I felt out of my depth: I had neither the people skills nor the necessary training. I felt I had to pretend I knew what I was doing. The feeling never subsided, but gradually I understood that I was not the only one. Nearly all the other editors were also doing it: trying to imitate what their seniors were doing and clinging onto the few pieces of management advice they ever got like believers to their favourite Bible verse.

Therefore, I was relieved when Sheila Fitzsimons, a media change specialist I spoke to in one of my first research interviews, said this about newspaper editors: “[They] were never really picked for their management skills. They were picked for their news judgement skills.” Fitzsimons’ note verified my view that management skills are often a secondary factor when newsroom leaders are recruited.

In this paper, I aim to show that this should not be so, and that the turbulent times we are living in places enormous demands on the way people are led in the newsroom. Apart from senior managers, I will be concentrating on the work done by middle-tier editors, because they play a great role in turning strategy into reality. For the purposes of my research I have simplified the challenge into a task of combining the day to day operation of the newsroom with innovation and renewal.

The reason I want to focus on innovation and renewal is, of course, the ongoing crisis of the news media. Media companies are currently undergoing a number of simultaneous changes that are driven by developments in communication technology, convergence of different forms of media, globalisation, and changing audience needs. These underline the need media companies have to continuously innovate to meet these challenges. (Baumann 2013, 78–79; Picard 2011, 5.) Apart from the need for innovation, there is also a growing need for creativity in a wider sense, since developing technology and changing audience preferences underline demand for content that is presented and distributed in a novel way. According to Küng (2010, 47–48), creativity has always played a vital role in the media, but in turbulent times its role becomes even more important. It is essential in creating an organisational environment where employees can ensure that the organisation is capable of tackling unforeseen changes, and media managers bear the brunt of responsibility for making this happen (*ibid*).

The implications the need for innovation and creativity has on strategic management have been somewhat widely explored. According to Mierzejewska (2011, 14), strategic

management has been the most widely used framework in media management studies, even though the whole field remains in her view “underexplored and undertheorised”. Conversely, the role of those newsroom managers implementing the new strategies, namely the various section editors and desk heads, has been all but invisible in media management research.

In this paper I will talk to editors from several legacy news companies and their digital rivals, along with former news professionals. To bring my findings into a wider perspective I will reflect on work done by scholars of creativity and media management. My hypothesis is that good management of creativity and innovation helps overcome the problem of combining day-to-day operation with innovation. My research questions are: 1) How do the interviewees see the problem of combining the aforementioned tasks? 2) How do they think the problem could be overcome? 3) How do the interviewees’ views fit into the scholars’ views?

In the next chapter I will go into more depth about why it is so important to study management in news companies. I will draw on the work of several scholars to show that the work of editors is becoming in many ways more important than it ever was. In chapter three I will present and define the key concepts used in the research and argue that the skill to manage creativity is one of the most important capabilities a contemporary newsroom manager can have. I will show that, according to previous research, managing creativity well does not only influence the organisation's capability to innovate, but can also lead to greater satisfaction at work, and to greater efficiency.

Chapter four is dedicated to the presentation of the findings of this study. I will first present the themes that emerged from the interviews when they were analysed, and then read the analysis in the light of the studies presented in the preceding chapter. Finally, in chapter five I will summarise my findings and present the questions that are left open for future research. In the summary you will also find a checklist of the most important management tasks an editor in a changing newsroom faces; if you are very strapped for time, you may want to skip to the list first.

## 2. Why is it important to research newsroom management?

The study of media management is a young discipline. As recently as fifteen years ago Lampel et al (2000, 263) was able to argue that management scholars have nearly totally neglected the study of the media and other cultural industries, because the managerial practices common to these industries are “at odds with our established views of managing organizations”. Since then things have gotten better, but still most media scholars share the view of Mierzejewska cited in the introduction: the study of media management is an underexplored and, furthermore, a very diverse field that combines elements from different academic disciplines, schools of thought, and methodologies, and is thus hard to comprehend as a whole (Küng 2008 2–3, Malmelin 2015 8–9).

Furthermore, the discord between theories of management and managerial practices in the media (Lampel et al 2000, 8; Malmelin 2015, 8) may have led to a certain disregard of the theory of management in media organisations themselves and especially in the news industry, where managerial and journalistic skills have been thought to go hand in hand, and journalists have traditionally only become managers after long careers as reporters, correspondents and such. In addition, the contemporary newsroom managers are often so occupied with their daily work that they have little time to reflect on the way they manage their juniors (for the situation in Finland, see Koljonen 2013). These questions, unfortunately, are not in the scope of this research, but they would warrant more attention, because they may still have implications on how newsrooms are run.

Anyhow, most scholars agree that the role of media managers – and the editors in newsrooms – is on the rise. There are several contemporary trends that contribute to this. For the sake of consistency I have summarised them into three trends.

1. In a diverse, distributed media environment the role of **branding** becomes ever more important, and the editors are the ones responsible for looking after the brand. In 2015, in his yearly media predictions, digital consultant Nic Newman (2015, 29) claimed that the audiences will “realise that even online-pure-play sites are shaped, given pitch and tone, branded by people other than writers and contributors.”
2. **Convergence** means that content produced by any news outlet will be distributed over a number of different media, in a number of formats, through any number of distribution channels and over a somewhat long period of time. This, in itself, is a co-operative enterprise of numerous professionals, either inside or outside the company, whose work has to be coordinated by an editor. (Koljonen 2013, 111–112.)
3. Lastly is what this study concentrates on: **leading people**. Newman (ibid) refers to recent high profile rows and resignations in news outlets and argues that they “should remind people that how journalists are organised, motivated and led in teams really matters.” Deuze (2010, x), drawing on his correspondence with media

workers, goes so far as to argue that “[i]n short, the problem of contemporary media work, as felt and experienced by its practitioners, is management.” According to Hellman and Nieminen, as times get hard and organisations have to be trimmed for constant change, leadership becomes more important than management, and a leader's work becomes more demanding – but, at the same time, more rewarding (Hellman & Nieminen 2015, 41–42).

### **3. Managing innovation and creativity in the newsroom**

Innovation has for some time now been the buzzword in news companies around the world, and for a reason. As noted in the introduction, the perfect storm that has gathered around the old news outlets demands them to accommodate one change after another, to come up with new ways to present and distribute their content, and all the while continue making profit. This means that there is a great need for continuous innovation.

