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TEACHING INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Journalism Students as Change Agents?

Marcel Broersma and Jane B. Singer

Digitalization has been a strong driver of change in the journalism industry over the past 25 years.¹ News organizations producing newspapers, broadcasts, magazines or digital products have faced a steep learning curve, trying to anticipate technological challenges and opportunities, as well as to adapt to the changes in news use resulting from the digital turn. To remain viable and relevant for audiences, they continuously need to develop their capabilities to innovate their products and practices (Fortunati and O’Sullivan, 2019; Küng, 2015; Porcu, Hermans and Broersma, 2020; Westlund and Lewis, 2014). The ability to be flexible and lead the way is even more key for news startups that provide alternatives to legacy news products (Briggs, 2012; Bruno and Nielsen, 2012; Marsden, 2017).

As innovation and entrepreneurship have become central to the news industry, journalism education has had to follow suit. In response to industry needs, growing numbers of journalism schools have started to offer classes that focus on innovation and entrepreneurship (Besbris and Petre, 2020), sometimes portrayed as “what will save journalism” (Kreiss and Brennan, 2016). Initially focused on anticipating emerging technologies (Ferrucci, 2018), gears are now shifting towards more ambitious goals. As proficiency with digital tools and platforms has become a prerequisite for new hires (Usher, 2016), employers are seeking young journalists who bring new and fresh ideas to the newsroom. They are expected to promote changes in topics, storytelling, and approaches that attract new audiences and thus increase the economic sustainability of news organizations. Increasingly, young journalists are asked to be “change agents” (Ottaway, 1983) who shift the boundaries of journalism (Broersma and Singer, 2021).

This chapter focuses on how journalism students deal with these expectations. How do they perceive journalistic innovation and entrepreneurial journalism? The first concept denotes a broad range of disruptive but typically incremental changes within news organizations. The latter points towards even more disruptive innovations that are the basis of new businesses that offer alternatives to existing media companies. Our study builds on longitudinal survey data collected in three consecutive years from students in two leading journalism programs, in Britain and the Netherlands (Broersma and Singer, 2021; Singer and Broersma, 2020). These findings are supplemented with interviews with master’s students in the Netherlands to gain insights into their motivations and how they evaluate the necessity of journalistic innovation and entrepreneurialism. Do journalism students feel that

journalism education meets the requirements of the industry they are about to enter? And do they perceive themselves as change agents who will be challenging and potentially shifting the boundaries of journalism?

Journalism Education and a Field in Change

Although journalism education worldwide has developed differently in terms of pace, content, pedagogies, and ideological principles, it is generally considered to lay the “foundations for the skills, attitudes, and knowledge of future journalists” (Josephi, 2020: 55). Long merely a form of vocational training in the tricks of the trade, education now offers – in parallel with the development of journalism studies as an academic discipline – more attention for critical reflection on journalism along with simply “doing it”. University curricula not only have become attuned to transformations in the field but also have been redesigned to further invite students to consider changes in journalism practice in light of the role and function of journalism in democratic societies (Adam, 2010). Two-thirds of younger journalists worldwide are now university graduates (Josephi, 2020), and journalism education is an important way of socializing people into the journalistic field.

Following French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 2005), journalism can be seen as a distinctive domain in society with its own dominant modes of behavior (*habitus*) and underlying norms and principles (*doxa*). The journalistic field strives to obtain autonomy from other fields such as politics, business, or public relations. Agents in the field, whether they are news organizations or individual journalists, try to gain economic, cultural, and symbolic capital to distinguish themselves from others, obtain more power, and improve their competitive position. A field is therefore never static; power lies in the ability to be transformative (Bourdieu, 2005; cf. Broersma, 2010). New entrants to a field, such as journalism graduates, can secure their position by challenging the status quo, introducing new ideas and practices, or covering new topics. Yet in every field, newcomers struggle with established agents who try to maintain their position (Bourdieu, 1993). Recent graduates thus must walk a tightrope. They need to stand out from other applicants to gain a job offer, but they also must not deviate too much from the dominant *doxa* and *habitus* in the field that have been internalized by those doing the hiring.

Journalism education must navigate the same tightrope. On the one hand, classes are structured to socialize students into an established field, often in consultation with the news industry or industry-based accreditation bodies; on the other, university programs seek to provide them with knowledge, skills, and a mindset that enables them to rise above other contenders in a precarious job market. The economic crisis of journalism, mostly in the West, also has spurred thinking about change in curricula. As Josephi (2020: 59) states in her survey of journalism education around the globe: “The deep uncertainty about the media’s future, and how the needs of the industry are changing, has also become a primary concern for journalism teachers”.

