

Liquid Journalism

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News is a product that commercial corporations sell to target audiences as defined by marketing departments. As a marketable commodity, it has always competed with the tendency of people to make their own news: pirate radio, alternative media, using the office photocopier as “the people’s printing press”, activist newsletters pasted on city walls, gossiping in the local pub or market tavern. This was never a real problem for journalists working in the 20th century heyday of mass media where the particulars of audience behaviors remained largely invisible to them – a period Hallin (1992) called the “high modernism” of (American) journalism. It is during this time that journalism, according to Hartley, emerged as the primary sense-making practice of modernity (1996: 12). In terms of journalism’s “modernist bias of its official self-presentation” (Zelizer, 2004: 112), its practitioners came to see their work and their product as the cornerstone of modern society, and more particularly: the nation-state. As Carey (1996) has noted explicitly: “Journalism is another name for democracy or, better, you cannot have journalism without democracy. The practices of journalism are not self-justifying; rather, they are justified in terms of the social consequences they engender, namely the constitution of a democratic social order” (online).

Much has changed since those days. Consider the following conclusion from a series of research projects by the American Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in 2005: “Sitting down with the news on a set schedule has become a thing of the past for many time-pressured Americans [...] More people are turning away from traditional news outlets [...] At the same time, public discontent with the news media has increased dramatically. Americans find the mainstream media much less credible than they did in the mid-1980s. They are even more critical of the way the press collects and reports the news. More ominously, the public also questions the news media’s core values and morality.” Reports in most well-established democracies around the world signal similar trends. Corporate journalism has lost its “sense of wholeness and seamlessness” observed by Hallin (1992: 14), but not necessarily because of the collapse of political consensus or increasing market forces, as he suggests. What journalism has lost, as it is produced within the confines of mainstream news media corporations, is ‘touch’ with what sociologists like to call reflexive or liquid modernity, suggesting a process of radical “modernization of modern society” (Beck, Bonss & Lau, 2003: 1), where “liquid modern society and liquid life are locked in a veritable perpetuum mobile” (Bauman, 2005: 12). The key to these assumptions about our postmodern

condition is the common perception among people of all walks of life, that we live in times of fast-paced radical change. In today's global society such a widely shared sense of accelerated change is no longer a break in the otherwise fairly stable routine of everyday existence; instead, it has become the structural condition of contemporary 'liquid' life: "We live today under conditions of *permanent revolution*. Revolution is the way society lives nowadays. Revolution has become human society's *normal state*" (Bauman, 2002: 17).

Leading social philosophers like Beck, Giddens, Rorty and Bauman tend to see the role media play in this process as a mere mirror of the changes taking place in world society. Media theorists like Manovich (2001), Levy (1997) and Fidler (1997) on the other hand see in the ways in which (new) media are appropriated in society cues for larger economical, political and cultural trends. Fidler for example attributes much of our sense of continuous change to "the unexpected cross-impact of maturing technologies" (1997: 2), arguing how new media are both affected by and impact upon all existing forms of communication in society. This process, which Fidler calls 'mediamorphosis', suggests how change is a given in the social shaping of technologies. It is in the way people engage disruptive new technologies such as internet the conditions of permanent change get expressed. Technological innovation and adoption processes thus can be seen as evolutionary in a Darwinian sense, in that whichever technology – as in: device, code or protocol – is dominant at any given point in time is not necessarily the 'best', but rather the more 'fitting' with the prevailing culture. This in turn suggests that the various ways in which certain cultural industries – such as the news media - adapt and adopt new media tend to reinforce and perhaps subtly modify existing power relationships.

Remediation

Bolter and Grusin (1999) dub the transitory process of old to new media as one of ongoing 'remediation', where old media are refashioned in new media which in turn force previous media to redesign themselves accordingly. Their work builds on the insights of McLuhan, stressing the mutual implication of old and new media. Extending such a definition of media, I would like to argue that 'media' in this context refers to its artifacts (cf. the hardware and software of ICTs) as well as its uses and social applications, as this allows us to see the symbiotic relationships between technological and social change when for example studying how news organizations refashion themselves to meet the demands of technology

and society. Sennett (1998: 96) argues how “it takes institutions a long time to digest the technologies they ingest.” This may be true, but it underestimates the perception and sense of continuous change the rapid introduction of new media bring to the workforce of media industries, as noted by international scholars of media production like Singer, Boczkowski, Cottle, Domingo, Heinonen, Quinn, Deuze, and others. It is thus important to note that any consideration of the future of news and political communication has to involve not only an awareness of how the social systems of journalism and politics self-organize to adapt to new circumstances while maintaining their internal power structures, but also how the contemporary condition of liquid modernity and its sense of permanent revolution wreaks havoc on the very foundations of these institutions.

