

Journalists as Innovation Agents:

The Development of a Measure for Journalistic Role Stress

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Abstract: Against the background of rapid change in the journalistic environment, we are interested in the potential to integrate journalists into organizational innovation processes. To this end, we are looking at journalistic role concepts, and especially the antecedents to these concepts that might or might not foster innovative contributions to the organization. Based on research with several news organizations, we propose the measures of role clarity, conflict and overload as antecedents to the propensity of journalists to act as agents of innovation within their organization.

Keywords: Journalistic Role Concepts, Role Stress, Organizational Innovation, Employee Involvement, Scale Development

Introduction

Media convergence, technological innovation and change in user behaviour create a challenging and ever-evolving environment for today's journalism. To remain relevant in these fast-changing times, journalistic organizations increasingly need to generate innovations. Often enough however, traditional journalistic organizations are not the ones bringing innovation to the field as often they struggle to invent and implement genuinely new concepts and business models. It seems, instead, that new journalistic ideas and concepts emerge more frequently from either grassroots movements or from non-journalistic fields.

Against this backdrop, we are interested in the antecedents to whether innovation may arise from within journalistic organisations. In particular, we are interested in the journalistic workforce, and whether their role, as perceived by them, allows for acting as an agent of innovation within these organisations. This question is set against the broader background of newer research into innovation and creativity in organizations, wherein employees are seen as the *starting point* for innovation (Zhou & George, 2001). Especially in fast-moving, changeable, globalized business environments, such as the present environment in journalism, innovative behaviours of employees are increasingly sought after (e.g. Howard, 1995; King & Anderson, 2002).

Interestingly, research into innovation in journalism has mostly been characterized through a technologically determined lens (Weiss & Domingo, 2010) focussing on technological innovation whereby creativity, expertise and innovativeness of the employees (particularly the journalists) have been left out at large. An exception is the recent study of Weiss and Domingo (2010) into innovation processes in newsrooms, wherein the authors try to break out of technological determinism - but even in this study, journalists are only seen as *participants* in the innovation process (focus on application behaviour) and not as stimulators or inspirers.

Journalists as Innovation Agents

Systematically integrating journalists into the development of new business models on an organizational level might seem as a radical idea. However, when talking about product or service innovation, it seems to perfectly make sense to, on the one hand give journalists the resources and motivate them to grapple with new (technological) possibilities, upcoming ideas in the field and customers' needs (initiation), and on the other hand to integrate them into adaption processes or even to give them resources at hand to realise ideas (implementation). Such ideas must not always result in a radical innovation, but might improve a product or service on an incremental level. This approach might not just foster creative ideas, but might additionally support the acceptance of related change.

However, with the ongoing observations of the journalistic system it becomes apparent that journalists practices tend to resist change (Weiss & Domingo, 2010), as journalists tend to hold on to their (former) powerful role models (Domingo, 2008). If we see innovation as a process of 'translation' of positions and roles in a network, shaped by the power relationships of the actors and their struggle to have their strategies and definitions overcome others (Akrich & Latour, 1992), it becomes evident that innovation processes (as a process of change) are highly defined by the individuals, their perceptions and behaviours. So, to study

the potential of integrating journalist into (product and service) innovation processes, we first have to think about the antecedents, which determine journalists' readiness to innovate.

If we wish to enhance employee's innovative behaviour (including idea generation and application behaviour (Jong & Hartog, 2007, p. 41)), management has to make sure that innovative, progressive thinking becomes included into a journalists' understanding of his/her responsibility. Krause (2004) found a positive linkage between delegation and idea generation and application behaviour. Her study further gives empirical support for a positive relation between granting freedom and autonomy, and innovative behaviour. So, journalists on the one hand need the explicit task, freedom and autonomy to engage with current developments in the field, on the other hand they just as well need corresponding resources (material as well as psychological), as we will outline next.

Methods: Antecedents to a new Journalistic Role Concept

Demanding such a shift towards innovation in journalists duties might result in different outcomes: (1) As one outcome, the additional responsibility innovation might impose on journalists' daily work routines might induce additional workload or even overwork (by Tarafdar, Tu, Ragu-Nathan, and Ragu-Nathan (2007) also called *Role Overload*). This overload might be perceived differently by different persons, some may rejoice in having to deal for instance with a broader thematic scope, a more dialogic relationship with their readerships, or the usage of more technology in writing their articles – other may not. (2) A second outcome might be *Role Ambiguity*. The additional field of responsibility might provoke uncertainty about one's own professional role. What does (still) belong to the one's responsibilities as a journalist, and which (new) tasks do belong to these? Additionally, journalists might not only feel ambiguity about their (new and traditional) duties, but might also perceive these duties as conflicting with their traditional role perception – in this case, we might speak of *Role Conflict* (3).

