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Creative Autonomy in the Newsroom: How Hierarchy Impacts Innovative Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

News organisations are in need of creativity to enable their own innovation. Yet “creative autonomy”, the freedom to experiment, to be creative, and to investigate radical possibilities at work, which is conditional to innovation processes, is still under-researched in journalism studies. In this article we fill this gap by addressing creative autonomy in newsrooms in transformation from an organisational perspective. We do so by using “innovative learning culture” or “ILC” as a lens to understand how creative autonomy is perceived within the newsroom, and what organisational aspects and social dynamics influence this perception. From a larger ethnographic study on innovative behaviour in two national newspaper newsrooms in the Netherlands, “creative autonomy” emerged as a relevant theme to journalists in both organisations. Their perception of creative autonomy is multi-layered, unevenly experienced across the newsroom, and strongly influenced by hierarchy. We also find that the perception of creative autonomy coincides with the perception of having close communicative relations with management. We argue that this can hinder the innovative behaviour of the majority of news workers who are not part of elite groups and typically perceive more distance from management.

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Creative professionals such as journalists are a news organisation’s “most important assets” (Malmelin and Virta 2016, 1041), since the quality and success of media products largely depend on the novel and creative ideas of the people that produce them. In fact, as workers’ new ideas “constitute the lifeblood” of innovation in organisations (Van den Ende, Frederiksen, and Prencipe 2015, 482), this inherently presupposes the exchange of new ideas at work (Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2022). As the capacity of organisations to innovate and transform themselves lies in social processes (Bergendahl and Magnusson 2015), studying these social, creative processes is crucial both to newsrooms in transformation and to the scholarly study of newsroom innovation.

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Traditionally, the newsroom has been studied foremost as a place where the news is constructed (see Hendrickx and Picone 2020; Paulussen 2016; Stonbely 2015), not as an organisation in transformation per se. And if newsroom innovation is studied, it is often mainly analysed from a technological point of view (Posetti 2018; Schmitz Weiss and Domingo 2010), a management perspective (Ekdale et al. 2015; Porcu 2020), or both. Although there has been some attention for culture in the newsroom—i.e. as an obstacle for innovation (Ryfe 2012; Tameling 2015, Usher 2014)—it is strikingly under-researched how creative processes can enhance innovation in the newsroom. Only recently studies have been mapping this vital social territory (see Koivula, Laaksonen, and Villi 2022; Malmelin and Virta 2016; 2017; 2019; Porcu 2020; Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020; 2022). By continuing to study the newsroom primarily as a news construction outlet, with a tech or management bias while excluding social processes, scholars run the risk of losing vital insights into how innovation in the newsroom can actually happen.

In this study, we therefore shift the focus towards an organisational perspective, studying social processes that trigger learning, experimenting, and innovation in the newsroom (Koivula, Saari, and Villi 2023; Malmelin and Virta 2019; Porcu 2020; Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020; Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2022). To study the newsroom as an organisation in transformation we adopt “innovative learning culture” (ILC) as a lens (Porcu 2020): a perceived culture that triggers and fosters innovation. By using ILC we view the newsroom as a whole, including management and workers, encompassing the social processes conditional to sharing and developing new ideas.

This research is part of a larger study on innovative behaviour in the newsroom using ILC as a lens (see also Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020; Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2022). From our ethnographic research “autonomy” emerged as a key, multi-layered theme. The dominant view in journalism studies considers the professional autonomy of journalists mainly in terms of political and commercial influence on the construction of the news proper (Örnebring and Karlsson 2022; Sjøvaag 2013). This news construction perspective can overlook the organisational pressures hampering creativity and innovation processes beyond news construction (Malmelin and Virta 2017; Örnebring and Karlsson 2022; Sjøvaag 2013). In order to enable more insights, in this study we make a distinction between journalistic autonomy, understood as professional autonomy in the literature, and “creative autonomy”, which we define as “the autonomy needed to be flexible, to experiment, to be creative, and to investigate radical possibilities” (Porcu, 2020, 1559), relating it to innovation.

We thus aim to fill a gap in journalism studies, addressing the perception of creative autonomy in newsrooms in transformation from an organisational culture perspective, using ILC as a lens. In particular we seek to answer how creative autonomy is perceived by news workers, and what organisational aspects and social processes impact these perceptions in the newsroom.

Theoretical Context

Autonomy and Innovation Processes in Organisations

Autonomy in the workplace or “job autonomy” is part of the study of job characteristics in the sociology of work (Hackman and Oldham 1976), and is used in the literature on

human resource management and entrepreneurial and organisational behaviour. Saragih (2011), following Hackman and Oldham, defines it as “the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out” (2011, 205). Job autonomy is often studied in relation to overlapping phenomena: not only does it strongly relate to a general “work satisfaction” and “performance”, it also strongly relates to “innovation”, “proactivity” and “risk taking” (De Jong et al. 2015).

The relation between job autonomy and innovation processes has been established in various studies and across several disciplines. Innovation processes are understood as the development of creative or new ideas which are viewed as novel in their context, not yet designed for an application (Amabile et al. 1996). Their relation to job autonomy is studied in occupational and organisational psychology (Janssen 2000), human resource management (Bos-Nehles and Veenendaal 2019), creativity and innovation management (De Jong and Den Hartog 2010), innovation studies (Miller and Miller 2020), entrepreneurial studies (De Jong et al. 2015) and management studies (Sanz-Valle and Jiménez-Jiménez 2018). These studies pivot around the positive relation between workers showing innovative behaviour and their perceived degree of job autonomy (Scott and Bruce 1994). Job autonomy, thus, is seen as essential for innovative behaviour (Bysted and Hansen 2015).

