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**Good for Business?
Instant Messaging at a Virtual Newsroom**

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Abstract

This research examines an entertainment website, Jezebel.com, to understand how the site's use of a virtual newsroom and computer-mediated communication influences organizational dynamics and culture. By employing a case study of Jezebel, this research utilized in-depth interviews and observations to examine the role of instant messaging (IM) in organizing work and shaping organizational culture. The primary research question was: How does IM affect communication and organizational dynamics? The answer to this question was embedded within two assumptions posed in the introduction—that a virtual newsroom will utilize a more lateral power configuration rather than a hierarchical organizational structure, and that the culture will promote a sense of creativity and community because instant messaging is a more informal mode of communication than face-to-face, email, or telephone interaction.

Introduction

This research examines an entertainment website, Jezebel.com, to understand how the site's use of a virtual newsroom and computer-mediated communication influences organizational dynamics and culture. By employing a case study of Jezebel, this research utilizes in-depth interviews and observations to examine the role of instant messaging (IM) in organizing work and shaping organizational culture. The primary research question is: How does IM affect communication and organizational dynamics?

Jezebel represents a new hybrid of online media that combines original reporting with the re-posting of current news stories. The New York City-based site can be considered part blog, part magazine, and part aggregator, combining the personal expression and political debate of the blog format with links to conventional media sites, such as *The New York Times* or CNN. Jezebel's resulting content is a meta-analysis of conventionally reported

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stories that span the cultural collective conscious, ranging from political to fashion to celebrity. Jezebel users can read about political scandal as well as celebrity scandal and refresh their screens every 10 or 15 minutes for newly updated posts. The stories may span topical boundaries, but the site's consistent editorial tone reflects that of any tenured publication. This continuity might be a byproduct of the six editors' past experiences working within the magazine industry.

New media vehicles such as Jezebel are challenging our definitions of news. Not only are their editors creating a postmodern media product that combines characteristics of popular media with that of alternative media, but many are also attracting both a loyal following of readers *and* advertisers who are increasingly abandoning the traditional print product (Grigoriadis, 2007). As celebrity weekly magazines continue to survive the volatile marketplace and conventional print publications continue to struggle, sites such as Jezebel are tapping in to the cultural zeitgeist by appealing to an assortment of appetites.

From a traditional media standpoint, many new media products operate outside of conventional standards and principles, where competition and self-preservation outweigh the fundamental role of press as cooperative watchdog of society. Nick Denton, founder and owner of new media empire Gawker Media, gave credence to such sentiment by writing on his personal blog, "Internet media can indeed seem, particularly to the gentlemanly and leisurely American magazine business, a Hobbesian environment. The new journalism is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Denton, 2007).

Considering such professional opinions, scholars are provided prime research opportunities. While current research (Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Singer, 2006; Stempel, Hargrove, & Bernt, 2000) frequently examines how websites operate within the media sphere or the use of CMC for interpersonal communication (Bailenson, Yee, Blascovich, & Guadagno, 2008; Polkosky, 2008), few have specifically considered the medium's utilization of a completely virtual newsroom. This study attends to these elements. One assumption of this research is that a virtual newsroom will utilize a more lateral power configuration rather than a hierarchical organizational structure. Secondly, it assumes that because instant messaging is a more informal mode of communication than face-to-face, email, or telephone interaction (Kim, Kim, Park, & Rice, 2005; Zack & Doherty, 1992), the culture will promote a sense of creativity and community.

Because of the unique content and unconventional organizational structure of the site, no single theoretical perspective offers a way of understanding its organizational context and content. Therefore, this study employs a combination of organizational theory, specifically Schein (2004), and newsroom sociology frameworks. The methodology section explains the research design, which is a case study, and describes the fieldwork site. The analysis contemplates how the virtual newsroom shapes the two basic assumptions that drive the culture of this organization. The discussion considers how an intersection of technology and place, byproducts of IM and inherent to organizational dynamics, influences issues of

authority, and the conclusion contemplates the applicability of this research to other organizations, mass communication theory, and future mass communication research.

Organization Theory

This research refers to two established dimensions of organization theory, the clinical and interpretive paradigm, to examine the organizational culture and leadership roles in an organization (Denison, 1996). This model, examined by Schein (2004), contextualizes occupational cultures from the individual and social levels that shape an organization and its decision-making processes. The framework places importance on both subjective and objective data so that observers can understand how a culture performs in its environment. The validity can be located within the narrative data.

Organizational culture, as defined by Schein (2004), is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon that is continually created by our communications with other people. In the case of this research, we can comprehend an organization as a network, composed of many parts unified under a governing culture. Media work might be considered one of society's most adaptable industries in that media producers have the ability to immediately respond to consumer demands (Deuze, 2007). This flexibility theoretically allows media organizations to adopt new ways of media production and content formats to increase audience size. While some of the more conventional media systems still find themselves mired in bureaucratic constraints, other more contemporary organizations are discovering virtually endless production options. Many of these alternatives involve a less formal structuring and a reconfiguration of the conventional hierarchical system, which often results in a complex, seemingly disconnected system.

