Renegotiating the Journalism Profession in the Era of Social Media : The Case of Finnish, Namibian, Tanzanian and Zambian Students

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2018-09-01

acceptedVersion

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The Case of Northern and Southern Journalism Students

Abstract

Based on a case study, this article examines how journalism students (re)define journalism ideals in the era of social media. The research relies on theories of journalistic ideals and practices and Critical Discourse Analysis. The data were gathered in focus group interviews with European and African students participating in a joint journalism programme in Namibia, in 2015. In the light of the study, the renegotiation proceeds in the following discourses: 1) Open and Collaborative Journalism Profession, 2) Accountable Digital Journalism and 3) Challenging and Contextualised Journalism Ethics. Within these discourses, the principles of journalism move towards collaboration with citizens. To differ from citizen journalists, the practices of accountability, transparency and data verification are seen as essential for professional journalists of the digital age.

Introduction

Journalism students are an important group when discussing the changes in journalism. First, the students have grown up in a digitised media environment, and are active users of social media. Second, journalism schools have been challenged to move from industrial model towards community and citizen oriented model of journalism education where news is seen as a collaborative process (Mensing 2011). Following this, today's journalism education increasingly integrates social media and citizen journalism to the teaching of professional journalism. The aim is to provide up-to-date, responsive education and capture the intertwining relations between journalism professionals and amateurs, citizen journalists and netizens (Gutsche 2011; Hovden, Nygren & Zilliacus-Tikkanen 2016, 16–17).

In this article, journalism students' perceptions of journalism profession and the ideals of journalism are examined from the viewpoint of participatory turn within journalism. The students examined come from the North and the South. Journalism students' perceptions of journalistic ideals are understood as part of the professionalisation process – a distinctly ideological development that reproduces continuously a consensus about who is a journalist or what good journalism entails (Deuze, 2005; Schudson, 2001).

The evolution towards collaborative journalism has been slow within the legacy media. The professional journalists have disregarded citizens' contributions, judging these as failing to be 'proper' journalism, and newsrooms have co-opted participatory practices to suit their traditional routines (Heinonen, 2011; Örnebring, 2013; Wardle & Williams, 2010). However, as a result of social media platforms boundaries increasingly blur between the websites of news organisations and the blogs and collaborative spaces of citizen journalism (Bruns & Highfield, 2012). Journalists are building presence in various citizen-dominated places of the Web (Robinson 2011, 202). The blurring can be further seen in a cognitive framework among professional journalism and journalism educators: the metaphors of dialogue and conversation are used to define 'good' journalism practice in discussions (Eide 2015).

Today' journalism students are thus entering the profession at a moment when new groups of people are creating, discussing, sharing, recommending and re-disseminating information online and when news media's use of citizen journalism and dependence on user-generated visibility are growing (Singer, 2014). The students are also facing the profession whose ideological commitment to control may be giving way to the hybrid logic of adaptability and openness: a willingness to see audiences on a peer level, to appreciate their contributions, and to find the normative purpose for journalism in transparency and participation (Hujanen 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013;

Singer 2014). Accordingly, the many boundaries of journalism, "contours of the boundary work", have become central to journalism research (Carlson & Lewis 2015; Carlson 2015) and education.

According to the high modern objectivity norm, 'proper' journalists are truth-seeking professionals who aim at factual, accurate, balanced and reporting people can trust in (Tuchman 1978; Deuze 2005, 446–447). Ethics has referred to journalists' specific sense of ethics, validity and legitimacy. Autonomy, in its' turn, has presupposed that journalism is independent of economic, political or other outside efforts of influence. Today, journalism is increasingly understood and taught as a shared and collaborative practice and process; good journalist listens to and reflects a variety of voices, stimulates discussion and engagement within public and communities (Soffer 2009, 474, 487–488; Robinson 2011).

According to Lewis (2012, 852) one central questions is: how, where and why does the professional logic of control become rearticulated. Following this discussion, the following paper's key questions are whether journalism is seen as an open and collaborative and/or closed profession among the students and how aspects and practices of accountability and ethics are redefined in the context of social media.