Autonomy in the Newsroom

Similarly, in journalism studies, “journalistic autonomy”—a core professional ideological value—has been defined as job autonomy which, as mentioned, draws heavily on the sociology of work (Örnebring and Karlsson 2022). The scholarly attention for journalistic autonomy in the workplace has, therefore, focussed mainly on the degree of control over processes and procedures within the context of the news construction process, including the freedom to make decisions about one’s own news stories. This relative freedom is constantly infringed upon by both external and internal forces, driven by political, economic or other agendas, often in inexplicit ways (Örnebring and Karlsson 2022; Sjøvaag 2013). Although in the literature such freedom is almost always related to the process of news construction, Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) distinguish two key parts of this freedom: the freedom within editorial matters, and the freedom beyond such matters which “captures the relative extent to which journalists can take part and influence decisions that affect their work beyond operative procedures of reporting, editing, and so on.” (2013, 136). According to the authors, the second part of this freedom is “less obvious and probably less studied” (2013, 135).

Breed (1955) was the first to analyse the construction of the news also as “the product of a workplace” (Örnebring and Karlsson 2022, 181) where organisational factors restrict journalistic autonomy. He found that news selection is not only the result of professional standards, but is also influenced by social factors such as hierarchy, conflict avoidance and normative behaviour (Sjøvaag 2013). Editors and managers, indirectly, make sure that news workers are actually prevented from exercising their full journalistic autonomy while constructing the news (Örnebring and Karlsson 2022; Sjøvaag 2013). Newsroom control mechanisms may ensure some creativity for journalists in reporting, editing, and presenting stories, but these boundaries are quite narrow “so that journalists can be trusted to act in the interest of the news organization” (Soloski 1989 in Sjøvaag

2013, 157). According to Örnebring et al. (2016) news workers are not always aware of this situation. The authors state that “journalists perceive autonomy on the everyday work place level and, so long as no-one explicitly tells them to tweak a story to better suit advertisers, they do not see their autonomy as threatened” (2016, 308). Bird-Meyer and Erdelez (2021) confirm that restrictions are not always apparent to journalists themselves: they point out that reporters say they work autonomously, but “this is true within certain narrow frames or constraints” (2021, 445).

Creative Autonomy and Innovation Processes in the Newsroom

Where research on journalistic autonomy in journalism studies has focussed on the construction of the news, its relation to innovation processes in the newsroom has yet to be fully understood. Journalistic autonomy is mentioned in studies on newsroom innovation (see Ekdale et al. 2015; Gade and Perry 2003; Nylund 2013), but it has a variety of meanings referring to either a journalist’s concrete work in the newsroom, abstract professional values, or something in between. However, if the creative boundaries are indeed so narrow for reasons of newsroom control (Bird-Meyer and Erdelez 2021; Örnebring et al. 2016; Sjøvaag 2013), this gives rise to the question how these narrow boundaries can allow for creativity and innovation at all, within and beyond editorial newsroom practices. Journalism is in need of creativity for its innovation (Deuze 2019). However, “creative autonomy” in the newsroom has received little explicit attention so far.

In this article, we define creative autonomy as an important part of an innovative learning culture (ILC), in the context of newsroom creativity and innovation. The conceptual lens of ILC relates explicitly to innovation processes and is understood as a prerequisite for innovative behaviour, such as the exchange of new ideas (Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020; 2022). ILC is defined as:

a social climate that stimulates people to work and learn together, to grow as an individual and as a group (team, organisation), and that provides people with the autonomy needed to be flexible, to experiment, to be creative, and to investigate radical possibilities in order for the organisation to have better chances for survival in the long run. This is facilitated by serving leadership, open communication, mutual trust, a supporting culture, shared goals, appreciation of individual achievement, and training and development. (Porcu 2020, 1559)

We argue that creative autonomy results from the social environment, enabling innovative behaviour which enhances newsroom innovation. Based on the research above, similar to the “within and beyond editorial freedom” distinction (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013), we differentiate between *journalistic autonomy* and *creative autonomy*. We consider creative autonomy to be “dual layered”: it is composed of a basic journalistic autonomy in daily operations, mainly related to a creativity limited to one’s own news stories, which is extended to a creativity in a broader sense, beyond one’s own stories. Creative autonomy, enabling newsroom innovation beyond daily operations, could lead to innovative behaviour benefitting the entire newsroom. To explore creative autonomy in the newsroom, we ask:

RQ1: How do news workers perceive creative autonomy in the newsroom?

RQ2: What are the organisational aspects that influence their perceptions?

RQ3: Which social dynamics drive these perceptions?

Methodology

This article is based on a larger study on innovative behaviour in two national newspaper newsrooms in the Netherlands (Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020; 2022), containing an ethnographic study to achieve an “in-depth picture” (Creswell 2014, 231) of a phenomenon in its native environment. Data have been collected in the newsroom of the relatively large *NRC Media* in 2017 (228 persons contracted and 93 flexible) and the smaller *Trouw* in 2018 (124 persons contracted and 47 flexible). These titles are selected for their strong market positions, as we assume that they are more able to invest in innovation than less established brands. This makes it more likely that workers experience an ILC in their newsroom, which increases the probability of sharing and developing new ideas (Porcu 2020; Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2020; 2022). The selection of these titles, thus, reflects the focus of this study. To enhance internal validity we triangulate data of an ethnographic nature, which comprise notes of non-participant observations and of open, not priorly structured interviews. Field notes have been taken on the spot, which have been edited into reports afterwards.

