

Svenja Ottovordemgentschenfelde
Reconfiguring practices, identities and ideologies: towards understanding professionalism in an age of post-industrial journalism

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A photograph of a person in a crowd, seen from the side, holding a smartphone up to take a picture. The person is wearing a grey sweater and a watch. The background shows other people and a water bottle, all in a blue-tinted, semi-transparent style. The overall mood is one of everyday life and digital media use.

Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

edited by Leif Kramp, Nico Carpentier,
Andreas Hepp, Ilija Tomanić Trivundža,
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Reconfiguring Practices, Identities and Ideologies: Towards Understanding Professionalism in an Age of Post-Industrial Journalism

Svenja Ottovordemgentschenfelde

1. Introduction

The “burning red-hot” (Farhi, 2009) relationship between journalism and social media platforms challenges the broad and established assumptions of traditional news making. In the digital age, many scholars have focused on the interplay between old and new modes and routines of production, the convergence and innovation of products themselves, and the dynamics between producers and users just as much as those between professionals and amateurs. At the core of this research are often questions regarding how journalists use social media and how they are appropriating these platforms into their journalistic practices. These are relevant questions, as the study of a profession must always start with the study of actual practice (Abbott, 1988).

Many popular social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or Google+, operate beyond the classic publication structures of news organizations. The professional practices of journalists have visibly changed and are adjusting to the affordances of social media and to the content these respective platforms offer. What we do not yet comprehend, however, is the underlying journalistic logic of how social media stories, supporting footage and sources are chosen. We also lack a detailed understanding of how normative values such as objectivity, neutrality and processes of verification, which have been deeply engrained in journalists’ occupational ideologies, are reflected and exercised in these spaces.

There is an ongoing tension between the traditional journalistic claim of control over content and an emerging culture of participation (Lewis, 2012). The notion of collective intelligence or the “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki, 2004) in the form of user generated content and citizen journalism are opening up the process of news production to non-elite actors. However, this openness does not imply transparency. Journalistic professionalism, more than ever be-

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fore, appears to be a field of negotiation which reconfigures the boundaries that traditionally legitimise journalism. We need to take a closer look at these shifts when attempting to understand the nature of journalistic professional imagination, identity and its occupational ideology.

2. The Professional Paradigm of Journalism

Traditionally, research into the routines and culture of everyday journalism has been framed through the sociology of news production (Schudson, 1989) or the sociological organisation of news work¹. These approaches examine organisational structures and workplace practices, and focus on the “middle ground” between the economic determinations of the marketplace and the cultural discourses within media representations (Cottle, 2003: 4). To better understand the journalist who operates as a central agent within the media space and contributes to shaping it, another approach appears useful which combines journalism studies and the theory of professions (Schudson/Anderson, 2008). The application of the so-called sociology of professions to journalism (cf. Lewis, 2012; Gravengaard, 2012) not only offers a nuanced understanding of a journalist’s everyday work, but also of the broader ideological forces underlying and shaping their practices and vice versa.

But what does “professional journalism” mean? For some, it implies a “minimal” (Waisbord, 2013:4) understanding of journalism as a profession, in terms of an occupation, a career and paid jobs. In this sense, Jeremy Tunstall (1976) once argued that a professional journalist is simply someone who works in the news media. While there may be a bit more to it, this common “trait approach” (Lewis, 2012:839) largely reflects a structural division of labour and specialisation (Nerone/Barnhurst, 2003), granting journalists the exclusive right to engage in a particular task for society (Abbott, 1988). Even though journalism has never matched the archetypical models of a profession such as medicine, law or academia, it successfully fulfilled the critical condition for any profession to claim jurisdictional control over a particular area in society (Lewis, 2012). Historically, journalism has monopolised the provision of a social need: news (Waisbord, 2013). This functional understanding of professional journalism largely refers to what journalism does vis-à-vis other areas of activity in society.