As a result, the most significant consideration for these innovative organizations becomes how to unite all the parts into a cohesive, adaptable whole. Many businesses decide to adopt unconventional communication methods in an effort to connect these components. When paired with alternative workplace structures, this technology creates unique new media interpersonal communications.

One such unconventional communication method is instant messaging applications (PIM), which can be described as text-based near-synchronous communication that is computer mediated (Ter Hofte, Mulder, & Verwijs, 2006). This technology is utilized in more than 70 percent of all companies today (Computer Bulletin, 2005). The various PIM vehicles, which include AOL instant messenger (AIM), Yahoo! Messenger, and MSN Messenger, operate to link groups of individual Internet users to virtual chat rooms so they may have a computer-mediated conversation in real time (Ter Hofte, Mulder, & Verwijs, 2006). Because instant messaging (IM) communication is computer-mediated, no verbal cues are present, although emoticons are often utilized (Ter Hofte, Mulder, & Verwijs, 2006). In addition, the technology is transparent in that presence information of IM group members is shared.

Kim, Kim, Park, and Rice (2005) examined the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in a Korean high-tech organization and established that CMC serves a different communication goal than that of telephone or face-to-face contact. Their study illustrates that IM is used to monitor the accessibility of others, discuss issues, schedule a face-to-face meeting, and “check in” without the obligation of urgent response (Kim, Kim, Park, & Rice, 2005). The researchers also found that IM users do not use the technology to foster relationships (unlike mobile phones or face-to-face contact), but as a group-talking tool. In addition, the researchers claim that younger people tend to adopt IM more readily than adults, who often chose to communicate instead via email.

Correspondingly, Zack (1994) cites that electronic communication aids in organizing tasks, while face-to-face allows for more problem-solving needs. Other research (Strom, 2006) maintains that more companies are choosing to implement IM as a way of improving response times between employees and some, such as IBM, have virtually phased out voice mails entirely. As such, many companies are choosing to implement the messaging software to enhance collaboration through faster communication.

Often these types of technologies accompany alternative workplace structures, such as virtual teams. The concept of virtual teamwork considers a group of individuals who collaborate with each other despite being separated by time, space, and organizational obstacles (Johnson, Heimann, & O'Neill, 2001). This research considers the telecommuters who become part of a virtual team, working with others on a collaborative project outside a shared office environment. The U.S. Census Bureau calculates the number of individuals with this arrangement to be 4.5 million in 2003 (Blanton, 2005). The most suitable jobs for telecommuting are those in the white-collar sector that can be accomplished outside the traditional office environment, such as consulting, research analysis, and writing (Ahmadi, Helms, & Ross, 2000). Telecommunicating benefits include those at the employee level (they can spend more time with their family), the organizational level (the company can cut costs and also retain employees who might otherwise leave the organization), and the community level (telecommuting reduces traffic congestion and pollution) (Ahmadi, Helms, & Ross, 2000).

From an organization theory perspective, such benefits of virtual teamwork could be tempered by the possibility of an unstable workplace culture. The culture of any group is difficult to change because people prefer stability to instability, and a stable culture offers predictability and coherence (Schein, 2004). This consistency offers group members self-esteem and connectedness with others, thus helping to satisfy their ego ideal, or feeling of self at their future best (Diamond & Allcorn, 2003; Stapley, 2004). One could posit that changes from a place-based work environment could stimulate inconsistency, at least for the short term.

In addition, studies (Vos & van der Voordt, 2001) indicate that from the employee level, one of the most frequent risks of virtual teamwork is an overlapping of work and private life, which often results in a telecommuter working more hours than their coworkers.

Other prevalent grievances include difficulties getting in touch with team members, a lack of mutual project visibility, and the constraints of CMC (much of it due to an inability to accurately determine the meaning of text-based messages) (Johnson, Heimann, & O'Neill, 2001). Because virtual teams often employ persons living in divergent time zones, individual accessibility can certainly pose problems. Time lapses between CMC can negatively affect collaborative endeavors and thus perpetuate inter-organizational stress. In addition, the element of ineffectual project visibility can pose great detriments to joint efforts, as previously examined.

In order to be productive, the telecommuter must receive pointed feedback, guidance, and instruction in the form of supervision (Ahmadi, Helms, & Ross, 2000). Research (Johnson, Heimann, & O'Neill, 2001) shows that for those involved in a virtual team, it is essential that the individual exercise self-discipline, is accountable, be flexible, and is able to trust other virtual team members. When virtual team members are able to demonstrate these four qualities, their alliance increases a sense of organizational achievement and thus workplace fulfillment.