The conceptualization of the ideals of journalism follows in this article the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA emphasizes the need of studying language use as an inherently social phenomenon within specific historical, cultural and interactional contexts available (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 2001). This means that the reinvention of the ideal and practice of journalism is seen here as a local, historical and discursive process. Journalistic values and practices, from the perspective of CDA, are constructed by drawing on discourses that have prior significations and that are socially available and possible in a particular context. I assume that students resort to powerful discourses about "good" journalism; students are constrained by these discourses but they also have options in creating, choosing and modifying them. In other words, I assume that dominant discourses within the respective media and journalism cultures are present when students imagine tasks and roles for themselves as professional journalists and for amateurs and citizen journalists.

On the basis of previous research I assume that the dominant discourses about journalism are somewhat different in the countries the students come from. Even though studies of journalists suggest similar professionalisation processes in different countries (Scholl & Weischenberg, 1998) there exists too much disagreement concerning professional norms to allow the conclusion that journalism has universal occupational standards. One possible perspective is that the dominant occupational ideology of

journalism is interpreted and applied differently across countries and media (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Research on journalism students also indicates that their identity has hybrid forms (Hovden et al., 2009; Mellado et al., 2012; Nygren & Stugbrand, 2014). Accordingly, the perceptions of journalism students from Finland, Namibia, Tanzania and Zambia are assumed to be grounded in local and historical contexts.

The Case Study Context

Journalism students' perceptions are examined in the context of the Journalism for Change programme, a higher education network project between Northern and Southern universities' journalism education programs. Universities of Helsinki, Jyväskylä and Tampere from Finland, University of Namibia, University of Dar es Salaam from Tanzania and Univerisity of Zambia cooperated to develop journalism education in Europe and Africa. This network's goal was to deepen students' understanding of journalism values and to develop these individuals' practical journalistic skills. The programme also sought to prepare students for the fight for human rights, democracy and cultural understanding. Freedom of the press and the ideals of equality and respect for otherness functioned also as integral points of departure.

Within the programme, a yearly intensive course was organised 2004 - 2015. The courses brought together around 125 students and 75 teachers. The present study focused on the students participating in the 12-day-long course held in Windhoek, Namibia, in 2015. The course was attended by 15 bachelor's and master's students of journalism and 9 university teachers: 3 Finnish (including myself), 1 Zambian, 1 Tanzanian and 4 Namibian teachers. The teachers' role was to lead activities and foster genuine interactions; the teachers shared their skills, knowledge and experiences with students through lectures, interactions and assignments. The programme also comprised field trips, group assignments and presentations.

Three focus group interviews were conducted for the present research at the end of the course. Finnish and Namibian students formed country-based groups, while Zambian and Tanzanian students formed a joint group. A written questionnaire structured the interviews. The items covered students' intellectual and practical understanding of journalism, perceived differences between countries, perceptions of the international course, interactions, cultural clashes, and eye-opening experiences. The interviews, lasting about one hour each, were taped and transcribed. Participants were asked for their informed consent, and all research ethics were upheld, including anonymity.

Students' perceptions are examined using CDA both as a theoretical and analytical framework. For analytical purposes, discourses can be defined as different ways of representing the world. Thus, the discourses in the aforementioned interviews are seen

as representing aspects of journalism from particular perspectives and as assuming and offering particular tasks and principles for journalists, citizen journalists and publics.

Three discourses (re)defining journalism ideals were found and named in the interviews: 1) Open and collaborative journalism profession, 2) Accountable Digital Journalism and 3) Challenging and Contextualised Journalism Ethics. The analysis conducted was interpretative in nature and, thus, based on the analyst's knowledge of the data and social and historical contexts in question. The identification and naming of specific discourses was based on textual evidence, the entire data at hand and background knowledge of the issues involved. To explain why and how particular interpretations were arrived at, these are illustrated below by detached citations extracted from the interview data.