But professional journalism can also be seen as a model of quality reporting, encompassing a set of desirable virtues, principles and beliefs. Journalistic professionalism is commonly used as shorthand for various, separate ethical standards and values relating to ideals such as fairness and neutrality, objectivity, autonomy and social responsibility (Waisbord, 2013). Professionalism in this sense has a strong normative dimension which is largely rooted

in journalism's ascribed role for democracy. It is viewed as representing one of the crucial institutions that supports a citizen's capacity to participate in society. As Blekesaune (2012:113) argues, "democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed" and with the advent of industrialisation, professional journalism claimed it was taking on that task by producing "hard news", "accountability journalism" or "the iron core of news" (cf. Anderson et al., 2012:7). This led to the emergence of what Aldridge and Evetts (2003:549) call the "occupational ideology" of journalism, which is highly ritual in nature and has manifested itself in a professional identity of fulfilling the classic liberal and normative watchdog function:

"Journalism exposes corruption, draws attention to injustice, holds politicians and businesses accountable for their promises and duties. It informs citizens and consumers, helps organize public opinion, explains complex issues and clarifies essential disagreements. Journalism plays an irreplaceable role in both democratic politics and market economics" (Anderson et al., 2012:7)

Whether or not professional journalism successfully lives up to this ideal is a different question. The aim of this article is not to identify desirable guidelines for occupational practice or to spell out what "good journalism" is or should be, but to understand the implications of journalistic change. Yet journalists appear to continue to hold on to particular self-representations and identities, a phenomenon Kunelius and Ruusonoksa (2008:662) call the journalistic "professional imagination". Idealised understandings of the press also persist in the public mind, as "[d]epictions in popular fiction, theatre, and film reiterate the ideal and disseminate it among audiences who never set foot inside a newspaper office" (Nerone/Barnhurst, 2003:435).

3. The Struggle over Boundaries

There is no universal way to identify and classify journalistic professionalism, as it "lacks the 'science' that the grand professions [...] use to justify their autonomy and independence, as well as the concrete entry into the profession – licensing and schooling, for example" (Nerone/Barnhurst, 2003:447). However, journalism has successfully claimed legitimacy and the jurisdiction to govern a body of knowledge as well as the practice of that expertise (Abbott, 1988). As a result, threats to the profession are primarily struggles over boundaries (Gieryn, 1983). These boundaries determine, for example, what practices are acceptable and which ethical standards journalists need to adhere to. It ultimately separates insiders from outsiders, i.e. the professional journalist and the non-professional amateur. Retaining control is a key objective and like all professions, journalism engages in boundary maintenance to some de-

gree or other – through jurisdictional disputes with neighbouring professions or through tactics aimed at stopping non-professionals who attempt to invade its territory (Abbott, 1988; Lewis, 2012). It is the latter strategy in particular that has gained increasing relevance in the digital age.

For much of the twentieth century, both the business model and the professional routines of journalism in Western democracies were highly stable and successful enterprises because they took advantage of scarcity, exclusivity and control (Lewis, 2012). Professional journalism derived much of its sense of purpose and prestige through its control of information, sets of “strategic rituals” (Tuchman, 1972), and its normative roles. Lewis (2012:845) argues that traditionally, news workers “take for granted the idea that society needs them as journalists – and journalists alone – to fulfill the functions of watchdog publishing, truth-telling, independence, timeliness, and ethical adherence in the context of news and public affairs.” This assumption may no longer persist in light of the current hyper-saturated media and communication environment.

The media has always been a site of change, and transitional shifts are not unusual in journalism. As a product of modernity, “journalism has been historically situated amidst social transformations” (Waisbord, 2013:5). The context of journalism currently seems more volatile than ever. Journalism is deeply intertwined with the subversive shifts overarching the whole media industry. Narratives of journalism as a “profession under pressure” (Witschge/Nygren, 2009), “in crisis” (Young, 2010) and “coming to an end” (Deuze, 2007) have become commonplace in the academic literature.

4. Reconfiguring Structure and Agency in News Production

Scholars in the field mostly agree on the principal viewpoint that the creation of news used to be a tightly-held, closely monitored, top-down process that involved the interactions and interventions of only a small elite (Chadwick, 2011). Recently, both the relationship between producers and consumers, as well as professionals and amateurs has changed. Digital technologies enable and encourage end-user participation, very much in the sense of Jenkin’s (2006) “convergence culture” or “participatory culture”, Deuze’s (2006) “digital culture” and Bruns’ (2008) notion of “produsage”. The emergence of user generated content (UGC) has particularly gained increased attention and salience in journalism, most notably in the form of “citizen journalism” (Allan/Thorsen, 2009) – which is termed “open-source” (Deuze, 2001), “participatory” (Bowman/Willis, 2003) or “grassroots” (Gillmore, 2004) journalism elsewhere in the literature. All of a sudden, the digitally literate user could

become a “parajournalist threatening the jurisdictional claims of professionals by fulfilling some of the functions of publishing, filtering, and sharing information” (Lewis, 2012:850).