Innovation as a company's resource is closely linked with its ability to enhance the creativity of its employees. Management of creativity can be seen as a company's capability of bringing out the creative potential of its workforce, whereas management of innovation comprises the processes by which this creativity is channelled to serve the strategic goals of the organisation in question, thus leading into the creation of new products, new ways to organise the workflow, and the like.

Succeeding in managing innovation and creativity is especially important for companies that try to survive in an unstable, turbulent environment. Deuze and Stewart (2011, 5) write that "rising costs, declining revenue (especially from advertising), and increasing competition" lead to an "increased focus on idiosyncratic creativity to rise above the many challenges and win the ongoing competition for market demand." Furthermore, Küng (2011, 52–55; 2008, 219–223) sees tapping "unexploited reserves of creativity" as one of the five things media managers need to do to ensure their companies stand a chance on the changing media market.

In this chapter I will look more closely into what is meant by innovation and creativity, and how newsroom managers can help advance these in their work. Finally, I will ask whether news work has been or ever can be innovative and creative, and if not, whether it can ever change.

#### **3.1 Defining the key concepts: innovation and creativity**

Innovation and its management has been thoroughly explored in scientific literature, but media innovation still remains a rather marginal topic (Malmelin 2015, 78). Nevertheless, as noted before, innovation is an important concept when dealing with the challenges media companies face.

Above all, innovations are defined by their novelty. Though novelty is always relational, they are considered to introduce something new into the socioeconomic system. However, an innovation should not be confused with an invention, as often happens in everyday language. In scientific literature an invention is a new idea or theory, often born as a result of years and years of research, whereas an innovation is the implementation of a new idea in a market or a social setting. Often there is a great gap in time before any innovations are derived from a specific invention. Thus innovations are seen to be processual by character,



combining the *exploration* of new ideas (invention) with their social or economic *exploitation*. (Dogruel 2013, 35–36; Storsul & Krumsvik 2013, 14; Malmelin 2015, 78–79.)

Typically, an innovation is a new combination of existing ideas, technologies, or the like. The implementation of an existing idea in a new setting may open up new possibilities. (Storsul & Krumsvik 2013, 14.) Indeed, this is often the case in news companies, where ideas found successful in one medium are implemented into another: Think, for instance, about the adaptation of serialised storytelling into podcasting by Sarah Koenig in *Serial*, the hugely successful true crime podcast series. Serialised format had already become the stable of television drama, and we can hear Koenig using narrative devices reminiscent of the ones used there, but *Serial* can definitely still be considered an innovation in podcasting.

Dogruel (2013), referring to a wide base of economic and sociological research, has introduced four characteristics of a media innovation that are worth citing here:

1. A media innovation is, at least to a degree, *new*.
2. It produces economic or societal value (*exploitation*).
3. It has *communicative implications*: that is, it affects relationships between people or organisations and rather than solely producing value for the media company.
4. Finally, it is a *complex societal process*: it is produced in an interaction between its developers and its users.

Innovations in general are divided into categories depending on whether they are gradual or fundamental. The dichotomy that is most used derived from Schumpeter (2012), in whose tradition *incremental* innovation is contradicted with *radical* innovation. An incremental innovation improves gradually on existing products, whereas radical innovation overhauls whole industries in a way which Schumpeter famously described as “creative destruction”. In a similar way but with a different emphasis, Christensen (2011) sees innovations as being either *sustaining* or *disruptive*. Sustaining innovation improves on existing ideas, products, or processes and thus helps giants retain their position on the market. Disruptive innovation, on the other hand, introduces new categories of these, thus rendering old products useless. According to Christensen (2011, xviii), “products based on disruptive technologies are typically cheaper, simpler, smaller, and, frequently, more convenient to use.” Disruptive products do not carry the promise of great profits on the existing market and thus, according to Christensen’s theory, established giants fail to see them as anything worth investing in, fail to respond in time, and, finally, fail themselves.

In media, as in any industry, the bulk of innovation is of the incremental or sustaining kind (Storsul & Krumsvik 2013, 18), but sometimes media innovations also have far-reaching

consequences. Think of, for instance, Facebook and the advent of social media, which has drastically altered not only the media business, but the way people present themselves publicly and, as witnessed by both elections in democratic countries and popular uprisings around the world, the politics. And looking specifically at the news industry, you can think of BuzzFeed or The Huffington Post. Their viral stories with pictures of cute cats were once the laughing stock of the industry, but they have now moved into offering the younger audience a news feed that competes, both in numbers and quality, with any news outlet in the world. From a cheap, inferior-quality product into a game-changer, right? (Christensen et al 2012, 6–8; Küng 2015, 55–73.)

If innovation is often an elusive concept, creativity is even harder to define. In the past it has been seen, by scholars and laypersons alike, as the realm of the solitary genius who produces great works of art or scientific ideas from the wondrous chambers of (most often) his mind. Creativity has been seen as a characteristic of an individual.

Understood this way creativity would not have much to do with journalism, let alone news journalism, but the view has been strongly challenged since the 1980s by the socio-constructivist theory of creativity. This theory, and the bulk of experimental research that accompany it, suggests that creativity is more a result of social environment than of the immutable characteristics of gifted individuals. Therefore, it is possible to influence creativity and, for instance, encourage working environments that breed creativity. (Amabile 1996, xv–xvi, 3–7, 16–17; Küng 2008, 144–145.)

One of the foremost proponents of the socio-cultural study of creativity is the American psychologist Teresa Amabile, who has been studying creativity since the 1970s. In this paper I will follow her definition of creativity and the consequences she draws from it. She recognises that it is impossible to reach an objective definition of creativity, but, drawing from experimental research, arrives at a conceptual definition of creativity: “A product or response will be judged as creative to the extent that (a) it is both a novel and appropriate, useful, correct or valuable response to the task at hand, and (b) the task is heuristic rather than algorithmic.” (Amabile 1996, 35.) (A heuristic task is one for which there are several possible solutions, like any news story. Its counterpart is an algorithmic task, for which there is only one correct solution, like many mathematical problems.)