A study (Akkirman & Harris, 2005) of virtual workplace employees in Germany found that these workers exhibit a higher level of work satisfaction than those of their traditional workplace counterparts. The authors (Akkirman & Harris, 2005) conclude that this satisfaction runs parallel to a well-organized virtual office plan, where organizational climate and integration is sufficiently communicated. By offering culture training, technical training, and social support to employees, a company employing virtual team members might better equip itself to take on this new workplace configuration (Akkirman & Harris, 2005). This study is significant because it focuses primarily on the organization's culture.

Culture is omnipresent in that every facet of an organization is influenced by how the group/individual behaves towards the organization's internal operations, different environments and primary tasks (Schein, 2004). Even within the realm of virtual teamwork, individuals cultivate internalized knowledge that is then contrasted with data in their environment. Quan-Haase, Cothrel, and Wellman (2005) personify such concepts with the term "local virtualities" to explain the physically restricted places where computer-mediated communication allows for the formation of intense collaborative networks. The researchers found that for organizations that perform work primarily online, IM is often carried out while multitasking other jobs. This, in addition to other factors, contributes to the formation of higher connectivity as well as to an increased sense of community within the organization (Quan-Haase, Cothrel, & Wellman, 2005)

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge involves the potential constraints of CMC, considering all other inter-organizational dynamics are derived from this interaction. The challenges to the virtual workplace often involve building trust among employees, which is difficult without effective communication. Because interpersonal communications in virtual teams lack conventional communication methods such as head nodding, informal openings and closings to conversations and turn taking, mediated communication may at times be

problematic (Nardi, 2005). Nardi (2005) concludes that such trust takes time and frequent contact between members, research demonstrates that online interpersonal trust between communication members increases when the partners establish both a supportive relationship and empathic accuracy with one another (Fen, Lazar, & Preece, 2004). With empathetic accuracy, communication partners are able to correctly infer the particular content of each other's feelings and thoughts (Fen, Lazar, & Preece, 2004).

From an organization theory perspective, we employ beneath-the-surface processes such as conflict, boundaries, defense mechanisms, and creativity to help us cope with our feelings and thoughts (Stapley, 2006). Similarly, when we come into relationships with other individuals, we may experience inner dynamics involving power and authority, relatedness and trust (Stapley, 2006). When considering the group or organization, we might not perceive it as separate entities, but as an organism utilizing a group mind, where the group-as-a-whole exhibits defenses against anxiety as well as basic assumption behavior (Stapley, 2006). This culture is then disseminated through a process of socialization, whereby a new member interprets the operating norms and assumptions of the group (Schein, 2004). While an organization's stated mission or operating espoused values might be the initial method in which a new employee can gauge how to act, the group's operating basic assumptions, or tacit behavior, drives the culture. Therefore, one learns the organizational culture's assumptions when old members of the group provide feedback to new members as the new members experiment with various types of behavior (Schein, 2004).

Virtual teams utilizing instant messaging exemplify this process by what Clark (1992) describes as the theory of common ground. This concept refers to the established shared knowledge that group members communicate through each other's discourse, which conceivably improves through time as members increase their communication (Clark, 1992). Instant messaging implies a shared space and the sensation of affinity that accompanies it (Nardi, 2005). As such, virtual team members using IM may improve their social bonding by embedding informal conversations within formal discourse (Nardi, 2005).

But also inherent and crucial to virtual teamwork is the implementation of a team leader. Leadership plays an integral role in both organizational culture formation and maintenance (Schein, 2004). Schein (2004) writes that leaders differ from administrators and managers in that leaders exhibit a concern for the organization's culture. Furthermore, a leader's impact on the formation of an organization's culture in a new group is considerable in the beginning, in that they impress their values, beliefs and assumptions on the group in the beginning (Schein, 2004). If the leader of a new organization is also the founder, they might also decide the fundamental mission and context of the group, in addition to hiring the group members (Schein, 2004). While the leaders certainly have an impact on the initial group culture, their experience dealing with internal integration issues and external adaptation also affects the evolving ethos.

Farmer (2005) defines situational leadership to describe telecommuting, or in this case, virtual leadership. Leadership and management might be explained differently; as

leadership refers to the influence a person has on employees to inspire or motivate them to accomplish organizational goals (Gibson et al., 2002), while management deals with leadership and routine events (Farmer, 2005). Situational leadership forms when a leader pairs the developmental stage of the employee with a particular leadership style (Farmer, 2005). Consequently, the situational leader does not apply one leadership style to all employees, but different leadership approaches according to the competence, performance and dedication of the employee. For example, an employee exhibiting high supporting behavior and high directive might only need coaching from the leader, while an employee showing low supporting behavior and high directive might warrant more direction from the leader (Farmer, 2005). In the case of online organizations, a leader can monitor these levels by both interpersonal communication within the group and individual output.

The clinical and interpretive paradigm utilizes a psychological approach to understanding the individual and group notions of culture. However, it is also essential to employ multiple lenses to assure a holistic understanding of this new media. Accordingly, a sociological perspective adds to this analysis.

Newsroom Sociology and Routines

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) describe the interplay of routines and organizational structure with their model of the influences of hierarchical news work, which includes five components, ranging from micro- to macro-level: individual, routines, organizational, extramedia, and ideology. These compartments unify to form a complete whole, interrelated media system.

