What do you tell people you do for a living?: “If I am being a bit facetious I tell them I am a paper stainer”

Dr Paula Geldens

Lecturer in Sociology
Faculty of Life and Social Sciences
Swinburne University of Technology
1 John Street
Hawthorn VIC 3122,
Australia

Phone: +61 3 9214 4677
Email: pgeldens@swin.edu.au
What do you tell people you do for a living?: “If I am being a bit facetious I tell them I am a paper stainer”

Drawn from a broader study into the experiences of newspaper printers within the context of ongoing technological innovation in their industry, this paper takes stock of the ways in which a group of 20 newspaper printers negotiate questions about what they “do for a living”. The findings revealed that whilst most participants would prefer not to talk about themselves at all, addressing this question was a common source of frustration. So much so that some had established specific techniques for avoiding such conversations or ‘short-hands’ that would enable them to extricate themselves from the interactions before awkward technical discussions were raised. Along with identifying the industries they worked in, references to children, their marital status and the recreational and sporting activities that they were involved in were key features of “the kinds of things you might talk about/the kinds of things that you would tell someone you had just met”.

Introduction

The advent of printing revolutionised the documentation and dissemination of information. Well advanced in the East by the 7th Century, printing took several hundred years to reach the West. Among the products made possible through printing, the newspaper has served fundamental social and political roles (Poster, 1999), including, according to Curren (1978:51):
‘...as agencies of social reform, forums for the exchange of ideas, purveyors of public information, checks on government abuse, sources of diversion and entertainment, the personal platforms of politician-proprietors, sources of cultural debasement, and so on.’

As such, this industry should be of particular interest to sociologists.

Over the centuries, and perhaps as a reflection of its instrumental role in society, the newspaper printing trade has come to offer a reliable career path for generations of (mostly) men. The very nature of the printing industry, however, has been one of significant and continuous technological change.

The relatively small body of literature addressing issues of newspaper production suggests that amongst the most significant technological advances in the newspaper printing industry was the development of ‘movable type’ by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1450s (Marjoribanks, 2000). The print industry made its way to Britain in 1476 where for decades it was contained to London (Franks, 2001). According to Franks (2001:16), “the industry…was tightly controlled because the state wanted to prevent its opponents from using printing for ‘seditious’ purposes”.

Australia’s first newspaper was published on the 5th of March, 1803 (Van Oudtshoorn, 1982). Using a flatbed printing press and wooden type which had been delivered by the
First Fleet thirteen years earlier, convict George Howe was the ‘writer-editor-printer-publisher-salesman’ of The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (Van Oudshoorn, 1982:8). By 1894, leading manufacturing techniques had reached the continent and the Sydney Daily Telegraph was being produced on the first linotype press in the country (Manion, 1982). Since these early days, printing presses have moved from being powered by steam and gas to the electric power generated presses of today (Manion, 1982) increased computerization, has further, and significantly, reshaped newspaper production.

It was not until the latter part of the 19th Century that specialisation emerged in this industry. In fact, “the skills involved in printing [had] remained the same for hundreds of years” (Franks, 2001:16). As noted by Franks (2001:16): “Printers were generalists – they could compose, or set type, make up pages of type for printing and print pages on wooden presses”. “Printers had to be able to work quickly, and they needed manual dexterity and strength to handle the heavy formes. They also had to be literate, with a good knowledge of spelling and grammar, and they had to develop a good knowledge of design and the techniques of printing” (Franks, 2001:17).

In recent decades, newspaper printers have observed the dissolution of many of these specialised, allied trades; including compositing as a direct result of technological innovation. Further to this, it has been suggested that there has been a deskillling of the printing trade itself: ‘computer technology has removed the need for craft skills, so that the work of a printer can be accomplished by any individual with basic computer literacy’
Marjoribanks, 2000:57). There is evidence, for example, that tasks once reserved as the domain of printers have been absorbed by journalists (Marjoribanks, 2000).

The impacts of such changes are not well documented. Most accounts of development and change within the newspaper printing industry focus upon the organisational level. Amongst these works are Franks’ (2001) account of the emergence and role of trade unions in the New Zealand printing industry, Hagen’s (1966) text mapping the history of early print unionism in Australia, Boyce, Curran, and Wingate’s (1978) edited collection which takes stock of 300 years of newspapers in England, Cockburn’s (1983) analysis of the deskilling of compositors in England, and Marjoribanks’ (2000) account of the responses to technological developments within News Corporation in England, the United States of America and Australia. Each of these fails, however, to fully account for the experiences of newspaper print workers. Two notable works that have explicitly explored the experiences of those on the print room floor are Cannon’s (1967) study in Britain with the now defunct compositor workforce and Lipset, Trow and Coleman’s (1956) study in the United States of America. This researcher has been unable to identify the publication of any significant studies of/with newspaper printers within Australia.