The constant tweaking, revamping, developing, adopting as well as abandoning of new media in the office (as well as at home) is a relatively recent phenomenon, which has accelerated in the last decade or so. It is exactly this period where contemporary observers see all kinds of rapid changes and feverish developments occurring in the realm of the social, particularly pointing towards the parallel trends of increasing globalization and individualization permeating all aspects of everyday life. Although people and social systems around the world respond to such sweeping changes differently, the impact of permanent revolution on society manifests itself most clearly in our increasing uncertainty, anxiety and disagreement about the exact meaning, role and function of such well-established features of modern life as the role of the state, the church, the family, and of professional journalism (Bauman, 2000). The added value of a social perspective offers media theory an important marker for understanding this status quo. The ambiguity of liquid modern life extends to the way we respond to and interact with new media. Fidler notes how we tend to overestimate the short-term impact of new media, failing to fully appreciate the complex and evolutionary trends expressed in the maturation processes of information and communication technologies. A more nuanced perspective, advocated by most contemporary scholars of new media, would move beyond such feverish expectations or delusions and look at new media in terms of how they take root next to and in a symbiotic relationship with existing media. Following Bauman, let me emphasize that these (r)evolutionary trends do not lead to some kind of ‘new’ stable media ecosystem as suggested by such media-centric approaches; no, disequilibrium and liquidity are the *permanent condition*, and get expressed both in the social as well as the technological.

Journalism and “high modernity”

Media as social institutions do not escape the sense of accelerated, unsettling change permeating liquid modern life, and it is exactly this notion of volatile, uncertain (global and local) flux that professional journalism fails to come to terms with. If we look at the various ways in which the news industry has tried to integrate or at the very least give some kind of coherent meaning to disruptive technologies like internet and social trends like individualization or globalization, one can see how journalism still depends on its established mode of production, through which it largely (and unreflexively) reproduces the institutional contours of high (or: ‘solid’) modernity. Thus journalism, when it moved online in the late 1990s, has consistently offered shoveled, repurposed and windowed content for free, cannibalizing on its core product while treating its Web presence as an advertisement for the offline product. In doing so, it remediated not only its product, but also its production process online, including but not limited to its established ways of doing things, its news culture, and its occupational ideology (Deuze, 2005). The primary function of the multitude online thus became the same as people were expected to behave offline, as *publics*: audiences to be sold to advertisers. In the same vein, journalism has engaged the individualized society in terms of its presupposed “audience fragmentation”, which in turn reified professional journalism’s position as the primary gatekeeper and information provider in society. Globalization has a particular impact on the making of news, as it forces journalists to translate events occurring all over the world involving all kinds of people to their local constituencies – which communities also increasingly consist of peoples, religions, and cultural practices with roots in different parts of the world. For most of the 20th century journalists have ignored the complexities when covering ‘the world’, combining narrow-minded frameworks like Orientalism (as eminently argued by Edward Said), ethnocentrism, and small-town pasteurism (following Herbert Gans), which more adequately represent the homophily of the average corporate newsroom and the make-up of the most affluent cultural groups in society than the kaleidoscopic make-up of citizens in most (Western) multicultural nations.