To observe social processes the researcher used “interaction” as a compass, attending formally organised meetings, including those targeted at: daily production, special projects, “catching up”, and brain storm or evaluation sessions. Interaction in various informal settings has been observed as well.

In addition, interviews were held across the newsroom and lasted approximately 60 min on average. Respondents participated upon selection by the researcher, based on their availability, and out of their free will. Prior to the interview respondents were given an explicit confidentiality warrant. Selection of the interviewees is based on “maximum variation sampling” to develop multiple perspectives, and on “snowball sampling” to find “information-rich” sources (Creswell 2014). The interviews started off with an open question around the research theme (“Within the context of this newsroom’s culture, what do you experience as stimulating, and as non-stimulating, with respect to sharing and developing new ideas?”). Then the interview could go in different directions, depending on the experiences of the specific respondent.

Both newsrooms have been studied over a 15-week time period in the Spring of 2017 and 2018, with an average presence of the researcher of approximately 3,5 days per week, resulting in 103 days and 132 interviews from 103 unique respondents (see Table 1). Some respondents were so “rich” in information that they were interviewed more than once. At *NRC Media* 41 news workers were interviewed once, and 12 more than once. At *Trouw* 40 news workers were interviewed once, and 10 more than once. Respondents vary in hierarchical position, age, gender, and contractual relations.

All data have been analysed per newsroom in atlas.ti software for relevant themes related to ILC, applying a bottom up inductive coding process (Braun and Clarke 2006). In both newsrooms “autonomy” (defined here as “creative autonomy”) emerged as an

Table 1. Research observation days in the field and the number of open interviews held.

Newsroom	<i>NRC Media</i> (2017)	<i>Trouw</i> (2018)	Totals
Data type			
Observation days	52	51	103
Open interviews	70	62	132
Unique respondents	53	50	103

important theme, after which the similarities in the findings between the newsrooms have been studied. Subsequently, the findings and conclusions were integrated. The patterns of both newsrooms related to creative autonomy were similar, despite the variation in culture between them in terms of “how things are done around here”. Therefore, unless indicated otherwise, “the newsroom” refers to both newsrooms.

In the following “journalist”, “news worker” or “worker” are used as synonyms, as is the case for “middle management” and “chief”. Also “management” and the “editors in chief” are used as synonyms. The latter terms comprise the deputy editors in chief, securing anonymity at the individual level. For the same reason, all references attached to the citations have been removed. We refer to different social groups in the newsroom (Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2022), which can be found in the appendix.

Findings

The Perception of Creative Autonomy in the Newsroom

Interestingly, when news workers talk about the freedom they experience in their work, they mainly describe their perceptions of autonomy and creativity in relation to their own news stories, which we have defined as journalistic autonomy. There are less workers who perceive a larger autonomy which goes beyond their daily production, which we define as creative autonomy.

Almost all news workers, independent of disciplinary background, state by default to perceive ample manoeuvring space in their daily work, in terms of executing their own ideas and making decisions with respect to the production of their own news stories. They state, often in an exited fashion, that this is “self-evident”, stressing that working independently is “of course” fundamental to their profession (“that comes with the job”). Even when a news worker operates under severe time or other practical constraints, (s)he maintains to perceive this regardless.

The idea of having to operate *without* this core value is therefore almost inconceivable, it is observed. It is also observed that workers get severely frustrated by the idea of having to operate *against* this value, as this means succumbing to the (newsroom) powers that be which would hinder them in their work. As a consequence, and in trying to protect their journalistic autonomy, news workers are convinced that their creative or new story ideas cannot reach their full potential when these are “ordered” from “above”. News workers, therefore, claim to execute their own story ideas, not someone else’s. A middle manager (or “chief”) explains this “not-invented-here-culture” and why the ideas from “others”, in particular managers – who can be perceived as a threat to journalistic autonomy—often fail:

The culture here is that other people [in the hierarchy] are not thinking about what stories you should write, there is a lot of autonomy. [If someone else comes up with a good idea for you] it’s not invented here. Maybe it’s a good idea, but it’s not invented here.

But the ideas of “others” do not always fail. Middle managers and editors in chief are keenly aware that any too bold attempts on their part to steer ideas in an explicit top down manner, will risk non-execution with workers. However, it can happen within daily news production that management wants a particular “urgent” story anyway and

“orders” it, often with “news pressure” as an argument. Since news pressure is experienced by the entire newsroom as an external dominant force, news workers tend to experience such an order as an exception to the rule, which they seem to tolerate. It is observed that news pressure is often related to what media competitors do with the same story. This is understood as common logic. “Sometimes”, a chief states, “a story just has to be written regardless.”

Without news pressure, managers try to steer some of the news production by working around news workers’ need for journalistic autonomy. They do this, for instance, by having one-on-one-conversations with journalists, who are then “suggested” to look at a certain story with a specific angle. In this mulling over stories and angles managers are careful not to undermine a news worker’s perception of journalistic autonomy, very aware that the latter is a *sine qua non* for journalists to do their work at all. The smaller of the two newsrooms even has a special term for this (“ultra-delicate cooperation”), used by management only.

Organisational Aspects Influencing the Perception of Creative Autonomy

Working Contexts

When focussing on organisational aspects which can influence the perception of creative autonomy, there are two main working contexts to consider. The first comprises activities *within* daily operations, characterised by high routinisation, high production pressures and tight deadlines. The second is concerned with activities *beyond* daily operations, which take up more—and allow for more freedom in—time, collaboration, reflection, and organisation.

