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## In search of the journalistic imagination

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## ABSTRACT

Journalists tell stories based on facts, but stories cannot be told without imagination. However, little research has been conducted on journalistic imagination. This study aimed to explore the indicators, roots, and cultivation of the imaginative capacities of journalists. For this purpose, 6 renowned journalists in Taiwan were studied. The results identified 10 indicators of imaginative capacity in the study participants. The research team also identified 6 roots of imaginative capacity, among which professional conduct emerged as the decisive root in the case of the journalists, and it was followed by personality traits, academic background, news sense, work experience, and social responsibility. Furthermore, the team identified 7 methods of cultivating imaginative capacity: self-reflection, reading and learning, observing and listening, comparing and benchmarking, nurturing broad interests, acquiring aesthetic experiences, and creating welcoming environments. The results provide an understanding of how journalistic imagination can be assessed, and they further contribute insights into the complexities that various roots endow upon diverse imaginative capacities when distinct methods of cultivation are used.

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## 1. Introduction

Journalism is a form of culture that is complete with its own social conventions and is powerful in a manner far more complex than its numerous critics might suspect (Schudson, 1996). Neither fabricating nor serving as passive recorders, journalists act as storytellers, but they cannot do so without imagination. Adam (2002) defined journalism as a form of expression that is an invention, a product of the imagination. Keeble (2007) believed that journalism is at its best when it is based on facts and authentic experience and when it displays great sensitivity to language, tone, and rhythm. Thus, journalists have been considered to shape public imagination (MacGregor, 2009) through their own imagination.

The various forms of media exert enormous political, ideological, and cultural power, but journalism maintains an unstable position within literary culture and academia (Keeble, 2007). Journalism will be regarded as a marginal literary pursuit unless journalists self-consciously construct their public identities (Hertley, 1996). As Adam (2002) stated, journalism education has been exceedingly functional. Numerous journalists are only concerned with fact finding and writing objectively, and, consequently, they may construct merely pictures of soulless information. Neither the practitioners nor the educators of journalism are sufficiently inclined to lift journalism out of the bureaucratic setting in which journalists are likely to operate.

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Keeble (2007) indicated that facts derived from eyewitnesses form the foundation upon which journalistic imagination can be constructed and then on which a close relationship with the audience can be built. Therefore, journalism education must encourage the creative spirit, much like practitioners of journalism like to acknowledge and further explore its creative possibilities (Keeble, 2007).

Keeble (2007) further indicated that journalism's clarity of language and structure give rise to its "plain style", but this does not mean that it is incapable of capturing complexity. The "plain style" helps journalists to appeal to readers' common sense and convince readers that they are reporting in good faith. Concurrently, the arguments made by these journalists can be sophisticated, provocative, and entertaining (p. 12). However, the notions of factuality and authenticity remain problematic, and journalistic imagination continues to thrive on complexities and contradictions. Despite the rhetoric they used, celebrated journalists such as Truman Capote and Nick Nuttall could not resist the temptation to resort to fabrication, "providing a sense of life carrying on, bringing us full circle, back to the place where the story began, rather than the requirements of a piece of journalism that it sticks to the facts" (p. 10).

Numerous well-known journalists like Daniel Defoe and George Sand have claimed that they habitually fly with journalistic imagination in order to become involved in the "here and now" and to capture authentic voices of human interest (Keeble, 2007). Despite its substantial value and the supportive voices it has offered over the years (e.g., Bak & Reynolds, 2011; Fishkin, 1985), extant research on journalistic imagination is scant. This limitation suggests that additional studies on the subject are warranted. Given this context and on the basis of the indicators of imaginative capacity (Liang & Chia, 2014; Liao, Chang, Lin, & Liang, 2014), the following questions were asked: do the connotations of imaginative capacity indicators of journalists differ from previous studies? Where do the imaginative capacities of journalists come from? How can these capacities be nurtured? In other words, this study analyzed the indicators, roots, and cultivation of the imaginative capacities of journalists. The contextualization of the imaginative capacity within the field of journalism, particularly the indicators, roots, and cultivation methods, is a substantive theoretical contribution of the present study to both fields of creativity and journalism.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Journalistic imagination

Fishkin (1985) held that great journalists excite their readers both intellectually and emotionally in a manner that conventional journalism cannot. By unleashing their imagination, these journalists can rearrange familiar facts, cast them in new light, place them in diverse contexts, challenge the readers' comfortable habits of thought, change the readers' methods of understanding the world, and most importantly, decipher the invisible codes that have pervaded their cultures and languages and also acquire the skills required to question what they hear or read and construct new patterns of meaning on their own. Kieran (1998) argued that good journalism should not merely describe how and why an event happened, but also seek to show its true nature. The identification and the spreading of this true nature depend on a journalist's deep thinking, sharp criticism, infinite imagination, and innovative methods of conveying happenings (Bak & Reynolds, 2011).

McKay (2007) indicated that the desire to "be there" strongly motivates all the best journalists. Fulfilling this desire requires journalistic imagination because the journalists might not be "there" during an event. Wilson (2007) added that to create the impression that they were present during an event, great journalists typically imagine and employ literary devices in order to make the sounds, the smell, the look, and the feel of an event come through based on the facts. Nuttall (2007) suggested that scene-by-scene construction can help journalists imagine and move a story forward moment by moment and give it immediacy, and, thus, maximize reader involvement. Furthermore, Chapman (2007) indicated that the prolific works of the best journalists brought to the process "a mould-breaking combination" of imagination and emotional commitment. By engaging their imagination to generate an effective response, these journalists penetrated the barrier of public indifference to certain social issues (Lockwood, 2012). The ability to use genuine emotions to portray characters and the capacity to capture the drama of everyday life ensure the survival of journalists even in harsh conditions (Bak & Reynolds, 2011).

Great journalists eagerly grasp the world experience, and their scrutiny is not only the factuality of events, but also an engaged witnessing of events, complete with memories and sensations, for the purpose of making sense of the world, based on the use of their faculties of journalistic imagination, creative seeing, and artistic commitment (Tulloch, 2012). Connery (2012) considered that what makes these journalists remarkable is their capacity to make keen, perceptive, and meaning-making observations. These journalists can create a world peopled with characters developed from their imagination in order to give readers something fresh and new. This ability to capture the authentic voice and manner of their subjects allows these journalists to reach a visionary level that has been often acknowledged. However, Connery contended that the act of visionary observation requires imagination applied to actuality. Lockwood (2012) observed that the use of literary tropes and effective rhetoric has been the key strategy used in recruiting the imagination for its immediate and widespread impact. As Lockwood indicated, imaginative journalists can enrich people's understanding of narrative possibilities and, in the perfect scenario, create new options for thought and action.

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