Amabile then moves on to consider what an individual needs to have to be able to solve problems creatively. She arrives at a three-fold definition of the components of creative performance. (Amabile 1996, 83–93.)

1. *Expertise*, or domain-relevant skills. Some research also shows that an exposure to a wide array of information, also from fields of expertise other than your own, will lead to more creative outcomes.

2. *Creativity-relevant skills*. This again is divided into an individual's cognitive style (their ability to understand complexities and break set during problem solving), their use of creativity-heuristics (mental tools that produce new ideas), and their working style (for instance, persistence and the ability to concentrate, but also to put things aside for a while). "Some creativity-relevant skills, then, depend on personality characteristics. Others, however, may be directly taught through training", Amabile writes (1996, 90).
3. *Intrinsic task motivation*. Intrinsic motivation rises from the task itself. Its counterpart, hereafter, is extrinsic motivation, which refers to motivation that rises from outside the source itself. According to Amabile (1996, 119), "[i]ntrinsic motivation is conducive to creativity; controlling extrinsic motivation is detrimental to creativity, but informational or enabling extrinsic motivation can be conducive, particularly if initial levels of intrinsic motivation are high."

Accordingly, creativity at any workplace can be enhanced by taking these components into account. Referring to several studies conducted by Amabile and her colleagues, Küng (2008, 151) has created a useful list of five key elements of a working environment that have an influence on intrinsic motivation and creativity:

1. *Encouragement*, especially for new ideas and any display of creativity. According to Amabile (1996, 261), feedback needs to be work-focused as opposed to person-focused, and new ideas should not be extensively criticised.
2. *Challenge*. Management needs to set *clear goals* that are attainable but at the same time push people to challenge themselves.
3. *Autonomy*, balanced with *clear direction*. In Amabile's (1996, 261) words: "Present a clear strategic direction for projects and for the organization overall but allow as much operational autonomy as possible to employees in the day-to-day carrying out of their projects. Clearly communicate the vision of the organization as creative and innovative."
4. *Resources and sufficient time*. Creative work needs to be sufficiently resourced, but it should be stressed that allowing unlimited time for the completion of a project is actually detrimental to creativity. As Küng (2008, 164) writes, "creative projects do not benefit from unlimited resources – and may perhaps even be harmed."
5. Team composition should favour *diversity* and the team's working habits should include *openness* and abundant *communication*. However, it should be noted that according to experimental studies it seems that if short-term results are needed, a

homogeneous team will work more creatively than a diverse one, though on long term the opposite is true.

To these elements, Amabile adds some more minor findings that nevertheless are important for media managers to remember. First of all, you will need to work to reduce red tape and approval layers to encourage innovation, and secondly, it is conducive to creativity to excitedly and extensively communicate the potential of new ideas, and the (even minor) successes these have produced. (Amabile 1996, 257.)

One important issue to consider, in relation with creativity and news media, is the influence of downsizing on creativity<sup>1</sup>. Amabile & Comti (1995), in a study conducted in a large technology company before and after substantial downsizing, found that though productivity did retain the level it had been on prior to the downsizing, creativity of the employees stayed on a significantly lower level than it had been before. The authors then conclude that, to protect creativity and innovation, managers should take four considerations: 1) They should think whether the layoffs are necessary at all since, according to research, downsizing rarely manages to reach its designated financial goals. 2) They should communicate honestly, efficiently, and in a timely manner. 3) They should try to keep existing teams intact, especially if creativity is demanded from these teams. 4) And finally, they ought to try to protect employees from the fear of another wave of downsizing, because the anticipation of layoffs is detrimental to creativity.

### **3.2 Why news companies often fail at innovation**

The question then stands whether news work is, or ever can be, creative. Indeed, sitting at your desk, waiting for a call from the fire chief and watching the online readership figures go up and down, your work may feel like the opposite of creative. Nevertheless, all things considered, creativity is central to all media work.

In essence, most media work is creative since it involves the production of novel offerings for the market day in, day out. This is especially true of news work: yesterday's papers are useless today, a television newscast cannot be rerun, and an Internet news site will need hundreds of new articles and videos every day. Even the most routine news pieces are novel in the sense that exactly the same story has never been produced before. Journalists also take great personal pride in the fruit of their work much in the same way artists do. (Malmelin 2015b, 105–106.) Nevertheless, managing creativity has often been neglected in media

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<sup>1</sup> It is safe to say that most legacy newsrooms have suffered from layoffs in recent years. In the UK, the number of full-time journalists has remained about the same for years, rising from 57,000 in 2007 to 70,000 in 2013 and coming down to 63,000 in 2015 (LFS 2007, 2013, 2015), but in the United States the number of journalists working in newspapers has gone down from 41,500 in 2010 to 32,900 in 2015 (ASNE 2015). In Finland, the number of full-time journalists has gone down from 11,700 in 2006 to 10,700 in 2013 (Statistics Finland 2015).

organisations (Küng 2008, 6). The reason may well be that creativity, being the air we breathe, has been taken for granted.

The need for creativity, then again, is both changing and growing. According to Küng (2008, 159), creativity is especially needed when organisations mount a response to changes in their strategic environment, and renewal must happen on the levels of systems, processes, and strategy. “Sustained creativity is one of the prime drivers of above average performance”, she writes (Küng 2008, 163). Furthermore, according to Hamel (2007) companies also pay a high price for not being able to harness the creativity and views of all their employees. Finally, Malmelin (2015b, 108) summarises the benefits of creativity for an organisation into three points: 1) It is a resource in both production and change. 2) It drives change. 3) Strategic creativity helps find new ways to achieve the organisation's strategic goals.

Above all, creativity is essential to innovation. Whereas creativity is the production of new ideas, innovation is “the successful implementation of creative ideas by an organization” (Amabile 1996, 230). And, as Amabile's definition includes the word “successful”, it must be concluded that media companies in general, and news companies in particular, have not been very good at innovation.

