

Commentary

The Midlife Crisis of the Network Society

Nikki Usher ^{1,*} and Matt Carlson ²

¹ College of Media, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL 61801, USA; E-Mail: nusher@illinois.edu

² Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA;
E-Mail: carlson1@umn.edu

* Corresponding author

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Abstract

The network society is moving into some sort of middle age, or has at least normalized into the daily set of expectations people have for how they live their lives, not to mention consume news and information. In their adolescence, the technological and temporal affordances that have come with these new digital technologies were supposed to make the world better, or least they could have. There was much we did not foresee, such as the way that this brave new world would turn journalism into distributed content, not only taking away news organizations' gatekeeping power but also their business model. This is indeed a midlife crisis. The present moment provides a vantage point for stocktaking and the mix of awe, nostalgia, and ruefulness that comes with maturity.

Keywords

digital journalism; fake news; hybridity; Networks; Media; participation; reflexivity

Issue

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1. Introduction: The Network Society Reaches Midlife

The network society is moving into some sort of middle age, or has at least normalized into the daily set of expectations people have for how they live their lives, not to mention consume news and information. In their adolescence, the technological and temporal affordances that have come with these new digital technologies were supposed to make the world better, or least they could have. The ability to capture, to record, to share, to broadcast from our phones, made all much easier by social media platforms, and then, watch it scale; the ability to transfer near-instant information across wide, post-geographic nodes of exchange; the enabling of openness, transparency, and data-sharing; the ability for people, not just traditional gatekeepers, to hold power to account, and beyond—well, we knew, as journalism studies scholars, that this would fundamentally reshape professional journalism as a practice, its normative epistemology, and

perhaps, even its authority. This excitement may seem puerile, but it was born of the optimism of youth. As a result, there was much we did not foresee, such as the way that this brave new world would turn journalism into distributed content, not only taking away news organizations' gatekeeping power but also their business model. This is indeed a midlife crisis. The present moment provides a vantage point for stocktaking and the mix of awe, nostalgia, and ruefulness that comes with maturity.

2. Darkness and Temporal Reflexivity

This thematic issue comes at a critical time, both geopolitically but also in terms of much needed academic reflection—asking what has happened and what we don't know about the nature of news and participation in a platform era. As scholars, we have seen just how nasty, or “wicked”, even actors can be on these platform, as Quandt (2018) writes in this issue, and as schol-

ars, we must ask, “What has such research wrought?” (p. 42). Participation and participatory journalism are words that scratch the surface of the myriad conceptions of what it means to shift the modes and terms of engagement, as Anderson and Revers (2018) discuss here, as they try to unravel a “participatory epistemology” to describe “journalistic knowledge in which professional expertise is modified through public interaction” (p. 26). The hybridity of journalism today recalls some sort of mutant mix of journalist plus something else, or what we think of as a standard news outlet plus some other, not always desirable enhancement, as Ruotsalainen and Villi (2018) discuss. When new modes of online participatory media can be thought of as Holt (2018) puts forward, as “anti-systemness” and when even the most ordinary commenters on news outlets swear, a lot, creating all sorts of new swear words that AI content analysis must be taught capture, as Boberg, Schatto-Eckrodt, Frischlich and Quandt (2018) do, what are scholars, not to mention the public, supposed to do? Boberg and colleagues present the quandary of comment section moderators grasping for standards as they bat away comments deemed unworthy of being admitted to the public space.

One cannot help but think of a Hollywood X-man battle between the “good” half-journalists, half-Frog. To carry this superhero metaphor further, Pepe-the-Frog might have once been a good mutant participatory journalism leader but became, due to the toxic sludge of populism, a frog-headed, swastika wearing anti-hero, a genealogy discussed here by Anderson and Revers (2018). Surely, as Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018) suggest, taking cues from George Simmel, there is some value to the benefit of the doubt for these new entrants into journalism; thinking of them as strangers already puts their potential contributions in a negative framework rather than a more productive one. But to wit, we are in comic-book world of participatory journalism; we do have, indeed, hybrid journalism strangers entering today’s world of participatory journalism; and perhaps we have engendered a form of hyper-reality that demands thinking about who is good, who is bad, from an individual, group, and structural level, why this has happened and some of these strangers, as Quandt (2018) suggests, will indeed practice the “dark participation” wielding a pernicious, evil cloud over what could be a productive vision of mutual reciprocity that Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014) hope might be possible.