This situation has fostered curricular change that accords more attention to innovation and entrepreneurial journalism (Baines and Kennedy, 2010; Mensing and Ryfe, 2013). Teaching business concepts, for instance involving audience research and marketing, and making students aware of opportunities for innovation are framed as empowering them “with the knowledge and skill sets to create their own jobs” (Ferrier, 2013: 229). Baines and Kennedy (2010: 97) concluded that young journalists should be “entrepreneurial self-employed agents, who might compete with, as well as service, other media organizations”. Mensing and Ryfe (2013: 32) similarly argued that “entrepreneurs who develop new business models

and innovative projects – either working on their own, with startups, or within traditional media companies” would be essential for the sustainability of journalism and the news industry. Journalism schools, particularly in the US but also in other Western countries, now actively promote entrepreneurship as a means to embrace the occupational contingency that characterizes professional journalism today.

Discourse around innovation is rather positive among journalists and scholars (Vos and Singer, 2016). It has been applauded as “key to the viability of news media in the digital age” (Pavlik, 2013: 181) because it strengthens the creative and economic potential of journalism within existing institutions and structures. Technical experimentation has been positioned as central to occupational innovation (Kreiss and Brennen, 2016) and as a change-maker for journalism and the news industry (Prenger and Deuze, 2017). Entrepreneurialism, on the other hand, has received a far less favorable press. Critics have argued that adding “business think” to curricula erodes the “wall” separating editorial and commercial considerations (Coddington, 2015; de Cock and de Smaele, 2016). Others focus on the negative implications for working conditions and the labor market. The combination of journalistic work with commercial tasks is seen as jeopardizing the quality of reporting and the public interest imperatives of journalism (Compton and Benedetti, 2010; Hunter, 2016). Besbris and Petre (2020) argue, based on interviews with educators, that a focus on entrepreneurialism as a solution to an insecure labor market mainly functions to normalize job precarity and safeguard universities’ position as training institutions (cf. Cohen, 2015).

Studying Students’ Perceptions of Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Research into students’ attitudes about instruction in entrepreneurship and innovation shows that these are not always high on their agenda. Goyanes (2015) found that the entrepreneurial intention of Spanish journalism students was very low, although later work shows the economic situation in journalism might be making the idea more attractive. Students who had “considerable intentions to start their own journalistic businesses” were motivated by the opportunity of doing work they considered meaningful, and by experiencing autonomy and flexibility in their work (López-Meri et al., 2021). Other research has suggested that student attitudes are predictive: Those who are open to new experiences and ideas, and have an extravert personality, are more likely to start their own business. On the other hand, emotional instability and low resilience reduce entrepreneurial intention (Buschow and Laugemann, 2020). A study by Albornoz and Amorós (2016) found that only courses that are attended voluntarily have a positive impact. This raises questions about how students see the necessity of journalistic innovation and entrepreneurialism, and how they consider their future role. Do they perceive themselves as change agents who will challenge the status-quo in the journalistic field, or do they adhere to established norms and practices?

To investigate, we surveyed students in the UK and the Netherlands in three consecutive academic years (2015–2016, 2016–2017, and 2017–2018). In addition, we interviewed MA students in the Netherlands in 2020. We studied all students enrolled in the journalism programs at the University of Groningen and City, University of London – both leaders in their respective countries that incorporate innovation and entrepreneurship in their curricula. The cultural settings and professional conditions for journalism are similar in the Netherlands and the UK; both countries score high on entrepreneurship (Global Entrepreneurship, 2019) and have a large percentage of self-employed media workers (Kivits, 2015; Ponsford, 2017), and journalists in both have noted growing pressures on their work (Hermans, 2016; Thurman, 2016). However, there are also notable differences between journalism education

in the two countries. Journalism is taught at both the BA and MA levels in the UK, but at only the MA level in the Netherlands. This disparity is reflected in enrollment numbers, which at the time of our study were between 32 and 45 MA students in Groningen, and between 506 and 601 BA and MA students at City. Our sample sizes thus varied considerably.

Response rates also varied: Between 19% and 48% at Groningen, and between 11% and 15% at City. Online surveys typically obtain a low rate of completion relative to paper ones in an educational environment (Nulty, 2008). All respondents had a nearly identical average age, between 22 and 24. The UK students were more likely than their Dutch counterparts to have had prior journalism work experience, especially in full-time roles. Only 13.4% of the respondents held a previous degree in journalism; a large majority of the MA students at both institutions had undergraduate degrees in other fields. While most respondents were European – 89.5% of the students enrolled in the Dutch program, and 78.3% of those in the British one – every continent was represented in our sample. Although not all were studying in their home country, students are identified below as “British” or “Dutch” for convenience.

In addition to our survey, we interviewed 28 Dutch and 27 international students from a broad range of countries who were enrolled in the MA program at Groningen in 2020–2021. They were asked to reflect about their own future career; the role, functions, and skills that they see as essential for journalists nowadays; what they consider good journalism; and how they expect journalism to develop in the near future. These findings are used to illustrate and further interrogate the survey results. We thus analyze how students position themselves discursively within the journalistic field against the backdrop of its dominant doxa and habitus.

