

[Charlie Beckett](#) and [Robin Mansell](#)

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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Beckett, Charlie and Mansell, Robin (2008) Crossing boundaries: new media and networked journalism. [Communication, culture & critique](#), 1 (1). pp. 92-104.

DOI: [10.1111/j.1753-9137.2007.00010.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2007.00010.x)

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This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/4221/>

Available in LSE Research Online: April 2009

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Crossing Boundaries: New Media and Networked Journalism

Charlie Beckett and Robin Mansell

London School of Economics

September 2007

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that today's news media are changing radically. New forms of what is coming to be known as 'networked journalism' are increasingly visible. These new forms of journalism raise many ethical issues not the least because, as we argue in this paper, they encourage new forms of boundary crossing on a scale not possible until recently. We suggest that these developments contain the seeds for the possibility to better understand differences and distinctions among people, but that they also heighten the possibilities for misunderstanding. Networked journalism does not yet provide a fully open space for dialogue. However, as journalists take on new roles and more voices are heard, there is a growing need to understand the implications of the new forms of boundary crossing that are being encouraged by this new form of journalism. Emerging forms of journalism may provide a foundation for public dialogue that enables stories about distant others to be told and better understood. The consequence may be that there will be new opportunities for enhanced sharing of viewpoints. Although convergent media platforms create opportunities for new exchanges, there are reasons to question whether the potential will be met.

The first main section of this paper highlights some of the features of networked journalism. We understand this new form of journalism as emerging in parallel with the spread of new media platforms of all kinds. This kind of journalism continues to involve the journalist as a professional who is becoming more a facilitator of on and offline news production for media institutions. It is the tensions between the older traditional and newer forms of journalism that this paper seeks to address. The second section considers what might constitute an ethical journalism in the news media environment, emphasising particularly the need to encourage new business models to encourage innovation in news

organisations. The third section takes up the difficult issue of what might constitute ethical journalism in the emerging news environment and the fourth examines the prospects for encouraging media literacies that are responsive to the needs of those who must be enabled to participate in new dialogues. Some pointers are provided in the fifth section towards the necessary elements of a research agenda aimed at understanding the implications of networked journalism.

Networked Journalism

The news media are changing today in ways that differ substantially from changes that have affected the news media in the past. The traditional news media involve deadlines and top-down reporting. They are very expensive to produce, although most of the larger news producers continue to be profitable based on their combined advertising and subscription business models. In contrast, the new forms of what we are calling networked journalism rely on a growing array of new media platforms. They are available at all hours of the day and they are often interactive, at least to some extent. In general, they are inexpensive to produce or, alternatively, they are heavily subsidized as a result of their access to news content produced initially for the traditional news media. In the case of online news media outlets, where they operate on a stand-alone basis, they either appear to be unprofitable or they simply are not held to account.

Networked journalism in the present context is not the same as citizen journalism (Gillmor 2004). The former is understood to retain the essential functions of traditional journalism, that is, to report, analyse and comment, filter, edit and disseminate. In the case of networked journalism, throughout the process of news production the use of digital and online technologies is at the heart of the process of newsgathering, processing and dissemination. The news process itself, however, changes from a linear to a networked process whereby there is constant communication and interaction with information.

The emerging forms of networked journalism are strongly collaborative insofar as professional journalists and amateurs often work together. Frequently boundaries are crossed within the production process as a means of sharing facts, raising questions, producing answers and ideas, and challenging differing perspectives (Jarvis 2007). This new form of journalism raises many ethical issues and it presents us with a paradox. It embraces the potential for both greater understanding and greater misunderstanding to occur. This is because each boundary that is crossed in the production and consumption of networked journalism enables an increasingly wide range of different viewpoints, languages, cultures, values and goals to be encountered. As they are encountered, they are likely to affect people's everyday lives and their perceptions of distant others in ways that are increasingly unpredictable.

