

The influence of newsroom layout on news

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Although valuable empirical research had been done on individual journalists, aspects of some of the results in international surveys remain puzzling at times. This paper argues that organisational and institutional factors should be taken into account to make the existing data more meaningful. An approach to this is suggested in this study of the new news room of the *West Australian* in Perth, and comparing it to the news rooms of a German regional newspaper. By looking at the *West Australian's* new news room, the link age between news room layout and final print product becomes clearer.

While much attention has been given to journalists as primary gatekeepers of news, attention has also been directed towards news as “the product of practicalities and constraints of the processes by which it is created” (Berkowitz 1997, p.vii). In other words, the focus has broadened from the individual to the organisational. The research reported in this article aims to add to understanding of the impact of organisational structure by looking at the new newsroom of Perth’s morning daily newspaper, the *West Australian*.

The micro issue of news room layout offers an important insight into news room culture, especially when looked at on a comparative basis with other countries. In Australia, the final print product is

the result of a finely-tuned, if enforced, team effort. In Germany, by contrast, the final product is the sum of individual efforts which, to exaggerate slightly, happen to be contained in one edition.

Research into newsroom work practices

The value of newsroom studies has been the subject of some debate. It has centred on the question of the individual (i.e. journalists' influence on news) versus the institutional (i.e. the media organisation as a whole). The two poles of discussion in the US were articulated by S. Robert Lichter and Herbert J. Gans. (Esser 1998, p.31)

Lichter concluded from a survey of journalists that news judgment is subjective and that decisions about sources, news pegs and the use of language will partly "reflect the way a journalist perceives and understands the social world." (Lichter 1987, p.31) Gans held that the institutional sphere's influence was too strong for subjective opinion to penetrate. (Gans 1985, p.29)

Pitching the individual against the institutional leaves out the intermediate level — the organisational. Kepplinger (who originated the concept of comparative workpractice studies in which I am currently engaged) wrote in a conclusion to the first comparative study of British and German journalists that "[t]he editorial structures probably have a significant impact on the final product ... although this aspect has not yet been systematically investigated." (Kepplinger & Köcher 1990, p.292). This was almost a decade ago.

Today we know a lot more about the individual, that is about journalists, thanks to the work of people like Weaver, Henningham and many others. In exploring "the global journalist", Weaver came to the conclusion that the surveys which have been conducted so far are valuable in establishing basic characteristics of journalists such as age, gender, minority representation and education levels. However, with questions such as journalistic autonomy or watch-

dog role on governments, it is far more difficult to establish meaningful data, since some of the figures blatantly contradict observable everyday practice. For example, journalists in the People's Republic of China said they thought it was more important to be the watchdog on government than did journalists in France or Canada. (Weaver 1998, p.466)

A broadened research basis is needed to align already existing data with a supporting context, and the area most conducive to further empirical research is newsroom practice. In their 1986 study, Weaver and Wilhoit pointed to the organisational environment as being highly predictive of journalists' role orientations. (Weaver & Wilhoit 1986, p.117; also Shoemaker & Reese 1996, p.5). Furthermore, they saw the newsroom environment as "extremely important in the ethical decisionmaking." (p.137). This point was reiterated in the findings on Brazilian journalists who "[i]n sum . . . perceived their organisational contexts, which include journalistic training, newsroom routines, more experienced editors, more experienced reporters and other peers, as the most influential factor in their conceptions of ethics." (Herscovitz & Cardoso 1998, p.427)

Breed's 1955 classic, "Social control in the newsroom" (re-printed in Berkowitz, 1997), came to the conclusion that a journalist looks to his colleagues and superiors, not the public, for recognition: "In stead of adhering to societal and professional ideals, he redefines his values to the more pragmatic level of the newsroom group." (p.120)

Breed further concluded that this produces results insufficient for wider democratic needs. More recent research has abandoned this kind of openly normative approach in favour of more guarded semantic signifiers, such as labelling newsroom routines as a "set of constraints". (Shoemaker & Reese 1996, p.105) This still pitches the individual in conflict with the organisational and/or the institutional. However, there is also increasing recognition of the fact that "[p]rofessionalism and (bureaucratic business) organisation can not

be conceived as being opposite poles on a continuum of freedom and control." (Soloski 1989, p.142)

In fact, looking at the changes to the newsroom layout at the *West Australian*, as an aspect of organisational structure, it becomes obvious that there is a conscious attempt to lessen this inherently conflictual situation of freedom (individual) and control (organisational/institutional).