The media has become a multi-way network which causes unease centred around who controls which spaces and information in the so-called “network society” (Castells, 2006). In this context, Lewis (2012:836) identifies an “ongoing tension between professional control and open participation in the news process” which questions journalism’s traditional “logic of control over content”. This fundamentally challenges the one-way publishing model and reconfigures the public service role of the media which entails encouraging civic participation and active deliberation (Williams et al., 2011). In light of these developments, many scholars have already claimed a transition from the journalist’s gatekeeping role to “gatewaching” (Bruns, 2005) and a shift from actual news production to the aggregation or curation of already existing content (Bruns/Highfield, 2012). All this points to clear threats to journalism’s occupational ideology and its professional boundary maintenance.

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Google+ thrive on the idea of participatory cultures and UGC. Their continually growing prominence and salience in people’s lives, and the ever-increasing amount of information shared in these online spaces have turned social media networks into an increasingly relevant tool for journalists. Chadwick (2011) observes that journalists are now tapping into the viral circulation of these online contents, embedding them into their news coverage and associated production techniques. News stories often first break online now and are picked up by journalists who obsessively follow their email, Twitter and blog feeds, hunting for new leads and sources. Most recently, scholars have been trying to make sense of the impact of social media platforms on journalism and a number of buzzwords have emerged: ranging from “networked journalism” (e.g. Beckett/Mansell, 2008), to “liquid journalism” (Deuze, 2009), “social news” (Goode, 2009), “ambient journalism” (Hermida, 2010) and “social journalism” (Hermida, 2012), they all attempt to capture that same phenomenon.

5. The Impact on Professional Practice

In this context, Anderson et al. (2012) argue that the current state of the news media indicates a new era: the age of post-industrial journalism. The broader shifts in the media landscape and the restructuring of the current media ecology as discussed above “will mean rethinking every organizational aspect of news production – increased openness to partnerships; increased reliance on publicly available data; increased use of individuals, crowds and machines to produce raw material” (Anderson et al., 2012:13). On a structural level, many

news organisations have tried to catch up and keep up with these developments, from the creation of positions such as social media editors to senior management decreeing that social media use is now part of each journalist's occupational responsibilities (Hamilton, 2011; Hermida, 2013). At the same time, individual news organisations started to publish guidelines and training programmes on how to embrace these new formats (Newman et al., 2011).

As a global media organisation, the BBC has been recognised for its innovative efforts in creating the so-called *UGC Hub*. This was started in 2005 so as to sift through unsolicited, non-professional contributions e-mailed to the BBC. With the increasing popularity of social media platforms, people have become more prone to distributing material themselves through Twitter, YouTube and Facebook (Turner, 2012). As a result, the UGC Hub's task "has moved toward semi-conventional newsgathering with a Web 2.0 twist [...], staffers now use search terms [and] see what's trending on Twitter" (Turner, 2012:np). But the BBC not only monitors what others are doing on Twitter, it also actively engages with the platform and its users through numerous of its own accounts.

Such new interfaces of journalistic work offer an inspiring chance to look at the emerging rituals and practices of "post-industrial" journalism. A deductive exploration² of a selected number of accounts hosted by or associated with the BBC (e.g. a particular news program or show, the BBC's dedicated account for breaking news, BBC journalist accounts, etc.) suggests at least five forms of journalistic engagement with Twitter:

1. **Interactivity.** Refers to direct communication with other non-journalistic Twitter users such as further discussion of news and broader commentary;
2. **Content dissemination.** Refers to links to articles, broadcast pieces, pictures and videos that are hosted outside the Twitter environment on the BBC homepage or BBC iPlayer;
3. **Sourcing.** Indicates concrete efforts undertaken for "fact finding", such as asking for eye-witness accounts, pictures, video footage or interview partners;
4. **Professional interaction.** Means interaction with other journalists and news outlets, mostly in the form of an @reply or retweet;
5. **Promotion.** Refers to personal branding, non-news related content, possibly even personal information that includes photos, links to personal websites, blogs and other material.