Students as Change Agents?

As Bourdieu suggests, entrants to a new field such as journalism students can adapt to the hegemonic doxa and habitus and try to compete with journalists in established positions on these grounds. Alternatively, they can position themselves as internal or external competitors, aiming to disrupt the journalistic field. Such change agents can start new businesses to add new products. Or they can work inside existing news organizations, aiming to innovate products and practices. Falck and Barnes (1975) distinguish among three types of behavior that such change agents can adopt. They can display *normative behavior*, adapting to the dominant norms in the field and bringing in new ideas that support its normative structure; this option will not lead to fundamental change. Young journalists could also use *deviant behavior*. They would then oppose the dominant norms in the field or in a particular news organization and try to disrupt them, offering alternative structures. This probably would be met with resistance from established voices, who would then try to marginalize the change agent. Finally, when newcomers adopt *non-normative behavior*, they neither oppose nor adhere to the status quo. They instead argue for adding new skills, practices, and ideas. Such a strategy increases the likelihood of new ideas being integrated into the existing structures of a field.

The three cohorts of students we surveyed displayed an almost unanimous belief in change and innovation. They agreed that journalism not only is in flux and is very different than it was a decade ago, but also that it *needs* to be changing to remain relevant in the future (Broersma and Singer, 2021). However, they perceive change mostly in technological terms. Students firmly, and almost unanimously, believe they need the latest technological skills. When asked to come up with terms to describe journalism innovation and entrepreneurial journalism, they also think in terms of digital technologies: “social media”, “online”,

“technology”, and “digital” top the lists of most-used keywords. At the same time, students feel that traditional reporting, writing, and editing skills are still crucial, as is adherence to established ethical values (Broersma and Singer, 2021). In other words, their thinking about journalism’s role and function in society and the principles that should guide journalism practice align very well with the established doxa of the field.

I think the fundamentals of journalism do remain the same, but I think everything around it is changing. That’s because our whole society is changing, not just journalism. The whole society is connected in a different way, and I think journalism just has to deal with that. How, I don’t know.

(S10, female)

A common sentiment among our respondents, captured by another interviewee, is that journalism does not “really need to change”. It simply needs “to keep up with new technological developments” (S11, female).

When asked if they perceived themselves as the persons who would actively bring change to the field, they were more reluctant. While a small majority of British students (between 59% and 65%) anticipated being a journalistic innovator during their career, their Dutch counterparts felt less convinced, with the percentage steadily decreasing over time, from 58.3% in 2015 to 30% in 2016 to only 16.7% in 2017. One reason seems to be that they question their own ability to bring change:

I don’t spend all day coming up with one-million-dollar ideas and stuff like that – thinking how I can improve things. I also don’t think I’m that sure of myself.

(S5, female)

I believe innovations is not really my cup of tea. I think you need to have a strong vision to do so, and I don’t think I have that.

(S10, female)

Students also feel that it would be very hard to bring change to the field because of its established structure and its challenges to new young entrants:

It would be nice, but I do think it would be very difficult. Especially if you’re working somewhere [*in an established news organization*], I don’t actually think that’s possible. Then it’s actually impossible to make changes. Then you are cast in a certain structure of a newspaper. I think if you start your own business from scratch, then you can make certain changes, but I don’t think that would be done easily.

(S7, male)

As the previous statement suggests, students anticipate working in start-ups or starting a new business themselves even less than they envision bringing innovation to established newsrooms. Most students indicated that they preferred to work for legacy news organizations such as newspapers or broadcasters, or expressed neutrality on the issue. Only 15% of the Dutch students in 2016 and 33% in 2017 preferred working at a digital-only outlet, as did 26.7% and 22.4% of the British students in the same years.

Students associated working in a legacy newsroom with high prestige and job security, which interviewees said they preferred over freelance journalism or starting their own

business. Summarizing the general sentiment, one student, originally from the UK, argued that being “an employee would be ideal”:

I did like the idea of being freelance and being able to dabble in a lot of different things and having articles on different platforms. But if it was someone like *The Guardian* or a newspaper I had a lot of respect for, I wouldn't really feel the need to kind of want my work published elsewhere anyway. So the security would probably outweigh the freedom of being freelance.

(S54, female)

Another student said the uncertainty of doing freelance work and having your own business creates stress, adding: “So I want to be in the company, and I want them to, you know, tell me what to do” (S27, female).