Within daily operations, as mentioned, all news workers state to perceive ample journalistic autonomy, mainly related to one’s own news stories. Journalistic autonomy can also include taking the initiative to add creative or new elements, or execute small alterations to the news product. Strictly speaking this goes beyond one’s own individual story, such as: choosing a new format, a creative use of an existent genre, creative visual images, clever ways of (multimedia) storytelling, or other small changes viewed as improvements. In general, these alterations occur spontaneously within daily activities and across disciplines. It should be noted that even if the chiefs are involved, these alterations are often claimed by workers as their “own” creative bottom up initiative.

Beyond daily operations news workers can experience a broader creative autonomy in “special projects”. These are either *news story* related projects or *organisation* related projects. Examples for news story projects are: working (alone or with a peer) on time consuming in-depth stories or in projects of investigative reporting which can require expert skills or collaborations with third parties. Examples of organisation projects involve: launching a (more) user friendly website, introducing a collective digital agenda system, experimenting with an entrepreneurial collaboration of workers and professionals “from outside”, organising production in a new manner, and so on.

Initiating Special Projects

News story projects are observed to be mainly initiated bottom up by news workers, whereas organisation projects are predominantly seen to be initiated top down by the editors in chief. Projects are considered “special” not just because they occur outside daily routines, but also because participation in them is not for everyone. This makes

projects relatively exclusive, which can trigger a higher status for participants, leading to a larger perceived creative autonomy by them, or ascribed to them, by other workers. Workers can feel “special” by claiming, and by being granted, their own news story projects. Workers can also feel special when they are selected for an organisation project. In terms of social groups (see also the appendix), workers rewarded a news story project can be seen as the *happy few*, those selected for an organisation project as the *usual suspects*. The majority of workers (i.e., the *larger newsroom*) hardly takes part in these special projects, unless production processes require this, for instance when introducing a collective digital agenda system.

In news story projects workers actively “claim” their own project. They are often the same workers who perceive creative autonomy as something “to fight for” and who, when rewarded, view this as a personal accomplishment. Others contradict this, stating that creative autonomy is for everyone (“it’s already there, there is no need to fight for it”), but also confirm that it requires to be “claimed” by workers, which often does not happen. As news story projects are mainly initiated and claimed from the bottom up, we view these perceptions of creative autonomy as *bottom up claimed*.

In organisation projects, in which participation depends on selection by management, news workers can also perceive a creative autonomy that feels larger than in daily operations. Such projects can be experienced as something new, as a creative break from everyday demands. As organisation projects are mainly initiated and assigned from the top down, we view these perceptions of creative autonomy as *top down assigned*.

Analysing both types of special projects, we find that rewarded news workers often originate from *elite* groups in the newsroom and typically ascribe a rewarded project to their personal qualities. Moreover, being rewarded a project can trigger or add to a worker’s sense of creative autonomy by the experience of being supported, seen, recognised, and validated for one’s work. It can be disappointing for other workers to perceive they are not acknowledged in the same fashion.

News workers can be selected not only to staff but also to lead an organisation project. The latter can consist of, for instance, a project aimed at shifting work routines towards digital ones. This is something which other workers, often with a heavy workload, can perceive as controversial “extra work” and not per se in their interest. Such projects, thus, involve a certain risk for management in terms of the odds for a newsroom protest. Often workers are convinced that the editors in chief typically delegate the lead of risky projects to others (i.e., to the *usual suspects*) to avoid a potential protest themselves. One *usual suspect* looks back on such an experience, describing it as “quite a shitty job” to have to win over the entire newsroom to engage in online experiences: “If I were the editors in chief I would proclaim this [to the newsroom], but they didn’t. [So I had to] convince nearly every journalist personally, showing them that this experience is in their own interest.”

Other risky organisation projects can also be delegated, as another *usual suspect* evaluates:

I’m glad [name project] is finally on the agenda. It is only disappointing that the editors in chief themselves do not take the lead, with a sound plan, without being too afraid. Afraid of the newsroom, I think, [there are already] too many changes. Now [the project] is completely delegated to someone else. I think that’s odd.

Editors in chief apply multiple ways to try to achieve digitalisation goals. They can, sometimes at the very same time, both delegate to a news worker the lead in a digital project to speed up digitalisation processes in the newsroom, and also explicitly state to workers that changes in routines towards digital ones are best shaped from the bottom up, instead of from the top down. It is the best way, management assumes, to stay away from too clear top down directives, which it knows news workers are allergic to—as news workers can perceive this as a direct threat to their journalistic autonomy—and which management presupposes yield only resistance. In general, editors in chief seek to avoid potential upheaval. They do this, for instance, by not having an internal debate on the digital strategy or on where the title is heading—even when news workers ask for this, sometimes in desperation—as debates could lead to “discussions” which could escalate into conflicts. To prevent this the editors in chief state to workers that they should “sort things out for themselves”.

Paradoxically, when news workers are fully granted the creative autonomy to “sort things out” in digital matters, they find this message puzzling and are quickly inclined to interpret this as being “left to our own devices”. It seems like workers need a map of the unknown territory first to understand where they can go.