This paper takes stock of the ways in which a group of newspaper printers negotiate questions about what they do for a living.

**Method**
Prospective participants (all current newspaper printers) in Victoria and Queensland were contacted through a key informant and provided with an information statement which outlined the purpose of the study and a consent form. A snowball sampling framework operated from this point. The purpose of sampling from two sites was to provide a possibility for variation and depth in the data rather than providing a platform for direct comparison of the two groups.

Prospective participants made contact with the research team in order to make arrangements for the conduct of interviews. Whilst face-to-face interviews were the preferred data collection method, it was necessary and preferable (due to constraints upon participants and members of the research team) that some interviews be conducted by telephone.

Interviews tended to last between 30 minutes and an hour (some a little longer). Telephone interviews tended to be shorter than those conducted in person: though certainly no less valuable. These interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and notes were taken during these interactions such that the data could be readily transcribed at a later date. The transcripts were subsequently thematically analysed.

A total of 20 male newspaper printers, aged in their late 20s into their early 50s, participated in this study. This singularly male sample reflects the nature of this workforce. Thirteen of these printers were based and working in Victorian print sites and seven in Queensland. All were ‘working on the press’ in some capacity at the time of
their interviews. That is, some participants were working in a supervisory role in addition to their responsibilities in relation to the operation of the press (most of the sample were working night-shift whilst a hand-full were day-shift workers).

Findings

At the beginning of each interview, participants were presented by the interviewer with the following: “Because we don’t often talk about ourselves, being interviewed can be a weird experience. If we met at a barbecue, for example, what are the kinds of things you might talk about/the kinds of things that you would tell someone you had just met about yourself?” This was a reasonably simple, but eminently meaningful line of inquiry given that these responses were provided within a context in which discussions about the loss of craftsmanship and a general sense of de-skilling at the hands of technological advance were common.

In response to this question, many participants commented that they simply “do not like to talk about themselves”, and more than one echoed the following sentiments: “I’m not the sort of person that likes to talk about myself much…unless I know the person really well: I have to feel pretty comfortable”. One revealed, rather frankly, “Oh you wouldn’t get much out of me at a Barbie; I’m not very social…my wife does all [of] that”. A few noted that if they were “on the drinks” at the barbecue they might be more forthcoming with information about themselves but were unlikely to volunteer a great deal about themselves without prompting.
Having overcome their initial trepidation about talking about themselves, most participants provided multifaceted responses to this and the other questions posed to them during their interviews. As presented in Table 1, when invited to reflect upon the types of information about themselves that they would likely offer upon being introduced to someone, their occupation and details about their children were the most frequent topics raised. References to their wives and/or marital status (including mention of divorce and marriage), and then to their participation in recreational and sporting activities, were the next most common topics raised by participants. Less frequently, but no less telling, were the two references to personal “history” (without further detail as to what this meant to them being offered), identification of the places in which they lived, and for one, a volunteering of the fact that he was in full time employ, were aspects worthy of note upon meeting people. With respect to this last category, this participant explained that the nature of his occupation meant that he was constantly managing peoples perceptions of him:

“I guess that I’m not a dole bludger…I sort of get that a little bit…mainly because…working night shift and people think…they see me out in the yard or…shops in your thongs and that.”

[Table 1 about here]

During these initial exchanges, the barbeque scenario proved to be particularly relevant as one as the following exchange demonstrates:
Participant: “I’d probably go ‘oh, how are you? My name is [name]’. Of course [you would ask] a question like, ‘what is it you do for a living?’ [And I would reply]…’I work for the newspaper’, and you’d probably ask me, ‘what is it that you do’? I’d tell you, ‘I print newspapers’, [and you would say], ‘ah, that’s interesting blah, blah, blah’, and then you would go, ‘when do you work?’ I wouldn’t go into details trying to explain my roster, but [would say] ‘I work whenever’, [and you would say] ‘what do you mean whenever?’ And then you would ask me, ‘are you off tonight?’ I’d say, ‘no I’m not, I’ve got to go to work’ and to cut a long story short, without making a history out of it, I’d say, ‘I’ve got to go to work guys, see you later’.

Interviewer: It sounds like you’ve had that conversation before.

Participant: So many times it’s not even funny.”

When asked directly, what they “tell people they do for a living”, most participants reported that they simply told people “I am a printer” and one that he was a “printing machinist”. Such responses indicated that there was a strong sense of occupational identity attached to producing the newspaper. There was something very particular about this occupation: “being a printer” meant something quite specific. Being a printer required the development of a specialised skill set and the acquisition of particular knowledge.

[Table 2 about here]
Reflecting the inherently public nature of the newspaper industry, some participants stated that they simply had to utter the name of the company that they worked for, that they “printed the newspaper” or that they worked at “the newspaper” to sufficiently satisfy most people. The reality was that the pervasiveness of the mastheads under which these printers worked meant that very few needed to explain further. One participant simply told people he was “an apprentice”.