In general, the reason for the failure of media companies at innovation is attributed to their incumbent status and their nearly monopolistic dominance of the publishing market before the advent of the Internet. After all, according to Christensen's (2011) paradigmatic view of disruptive innovation, successful companies fail particularly because of their success. Since they are doing well in an established market, it will be very hard for them to spot the kind of category-changing innovation that could threaten their position, and to invest in it. After all, disruptive innovations are often seen as being inferior in quality and it makes no sense for an incumbent to invest in them while greater profits can be made in an established market. Today's revenue streams seem sweeter than the promise of innovation. (Consider, for instance, the way the music industry was unable to see a revenue stream in the online distribution of music, thus leaving the playing field open for competitors from the tech industry, like Apple and Spotify, to take a big chunk of the market.)

Scholars agree that several mistakes have been made in the media business: Companies have failed to create an innovative newsroom culture and to empower the new generation of employees (Christensen et al 2012, 5). They have been concentrating on protecting their existing operations, and have thus left room for more innovative competition to enter the industry (Picard 2011, 54). They have not recognised the role technology will have in the future, and therefore have not been able to integrate their content-creation and technology functions (Küng 2013, 9–10). And so on.

However, rather than listing past mistakes, media scholars and journalists should be trying to figure out what media companies can do, and this is exactly what several of them have been trying to do. In many ways their findings coincide with the steps managers must take to

enhance creativity, though fostering innovation happens more on the strategic level. I have summarised the findings into three points, though it should be noted that as organisations are different, not every point can be applied to all organisations.

1. Most importantly, most scholars agree that key to finding your innovative edge is *knowing the strengths* your company has and exploiting them. “News organizations should look for new business lines that leverage existing newsroom assets”, Christensen et al write (2012, 12). According to Küng (2011, 54–55; 2008, 219–223), tapping “unexploited reserves of creativity” is one of the main managerial tasks in legacy media companies: “[t]he 'old' media have all the necessary resources to innovate and succeed – they just need to liberate them” (Küng 2011, 55).
2. As with creativity in general, understanding *autonomy* is paramount to innovation, and it comes with consequences for the way companies are organised. Whereas many news companies are rather hierarchical, the most innovative of them tend to operate a different kind of structure. The *Guardian*, the British news company that has stayed on the frontline of the digitalisation of the news for more than a decade, has a low hierarchy, combined with an open management style where information is available to many and travels quickly. New ideas have fewer hurdles to cross, and it is, at least in principle, easy to get your voice heard. (Küng 2015, 10.) BuzzFeed has built its whole structure around small teams that are rather autonomous and make the whole company agile (Küng 2015, 60–61, 72–73). Then again, freedom needs a structure to support it and to ensure that its benefits permeate the whole company: “small groups operating autonomously still need to be well linked to the rest of the organization to ensure knowledge and learning can be transferred and creative potential fully exploited” (Küng 2011, 54).
3. For a long time, both the technology and the audience needs of news companies stayed rather unchanged. This made possible the segregation of the editorial staff from the commercial part of the organisation and gave them independence over content-creating activities. Unfortunately, it means that in quite a few newsrooms the editorial staff still have little understanding of technology, and technology people are often kept away from the newsroom. As change in the media industry is very technology-driven (see for example Küng 2008, 124–125; 2011, 43–45), journalists need to work together with technology specialists to come up with the innovations they so dearly need. Also sales and marketing professionals, who have been kept apart from the editorial by the so-called “church and state” -separation of legacy news organisations, should be included. Creativity is enhanced when different kinds of people are able to meet and exchange ideas. Furthermore, to be able to roll out new products quickly, an organisation needs to be able to efficiently muster the necessary capabilities, and this can only happen if there is enough communication between the different departments of the said organisation.

## 4. Analysis of the interviews

The primary material for this study consists of seven interviews conducted either in person or over the telephone, and one interview where the respondent had time to answer only via email. Two of the interviewees worked or had recently worked in management roles for the *Guardian*, three for the *Independent* / the *Evening Standard* -group, and two for BuzzFeed UK.

I conducted the interviews following the practice of the thematic interview, thus presenting the interviewees with open questions and trying to direct the conversation just as much as was necessary to keep it within the theme of the research. I wanted to see what kind of an interpretation the interviewees themselves would give to the themes discussed and not push them to react to my own interpretations of them. Later, the interviews were transcribed and analysed. In the analysis I scanned the interviews for common themes the interviewees would hit upon and then tried to combine the different, more specific themes into broader categories. I paid attention not only to what was being said, but also to what was omitted, since this could tell volumes about the limitations news organisations set on innovation and, therefore, on what they will be able to achieve.

My goal was to see how newsroom managers solve the conflict of running the ongoing news organisation, possibly with diminishing resources, and renewing the organisation and innovating. In the analysis it became evident that this conflict manifests itself in the form of three intertwining subconflicts: 1) the conflict of goals, 2) the conflict of leadership roles, and 3) the conflict between freedom and control. In this chapter I will first present each of the three subconflicts with the solutions the interviewees give to them, and then move on to see how these themes fit within the framework of the studies discussed in the previous chapter.

But before moving on to the analysis, it will be useful for the reader to know a little bit about the organisations the interviewees work or used to work for. All the organisations in question were going through an interesting time when the interviews were conducted: the *Guardian* announced its cost-cutting plans and the *Independent* shut down its print edition altogether, while BuzzFeed was striving to become more like the legacy players to be able to run a big newsroom with a consistent news operation.

### **The *Guardian***

The *Guardian* is one of the pioneers of online news. It launched its website in 1999 and was one of the first legacy news organisations to announce a digital-first strategy in 2011. (Küng 2015, 9–12.) In print the *Guardian* falls far behind the other British quality newspapers (Ponsford 2016a), but online it is one of the most popular quality news providers worldwide, overtaking the New York Times by a narrow margin in October 2014 (Küng 2015, 9). It does not operate a paywall online but relies solely on advertising revenue, though several of the

paper's senior managers have hinted at the possibility of making some of the content accessible only to paying members (Ponsford 2016b, MacKenzie 2016).

Guardian News & Media, the company that publishes the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, and the *Guardian's* website, is entirely owned by the Scott Trust. Though the Trust expects the *Guardian* to make a profit in the long run, this ownership structure has made it possible for the company to invest a lot of money in online news in spite of the mounting losses. Nevertheless, in January 2016 Guardian News & Media announced its plan to cut running costs by 20 per cent – some 50 million Pounds – in three years to break even. (The Guardian to cut... 2016.)

