

Journalists and their audience: a changing relationship?

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Abstract

It has been argued by some that the changes occurring in journalism have led to the audience becoming more important in a journalist's creative process, particularly with newer work practices such as social media and online writing and tools such as Search Engine Optimisation. However, what this paper is contending is that the audience has always been one of the structures that journalists interact with in their creative process.

Using data from a doctoral research project that examined the creative practices of print journalists in Australia, this paper will demonstrate how journalists interact with their audiences throughout the work process from story generation to research, writing, publishing and feedback. The discussion about print journalists and their audiences demonstrates how the audience is important in a journalist's creative process regardless of the platform they write for.

What this paper will also show is that the audience is a structure that both enables and constrains journalists in their creative process. Further, writing for an audience becomes part of a journalist's tacit knowledge (Schön, 1983), thus making the creative process easier.

Introduction:

Changes in the domain of journalism and the expectations of the field in journalism are altering how journalists produce their work with changes in one area, the audience and its interaction with journalists, seemingly becoming more important in journalists' practices (Karlsson, 2011; Wyss and Stoffel, 2011). Christopher Anderson contends that 'a fundamental transformation has occurred in journalists' understanding of their audiences. A new level of audience responsiveness is now being incorporated into the DNA of contemporary news work' (2011, 529). Newer practices such as the increasing use of social media tools and writing in an online environment, both of which give the audience an opportunity to engage with journalists with more immediacy, as well as the increasing significance of search engine optimisation (SEO), may mean journalists are more aware of their audiences, but does this mean the audience has become more important in a journalist's creative process? Findings from a research project that examined how print journalists interact with social, cultural and individual structures to create their work suggest the audience has always been an important component of a journalist's creative process.

This paper draws on data analysed as part of a larger research project that applied the systems model of creativity developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1988; 1997; 2003) to print journalism in Australia to examine the creative processes of print journalists. Csikszentmihalyi contends that, rather than an individual being the sole source of creativity, the individual is one part of a system of three elements that interact to provide the opportunity for a creative outcome: a domain of knowledge – the symbol system or cultural structure – which an individual learns; an individual, who uses the knowledge learned from the domain to produce an outcome; and, a field, which is the social structure comprised of experts who are charged with recognising and

accepting a creative outcome. A creative outcome is achieved when the journalist, as an active agent in the system, and these structures interact.

To gather data for the research project that this paper draws on, thirty-six journalists and editors (See endnote) from Australian newspapers and magazines were interviewed in 2007 and 2008 and three newsrooms (two regional and one metropolitan) were observed in 2009 and 2010. Secondary data in the form of interviews, seminars, lectures, speeches, books and articles was also gathered to provide triangulation to the data. One of the findings that emerged from the data collection and analysis is that the audience, as part of the field of journalism, is one of the crucial structures journalists interact with as part of their work practice. In other words, to tie the argument back to the point of this paper, one of the conclusions from the research showed that the journalists and editors from this research, who considered themselves to be primarily print-based, considered the audience an important element in their practice. Many of the journalists, and editors, also had experience in working in an online environment and were able to provide examples of their interaction with the audience in that capacity.

Therefore, this paper includes findings about journalists and their audience from the research project including a brief discussion on several areas where it can be seen that journalists' work practices are changing in the newer digital environment because of the audience. It also provides a tentative proposal for a future research project in audience research in relation to journalism. What this discussion will show is that regardless of the platform a journalist produces for, the audience is a structure that both enables and constrains journalists in their creative process. Further, writing for an audience becomes part of a journalist's tacit knowledge (Schön, 1983), thus making the creative process easier; as Fulton states 'the tacit knowledge a journalist has allows them to 'do without thinking'' (2011, 12).

The audience

While the term 'audience', as used here, refers to the readers of a publication, the definition of audience within the systems model is broader than that which is typically used in a journalistic context. Csikszentmihalyi defines creativity as 'a phenomenon that is constructed through an *interaction between producer and audience*' (2003, 314, emphasis in original). In other words, when an individual produces something, it is presented to an audience for social validation that it is, indeed, a creative product, with the audience in this context referring to members of the field, including what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'gatekeepers' (1988, 330), those who 'have a better chance than others of incorporating a selected variation into the domain' (ibid.). Examples of gatekeepers for the domain discussed in this paper would include sub-editors, news editors, chiefs-of-staff, editors, etc.