The key components of the individual level include the newsroom socialization process, personal values, a journalist's personal background and their professional roles and ethics. In interviewing legions of journalists about socialization, Breed (1955) found that many of them ascribed socialization to "learning by osmosis" (p. 182) or something that is not specifically stated within the organization text, but acquired through watching and learning. Personal values have an indirect affect on the news process, and many scholars claim that their impact is greatly diminished by routines and organization constraints (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1978). What factors play a more significant role are professional roles and codes of ethics. These elements are inherent to most conventional media professions and are often acquired via the socialization process.

Routines are an established and defined set of procedures that one follows within an organization that together, make up the mechanics of news work. Some of the key components found within this body of literature are gatekeeping, objectivity, sources of routines, and routine channels. David Manning White (1950) initially defined gatekeeping as a person's in and out decisions in terms of what is news. Objectivity can be accomplished by utilizing quotes, attempting to have "balance" between sides and fact checking (Tuchman, 1978). In addition to the content itself and the angle of information gathering, the sources of routines must also be considered (Gans, 1979). The routine channels (Sigelman, 1973)

include news channels (such as official sources and news briefings), informal channels (such as leaks and other journalists' information), and enterprise channels (stories a journalist finds on his or her own).

Some of the key components inherent to the organizational level are the hiring and firing of individuals, the tensions between levels of the organization and the established roles of journalists within the media system. The hiring and firing system allows an organization to exercise a sense of control within newsroom dynamics. By hiring persons who fit in with the already-established culture of the workplace environment and firing those who don't, the organization can perpetuate a stable culture. Within this layer also exists tensions between different levels of the organization, such as the relationship between economic goals and editorial goals of a news organization, which can both positively and negatively influence the workplace environment (Steinem, 1994). Gans (1979) found three levels of newsworker roles: front line, middle level, and top level. The front-line roles are usually those occupied by writers, reporters, and editors. Middle-level employees are usually the top editors (such as the managing and executive editors), while the top-level workers are the executives, such as the publisher and CEO.

Extramedia pertains to those dynamics that occur between the news workers and outside factors, such as those between the news worker and their sources, their advertisers, and their competition. Competition among organizations also plays an important role. It is imperative that journalists keep a keen eye on what their competitors are doing, so as not to miss a significant story (Gans, 1979).

Journalists possess the power to define a situation. Gans (1979) writes that journalists share the ideological values of responsible journalism, private ownership, and liberal democracy. Accordingly, these values are filtered down through symbolic content to society.

Utilizing these two diverse theoretical frameworks—organization theory and newsroom sociology—allowed for both a psychological and sociological perspective of the virtual organization and its communication process. Previous studies relating to the separate conceptual spheres were available to aid in understanding the application of these frameworks and CMC technology.

Methodology

This research examines one entertainment website, Jezebel.com, to study the role of IM in organizing work and shaping organizational culture. Jezebel has been chosen for several reasons. The first is the site's unique blend of social commentary, which consists of original content that links to stories culled from the online versions of both conventional and unconventional news sources, such as *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, MSNBC.com, PerezHilton.com, DigitalSpy.com, and Feministing.com.

Jezebel's content is composed of 15 percent fashion, 30 percent celebrity, 20 percent magazine, 30 percent relationships, and the rest a hybrid of stories. The site usually runs 40 to 55 posts per day, depending on whether the managing editor chooses to post a new item every ten minutes or fifteen minutes. A typical day consists of the regular features Morning Crap (a roundup of celebrity gossip stories), Naked Truth (a morning wrap-up of hard news stories), Cloak and Dagger (a roundup of fashion news stories), Celebritease (another roundup of the day's celebrity stories), Hey Ya (one comment each), Daily Snow (an evening wrap-up of hard news stories), and supplemental feature material. Sandwiched between these are Clips (videos), Quick Links, Snap Judgment (photo), Ad Libs (advertisement videos), and Mag Hag (magazine commentary).

The content is generated by five editors—Jennifer, Jessica, Dodai, Moe, and Tracie—and helmed by a managing editor (also called a site lead), Anna. All the editors worked for conventional place-based magazines before being employed by the site. According to the website, 96 percent of Jezebel's readers are female, with 82 percent of readers between the ages of 18 and 34. Monthly unique traffic totals 1,510,000 million people.

The second reason, as previously mentioned, is that Jezebel does not engage in a traditional place based organizational structure, but rather conducts its communication via instant messaging. The editors all live in apartments in the New York City area and their workdays begin at 8 a.m. and end around 8 p.m. Their primary mode of communication and unconventional work structures appear distinctive to both organizational and mass communication literature.