A comparative angle

When discussing the surveys of journalists in many countries, Weaver, in his introduction to data assembled in *The Global Journalist*, found the patterns of similarities and differences "striking and intriguing in their variety." (Weaver 1998, p.6) Hidden behind this phrase is the fact that the world of journalists does not divide neatly into East and West, or into democratic or non-democratic countries. There were as many dissimilarities between Western European nations as there were similarities.

The former came compellingly to my attention when I visited a German regional newspaper, the *Mainzer Allgemeine Zeitung*, in June 1998. The newsroom layout, and the work practices could hardly have been more different to those I had experienced in Australia. Most rooms, off on either side of a long corridor, with firmly closed wooden doors, had no more than one or two work stations. The sports department, with six work stations, had the largest number of computers in one office.

Via the pagination system, into which the dummy had been fed, the German journalists know exactly how many centimetres they have to fill. They write their story from beginning to end, and add their own heading and any captions needed. No-one touches the article once it has been lodged by the journalist. No sub-editor or editor checks it. This is a pattern common to most German regional dailies. (Esser 1998, p.390)

In other words, the German and the Australian systems, or for that matter the British system on which the Australian is modelled, are significantly different. Even if almost identical percentages of Australian and German journalists state that they want to report news quickly (74% and 73% respectively) and want to provide analysis (71% and 74% respectively) (Weaver 1998, p.466), they do so under considerably disparate organisational structures. These differences are reflected in the layout of their news rooms. I therefore would like to suggest that news room layout can be used as a paradigm for newsroom culture.

The newsroom at the *West Australian*

Over the Easter weekend of 1998, Perth's daily newspaper the *West Australian* moved from its location at Forrest Centre, off St Georges Terrace, in the CBD to its newly built premises at Herdsman Lake, eight kilometres north of its previous location. The move, described by the editorial manager as a move to a more efficient operation, but less efficient location, was economically motivated.

The *West Australian* had moved in 1987 to Forrest Centre while being under the ownership of Robert Holmes a Court (who had bought the paper in 1987 from the Herald and Weekly Times/Murdoch), and who also owned the building. After the stockmarket crash, Holmes a Court sold the paper to Alan Bond, and the building to the State Government Insurance Office (SGIO). When Bond was declared bankrupt in 1991, the banks were in receivership of the *West Australian* and its associated country papers which in January 1992 were floated. With the Forrest Centre building owned by the SGIO, the *West Australian* found itself in rented accommodation.

Before the move to the Forrest Centre, the *West Australian's* address had been 125 St Georges Terrace, in premises custom-built

for the paper in the early 1930s. All editorial sections there except photo to graphic had been on one floor. Forrest Centre, which can be described as approximating an octagonal shape, offered less space per floor, and the departments were distributed over three floors. On the first were photo to graphic and design, on the second business and features, and on the third were the editor, general (news), foreign, sport, the leader writer and the cartoonist.

On the third floor of Forrest Centre, which offered splendid views over the Swan River, the Narrows Bridge, the offices of senior staff, including the news conference room, were situated along the window front. General was towards the river side of the building, with the chief-of-staff at its centre. Sport, and the work stations for subeditors, were towards the St George's Terrace side of the building. The floors were connected by lift only — there were no stairs — which was perceived as an additional barrier.

So much for the old. The present research examines the impact of the new newsroom on editorial staff. Information was gained through individual interviews with a range of journalists, including reporters, sub-editors and editorial executives. At least one journalist from each section of the newspaper was interviewed.

The new Newspaper House at Herdsman Lake is rectangular in shape, containing within it a long rectangular entrance, like an open air atrium, before one steps into the building. This means that photographic and the library are on the same floor as the newsroom, but on the other side of the atrium.

Given again the chance to design a news room, the West Australian opted for one large floor. The editor, Paul Murray, made the point that, in drawing up the plan, every one was consulted. However for most staff the level of consultation was at the "micro" level — that is, concerning the size and design of their own work stations.

