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From Fortress to Network:
Changing Structures of
News Media Production

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From Fortress To Network: Changing Structures Of News Media Production

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Abstract

A new form of networked journalism based on new media is changing the core of news production and consumption, challenging the business models of the past and the efforts of traditional journalism organizations to control the news. News values are changing even in the BBC and other mainstream news outlets. Although the meaning of news itself is changing, the author argues that even more significant is that we are gaining a whole new means of producing and consuming news. This has implications for empowering citizens, though the outcomes are by no means certain. Policy choices will shape the consequences of current shifts in news but the changes are global and there is increasing evidence of the major potential for change as news production becomes much more like a service – a service co-produced by citizens and journalists.

1   Introduction [1]

The creation of journalism anywhere in the world is, in some sense, now conditioned by digital technologies and the Internet. All media production is effected by factors such as citizen journalism, online search, blogging and hyper-textuality. Even the most traditional, isolated or basic form of news media production is operating in a public sphere that has been influenced by the Internet and digital technologies. Like global warming, contemporary media change is a force catalysed by technology. It has been driven firstly by the old 'advanced' economies and is now being accelerated by emerging media markets. While its impacts are highly varied they are universally present to some degree. Certainly, many people in the world do not have direct access to media markets, let alone the possession of new media technologies. However, all parts of the world are subject to the consequences of their influence. In that sense, the whole world shares a new media environment and its ecology is now intrinsically digital.

Of course, the news media differentiates itself geographically. In both rural and urban India, for example, newspaper sales and 24-hour TV news channels are expanding. Conversely, in America whole towns are suddenly without newspapers and there are major American TV or newspaper companies that no longer have bureaux outside the United States. What kind of journalism is emerging from this process of flux? Is it possible to generalise on a global scale about the trends in journalism? Is this primarily a change in the business model for journalism or a more profound shift in the very nature of how we define, understand and use the news?

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[1] This paper is based on fieldwork carried out the author in Kenya in December 2008 as part of a research project examining the role of local media and governance. It also draws upon the activities of Polis, the forum for research and debate into journalism in the Media and Communications Department, LSE and on a series of private seminars with UK media practitioners.

In this paper, I argue that a reconfiguring of journalism is taking place based on a greater 'networkedness' of production, distribution and consumption. I also suggest that this process which is leading to new forms of networked journalism will continue to reshape, and possibly even destroy, the institutions that were, in effect, the custodians of journalistic value. The news media organizations that so dominated national and global journalistic production have been mainly responsible for defining what kind of news was produced. If they lose some measure of control over the process or if news production takes place outside their organizational structures, then this could redefine what we mean by news itself.

2   Networked Journalism

Journalism is now permeable, interactive, 24/7, multi-platform, disaggregated and converged. Take these recent examples:

- The Twitter alerts by tourists who witnessed the Sechuan earthquake that scooped the world's mainstream media and unsettled the Chinese government. [2]

- The mobile phone images of Saddam Hussein's execution that punctured the Bush administration's hope to present the world with the story of a clean judicial death. [3]

- *The Guardian* newspaper - a small circulation liberal British newspaper that now has approximately 17 million online readers based outside of the UK.

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[2] See   http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/technology/2008/05/twitter_and_the_china_earthqua.html accessed 10.6.09

[3] See http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=863ce7d4a3 accessed 10.6.09.

These are all examples of how new media technologies are involved in the transformation of journalism. They are all instances of novel journalistic procedures that are significantly different to previous practice. They are examples of how new media technologies are facilitating greater public participation in all stages of news media production. They are increasing user generated content and promoting interactivity. The news space is being shared and the old business model is being remade. The economic and social function and use of journalism is in question.