In order to capture the depth of this organization's dynamic, this study utilizes a case study of Jezebel. Case studies utilize numerous data sources in order to thoroughly examine groups, individuals, organizations, or events (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). The four characteristics of this methodology are particularistic (examines specific phenomenon or situation), descriptive (detailed explanation of topic), heuristic (allows people to comprehend innovative interpretations and perspectives), and inductive (generalizations and principles appear from new data) (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Because case studies provide the researcher with a vast array of information about the topic being studied, case studies are valuable for supplying abundant detail (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

One advantage of conducting a case study is the ability to help answer the *how* and *why* questions (Yin, 2003). In addition, the method allows the researcher to study the phenomenon in its naturally occurring context, rather than in a controlled setting (such as an experiment). Like Tuchman (1973), this research employs ethno-methodology, which is the method employed by researchers when agents engage in everyday activity in order to interpret the social reality.

The Jezebel case study consisted of 20 days of 12-hour observation/participation in the editors' workspaces (their separate apartments), in-depth interviews both in person and utilizing IM, and a collection of documents, which included a week's worth of all IMs

between Anna and each editor. The majority of observation/participation time (14 days) was spent with Anna so her nearly constant virtual interactions with editors could be observed. This intensive observation/participation allowed a personal view of the various research settings and to witness firsthand the creation of the product and thus provide extensive description about the organization, its workers and their routines (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). In addition, a daily research diary aided in the recollection of fieldwork considerations. Utilizing these three data sources permitted the triangulation of methods and improved this study's validity and reliability (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

Researching the influence of IM on organizational culture was accomplished by gathering information at three levels: 1) visible artifacts, 2) espoused values, rules, beliefs and behavioral norms, and 3) unspoken, basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004). Artifacts include an organization's language, published record of values, ceremonies and rituals, physical environment, and technology (Schein, 2004). In this case, the visible artifacts consisted of things physically visible, such as an editor's personal workspace, the site content, and hard copies of the editor's IM communication. Espoused values, rules, beliefs, and behavioral norms refer to the information received from an organization's member when asked about the culture's artifacts. For this research, the espoused values, rules, beliefs, and behavioral norms represented what the editor said when asked about the site or about their experiences, all of which were communicated through interviews. However, the unspoken, basic underlying assumptions exist on a deeper level, and they are considered the "essence" of the group's culture (Schein, 2004, p. 36). Basic assumptions are taken-for-granted ways of responding to a situation that are neither espoused nor debatable. A researcher must attempt to reach this third level or run the risk of prematurely interpreting only the material garnered from the artifacts and espoused rules.

Results

Two dominant themes emerged during interviews with editors about IM usage: IM as efficient organizational tool and IM as emotional stimulus. The duality of these themes surfaced while examining the site's assumption that IM is the best possible means for their communication.

This assumption was promoted by Anna's decision to control the flow of information by limiting the communal contact her editors have in favor of a more channeled method (IM). While the editors can and do communicate with each other via IM during the day, the dialogue is often informal and non-work-related.

Nearly all the editors extol the virtues of IM as an efficient communication tool. However, most do not mention any lack of group conversation that might benefit both the creative process and the feeling of organizational unity. Anna is the only person every editor is in constant contact with during the workday, and thus she also controls the organizational flow of content. Anna approves the story selection, top edits nearly every

piece and chooses the stories to run each day and she communicates most of this information over IM. Thus, her espoused beliefs and values essentially drive the site.

However, one might question how aware the other editors are of this presumed “shared” knowledge. The frenetic pace of posting deadlines and infrequency of face-to-face interaction about big-picture thoughts may well reduce the amount of cohesive espoused values. As such, some of the values, such as one editor’s (Moe) consistent defiance of protocol, exist on the individual level, rather than at the group level.

This analysis, as described in the themes below, suggests that the group’s assumptions exist within the fluid space of individual and group dynamics. The combination of physical evidence and statements from the editors create an image of a workplace culture that encourages both individual knowledge and a group mind. The frequent inner dynamics portrayed during observations and through interviews signified by conflicts should be recognized as coping mechanisms that allow the individual and group to manage anxiety. In addition, the individuals and group-as-a-whole display flexibility and a willingness to adapt by readily and successfully adopting new modes of organizational communication, and with few exceptions, the editors willingly accept organizational changes if they feel either they or the organization-as-a-whole can benefit.

IM as organizational device

It is first essential to provide background to the site’s use of IM. Jezebel is one of eight websites own by Gawker Media, a company based in New York City. Because all of Gawker Media’s sites operate within the virtual sphere (and none have a place-based office), a method of quick, real-time communication was necessary to connect individual sites with the central organization. According to Anna, her boss at Gawker Media indoctrinated her to the IM system before she could even ask questions, “When I got hired my then-boss Noah was like, ‘well, here’s my IM and here’s everyone else’s IM in the company. And it became very clear to me without Noah having to say it that that’s how people communicated, via IM.”

