

**Media Anthropology Network
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E-Seminar 55

"It's like a family!" - The unity and community of journalists. On connections between newsrooms and how journalists share a community of practice

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Hello medianthro list.

I hope you have had a chance to read the paper by Line Hassall Thomsen.

Thank you to John, Philip and Veronica for inviting me to start off discussion of Line's paper: "It's like a family!" - The Unity and Community of Journalists: On studying connections between newsrooms".

It was a pleasure to read this derivation of Line's major ethnographic project, which I've been familiar with for some years. This larger ethnographic examination of television news production, involving observation and interviewing over a long period with extensive follow-up, seems to me one of the most thorough and original television news ethnographies of recent times. The paper develops a concept of distinct, competing, newsrooms being connected "by way of everyday practice-communities", whereby friendly, respectful bonds with other journalists shape ideals of "good journalism" more than do internal management structures and pressure from immediate peers. The community of practice concept is a helpful theory upon which to develop explanation of the pronounced links of affinity which Line observed stretching across institutional boundaries and this work starts to unpick the social dimensions of news work in very interesting new ways.

I find Line's observation that "I see journalists as never only engaged in creating media but also always engaged in producing themselves as social persons in relation to others" a particularly valuable insight, reminding us that news production is far more than a 'routine' driven process with varying degrees of influence from micro and macro level forces on the implementation of those routines; it is a highly public, exposed, high-stakes social process performed for an immediate

audience - fellow news workers and managers - as well as the distant mostly unknown public audience. The concept is original and useful, and this paper does a good job of exploring its manifestations and implications.

The example of the dismissal by management of a senior journalist and an outpouring of support - even from people within rival media organizations - is held up as an example of the strength of such bonds, but I wondered if such cases might also be explained from an industrial relations perspective in the context of fast paced newsroom change: the need across the industry to revolt against a high-handed sweeping away of the old guard as the news product is reshaped for the digital age. Colson and Heinderyckx (2008), for example, demonstrated how poorly such change has been managed by some organizations.

Examples are provided to demonstrate the idea of journalists who are professional competitors seeing each other as 'family', but I would have liked a clearer sense of roughly what proportion of informant perceptions of other journalists could be characterized in this way, as opposed to what proportion (roughly) expressed a more competitive or cynical view. There is the implicit suggestion that this 'family' approach is the norm amongst the informants the author engaged with, but at the risk of imposing quantity on an appropriately qualitative approach, I'd like clearer evidence. I recognize some of this from my ethnographic work (though I failed to theorize it as well), but also found amongst the news agency journalists a widely held and tangible 'dog-eat-dog' approach, which they would proudly encapsulate with tales of how one news agency managed to sabotage the work of another in order to get a story (such stories were often more colourful legend than fact). Some of the examples in the paper come from war reporting, when journalists do have to depend on each other in unusual ways and do form extraordinary bonds, but I wonder if these cases are confined to those relatively few, mostly senior, news workers who have been in such situations, but would be less pronounced amongst less experienced news workers who might eagerly adopt a competitive ethos?

Another fascinating example used as illustration in this paper and presumably drawn from the author's observation was the case of rival broadcasters finding out about scoops because someone in the newsroom would make a call or send a text to a friend in the rival newsroom before the story was broadcast. I witnessed control over news workers in the television news agencies to prevent this from happening; there was friendly boasting about a story a rival didn't get, but typically after the story was broadcast. The paper implies that links of friendship spread such typically propriety information between rivals, potential costing an employer a competitive advantage; or is there more to it? Are some newsroom cultures simply more competitive than others? I wonder, for example, if the author saw a pronounced difference in this regard between Danish and British newsrooms? Line also observes the power of the unique jargon of news workers to exclude outsiders and reinforce a sense of community. Even within the television news industry, there are sub-grouping of jargon (between the international and the local for instance). I catalogued much of the jargon used by television news agency workers, some of which had origins four or more decades earlier and some of which was intelligible only to that small television news agency community. In London television, the extensive use of freelance staff seemed instrumental in diffusing a more generic broadcast jargon (and related work practices) into the news agencies and from the news agencies to the large broadcasters (of the sort Line observed), as well as in reinforcing the interdependence between the two.

It is interesting that the family-like bonds are seen by the author as a stronger definer of 'good practice' than is management dictat; it would be interesting to read examples of this. As Jerolmack and Khan (2014) suggest in their useful provocation entitled 'the Attitudinal Fallacy', one could

imagine interviewees suggesting this, as a subtle validation of their autonomy, but find through observation - or indeed, measurement of content - that the product indeed varies little from what management/owners proscribe.

On a broader level, Line's large project of comprehensive ethnographic research with multiple broadcast news organizations seems to suggest that access to major media is still possible for researchers, even though there are indications access increasingly closing down. It is pleasing to see large news organizations still providing this kind of access in 2007; would they now? It does seem, given the number of ethnographic news production projects in the last decade and half, that Danish broadcasters have been particularly, and commendably, open to such research. In a small study with Zoellner (Paterson and Zoellner, 2010) we found media ethnographers agreeing on the usefulness of some prior professional media or journalism experience in gaining access, and it seems Line used her professional networks and experiences well to gain a deep level of access but also to build personal relationships with journalists which yielded the kinds of insights about networks of friendship which this unique paper describes. It suggests she moved beyond a level of news worker defensiveness which I found in newsrooms and which I suspect is common in the early stages of most newsroom observation. It takes skill and persistence to get beyond this, and this paper offers good evidence of the rewards for doing so. But as US newsroom ethnographer David Ryfe (2016) observed, contemporary realities for research students and academics make such long-term field research exceedingly rare. I hope Line's excellent work inspires more researchers to try.

I hope some of these observations are useful - back to the list for discussion..

Sources referenced:

Colson and Heinderyckx (2008), in Paterson and Domingo, *Making Online News* (Peter Lang); Jerolmack, C. & Khan, S. (2014) "Talk Is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy." *Sociological Methods & Research*, 43(2), 178-209; Paterson, C. and Zoellner, A. (2010) "The efficacy of professional experience in the ethnographic investigation of production." *Journal of Media Practice*. 11(2), 97-109; Ryfe, D (2016), chapter in Paterson, C., Lee, D., Saha, A, and Zoellner, A. (Eds.) (2016) *Advancing Media Production Research*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.