We assume that journalists that perceive any of these to be less willing to (openly as well as mentally) participate in innovation processes. Accordingly, we see journalists' role concept as an antecedent, which determines journalists' readiness for innovative behaviour. In this light, we are proposing an expanded scale for measuring these role antecedents.

Step 1 – Item Development

In this study it was our aim to develop a measure to explore role stress among journalists involved into an innovation project. The construct of *Role Clarity*, developed by Sask and Cronshaw in 1990, asks whether a person knows the expectations laid towards her role (e.g. "I have a clear idea of what someone in my job does"). The construct of *Role Conflict* by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) describes conflicts employees might perceive between tasks they have to do and tasks they consider relevant or appropriate (e.g. "I work on unnecessary things"). The labelling of the third construct *Role Overload* is slightly misleading, as the construct, developed by Tarafdar, Tu, Ragu-Nathan, and Ragu-Nathan (2007), basically describes overwork. The authors define Role Overload as the situation "[...] when the require-

ments from an individual's role exceed his or her capacity in terms of the level of difficulty or the amount of work" (p. 307). Every scale has been adapted to the field of journalism. As the original items were formulated in rather general terms, only minor adaptations were necessary. Participants expressed their level of agreement with each item using a 5-point response format ranging from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree.

Step 2 – Questionnaire Administration

To research our hypothesis, we surveyed journalists, working for a Swiss regional (daily or weekly) newspaper, realising an open innovation project, where it becomes journalists' task, to actively participate in the innovation process. In groups of six to ten people, journalists research a specific (potential) target group of their choice (according to prior agreement with the project management), as for example youngsters, to develop customer oriented product alignment or new product or services. Each group passes in so called Ateliers three stages: In the first stage, journalists collect qualitative data about the specific target group, by for example interviewing members of this group, or by shadowing them through a day or analysing the customer journey. In the second phase the journalists develop, based on the collected information, a concept idea, how an existing product might be developed to better fit the target group's needs, or how a new offer might look like. In the third stage journalists get back to members of the target group and present their concept idea to generate specific feedback by people who are supposed to use/consume the presented product/service. Each journalist (besides he/she is prevented for any reason) is going to participate in at least one Atelier.

In this (temporally limited) project, management made the participation in an (product and service) innovation process to an explicit task for each and every journalist of this regional newspaper. We had the chance to survey the participating journalists in March 2013. At this point, the journalists were already informed about the project, but the first Atelier was not realised yet. It's planned to conduct a second survey as soon as every journalist participated in at least one Atelier (post survey).

In this first inquiry, 90 journalists completed the survey, which corresponds to a response rate of 40%. Of these, 74 work for the print outlet, six for the corresponding online platform (for 10 journalists this information has not been reported). 28 people work for the general editorial office, the others for regional content. In terms of the distribution, we found a rather balanced respondent profile with 35% of journalists between 16 and 34 years, 39% between 35 and 49 years, and a slightly smaller group of 25% between 50 and 63 years.

A replication of the study is going to be realised in the last week of August 2013 and first week of September 2013. The survey is going to be distributed among journalists of a Swiss, national daily newspaper. The population consists out of 237 journalists. At the conference and in the final version of the paper we're going to be able, to present the data of this replication study.

