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**Newswork within a Culture of Job Insecurity:  
Producing News amidst Organizational and Industry Uncertainty**  
Brian Ekdale, Melissa Tully, Shawn Harmsen, and Jane B. Singer

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**Abstract:**

*Rapid change in the news industry and the prevalence of layoffs, buyouts, and closings have led many newsworkers to experience job insecurity and worry about their long-term futures in journalism. Our research uses a case study of employees at an independently owned media company in the United States to explore the various ways newsworkers respond to this culture of job insecurity and how their responses affect efforts to change news practices. Findings demonstrate that those who believe their jobs are at risk are unlikely to change their practices and even some who perceive job security are reticent to initiate change. As a result, the culture of job insecurity in the news industry has a limiting effect on changes to journalism practice.*

**KEYWORDS**

layoff survivors; newsworkers; precarious work; risk society; sociology of news

**Introduction**

The news industry has experienced tremendous change over the past two decades. News organizations everywhere are trying to adapt to a shifting media landscape that has upended processes of news production, audience consumption, and revenue generation. News organizations and newsworkers have become casualties of this struggle. Layoffs, buyouts, and closings have become increasingly common, a development that affects both those who lose their jobs and those who remain in the newsroom. Many newsworkers worry about their ability to keep their current jobs, and they question the prospects of working in the industry long term. Thus, industry and organizational change has resulted in a culture of job insecurity within journalism. How newsworkers respond is the focus of this study.

This article examines newswork in the midst of organizational and industry change. Through a case study of newsworkers at an American media company, we use Mishra and Spreitzer's (1998) typology of layoff survivors to explain how and why newsworkers respond to job insecurity. Our findings reveal various responses, from hopeful newsworkers who promote newsroom innovation to cynical newsworkers who challenge efforts to change news practices. This research demonstrates that a culture of job insecurity has a limiting effect on newsroom change as those who fear their jobs are in danger are unlikely to risk altering well-understood practices, while many others who perceive job security would rather accommodate than initiate change. This study contributes to a growing body of scholarship on barriers to change within the news industry by considering the relationship between

precarious labor and news practices (Deuze 2007; Ekinsmyth 1999). Although changes in the news industry are distinct, they reflect broader trends concerning precarious work in the risk society (Beck 1992, 2000; Kalleberg 2009).

### **Newsworker Insecurity and Layoff Survivors**

The challenges facing the news industry are many: a significant decline in newspaper readership; changes in audience expectations and behavior; competition from amateur and startup news sources; loss of profitable revenue streams like classified ads; inability to compensate for declining print revenue with online advertisements and paywalls; and the global economic downturn (Chyi, Lewis, and Zheng 2012; “The Digital Future Report” 2012; Siles and Boczkowski 2012). These challenges have been particularly hard on newspapers, which have seen circulations drop and advertisers disappear. A few well-known newspapers have shut down, some have discontinued print products, others have scaled back print operations from daily to semiweekly, and many have reduced staff through layoffs and buyouts (McChesney and Nichols 2010; Meyer 2004; Robinson 2011; Willnat and Weaver 2014). As a result, news organizations increasingly rely on freelancers and other “contingently employed newswriters” to provide content for their products (Deuze 2007, 155; Ryan 2009). At the same time, expectations for working journalists have increased. News organizations are trying to do more with less, meaning journalists are asked to work harder and more efficiently to compensate for smaller newsrooms (Reinardy 2011a). In addition, journalists are expected to keep up with social media by blogging, tweeting, and otherwise interacting with audiences during hours previously designated as “time off” (Deuze 2007; Robinson 2011).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these changes have affected journalists’ job satisfaction and perceived job security (Reinardy 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Willnat and Weaver 2014). Those planning to leave journalism cite industry concerns, job satisfaction, salary, and a decline in news quality (Reinardy 2009). Reinardy (2011b) found that younger journalists, in particular, are highly susceptible to burnout and are uncertain about their intentions to work in the industry long-term. Relative to other professions, journalists report a high level of cynicism, measured as feelings of indifference or distance toward their work (Reinardy 2011b). In addition to job dissatisfaction, journalists’ sense of autonomy in their work has decreased steadily since the 1970s (Willnat and Weaver 2014). In short, many newswriters are stressed and feel detached from their work. This anxiety is evident in coverage of prominent newspaper closings, in which journalists decry the harrowing state of the news industry, rather than discuss contextual factors that help explain specific closings (Carlson 2012; Chyi, Lewis, and Zheng 2012). Further, Usher (2010) found that former journalists blame their exits on external factors like technology and corporate greed without examining what they could have done to bring journalism ideals into the dynamic news landscape of the future. Many newswriters see journalism as a wounded industry, and they are unsure if anyone can stop the bleeding.

