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Digital Journalism as Practice

Bart Cammaerts and Nick Couldry

Introduction

Sharing can be enjoyable, if banal: for example, sharing a bowl of food, a finite amount of a necessary resource. Sharing becomes more interesting as social creativity when new types of things become shareable, enabling new types of resource to be grasped for the first time *as such*, as things that can be held collectively, not just individually or institutionally (Belk 2007). New acts of sharing expand the repertoire of possible action. Our historic media infrastructures derive, originally, from the discovery, centuries ago, of new acts of sharing: the production and circulation of new stories as ‘news’ (Rantanen 2009). Digital platforms enable new types of sharing and possibly new types of journalism in digital forms. That is the possibility this chapter will explore, at a time when the word ‘sharing’ has become a guiding metaphor of our times (John 2013).

To do so, we will draw on the work of ‘practice theory’ (from wider social theory), which over the past decade has enabled media scholars to recognise the variety, importance and complexity of the many new things we are doing with digital media. The chapter will include a brief discussion of practice theory in general before we discuss the practice of sharing in particular as the source of new forms of journalism.

The notion of ‘practice’ emerged in audience and media anthropology research in the early to mid 2000s (Couldry 2004; Bräuchler and Postill 2010) out of a need to clarify its direction

of travel. By the mid 1990s audience research had already expanded far beyond the limits of its early formation, that is, research into how audiences decode particular media texts, and then looking for correlations between that and wider social consequences or underlying social variables. We were already well on the way towards ‘third generation audience studies’ (Alasuutari 1999), that is, research concerned not with audiences interpretations of texts – or even their interpretation of the large set of secondary texts built around the media text – but concerned instead with, for example, the open-ended processes of identity formation *around* the text, with the wider aim of ‘get[ting] a grasp on our contemporary “media culture”’ (1999: 6) as a whole. However, this expansion of focus in audience research had brought with it some important doubts about its feasibility as a long-term research agenda. For Ang (1996: 66) it was important to capture what she called ‘a sense of crisis within the study of audiences’. Ang (1996: 76) considered the audience to be increasingly unresearchable since audiences had become ‘undecideable’. For Ang (1996: 75) the context of what audiences do was now understood in such a complex way that it was impossible even to imagine ‘a full and comprehensive portrait’ of a contemporary cultural formation. The problem, as Ang (1996: 80) saw prophetically, was that ‘the media are increasingly everywhere, but not everywhere in the same way’. Clearly reflected here are the roots of journalism’s expansion beyond its traditional boundaries in the 2000s.

In response, one of the authors (Couldry 2004) offered the idea of ‘theorising media as practice’ as a way to better capture the actual diversity of everyday practice with media in which people were becoming involved in the age of taken-for-granted internet access (a need which has only increased in the age of Web 2.0 and ‘user-generated content’). In the next section we will summarise the basic moves of practice theory as applied in the media field, before moving on to discuss ‘sharing’ as an important new practice from this perspective.

The second half of the chapter will explore this possibility in greater empirical detail, and consider its implications for wider developments in digital journalism and digital politics.

Practice theory

A media practice approach asks quite simply: *what are people* (individuals, groups, professions, institutions) *doing in relation to media* across a whole range of situations and contexts? How is people's media-related practice related, in turn, to their wider agency? This may involve the production or reception of a particular text, but very often it will not. Through this simple move away from the *primacy* of the text, the practice turn considerably expands what we are interested in at the user, or audience, end of media research, but as we argue in this chapter, also at level of the producers of news and information. This move is crucial for grasping the diversity of acts that now come potentially under the heading of 'journalism practice'.

Origins

A practice approach operates with a wide definition of media (it has no reason to do otherwise), thinking about the users of media: basically, *all* platforms, mobile or fixed, through which content of any sort is now accessible or transmissible.

To understand this shift, let us recall one earlier strand within the history of media research. The basic question ('what [do] people do with media') was originally asked by Katz in 1959, but the Uses and Gratifications approach that followed from that question focussed on *individual usage* of bounded objects called 'media'. The practice approach to media discussed here differs in its *social* emphasis and in its emphasis on relations *not limited* to the use of discrete technologies, but was itself foreshadowed in media research of the 1980s and 1990s when writers such as Silverstone were exploring the uses of communications technologies in the home. Over time, researchers began to move beyond the specific contexts

of media consumptions: Ang (1996: 70–2) asked: ‘what [does] it mean [...] to live in a media-saturated world?’, while Couldry (2000: 6) asked ‘what it means to live in a society dominated by large-scale media institutions’.

Meanwhile in anthropology, by the early 1990s, Ginsburg (1994: 13) defined a distinctively anthropological approach to ‘mass media’ in terms that read like a prediction of where the whole field of media research was heading. Ginsberg observed that:

[o]ur work is marked by the centrality of people and their social relations – as opposed to media texts or technology – to the empirical and theoretical questions being posed in the analysis of media as a social form.

A decade later, Bird (2003), an anthropologist specialising in media, echoed Ang’s doubts from a few years earlier, when she wrote that ‘we cannot really isolate the role of media in culture, because the media are firmly anchored into the web of culture, although articulated by individuals in different ways [... because] The “audience” is everywhere and nowhere’ (2003: 2–3). One might say the same of the ‘journalist’. In this history of the developments of audience research lie the origins of a practice approach, and its relevance to the expanding space of contemporary journalism. Similarly, work on alternative media complicated the dichotomy between production and reception in relation to media practices (Bailey, et al, 2008).