The Internet and its applications, including blogs, web sites, and new online social networks or cyber communities, represent a huge change for the media. It is clear that online spaces for discussion and dialogue are playing an increasingly significant role in people's lives where they have affordable access to such spaces (Livingstone and Bober 2005). Some argue that the digital environment and the Internet make possible a 'space of flows' (Castells 2001) and it is within this uncertain and complex space that perceptions of risk of insecurity of mind or body may be heightened and that trust in authoritative viewpoints may be reduced (Bauman 2000; Beck 1992). Boundary crossing enabled by networked journalism allows for, and may even encourage, disorienting experiences in a variety of ways (Chouliaraki 2006). Just as it contains the seeds of the possibility of greater understanding of difference, it also may heighten the possibility of misunderstanding. Frequently, when the new online spaces are privileged, the significance of mundane, familiar practices that happen in near and distant places are discounted despite the fact that they are encountered every day through the media. The new forms of news media support diaspora communities in many ways, enabling people to maintain ties with towns, countries, cultural, religious and political groupings, but, at the same time, they seem to encourage ever more fragmented communicative networks, giving rise to possibilities of misapprehension with respect to the values and desires of others.

Networked journalism also gives rise to more decentralised decision making and non-hierarchical structures as well as to greater heterogeneity and diversity. This confronts the traditional practices of journalism which tend to be much more centralised, homogeneous and less pluralistic. The impact of this confrontation is profound for the news media and it is arguably even more profound for us as human beings. The new globally organised news media enable new forms of border crossing that are uncomfortable because they bring us into confrontation with others in ways that we suggest can be resolved and understood *only* through persistent dialogue. Thus, a central responsibility of the journalist today arguably must be to support and encourage new spaces for dialogue in a manner that is ethical and enhances trust (O'Neill 2002; Paxman 2007).

While the traditional news media have provided platforms or spaces for public debate historically, they continue to be limited in the sense that there is relatively little incentive for openness and innovation. This is the case for both the commercial and public service media. In the face of the current changes that are underway, the status quo is not an option for traditional news media. This suggests that as networked journalism spreads it could give rise to declining investment in training for journalists or, alternatively, it could foster new models of training and news processes that reduce the risks of misunderstanding and which may lead to enhanced trust. We consider these possibilities in the next section which focuses on trends in the news media sector.

Trends and dynamics in news media

Since the early 1990s it has been largely accepted that a free media market in journalism is a political good, notwithstanding controversy as to what might be meant by media freedom (Nordenstreng 2007 forthcoming). Nordenstreng (2007 forthcoming: np) demonstrates that the doctrine of the 'free marketplace of ideas' emerged in the US in the 20th century when freedom came to mean a negative freedom associated with the "absence of state control, including legal regulation other than safeguards against

“censorship” (see also Siebert et al. 1956). In contrast, a positive freedom reflected in international law suggests freedom as “not an end product to be protected as such but a means to ensure other more general objectives such as peace and democracy”. In fact as Peters (2004: 72) argues, “the lesson from this history is, firstly, that free flow of information has never been a neutral and ecumenical concept but rather a tactical argument in socio-economic and ideological struggles”. A conception of freedom consistent with the need for a moral space for open dialogue can, however, be drawn from Article 19 of the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that: ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’.

In many countries today we are living in a period of unsurpassed access to information and debate provided by the news media. The past several decades have seen political changes that have opened up a space for greater expression across regions such as the former Soviet Union. Technologies such as radio and print still are the dominant media in much of the world and their expansion is contributing to a greater degree of understanding and debate. In countries such as India the liberalisation and expansion of the economy combined with increased education resources has led to rapidly expanding markets for news media. In Africa, despite relative economic and political underachievement there is increasing use of new technology, improving elementary and further education and a degree of liberalisation that is encouraging the growth of a ‘free’ news media. In Africa, mobile phones and the Internet are increasing access to information from a greater diversity of sources, although basic infrastructure problems and political issues continue to restrict access and reporting (Beckett and Kyrke-Smith 2007). And, even where relatively open news media markets have been created, this is no guarantee of social and political benefit. For example, in Russia there is now apparent press plurality, but much central state censorship has been replaced by a culture of editorial compromise and commercial and political control (Richter 2007).