Although low morale, job insecurity, and job dissatisfaction are not new to journalism – journalists in the late 1800s and early 1900s had no guarantee their jobs would be waiting for them the next day (Fedler 2004; Hardt 2005) – recent developments in the news industry speak to the increasing precarity of contemporary labor (Deuze 2007). In *Risk Society*, German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) argues that we have entered a second modernity, one governed by a logic of risk. For Beck, labor within the risk society is defined by greater control by the employer and greater uncertainty for the employee. In *The Brave New Work of Work*, he writes, “for a majority of people, even in the apparently prosperous middle layers, their basic existence and lifework will be marked by endemic insecurity” (Beck 2000, 3).

Ekinsmyth (1999) notes that risk is common among all laborers, even though the nature of that risk is dependent on the work context. In her study of magazine freelancers she writes, “many expressed the belief that freelancing did not entail *more* risks than direct employment, only *different types* of risk” (1999, 361, emphasis in original).

In the risk society, the labor market is defined by precarious work, which Kalleberg (2009) describes as “employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker” (3). Kalleberg cites a decrease in employee loyalty to employers, increase in long-term unemployment, and the growth in perceived job insecurity among workers as evidence of the precarity of American labor. Rather than viewing precarity as a new development, Neilson and Rossiter (2008, 65) argue that precarity is “the norm of capitalist production and reproduction,” only briefly displaced by the stability of Fordism. As such, Kalleberg asserts, “precarious work is the dominant feature of the social relations between employers and workers in the contemporary world” (Kalleberg 2009, 17).

Layoffs take on new meaning in an era of precarious labor. Although layoffs have long been a feature of industrialized employment, Kalleberg (2009) argues layoffs now are more indicative of the capitalist drive for increased profits rather than the natural ebb and flow of business cycles. As a result, “people in general are increasingly worried about losing their jobs—in large part because the consequences of job loss have become much more severe in recent years—and less confident about getting comparable new jobs” (7). While losing a job can be traumatic for the unemployed, direct and indirect threats of unemployment also can create tremendous stress for remaining workers. As Amundson, Borgen, and Erlebach (2004) argue:

In the downsizing context, working life is charged with anxiety as everyone tries to come to terms with the downsizing process. Employees grieve for colleagues who have left and experience uncertainty and anxiety about who will be the next person to lose his or her job. (268)

Workers who remain employed with the downsizing company, the so-called “survivors,” wrestle with grief, guilt, anger, and doubt. Surviving a layoff can be so worrisome that survivors can experience more stress and less autonomy than workers who have lost their jobs and have found new employment (Devine et al. 2003; Ekinsmyth 1999). Thus, while survivors are grateful to remain employed, they experience a number of stressors that can alter their relationships with their work, colleagues, and employers.

Mishra and Spreitzer (1998) argue survivor responses to downsizing can be mapped along two spectrums: constructive/destructive and active/passive. Constructive survivors assist their companies in the process of downsizing and moving forward, while destructive survivors are unwilling to contribute toward current and future efforts. Moreover, active survivors feel confident in their ability to cope with the changes to their work environment, while passive survivors feel great uncertainty and, in turn, withdraw from company activities. Building from these two dimensions, the authors offer four archetypes of layoff survivors:

- *Hopeful workers* (constructive, active): those who perceive great job security and eagerly assist their company in achieving future goals
- *Obliging workers* (constructive, passive): those who also feel secure in their employment but are more likely to accommodate than propose change
- *Fearful workers* (destructive, passive): those who perceive job insecurity and feel helpless in the face of organizational change
- *Cynical workers* (destructive, active): those who anticipate losing their jobs but would rather challenge or impede their company’s efforts than abide by company demands

Mishra and Spreitzer further identify four factors that determine how survivors respond. They argue a survivor is more likely to respond constructively if that employee has *trust in top management* and believes that the *downsizing was justly designed and executed*, while a survivor is more likely to respond actively if that employee has a *sense of personal empowerment in his/her work* and feels that the *intrinsic value of his/her work has increased* following downsizing. Thus, for example, employees who trust that management has made the right decision in instituting layoffs and continue to enjoy their current work will likely become hopeful workers, while those who believe layoffs were handled unfairly and experience little autonomy in their current work are likely to respond fearfully.

Mishra and Spreitzer's (1998) framework has been applied to downsizing in a variety of work contexts, including an international hotel (Susskind 2007) and a large telecommunications company (Pfaff 2004). Further, Spreitzer and Mishra (2002) tested this framework for long-term consequences of downsizing and found that trust, justice, and empowerment positively affected survivors' continued relationship with their company long after a specific downsizing event. While this framework has not been applied to the news industry, it is consistent with Reinardy's (2011a) research, which found that newsroom layoff survivors who had faith in their organization, were enthusiastic about their jobs, experienced job autonomy, and were committed to their company adapted to the changing environment and expressed job satisfaction, while those who experienced low amounts of trust, morale, commitment, and autonomy exhibited lower levels of job satisfaction. Thus, Mishra and Spreitzer's framework has the potential to explain short-term consequences to newsroom layoffs, buyouts, and firings as well as long-term responses to a culture of job insecurity within the news industry wherein downsizing and layoffs have become normalized. Further, this framework offers a way to understand how attitudes toward changes in employment affect newsworker practices in a time of precarious labor. Therefore, in this study we use Mishra and Spreitzer's framework of survivor responses to answer the following research questions concerning newsworkers employed at a company with a history of layoffs that is experimenting with changes to news practices.