While IM continues to be the primary method of communication within the company, individual sites can choose how they want to communicate within their own domain. Several of the larger Gawker Media sites use a Web-based group chat tool called Campfire as their main method of communication. Given the choices, the main question for the site managers becomes how to do the virtual news work most efficiently. Anna chose to utilize IM with her staff for the first six months, but then decided to test Campfire with her staff. She says the short-lived trial proved to be problematic for two reasons: editors would often argue for story assignments and would also engage in prolonged informal chat. Hence, Anna chose to re-implement IM. This choice illustrates both the power Anna exerts as leader and her willingness to manage significant organizational decisions.

Anna found that although IM alleviated some of the Campfire issues, utilizing IM

cannot guarantee that communication will be 100 percent work-related. Anna says that while “there’s no time for small talk, usually, there just isn’t,” some nonetheless trickles into IMs. However, she emphasizes that her management role within these non-work-related conversations aids in its control:

Although you’ll see that I’ll have banter with them, like I’ll talk about food or whatever, but it doesn’t really go on for long. And if it does it’s because they have the time to do it and I do. Because I know what they’re doing and how much time they have because I know how long it takes them to finish a post, at this point I know. So if I start shooting the shit about something it’s usually because I know that that person is done, usually for the day or that we have enough stuff so that they can sit back for the day.

While she acknowledges that other editors may still informally chat during the day, she doubts (the frequency).

They don’t really even talk to each other during the day. I don’t think that (Jessica) and (Dodai) are having any sort of conversation right now. I think they’re all doing their own thing. I think that if there’s any conversation it’s between (Moe) and (Dodai), maybe. But I’m not privy to it. They just don’t talk to each other, unless it’s either at the end of the day or via email when there’s like a mass email that goes out to everyone and they’re responding back and forth.

However, both Jennifer and Tracie say they do indeed chat with other editors via IM during the day. Jennifer claims it is part and parcel of the organizational dialogue, “We’re talking bullshit with each other over IM all day long. I mean, yes we’re working, but we’re also like, ‘Dude, you’re not going to believe what happened to me last night.’ And that goes on all day, so there’s that level of intimacy that’s not normally there.” Jennifer and Tracie’s regular informal communication enhances the common ground (Clark, 1992) between the editors and helps increase their social bonding, which works to enrich the overall shared knowledge of staffers. In addition, this chat is being carried out while the editors are multitasking her writing tasks, an element contributing to higher connectivity and increased sense of community (Quan-Haase, Cothrel, & Wellman, 2005).

While Anna’s communication strategy promotes both a high level of productivity and connectivity, several staffers claim a downside to IM is a decreased communal creative process. Dodai compares the editorial processes of a conventional newsroom to that of Jezebel in terms of resourceful banter and says the nature of the site’s organizational structure inhibits creative partnership to a certain degree,

If we were sitting in the same bullpen or bunch of cubes, like where I used to work we could sometimes talk out loud a bit like, ‘What do you think of this?’ And I feel like because I know that she has other windows open, I feel

like I have to be sure that I really want to be asking this question before I ask it. Sometimes I'll think, 'Maybe I should ask her if it needs a better headline.' And I feel like maybe if she were there it'd be so easy to ask. So I think I rein back a little because we're trying to be efficient and I'm trying to IM only if it's serious.

IM and emotional work

Communication literature (Johnson, Heimann, & O'Neill, 2001; Nardi, 2005) often refers to computer-mediated communication (CMC) as being a double-edged sword. While methods such as IM boast benefits such as efficiency and directedness, they also possess more challenging characteristics, such as the misinterpretation of information. Anna articulates this dichotomy,

The pros are that it's instantaneous and it's in writing. The cons are they misinterpret what I say. So on the one hand, they can misconstrue tone and intent, but they're not going to misconstrue the content of what you're saying. So if you say, 'I want you to do this,' they can't say "I didn't understand what you meant," because you said, 'I want you to...' They might think that I said it in a bitchy way when I just said it in a busy way. But it just really depends on how busy I am, because if I have something difficult to say, like, 'I'm not going to put this post up,' or like, 'I have a problem with it and will you please redo it,' if I have the time I might massage it by saying, 'You know, I love this idea,' and I'll qualify it and I'll be nice and then I'll get into the good news/bad news. If I'm too busy I'll just be the bad news though.

However, Dodai believes that Anna is often aware of this discrepancy, and as such, frequently follows up abrupt exchanges with a cyber postscript apology of sorts, "There have been times when Anna's has written something and then wrote, 'that came out wrong.' Because I think she's conscious of it, too. Because when you're seeing it there's no emotion and sometimes you can say something sarcastically, and in the tone of your voice it would make sense, but when you see it written, maybe it doesn't."

These types of exchanges illustrate Anna's situational leadership in dealing with varying interpersonal communication. Although Anna's IM exchanges may at times appear curt, she often utilizes elements of empathic accuracy (Nardi, 2005), such as the cyber postscript to promote trust between herself and other editors that lead to increased cohesion.