Creativity researcher Keith Sawyer (2012) also discusses the audience in a similar way to Csikszentmihalyi but attempts to distinguish different levels by recognising that within an audience there are varying levels of experience and engagement. Sawyer contends that sociologists have discovered audience members should be classified at different levels, 'depending on their level of expertise and how connected they are to the creators who work in the field' (Sawyer, 2012, 218). Sawyer proposed a concentric model of 'nested audiences' (ibid.) that can be used to explain the different levels of engagement and expertise with 'intermediaries' (what Csikszentmihalyi calls the gatekeepers) in the centre of the nest, with

'connoisseurs' in the second circle, 'amateurs' in the third circle and 'the public' as the outer circle.

Sawyer describes the intermediaries as the members of the audience who initially select what they believe to be worthy of inclusion in the domain. In journalism's case, the intermediaries could include the previously listed gatekeepers. The creative contribution is then passed outward to connoisseurs, then amateurs and finally to the public. Connoisseurs are defined as those who 'have been socialized into the domain, almost as thoroughly as the intermediaries of the field' (Sawyer, 2012, 218–219). Sawyer maintains that connoisseurs know almost as much about the domain as the intermediaries – they know how it works and are active and opinionated.

Amateurs are people who have had exposure to the domain, typically in childhood and in school, and continue to participate and engage with the domain but not at a high level. Finally, the public are the audience who appear to have less control over what initially gets 'recognized, distributed, and valued' (Sawyer, 2012, 220), although Csikszentmihalyi carefully notes that different fields have varying levels of audience engagement with one conclusion that he made particularly applicable to journalism: 'For mass-market products... the field might include not only the small coterie of product developers and critics, but the public at large' (2003, 324).

While Sawyer did not specifically examine journalism in his analysis of audiences, a number of his contentions about the importance of an audience can be discussed in relation to journalism. For example, Sawyer noted intermediaries in a field often monitor audience numbers and, in many domains, these numbers are 'a key measure of "success"' (2012, 221). This is particularly relevant in journalism, with a number of academics (McManus, 1994; Underwood, 1993) arguing that the exercise of market-driven journalism, which suggests audiences are a commodity to sell to advertisers, means an audience is highly relevant to a publication's success and continued viability. Turnbull is blunter: 'For the commercial media, audiences mean money... It is therefore hardly surprising that newspapers, magazines and other print media pay a great deal of attention to circulation figures as a measure of their commercial success' (2006, 81). Machin and Niblock state that an audience is a limitation on a journalist because 'news must be designed for specific target audiences' (2006, 6) a statement agreed with by Schultz (1998) who, while investigating the 'Fourth Estate' ideal in Australian journalism, found journalists were very aware of the importance of the audience but felt that their autonomy was restricted by their readers. It is possible to argue against Machin and Niblock's and Schultz's statements and state that an audience can also be enabling, meaning a knowledge of the audience and its preferences can assist a journalist's creative process.

Sawyer also claimed that what the public chooses to engage with only has an 'indirect influence on future creative works' (2006, 130) but the above argument regarding market-driven journalism would suggest the audience in journalism is one of the important influences on what gets published. Conley and Lamble, for example, suggested many of the newer lift-out sections in newspapers have been developed to appeal to a younger demographic and thus increase circulation (2006, 44). Issues such as the 'dumbing down' of the media (Randall, 1996; Tapsall and Varley, 2001), where journalists are encouraged to aim stories at the 'most vulgar interests of the public' (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, 2001, 134), and the implications of the rise of the Internet with audiences having access to multiple sources of news, has led to the industry changing the way it reports both in terms of content and the structure of news stories. Therefore, this paper argues that in journalism, the audience is a significant influence in deciding future creative works although, to continue earlier contentions, it is only one part of the system.

Discussion

During the interviews and observation for the research project, the journalists and editors frequently referred to the audience as a structure that they interacted with throughout their creative process. During the interviews, respondents discussed how they viewed the audience and what effect this view had on their practice. They noted how the audience contributed story ideas, how important audience feedback was in both their own production process and for the publication, and how their work was edited because of the audience, both directly and indirectly. Observation of the three newsrooms showed high levels of interaction with the audience, albeit different types of interaction, with the regional publications having a more intimate relationship with their readers. In the regional newsrooms, there was a high, personal interaction between the members of the newsroom and the audience with face-to-face contact as well as phone calls and emails. Kathryn Bowd found that country newspaper journalists are more involved with their audience because of the work environment: 'they [journalists] live and work within that community, often participate in community organizations and are accessible to their audience in their professional environment' (2005, 126–127). Evidence supporting Bowd's comment was found in the observation of newsroom NR1: a senior journalist recalled advice her first editor at the paper had shared about working at a community paper, while the intimate knowledge NR1's journalists and editor had of their circulation area helped in their production. Further, observations showed how the audience accessed the journalists in NR1:

Senior journalist told as a young journalist that at a community paper the story you write today will be published tomorrow and you could be having dinner with them tomorrow night (Fulton, 2009–2010 – Day 3).