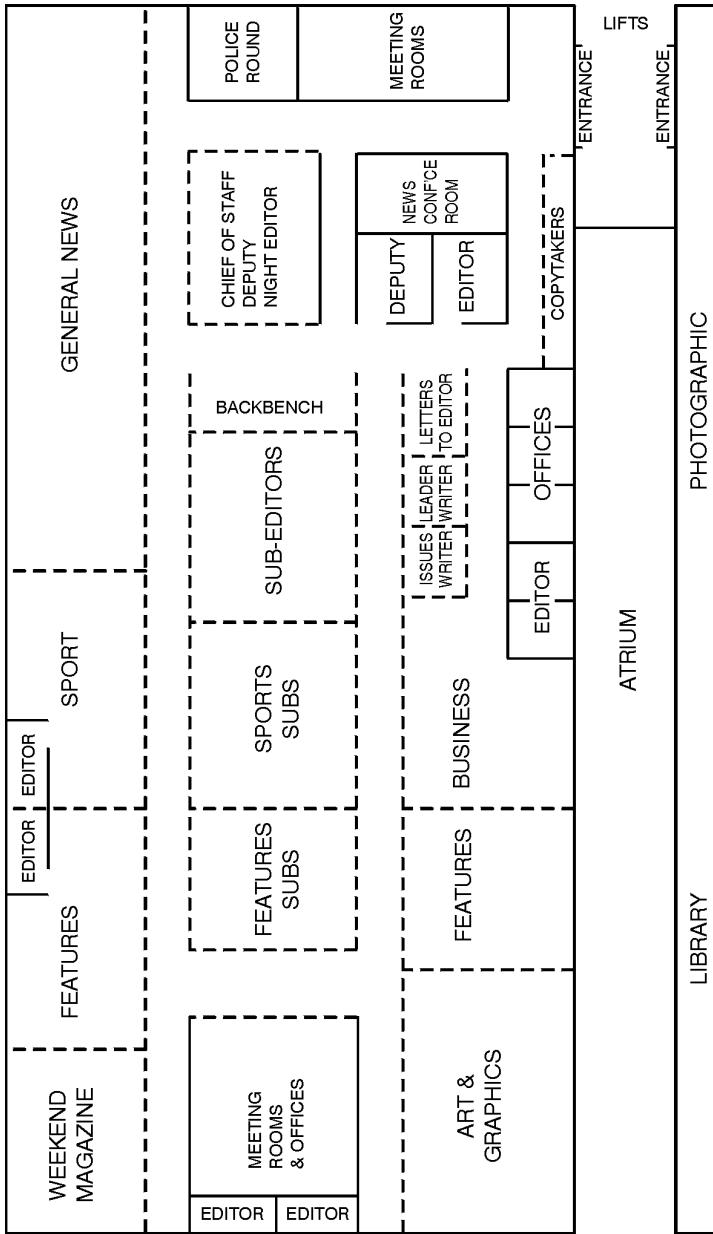
As the rationale behind joining everyone on one big news floor, Paul Murray primarily pointed to the earlier “geographical isolation” of the various sections, including the library, which led to their not being used or interacted with to their fullest potential. As Paul Murray put it, “our principal wish was that everyone be together. That was our first design imperative.” (Paul Murray, 4 Nov ’98)

The idea of greater staff cohesiveness seems to have been successful. Everyone I talked to welcomed the new newsroom’s possibilities for interaction, especially the staff in those sections which were previously removed from the decision centres. I did get the odd ironic statement, though, mentioning that “even if they [in the news department] still don’t talk to us, at least we can talk to them”. There was overall agreement that the new layout made communication easier, and more personal, since it now was frequently done face to face rather than by phone or email message.

Other major changes in the new design were to bring the artroom more into the newsroom, and to position the sub-editors as a “central core” down the middle of the building, “much more into the path of reporters.” (Murray, 4 Nov ’98) Moving the sub-editors was a deliberate strategy, aimed at easing their isolation and improving on their previous work environment — a choice of either staring at one’s own screen or at the back of another sub’s computer. In their new location in quadrants, they can talk more easily to each other and to reporters. Paul Murray remarked with pleasure that he sees reporters far many more times standing with sub-editors, discussing the treatment of their stories.

This results in a change in culture, away from the old adversarial roles played by subs and reporters. But it is not a sudden change: Murray says he has tried to change the sub-reporter relationship since taking over as editor in 1989. But it was only now that the change could be given physical expression in having the sub-editors forming the spine of the room.

Figure 1: The new newsroom of the West Australian



Also of importance is the relationship between sub-editors and section editors. The cooperation between editor and sub-editor was particularly noticeable in Foreign and Sport. The foreign editor who, on the whole, works tirelessly from wire services, is in constant consultation with his chief sub-editor, who is also his deputy. Similarly the sports editor (heading a department of 28 people), named his chief sub-editor as his main discussion partner.

According to Murray, putting the sub-editors along the centre of the building is also aimed at greater productivity. The same drive towards multi-skilling, which can be observed in newsrooms around the world, is here at work. Sub-editors are encouraged to be flexible, and in particular are able to give assistance to other editorial sections.