These five categories claim to be neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Instead, they offer a practice-oriented starting point that can help us to approach the more complex, non-observable dimensions of professional transformations. Practices are visibly shifting towards capitalising on the affordances

of citizen journalism and crowdsourcing, as illustrated by the above example of the BBC. The deeper question for journalism is: how does this impact the professional imaginations, identities and occupational ideologies of journalists? And where are the old and potentially new boundaries then to be located, that legitimise journalism and its jurisdictional claim over the production of news? If the traditional model of journalistic work reflected ideals such as objectivity and neutrality through the technical quoting of primary definers, then what do these new forms of journalistic practices and rituals associated with social media stand for? This must be a key element on the agenda for journalism research of the future.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

As Hermida (2013) argues, it has long become pedestrian for journalists to engage with social media and gather material from these platforms. But what happens from the point of sourcing to the finished news product is somewhat of a black box. We do not yet understand the professional logic which underlies and guides the inclusion of citizen journalism in professional journalistic output. What kind of information and footage do journalists take and what do they leave, from whom, when and for which purposes? When do journalists consider their interaction with both the wider civic and professional community on these platforms valuable or necessary? And most importantly, we need to ask how the classic journalistic normative value system, based on objectivity, neutrality, verification and fact checking, translates into professional engagement with platforms like Twitter. Deconstructing this black box is a prerequisite and a gateway for understanding the changing nature of the professional self-understanding and self-representation of journalists.

On an analytical level, it may be useful to cluster journalism and its surrounding environment into three functional layers: 1) the micro level of the individual journalist operating within their professional production setting and the respective relationships with colleagues, audiences, and sources; 2) the meso level of organisational cultures, corporate strategy and editorial policies that facilitate and encourage certain production practices; and 3) the macro level of national/global regulatory, legal, technological and competitive forces that govern and condition journalistic operations and behaviour. In doing so, we may be able to identify and determine both internal and external forces that actively contribute to shaping journalistic behaviour, which may in turn impact the professional imaginations, identities and occupational ideologies of journalists.

Finally, future research may also require new methodologies. Traditional methods such as newsroom ethnographies may have to be extended via the alternative approaches that account for the many currently splintering forms of journalism (Lewis, 2012). Journalism has become increasingly precarious and contingent, detached from the stability that institutions once provided (Deuze, 2007) and the physical locale of the newsroom is now only one of the many sites of journalistic activity. These alternative approaches could involve research designs that account for the socio-technological affordances and constraints of social media platforms (Hermida, 2013) or might include an actor-network analysis of news production (cf. Schmitz et al., 2010; Anderson, 2011).

7. Conclusion

It is inherent in the evolutionary nature of professions that professional imaginations, identities and occupational ideologies change over time. This change could point to the exclusion or marginalisation of certain professional ideas or values just as much as it codifies or adds salience to others (Deuze, 2007). Many scholars argue that in the digital era, the boundaries of who is a producer or a consumer, a professional or an amateur, are becoming increasingly amorphous, and it is hard to argue against this. The persistence of a professional imagination and an occupational ideology, however, means that boundaries are still actively sustained and maintained. They may simply be modified, adapted to new circumstances and environments. As the dynamics and relationships within the journalistic sphere continue to change, our understanding of professionalism needs to evolve as well. How do the affordances and associated cultures around digital technologies and social media platforms fit in, clash or alter professional journalistic ideologies? How does this impact the professional imagination of journalists and their roles in society or, to use Jay Rosen's (2013:np) words: "journalism, what is it good for?" Finally, to decode the nuanced and evolving meaning of professionalism in journalism might also require a different understanding of news as a product altogether. Perhaps we need to revisit the traditional idea of news as new, but instead think about the idea that news is "no longer what's new but what matters" (Anderson, 2013:np). It may be here, on the contextual level, where professional journalism could reposition itself in society and resolve the tension between its claim for journalistic control over content and cultures of open participation in the news process.

Notes

- 1 For a review of these traditions see Cottle (2003).
- 2 This deductive exploration was part of a pilot study, undertaken within the scope of the author's PhD research during the summer months of 2013. See project abstract also published in this book for further information.

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Biography

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