The Discourse of an Open and Collaborative Journalism Profession

Within the Discourse of an Open and Collaborative Journalism Profession, the relationship between active netizens or citizen and professional journalists, as well as the demarcation between social and professional media, are being defined. Within the talk of Finnish students, journalism was portrayed as an open profession in the way that citizen journalists were described as an additional resource for professional journalists to pursue better journalism, especially in online context.

The ideas of journalism as a collaborative practice and journalism as an open profession were represented as uncommon in the talk of the African students and in the context of African media. As portrayed in the discourse, before the course African students perceived 'unprofessional' and citizen journalists negatively as "unprofessionals" who threaten the quality of journalism and journalistic jobs. Within the talk of the students, a demarcation is thus being constructed between Northern and Southern journalistic cultures and understandings and between journalism as an open or as a closed profession. The African students portrayed this as a "difference in mindset of journalism" and saw it as a central difference:

> The major difference I've noticed is the mindset of journalism at large, which was really different between the North and the African countries. . . . The idea that northern people, particularly from Finland, regard journalism as an open profession [sic], this is not common in Africa, especially in Tanzania. I believe everything begins with a mindset. That's the major difference we have [sic]. Other things could be more or less the same, but as long [as] that's different, I feel it leads to other differences that exist. (Namibian student, personal communication)

The discourse in question indicates, however, indicates that the perceptions of African students widened during the course; their prior perception of journalism as a closed

profession had been challenged. Many African students explained the course's major intellectual outcome for them was that journalism can be understood as an open profession: instead of perceiving citizen journalists as a problem or a threat, journalism can be perceived as a collaborative practice, and citizen journalists as a resource for professional journalism. So, in the talk of the African journalism students collaboration between professional journalists, ie. themselves, and citizens is portrayed as important and possible: the course made them more open towards the idea of working with citizens and learning from them:

> It [journalism as an open profession] seemed to be quite an acceptable thing in different cultures… so that has really widened my mind. . .when I go back home, we will have intellectual discussions and see how it goes because . . . it [has] started really to make sense to me. I think that was the biggest thing I acquired. (Tanzanian student, personal communication)

Although citizen and professional journalists, 'in the end', are seen as potential collaborative partners in the discourse, ethical challenges characterise these interactions. It is perceived problematic that citizen journalists are not bound by journalism's ethical code and that they easily break the code, for example, by publishing news online without fact checking. In order to solve this perceived ethical problem, the role of a journalist and journalism student widens within the discourse. The task of a professional journalist is not only to work with groups of citizens but to teach citizen journalists journalistic principles in order to make the quality of journalism better and the profession more respectable and trustworthy in the eyes if the public.

The Discourse of Accountable Digital Journalism

The Discourse of Accountable Digital Journalism is connected to social media platforms that digital technologies enable. The discourse reproduces some of the ideals of modern journalism as principals for journalism of digital age: the notions quality, impartiality, truth-telling, balance and accuracy are reconstructed in the spirit of high modern journalism. However, instead of talking of 'objective journalism' the notion of *accountable* journalism is constructed as a central ideal for digital journalism. Accountability is portrayed as a journalist's responsibility always check and verificate the information and only transmit correct and fact-based information. As stated by the interviewees, a good journalist "takes responsibility for upholding the truth as the first priority", and follows the professional code of practice in social media as well.

> Accountability: the word in a way kind of explains itself. We as journalists, journalists to be, we should be accountable for whatever we put out there, so I think . . . it does make sense, just taking responsibility for your actions. (Namibian student, personal communication)

Within the discourse the expectations put on journalists to produce content quickly while interacting with a variety of sources across multiple platforms are represented as significant challenges for accountable digital journalism. Problems in accountability are also connected to rumours circulating in social media as well as the lack ethical guidelines and praxis in social media contexts. Especially African students saw many problems in the ways professional journalists in their countries pursue journalism in the context of social media. The problems named included plagiarism, copyright violations, invasion of personal privacy, photo manipulation and the use of user-generated texts and images whose authenticity is questionable.