As evidenced in the exchange detailed on a previous page, it became apparent that the detail included in these exchanges was likely to be very different depending upon the level of interest of the person asking, and the context within which the conversation was taking place. If asked such a question at a barbecue or over the counter at a shop, for example, responses would be very different to those offered around people who were likely to know something about the newspaper trade or indeed if it were someone who they were likely to encounter again:

“*They haven’t got a clue…when you say you’re a printer they go “oh, ok, right”…I know they haven’t really got a clue what you’re talking about…if it’s somebody close or some-one I can sort of explain to them a little bit, but…if it’s somebody over the counter or someone…and they say what are you doing now? blah blah blah…It’s a bit hard to explain to ‘em…cause if they haven’t got any idea, they can’t fathom it.*”
For some, simply mentioning “the newspaper” was not sufficient:

Participant: … you always get asked if you’re a journo or a this or that … and

    I say ‘just’ a printer.

Interviewer: And do you say ‘just’ a printer?

Participant: Yes I say ‘just’ a printer. Yep, it’s always a word that comes in

there…probably only two weeks ago we were at a party and this

one particular woman said, “oh what are you doing” , and I said,

“oh I’m a printer…”, and she went “Ah!”. She happened to have

a printing background and she just wouldn’t shut up all night, it

was question after question…and what is this machine doing, how

does this bit work, what do I do now, so that was pretty exciting.

But you get that occasionally, other times, I probably just cut

them short, you know “it’s a job”.

Interviewer: Why do you do that?

Participant: …I’ve been doing it for that long I’m tired of explaining it. It’s

not a feeling of worthlessness or anything it’s just…if I start

discussing printing they really don’t know what you’re talking

about…so you know what I mean it starts getting a bit pointless .

Explanations necessarily became more complex when questions of practice and printing

process arose:
“I’m a printer, it’s pretty hard to explain you know, so I say I work at the [company name]… and we produce the paper, print the paper, it’s pretty hard to go into and explain… I think most people think it’s like photocopying and it just comes out the other end all done so… most of the time I sort of try to explain it but most of the time I just let it go.”

References to public perceptions about newspaper printing being not unlike “photocopying” or “just pressing buttons” were common. Such statements were related with frustration at having to constantly look for ways to explain the highly technical nature of modern day printing: “They don’t understand the depth of what goes into it”. It is not surprising then, that at least one of these twenty printer workers admitted to “taking the piss”:

If I’m being a bit facetious I say that I’m just a paper stainer… I say “I print for a daily newspaper”… [and am generally asked] “What do you have to do there…?” So I go into more detail… I say “we put the paper in the press, set the press up to go and off we go”. Some people go, “oh yep”, and they sort of get the idea of what I’m talking about but some ask for a bit more detail. But you can’t go into too much detail without going into too much detail. So I just say “I’m a printer”.

As a consequence of these interactions, many of these printers had developed a shorthand explanation for what they did. Such strategies were initiated in the hope of avoiding
longer, often intensely frustrating discussions during which participants found it difficult to communicate the highly complex and technical aspects of printing.

Conclusions

Whist most participants noted that they would prefer not to talk about themselves, there were some strong themes to emerge from these interviews. Identifying what they did for a living and making reference to their marital status and their children as well as the recreational and sporting activities that they were involved in were common.

Of significance, is that despite the industry having been in existence since the 7th Century in the East, and the very early 19th Century in Australia (Van Oudshoorn, 1982), and having formed such a significant social, political and historical role within society (see Poster, 1999; Curren, 1978), the reality of what it means to “be a printer” was frustratingly beyond the comprehension of many of those with whom these participants came in contact. So much so that some had established techniques for avoiding these conversations or ‘short-hands’ that would enable them to extricate themselves from the interactions before awkward technical discussions were raised. Whilst this paper has not mapped out the technological innovations to have emerged in this industry (to be published elsewhere) in recent years, the increased use of technologies within newspaper production has undoubtedly played a significant role in this situation.
References


Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Jessica Tatham-Thompson and Michelle Dickinson who worked as research assistants on this project. We would like offer out thanks to the participants who gave of their time, their wives, families and housemates who allowed us into their homes and to Swinburne University of Technology for providing funding to support this research.
Table

Table 1. What do you tell people about yourself?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (n=20)(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status/reference to wife</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational activities (&quot;painting&quot;, &quot;fishing&quot;, &quot;traveling&quot;)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporting activities (&quot;football&quot;, &quot;cricket&quot;)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal “history”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of residence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Some participants provided more than one response, all have been included.

Table 2. What do you tell people do for a living?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (n=20)(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I am a printer”</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I work at [Company Name]”</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I print the newspaper”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I work at the newspaper”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I am a printing machinist”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I am an apprentice”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m just a paper stainer”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Some participants provided more than one response, all have been included.