### **The *Independent***

The *Guardian* may have been a digital pioneer, but the *Independent* is responsible for the boldest move in British media in 2016: in March it shut down its print newspaper altogether. The *Independent* had been founded in 1986 as a challenger to the established broadsheets, but its readership had fallen dramatically from its heyday (Sillito 2016).

The *Independent* continues to operate online. According to the *Independent*, the main web site, [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk), is profitable (The Independent becomes... 2016). The *Independent* is owned by the Russian businessman Alexander Lebedev and his son Evgeny Lebedev, who bought the paper in 2010. They also own the *Evening Standard*, a free London newspaper with a circulation of 900,000 (Ponsford 2016a). The titles share content with each other.

### **Buzzfeed**

Of the three organisations, BuzzFeed is by far the youngest. It was founded in 2006 by Jonah Peretti, one of the founders of Huffington Post. For years it was Peretti's side project, known (and ridiculed) for its listicles and cat pictures, but in 2011 he quit Huffington Post to run it full-time. (Küng 2015, 55.) Now BuzzFeed boasts 200 million monthly unique visitors.

Originally news was not on BuzzFeed's agenda, but it now wants to become world's leading news source online (Küng 2015, 64). It has eleven international editions in six languages and journalists stationed in more than ten cities around the world. The numbers of the editorial team are not made public, but BuzzFeed UK employs around twenty news journalists.



## 4.1 The three themes

### 4.1.1 The conflict of goals

One of the first things to emerge from the interviews was the problem editors see in combining the requirements posed by the production of a physical newspaper with what it takes to produce digital news. Since innovation mainly happens on the digital side, the way this conflict is resolved is very important for innovation altogether. If, as sometimes still is the case, newspaper is perceived as the main product of an organisation, it is believed to take up all the time the editors have, leaving very little for the development of new functions. The view is put bluntly by the former editor of the *Independent*, Chris Blackhurst:

“The main concern of any legacy organisation is still getting the title produced either each day or each week, depending on whether it’s a daily or a Sunday. All the energy is focused on that. [...] On the editorial side, you don’t have many people who are thinking about strategy and future requirements. I mean, the people who do that are the Editor and the department heads, but quite honestly, they are a hundred per cent occupied with getting the paper out.”

Also, the production of a newspaper is seen to carry with it certain generally accepted requirements that block innovation and change when it comes to what is being reported and how: “Print seems to come with a sense of things you must do”, says Christian Broughton, the Editor of Independent Digital. “There are certain set pieces you can’t not do. So it just removes opportunities on some occasions.”

The fact that the demands set on story choice and style are different in print and in digital may be very confusing for editors and reporters alike. Broughton, who at the time of the interview was preparing his team for the time when the *Independent* no longer exists in print format, pointed out that it is very difficult to be good at the two things at the same time:

“One of the most important learnings about digital I’ve come to over the past three years of doing it is just how different it is from newsprint: rhythm of the day, the type of journalism you produce, the formats of the journalism you produce. To make it perfect for web, it’s got to be different from something that’s perfect for print. It’s always like, if you try to do one piece for two places, there’s always going to be a compromise.”

Broughton’s view is seconded by other interviewees. Sheila Fitzsimons, a media change specialist who used to work in a senior management role at the *Guardian*, says: “If you edit across platforms, I think you probably don’t edit for anything as well as you would’ve done. [...] I think it’s probably much easier if you don’t have a newspaper, or should be much much easier.” Jim Waterson, political editor for BuzzFeed UK, makes a similar point when he

talks about the freedom BuzzFeed has in selecting the stories it will run: “We don’t see the point in being the sixth person to write the exactly same story that you’ve seen.”

How, then, can the problem of conflicting goals be solved? The key is choosing what one does and what one leaves aside. This may seem self-evident, but, honestly, prioritising is something that legacy news organisations are not very good at. According to Paul Johnson, managing editor for the *Guardian*, prioritising had not been a problem at the time when the newspaper was the only product: “[T]here was a certain discipline in that, because there were physical constraints. The pages aren’t elastic.” But when the Internet came along, the constraints vanished:

“We went through a phase when we did feel that some editors were just saying yes, and commissioning and commissioning and commissioning. To the point where we were probably producing too much.”

According to the interviewees, it is rather difficult for many editors, and reporters as well, to stop doing the things they have felt they should be doing. Therefore, communication about the priorities chosen has to be continuous and very clear. This is what Sheila Fitzsimons says, referring specifically to prioritising publishing platforms, but the same could be applied to story choice and other things too:

“I think you have to be really clear about which platforms you are prioritising, so people can feel that, you know, ‘there’s work that I couldn’t do, but I’ve done things I should’ve done’. I think if you’re asking them to think about digital, you don’t bollock them the next day about a story they’ve missed in the paper. [...] The other thing is, I think, that people throw out this ‘do less the better’, but they never say what is less.”

The interviewees also touch upon the subject of how to prioritise. The most important things are knowing your organisation and knowing your audience. Here is Paul Johnson of the *Guardian* again:

“There’s no point for us in doing ten stories on Justin Bieber every day, because there’s another one thousand five hundred out there and why would we do that? But it’s probably the areas where we have some expertise, where we have some creative stuff, that we could build up a little more. [...] What we’re likely to move into is big serious topics that we’ll try to embrace while keeping doing the news, you know, [because] the metabolic rate of the newsroom must not drop.”

Doug Wills, managing editor for the *Evening Standard* and the *Independent*, talks about how the papers have been able to retain their character through change and downscaling. They’ve held on to, for instance, their leading foreign correspondents and thus “kept their pride”: “So that’s the skill – knowing what you’re good at and fostering that.” Christian Broughton

seconds him, saying that innovating for the digital actually forces an organisation to constantly return to its *raison d'être*: "It keeps your principles on the forefront of your mind, because you are constantly thinking about them, you're constantly looking to translate them to a new challenge."

Audience data is clearly an important tool in goal-setting for all of the organisations in question, but the interviewees also highlight that it should be interpreted according to the organisation's fundamental goals. Going for the maximum number of clicks is nothing. For Johnson, of the *Guardian*, the solution is a combination of data and brand: "We know there's a lot of interest in this, and we know our brand." Broughton, of the *Independent*, says "you have to be the right size of you." Also, just going for numbers does not motivate the journalists: "While scale certainly supports the business, it's the journalism that matters to the hearts and minds of the newsroom", Broughton adds.