Mainstream changes

Mainstream Editorial managers, such as Peter Horrocks, Director of BBC World Service, are recognising that their strategic approach to the production of news must change:

> "Culturally it means moving from a culture which is identified by the news unit you are in towards a culture based on *audience understanding*. So don't think of the world as being identified by the programme you work on or the network you provide for. Don't think of the world solely through your paper or magazine" [emphasis added] [4]

By 'audience understanding' Horrocks is betraying his institutional bias as a career manager at the BBC. He is also displaying unusual awareness of the shifting relationship between that institution and the public. As a senior BBC news manager he is used to considering the 'public' dimension of his work as a public service broadcaster. He is held to account on behalf of the public through a complicated system of charter, legislation, and corporate as well as executive oversight. As a journalist working within that structure his task has been to produce editorial content according to the BBC's institutional values and strategies. Until recently, the audience was almost entirely separate from

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[4] Horrocks, P., Director, BBC World Service, unpublished paper, December 2008.

journalistic production. Today, user generated content, interactivity and crowd-sourcing have changed that culture of self-enclosed production by bringing the audience into every part of the BBC journalistic process. So now, as Horrocks suggests, BBC journalists will have to 'understand' their audience just as well as they previously had to understood their role within the institution. They will have to understand how to engage with citizens, how to receive and deploy material from them, and how to respond to their editorial influence.

This is not just about change at the BBC. Every aspect of UK mainstream news media has become more networked. Britain's oldest topical magazine *The Spectator* has a blog platform. The most culturally conservative daily newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, has a '360 degree' newsroom where all staff work online, prioritising news stories for the website and the newspaper. *The Daily Mail* is now one of the most used show-business news sites in America, while *The Sun* newspaper now claims to be the UK's biggest provider of budget holidays. They are all creating more interactive, diverse and multi-functional relationships with their readers.

This procedural development means the news media industry is changing from being primarily a manufacturing industry to being a service industry. Of course, it retains a large amount of material production processes. There are still printing presses and TV studios. Indeed, there is a massive cost associated with legacy production methods. The traditional model for the exchange of news was that the consumer paid directly or indirectly through advertising (or taxation) for a package of news. This was delivered as a broadcast bulletin or as a bundle of newsprint. Online and digital news changes that relationship. It slashes the transaction costs associated with both producing and consuming the news and the degree of dependence on physical production. It also gives the consumers much greater choice and control over news delivery. They have far more opportunities for interactivity, even in the case of broadcast news. When news is online it becomes as much a series of flows as it is a package. Instead of a one-off transaction there is the potential, at least, for a series of multi-directional, variegated interactions

between the producers of news and with the consumers. The red button, phone line and web site all afford channels for interaction.

This is why I argue that it is as useful to see the creation of news as a service as it is to think of it as a manufacturing process. Modern mass media news has always been highly packaged and reformatted to facilitate and promote consumption. The aim was to grab attention and maximize impact. However, now the news producer commands attention through their interactions with the consumer. Consumption is promoted by the increasing attention that is being given to connectivity. Online news platforms, especially, attract audiences through search, bookmarking and referral from mainstream media platforms. These are all processes rather than separate transactions. Understanding how the audience behaves while using those processes is the first step towards delivering the service which is the news. This is what Peter Horrocks means by 'understanding audiences'.

The function of journalism is changing from creating a product to facilitating a process. This inevitably means transforming the way journalism is produced but it also impacts on editorial values, even where there is a strict editorial code and culture such as the BBC. Quoting Peter Horrocks again:

> "Our traditional model was a rather safe middle of the road, balancing neutrality. I have argued previously that this model is now outdated and that we need to embrace an idea of "radical impartiality", that is of a much broader range of views than before... This has led to a loosening of the range of expression we include."[5]

Of course, what is 'radical' for the BBC may not seem particularly mould-breaking elsewhere. Indeed, Horrocks' idea of 'radical impartiality' is not close to becoming part of BBC Producer Guidelines. It is even possible that the BBC may retreat further into its classic editorial rules as a way of contrasting

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[5] Ibid.

