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### On Creativity

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# On creativity

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/jou](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/jou)**Mark Deuze**

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The single biggest challenge facing journalism today is creativity. This is not to say that journalists are not creative, or just need to become more creative. I intend to argue that for a variety of reasons, we need to understand journalism as distinctly and intrinsically creative, and that in this creativity, lies the answer to some of its most pressing problems: its overreliance on corporate structures and commercial considerations, and the subsequent precaritization of the profession.

Journalism is (a form of) creative work. It can be beneficial to be creative as a journalist, for example, by developing a new angle for a story or an unconventional way of covering it. Creativity plays a part in all aspects of the journalistic product cycle, starting with story ideation and inspiration; creative approaches to researching, gathering, selecting, and verifying information; the production process, promoting, publishing, and distributing the news, up to and including creative ways to engage the audience.

Creativity today is seen as a key competitive advantage (Küng, 2008) and particularly in management circles gets touted as the critical factor that sets media companies in general and news organizations in particular apart from many other industries (Killebrew, 2003; Malmelin and Virta, 2016). Creativity, in this context, gets heralded both as a special or unique ability that brings that little bit ‘extra’ to a certain way of doing things, as well as something that can be seen as inherent to newswork, as ‘journalists of any genre can be seen to be producers of creative cultural texts’ (Fulton and McIntyre, 2013: 17).

Lynch and Swink (1967) wrote as far back as 1967 about how advantageous a ‘creative aptitude’ would be for journalists, noting however that newsroom conditions were generally not particularly conducive to creative storytelling practices, instead relying on ‘set structures, pat phrases and clichés’ (p. 372). Creativity in newswork tends to be seen as curtailed by the routinized, formulaic and highly structured nature of the news industry (Berglez, 2011; Mortensen and Svendsen, 1980; Nylund, 2013). However, such a perspective on journalists – as powerless individuals surrounded by a hegemonic system full of pressures and constraints – does little justice to the networked, fragmented, and altogether unruly professional practice journalism is becoming around the world (Deuze and Witschge, 2018). As studies among individual journalists show, the structures of

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journalism – its occupational ideology (Deuze, 2005), its hierarchy of influences that governs newswork (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016), its industrial and increasingly post-industrial setting (Anderson et al., 2012) – often enable rather than constrain their creative practice (Coffee, 2011; Mare, 2014; Wagemans et al., 2016).

Journalism, throughout its history, can be seen as becoming more creative, as the profession adapts to technological innovations with new formats, storytelling modes, and ways to engage audiences (Prenger and Deuze, 2017). In the process, journalists cautiously embrace a more personal, intimate style and tone (Beckett and Deuze, 2016; Steensen, 2016). However, exactly this creative and affective turn may in fact inhibit rather than stimulate journalists' agency and voice. Tim Markham (2012) signals a loss of agentic power for journalists as they embrace creativity and a more personal approach in the context of a generally limiting professional environment, bleakly concluding that 'while everyone may be authorized to be creative and be themselves, to do so only reveals their powerlessness' (p. 198).

Creativity, therefore, is both paramount and problematic in journalism. It is crucial for journalism with regard to innovation, yet it has always been part and parcel of journalism. It is intrinsic to the practice of journalists as well as their professionalism structures it. Yet, for all its significance and challenges on so many levels, it is rarely mentioned or studied, let alone taught – even though students in journalism programs tend to be primarily motivated by the wish to have a varied career, co-determined by the pleasure of writing, to be able to be creative, and exploring their (self-perceived) talent for journalism (Hanusch et al., 2016).

Perspectives on creativity, Sarah Coffee (2011) argues, are generally divided into three categories: romantic, inspirational, and rational. The romantic view sees creativity as something exceptional, embodied by the mysterious nature of (the) genius. The inspirational view describes creativity as the result of an external force or being. In her work with freelance journalists, Coffee finds how they subscribe to a rational view on creativity, where creative practice results from hard work; a commitment to the craft; and an embedding in meaning-giving stages, systems, and structures. With Fulton and McIntyre (2013), Coffee sees creative activity as something that can be found throughout the practices and self-understandings of journalists and other media workers. It must be clear, then, that being creative, engaging in creative activity and carefully cultivating creativity are all essential traits (rather than exclusive states) of both individual journalists and the profession of journalism.

The problem with the rational view on creativity – influenced as it is by prominent research in psychology, most notably through the work of Teresa Amabile (1996) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) – is that policymakers and capitalists alike have colonized it. Under the guise of the late 1990s mantra of 'creative industries', politicians, public officials, and entire governments have signed on to the notion that everyone should be encouraged to be creative and to become entrepreneurial in the process – while at the same time dismantling state support systems for the arts and for the protection of workers. Commercial companies – particularly in the media industry – similarly have used creativity as catchall concept to re-arrange the nature of work into increasingly casualized, temporary, and otherwise 'atypical' forms of labor (Deuze, 2007). As Angela McRobbie (2016) notes, creativity today is a *dispositif*: an array of policies,

personal and institutional practices, world views, aspirations, and even physical dispositions that promise work in the media to be something fun and self-actualizing and pushing workers (and those that teach workers-to-be) to internalize this system rather than oppose it, to adapt rather than to come up with alternate strategies and to conform instead of stepping out.

What I consider the single biggest challenge – for reporters, editors as well as journalism students and scholars – is to find ways to harness the intrinsically creative quality of newswork to not only engage in innovative and valuable practices regarding the product cycle of journalism – something that generally only benefits the business of news, and only in rare cases, leads to some recognition for the journalists involved (Bilton and Leary, 2002). I would rather see journalists embrace creativity in all their dealings with the world – with all that a journalist can be, in part thanks to but also very much regardless of legacy media companies, how you can shape and nurture a professional identity independent of the generally exploitative system of news as a business, instead becoming creative about being creative.

In this context, I am encouraged by research into non-profit startups (Konieczna and Powers, 2017); by creative work in service of social support and community life (McRobbie, 2016); by emerging forms of collective action among media professionals within and outside of trade unions (Bureau and Corsani, 2016); and by some associations, departments, and even entire companies within the profession of journalism advocating (and practicing) more humane management styles in which talent is truly nurtured, mentorship and lifelong learning is promoted, and people are adequately rewarded for their work (both in terms of money as well as resources and social support), all while passionately pursuing truth-seeking and fact-verifying journalism as a distinctly creative practice. The outcome of this kind of broad-spectrum creativity is, hopefully, a more diverse and multiperspectival journalism. As students, scholars, and educators, we have a distinct responsibility to prepare journalists-to-be not only for the creative work that lies ahead but also for the kind of creativity necessary to find their own way and voice both within and outside of the industry, empowering them through sustained critique as well as a hopeful eye toward all the colorful ways one can be a journalist.

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