RQ1: How do newsworkers respond to a culture of job insecurity?

RQ2: How do these responses affect efforts to change news practices?

## Methods

To answer these questions, this study draws from data gathered between mid 2012 and early 2013 from employees of an independently owned media company in a mid-sized U.S. city. The company produces a 50,000-circulation daily newspaper, a market-leading TV news outlet, and associated websites. In August 2012, a newsroom manager circulated a recruitment email to 124 journalists, editors, and managers, asking them to participate in our study. Between August 2012 and January 2013, 20 people agreed to participate in in-depth interviews, most of which lasted an hour or more. Interviews were transcribed in full; the authors then coded and recoded for themes related to the research questions. Each interview was coded by at least two members of the research team. All company newsworkers also were invited to complete two online questionnaires administered five months apart. The first (Q1), fielded in August 2012, received 42 responses. The second (Q2) was fielded in January 2013, approximately one week after the company announced a round of layoffs. Q2 largely replicated Q1 with a few changes based on preliminary data analysis and a handful of additional questions that gauged newsworkers' responses to the recent layoffs. In total, 21 people participated in Q2. Many of the questions asked respondents to assess their agreement/disagreement with statements, such as "staff reductions have made it difficult for us to cover our community," on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The

questionnaires also included several open-ended questions, such as “What do you think are the factors that led to the recent layoffs?”

In total, we can identify 47 unique participants – though participation is likely higher considering that several chose to submit questionnaires anonymously (9 in Q1, 4 in Q2) – meaning at least 38% of those recruited participated in this study. Participants represented a wide range of newswriters, from recent college graduates to veteran journalists to the company’s CEO. Results reported below use generic identifiers to preserve respondents’ anonymity. Although all interviews took place before the 2013 layoffs were announced, a few managers spoke about these plans before they were made public. The research presented here is part of a larger study on the changes taking place at this media company (Authors 2013). In January 2014, members of the research team shared preliminary data analysis with company editors and managers, who offered member validation for the findings presented below (Lindlof and Taylor 2002).

Although limited in their generalizability, case studies offer an optimal approach for investigating contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2003). For our purposes, using in-depth, triangulated data from a single case allows us to explore how different newswriters react to the same newsroom changes. Because our data collection spanned a seven-month period, our case study provides insight into how newswriters respond to industry and organizational uncertainty over a period of significant company change. Within the past several years, newswriters at the company have witnessed editor and executive turnover, workflow changes, experimentation with product and content, financial restructuring, an assemblage of new upper management with little to no journalism experience, and two rounds of layoffs: one in 2009 and another in 2013. During the time of our data collection, company leadership was promoting several changes to news practice, including the increased use of digital and social media technologies, greater collaboration with community members, and reporting initiatives that reflected the tenants of public journalism (Authors 2013). Most of these changes were initiated from upper management, often the CEO. In short, the frequency and speed with which this media company has invested in, pursued, and abandoned both familiar and unique initiatives make this work an important contribution to the growing field of newsroom studies and precarious labor.

### **Responding to a Culture of Job Insecurity**

Interviews and questionnaire responses indicate that job insecurity has become a significant undercurrent of working at the media company in our study. Several interviewees noted that the 2009 layoffs had a notable effect on employee morale and newsroom culture. As one journalist with decades of newsroom experience said, “[the 2009 layoffs] really shook people, because there really hadn’t been much of a history of that here.” Another reporter described the 2009 layoffs as “really unexpected,” noting that she didn’t realize what was happening until one of her colleagues suddenly walked out without saying goodbye to anyone. “There has been a very big level of distrust since then,” she said, “I don’t think anybody ever feels 100% comfortable in their position that they’re going to have it in six months or a year from now.”

Just prior to the 2013 layoffs, upper-level managers expressed concern over how newswriters would respond to the move. “[The staff] will be in self-defense mode,” one manager said. “There will be a lot of anger.” This belief was supported by responses to Q2, in which 70% of respondents disagreed and only 15% agreed ( $M = 2.95$ ;  $SD = 1.64$ ;  $N = 20$ ) with the statement, “[The company’s] changes have no impact on job security.” At the same time, respondents were split on whether they believed their own jobs were secure (Q2; 50% agreement; 35% disagreement;  $M = 4.2$ ;  $SD = 1.88$ ;  $N = 20$ ). These findings demonstrate that,

in the aftermath of a layoff, participants in our study recognized the precarity of newswork at the company, even though some did not perceive job insecurity at an individual level.

