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Eldridge II, Scott

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21st Century Journalism: Digital

Scott A. Eldridge II
University of Groningen

Abstract

In the 21st century, the ways journalism was produced, accessed, and understood shifted almost entirely from analogue to digital media. With rapidly developing technologies enabling new ways of communicating online, digital journalism emerged as a distinct type of journalism, reflected in changes to the ways news is presented to audiences, how both journalists and audiences engage with new interconnected opportunities, and how scholars conceive of journalism in this era. At the center of these shifts were changes in the relationship between the field of journalism, its practices, and its audiences. This chapter highlights changes that accompanied the emergence of digital journalism, and specific challenges as journalism adapted to online technologies. Key moments include traditional news media confronting the early web, the emergence of blogs and new approaches to journalism which sprung up online, the rise of user-generated content and interactivity, and the social web.

Keywords: blogs, social media, convergence, world wide web, web 2.0, user-generated content

Digital journalism is in part a description of news produced for online spaces and using digital technologies, and in part a description of a wholly new approach to understanding journalism that has developed in a digital age. It refers to news found on websites, across social media, and communicated through digital devices, and also to shifts in relationships between journalism and society that have accompanied a rapid shift from analogue to digital technologies across the past decades. These changes have affected three main foci of journalism studies: journalism's products, the work of journalists, and journalism's relationship with publics, as well as the way journalism scholars makes sense of these (Eldridge and Franklin, 2017).

In unpacking *digital journalism*, attention should be paid to the past twenty-five years in particular, beginning with the mid-1990s when the technologies of the internet spread globally. For all intents and purposes this marks the emergence of the 'world wide web', when the infrastructures of the internet reached a level of sophistication where they could support the communication of news content effectively, and when end users could access the web with relative ease. This came about as the standards and protocols that allowed computers to navigate the internet were agreed to, including Unique Resource Locators (URLs), Hypertext Markup Language (html), and Hypertext Transfer Protocol (http) standards, and when browsers were released which could present text, images, and audio in the same windows, such as Mosaic and Netscape (Brügger, 2010).

Though they did so tentatively at first, the mid-1990s is when we see news media registering websites, publishing news content online, and experimenting with the early web as a new medium for their content (Curran, 2012). Mainstream news media were not alone in seizing the web as a new space for news, and the early web also presented opportunities for others who were interested in creating their own news output. This era has been shaped by the emergence of new independent websites and blogs. These new types of journalist and journalism make understanding journalism in this era more complex, as journalism extended beyond familiar institutions. These two threads of change, traditional media going online and new types of online journalism emerging, continue to define this era still today.

Initially, traditional news media echoed the familiar 'one to many' approaches of industrialized journalism in the 20th century (Broersma and Peters, 2013). This was partly due to uncertainty, as it was not clear whether the online environment would be viable both in terms of attracting audiences and revenue. For print media that relied heavily on advertising sales for revenue, the online environment was commercially untested. Seeming to hedge their bets, newspapers used their print pages to encourage readers to go online, and online visitors to explore the printed paper. Web archives show the *Washington Post* in the late '90s emphasized content "From this Morning's *Washington Post*" on its homepage to encourage web readers to buy the paper. Others sent 'e-editions' of their papers via email, and early newspaper sites like that of the *Daily Telegraph* which went live in 1994 published once daily, replicating print production in a new online space. While some news media tinkered with experimental approaches – the UK's *Guardian* experimented with an ambitious football site, and an alternative 'web zine' – most news media treated the web as a platform to replicate offline content in an online space. Early web technology also favored newspapers and their routines, as text was less burdensome on early internet service providers and less costly for users who still had to pay for access by the minute. Furthermore, the daily routines of papers meant these sites could be updated somewhat regularly, giving reasons for audiences to return.

Broadcasters who were more at ease with images and sound had to adapt, or risk being left behind in the text-dominant early web. As Thorsen, et al. (2010) note, newsrooms still in the process of updating their own content management systems struggled to cope with more complicated websites, and text-based sites led to fewer crashed sites and servers – the BBC discovered this when an early news site featuring animated world clocks, kept crashing. This is also evident in archived websites of broadcasters. The only audio on archives of NPR's site (then, National Public Radio) were the short hourly news bulletins – played on external 'RealPlayer' software – and otherwise textual content supplemented on-air features. NPR.org also had a search feature to find the radio frequencies for local NPR stations. Magazines also had to adapt, as online their value proposition shifted. Magazine content was designed for a different type of news cycle (weekly, or monthly) than the web engendered. Magazines like the *Economist* were highly restrained in putting content online, initially only promoting the print version, and news weeklies like *Time* and *Newsweek* in particular suffered as the web took off, as their formats were out of pace with the speed of online news.