In general, news workers perceive a lack in “leadership” in communication as well as in action. Workers prefer clear and direct communication, both because of a personal need to feel seen and recognised, and because of a professional need for a strategic vision on the title’s future. The latter is perceived to require plenary discussions within the newsroom, as well as the translation of a strategy with regard to their own work which enables them to move forward (“if there is no clear order from above, nothing ever happens”). Often workers feel that these needs are not met. A large part of workers is not in direct contact with the editors in chief, do “not know what their ideas are”, feel “not heard”, and state to not know what is expected of them with respect to digital routines. Leadership in terms of action, from workers’ perspective, does not happen either. They perceive delegating risky tasks as a “lack of leadership”, which is frowned upon. All these experiences can undermine their perception of creative autonomy.

Newsroom managers perceive their own performance differently. With respect to communicating with the newsroom, they perceive themselves as clear, and communicating a lot (“we’re communicating like crazy”). It should be noted that the *larger newsroom* notices that management does in fact communicate, but in their perception it does so mainly with the *elites*, not with them. Special projects involve direct social activity between management and “special” workers, which differs from social actions with workers in daily operations with whom editors in chief mainly communicate indirectly, via the chiefs. This creates a distance between management and workers, which can lead to not knowing each other, nor each other’s work and challenges, a news worker from the *silent majority* states:

I think I would like to be informed more on what the editors in chief are actually doing. I truly have no idea what they are doing. [Q: *Do you ever talk to them?*] No. [They] never drop by. [They] are not into [our work].

News workers often find this lack of direct contact rather disappointing, another worker from the *silent majority* explains:

[The editors in chief do] not know me that well. Which I find kind of a shame, actually. I know people complain that [they do] not talk a lot with news workers, that [they have] little feeling for news workers. Although [they are] of a social nature, at least that's what I've heard.

Managing the Newsroom as an Art

Special projects can come from the bottom up or from top down, but deciding which project or worker is going to be rewarded is, ultimately, a management decision. The process of managing all newsroom activities proves to be an art in itself. There is always the primary challenge of matching the available human capacity with all the activities to be performed at any point in time. Planning all news story activities, both within daily operations as well as within news story projects, for instance, is not an easy task. Trading off the value of a story and its production costs can also be a complex balancing act. Furthermore, the combination of the management of daily operations, news story projects, and organisation projects – all at the same time – can require different organising strategies and skills. This is particularly the case with respect to the systemic absorption of workers' new ideas: only those new ideas shared with management can be considered for further developed.

Bottom up initiated organisation projects are not impossible, but they are less common than bottom up news story projects. This is not because news workers do not have ideas from which the entire newsroom could benefit, but because they can be afraid of possible negative reactions when they upwardly share their creative or new ideas ("I'm certainly not going with this to [editors in chief], as [editors in chief] would laugh right in my face"). Most workers (i.e., the *larger newsroom*) would rather not take this risk. Therefore, perceptions of fear—unlike perceptions of trust—do not trigger but rather hinder the perception of creative autonomy. When journalists state having tried to share their ideas, this is often not experienced as a fruitful endeavour. Even though editors in chief are known for their often widely expressed claim that "their door is always open"—which can be perceived as true for the *elites*—workers often perceive that there is not much response to their ideas. When journalists talk about this, they do so with slight disappointment and cynicism ("never heard of it again, of course"), or they are amazed about the non-response ("it was such a great idea"). This does not stimulate sharing ideas with management the next time around.

Management states to be "always open" to workers' creative ideas. It opposes workers' negative perceptions for different reasons which may be related to newsroom size. Management of the smaller of the two newsrooms states it is "not aware" of missing out on any new ideas. Management of the larger of the two states that the perception of workers' new ideas are disregarded to be "a misconception". It argues that this has to do more with a lack of its project management skills than with openness to workers' creative ideas. The skills for selecting, adopting, and developing ideas systematically in the pressure cooker context of the newsroom have yet to be fully mastered, a manager explains:

We still very much need to learn how to work systematically. We usually just begin, often without an overview. People have a lot of new ideas but little structure. How do you keep oversight over your projects, while you also have to take care of the daily news?

Nonetheless, special projects do occur. For a worker to never be rewarded with a project at all can be experienced as a form of exclusion. The reason for this may need further research, but it seems that enjoying journalistic autonomy, without the experience of

being acknowledged for one's work with managerial attention—which one receives in a project—can undermine workers' creative autonomy, and thus their inclination towards creative behaviour. This can also result in disengagement, or even resignation. Workers' perceptions of exclusion, however, do vary. For some, to not be selected for an organisation project is not the key issue, but to not have been consulted at all, is. For instance, a worker with an expertise in a certain field, who would have liked to have shared their thoughts with management on a project beforehand, feels overlooked afterwards when they were not invited to do so. This is perceived as “not being seen” and as a lack of recognition.

Just as management tries to be aware of activities in the newsroom, almost all workers carefully and critically observe the moves, decisions, and actions taken, or not taken, by their management. Whatever the topic may be, all actions of the editors in chief are critically analysed, commented upon, ready to be interpreted and explained in terms of politics and strategy. Furthermore, this careful watching is observed to be an activity that is “position free”: whether or not close to management, all news workers appear to have their “political antenna” out for what's happening.

Social Dynamics Driving the Perception of Creative Autonomy

The perception of creative autonomy seems to be related to the experience of being seen and acknowledged. The social dynamics between management and news workers reflect the negotiation between them in obtaining creative autonomy. These dynamics drive the perception of creative autonomy and originate in who is “steering” creative autonomy (*bottom up claiming* or *top down assigning*), how creative autonomy is obtained (*passively* or *actively*), and in which working context these dynamics play out (*daily operations* or *special projects*). We find four main social dynamics:

Passively Claiming (In Daily Operations)

The first dynamic is that workers *passively claim* creative autonomy in daily operations by manifesting their expertise, provided this is viewed as scarce by others. The scarcer this is perceived to be, the better the chances a worker has to obtain creative autonomy without having to resort to an explicit go-out-and-get-it-attitude. A scarce expertise creates a fait accompli, which is respected. The spontaneous alternations to the news product, as mentioned, can also be seen as a result of this.