#### **4.1.2 The conflict of leadership roles**

In the introduction I quoted Sheila Fitzsimons who said that editors "were never really picked for their management skills. They were picked for their news judgement skills." The view is shared by most other interviewees. To be able to lead innovation and change, newsroom managers have to resolve the conflict that arises from the fact that the role of a newspaper editor is very different from the role of a manager in a multi-channel news organisation. Especially when it comes to middle-tier managers, the interviewees paint a picture of people who have been recruited according to criteria belonging to a world lost in time, and who thus retain a role that is not compatible with the demands of their job. The view of the editors' capabilities is, again, put most bluntly by Chris Blackhurst – who more or less thinks not much should be expected of editors when it comes to innovation:

"Don't forget that editors are journalists and their only experience is in journalism. They're not change professionals, they're not management consultants, they're not people who've worked in other sectors. They are first and foremost journalists who have come up through the journalistic system. How you implement operational change is not something editors are usually specially equipped to deal with. [...] They don't hold MBAs or anything like that, they've not been on management courses, they know nothing about management."

According to Fitzsimons, it is especially the middle-tier editors whose role is being disrupted:

"First of all, whenever you want to change things, it really disrupts what they are doing. [...] [They] may have been used to thinking about the newspaper deadline, and what you're asking is often a turn-around. So I think they are the

people who have biggest change and the least time to do it in. And also it often involves a reduction in their role, or a loss of autonomy.”

Nevertheless, running a digital news operation requires new management skills. Paul Johnson points out that whereas a newspaper organisation was linear, a digital organisation is concentrated in the middle. A desk head, for instance, will have to coordinate their work with everyone from a community editor to video desk to SEO people, and this requires network management skills. Furthermore, stories are run not simply from one day to another, but more like projects – this, again, asks for certain capabilities. Lastly, Fitzsimons is quite clear about what kind of skill the middle-tier managers most need most: time management.

“[In the past] people only had about thirty stories a day. [Now] people are having three hundred stories a minute. It’s a bit like people would have gone from fighting a man with a musket to facing a man with a machine gun, and trying to keep themselves the same way, it’s just not going to be possible. Their roles were designed for a different sort of time. I think that might be the issue: more about how do we help them manage their time, and less about how do you get them more information.”

### **4.1.3 The conflict between control and freedom**

Lastly, resolving the conflict between the ongoing operation and innovating for the future requires resolving the conflict between control and freedom. A complex operation like putting out a newspaper needs a complex structure, some interviewees stress, while others think this may not work in digital, and may even hinder creativity.

The ones who most highlight the importance of having a structure are Doug Wills and Chris Blackhurst. Wills puts it like this: “You couldn’t work without that structure, because of the discipline on timings of the daily newspapers and the web, you have to have a structure. It would just be anarchy without it.” Blackhurst adds that, when building strategy, hierarchy also contributes to decisive leadership and bold moves:

“You certainly don’t involve all the journalists in the discussion about how the product should change. That would be disastrous, because everyone would have an opinion and what you actually need is decisiveness and a very clear, bold vision, not something that has been done by a committee.”

The *Guardian*, on the other hand, takes pride in its somewhat flat organisation: three steps will take a reporter to the Editor. There is a structure, but information travels freely and, since there are very few layers, anyone can take a stance to any changes about to be implemented. “There’s less command and control, and that has its advantages and benefits”,

Fitzsimons says. "It's that kind of creative anarchy, really, lots of autonomous people doing what they do the way they think is the best way of doing it."

Unsurprisingly, this is also the way BuzzFeed is run, according to Janine Gibson, the Editor for BuzzFeed UK: "Management structure and culture at BuzzFeed are more akin to classic start-up culture. Journalists are liberated by access to tools and the ability to publish with far fewer processes." However, Gibson, who used to work at the *Guardian* before moving to BuzzFeed, states that this follows almost automatically from the demands of digital news:

"The digital-only newsrooms of the *Guardian* in the US and Australia worked very similarly. There are processes, cultures and ways of working that form almost automatically in digital only newsrooms which mean they all have far more in common with each other than with their print peers."

All the interviewees highlight the importance of granting autonomy to specialist reporters: this will not only boost their work satisfaction, but will also make for better journalism and more innovation. According to Wills, specialists are a great source of ideas, whether they be for stories, series, or campaigns. Christian Broughton talks about "obsessions":

"Everyone has their obsessions. If you allow people to pursue their obsessions, it makes some great journalism. [...] Those traditional beats of journalism, [...] that's a very good way of organising the newsroom for the news editor, but it's not a very human structure. If you know that somebody is obsessed with, I don't know, the oil industry, let them run with it, [...] It makes for better journalism and better distribution and a better relationship with the readers."

For a middle-tier editor, however, working in a less hierarchical organisation will mean giving up control. As Fitzsimons says, in the old days a foreign editor could decide which stories would be run, who would be sent where and even what the headline would say. "Today you wake up in the morning and somebody has already sent a reporter somewhere." According to Fitzsimons, giving up control does not come naturally to the middle-tier editors, but they will have to learn it: "the whole point about Internet is that you have to give up control, really."

Newspaper organisations are often built to minimise errors, which means that traditionally there is little room in their culture for experimentation. Many interviewees recognise that this culture has to be overcome with clear statements of priorities. Whereas in some areas strict control has to be applied, in others it should be discouraged. "We make it an environment where everyone is welcome to contribute, we encourage their ideas, we celebrate their ideas", says Christian Broughton. "You can't have a fear factor in the newsroom. I mean, there is a difference between getting a story wrong, which is something we take incredibly seriously, and trying a new platform, trying a new social network, trying to see if our journalism works in a fresh way."

## 4.2 Implementing the theory

In this chapter I will look at what the different solutions that emerge from the analysis of the interviews look like in the light of the theory of the management of creativity and innovation, presented in chapter 3. The theory is thus used to give the analysis more depth, scope, and generalisability. More specifically, I will first see how the solutions reflect Amabile's (1996) three requirements for creativity: 1) expertise, 2) creativity-relevant skills, and 3) intrinsic motivation. Then I will move on to consider them in the light of the five characteristics of a creative workplace, as researched by Amabile and summarised by Küng (2008); lastly, I will briefly discuss how the interviewees understand innovation, since this will give us important insights into the limitations news organisations place upon themselves.

