

New communication technologies and the phenomenology of journalism

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This paper assesses the implications of new communication technologies for journalistic cultures of practice. Its theoretical premise is a simultaneous rejection of technological determinism and professional voluntarism, asserting instead that new media should be regarded as historical and political in origin, and ‘genetically structuring’ in their effects. This means that instead of focussing on the direct or linear impact of new technologies at the macro-level, I will look instead at the ways in which they are embedded in everyday practice, and systematically forgotten as contingent forms. It will be seen that aside from overt shifts in professional journalism (which have been well documented elsewhere), new media forms influence in a phenomenological sense the way journalists inhabit their professional, epistemological and physical worlds. These influences, insofar as they help to structure processes of individuation and the constitution of collective professional identity and shared culture, are largely misrecognised as unremarkable or natural developments, but can in fact be regarded as politically implicated. The upshot is that while the democratic potential of new technologies is widely emphasised, they can also be seen as introducing new criteria by which positions of power in the journalistic field are established and occupied, and as subjecting (admittedly problematic) news values to further marketisation. This is not to suggest that such trends are inexorably negative, but rather than there are new symbolic economies in play, the rules and implications of which are not well understood.

The broad political aspects of new technologies in journalism are relatively straightforward to sketch. Nick Davies wrote in his recent book *Flat Earth News* that it is becoming increasingly standard journalistic practice to conduct one’s research from a desk – he found that in only 12% of the news articles he sampled was there evidence of ‘primary’ or on-the-ground sourcing. While deeming this development problematic per se may potentially rest on a suspect substantialist or instrumentalist premise, Davies argues that by relying on existing media stories and hearsay for generating and developing stories journalists are increasingly engaging in groupthink, which is demonstrably problematic in terms of accountability, transparency and agency. It could also be said that the new technologies available to journalists – more precisely, technologies with which journalists are expected to be proficient – are related to changing professional structures: the growing prevalence of freelance contracts, the expectation that journalists will perform supplementary tasks such as layout, photography and editing, and the ‘rationalisation’ of journalistic output, in which a single item is packaged in a variety of formats. (Bob Franklin has also observed that new communication technologies are one of the factors behind the increasing tendency for journalists to perform single tasks across a group of regional newspapers). Without going into detail, I would suggest that such trends contribute to increasing job insecurity in the news media (which in turn leads to a more conservative, risk-averse culture of professional practice), and that the commoditisation associated with multi-platforming potentially leads to the

homogenisation of news, since predictability of novelty and continuity of narrative form are both necessary ingredients of marketability.

The other well-documented change seen over the past decade has been the dissolution of the boundary between news producer and consumer. While public involvement in the practice of journalism – whether in the form of user-generated content or post-hoc interaction – is broadly welcomed on democratic grounds, it can alternatively be characterised as the importing of exogenous principles of differentiation (namely, ones based on popular mandate) into journalism. This might be regarded as no bad thing, and I have argued elsewhere that the internal misrecognised ‘rules’ of the journalistic game have little to do with ethics per se and much to do with the reproduction of the field’s hierarchies and gatekeeping structures. However, it is only with the continued relative autonomy of the field that certain types of cultural production are possible – investigative journalism is one – and the popularisation of news production criteria risks casting in political terms what is in fact better described as a cultural shift towards maximal dissemination or an economic shift towards profitability as dominant signifiers of news value.

I would contend that there is another dimension to the dissolution of the producer/consumer separation which is often overlooked. While journalists have always been renowned as news junkies, traditionally a journalist’s production and consumption of news has been temporally if not spatially distinct. It seems notable that a new set of cultures have become established as normal, in which constant, intimate practices of news consumption have become embedded throughout a journalist’s work cycle. This sort of fluidity and mobility of access to news undoubtedly provides access to valuable sources of information and other resources, and the consistent presence of the consumer mindset could presumably lead to greater sensitivity to audience interests. It could also, however, lead to the same problem mentioned above – an over-sensitivity to the anticipation of what will sell or go down well with an audience. While not wishing to defend a hallowed productive realm isolated from its audience, I would suggest that the implications of this close intertwining of production and consumption needs to be researched further.