Expertise, thus, functions as a “natural” protector against interference from, in particular, managers. Interference can infringe upon a workers' perception of creative autonomy. News workers feel that managers with the same expertise as them often *will* interfere. There are also managers with similar expertise who *will not* interfere. The latter is perceived to grasp that this is not productive for a worker's creative autonomy, and is seen by workers to be more “trustworthy” than the former.

The “natural” tendency of management to want to interfere with certain news desks is often understood by workers as being due to “personality issues”, but also as a result of “news pressure”, which can be high. Such pressure combined with a perceived non-uniqueness of a news desk's expertise makes top down “interference” almost predictable. This combination of forces can explain why the “pressure from above” is felt more acutely with the national news desk, including the political desk. A lot of news workers and their

managers believe they are qualified to speak about “their” national news, while they refrain from commenting on the work of other desks, like the foreign or the science desk, perceived as more specialist. A worker from the *newsroom establishment* explains:

There are two positions in the newsroom you do not want to end up in: one is editor national news desk and the other is editor at its [political] desk in The Hague. Everyone thinks they’re an expert. It’s today’s news. And [the editors in chief] interfere with everything.

The “penalty” for not having an expertise considered scarce, can also be observed across disciplines. For instance, *picture people* (Lowrey 2002) often perceive less creative autonomy than *word people* due to their historical position as a “supporting” discipline. Word people, in general, are perceived to be more assertive than the often more introvert picture people. Inevitable discussions about visual choices are typically won by a word worker, leaving an often tongue-tied picture peer behind. A picture worker from the *silent majority* explains how journalists tend to overestimate themselves, infringing upon the creative autonomy of their more expert colleague:

Journalists immediately come up with an image themselves. [...] I don’t even get the time to think of something, a plan b. That’s where the friction lies. They are on my territory. This happens across the entire newsroom. That’s why you don’t end up with the best image. Because, yes they will find an image, but often that is just a cliché.

Actively Claiming (In Special Projects)

The second dynamic is that workers *actively claim* creative autonomy by taking the initiative to share their new ideas for a story project with management. To actively claim it is stimulating, as claiming something and succeeding in it is inherently empowering. Moreover, it is also stimulating when one’s ideas are accepted by management. Both these elements can boost a worker’s self-confidence and their perception of creative autonomy, which can trigger the likelihood that (s)he will try this again. Successful “claimers” often fully ascribe their success to their traits and talents, such as assertiveness or being a self-starter. Not only do they perceive their success as a personal accomplishment, they also consider this to be an individual responsibility, as a worker from the *happy few* explains:

There is room for new ideas, but you have to share them yourself as you are responsible for experimenting with them. This is not necessarily being encouraged, but it’s not stopped either. There is room, but you will have to seize the opportunity yourself.

Next to the traits of being assertive and self-propelled, to successfully claim creative autonomy one also has to “fight for” it and be able to oppose orders, another worker from the *happy few* states:

Innovation is something in your head. And if you are creative and you can translate this into a doable plan, I think a lot is possible.[...] I feel I have the time to research things well. A large autonomy. [...] It is not self-evident, I fought for it. [...] This causes friction with the strategy of [publisher]. [...] It is a conscious decision to shield myself from that strategy.

To “not be bothered by anyone” and to be exempted from routines or “chores”, is considered the ultimate form of creative autonomy. This *carte blanche* is perceived to be granted by management to only *some* of the *happy few*, based on their priorly manifested journalistic talent(s), such as: being an extraordinary intelligent or creative (investigative)

reporter, writer, or analyst. What seems crucial is that “talent”, similar to “expertise”, needs to be perceived as scarce to be rewarded this special status.

Interestingly, a lot of workers do not take advantage of the opportunity to *actively* claim their creative autonomy for a project of their own, which requires upwardly sharing their own ideas. They seem to shy away from this even when management actively promotes that there are resources to fund such projects. The motives for such behaviour are mixed. Being a shy or introvert worker, resulting in not daring to speak to management, is only one. Some workers perceive themselves to not be in the “position” to do so, which can indicate that actively claiming creative autonomy presupposes a higher position. Others actually would like to claim their own project but state to not find the time to organise things (“heavy workloads”). There are also workers who state to feel a lack of enthusiasm and say they need encouragement from management first, in order to feel motivated to claim their creative autonomy. Still others experience a kind of resignation and, hence, of distance towards management, possibly due to previous not rewarded attempts. The successful “claimers” view the “non claimers” from yet another perspective. A worker from the *happy few* states to be “fed up” with the attitude of colleagues who “avoid” claiming their creative autonomy:

You cannot always hide behind the back of the editors in chief! You need to make a contribution yourself. A lot of people don't do this. A lot of space to do something is consumed by people's grudges and frustration [...] Instead you can also consider: how can I change this situation for the better?