The staff know their area well, know residents. When looking for contacts, eg for HSC story, at least one staff member knows the principal's name or another contact (Fulton, 2009–2010 – Day 1).

Journalist tells Junior cadet she is the 'meeter and greeter' because her desk is at the front. Try to shield Editor as much as possible – get stories from public and pass them on to Editor. Journalist says public think they have a right to the editor (Fulton, 2009–2010 – Day 3).

This last observation has been noted by Bowd (2005) and Kirkpatrick (2002) who both discussed how non-metropolitan audiences believe they own their local newspaper and expect a high level of access to an editor. Meanwhile, in NR2, as a metropolitan newspaper, there seemed little evidence of the editor engaging directly with the public and the newsroom received most of their feedback via online comments or emails, although there were also phone calls received at the news desk about stories. Audience reaction to one particular story during the time of the observation led to discussions between the senior staff about a follow-up, thus providing evidence of how the audience can assist in the story generation process:

Good audience feedback on certain stories – audience ringing up asking questions about weekend story. (Later) News editor and Chief-of-staff wonder should there be follow up to [article title deleted] – lots of audience reaction (Fulton, 2010 – Day 1).

Reader feedback in this newsroom, though, was not always positive. A senior journalist told how she found some feedback quite threatening with readers sometimes using personal insults to comment on a story via the publication's website.

Negative audience feedback is not a new phenomenon in journalism but the ability for readers to reply to journalists' contributions via an online portal, and to reply anonymously, has meant that journalists have censored themselves. There have been instances in the British media environment, for example, where some women are censoring their writing because of violent, misogynistic comments made on articles they have written. Eleanor O'Hagan, a freelancer for *The Guardian*, wrote that she is aware her writing changed because of abuse: '...very early on, I became conscious of how my opinions would be received and began watering them down, or not expressing them at all' (in Hasteley, 2011).

During the discussion about negative audience interaction in NR2, another journalist in the conversation revealed how he dealt with such comments:

Journalist contacts his nasty feedback deliberately and politely thanks them for their input. They are usually sheepish when contacted (Fulton, 2010 – Day 1).

This journalist from NR2 also agreed that he tailored his writing to the audience because the audience is, 'very important. But at the same time I'm not going to write something that I don't believe'.

This comment by the journalist in NR2 about the importance of the audience was a common theme throughout the interviews. One of journalism's basic tenets, and a core lesson in journalism education, is to keep the reader in mind when writing (Conley and Lambie, 2006; Maskell and Perry, 1999; Sheridan Burns, 2002). However, some research has argued that journalists are often unaware of the characteristics of the audience they are writing for (Allan, 2004; Ewart, 1997; Schudson, 1997; White, 2005). Baker's (1980) research into how journalists learn and apply the news priorities of their organisation included a question that asked the sample about their perception of their readership. Baker found that out of the forty journalists he interviewed for the research, very few had specific information about the audience of their publication. However, Baker also found journalists understood the importance of learning how to write in the style of the publication, which is typically tailored with an audience in mind. From these two seemingly contradictory findings, Baker concluded journalists did appreciate that knowing and understanding the audience was crucial in a journalist's work. Gans, on the other hand, agreed with Baker's first contention, that is, journalists worked with little knowledge of their audience, but took this idea of lack of interest further: 'they had little knowledge about the actual audience and rejected feedback from it. Although they had a vague image of the audience, they paid little attention to it; instead, they filmed and wrote for their superiors and for themselves' (1980, 230). This comment by Gans was seemingly confirmed by an answer from J4 who, when asked if his work had been edited because of audience feedback, replied:

I guess that all stories are edited because of your audience because, again as a general news reporter going back to that news sense, populist perception, someone further up the line than you, who may or may not, probably do, they have a sharper news sense and they will edit accordingly probably to reach more people (J4, i/v, 2007).

So, while J4's remark appeared to support Gans because he deferred to his superiors' knowledge, J4's comment became a confirmation of the earlier contention about the importance of the audience to a publication, with J4 deferring to the detailed knowledge senior staff have about their readership. In fact, out of nine editors in this study who were asked about their publication's audience, nine indicated the audience was the highest priority in choosing what was to be published.