But complex IM dynamics also extend beyond Anna's interactions with other editors. Numerous editors declared Moe to be the most generally disgruntled during IM conversations. Moe acknowledges such interactions but maintains her behavior is not only justified, but when put into proper perspective, overblown by others,

You know, some days I might be pissy because I'm tired or I've had too much caffeine or I'm on the drugs and pissy about something and then we'll have a fight. These things escalate and they die down a lot easier than they would in real life. I'm not a confrontational in person at all, but I am on IM. I think a lot of it is the nature of the job and the fact that everything is so urgent. Also, a lot of it is a joke, you know? When you're on IM, most of it is said, even if you're angry at someone they know that you're not *angry*, angry, you know? It's like you're annoyed or you're irritated or you're just dealing with the grind of the job.

Jennifer is one of the editors who conflicts with Moe most often. While she confesses that the arguments take an emotional toll on her, Jennifer asserts that the disagreements are always rectified in time, with little negative consequence. Her sentiments demonstrate how a CMC based relationship can be fraught with occasional drama, yet ultimately supportive and cohesive:

Moe and I have had IM fights about pieces or the way that something got edited or something. Then it turns into a phone fight and then it turns into an, 'I'm not talking to you, call Anna.' But then it's fine by the end of the day. I'm always upset and I take things super-personally, anything anyone ever says. I'm one of those kinds of people, I'm just the sensitive girl. But I also adore Moe and totally love her in all sorts of ways, and can totally talk to her about anything in the world. And I really respect her; I think she's a smart, smart girl. So we have no bad blood. But we have the sibling dynamic.

Discussion

This research illustrates an implicit connection between Jezebel's technology and the virtual workplace, and we can deduce that the workplace culture and nature of the organization are a direct result of this interaction. Accordingly, it is useful to analyze concepts found within this research that relate to technology and authority and locate these notions from both a macro and micro perspective.

Though technology presents businesses with seemingly limitless organizational possibilities, this research indicates that to ensure levels of accountability and productivity, some conventional constraints tend to remain. While a non-linear, non-hierarchical organizational structure may be an ideal for some collectively run organizations, most companies desiring profitability will require authority at some level.

First and foremost, organizations employing new technology requiring computer-mediated communication (CMC) may experience an increase a logical flaw in informal communication structures, encouraging leaders to impose formal restraints in managing group work. Instituting and adhering to a workflow protocol is one standard supervisory system that operates to limit informal organizational structures. A second method is the

regulation of collective communication, which both restricts interaction between employees and increases situational leadership. Last, a universal increase in productivity standards as measured by a tech-based metric may preclude an employee's ability to engage in supplementary informal communications.

However, it would be shortsighted to presume that all informal systems within the virtual organization should be discouraged. Indeed, many of the informal systems resulting from CMC are integral to the health of an organization's formal systems. Informal systems cultivate the emotional livelihood of a virtual group by aiding in group building and group work. Informal structures such as friendship and trust, developed primarily through casual CMC, are the muscles that enable the organization as a whole to function. Therefore, it would seem to follow that the most successful leaders will not only tolerate these structures, but also encourage them.

Whether by careful planning or good fortune, Gawker Media executives have designed an organizational system that balances surface flexibility with beneath-the-surface restraint. The company's strategic hiring of managing editors and implementation of technology provide each site with an authority figure that can both manage employees and process the group's creative output.

In the case of Jezebel's, one of the site's most durable characteristics is the tacit nature of Anna's authority. Her "velvet hammer" management qualities combine informal and formal communications, which typically operate to minimize feelings of creative restraint while maximizing group production. In addition, she employs a high level of emotional intelligence when navigating her relationships with her superiors, as illustrated by her adherence to IM by dismissal of Campfire. Anna's aptitude at balancing these dynamics while utilizing CMC creates the core cohesion of this group, and without these acquired abilities group work would be much more challenging.

As of this writing, Anna remains Jezebel's manager and the site's page views continue to increase each month. In addition, Gawker Media remains a viable media company.

Conclusion

This research initially posed one primary question: How does instant messaging affect communication and organizational dynamics? The answer to this question was indeed embedded within the two assumptions posed in the introduction—that a virtual newsroom will utilize a more lateral power configuration, rather than a hierarchical organizational structure, and that the culture will promote a sense of creativity and community because instant messaging is a more informal mode of communication than face-to-face, email, or telephone interaction.

Both assumptions are accurate to some degree. IM is effective from a production standpoint, in that the editors can produce an enormous amount of content on a daily basis

with little technological difficulty. However, the emotional ramifications of utilizing this communication tool include employees negotiating nonverbal cues for expediency's sake, which can prove to be a proverbial elephant in cyberspace.

This research demonstrates that the manager is ultimately accountable for both elements. The informal communication structures resulting from IM communication, illustrating a more lateral power configuration, veils but not supersedes a manager's leadership, which is the ultimate driving force of the organization in that they are ultimately accountable for operations in a flexible organizational structure. The manager chooses the employees according to fit and thus wagers that the worker will both adapt to the more flexible organizational structure and thrive creatively. This element directly relates to the second assumption—that the culture, under mature leadership, will promote a sense of creativity and community.