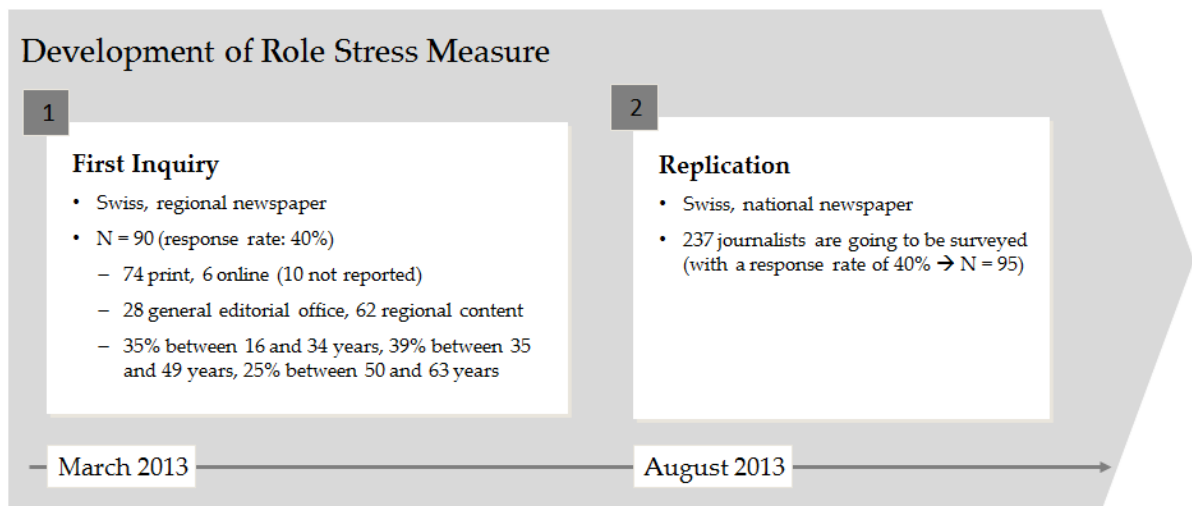


Figure 1: First Inquiry and Replication of Measurement Development

Step 3 — Initial Item Reduction and Scale Evaluation

After conducting factor analysis, we found the factor *Role Clarity*, consisting of the items “I have a clear idea of what someone in my job does”, “I am well aware of the duties that are required from me”, “I thought I knew what to expect as a journalist. In light of the changes of the last few years, I am no longer sure”, and “I’m not sure whether certain tasks belong to my responsibilities or not.” The factor is rather underdeveloped as a measure, with a mediocre α -value of .54. With this reservation in mind, the items the factor consists of received approval (with $m = 2.12$, $sd = 0.92$). Journalists seem to have a clear idea of what is expected working in the profession. An alternative, more provocative interpretation or rather a possible consequence of this result might be, that journalists only hold a finite conceptualisation of their job and would not let anyone else (such as academics or managers) tell them, what they have to do or what they should change in doing their job (especially the two items “I have a clear idea of what someone in my job does” and “I am well aware of the duties that are required” received high acceptance (means: 1.66/1.68)). In light of the current public discussion surrounding the function of journalism within society, these results might eventually be interpreted as a defence reaction performed by journalists, guided by the impression that everybody and everyone wishes to have a say defining their job.

The construct of *Role Conflict* consists of the items “I feel torn between organisational needs and societal requirements”, “I work on unnecessary things”, “I receive an assignment without adequate resources to execute it”, and “I receive tasks which do not fit with my job profile”. After conducting the factor analysis we had to delete one item (“I have to “feel my way” in performing my duties.”). Excluding this item, we find a good α -value of .78. For the construct we received undecided results with a tendency to rejection ($m = 3.29$). The combined items are marked by a (comparatively) high standard deviation of 1.12. Even statements such as “I work on unnecessary things” generated undecided attitudes with a mean value of 3.3 ($sd = 1.15$). The item that received the highest acceptance was “I receive an assignment without adequate resources to execute it” ($m = 3.09$, $sd = 1.10$). Overall, these results point to certain conflicts that may exist in the journalists’ daily work. It is not readily apparent how to

interpret the situation that journalists seem to have a concrete idea of their job (Role Clarity) but state that they partially work on unnecessary things. It seems that journalists have a clear idea of what they should be doing. However, at times they seem to be forced to work on, in their eyes, “unnecessary things”. In this first inquiry we unfortunately missed the chance to further question participants which tasks they categorize as ‘unnecessary’. We might resume this topic in the qualitative interviews and/or a future inquiry.

The factor *Role Overload* is a measure for journalists’ perception of overwork. Here again, the α -value of .65 is rather average. The results indicate high pressure faced by journalists in their work environment, with 81% of interviewed journalists saying they often work overtime and 96% stating that they often attend to many assignments at the same time. Summarized across the factor, the mean value for the items is 2.29 with a standard deviation of 0.94. These results seem alarming and turn the strain inherent in journalists’ workplaces to an urgent issue in the current discussion on the quality of journalism and budget cuts.