The open news room floor underlines the ease with which sub-or reporters can move or be moved from place to place. But this also applies to senior staff. I happened to do my research at the *West Australian* at a time when the editor was overseas, and everyone, except for the chief-of-staff, had played musical chairs. The deputy editor was editor, the night editor was deputy editor, the news editor night editor etc. In a working environment, which produces a fresh product six days a week when most people only work five, this flexibility seems entirely appropriate.

This also puts the question of job autonomy, raised earlier in comparison with the German system, in a new light. The assessing of autonomy should possibly be weighed against available responsibilities. If the lines of responsibility are kept fluid, with certain tasks not permanently appropriated by certain people, then the clearly drawn work demarcation lines exemplified by the one person offices in Germany, seem unnecessary. Responsibilities are bestowed as part of a flexible system, which expects people to take them on — or hand them over — due to the incongruity of people's working week or year and the 24-hour nature of news.

Impact of interactions between departments

In conducting my research I could not help realising that in expecting the newsroom would impact on the product, I may have put the cart before the horse. If restructuring of the news room is to result in changes in the product (the content of the *West Australian*), such changes are evident only to a small degree as yet, although they may filter through in time. For the moment, it is far more evident that the new newsroom formalised changes which had recently been initiated.

The return of the features department to the same news floor is, in part, recognition of the importance of entertainment segments to the paper. In Australian newspapers the percentage of entertainment in features and lift-outs over the last decade has increased by 7 per cent (while news has decreased by 8 per cent), as highlighted by Grattan (1998, p.26) This phenomenon has been observed in other countries, including Germany. (Kepplinger 1998)

The features editor is in no doubt that his department has benefited most from being on the same floor. Apart from the fact that the other staff can see "that we work as hard as they do and don't drink champagne all day," he notices a far greater cross-fertilisation between news and features. Features now can alert news to a good general story, and they also can add to the creative input.

Putting the arts and design department on the same floor is a further great advantage for features which, of all the departments, interacts most with art, layout and design staff. These now attend news conferences. (The features editor began attending conferences some six months before the move.) In the morning news conference, the features editor gives notice of the pointers he needs on the front page, and what the main stories of the day's lift-out are.

The sports department, too, although previously on the same floor, feels more included. With senior staff of fices being part of the

central spine, consciously offering an “open door policy”, as Murray put it, sport finds it easier to talk to editorial people. According to deputy sports editor Trevor Gilmour (interview 22 Oct '98) this has resulted in sport stories getting more frequently into a prominent place outside their own section, especially page 1 (and the tabloid *West Australian*'s front page has room for only two stories).

The compartmentalisation which had been in place, due to the geographical separation of departments, is breaking down. The newspaper “dummy” still allocates space to departments, but where a story eventually finds its place is now more open.

The accessibility of photographic, layout and design has led to a greater involvement of these departments in the working of some staff. For example, the foreign editor now gets the first batch of potentially interesting wire photos when he comes in at around 10a.m., rather than searching later for the pictures to go with the stories. This does not mean that the stories are now pictorially driven, although an element of this may have come to bear on the selection. (According to foreign editor P.T. Singham, the availability of pictures makes the choice of stories easier, as the choice between stories of similar level of interest can be made on the strength of the photo.)

The department which appears to have been least affected by the changes is news (or general, as it is called at the *West Australian*). The chief-of-staff is now, as it were, sidelined, looking down on his reporters from a kind of raised commando bridge, rather than being at their centre as before. Apart from his seating, little has changed. Whether this constancy can be interpreted as meaning that news is an area of stagnation, not affected by new ideas or changes, is open to discussion. News, as research has shown (Grattan 1998, p.26), is fighting a battle for the attention of the public, and has to prove its relevance. The breaking down of barri-

ers between various segments of the paper might be, in the long run, more a benefit to them than a danger.

Conclusions

For the moment, the new newsroom exemplifies rather than generates the changes which are occurring in the news product. These product changes — higher profile of features, more emphasis on layout — preceded rather than followed the move to Herdsman Lake. But they have been maintained and strengthened. Other changes, such as a continuing breaking down of barriers between sections, may possibly be observed in the future.

The new floor design emphasises flexibility and transparency. Job autonomy, in places like Germany, is achieved by strict segregation of jobs which, in turn, are entirely one person's responsibility. At the *West Australian* the reverse is the case. By expecting staff to take on — or hand over — responsibilities, which are linked to a position rather than a person, the feeling of being stuck in one employment situation does not arise easily.

Surveys on journalists may produce similar answers to questions, but the way meaning is given to criteria such as job autonomy can be very different in deed. Without a closer look at the organisational level these embedded differences will not be revealed.

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