This workplace design could make sense for other media organizations, even beyond making money. So long as the organization's leader is clear in the group's mission, she can build a staff that both respects and is loyal to that goal. For instance, if an organization's mission is to turn out vast quantities of media product in a short term, there is a particular "type" that might be an ideal fit for this job. This "type" must be willing to put in physically demanding hours that will likely blur lines between private time and work time. If the mission is to do long-term, in-depth collaborative research/teamwork/etc., there might exist another "type" of fit, one who would glean fewer physical and even psychological obstacles.

Moreover, this structure could also benefit creative organizations that depend upon individual productivity as well as some collaborative work. To reach a high level of productivity that is consistent, the organization must institute a leader who exercises emotional intelligence. This leader must be able to navigate the relationships with people both "above" her and "below" her in whatever kind of hierarchy exists. In other words, she must be able to efficiently and effectively confer with all members of the organization, while utilizing all different forms of communication (FtF, phone, email, IM). While the main communicative tool may be CMC, she must be accomplished with all communication measures.

This delicate balance also reveals the potential failure of this sort of enterprise. The three levels of the organization—front-line, middle-level, and top-level employees—must all fit together. A breakdown within or between any of these levels could cause a collapse of the system. For instance, Deuze (2007) writes that most creative industry employees do not perceive management, business and commerce as entirely opposite to quality, culture or creativity. But if a front line employee, such as a writer, outwardly resists a manager's implementation of creative direction that might benefit the company's bottom line, the system becomes at risk. It therefore depends primarily on the middle level to resolve such a conflict. This could mean negotiating with the employee for a reconstructed fit or replacing that employee with someone who is better suited altogether. But even these negotiations must be articulated to the top-level employees to ensure cohesiveness.

Thus, the ultimate success of this enterprise depends on the group's leader. While the group's fluid dynamics stem from informal and formal structures, it is again the leader's responsibility to manage the balance of personalities, in addition to her normal task-related responsibilities. So while organizational structure or content ideas are important, perhaps the most critical decision top-level executives make is, who will be the most effective leader?

Lastly, this research reflects such a theoretical shift. Scholars such as Breed, Tuchman, and Shoemaker have undoubtedly influenced the way we understand media. However many of their constructs, conceptualized decades ago, are antiquated in light of today's evolving media. While some of the more traditional news structures continue to employ a linear, hierarchical organizational system with a well-preserved culture, those situations are becoming atypical as newsrooms adapt to the shifting marketplace by adopting convergent platforms. While scholars such as Singer (2006) are increasingly attending to such shifts, it would be valuable to lend more focus on completely networked media organizations. Accordingly, this research illustrates an organization that is successfully evolving from a hierarchical to a networked organization.

While this research initially presumed that organization theory and mass communications might hold equal explanatory power, the fieldwork and analysis indicate that an organization theory application more effectively examines the media system as a whole.

Implications for Future Research

First and foremost, this study exemplifies the potential for new media researchers to adopt a cross-disciplinary approach to their analysis. As old models for understanding media cease to support the complex structures of new organizations, we must look to other frameworks for additional guidance. Accordingly, this study illustrates how being receptive to other means of data interpretation can lead to rich explanatory power.

Secondly, future research should examine the economic implications of new media organizations exploring innovative ways of conducting media work. While some may believe news workers such as those employed by Gawker Media are in control of their work situations, others may conclude that the organization is taking unfair advantage of its employees by prioritizing output over personal health and wellbeing. How might these new organizational models have an effect on incoming generations of media workers and what could this mean for the industry as a whole?

Similarly, from a practical perspective, while the old media model is falling apart, it would be useful to understand what types of skills are necessary for young journalists entering this new world of media work. As frequently implied, this research indicates that a new employee must be willing to forgo a nine-to-five schedule in lieu of often-grueling work hours. Media reports (Richtel, 2008) of bloggers acquiring sometimes-deadly health problems due to time stress underscore the fact that this new world of media work is

challenging to both the body and the mind. In addition to accepting such time commitments, a new journalist should have a functioning knowledge of progressive technology, although extensive technological experience is not a requirement. For example, many of the media workers in this research entered the workplace with only rudimentary knowledge of the technology and then became socialized to the mechanics of the job.

What is mandatory is a willingness to adapt to unconventional media making processes. As many conventional news vehicles struggle to implement new technology, reorganize work structures, re-evaluate their place in the marketplace, and essentially re-examine their purpose, other more innovative media organizations are flourishing. While young bodies might primarily staff these inventive organizations, the truly essential component to group success is a flexible mind. The ability to adapt to changing informal and formal communication structures and navigate the accompanying complexities is a core requirement for the employees of these pioneering industries. Hence, the most imperative skill one might employ is the ability to adapt and adjust to the organization and its needs. These obligations might be outwardly expressed or implicitly stated. But regardless, it is the employee's task to interpret this information from the organization's leader in order to contribute to group work and ultimately, successful and healthy group maturity.

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