Despite challenges mentioned, within this discourse, being accountable is ultimately seen as possible if journalism as a profession, first, succeeds in (re)defining its principles for digital and social media age and, second, implements those principles through a code of practice. As expressed by the focus group participants, the digital era requires new journalistic skills in verification. Echoing this need, as an especially important objects for journalism education and the course in question were portrayed teaching of verification tools and authenticity checks:

> Back home we edit news for radio station[s]. Sometimes you get news from Internet sources. Now this [course] has brought the aspect of [sic] are these Internet sources credible. That's something I will go back home thinking of [sic] practical skills of applying on [sic]. When we get news from Internet sources, [we must ask if]. . . they [are] credible, [if] . . . they [are] real sources and all that. (Namibian student, personal communication)

Within the discourse in question also transparency is represented as a means of increasing accountability in digital journalism. Transparency is defined as professional journalists explaining what they are doing and why to their audience. As put by the students, an accountable journalist shows the evidence to back arguments, makes clear who sources are, remains critical towards sources, corrects false information and factual errors also in online context, and finally apologises for wrong or inaccurate information:

> Just like the [sic] paper, it would apologise for a wrong story or an inaccurate story on the front page. The same should be done online. For me, the same rules for traditional media . . . should also apply to online media. Things we do in print . . . – acknowledging, [giving the] right to reply, present[ing] . . . an apology – we should apply online. (Namibian student, personal communication)

The Discourse of Challenging and Contextualised Journalism Ethics

Within the discourse of Challenging and Contextualised Journalism Ethics ethics is represented as a highly important but a challenging and treathened ideal for journalism.

The problems with ethics were connected especially with African countries that do not support free media and critical journalism, but also to commercial pressures of Western and Nordic media. Because of this, an ethical code of practice was presented as something which cannot be taken for granted but journalism professionals, students and educators worldwide need to fight for:

> Again it [the course] brought up the aspect that wherever you are in the world, we're all fighting for the same thing. We all want to uphold ethical codes, be it in Finland, Tanzania or Namibia. There's no difference. (Tanzanian student, personal communication)

Within the discourse, the ideal of journalism ethics was represented as an inherently contextual and cultural construction. The code of ethics can cannot be separated from cultural, political and societal spheres, and the challenges concerning journalism ethics cannot be met not only through journalism's own means and practices. As perceived within the discourse, no freedom of expression and the political sphere's efforts to influence media and journalism undermine an ethical code of conduct especially in Tanzania and Zambia.

Especially Finnish students voiced the necessity of legal structures, such as freedom of speech, and the role of journalists' unions, to provide essential contextual factors for ethical journalism practice. As put by the Finnish students, while many African countries lack journalists unions, they lack an institution that can defend the journalism profession from outside influence and help to implement ethical journalism practices. Compared with Zambia and Tanzania, the contextual situation in Finland and Namibia was portrayed as better for ethical journalism. Due to freedom of the press and journalistic autonomy, Finnish and Namibian journalists were represented as more independent and having thus more chances to pursue journalism of ethical quality.

The practical problems named in the discourse varied from violence to corruption and the lack of professional institutions to support the ethical code of practice. From Tanzanian journalism culture, the practice of 'brown envelopes' was portrayed as a problem: organisations and other actors pay to have their news published in the media, with the money given to journalists in a brown envelope. The violence Tanzanian journalists face was represented as a severe, shared problem that has been normalised and swept under the carpet in that country. Students from other countries required action from the global community but perceived it as highly problematic to intervene into a problem that may cost journalists their lives in Tanzania:

> I was thinking . . . how can we mayb e help to develop [sic] the situation there [in Tanzania] because they have been independent for 50 years. However, their media is not as independent . . ., and politicians exercise so much power and rule over everything that goes on. So I think, as journalists, at the end of this course,

> we should find a way to maybe encourage the people from Tanzania [to think about] . . . how they can improve their own [media] landscape. (Namibian student, personal communication)