Few argue 'against' the new forms of journalism that are emerging today, but the very developments that promise infinite information are endangering the system of activity that is journalism and which does much to originate, process and distribute the type of information that is called news. Technological changes in the form of improvements in broadband access and data storage capacity mean that there are infinite information resources online. One laptop can access all the information, video and graphics that are put online by a news organisation and others. Online networking allows potentially infinite access for the consumer to images and texts, limited only by download speeds and human comprehension.

In addition, the combination of digital compression technologies and market liberalisation means that the news media industry is now very much more consumer-led than it was in the past. Instead of waiting for the news to be delivered it can now be accessed at any time. The news media are now continuous with access to news channels, websites and permanent broadcasting. Because there is so much choice, including not consuming news at all, the news media producers are more inclined to respond to what the consumers want or risk losing their attention. This means that there is a need for new means of engagement with the consumer or citizen. Previously, the news media responded to longer-term trends in their audience, whereas today they must build a 'community' around a brand. News producers can now be more interactive as mobiles, texting, the Internet, and email allow audiences to communicate more easily with each other and with journalists. Increasingly, connected consumers want to be producers as witnessed by the growth of user generated content which is flooding onto social networking sites and finding its way onto news outlets.

The start-up costs for news media today can be virtually zero (for a blog) and national 24 hour television stations can be set up for a few hundred thousand pounds. Running costs are generally much lower than in the case of traditional news production as everything from licences to camera technology is becoming cheaper. Whereas in earlier times there was only one platform for news there is now access to many outlets for any single journalist or news organisation. Journalism was once regarded as 'a licence to print

money', but today competition from non-journalistic as well as other sources means that the traditional news media are beginning to see their profit margins squeezed. At the same time, they are investing in new technology. As a result many organisations are undergoing a period of retrenchment, generating low dividends and experiencing service reductions, although there are some exceptions such as in South Africa, India and China where the news media are thriving. Generally, however, the news media sector is entering a period of profit reduction precisely at the moment when new technologies offer the potential for new product development. The new forms of journalism that are emerging today will not achieve their potential for enhancing a public service environment if the new opportunities are treated simply as a way of securing 'free' content to compensate for cut-backs.

Networked journalism can take many forms which contribute new opportunities for public debate. For example, radio is increasing its audiences, even in markets with highly developed television or new media access. Radio seems to fit with increasingly mobile and time-poor life-styles. Radio can now be accessed via television, the Internet or mobile phones. And radio phone-ins are increasingly offered thanks to the spread of the infrastructure for networks. However, for such phone-ins to be participative, the public needs to be allowed to influence the subjects for discussion and to trust that their safety as a result of participation is ensured (Ibrahim 2007 forthcoming)

Web forums or blogs also provide an online means of creating active spaces for discussion and the dissemination of information from public-to-public. They provide platforms for consumers to critique and correct the media, but for this to become an open forum, news organizations must be transparent and embrace the criticisms that they receive. Networked journalism might ultimately move beyond the rather simple forms of 'interactivity' that are in use today. For example, journalists might retain their functions of editing, filtering and producing news but the 'journalist' might become the media literate citizen who initiates as well as contributes to the news flow. This, in turn, might lead to public debate which the networked journalist might report in a reflexive way as part of the news production process itself.

As one commentator put it:

‘In networked journalism, the public can get involved in a story before it is reported, contributing facts, questions, and suggestions. The journalists can rely on the public to help report the story; we’ll see more and more of that, I trust. The journalists can and should link to other work on the same story, to source material, and perhaps blog posts from the sources. After the story is published — online, in print, wherever — the public can continue to contribute corrections, questions, facts, and perspective ... not to mention promotion via links. I hope this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as journalists realize that they are less the manufacturers of news than the moderators of conversations that get to the news’ (Jarvis 2007).