Beyond layoff concerns at this specific company, several participants mentioned that they had been laid off from previous jobs and spoke of colleagues who had been let go from other news organizations or left journalism altogether. Discussing turnover in the industry, one reporter said “A lot of my friends that were in [journalism] have left and are not in journalism anymore,” adding “I know just keeping an eye on [a regional newspaper] that they’ve had a lot of layoffs.” Another reporter doubted she would recognize many people at the newspaper she left 6 years prior. “I would know maybe 10 percent of the people,” she said. “There have been layoffs. There have been people like, ‘I’m not dealing with this anymore.’”

Although, prior to the 2013 layoffs, some of the recent hires had not witnessed layoffs first hand, in our interviews they demonstrated an acute awareness of the employment uncertainty in the industry. For example, one reporter hired six months prior anticipated that the newsroom would shrink further in the coming years: “there might be a few less people here and then the people who are here are probably doing a little bit more.” New journalists regularly encountered tales of colleagues lost and an industry in flux. As one reporter said, “Whenever [managers] talk about money and how the company is doing and changes, one of the first questions people ask [is] ‘Are there going to be layoffs?’” Uncertainty about what the future holds and what it all means for job security has become part of the regular conversation in the newsroom. All of these factors contribute to a culture of job insecurity. Thus, in the analysis below, we categorize all workers’ responses using Mishra and Spreitzer’s survivor types, even participants who had yet to survive a layoff in the strict sense.

Consistent with Mishra and Spreitzer’s framework, uncertainty was not experienced evenly among newsworkers in our study. Participant data indicates that all four types of survivor responses were represented at the company. As with all typologies, no individual served as an ideal type of any of the four archetypes, yet most newsworkers articulated responses that largely conformed to one of the four survivor types described below. Because the following analysis draws heavily from our interview data, it is important to note that interview participants did not comprise a representative sample of employees at the company. In particular, editors and managers were overrepresented. About half of those we interviewed demonstrated characteristics of the hopeful survivor, with the other half evenly divided among the obliging, fearful, and cynical. It is plausible that those who eagerly embraced the company’s vision were more willing to speak with a group of researchers than were those who feared for their jobs or opposed the company’s plans. Responses to Q1 and Q2 were more mixed and, thus, provide a more complete understanding of varied responses to job insecurity among the newsworkers in our study.

### *Hopeful Newsworkers*

Most, but not all, of the hopeful newsworkers we interviewed were managers, editors, or relatively new employees at the company. During our interviews, these individuals indicated support for the company’s initiatives or at least an appreciation for the company’s effort to innovate its news practices. These individuals saw themselves as allies of the company and active participants in initiating and implementing change. Unsurprisingly, several managers we interviewed embodied the hopeful survivor, justifying their decisions as in the best interest of the company, the community, and journalism. Because of great uncertainty in the industry, they said it was important to continue to look for better ways forward. They said that familiar practices were not financially sustainable and had not always

fulfilled their mission to best serve the community. Besides managers and editors, several others told us that they liked that their employer was willing to try new things, even if some of those initiatives were unsuccessful. “I feel like we have to be out there experimenting to see what’s going to work,” one reporter said. “Some people will not have the courage to stick with the group that tries to get there [but] people who do are going to get there.”

Managers expressed an eagerness to test out new approaches to producing news and an openness to changing directions if these initiatives proved unsuccessful. Although many newswriters interpreted this approach as a lack of commitment to new projects, some appreciated the leadership’s receptivity to change and experimentation. For example, one product manager said that although he spent a week developing a project that was ultimately turned down, he praised his supervisors for giving him the freedom to test out a new idea. He said the company was “very open to failure,” though he acknowledged that most of his colleagues did not believe that to be true. An editor also expressed frustration with coworkers who complained that the staff was overworked and underappreciated, challenging his colleagues: “You have a job, right? And you’re in a place that’s trying – trying to figure it out.” He wanted his coworkers to recognize that, even in a time of great industry uncertainty, organization leaders were seeking to find the best path forward.

Recently hired newswriters who fit the hopeful type saw themselves as part of the company’s strategy to innovate and strengthen its digital presence. According to Mishra and Spreitzer (1998), employees are more likely to respond hopefully if they are empowered in their work, meaning they believe they have a sense of purpose, the necessary skills, and the autonomy to make choices and influence the system. The hopeful newswriters in our study articulated precisely this sense of empowerment. One recent hire said she was forewarned during her job interview that the news organization was in the midst of several transitions. “It was really nice to be told from the beginning these changes were coming,” she said. Another recent hire said that his strengths in digital media gave him confidence in his future with the company. He said he had the freedom to move between different projects based on where his skills were most wanted. “It makes you feel good, and it makes you feel needed,” he said. Recent hires’ proficiency with digital media set them apart in the newsroom and enhanced their sense of empowerment, factors that contributed to their hopeful response. “I think that there is an embrace of people who are embracing new media,” said one new reporter, “and I like to think that I’m one of those people.” These journalists felt secure that they possessed the skills the company desired and were encouraged to try new things.