While student survey respondents were quite open to the importance of business principles in journalism, agreeing that they should be knowledgeable about these and also could be involved in matters related to generating revenues, they did not consider themselves future entrepreneurs. As one student phrased it:

I don't have an entrepreneurial attitude. I'm really terrible at all that. But I know people that do, and those people go far. That's just how it is. So, if you've got it, if you just know how to and you've got all these ideas to run a business and make a little business. I mean, yeah, then you can really do something with it. (...) But I do think that at the end of the day, journalism is about writing. So, it's not about making money.

(S25, male)

Around 40% of the Dutch and British students in the first two waves of the survey expected at some point in their career to start their own business, but that number dropped in 2017 to 31% of the British and 16.7% of the Dutch students (Broersma and Singer, 2021). Based on both the survey and the interviews, even these figures are slightly skewed because when students think in terms of their own business, they mostly seem to think of working as a freelance journalist instead of building a company.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship as Mission for Journalism Education?

Over the past two decades, the job market for journalists has fundamentally changed due to the introduction of new technologies in the newsroom, novel means of distribution, and the necessity of reaching new audiences. Journalism programs have responded to these changes in the field by introducing digital skills in their curricula. However, proficiency with digital tools and platforms no longer enables young journalists to stand out. Many of them might be working as freelance journalists, which forces them to think commercially: developing specific expertise, creating a personal brand, and pitching new ideas, products, and stories to distinguish themselves in a journalistic field crowded with other self-employed journalists (Brems et al., 2017; Gollmitzer, 2014; Holton, 2016).

Journalism graduates hired by news organizations also may find themselves expected to be more innovative than they realize. Many are expected not simply to contribute to the daily news production process but also to bring new ideas to the table. In other words, new entrants to the journalistic field are increasingly expected to be “change agents” (Ottaway, 1983). A mindset not only open to change but attuned to the opportunities it presents

for maintaining existing audiences and attracting new ones, and thus enhancing the economic position of their news organizations, would be beneficial to both them and their new employers.

As highlighted above, journalism researchers also have foregrounded the benefits innovation-minded students can bring to an industry in need of fresh ideas (Paulussen, 2016). More than a decade ago, Mensing and Ryfe (2013: 27) already argued that teaching students business skills would empower them to “compete with the core news industry” by innovating “practices that will ultimately replace the news industry we have now”. Growing numbers of journalism schools have responded by integrating classes on innovation and entrepreneurship in their curriculum, as well as intensifying their focus on introducing students to new digital technologies. This might be in part a strategy to embrace job precarity and remain relevant as training institutes that prepare students for an insecure future in which they need to take responsibility for their own career, as Besbris and Petre (2020) argued. However, attention to innovation in curricula also seems to reflect the belief that journalism is in flux, technological developments drive occupational innovation, and innovation is necessary to remain economically sustainable and societally relevant (Evans, 2018; Kreiss and Brennen, 2016).

The million-dollar question is how successful journalism education is in training students in developing an innovative mindset and entrepreneurial skills. Although some studies find that students indeed have entrepreneurial intentions (Buschow and Laugemann, 2020; López-Meri et al., 2020), most research indicates that they are not the “change agents” journalism schools and the news industry want to create (Albornoz and Amorós, 2016; Broersma and Singer, 2021; Goyanes, 2015; Singer and Broersma, 2020). The respondents in our longitudinal survey and interviews did not discursively engage with *deviant behavior* (Falck and Barnes, 1975) in which they set out to challenge existing norms and disrupt the field. They also did not exhibit sympathies for the productive “third way” of *non-normative behavior*, in which they would offer alternatives without either opposing or adhering to the status quo. Instead, most respondents expressed intentions for *normative behavior*, adapting to the dominant doxa and only offering “new” ideas that support it. They did not generally perceive themselves as actually becoming disruptive innovators, and they felt even less inclined toward journalistic entrepreneurship.

We did not find major differences between the internationally diverse cohorts of journalism students in the UK and the Netherlands, suggesting a strong consensus about the dominant doxa in the field. When students are challenged to reflect on journalistic innovation and entrepreneurship, most of them merely think in terms of technological developments. They feel journalism needs to absorb these within its existing normative framework – but without fundamentally changing it. In their socialization into the field, students have internalized established professional discourses about how to do “good” journalism (the habitus) and the normative foundations of profession behavior (the doxa). They express loyalty to established ethical principles, the watchdog role of journalism, and contributing to positive social change (Broersma and Singer, 2021). This raises the question of whether journalism programs focus too much on technology in relation to innovation and entrepreneurship, and too little on the question of whether the normative core of journalism itself should change to remain relevant for society. Challenging students to think beyond the confines of incremental innovation would imply an emphasis on creativity and critical thinking. Provoking such out-of-the-box thinking would push them to contemplate a future for journalism beyond existing journalism practice or the established news industry.

Note

- 1 This chapter builds on, and borrows from, Singer and Broersma (2020) and Broersma and Singer (2021).

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