Passively Assigning (In Daily Operations)

The third dynamic is that current management most of times *passively assigns* creative autonomy to certain workers as well as to specific news desks on historical grounds. These are journalists who were previously in a management position or who have otherwise acquired a certain status across time (for instance the *newsroom establishment*). Such an “inherited” creative autonomy from management's predecessors also applies to certain news desks. This “baked in” differentiation in certain news desks' creative autonomy is maintained most of times. The latter is argued to be strategically productive for the “mix” of content of the newspaper and occurs particularly with those desks further away from the “hard news”. While guarding this inheritance, the expectations among the chiefs of these news desks are clear from the outset: they have a lot of creative autonomy, as one of them explains:

This newspaper has never hindered me [in my creative autonomy]. I hardly interfere with the organisation, so I always have the idea [that it is a] very open and fast organisation. The autonomy is huge: go take it.

Actively Assigning (In Special Projects)

The fourth dynamic is that management *actively assigns* creative autonomy by developing a project and actively selects workers, either to lead it or participate in it. Selection appears to trigger a mutual trust and loyalty between management and selectees, which can result in reciprocal advantages. Communicating in close knit ties appears to trigger in workers a sense of being seen. At the same time, selection provides management with a ring of hand-picked entrusted workers. This can result in a mutually perceived

“safe space” in which both “dance” with each other, each negotiating their own creative autonomy.

A clear indication that editors in chief attempt to strategically take the lead in this dance is that the managements of both newsrooms stated, using the exact same vocabulary, that when they came into office “the first thing” they did was to “change all the chiefs” by appointing new ones to “get a grip on the newsroom”. Strategic thought can also drive management’s initiatives for special projects: organisation related projects are usually said to future proof the newsroom in some way. In the larger of the two newsrooms such projects are also viewed by management as a “learning experience” for participants. Moreover, such projects are sometimes initiated with a dual purpose: not only with the intention to learn from them, but also to prevent inertia or discontent, by engaging workers in a novel experience. When energies are low, a manager explains, projects are used “to shake things up”:

Not having projects, not having a common goal, is a breeding ground for disintegration. This is the case for all organisations. People get bored, look around, grumble. I actually mean this in a positive way: projects have a necessity. [...] If you don’t have a common goal [...] then I notice here [...] that one [person] starts to grumble, and then there are more to come [...]

Management can also actively “assign” creative autonomy for projects to the *entire* newsroom. At the time of research in the larger of the two newsrooms there was the plan to systematically win more journalism prizes. Every journalist had to come up with a story project idea, which after approval, would be rewarded with resources to develop it. When management did invite everyone to participate, in the *larger newsroom* the suggestion of ideas “on demand” was seen as stifling creativity. Also, workers from the *elites* viewed this as an order. Someone from the *usual suspects* stated that (s)he interpreted this as a “disciplinary measure” against the newsroom, explaining how upsetting it was when this occurred:

Because the editors in chief are behind it, it has a mortgage on it. Most good ideas cannot be organised like that. [...] Organising [prize] worthy productions. It is disciplining the newsroom. [...] Then in fact you’re saying: until now we have not been doing good enough in that field, that should be improved.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we have analysed how creative autonomy is perceived by news workers and how it influences innovative behaviour—such as sharing creative or new ideas—in newsrooms in transformation. We argue that creative autonomy is dual layered: a basic journalistic autonomy, which consists of job autonomy with a creativity limited to one’s daily news stories, extended with a larger creativity beyond one’s daily news stories from which the entire newsroom can benefit. Overall, we find that the organisational structures crucially impact news workers’ perceptions of creative autonomy. These perceptions are found to be multi-layered, unevenly experienced across the newsroom, and strongly dependent on hierarchy. In particular, we find that the perception of creative autonomy appears to be connected to the perception of being seen and acknowledged by newsroom leaders. We also find that these perceptions coincide with having close communicative relations with newsroom leaders, experienced mainly by newsroom elite groups.

The newsroom majority on the whole perceives a lack of direct contact with newsroom leaders and, as a result, often does not feel that their communicative needs, nor their need to be seen and acknowledged by newsroom leaders, are met.

Relating these findings to the context of an innovative learning culture or “ILC”, the broader lens for this study and a prerequisite for innovative behaviour, we conclude three main things.

First, it is the perception of creative autonomy—which makes up a crucial part of ILC—that enables innovative behaviour which can be beneficial for the entire newsroom. Journalistic autonomy is not enough to trigger innovative behaviour beyond one’s own news stories. Although research outside journalism studies considers job autonomy (i.e., the basis for journalistic autonomy) to be a key driver for innovative behaviour (Bysted and Hansen 2015; De Jong and Den Hartog 2010; Sanz-Valle and Jiménez-Jiménez 2018; Scott and Bruce 1994), this only partly holds true in the newsroom. As we find, some news workers expand their creative scope beyond journalistic autonomy by claiming their own (special, innovative) projects. Such projects, however, require the upwardly sharing of new ideas. In order to do so, workers need to perceive a creative autonomy, which is mainly experienced by elite groups. Still, we find journalistic autonomy is conditional for journalists to perform in the newsroom: almost everyone states to experience it. This default reaction seems to answer to an ideological (and perhaps psychological) need of journalists: they find it hard to operate without feeling autonomous. This can be explained by professional ideology which dictates operating independently from the power influences from outside the newsroom and, ideally, also from those from inside (Breed 1955; Örnebring and Karlsson 2022). Indeed, our study shows that journalists try to protect their journalistic autonomy by executing mainly their own story ideas. Or by having an expertise seen as scarce, which functions as a “natural” protector against interference from the hierarchy.