Together, hopeful newswriters expressed very little anxiety over their job security and saw themselves as partners in the company’s future, even if that future wasn’t entirely clear. At the same time, hopeful participants recognized that their optimism was not universally shared throughout the newsroom. As one manager said, “There’s really never been a more exciting time to be here, in my opinion, [although] I’m not sure everyone would agree with that.”

### *Obliging Newswriters*

While hopeful newswriters supported the company’s vision and took advantage of opportunities to experiment with new ventures, obliging newswriters were more likely to conform than to innovate. These obliging newswriters did not feel as though they were at risk of losing their jobs and continued to be productive workers. At the same time, they were more interested in fitting their existing work practices within the perimeters set by the company’s leadership than in experimenting with new ways of producing news. These newswriters believed they understood what was expected of them and, therefore, focused their energies on ensuring they were meeting those expectations.

Obliging newswriters sought to minimize the distractions they felt the company created by pursuing new initiatives and regularly changing course. For example, when asked about the company's mission statement, several employees expressed little interest in the widely circulated internal document. "I know we have a mission statement," one reporter said. "In fact, they're on the wall back there, but I'm not going to look at them. I've never been really into those." Similarly, an editor made a clear distinction between the company's mission statement and his work philosophy. "If you're talking about my personal mission here which is to do better journalism and get paid on a regular basis, [company leaders] just need to get out of my way," he said. These newswriters weren't interested in the company's efforts to define and redefine itself as long as these efforts didn't hinder their work of doing the journalism they wanted to do. Others witnessed the industry changes happening around them but didn't see how these changes applied to them directly. For example, one seasoned print reporter said, "even though we talk digital first, and there are things going that direction, I don't feel it's really upon me to be digital first." While he doubted that the company would replace him when he retired, he was confident in the work he produced and didn't plan to change his news practices unless he was told directly.

In terms of job security, a few obliging newswriters articulated a distinction between working in the profession and holding onto their current jobs. For example, one reporter said that a previous layoff experience taught her that losing a job is a part of life. "I've been out before and I know I can get another job again, so I'm not going to live in fear," she said. "I feel like as long as I keep delivering the types of stories that I know they want, then I have room to try things and maybe then fail." When asked about his level of satisfaction with some of the company's latest initiatives, the editor cited above responded, "Happy is a lot to ask for from a job." He continued by describing a functionalist approach to work:

I show up. I do my job. I go home. I expect to get paid. That sounds very nihilist. Sorry it sounds that way. I cannot get concerned over what corporate decisions might be ... I do the best job I can do to the mission that I've been given until that mission gets changed.

These obliging survivors felt confident in their ability to retain their jobs by performing their work to satisfaction, but they did not seek to become active partners in the company's latest efforts.

According to Mishra and Spreitzer (1998), those who feel disempowered, experience a decrease in quality of work, and believe product quality has declined are more likely to respond passively to downsizing. Consistent with larger trends within journalism (Willnat and Weaver 2014), several of the newswriters in our study said their jobs had become more difficult and the journalism worse. From the workers' perspective, efforts to do more with less meant that their jobs became more challenging and stressful. One print reporter said that in addition to reporting and writing, they are being asked to embrace a variety of new tasks, such as taking photos, shooting video, and writing TV scripts. "Getting used to doing all those other responsibilities is extremely stressful and extremely different and leads to incredible challenges," he said. In Q1, a veteran reporter similarly complained about the new expectations for journalists:

Digital and social media have added hours to the day that we're expected to fit in. This isn't easy, especially when the current salary structure was built for a "newspaper" reporter. That sh\$% [sic] was an easy eight hours. This is a whole new ballgame.

Even though workers are asked to do more with less, several newswriters noted that eliminating news staff has resulted in a weaker news product. One experienced reporter said he was disheartened to overhear a colleague telling a caller that the newsroom didn't have anyone left to cover a particular story:

It was probably something that, in the big picture, wasn't all that important, but something we had covered for years and years and years, and I think that it's taken a while for people to get their minds around that we say "no" sometimes.