	<i>mean</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>α-value</i>
Role Clarity	2.12	0.92	0.54
I have a clear idea of what someone in my job does.	1.66	0.78	
I am well aware of the duties that are required.	1.68	0.65	
I thought I knew what was expected of a journalist during his work. After the changes within the last years I rather doubt it. (Recode)	2.57	1.10	
I'm unsure if certain tasks belong to my responsibilities or not. (Recode)	2.58	1.16	

Table 1: Construct Role Clarity

	<i>mean</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>α-value</i>
Role Conflict	3.29	1.12	0.78
I feel torn between organisational needs and societal requirements.	3.10	1.16	
I work on unnecessary things.	3.30	1.15	
I receive an assignment without adequate resources to execute it.	3.09	1.10	
I receive tasks which do not fit with my job profile.	3.69	1.09	

Table 2: Construct Role Conflict

<i>mean</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>α-value</i>
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Role Overload	2.29	0.94	0.65
I often have to do more work than I can handle.	2.99	1.18	
I often work beyond actual or official working hours.	1.77	0.86	
I often attend to many problems or assignments at the same time.	1.47	0.62	
I never seem to have enough time to do my actual work.	2.92	1.10	

Table 3: Construct Role Overload

Conclusion and Discussion

By making innovative behaviour an explicit task of journalists, new duties are imposed upon them. For the journalist in question, this may on the one hand mean an additional task for an already busy workday, or on the other hand, an enrichment of the daily work routines. One may of course call into question whether innovative behaviour should be part of the journalistic role model, or whether it should better still and predominately focused on the journalistic core functions.

We would argue that newsrooms might not only benefit from the concrete product and process innovations that may result from greater participation of journalists in these efforts. Integrating journalists into innovation processes might additionally ease the acceptance of related changes as (many innovations and transformation efforts fail due to social reasons (see e.g. Boczkowski, 2004; Steensen, 2009)), and journalists might develop a different attitude regarding necessary changes, if they become integrated into these processes. Not last from a public service perspective, it might be beneficial if journalist take greater part in changing the journalistic landscape, as they might be best equipped to ensure a level of quality that might not always seem salient from other parties in this process that are further detached from the product and the readership.

With the measure of journalistic role stress laid out above, we would like to increase the exploratory power if and under what circumstances journalists are ready and willing to actually take part in actively shaping the media landscape. With the scale that was developed on the preceding pages we hope to make a first step towards being able to capture the journalists' perspective on changing requirements and fields of responsibility in the profession and its influence on journalists' role perception.

In our approach we see a journalists' (professional) role concepts as an important factor of influence, not just for his/her readiness for innovative behaviours, but also for the development of his/her function as a journalists in society in general. Current developments in journalism have an influence on journalists' function in society, be it as innovation agents, as curator of abundant information, or as an interaction partner for readers and users.

What become apparent that the measures still need some more improvement, especially the construct *Role Clarity* that only has a rather mediocre α -value of .54, rendering a less reliable measures as it could potentially by. From interviews with the editor-in-chief of the news or-

ganization in question, we were told that the measure might, as it stands now, suffer from response bias. Journalist are confronted on a nearly daily basis with discussion (often from outside parties) about the future duties of journalists in society – as a defence reaction, journalist might be over-eager to stress that they at least have a clear concept of their job. Not least for this reason, we want to reframe several items within the construct and intend to better stress the aspect of additional (disputable) duties in journalists daily work. With an aspired redraft we might slightly turn the construct from *Role Clarity* into the direction of *Role Ambiguity*. Rizzo et al, (1970) propose a Role Ambiguity scale which might be consulted for this reason.

For the construct *Role Conflict* we received a good α -value of 0.78. We still might improve the scale by stressing the potential conflict between a rather traditional journalistic role concept and contemporary requirements in journalists' daily work. For this reason, we are contemplating redrafting the item „I receive tasks which do not fit with my job profile“ to „As a journalist it's definitely not my job to bother about journalistic product innovation“ or „Developing product innovations is why I became a journalist“. With such an elaboration we might strengthen the validity of the construct.

Finally, also the *Role Overload* construct could be further strengthened to increase the rather average α -value. We would like to stress the aspect of *Role Overload* inherent in the construct, and to reduce the *overwork* aspect. We therefore might need to redraft several items: The items „I never seem to have enough time to do my actual work“ and „I often attend to many problems or assignments at the same time“, as they stand now, stress a different aspect of overload than the items „I often have to do more work than I can handle“ and „I often work beyond actual or official working hours“. The first two might rather be interpreted as role overload or task overload, whereas the last two speak rather imply overwork. For this reason, we contemplate dropping the last two items and to replace them with items stressing aspects related to the fact that journalists nowadays might have to care about innovation, while have increasingly less time to complete their traditional tasks.

We would like to test our ideas for these redraft in a replication of the study scheduled for late august. The results of this replication study will be integrated into the final version of this paper and are going to be presented at the conference. Nevertheless, and with these redrafts in mind, we hope the study and the measure developed within, might serve as an instrument to rethink journalistic role concepts.

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