At the outset, this thematic issue tries to be generative and reflective, no easy task, and the mixing of theoretical articles with empirical ones sets forward a productive path for what must come next. Quandt tricks the reader in his essay (spoiler alert), after $\frac{3}{4}$ of an article on the deep dark platform world, writing “If you now believe that the future is all doom and gloom, then you have stepped into a trap I have set” (2018, p. 44). What do we make of the past, present, and future for news, news and participation, and participatory journal-

ism in a proprietary platform world? We need to ask these questions and provide some sort of “temporal reflexivity” (Carlson & Lewis, 2018), and in particular, chart the waves in our own academic discourse about participation as emancipatory and generative and participation as dark, evil counterpower. These essays suggest a need for balance—that the past was not as rosy as we scholars might like to remember, but more important to keep at the forefront of our present consideration. The present, in fact, might not be so bad either—there are ways in which marginalized groups can connect, new accountability is fostered, new ideas and practices can be introduced into newsrooms and professional journalism that might well enable future sustainability or at least more targeted and successful strategies. This means good strangers bearing presents and new powers, not bad ones with dark arts—as we have seen recently, when programmers bring their skills to journalism (Usher, 2016), and historically, when photographers came to journalism (Zelizer, 1995).

But the benefit of age is often the shift from a fascination with immediacy to a longer, deeper vision of the world. Lewis and Molyneux (2018) make this clear in the look back at guiding assumptions of social media within the journalism studies research. Could we begin again with what we have learned, how might have these studies been carried out? Robinson and Wang (2018) provide some help here by starting from a point of inequality rather than an assumption of social media equality; social media gives rise to elites who marshal offline resources and capital into online status. But, as they argue, this should not be entirely deterministic; we can’t derive from social structure all we need to know about social media. We just need to be aware that what we study is deeply rooted in and reacting to the larger whole.

3. Into the Light: Moderating Dystopia and Utopia

How do we move forward then? Entrepreneurial journalism can both ground us in pre-existing normative boundaries, but it can also provide a way out (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Usher, 2017a). The thirty-years out vision that Ruotsalainen and Villi (2018) suggest has multiple modes for seeing the journalism of the future—but the idea of niche, elite, quality journalism for a small few is deeply concerning even as we can already see signs of this happening with membership models. On the other hand, perhaps the very understanding of participation as a possibility in journalism unsettles the knowledge claim of journalists to begin with and invites new people to retake this claim to knowledge in alternative form of participatory expression. We see this discussed here in a number of essays—in comments, ordinary people are now free to push back in very visible ways on news outlets, and even after over a decade of news comments on websites, there’s no real method through which to distinguish the good from the bad—but we can at least say people are passionately talking back and questioning

their received wisdom. But of course, that received wisdom is sometimes important, too—at some point, there has to be a commons for public deliberation as Boberg et al. (2018) note, but what happens when this commons goes away—when we are only sharing on our private, siloed platforms?

To be in a midlife mindset is ideally to find comfort in stability while not entirely surrendering oneself from novelty. When applied to the participatory potentialities of digital journalism, we find evidence of stasis that does not suggest we are stuck, but a recognition that the same tired, structural, political economy patterns repeat themselves, perhaps more so in a post-capitalist, globalist society. As one of the authors of this essay argues, user-generated content and citizen journalism have been full-on appropriated by professional newsrooms, who haven't shifted their normative frameworks much (Usher, 2017b). Appropriation is an endless swirl, starting with the least powerful being appropriated and normalized into the slightly less powerful (turtles all the way to the top, as it were), as the drivers of capitalism and power struggle to dig in their tentacles of power.

Does this all get better somehow? Can we move toward a moderatism where dystopian and utopian visions co-exist, where the anti-heroes and heroes of the platform news and information ecology surrender their arms and instead of unconditional surrender, work out terms where free expression can coexist with respect? Or, perhaps even better, where public knowledge production can coexist with respect for expertise, with working in a symbiotic relationship rather than a lopsided parasitic one? Certainly, the powerful platforms have this in their best interest, and have begun funding academics to research how healthy discourse may survive. The bigger question is whether moderatism is, in fact, dead—or whether it can, in fact be rehabilitated—given how many find this call for balance undesirable. In our small pocket of the world, where we think big ideas and study those who produce them, what they look like, and how others consume them, we need a call to remember balance in our research questions such that we are able to capture a broad perspective of what the world is—and then ask, what it shall be.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Nikki Usher, PhD, is Associate Professor in the College of Media at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the author of two books, *Making News at The New York Times*, and *Interactive Journalism: Hackers, Data, and Code*.



Matt Carlson, PhD, is Associate Professor at the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota. Recently he authored *Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing the News in the Digital Era*.