its objective, balanced ethos with what it sees as the partiality and personalization of much 'amateur' online production:

> "Although a Web site may look professional, it may in fact be authored by an amateur enthusiast. Amateurs may be a great source of information and expertise, but may also lack the objectivity, accuracy, copyright ownership and legal awareness of many professional sources." [6]

In practice, the BBC has already 'loosened' the 'range of expression' on its platforms, especially its online ones. All of its output is filtered or moderated but it allows a greater range of voices and views to be expressed directly from the public. This has created problems. For example, after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in 2007 the BBC allowed comments from viewers on its website that were anti-Muslim. Some were even tagged 'recommended' by other viewers. The anti-Muslim comments were so numerous that the BBC considered shutting down the forum in case it gave the false impression that the BBC was supporting that viewpoint, as Peter Horrocks observed:

> "This brief recent Bhutto example throws up some pretty fundamental questions for those who argue for organisations like the BBC – the so-called "mainstream media" - to be much more responsive to audience interest and comment. Should we have given over a significant part of our website or our analysis programmes on Radio 4 to consideration of whether Islam is a religion that is inherently skewed towards violence? Or were we right to concentrate our journalism on reporting and analysing the life on Benazir, how she came to die and the political consequences? I hope that most people would agree with the choices that we made." [7]

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[6] BBC Editorial Guidelines at:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/internetresearch/amateursites.shtml Accessed 18.6.09

[7] BBC Editors' Blog January 7, 2008
http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2008/01/value_of_citizen_journalism.html, accessed 17.6.09

In the BBC's own terms, it is coping with the change in the nature of news production in a gradualist manner. Other commercial news organizations do not have those same constitutional constraints. Commercial international broadcasters such as Sky News and CNN have adopted bolder initiatives such as CNN's *iReport* and Sky News' Twitter Correspondent. These push the viewer's own input much more directly towards the mainstream output of the channel and online. The traditional news institutions are paying far more attention to the public as an active part of news production. The coverage of the post-election demonstrations in Iran in 2009, for example, showed how citizen journalism is becoming an integral part of mainstream coverage. The coverage of this event also showed how the public can use new media to send communications that impact on editorial decisions. Lobby groups used the micro-blogging site Twitter to put pressure on news organizations to step up their coverage of the Iran protests and the election dispute. The "#CNNfail" campaign urged users of Twitter to tag their messages with protests against CNN's failure to headline the story in America. In practice, of course, it is virtually impossible to assess what influence this had on the mainstream media news organizations. Although they all pay attention to and foreground citizen journalism, like the BBC, they are retaining strict control over their own editorial policy,

Development and media change

The idea of journalism is applied very differently according to economic, social and political circumstances around the world. However, as I have suggested, the new media technologies are having, or will have, considerable impact upon all these circumstances in this period of change. A developing country like Kenya, for instance, has seen limited penetration of access to satellite television and the Internet while email use and mobile telephony are transforming news-gathering techniques. Kenya has long been a relatively successful media market and a regional media centre. However, despite the existence of a healthy commercial media market, large swathes of the nation

have been uncovered by any news media. The following brief case study shows how innovative forms of news production are filling that gap, but with a different kind of journalism.[8]

The Nairobi slum of Kibere was until a couple of years ago largely untouched by conventional media. Mainstream Kenyan media ignored it as its residents were too poor or too illiterate to buy newspapers. What happened in Kibere did not figure on the Nairobi media agenda. This is a place where electricity is frequently cut off, where email and the Web are confined to a few internet cafes - and anyway, it is irrelevant for a slum that does not figure on the world wide web. State-provided landlines for telecommunications are largely ignored because of their unreliability which is attributed to incompetence and corruption.

The people of Kibere have now found a voice through SMS. Through cheap mobile phone texting, its 500,000 people can begin a conversation with the volunteer journalists of a new community radio station *Pamoja FM*. The journalists use their mobiles to gather news. *Pamoja*'s audience members use their mobiles to text in stories, to ask questions and to request help. And so the right medicine is identified for a listener's illness. A lost child is located. A new store opening is announced. This is made possible by new technology. This is changing lives and it is changing journalism.