Of Amabile's three requirements for creativity, expertise is most clearly recognised by the interviewees. Doug Wills sets great importance on specialist journalists in coming up with the important ideas; Christian Broughton, head of the now digital-only Independent, talks about fostering the obsessions of the journalists with the aim of producing better journalism; also BuzzFeed seems to put some stress on nurturing journalists' expertise.

Also, there are a lot of references to the importance of motivating journalists and, moreover, motivating them not with money or clicks, but with the quality of journalism. Broughton refers to this when he says that "it's the journalism that matters to the hearts and minds of the newsroom"; for Johnson, it's knowing the *Guardian's* brand as the one tackling the big, important issues. Jim Waterson, the political editor for BuzzFeed UK, does not see reader numbers as a specifically important issue: on the contrary, his team is working to get big, exclusive stories that would give BuzzFeed "profile" and make it "respected".

Nevertheless, the third of Amabile's requirements, creativity-relevant skills, is absent from the interviews. Though many interviewees highlight the importance of training, and both the *Independent* / the *Evening Standard* and the *Guardian* have extensive training available, the courses referred to seem to concentrate on technical skills.

According to Amabile, "[s]ome creativity-relevant skills [...] depend on personality characteristics. Others, however, may be directly taught through training." (Amabile 1996, 90.) In her studies, she goes into great depth in describing these processes, but for the purposes of this research it will suffice to name the three main categories. First of all, she refers to a cognitive style that is "characterized by a facility in understanding complexities and an ability to break set during problem-solving" (ibid., 88). Secondly, there is "a work style conducive to creative production": evidence suggests that this is characterised by a) an ability to concentrate effort and attention for long periods, b) an ability to let go of failed solutions, c) persistence in face of difficulty, and d) a high energy level and hard work. (ibid, 89.)

These two things, one could argue, are hard to teach through training, or at least would require a long and persistent training that may not be available for employees of a news company. Nevertheless, the third category, knowledge of creativity heuristics, can easily be taught on courses and in workshops. These are “ways of approaching a problem that can lead to set-breaking and novel ideas” (ibid, 89), and they can be either unconscious ways of working or tools of thinking applied consciously. Amabile does not give an exhaustive list of creativity heuristics, but as an example refers to heuristics developed by other theorists, like trying counterintuitive solutions or “making the familiar strange”. For a newsroom aiming for more creativity, training journalists in creativity workshops could be a worthwhile thing to do.

As presented in chapter 3, the five main characteristics of a creative workplace, according to research by Amabile referenced by Küng (2008, 151), are 1) encouragement, 2) challenge, 3) autonomy, 4) resources, and 5) diversity and open communication.

From the analysis of the interviews it could be seen that newsroom managers take encouragement seriously. Most interviewees would bring up the idea of celebrating the successes and failures of the teams, and, furthermore, the importance of not scolding the journalists for things deemed to be of lesser importance. Challenge was also mentioned often: Christian Broughton, for instance, mentioned that journalists “like interesting challenges.” The whole digital transformation was seen by most not so much as a problem but as a challenge. The third point, autonomy, also came up often as an almost naturally occurring characteristic of a digital-only news team.

The question of resources is clearly a tough one for news organisations. The number of journalists in legacy organisations has been diminishing, and, consequently, both the legacy organisations in this research were going through downsizing at the time of the interviews. Clearly this is not an easy time to demand that news organisations allocate more resources and time for innovation. Nevertheless, in most news organisations it is common practice to take a journalist off rotation when they have a brilliant idea that will need more time, and this practice also came up in the interviews.

Openness of communication also came up in the discussions with the people who worked or had worked at the *Guardian*: it was seen as contributing to the organisation’s ability to change. However, not one of the interviewees mentioned team composition or diversity in the newsroom as an issue, though according to Amabile team composition should favour diversity. This could be seen as inconsequential, but, according to a survey conducted in December 2015, British newsrooms are very homogeneous. The study found that 94% of journalists in the UK are white, while the proportion of whites in the whole workforce is 87%; that all major religions except for Judaism and Buddhism are under-represented; that journalism is becoming more and more a profession for the educated middle class; and that though women make up the bigger part of the profession, the majority of editors are men

(Williams 2016). We can only guess how this homogeneity affects the British newsrooms' ability to innovate.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to pay some attention to the way innovation is framed in the interviews. In chapter 3.1 I described how innovations are divided into categories: in the Schumpeterian tradition, these are incremental and radical innovation, and in Christensen's writing, sustaining and disruptive. Most innovation will always be incremental or sustaining, but radical or disruptive innovation is what brings about great change.

All my interviewees framed innovation in terms that limit it to incremental or sustaining innovation. When asked questions about the kinds of innovations that have come up from different teams, or how ideas from the staffers are managed to become innovations, everyone talked about story ideas, formats, series, or the like. Even with the advent of Internet video, everyone was very concentrated on text: the idea of running a podcast or an Internet television show seems too far fetched to come to mind, let alone new products or anything more radical.

It's not inconsequential how innovation is thought of in the newsroom. The market environment of the news media is changing rapidly, and we have already seen how BuzzFeed, a classic disruptor, has been able to take on some of the big news companies on their own turf. More will certainly follow, and thus it is important for the legacy players that they do not set their aims too low. As Küng (2011, 55) writes:

“[E]stablished media organizations who fear they will be outrun by new players in the digital economy should perhaps remember that hotshot new companies do not have a higher creativity quotient than older ones. They simply place fewer blocks in the way of their people acting on their creative drive and insight. The 'old' media have all the necessary resources to innovate and succeed – they just need to liberate them.”



## 5. Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper I set out to find out how running the day to day operation may hinder news organisations' ability to innovate and change. To me, the most striking thing I found out was how we journalists seem to set a cap on our thinking about what we can become. What we are used to doing does not only set restrictions on the way we use our resources, for instance, but more importantly, it seems to limit our imagination.

