The concept of culture has become popular in analyzing organizations and occupations. If we think of the essence of culture as being the learned, taken-for-granted, shared beliefs and values of a given group or occupation (Schein, 1992, 1999, 2003), what I have called its tacit non-negotiable assumptions, what are some of the assumptions that the members of the media industries and occupations share?

I think of the “media” as a set of industries such as newspapers, radio stations, television, movies and the internet, and a set of occupations such as journalism, writing and reviewing, editing, publishing, printing, broadcasting, film making and advertising. A culture arises whenever a group with more or less stable membership has enough shared learning experiences to have figured out how to survive in its external environment and how to organize itself internally. What works is what ultimately becomes the culture of that group. Analysis of the culture of the media therefore requires us to think both in terms of the shared learning of the total set of industries and occupations, as well as to consider the various groups within the media that may have sub-cultures of their own.

To analyze any of these cultural units requires us to recognize that organizational and occupational cultures exist or manifest themselves at several levels of consciousness (Figure 1).

The observed behavior and the physical structures of an occupation can be thought of as the “artifacts” of the culture. These are easy to observe but hard to decipher. For example, when a senior editor of the New York Times recently resigned because a Times reporter had been reporting fabricated news for some time and the editor did not catch it or, if he did, let the matter go, that resignation and its acceptance is a clear artifact of the media culture. But what it implies at a deeper level is not entirely clear — that reporters should never falsify anything, that editors should be smart enough to catch false news, that editors should be better at seeing patterns of falsification in a given reporter’s work, that if something scandalous happens someone must be found to take the blame or all of the above? Visible artifacts can mean different things in different contexts. To decipher the culture of the New York Times therefore requires a deeper analysis than just making inferences from observed behavior.

To take another example, when more and more news broadcasts claim to show you “breaking news,” “exclusive stories,” and repeat endlessly the few pictures that may have been obtained by a TV crew dispatched to a disaster, it tells you something about the “values” of the media culture, but again, one senses that there are deeper assumptions operating that are not easily discernible without inquiring of insiders why the members of a given group do what they do. What is the significance of the fact that you see the same pictures in the morning, afternoon and evening news, presented at each time as if it had just happened. To get at the deeper levels of a culture, the shared tacit assumptions, we must talk to insiders and at least elicit their "espoused values," what they claim their non-negotiable principles and ideologies to be.

Sometimes we get a glimpse of these in dramatized, second-hand accounts as, for example, in the movie Network News which purports to show how critical it is for the media to be trustworthy, to show only what really happened and to report only genuine feelings. However, when we take an analytical stance toward our observations, we note that much of what we observe does not match the espoused values claimed by various insiders or the official literature of the occupation. As the movie represents the culture, there are clearly different points
of view associated with the reporter’s having simulated tears instead of real sorrow. What these anomalies or inconsistencies imply is that there are still deeper levels of the culture that are unconscious taken for granted shared assumptions which drive the actual day to day behavior of members of the occupation. Once we understand these, we can explain both the behavior and the inconsistencies we observe.

For example, I would conjecture that one of these shared taken-for-granted assumptions is that a story must be “news-worthy,” that it must meet some criterion of what the listener or viewer would most likely be interested in. And, presumably, the members of the occupation have learned from their own experience and from what others have taught them that what is “newsworthy” has to be current and dramatic, i.e. murders, fires, wars, floods, and other various disasters. Furthermore, it must involve some “human interest,” deaths, separations, acts of heroism, and stories involving strong emotions of various sorts. One would also infer that good stories must contain surprises, unexpected events, i.e. “man bites dog”, and must imply some kind of “lesson” such as “crime does not pay,” or “humans can behave heroically in disaster situations.” One might also conjecture that the story should be entertaining in some way so that it captures and holds attention.

These deeper cultural assumptions form a kind of cluster that defines the core of the occupation (Figure 2) but within that cluster one can find conflicting and inconsistent assumptions. A rookie reporter might learn, for example, that being truthful is critically important, but that the truth can be “spun,” that is, presented in ways that are more or less “newsworthy.” The principle of presenting “just the facts” is made equivocal by another principle – to “select those facts that are most newsworthy, that contain the most dramatic potential, the most human interest, the most entertainment value.” The reporter will learn that the domain of “facts” is infinite, and that one can manipulate the presentation by what one presents without actually falsifying anything.

The reporter will also learn from multiple experiences of having his or her work edited by varying levels of editors what some of the more subtle assumptions are about how to write, what to write about, how to spin the story for reader or viewer interest. Since news items are occurring all over the place and are covered by different reporters, it is inevitable that competition will arise among reporters to get their stories used. The basic assumption of “we report only the facts” will then inevitably be biased by a second assumptions of “provide stories that the editors will accept,” and that, in turn, will be biased by insider knowledge of what different editors prefer and respond to. The editorial process allows any given medium to insert a further bias, an editorial position, often reflecting the values of the founders or current owners or publishers or, in many cases, the values of the advertisers on whom the medium is dependent. To counter-act this bias the U.S. Constitution protects the “freedom of the press” and much is made of the critical role of the independence of the Fourth Estate as a cornerstone of democracy. It is for this reason that much concern has been expressed about the recent trend of fewer and fewer owners controlling more and more of the various media, making it that much more possible to express editorial bias by what is presented and how it is spun.

The different media, i.e. newspaper, radio, and TV, probably generate a variety of additional principles and tacit assumptions reflecting the core technologies underlying these media forms. To understand the shared assumptions of each of these groups would require observation and talking to insiders. But in an information age, it would seem to be essential to understand the deep assumptions that the media make about what is information and how it is to be presented to the public.

References