The use of SMS also networks this community into wider Kenyan and international media and so into greater visibility by more powerful policy making initiatives of international NGOs and Governments. When Kenya was ravaged by internal violence in December 2007, it was *Pamoja FM* that acted responsibly to report the conflict in a way that lessened, rather than fanned, the flames of unrest. [8] This was an example of local media acting with an ethical responsibility beyond its boundaries. Local journalists could do this because of new media technologies that connected them in new ways to their public, and also to the wider world.

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[8] See http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/pdf/kenya_policy_briefing_08.pdf

All media change is differentiated geographically. In India newspaper sales are increasing while in American and the UK they are falling. But even where Internet penetration is relatively low in places such as Africa, it is catalysing other kinds of communications and developing new capacities and capital flows. All these markets are now subject to the influence of digital technologies as a source of production innovation, information distribution and social adaptions to the new possibilities in communication behaviour.

3 Perspectives On The New Media Environment

So what insights can we draw upon to underpin our understanding of what is happening to news media in these diverse ways? These dynamics can be better understood if we consider conceptual understandings of what is a media environment, what is a media culture, and how the idea of news is situated in its own history.

Media as an environment

Roger Silverstone's posthumous work *Media and Morality*[9] sets out how the global news media are operating at a moment in history where their political and moral purpose is contested as never before. He argues that international news media should aspire to the standpoint of *Cosmopolitanism* - a sense that journalism could contribute to a better understanding between different peoples in different places. But he was also acutely conscious, as a former journalist and as a critical scholar, that the media can be a platform for both positive and negative forces. However, his perspective makes an extraordinary claim for journalism:

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[9] Silverstone, R. (2007) *Media and Morality*, Polity.

> "I want to endorse the idea of the media as an environment, an environment which provides at the most fundamental level the resources we all need for the conduct of everyday life. It follows that such an environment may be or may become, or may not be or may not become, polluted." [10]

Silverstone builds on the metaphor of an environment, suggesting that certain impacts upon it may be described as 'polluting'. He does not describe in practical terms what might constitute an unpolluted media environment beyond the aspiration towards a more cosmopolitan standpoint. However, an important point about the idea of 'media as environment' is that it serves to counter simplistic technological determinism which associates the new media only with positive outcomes. Thus, there is nothing inevitable about the democractising effects of new media technologies. There is nothing innately liberal in their effects and they are not necessarily associated with more open systems of communication. The media environment is changing but there are important policy choices to be made about how that happens and with what consequences.

The media policy choices traditionally fall into two standard categories. Firstly, there are macro-economic and structural media policy choices to be made. For example, should regulatory authorities prioritise Open Source or intellectual property rules? Secondly, there are the business decisions made by media institutions which are today continuing to act as 'fortresses'. What kind of journalism will they supply? Do they seek revenue in data and analysis supply for the elite or in mass populist 'infotainment'? What platforms will they adopt and what content will they provide?

What is different about this process as compared to earlier changes in the media is that, by its very nature, the emergence of a more networked journalism means the debate around these policy choices engages with a wider constituency than the news media workers themselves. If the public and

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[10] Ibid.

societal organisations are directly participating in news production, then the terms of the political and moral argument about the future of journalism might also change. If public and societal organizations are already creating their own social media networks then they are already starting to help set the terms of the debate. At this point in the change process, what I am suggesting is that this is a new context for the creation of policy about the kind of media environment that will be created. This new context, means that it is not feasible to predict the outcomes since that context is very fluid and dynamic.

Media as networked culture

Increasingly, news media production breaks out of the old institutions that managed journalism. We have seen how the BBC and a Kenyan community radio station have opened themselves up in their practice. Increasingly, we can findnews media being created in partnerships with NGOs, businesses, governments, community groups, foundations, universities or other independent media.