There are, however, several conditions that would need to hold if news journalism is to develop in this way. More media organisations would need to become the driving force by building user communities around their activities, thereby preserving their brands and markets. Successful networked journalism providers might offer the premium service of skilled journalistic functions: editing, analysis, technical support and information packaging, but this would become integrated into the flow of information from users. The journalist would not act as a gatekeeper as in the past, but instead as a facilitator or moderator as Jarvis suggests in the quotation above. In addition, policy makers would need to redistribute public service media funding away from the traditional media and towards support for increased media literacy, a topic we address later in this paper. If networked journalism is to develop in the way envisaged here, the public would need to encourage these developments as would the political classes. The enthusiasm with which politicians will support the accumulation of enhanced literacies for new media within the general population is likely to be moderated by their realisation that networked journalism presents a threat which goes against the grain of hierarchical forms of governance. If greater openness conflicts with traditional modes of their operation,

governments will become increasingly uneasy as few political systems are predicated upon the need for an informed, much less, networked, public (Monck 2007).

Networked journalism offers no guarantee of a new open or moral space for dialogue. The fractious debates on blogs such as *Comment is Free* at the British *Guardian* newspaper's website are indicative of the extent to which online debate does not guarantee greater understanding. Other studies of the blogosphere which benefit from systematic empirical research such as that by Kim (2007 forthcoming) in the case of South Korea suggest a similar development. Nevertheless, new discourses are emerging with new styles and languages, suggesting that networked journalism will also evolve as part of broader cultural changes (Ito 2006)

Another issue that is crucial to the further evolution of networked journalism concerns the authoritative status of news. Organisations that produce the news for traditional news media such as AFP, AP, Reuters, CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera continue to have the means of delivering authoritative information and analysis. However, even where the traditional journalism models continue to work, the liberal news media are severely limited insofar as they tend to be self-contained, often self-referential, and elitist; they rarely cross difficult boundaries. In addition, audiences are fragmenting and the younger generation often prefers informal social networking sites and wikis which are freely available. As a result there is need to find ways to make news reporting economically viable in the long term.

At the same time, web forums and blogs provide a way of creating active spaces for discussion, offering platforms for individuals to critique and to correct the traditional news media. Little Green Footballs – a blog - for example, revealed how a photographer working for Reuters faked some photographs of the Israel/Hezbollah conflict. In this case, Reuters offered transparency and accepted criticism (Beckett 2007). In the case of networked journalism as indicated earlier, the journalist might become a facilitator. This facilitation role is illustrated by several examples of journalism initiatives which are enabling new boundaries to be crossed. For example, the BBC World Service Trust is

enabling Pashto and Dari speaking audiences, inside and outside Afghanistan, to listen to their favourite radio programmes using the Internet (BBC World Service Trust 2007a). In another case, Zig Zag is allowing young people in Iran who use a secret language to communicate, offering the first chance they have had to hear each others' voices and to engage with figures such as religious leaders (BBC World Service Trust 2007b). And in yet another instance, My Life offers a programme of workshops for young women in Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Saudi Arabia to tell their stories for the first time online (BBC World Service Trust 2007c).

From an economic point of view, if these and other new forms of networked journalism are to flourish, investment will have to shift from traditional journalism to promoting new business models and new media literacy capabilities. This shift will be necessary if the public, wherever they may be, are to become the producers of the news and of their own stories.

Towards Ethical Journalism

Enhanced opportunities for public debate are required because of the need to foster new moral spaces for collective deliberation and action. Such spaces will need to be hospitable, caring, and just (Silverstone 2006). Networked journalism goes part of the way towards providing an online space for people to find new ways of engaging with the world and with its people, with those nearby and far away, geographically, culturally and morally. However, when it comes to portraying distant others, both the traditional media and the newer media often fail us insofar as they do not grant those at a distance their own humanity (Chouliaraki 2006). As Chouliaraki suggests the images and texts produced tend either to push others away so that it is impossible to see their humanness or, alternatively, bring them so closely into view that it is not possible to see their distinctiveness. Ethical journalism requires that distant others be recognised as others with humanity. While the traditional media are often asymmetrical, dysfunctional and flawed in this respect, networked journalism is providing a basis for optimism that this will change (Silverstone 2006). But optimism will give way to pessimism if news media

platforms become hosts to imagery and text promoting a lack of regard for others. It is for this reason that scepticism is essential with respect to the implications of the developments discussed in the preceding section.