For television news, broadcasters' approaches were also guided by their commercial or public-service priorities. CNN, as a commercial behemoth, launched *CNN Interactive* in 1995 – a popular, online site, with text-based news content across a range of categories and set a tone for TV news going online, particularly as they had greater resources to innovate. This created pressure for public service providers, including the BBC, to go online if they hoped to remain relevant. The BBC's news site launched in 1997, following expansion of their newsroom to bring in new staff who could produce web-specific content. Considered a late-starter, the BBC's approach was still innovative in how it brought expertise together. Described as *convergence*, this harnessing of the expertise of web specialists and traditional journalists by placing them in one newsroom, when successful, enabled the mix of textual, visual, and audio content which makes *digital journalism* unique (Allan, 2006). It also reflected a blurring of previously discrete formats of print and broadcast media. Though *convergence* has been *normalized* into journalistic routines through *multi-skilling* (where journalists work across media technologies and formats) the transition of newsrooms to produce *digital journalism* was neither linear, nor universally well received. Converged newsrooms at times 'de-converged' when the efforts to put everything under one roof weakened the traditional media brand, and to this day there remain identity and occupational divides between newswriters from web backgrounds, and those from journalistic backgrounds.

At the beginning of the century, those investing in converged newsrooms and online content were speculating as to which type of news – online or offline – would prove sustainable. Questions of commercial success were linked to advertising revenue for one, and this is far cheaper online. As web cookies and social media led to tracking of online users' interest, advertising online also became highly targeted. For print media, advertisers flocked to the web as this was a safer bet for reaching their target consumers. However online commerce was not the only pressure, and particularly in countries with strong public service traditions, broadcasters had mandates that insisted their news be publicly accessible which carried over online. This set limits on the revenue potential of this new space, and newspapers felt they could not charge for content for fear of losing their audiences to these free sites. This is regularly cited as a reason British newspapers made their content free online, as the BBC ran a freely accessible news site. Another complicating factor for newspaper revenue were the new services emerging from the 'dot com' boom of the early

2000s, particularly in the United States when sites that hosted classified-type ads and job listings pulled that revenue stream away from papers (Boczkowski, 2004). By some estimates, this cost the newspaper industry several billion dollars (figures vary between studies, however that there were losses is less disputed).

After the turn of the century, the dominance of text-based news online was beginning to wane as the infrastructures of the web became robust enough to host audio and video. By this point, many traditional news media had moved beyond daily news cycles, updating their sites and stories throughout the day, and began mixing formats. Archives of *The New York Times* show in the late 1990s it had started timestamping its updates to the minute, and the BBC then promoted its site as “updated every minute of every day”. More and more media also offered exclusive or online-specific content, such as the *Guardian’s* ‘G2’ site. As news media came to terms with these new opportunities and users became more familiar with going online, sites also increased their interactivity through web forums and chatrooms, and online ‘Q&A’ sessions. This underscored a transition from ‘the web’ towards the more interactive and user-friendly *Web 2.0*.

Despite new opportunities, perspectives on the future of *digital journalism* split between *cyber pessimists* who doubted the web’s potential, and *cyber optimists* who herald the web as part of a democratizing revolution. This reinforced a schism between traditional media, who saw value in their institutions and the work produced by mainstay media, and new digital journalists who saw the web as a frontier for challenging the mainstream, and for new voices. Optimists saw the immediacy of the web and the ability to publish cheaply as an entrée for new types of journalism to emerge, extending *digital journalism* to include a new range of journalists working almost exclusively online. This included networks of activist independent journalists, like *Indymedia*, or niche-specialist sits, like *Slashdot*, who could now reach wider audiences. At the same time, organizations including *Huffingtonpost.com*, *Salon.com*, and *Gawker Media*, capitalized on digital approaches to build large media organizations, mixing traditional newswork alongside blogs, with vast interests attended to.

It was during these years when blogs in particular became a new force in journalism (Wall, 2015). Representing a radical change in conveying news, blogs presented pages of chronological posts, sometimes with extended reporting but more often highlighting information and facts or quotes from elsewhere on the web. News bloggers then added context and commentary to these sampled materials, presenting new insights, or pushing back against what was seen as a ‘mainstream media narrative’. These posts were then evaluated by a community of fellow bloggers who all read the content, and were united by shared interests as varied as culture, politics, or sports. This practice was described as shifting journalism from a ‘filter then publish’ model of traditional news to a ‘publish then filter’ approach. Where traditional media built their authority around journalistic practices which preceded publication, blogs built theirs on the community which linked to, commented on, and amplified individual posts. This practice of linking between blogs came to be measured in terms of *authority*, which weighed the in-linking and out-linking of any particular blog or post.

With blogs, the boundaries which had surrounded journalism as a professional field were confronted by new communicators who could also break news, and perform journalistic work, doing so outside the traditional mechanisms of journalism. “If anyone can be a publisher, then anyone can be a journalist”, Clay Shirky (2008) commented. For understanding *digital journalism* as a distinct era emerging in journalism’s history in the

early 21st century, both the enthusiasm and the critique of the ‘mainstream’ are at the core of this aspect of change. As a countervailing force to the mainstream media and corporate influence, blogs and online journalism collectives proposed a new model of journalism that sought to reorient the power of those in the mainstream.