Social groups, business and government are all becoming more networked – all public-facing organisations are turning into media organisations in some way and journalism can be part of that process. Journalism is moving out of the newsroom and into offices, schools, hospitals and homes. I suggest that to retain its relevance, journalism will have to go environmental, in Silverstone's sense. Or following another sociologist of new media, it must become part of 'the culture'. Manuel Castells outlines how society is remaking itself as a series of networks:

> "Networked individualism is a culture, not an organizational form. A culture that starts with the values and projects of the individual but builds a system of exchange with other individuals, thus reconstructing society rather than reproducing society." [11]

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[11] Castells, M. (2009) *Communication Power*, Oxford University Press

If journalism follows this shift from traditional institution to network, then this will challenge the role of journalism as a separate Fourth Estate. It can also argued, however, that this role was always something of a myth. Journalists have savoured the power that separation brings, but never fully accepted the responsibilities that it entailed.

This implies that journalism has to make a new contract with the citizen. In the past the deal was that news was produced in return for advertising or tax income. As those forms of revenue support are weakened, journalism has to re-make the case for journalism's output as an agent of public value. By public value I am using a relatively broad definition – that is, a combination of public interest and usefulness. Journalism's public value has always been about more than just 'speaking truth to power'. Journalism is a process or service that can promote economic efficiency, cultural richness, community activity and personal development for the individual and their family. It also has the secondary values of creating wealth and providing entertainment. These values are part of the range of journalism that may also include the aspirational public ideal of crossing boundaries and connecting distant peoples in relationships of empathy and understanding. What changes when the journalism changes is not necessarily the categories of public value themselves. What changes is the relationship between the public and those defining what is valuable on their behalf.

One example of this is *Netmums.com* which is the UK's most popular forum for news and discussion for 500,000 mothers who are members. It was set up by two parents and its many regional and specialist forums are run by volunteers. As well as general family news and chat-rooms it provides a range of advice, counseling, and community services. It is entirely networked in that it is highly interactive, consumer-driven, citizen-created and open. It reports and analyses contemporary issues and events and provides great public value to its consumers. And yet, at present, it falls completely outside all the official definitions of the public interest or public value journalism in UK media policy. It receives no public service subsidy from the government or the BBC

license fee, despite the fact that it is filling a gap ignored by so-called public service journalism. It is reconstructing, rather than replicating journalism, although perhaps not society itself.

Networked journalism as history

The historical context of journalism can be framed in economic, political or cultural terms. Here, I examine the current phase in its history in terms of its production. The decline of the old journalism production methods and the growth of new networked systems mean that the very nature of news is altering as I have discussed above.

Temporality in journalism is changing, for example. With the 'death of the deadline', for example, comes multi-dimensional narratives. 24 hour news production and publication means that the consumer and producer have a different concept of what is new or topical. Hypertexutality and storage online means that narrative is now horizontally multiplied, with constant referentiality perpetuating the life of a 'story' into may stories and back stories.

With the so-called 'death of distance' comes new flows of information. The world is interconnected, and that connectivity can reverse the direction of ideas as well as data. This does not mean that we are in an era of free, unhindered flows of media. The lesson of Google and China in 2007 or Iran and Twitter in 2009 is that new networks are created but there are still limitations created by censorship, commercialism and physical separation. Nevertheless, the degree to which the citizen is able to communicate locally and globally through more diverse channels is changing the balance between citizen, government and news media. There is greater power devolved to the individual by new media technologies to communicate 'one to one' or 'one to many'.

Terhi Rantanen's work, *When News Was New,* on media history suggests that this means that the very idea of news itself is shifting and that this has

happened before.[12] She cites, for example, the role of the news agencies in the 19th century in creating the global system of modern mainstream media institutions. Rantanen identifies four developments reshaping the definition of news practice which she indicates are redefining the idea of journalistic narrative.   These are: 1) the difference between events and news is disappearing;   2) the difference between information and news is disappearing; 3) the difference between news and comment is disappearing; and 4) the difference between news and entertainment is disappearing.