Both traditional and new news media can circulate Abu Graib pictures, Iraq war footage, and Danish cartoons leading to controversy in ways that heighten the global visibility of violence. This leads us to ask about the implications of spectacles of violence for ideas about ethics in public life, identity, and the norms that should guide judgements about ourselves and others (Chouliarki 2006). In an era of a mix of traditional news media and emerging networked journalism, to what extent is it feasible to encourage new modes of caring for distant others? The expansion of networked journalism may encourage or discourage public action that grants equal value to human life, regardless of whether such life belongs to 'my' community or 'another' community. Similarly, the traditional media may encourage us to experience a feeling of global intimacy through their representation of distant others, but they may not encourage reflection on why suffering is occurring or what can be done about it. If networked journalism is to succeed in fostering the kind of dialogue envisaged here, it must create spaces for news production and consumption which are consistent with such reflection.

If it has the potential to do so it may offer the possibility to move away from predominantly Eurocentric dialogues which predominate in the news media of the Western industrialised countries. From an optimistic perspective, it may even be the case that some new forums will provide a basis for encouraging thinking in terms of 'transmodernity' as Dussel (1996) suggests. They may encourage dialogue which is a reflection of 'border thinking' as new boundaries are crossed, rather than dialogue which is informed by a relatively uniform globalising worldview (Mignolo 2000). If networked journalism begins to bring about the possibility of understanding local histories or a remapping stories of colonial difference and exclusion, the potential may exist to begin to build a more worldly and ethical culture (Escobar 2004: 219). As a result there may be potential to move beyond dichotomies between 'north'/'south', 'information rich'/'information poor', and 'hegemonic'/'indigenous' knowledge, and towards a new,

not yet completely understood, alternative. These would be foundations for a new global dialogue which respects the humanity of all.

Fostering New Literacies

What are the prerequisites for networked journalism to foster this alternative? One prerequisite would be for the new journalism to support new forms of ‘translation’, a possibility that de Sousa Santos (2003) argues might underpin greater mutual understanding and intelligibility among those who have worldviews that are different and at odds with each other (Escobar 2004). If networked journalism creates possibilities for new border crossings and translations, then it could underpin new understandings, reflections and, potentially, ethical action. However, for such translations to occur, there must be substantial investment in new media literacies that extend beyond basic reading and writing. Literacy in the context of the media is often seen as a capability that is necessary to provide people with a means to protect themselves from harmful aspects of the media. But as our engagements with close and distant others are mediated increasingly by new media, new literacies become essential for participation, active citizenship, learning, and even cultural expression (Livingstone 2004). Although considerable effort is being devoted to gaining access to networks and to acquiring literacy for basic understanding, much less attention is being given to enabling people to acquire a more sophisticated understanding of the media, including news media.

This means enhancing capabilities for critical evaluation and for creating communications of various kinds for exchange in new media environments. Although, media literacy principles are being developed under charters and conventions, they are not being widely translated into teaching resources. Increasing resources and equalising capabilities so that many more benefit is the challenge for the future if the implications of boundary crossing and networked journalism are to foster an ethical media. At present, the European Commission, for example, defines media literacy as follows:

‘Media Literacy may be defined as the ability to access, analyse and evaluate the power of images, sounds and messages which we are now being confronted with on a daily basis and are an important part of our contemporary culture, as well as to communicate competently in media available on a personal basis. Media literacy relates to all media, including television and film, radio and recorded music, print media, the Internet and other new digital communication technologies’ (European Commission 2007)