Dissatisfaction with the news product was evident in questionnaire responses. For example, the vast majority agreed with the statement, "Staff reductions have made it difficult for us to serve our community" (Q1: 0% disagreement; 82% agreement;  $M = 5.88$ ;  $SD = .78$   $N = 34$ ; Q2: 10% disagreement; 85% agreement;  $M = 5.8$ ;  $SD = 1.54$   $N = 20$ ). Beyond coverage issues, newswriters also worried that an overburdened newsroom would produce lesser quality journalism. "The more overworked and the more stressed we are, the more mistakes we're going to make," said one graphic designer. "Whether it's not fact-checking or spelling something right. If we don't take care of ourselves, then we're going to continue to make stupid mistakes." Thus, newswriters who witnessed iterations of layoffs at the company generally agreed that their work has become more challenging and the overall product has suffered.

Although obliging newswriters may feel overworked and believe the quality of the news product has declined, they still trust company leadership to make fair downsizing decisions (Mishra and Spreitzer 1998). This was evident in Q2 as most, but not all, respondents identified declining revenue and the need for growth in digital skills as the two biggest factors motivating the 2013 layoffs. As a result, obliging newswriters retain a personal sense of job security and continue to be productive, yet ultimately passive, members of the newsroom. While obliging newswriters do not hinder the company's efforts to change newsroom practices, they do little to promote innovation. The next category of workers, fearful newswriters, also feel overworked and disempowered, but unlike obliging workers they worry that their jobs are at risk.

### *Fearful Newswriters*

While hopeful and obliging newswriters are confident in their ability to retain their jobs, fearful newswriters perceive job insecurity and are unsure how to make themselves more valuable to their employers. The fearful workers in our study recognized the changes happening around them and were uncertain that they would be a part of the company's future. Several of these newswriters traced their anxiety back to the 2009 layoffs. "When you've been through an organization that one day had 15 people laid off, that will get your attention real quick," said one reporter. "You better be ready for whatever is going to happen, especially if you're not sure where things are headed." Others talked about their colleagues being laid off when discussing their own sense of job insecurity. For example, one reporter said that she experienced "survivor's guilt" after some of her colleagues were let go. "I don't know how I'd react in that situation and part of me thinks I will have to someday," she said. She continued to describe her anxiety:

I would say this is the first paper I've been at where I'm not sure where I stand in the pecking order. ... And there's no rhyme or reason to when there are layoffs. There are

people with tons of experience...to new people just out of school. ... You really have no idea how they're doing this.

According to Mishra and Spreitzer (1998), when layoff decisions are based on merit, survivors are less likely to feel threatened, but “when survivors perceive the decision rules to be politically based or random, they are less likely to see the implementation as fair and more likely to retaliate against the injustice of the system” (576). Thus, the reporter above who did not understand the logic behind the layoff decisions began to question her standing within the company. Others agreed that layoff decisions were made hastily and did not account for the dismissed workers' contributions to the news products. One Q1 respondent criticized management for making layoff decisions based on trends in journalism studies without considering the worker's contributions to the news product: “They get rid of some employees that are seasoned for what fits in the academic mold of the time.”

A few journalists expressed concern that they had not been included in some of the company's latest initiatives. “I can't think of anything I've done real recently that has been [innovative],” one editor said. “So there's, along those lines of fear, not fitting in good enough and they will find somebody that will do innovat[ion].” Another newsworker said that management had isolated his unit to do only print-related work. Recognizing the company's focus on digital production, he anticipated dire consequences for him and his colleagues: “they're just keeping us around until they pull the print product.” These workers believed that they had been marginalized within the company. They did not see how their work fit within the company's future plans, which made them doubt their future with the company.

Although only a few of those we interviewed embodied the fearful type, several participants indicated that profound anxiety was spread more widely throughout the newsroom. “I would say there's maybe a handful of people who are comfortable,” one reporter said. “I'd say there's a lot of people who are unsure and are trying to keep...their options open.” Indeed, a few participants said they were taking advantage of opportunities to learn new skills so that they would be more marketable in the future, such as one reporter who said, “hireability is also something that's always in the back of your mind.” “I do see [the changes] wearing down a lot of colleagues,” said another journalist. “They become very cynical of each new email we get about trying something new... They don't want to try new things for fear that they will fail and that will put them on the chopping block.” Although hopeful workers believed the company provided workers the freedom to fail, several others doubted that this freedom was afforded to all. For example, one Q2 respondent indicated that only a favored few truly possess the freedom to fail:

The staff [is] too fearful to suggest and implement ideas, or question the bad ones handed down. One of the only new things attempted, a manager who started an array of “topical sites” without any strategy behind the decision, made no sense, made no money, weakened our brands, and wasted a tremendous amount of company time and resources. All because he was bold and well-liked, esp. [sic] by the right people.

Others reiterated this sentiment. They did not believe that all workers were shielded from the negative consequences of failure. For fearful newsworkers who were already anxious about losing their jobs, the rewards of experimentation did not outweigh the risk of failure.