It would be misleading to suggest that a material geography of journalism has been replaced by a virtual one. Deborah Chambers has researched the one-to-one epistemology through which journalists often characterise their work, and it seems convincing that the prioritisation of this view of news gathering as instrumentalist is more a matter of strategy – serving as symbolic capital which enhances the perceived value of specific journalistic practices – than objectivity as such. Similarly, I would argue that it is misplaced to suggest that journalists have always inhabited a wholly symbolic realm in which what counts as newsworthy or even factual is determined exclusively according to the arbitrary principles of a culture detached from its material context. But for each of these approaches there is at least a well-established awareness of the political implications of their contingent criteria. In the latter case, it is possible to establish dominant signifiers of authority, which may be essentially arbitrary (in the absence of universal journalistic principles) but associated with power relations in the field. It is fair to say that new ICTs mean that the multi-stage, often contested yet normatively established process of mediation of information has been altered. This, again, does not mean the replacement of an idealised object-subject pairing with something purely intersubjective or circular: if we were to posit that news is increasingly produced in a virtual space, that space is no less structured or determined than its ‘physical’ other. Critics such as Hassan claim write of an excess of mediation; it could also be said that the immediacy of new technological forms leads instead to a short-circuited mediation of knowledge. What is perhaps more important to consider is how these new forms of mediation, or more concretely how modes of journalistic production become established as

normal, and part of the individual's phenomenal experience of the everyday, including the negotiation of lived spaces.

Traditionally, the dominant engine of production and reproduction of cultures of journalistic practice has been 'the newsroom'. While the term's ambiguous use as shorthand for a variety of symbolic forms extends to the mythical, romantic and nostalgic, the physicality of the newsroom has always been central to such mythologies – and it has historically been characterised in a particularly urban fashion: smoky, sweaty, chaotic, febrile, warren-like, claustrophobic, and with a news cycle whose peaks and troughs in activity mirror the temporal metaphors associated with urban life. Further, this muscular, intense environment provides the context for the institution not only of news values and norms of professional practice, but also professional ideologies and identities. After Weber, a practitioner's capability is perceived not through the deployment of professional skills but rather their embodiment: if someone appears to naturally belong or thrive in the newsroom culture, this is in fact the end product of a process (as political as it is usually nonconscious) involving naturalisation, anticipation, reorientation, realignment, personalisation and projection. In our context this is important because the individuation of the journalist entails the incorporation not only of techniques, but of symbolic capital producing a 'perfect fit' with a phenomenal world which is, among other things, distinctly urbanised. Of course, the newsroom model is overused, and only applies to particular subfields of journalism. I have noted elsewhere that war correspondents lack the sort of 'cauldron' conducive to the consistent reiteration of structured, structuring practices which provide the political underpinnings of professional identities and ideologies. This potentially means that war reporters are less susceptible to systematic professional inculturation, though the evidence suggests that autonomy from such forces itself becomes a strategic arena.

How have recent developments in ICTs transformed the newsroom as a vehicle for political reproduction? Perhaps obviously, flexibility of hours and location of work would be expected to undermine the structuring capacity of a more insular environment, though it is worth stressing that since journalism by definition involves interaction with non-journalists it is likely that the newsroom culture has always been porous. Further, temporal flexibility and spatial mobility should not be understood as the destructuring of professional life, but rather the substitution of new structures for old – and these structures are no less determined and determining, nor necessarily less urban. Second, demographic profiles suggest that the rise of user-generated content in news media might be thought to represent a 'suburbanisation' of journalistic production. This is certainly plausible (though as yet undocumented in terms of how such a process might impact on cultures of practice and identity), though I would emphasise the influence of performative expectation in such news-making. That is, norms of practice amongst 'citizen' or public news producers are not under-determined, but structured according to, among other things, historically naturalised perceptions of the way that news is done – a 'haunting' of newly emerging practices by durable, transposable historic forms. Third, it has been observed in the past decade that, ironically enough, those branches of journalism characterised by (and valued for) their independence spend increasing amounts of time in communication with colleagues and competitors. War and foreign correspondence may increasingly provide fertile ground for newly political forms of professionalisation and inculturation, though perhaps more likely is a systematic renegotiation of existing dominant principles of differentiation, and the symbolic economy which regulates their production, appropriation and embodiment – and by extension the lived experience of the media professional. I would suggest that in all of these cases we are not yet in a position to determine the new 'rules of the game', but that we should continue to unpack the determinants of new cultures of practice and processes of individuation, in particular those which are experienced as natural or benign developments.