Independent blogs and news sites also proved less hesitant unveiling news than their mainstream counterparts. One early example of this came in January 1998, when Matt Drudge’s *Drudge Report* outflanked *Newsweek* in reporting on Bill Clinton’s affair with a White House intern, a story *Newsweek* had reported but was sitting on. In doing so Drudge showed what an independent website – one with a decidedly conservative political agenda – could achieve, unencumbered by the routines of traditional print. Drudge was not alone among new upstart digital journalists. In 2002, Duncan Black at the *Eschaton* blog published remarks by U.S. senator Trent Lott in support of a colleague’s past campaign as a segregationist, leading to Lott’s resignation as Senate majority leader. In the UK, *Guido Fawkes* regularly uncovers political news, with similar results, as did *Gawker*, in politics as well as media and tech industry news which might not have made mainstream agendas (Eldridge, 2018). *Talking Points Memo*, *Daily Kos*, and *Little Green Footballs* were leaders among political bloggers, and the Patch network, *fishbowlDC*, and *The Gothamist* were adept at covering cities, including localities under-covered by mainstream news. These shepherded a new class of ‘j-bloggers’ into journalism (Singer, 2005).

As the web becomes a more dynamic space for journalism in the mid-2000s, the role of the public also changed and those situated outside the journalistic field became more engaged in newsmaking. Axel Bruns (2008) termed this *Producersage* to describe blogs, but also users contributing to news sites and the public moving from being primarily recipients of news media towards being news contributors. This includes contributing camera phone images of unfolding news events, which notably occurred with the London underground bombing in 2005, and later with the pursuit of the Boston Marathon bombers in 2013. The public also saw a new voice in commenting on existing stories, and through forums, comments, and other interactive spaces digital their participation shaped a new ‘vox populi’ for the digital era.

While this shift was critical for the way journalism approached audiences online, *user-generated content* such as images and commenting on websites paled in comparison to the influence of the public as social media became a force. Since 2006, when Facebook became publicly accessible, social media including Twitter, YouTube, and others have played larger roles in journalism. News media started using these platforms to promote their content, and for journalism social media introduced the ‘social sharing’ of news as a new dynamic. This affected all three of the traditional foci of journalism studies – journalists producing content, the content itself, and the audiences of journalism – as social sharing invigorated immediacy, and in instances led to more rapid-fire journalistic routines. It also led to missteps, as hoaxes and unverified news spread more rapidly with social media, and as those stories which went *viral* and spread quickly on social media were not necessarily the most newsworthy.

Social media made prominent the notions of digital communities for news media, particularly as audience members shared what was important to them, and not necessarily what news media consider paramount. This made functions of gatekeeping and agenda setting a more diffuse practice among audiences, and for some it moved the value of news from ‘public interest’ towards what was ‘interesting to the public’ (Vos and Heinderyckx, 2015). At its worst, this led to news being tailored to garner social media attention,

derisively termed *clickbait* for the way these used language optimized to pique interest, and prompt sharing. Social media also led to increased control among individuals over their own news diets, as they could now tailor individualized *media repertoires* which suited their particular interests by following specific sites and media, and leaving out the rest. This has led to *filter bubbles* and *echo chambers* among users who no longer see a wide variety of news, and has also forced news media to consider their audiences differently.

This suggests a reorientation of power away from traditional actors and towards peripheral voice online and in some cases this has occurred. But digital changes have not been universally well received or evenly distributed and there has been what Seth Lewis (2012) refers to as a “tension between professional control and open participation”. Accusations of ‘amateurism’ with bloggers, of devaluing journalistic craft with *user-generated content*, and of promoting *clickbait* over serious public interest have all been presented as negative developments within this era. There have also been accusations of a weakening of the vaunted role of journalism as the *Fourth Estate* as new actors and new media grow in status online, without the familiar gravitas of the traditional field (Eldridge, 2018).

In response, traditional news media reasserted their primacy by incorporating digital approaches more fully in their content. Adopting the blogging format, news media *normalized* bloggers’ alternative voices by hosting blogs on traditional media sites (Singer, 2005). Twitter, originally a way to communicate outside the confines of traditional news media, was *normalized* by traditional news for both sharing stories and engaging with audiences. While social sharing led to certain types of *viral* stories gaining popularity, news media responded by publishing their own content on Facebook, and other platforms. These approaches have not all been successful – while Twitter remains popular among news media, Facebook as a space for news seems constantly in revision. They have, however, shown how traditional journalism, in a more dynamic digital era, continues to play a role alongside innovative newcomers. Beyond reflecting the increasingly dynamic media spaces online as technologies have developed, the developments of *digital journalism* show that while technologies help define this era, they are, in many ways, a substrate to the changes the field of journalism experienced as it moved online.

See Also: Journalism; Journalism Studies; Boundary Work; Citizen or Participatory Journalism; Social Media as Distribution Tool; Digital Journalism; Multitasking or Multiskilling; Newsrooms; Viral Content

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