### *Cynical Newsworkers*

Like fearful survivors, cynical survivors doubt they have a future with their company, but unlike the fearful, the cynics are openly critical of their company (Mishra and Spreitzer

1998). Cynical workers believe they have the ability to handle being laid off, so they are more concerned with drawing attention to the company's failings than retaining their current jobs. Although most participants in the study had a mix of positive and negative things to say about the company, a few newswriters expressed clear and consistent disdain for their employer.

One complaint of cynical newswriters was that the organization's leadership demonstrated poor planning and failed to provide clear guidelines for successful work. A few said they rarely received positive feedback from their superiors, which made it difficult for them to know what was expected of them. "I think our leadership is lacking, and I think we've been given no direction," one long-time employee said. Another newswriter who had been with the company for 10 years demonstrated extreme cynicism throughout his Q1 responses. For example, in response to a question about ideas the company should consider, he wrote, "Who cares, I am looking for a way out of journalism." Later, he added:

Newsroom management is so bad and so devoid of real new ideas I don't see any real hope for reversing the slide. ... The innovators in the newsroom have been let go, left of their own accord or given up since [it's] a losing battle to change anything.

Five months later, as demonstrated in his Q2 responses, this newswriter's contempt for the company had not receded. When asked about the company's best initiatives, he responded, "who cares, I am just saving money to leave this company and journalism." He continued:

I have been in journalism long enough to learn that newspapers cannot be saved from their own inept management. You can't cut and trim your way to a great product and this paper has deteriorated to the point it is not worth even picking up and skimming through.

Throughout his responses, this newswriter articulated acute cynicism toward the company. He "strongly disagreed" with the statement that his job was secure, and he used the opportunity to denounce his company's leadership and the news products he helped create.

Another cynical newswriter questioned whether leaders had a "master plan" for their actions or if they were making decisions on the fly. He said he was trying to stay positive that his superiors "are doing their best to make sure we're doing great – it just doesn't seem like it from where we are." He said he didn't know what the company was trying to accomplish most of the time because managers and editors were ineffective at communicating with the staff. He reiterated this point in Q1, writing the company needed "[m]ore communication and planning. This is repeatedly promised and thrown away. Too many secrets and then ambush information." This newswriter said he did not go to school to become a journalist and he didn't anticipate working in the industry much longer. "It's so much so that I'm looking at other jobs," he said. "It just feels like you get stepped on, and stepped on, and stepped on. You just get tired of it after a while." He said he had advocated for change in the past but he had since given up trying to help the company or save his job. He believed he was not a part of the company's long-term future, and he appeared ready to move on.

While extreme cynicism was not common among the participants in our study, the cynics were not the only ones to offer sharp critiques of the company. Several expressed doubt and resentment toward upper management. As one reporter wrote in Q2: "I love journalism and will continue to work in this field until I'm told not to. However, my respect for this company and its leadership has fallen greatly. I work for the readers." Another respondent was similarly pessimistic: "The situation seems hopeless now. There are a few good tactical things going on, but in the big picture the rate of the company's descent is

alarming.” Although most Q2 respondents stated that the 2013 layoffs were motivated by declining revenue and a need to add journalists with multimedia skills, a few cited failures in leadership, for example, crediting “poor company planning” and blaming the organization for “failing to innovate in any meaningful way for the last four years.” In general, critics blamed the company for investing in the wrong initiatives or giving up too quickly on promising ideas. At times, it appeared that some viewed the company’s lack of commitment to new initiatives as indicative of a lack of devotion to its employees.

Several said they believed the company would rather recruit new employees with the desired skills than invest in training existing staff. One cynical newsworker, in particular, said he had a variety of multimedia skills but was not given time off from his regular tasks to take on digital projects. He felt underutilized in a company that claimed to prioritize its digital presence. “They want to hire people who have exactly the skillset to build these things rather than train up within,” he said. Similarly a TV producer wrote in Q2 that the “knowledge and experience of its staff” were critical to the company’s success. “Teach them the ‘new way of journalism,’” the producer added, “and don’t [sic] just overlook them, and look for a new person that is cheaper and knows ‘new tricks.’” Their fears were validated to a certain extent in our interviews with company leadership. For example, one manager said that the greatest challenge for the company will be “getting journalists to do the things they need to do...because they’re so entrenched in the old.” Another explained that the layoffs were necessary, in part, because of a “need to increase our digital skill sets.” “It’s clear that we couldn’t convert people,” he continued. “We don’t have the time to convert some of these people.” While some newsworkers complained that the company was unwilling to invest in its staff, the leadership felt their efforts to train from within had not produced sufficient returns. Thus, those who were unable or unwilling to adapt to the changing demands were right to worry that their jobs were in jeopardy.