Within the cohort for this research, journalists who were asked about the audience for their publication provided mixed answers: some knew the specifics about who they were writing for, with answers such as 'families', 'our local community, all ages', 'decision-makers', '35–49 year old male, professional, AB', but others were unsure. J8 laughed and replied, 'Hypothetical?' (interview, 2007). However, when asked how important the audience were in their writing, nine out of the twelve journalists said the audience was a factor in their writing process. One of the other three journalists, while claiming the audience did not feature in his work process ('I don't think about my audience when I write. I will write what I believe to be the best treatment of any possible story for myself' (J2, interview, 2007)) did note he was aware of stories that would not get published because 'they're [management] pitching at this particular audience' (ibid.). J2's second comment provides support for Baker's (1980) claim that learning the style of the publication ensures the audience is targeted. J2's comment is an example of how journalists internalise what is required of them and can write without consciously thinking about it. It is this tacit knowledge (Schön, 1983) that enables a journalist to 'do without thinking', with the individual, as agent, making creative choices in interaction with the structures of the system, in this case the audience.

A number of the editors and journalists interviewed (E1, E2, E3, E9, E11, E12, J8, J9, J14, J16, J19) worked at community newspapers and when asked how they decided if a story was newsworthy, each of them noted the importance of the audience. E3, for example, said:

As a community newspaper, we are unashamedly only interested in how it affects our community. If writing for, say, a State-based paper, the focus would be more general, and not as personal. State planning policy is a good example. *The Sydney Morning Herald* would run a general story about the changes to the policy, the [publication name deleted] would look at how those changes affect our local council and developers (E3, i/v, 2007).

In a 2008 Boyer lecture, media owner Rupert Murdoch spoke of his views of how important the audience is to his publications:

When I was growing up, this was the key lesson my father impressed on me. If you were an owner, the best thing you could do was to hire editors who looked out for your readers' interests—and give these readers good honest reporting on issues that mattered most to them (in Boyer Lectures, 2008).

In a later speech, Murdoch further emphasised the reader's importance but also what he believes happens when a publication ignores their audience:

I can't tell you how many papers I have visited where they have a wall of journalism prizes – and a rapidly declining circulation. This tells me the editors are producing news for themselves instead of news that is relevant to their customers (in Newsroom America staff, 2010).

Murdoch's comment relates to an argument Stockwell made about how some members of the mainstream media have an 'elitist attitude' (2004, p. 16) to audiences, that is, thinking that they know better than their audience, with some journalists continuing to believe in the top-down model of mass media where communicators have the power to control meaning through selecting and processing information that is to be transmitted to an audience. While this perception may hold in some instances, analysis of the data in this research indicated that this cohort, both journalists and editors, understood the importance of the audience in their production process via feedback from the audience and within the editing process.

For example, J2, J3, J4, J7, J8, J14 and J16 each said they had received feedback from the audience via email, online comments or letters, both positive and negative, on such things as stories, writing style and errors in stories. J4, for instance, has had positive feedback on his writing: 'I have had some positive comments on my turn of phrase in my weekly columns ... I try to use sayings I've heard over the years that aren't yet cliché' (J4, interview, 2007) while J14 had the opposite when she received a letter from a reader who had an issue with how she had used commas in a story: 'She wrote a lovely letter saying, "just thought I'd let you know, this is how we were taught and this is the right way to do it"' (interview, 2007).

The interview data also showed how editors use audience feedback to encourage readership. E3 remarked how audience feedback dictated the content in the publication, a point taken further by E15, whose magazine depends highly on reader response:

It would not affect our work, as we think we know our community. Audience feedback may influence content in general though. For example, the [publication name deleted] carries [section deleted], which is popular with our readers, though many regional papers do not (E3, interview, 2007).

Every week we rely on the readers' feedback to determine what they like – what covers they will buy, what covers they won't and that affects what stories we write in the future (E15, interview, 2008).

While a number of the journalists interviewed noted their work was edited indirectly because of the audience (that is, they internalised the publication's expectations of what was expected of them and wrote accordingly), there were also examples in the data of direct editing because of audience input. An editor and a journalist in this cohort both provided examples of how the way they reported court cases was directly edited because of the audience's sensibilities. E3 said, 'we have been taken to task for being too graphic' (interview, 2007) while J24 provided an example of how management's perceptions of the audience of her publication changed the rules about what could and could not be reported:

Many moons ago, when I was covering court, we stopped reporting 'minor' sexual assault/abuse stories, and cut down the detail in those we did cover, simply because they were too 'distasteful' for our readers over breakfast. It was a shame because it downplayed the problem (J24, interview, 2008).