Of these four developments, perhaps the first is the most important. If one considers the recent history in the UK, or example, of political 'spin' and its relationship to political news we see how rarely stories are about 'facts' or about something that is actually happening. The other change categories also resonate with today's developments. It is clear that the public needs to rely less on the news media for simple information as it is so freely available directly from sources such as the Government or via aggregators of basic data such as Google News. Certainly, the difference between news and comment is disappearing as journalists are expected to contextualize and speculate on all events, statements and debates. The public understands that all facts are relative and that journalism reflects that. The public's own perspective is instantaneously built into journalistic narratives through interactivity. The fourth difference is perhaps less novel or profound because the attention of the public has always been gained at the price of easing accessibility for the news media. The tactic of making news exciting, dramatic and enjoyable has been refined but arguably has always been an essential component of mass media. In addition, today new media technologies mean that the public frequently is making up its own news entertainment. Public participation is becoming a pleasure in itself.

Rantanen's change factors are suggestive of a shift in style and form. A potentially much more significant change factor in news content today is in the mode of production. News used to be linear and now it is networked and that

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[12] Rantanen, T (2009) *When News Was New*, Wiley-Blackwell

is what will remake the meaning of news. The historical shift is not in the categorization of content but in the way that it is no longer delivered exclusively by a professional institution to the public. Instead, it is created through a network of exchange and interaction.[13]

As Rantanen observes, the conceptual shift underway today may be understood from an historical standpoint as one that returns to something pre-mass media rather than taking us to an entirely new place:

> "Considering the historical trajectory of news from news hawkers in the Middle Ages to bloggers in the Information Age, it is possible to argue that we are now witnessing the death of 'modern news', as conceived in the nineteenth century. In this situation of multiple change, serious thought is required about what constitutes news. Everybody thinks they know what news is, but in fact nobody can define the twenty-first concept of news. The boundaries are again becoming blurred. News may again become just new stories" [14]

4   Conclusion

In the midst of these exciting dynamics in journalism there is always a danger of exaggerating change, even when using an essentially synthesising paradigm such as Networked Journalism. However, I suggest that there is now a growing body of empirical evidence as well as analysis that suggests that we are going to lose more than just some of the elements of traditional news organisations and news practices. We are going to gain a new way of creating and consuming news. We are in the process of reinventing the idea of what news is.

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[13] Beckett, C. (2008) *SuperMedia*, Blackwell.

[14] Ibid.

On a global scale we can generalize about the way that journalism is becoming more networked. At its core there is a reformation of the business model for journalism. But this process of change can also lead to a more profound shift in the way that we define, understand and use the news. As business models change, so potentially does the distribution of power in the news production systems.

The key political question is whether these new forms of journalisms give greater voice to the public. And more significantly than that, whether they empower the citizen to act. As always, there is an institutional bias towards reasserting control. We see this in Lord Carter's *Digital Britain* report [15] which taxes citizens to create broadband structures for the benefit of online business. We see it in the attempt by Rupert Murdoch's News International to buy its way into social networking sites. These are attempts to reassert traditional government and commercial control over the newly emerging communication spaces.

In the end empowerment and political action are facilitated, not sanctioned, by media, let alone by journalism. They are realized through political action and organization. A more networked news media allows for greater public participation but it does not assure public control of its consequences. New networked journalism is providing an historic opportunity to use journalism for certain liberal, democratic, humanistic ends. Networked journalism as a synthesis between mainstream journalism and citizen activism is a compromise mode of co-production of news. It therefore contains the seeds of failure as well as progress.

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[15] See *Digital Britain,* Department for Culture, Media and Sport, June 2009, at http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/broadcasting/5631.aspx/