### **Newswork as Precarious Labor**

Using a case study of a media company in a mid-sized U.S. city, our research questions asked how newsworkers respond to a culture of job insecurity and how these responses affect efforts to change news practices. Our findings indicate that responses vary, depending on whether newsworkers believe their jobs are at risk, the news products have declined in quality, and company management can be trusted to make wise and just decisions. Further, these responses help explain whether newsworkers are likely to experiment, conform, withdraw, or challenge their employer’s efforts to change news practices. Hopeful newsworkers believed they were secure in their jobs and were doing work that management viewed favorably. These workers engaged in constructive, active efforts – such as supporting new company initiatives, producing digital content, and proposing innovations – that afforded them a sense of job security. Hopeful newsworkers believed they had the freedom to fail as long as they were active partners in the company’s future. Obliging newsworkers, meanwhile, sought to perform their jobs in a manner that gave them personal satisfaction while keeping the company’s latest initiatives at arm’s length. They weren’t opposed to the company experimenting with new ideas, but they were not interested in being at the forefront of such change. Obliging newsworkers believed their jobs were safe as long as they continued to produce content that satisfied their bosses and, thus, tried to adapt existing practices to new plans and objectives set by the company. Fearful and cynical newsworkers, on the other hand, believed there was little they could do to retain their jobs. Several of these workers said that they gave up trying to alter their news practices, because they felt either their efforts had gone unnoticed or their work had become marginalized. Fearful workers did not believe that they had the freedom to fail; they anticipated severe consequences for falling

short of expectations. As one manager described it, they adopted a strategy of “keep your head down [and] try not to be noticed.” Cynical newswriters, meanwhile, wanted to be noticed. They believed their company was on the wrong track and thought it was important to voice their criticism. Cynical newswriters were planning their exit strategy, one that included blaming the leadership, or lack thereof, for the company’s misfortunes.

This research highlights the importance of studying news practices and production through the lens of precarious labor (Beck 1992, 2000; Deuze 2007; Ekinsmyth 1999; Kalleberg 2009). Recent scholarship has provided great insight into barriers to change within the news industry. Scholars have rightly identified hindrances to change such as professional identity (Lewis 2012), “deep structures” of daily news routines (Ryfe 2009), lack of reflexivity (Usher 2010), and dwindling resources (McChesney and Nichols 2010). To this list, we add the limiting effect of a culture of job insecurity. Certainly, participants in this study articulated concerns related to the values of journalism and the daily routines that shape news practices. At the same time, their understanding of newswriting as a job, one that they may or may not be able to keep, also influenced their news practices and receptivity to change. One could assume that those worried about losing their jobs would be more likely to take risks that might make them more valuable to their employers, but our findings indicate the opposite. Fearful and cynical newswriters who perceive job insecurity stifle innovation and experimentation by adopting a risk-averse approach to newswriting and actively challenging their employer’s efforts. Further, the culture of job insecurity limits change even among workers who do not personally experience job insecurity. As demonstrated above, obliging newswriters moderate changes to journalism practice to fit within a work schema that is meaningful to them and has proven valuable to their employers. Obliging newswriters do not push the boundaries of news practices like hopeful newswriters. The obliging adopt a more conservative approach to change. To paraphrase the obliging newswriter quoted earlier, they do the best job they can do within the mission they’ve been given until that mission changes. Thus Mishra and Spreitzer’s (1998) typology of layoff survivors offers a useful framework for understanding newswriting within the context of increasing job insecurity in the news industry.

The findings of our case study are also instructive for news organizations attempting to change newsroom culture and innovate news practices. We caution these decision makers not to see this study as rationale to lay off or otherwise penalize employees who are not a hopeful workers. In fact, doing so would likely convert hopeful workers into one of the three other types, as survivors would view such acts as unjust. Instead, editors and managers should consider how they can cultivate the active and constructive responses they desire by building trust, clearly communicating the reasons behind layoff decisions, encouraging autonomy, and paying attention to employee job satisfaction. A good place to start is with obliging workers. As demonstrated in this study, obliging newswriters exhibit faith in their employer and confidence in their abilities. What obliging workers lack that hopeful workers have is a greater sense of empowerment and value in their work. If news organizations make a deliberate effort to convince obliging newswriters that they also have the freedom to fail, obliging workers may feel greater autonomy and may pursue ventures that make their work more meaningful. As a result, obliging newswriters may become the innovators and hopeful workers their employers desire.

News organizations often suffer from a paradox of their own making. While they encourage workers to change news practices, they often engage in efforts – poor communication, unclear metrics for success, increased work expectations, weak justification for layoff decisions, and so on – that elicit worker responses that impede such change. Though some newswriters will become eager contributors, others will pursue stasis out of disinterest, fear, or anger. As such, the culture of job insecurity within the news industry has a

limiting effect on changes to journalism practice, regardless of the substance of those changes. Those who buy into a company's mission will feel validated because of their loyalty; those confident in their current newswork will feel secure despite their lack of engagement; and those who see their situation as hopeless will stop trying. Thus, efforts to change news practice by company leaders can have an opposite and undesired effect on many newswriters – the further entrenchment of traditional news practice.

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