As in the case of the predominant understanding of press freedom as a negative freedom, the emphasis in the case of literacies is mostly on those aimed at enabling people to avoid harm. If the goal of enhancing public dialogue and understanding is to be advanced, more attention will be essential to the positive aspects of literacies, that is, those which foster democratic participation and active citizenship through dialogue. The European Charter for Media Literacy (European Commission 2006) goes some way in this more positive direction. But as Livingstone et al. (2005) have pointed out, attention to literacy may begin to substitute for regulation and those who do not have the literacy skills required for participating in new forums will be excluded. Skills associated with critical evaluation and capabilities for determining reliable and trustworthy information are essential if there is to be an opportunity to foster a form of networked journalism that is consistent with border crossing and translation that can support reflection and action that is respectful of all and just.

A Networked Journalism Research Agenda

The economist Gunnar Myrdal (1969: 9) said that research questions ‘are all expressions of our interest in the world; they are at bottom valuations’. The implications of the developments outlined in the preceding sections of this paper, suggest a growing need for a research agenda that is ‘critical’ in the sense of being reflective on the spread of these technologies and their capacity to enable boundary crossing on a global scale. Globality means that researchers must cross boundaries as well and as they do so they must make ethical valuations. The fundamental changes associated with networked journalism

present a threat to the status quo. Threats to established power relations that govern economic and political models need to be assessed and, where necessary, measures taken to ensure that the new forms of journalism retain the potential to foster open dialogue and reflection on the humanity of others.

A research agenda in this area is needed to encourage a probing of the ideologies, ethical stances and practices that inform the production and consumption of news media. The traditional news media were the subjects of research aimed at contesting the dominant Cold War ideologies (Mansell and Nordenstreng 2007; Nordenstreng 1984). Research was informed by awareness of the need to challenge dominant conceptions of the role of the media in society, conceptions that frequently were ‘naturalized’ within journalism research programmes. Similarly, an ethical and normative orientation with respect to emerging forms of news media is essential if the research community is to challenge received wisdom in a way that provides the basis for a critique of the strengths and weaknesses of emerging models and creates openings for alternative developments.

We argue not only for a more critical approach to the issues raised in this paper, but also for a vigorous attempt to foster what we refer to as a ‘critical interdisciplinary’ research agenda. The research agenda that we advocate would, in the first instance, involve disciplinary boundary crossing to break down the barriers that often sequester research of different kinds, making it difficult to reflect on the multiple contexts in which network journalism is evolving. It would also be concerned with power, its redistribution, and its consequences for those engaged in the production and consumption of news. Shome argues for a ‘transnational interdisciplinarity’, that is, research that is politically aware and which is aimed at crossing the boundaries that designate places and that distinguish the spaces within which communicative relationships are cultivated. She suggests that researchers need to: ‘engage in, and try to connect to, knowledge formations and vocabularies that reside in other modernities and other temporalities that are either refused recognition, or are not adequately translated, in machines of knowledge production’ (Shome 2006: 3). This is essential if networked journalism is to foster the kinds of ‘translations’ that may enable better recognition of others’ humanity.

Conclusion

In a global world of networked journalism, not only do we need to move beyond the familiar and damaging dualisms of the past, it will be essential to acknowledge exclusions when they occur and to investigate why they are occurring and how they are being perpetuated. An ethically grounded research strategy for understanding the changes associated with networked journalism would begin the task of assessing both the potential and the risks of the way the news media are evolving. As in other areas of media and communication studies, we need to follow Alhassan (2007) who asks ‘what is the relationship between the margin and the centre in the epistemic economy of communication studies? How is it established and maintained?’ As indicated above, both Escobar (2004) and de Sousa Santos (2003) argue in favour of new border crossings and translations which could encourage better understanding of the dynamics of power relations which give rise to inequality and, ultimately, to actions aimed at reducing it. We have suggested that networked journalism could create opportunities for journalists to facilitate public debate. However, we have also warned that if this is to happen, financial resources will have to shift from supporting traditional journalism to promoting the new forms of news media and to fostering new media literacies that do not exclude and which support new forms of border crossings and translation.

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