Granted, it is always difficult to draw conclusions from a sample as small as mine: a handful of interviews with people from just three news organisations. Thus these conclusions should be taken with at least a pinch of salt. Furthermore, the suggestions I am about to present will reflect the views of the people I have interviewed, the culture of their organisations, and their position within those organisations. Moreover, the findings will inevitably be influenced by my own experiences of newsroom management. Though I have tried to come up with suggestions that would have some relevance to people working in different levels of news organisations, they will probably be most relevant to people working in mid-tier management in old newspaper organisations. The suggestions should not be considered to be a one-size-fits-all solution, but a collection of ideas everyone can use to reflect on the way innovation is led in their organisations.

In the introduction I promised to present a list of things a newsroom manager can learn from this paper to overcome the conflict just presented. Following from what was just said, the first item on the list is:

1. **Think bigger.** In a turbulent industry like today's media, threats are many but so are the possibilities. Editors should not think too narrowly about what their organisation's journalism will be.

Nevertheless, the fact that you can try to become anything does not mean you should. It became very evident from both the literature and the interviews that key to finding your place in the new media landscape is knowing, firstly, your strengths and, secondly, knowing your audience. As Paul Johnson of the *Guardian* put it, there's no point in them publishing endless stories on Justin Bieber; instead, the *Guardian* has appointed a full-time immigration correspondent, because "we know there is a lot of interest in this, and we know our brand." Brand carries with it an idea about who your audience is and what you have promised to deliver them. Thus, the second item on the list is:

2. **Know your strengths and know your audience.** In the new media landscape, differentiation is key.

Once you have mastered item two, you are better equipped to tackle the issue of allocating your organisational and personal resources. No matter how big a team you have, and how efficient you yourself are, there are always more stories in the world than you will have time

to cover, and more new tools to master than you will have time to learn. Thus a newsroom must be willing to leave aside stories it would have covered in the past and platforms it has deemed unimportant. Moreover, on a personal level, editors must be able to choose how they use their energy and time – and also, they must be willing to give up some of the decision-making power they have and trust it in the hands of others. Therefore, the third item on my list is:

3. **Prioritise.** You and your team will not have the resources to innovate and change in case you do not accept that there are things you will have to stop doing – both on a personal and an organisational level.

Furthermore, giving up some of your control may have other benefits. Whereas an old newspaper was produced in an organisation where everyone pretty much followed their given brief, a changing digital news organisation will give its journalists more autonomy. This follows from the needs for creativity, for balancing the editors' workload, and for differentiation. In digital, there is no point for a political correspondent to be pushing the same story everyone else has – they will have to be allowed to follow their creative instincts and their “obsessions”, as Christian Broughton put it. Nevertheless, autonomy does not mean anarchy and it needs structures to support it. First of all, to be able to make decisions, autonomous journalists need access to information and tools and the knowledge to use them. Secondly, they need clearly stated goals as to what they are to do with their newly won freedom. Thus:

4. **Understand autonomy.** Give your staffers freedom and respect their expertise, but at the same time help them use that freedom in ways that benefit the goals of the organisation as a whole.

The use of new tools, whether they be analytics tools or distribution platforms or something else, creates a need for constant training of the journalistic staff. Moreover, training is imperative to cultivate a culture where learning new skills is encouraged and expected. To me it was somewhat troubling that most people I interviewed, in both legacy and clean sheet organisations, would trust that their journalists are intrinsically interested in learning new things, and if they are not, at least the Millennials recruited after they are laid off will be. I believe that journalists, like all people, are prone to falling into the comfort of repeating what they already know, and therefore it is important that newsroom managers consciously try to create a culture of learning and progress. Also, it will be beneficial to consider a broad range of capabilities a journalist may need to learn these days: creativity-relevant skills Amabile mentions are one example, time management skills that editors should need to learn, according to Sheila Fitzsimons, are another. The best thing would be to take a personal interest and responsibility for the progress your staffers are making, and thus the fifth item on my list reads:

5. **Take an interest in your staffers' progress.** You should create an atmosphere of progress, try to bring everyone along and help them apply their skills and creativity in the new ecology of news.

Lastly, very few of the things mentioned matter at all if the journalists do not know what you expect from them. Thus, it is very important that newsroom managers pay more attention to communication. The message sent has to be clear and simple and it has to be repeated time after time – as Sheila Fitzsimons puts it, “it’s relentless communication about what matters and why”. And not only is it important that editors really concentrate on the way they communicate their message, they will also have to learn to listen to messages from others, and to facilitate the communication between different parts of the organisation. To a large extent, innovation and creativity reside in the liminal spaces between departments, and thus editors will have to be there to encourage encounters in these spaces and to take up on ideas thus produced. Furthermore, communication is paramount to speed, something that is also important for digital news organisations. So the sixth and final item on my list is:

6. **Simplify, communicate, listen, repeat.** Being innovative and effective at the same time does not work without having clear goals, and even the clearest of goals don’t work if they are not communicated effectively. Moreover, it is not enough that vertical communication works, newsroom managers will have to make sure communication also functions horizontally. This demands skills a newspaper manager probably never had.

This research is a rather superficial take on a wide and complicated issue, and it raises many questions that would require further research. For instance, it would be interesting to learn more about the way innovation is framed in newsroom managers’ thinking. Is it true that it is seen in such a limited fashion as my research suggests? What consequences does this have? And the question about training is another, very concrete one: is it useful to train journalists in new technical capabilities each time a new demand comes along, or should news organisation take another kind of approach into what they think journalists should learn? Is enough being done to ensure that journalists feel like they should and can learn new things? Unfortunately, these questions are out of the scope of this research, but I welcome anyone to take them on, if they wish.

## List of interviews in chronological order

Chris Blackhurst, columnist, former editor of the *Independent*. Interviewed on the phone 26 November 2015.

Sheila Fitzsimons, formerly executive director for transformation at the *Guardian*. Interviewed on the phone 30 November 2015.

Janine Gibson, editor for BuzzFeed UK. Email interview 10 December 2015.

Doug Wills, managing editor for the *Independent* and the *Evening Standard*. Interviewed 16 December 2015.

Paul Johnson, managing editor for the *Guardian*. Interviewed 12 January 2016.

Jim Waterson, political editor for BuzzFeed UK. Interviewed on the phone 11 March 2016.

Christian Broughton, Editor for Independent Digital. Interviewed on the phone 18 March 2016.

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