J24's account illustrates how an audience, as part of the field of journalism, can influence content. The audience, as one part of the system of journalism, joins other members of the field in supporting, or enabling, a journalist's production both directly, such as in story generation, and indirectly, including providing guidelines for what is to be published. In this instance, the audience has influenced other members of the field, that is, management, with the result that a

structure in the domain changed. This meant that J24, and other journalists on J24's publication, needed to consider these changed structures in their production process so their product was acceptable to the field. E14 also provided an example of how the audience is considered when decisions are made about what articles are made available on the publication's website:

You write shorter pieces and punchier bits. Still the facts, but it can't be as long because people aren't going to read long bits of text online. So, you just want to get the message across quickly. For example, yesterday I went to a press conference and I came back and wrote about 350 words and that's about as long as you can write. You can just include all the main facts in that and if they want to know more they can read it in the magazine (interview 2008).

E14's decision to limit online articles to shorter versions of the full story seems to contradict academic sources (Randall, 1996, p. 212) who claim that there is little restriction on the capacity of online publishing. However, what this decision shows is how intimately E14 understands the publication's audience; she has recognised the 'criteria of selection, the preferences of the field' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 47), in this case, the audience as part of the field, necessary in the production of a creative contribution.

A number of the respondents were involved in writing for the online version of their publication and discussed how writing an article for the online version required different considerations to get an audience to read. J6 noted how online writing has changed because of the nature of the Internet and how the audience reads news online:

... airy-fairy really creative intros are no good to me because on most of our pages we have a one paragraph [inaudible], which is the 'get people in' paragraph. And what might work on a page where the rest of the words follow on and the headline is there, the picture's there and it all works in a package, doesn't necessarily then work online... You've got to make people want to read the rest of it 'cause the rest of it is not there in front of them. They actually have to click to read the rest of it (J6, interview, 2007).

Another respondent, commenting on how working in an online environment affected his writing style, inadvertently referred to the importance of the audience as part of his production process:

As far as the output of news is concerned, news style and writing style [online], I suppose you can get a little more relaxed but not that much because you still work for the publication (J1, interview, 2007).

J1's inclusion of the publication in his comment further illustrates how crucial the audience, as part of the field, is in a journalist's production: journalists need to remember the audience they are writing for. While it could be argued here that the audience is constraining, even in the more relaxed style of online writing, it should also be seen that the audience is also enabling in this instance. Without the innate knowledge of his publication's audience, this journalist would find it difficult to produce work that is appropriate for the publication. In other words, the audience provides one of the frameworks that can also support a journalist in their creative process.

Conclusion:

While there are arguments that audiences are fundamentally changing how journalists produce their work, what this paper has argued is that an audience has always been a crucial structure

that journalists interact with during their creative process. Journalists and audiences interact throughout the work process from story generation to research, writing, publishing and feedback. While newer technologies such as social media and other online interaction between journalists and their audience have provided a more immediate interaction, the research project this paper is drawn from reinforced the idea that journalists are aware of the audience they write for even if it is an unconscious process. In other words, the audience, as one part of the system of journalism, and the knowledge of the audience, becomes part of a journalist's tacit knowledge (Schön, 1983).

Further, it seems the audience is important to journalists' creative process regardless of the platform used. With this in mind, audiences and journalists' interaction with audiences was also identified as an area that could be researched as part of a post-doctoral research project. A suggestion for future research that emerged out of the doctoral research was to apply the findings from this research on print journalism to newer forms of journalism in an attempt to discover how journalists create their work as they interact with the different social and cultural structures that newer forms of journalism provide. The relevance to this paper is that one part of the study could be an analysis of several publications' 'Most Viewed' listing, which quantitatively selects the stories that audiences read and lists these stories on the publication's website in order of popularity. An examination of these lists could provide insight into how the audience is affecting news practices, such as headline writing and what to include in the first par of a news story, and how news workers produce the news for an online audience. This information would offer valuable knowledge into how the rules, conventions, techniques, guides and procedures of the domain of journalism have changed, or are changing, because of new technology.

Endnote

Editors and journalists in this research were interviewed anonymously and each was allocated a code: journalists' codes started with a 'J' (J1, J2, etc.) and editors' codes started with an 'E' (E1, E2, etc.). Any quotes from secondary data have been attributed as information is in the public domain. The three newsrooms were coded as NR1 (regional, community paper), NR2 (metropolitan) and NR3 (regional, community paper).

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