The discourse had also a positive dimension. In addition to challenges, the new skills and understanding gained during the course about the ethics were represented as useful and valuable. The concept of a media ombudsman was new to Zambian students. Students own role was portrayed as central when developing and putting the ethical code of journalism practice in their home countries. As put by Tanzanian and Zambian students, they perceived it as their professional and individual challenge to tell others in their home universities about what they had learned and implement new insights into journalism practice:

> If we have similar codes of ethics to people in Finland and in Namibia, how come Finland is number one in the world and Namibia in Africa? So what are we [in Zambia] doing wrong? I would like to put . . . in practice, when we go back home, the new theories we have discovered here. I didn't even know what a media ombudsman was. Why don't we have such a person in Zambia, someone you could report to? I think this course has been mentally challenging for me, something I will be thinking about as we go back home. (Zambian student, personal communication)

Discussion

Through a case study, this research examined how journalism students from Finland, Zambia, Namibia and Tanzania are (re)defining the ideals of journalism in the era of social media. Three discourses on journalism's ideals as journalists enter this era were found and analysed: Open and Collaborative Journalism Profession, Accountable Digital Journalism and Challenging and Contextualised Journalism Ethics.

The discourses show that the journalism profession and its ideals are being (re)negotiated among journalism students in the spirit that partially resonate with high modern ideals of good journalism, including objectivity and ethics (Tuchman, 1972; Deuze x). At the same time, these discourses show that new dimensions are being brought into the (re)definition of professional ideals. The ideals and practices of professional journalism are considered particularly in terms the challenges and possibilities social media and citizen journalism offer in terms of professional journalism's practice. The on-going debates about participation, citizen journalism, data verification and transparency are central to all the interviewees' comments.

Within the discourses of an Open and Collaborative Journalism Profession and Accountable Digital Journalism, good journalism practice both makes use of and differs from social media, as well as moves towards openness and transparency. Professional

journalism is described, namely, as both a collaborative practice between professionals and citizen journalists and a practice that is accountable to citizens (Lewis, 2012). Noteworthy is, however, that even though journalism is portrayed as shared process with citizens, the metaphors of conversation or dialogue (Eide, 2015), were not present in the students' talk to illustrate deeper meaning of collaboration for communities and democracy. Despite students' willingness to appreciate citizens' contributions, it is therefore difficult to see weather the normative purpose for journalism would be profoundly moving towards participatory ideal (Soffer 2009).

In the light of this study's results, direct relationships are difficult to identify between the course and the insights students' gained. However, for the African students, the course's major intellectual outcome appears to be the idea of journalism being a profession open to citizen journalists and individuals who have not completed a journalism education. Moreover, the discourse of challenging and contextualised journalism ethics indicates a contextualised approach to journalism ideals amongst the students. More importantly, the results show how journalism's ideals and practices are local constructions (Nygren & Stigbrand, 2014) and how students' (re)negotiations differ across cultures.

This case study highlights the need to expand the research sample when studying students' perceptions of journalism from a comparative perspective. The study also calls for approaches that take into account the complexity of journalistic contexts (Wassermann, 2011) and journalism students. The essence of discourses as sociocultural constructions can be seen in the study. Discourses socially available for students from different cultures and journalism education backgrounds were not exactly the same. Despite a shared discourse on an open and collaborative journalism profession, the students interviewed voiced this discourse somewhat differently. African students relied on this discourse only after reflection.

The discourses discussed also indicate that, for Tanzanian and Zambian students, the challenges regarding their media and journalism only partially relate to the era of social media. The political and social spheres, including defects and restrictions on the freedom of the press and expression, form essential contextual premises in which many ideals or concepts that are almost self-evident to Finnish and Namibian students are far from being obvious or simple to implement for other nationalities. Because of this, future research on journalism students' professional identity and negotiation of journalism ideals needs to examine in more depth how these ideals are made sense of as part of social, cultural and political circumstances. (3970 words, max 4000)

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