Second, the organisational structures, and the social dynamics they induce—touched upon by Ekdale et al. (2015), Gade and Perry (2003), Malmelin and Virta (2016) who state how crucial communication skills and processes are in the newsroom—notably impact the perception of creative autonomy, and thus ILC. As is shown, creative autonomy is pursued and obtained, related to social dynamics between management and the newsroom. These dynamics are clearly influenced by hierarchy. A distinction in working contexts can create a hierarchy of more or less exclusiveness (such as initiating special projects for “special” people). The latter results in different social groups in various working contexts enjoying dissimilar perceptions of creative autonomy. Furthermore, some groups in the social hierarchy, such as the *usual suspects* or the *happy few* are part of the *newsroom elites* which enjoy a larger perception of creative autonomy, related to relatively closer communicative ties with management. The majority of workers (i.e., the *larger newsroom*), however, hardly takes part in any project, which can result in a relatively distant relationship with management. Due to this distance the editors in chief and the *larger newsroom* often risk misunderstanding each other, which does not stimulate perceptions of creative autonomy. These findings go beyond those of Ekdale et al. (2015) and Hendrickx and Picone (2020) on newsroom leaders’ poor communication skills in innovation only. We find that the perceived lack of direct communication structurally impacts the *larger newsroom* negatively in terms of their perception of creative autonomy, as most workers already experience a hierarchical distance from their

editors in chief. The close communicative ties management has with the *elites*, which reinforce their perception of creative autonomy, are missed by the *larger newsroom*, which undermine theirs.

Third, the findings show that the factors that facilitate ILC—such as open communication, serving leadership and shared goals—need improving if an overall ILC is to be perceived. For example, future proofing the newsroom requires sufficient knowledge and skills from management to organise simultaneous activities without missing out on new ideas. This proves to be a work in progress. Not picking up on new ideas can lead to missing out on innovation opportunities, as well as to disappointment among idea sharing news workers, who may not share their new idea a next time around. Furthermore, management tends to lead and transform the newsroom in a somewhat under the radar fashion in order to prevent discussions or protests in the newsroom, as these may escalate. This conflict avoidance also appears to motivate editors in chief to communicate to workers that, when dealing with certain digital tasks, they should “sort things out for themselves”. At the same time, however, workers like to know what is expected of them.

All things considered, we argue that before workers *can* “sort out” how they can innovate and deal with new digital routines, they need to know what the boundaries are, either to stay within them or to go beyond. We call this the “autonomy paradox”. More research is needed, but a perceived lack of “role clarity” (Frare and Beuren 2021) may explain why a majority of news workers does not claim opportunities for creative autonomy at all. This strongly differs from Ryfe (2012), who argues that predominantly the “habits” and “investments” in journalism practices limit newsroom innovation.

Workers often perceive that conflict avoidance has a higher management priority than attention for their communicative needs, such as being informed on the newspaper’s future strategy and, in essence, to be seen and appreciated. We find that this can undermine the perception of creative autonomy of the *larger newsroom*—sometimes desperate for more communication—which can become a breeding ground for the discussions management is trying to avoid. We call this the “strategy paradox”.

The autonomy and the strategy paradoxes are interrelated: when there is no direct top down communication, there can be either inertia or turmoil. In order to enlarge the perception of ILC of the majority of workers, editors in chief need to walk a complex thin line: management is expected by the newsroom to communicate sufficiently, directly, and just-in-time to answer worker’s communicative needs, without being too top down. This careful balance is difficult to navigate for the editors in chief.

As we conclude that the organisational structures, and in particular the hierarchy within it, impacts the perception of creative autonomy, it follows that ILC is crucially influenced by the newsroom’s organisational structures. We therefore argue that professional culture may not be “the biggest stumbling block to change”, as Ryfe (2012, 25) and other scholars observe (Tameling 2015; Usher 2014), but that hierarchical structures, and the communicative needs that come with them, are.

To improve perceptions of creative autonomy across the newsroom, we argue that creative autonomy should be shared more widely beyond the newsroom *elites*. This study indicates that the barriers to achieve this can be lifted by being very aware how hierarchy can impact perceptions of creative autonomy negatively, while bridging existing hierarchical gaps through direct communication between management and workers.

This time investment, we argue, pays off in the long run, counterbalancing the short term “efficiency creep” (Magnusson, Koutsikouri, and Päiväranta 2020), or efficiency mindset, newsrooms appear to be locked into. Investing in and focussing on social processes around creative autonomy also enlarges the perception of ILC, and maximises the innovative capacities, which ultimately are required to future proof the newsroom. As this study is focussed on the perception of social processes that enable, and therefore precede, creative and innovative ideas, more research is needed regarding the material quality of these ideas, and how these are related to ILC.

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Appendix

Table A1. Social hierarchy in the newsroom: five relevant social groups.

Social status (from high to low)	Social sub-group	Definition group participants
Newsroom elites	Newsroom establishment	Individuals with a contract in an established position, rooted in experience. Sometimes ex-management, but not always. Hold a writing position. Viewed by others as “untouchable” and independent from management.
	Usual suspects	Individuals with a contract targeted by editors in chief to participate in special projects and receive special attention. Hold a writing position. Viewed by others as privileged by, as well as close to, management.
	Happy few	Individuals with a contract who share creative or new ideas with editors in chief on their own initiative and have their support. Hold, mostly, a writing position. Viewed by others as privileged by, as well as close to, management.
Larger newsroom	Silent majority	Individuals with a contract, part of the majority of the newsroom. Hold a writing, editing (word people) or image (picture people) job. Viewed by others as neutral in privileges and closeness to management.
	Flex people	Individuals with a flexible contract and at the bottom of the hierarchy. Work in shifts in text/image editing, online/multi-media and writing positions. Viewed by others as the non-privileged and distant from management.

Source: Adopted from Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma (2022).