A new media ecology

The 21st century can tentatively be seen as a period when the developed world enters the second ‘liquid’ phase of modernity, where all existing modern social, economical and

political institutions – the church (or mosque, temple), the family, journalism, the nation-state – have become what Giddens (2002) calls ‘shell’ institutions: alive, but dead at the same time. Instead of being able to rely on such institutions for providing some automatic or consensual function in our lives, it is up to each and everyone of us to enter into a complex and ongoing negotiation with them, of which the outcome will always be uncertain. This process coincides with the emergence of a post-industrial information culture (Manovich, 2001), shifting the emphasis towards ‘immaterial’ resources like those traded on the international stock exchange and over the World Wide Web, leading scholars to proclaim the establishment of a global network society (Castells, 2000). What is expected of us in such a society is to acquire the skills and resources necessary to navigate complex and interactive social and technological networks. This shifts our core competencies away from so-called ‘expert’ systems to what Levy (1997) sees as a form of collective intelligence particular of cyberculture, where knowledge about any given topic or subject is based on the ongoing exchange of views, opinions and information between many rather than pulling the wisdom of a few. Hartley (2002) predicts in this context the emergence of a global ‘redactional’ society, where the core competences once exclusively associated with professional journalism are increasingly necessary for every citizen to guarantee survival in a networked information age. Journalism has become not so much the property of what journalists do in order to sell news, but what people all over the world engage in on a daily basis in order to survive, coping with “modernity’s extreme dynamism” (Giddens, 1991: 16), and the permanent revolution of liquid life (Bauman, 2005).

It is in this context that a new media ecosystem (Bowman & Willis, 2005), or new media ecology is taking shape. I have previously drawn distinctions between different and recombinant functions of journalism in such a new media system, where its news professionals will have to find ways to strike a balance between their identities as providers of editorial content but also of public connectivity (as in providing a platform for the discussion society ideal-typically has with itself), as well as between its historical operationally closed working culture strictly relying on ‘experts’ and a more collaborative, responsive and interactive open journalistic culture (Deuze, 2003: 219). Of such a complex new media ecology one can see internet (and all what we do online) as its primary manifestation, where people empowered by increasingly cheaper and easier-to-use technologies participate actively in their own ‘newsmaking’, from responding via e-mail to a breaking news story to collectively producing ‘citizen journalism’ Websites powerful enough to influence presidential elections –as in the case of *Ohmynews* in South Korea. What is particularly

salient about these trends is a further blurring of the carefully cultivated dividing lines between professional and amateurs, between producers and consumers of media. Jenkins (2003) describes this development as the emergence of a ‘convergence culture’, indicating a shift within media companies towards a more inclusive production process fostering “a new participatory folk culture by giving average people the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content” (online). There is no doubt that a future news system will be based – at least in part - on an interactive and connective mode of production where media makers and users will co-exist, collaborate and thus effectively compete to play a part in the mutual (yet never consensual, as Niklas Luhmann has noted) construction of reality. On a concluding hopeful note, Balnaves, Mayrhofer and Shoesmith (2004) consider such a shift towards a more engaged, emancipatory and participatory relationship between media professionals and their publics an example of a ‘new humanism’ in the domains of public relations, journalism and advertising, constituting “*an antidote to narrow corporate-centric ways of representing interests in modern society*” (p.192).

Liquid journalism

For journalism, all of this not only means that value attributed to media content will be increasingly determined by the interactions between users and producers rather than the product (*news*) itself. The real significance of the argument outlined here, is that we have to acknowledge that the key characteristics of current social trends – uncertainty, flux, change, unpredictability, or perhaps: ‘kludginess’ (paraphrasing Jenkins, 2004: 34) - are what defines the current and future state of affairs in how people make and use journalism all around the world. In terms of business praxis, this means we will see a bewildering variety of top-down, hierarchical and extremely closed-off types of corporate enclosures of the commons existing next to peer-driven forms of collaborative ownership regarding the manufacture of news. In terms of media production processes, we will continue to witness an continuing mix of “one-size-fits-all” content made for largely invisible mass audiences next to (and infused by) rich forms of transmedia storytelling including elements of user control and ‘prosumer’-type agency. In a way, it will be a mess – which makes the careful and socially realistic study of what people in their shapeshifting identities as consumers as well as producers of (news) media actually do all the more important.

Instead of lamenting or celebrating this process, or trying to find a fixed point somewhere in the future in our failed predictions of where we are going, we should embrace

the uncertainty and complexity of the emerging new media ecology, and enjoy it for what it is: and endless resource for the generation of content and experiences by a growing number of people all around the world. Part of what will happen will reproduce existing power relationships and inequalities, for sure. Yet we are also witnessing an unparalleled degree of human agency and user control in our lived experience of mediated reality. A journalism that will successfully embrace and engage this ecology, will have to become fluid itself: a *liquid journalism*.

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