Principles

Practice theory is interested in the *social* nature of practices. Behind the recent turn to ‘practice’ in social theory lies an interest in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of language which involved understanding language as action in the world, by contrast with an older view of language as the expression of meanings that must somehow ‘correspond’ to the world. Wittgenstein saw language as a toolkit: ‘think of the tools in a tool box: [...] the functions of

words are as diverse as the functions of these [tool]s' (Wittgenstein 1978: 6). Just like tools, words for Wittgenstein have a usage that is socially established, not individually chosen. Wittgenstein's term for that inherent social dimension was 'form of life'.

The concept 'forms of life' points to things that humans regularly do, without needing to codify them, practices that have an order which is linked to the organization of life itself, our needs in life, with words being tools in that wider form of life. So can we think about media-related practices, and journalistic practices in particular, as tools within a wider form of life, our way of living with and through media?

This gives us a very open approach to make sense of whatever people are doing in the space of journalism. Much more detail is needed of course to give a full sense of the potential of a practice approach. We do not aim in this chapter to develop this wider argument (but see Couldry 2012: chapter 2).

Beyond 'audience' practices

As originally formulated, a practice approach was strongly biased towards its roots in audience research rather than research on the producers of media. There is, however, no justification for limiting a practice approach in this way. A practice approach to media, while it *overlaps* with audience studies, can also offer insights into what in the past was called production studies, and indeed into practices which move *between* production and reception (e.g. alternative media).

Indeed, from the beginning a practice approach encouraged us to pay attention to another key area: the uses to which media are put in daily *institutional contexts*, including work contexts where media are used towards various instrumental ends, for example 'practices of using media sources in education [...] the uses of media in the legal system and in work practices across the public world' (Couldry 2004: 126). The potential importance of such

practices derived from a view of the world very different from that implied by the traditional model of producing, distributing and receiving mainstream media contents that had dominated earlier media studies, and that reduced those not institutionally involved in producing or distributing media contents for mass circulation (those outside ‘the media’) to the role of *leisure*-based media consumption. Already in 2004 this was an inadequate reading of people’s possibilities for acting with media in general, and their engagement with journalism in particular. Subsequent notions of the ‘produser’ simply repeated this point, but using terms which still reflected the divisions of the age of mass media. What needs our attention is the *open-ended* space of practices for using and making media to meet purposes which may have nothing to do with those of media industries, but help build or sustain other institutions.

In a world of massively accelerated and expanded information circulation characterised, as Wernick (1991) prophetically pointed out a quarter of a century ago, by a huge inflation in promotional culture, many types of work practice now involve consuming media, commenting on media, aggregating media content, and sometimes also making media for some form of circulation. Using Twitter, for example, for work purposes to promote events and business developments, and to circulate reactions to those same events and developments is now routine. But many of such practices are aimed purely at immediate ends that serve institutional purposes: getting a particular word out. There is particular interest, however, in activities that aim to share information and resources towards broader collective ends which do not obviously benefit any particular institution, or individual. For here might be the beginnings of new forms of making stories and information into a common resource, that is, ‘news’ (Rantanen 2009: x–xi). We will approach this topic through developing individual and collective practice of ‘sharing’.

Introducing sharing as a practice

We are sharing things with each other in new ways because of the affordances of digital platforms which make it easy to share. Some forms of practice already discussed implicitly involve sharing: for example, ‘showing’. You send someone a weblink, so both showing and sharing it; or ‘presencing’ which inevitably involves sharing many things with a wider group to whom one is ‘present’. The interesting and more general question which these practices raise is whether we are now increasingly thinking about ‘sharing’ in a different way, imagining completely new possibilities for sharing things and so, in effect, marking off sharing as a distinct, perhaps complex, practice in itself.

Two types of action we might miss if we did not think about sharing as a separate practice would be first, people uploading resources online so that they can be a common resource. The second would be people doing things collaboratively on the basis of those shared resources which would not be possible otherwise: for example doing journalism in a distributed way. By ‘sharing’ we mean an activity where there is something more going on than the basic act of, say, pointing or connecting to others: where there is a more generalized intent to share a resource for collective use, or to share an experience so that it is no longer bounded as a purely individual ‘experience’. The massive new opportunities *to share* things in the digital age mean that we will only *gradually* become used to the new possibilities for sharing what previously were individual actions: ‘sharing’ will be necessarily an emergent practice. One example might be new forms of political activism, within social movements increasingly using social media to mobilise for direct action and/or disseminate evidence of police violence; or indeed situations where ordinary people post or upload or simply tweet materials for possible collective use, hoping that someone will be able to make use of them, and expose injustice in the process of that practice.

But not all sharing is voluntary or hopeful. As Dave Eggers' recent fable *The Circle* (2013) analyses, social media platforms now depend on a business model – even a social vision – which is based on compulsory sharing with the platform owners: requiring (or strongly incentivising) users to share not only their comments, ideas, experiences, but also the whole history they leave online, so that economic value can be made from it, by selling or analysing the data. We could call this 'passive sharing' – sharing which we are assumed to have done when we use a social media or other online platform, but whose exchange we have generally not approved specifically – but it can have active variants, as when healthy individuals are persuaded to 'share' regular data on their health via phone or tablet apps (health apps being one of the main growth areas in the increasingly crowded app market, see Bradshaw, 2014). With sharing, we come to one of the key moral and potentially political issues of our age: whether the economy can successfully rely on processes so broad and important, to which consent is so partial and uncertain (Cohen 2012; Crary 2013; Mejias 2013). In this volume, Daniel Kreiss and Scott Brenner tackle these issues at some length. However in this chapter we sidestep these broader issues in order to focus critically on what new practices of voluntary and generally 'active' sharing might mean for the expansion of journalism's domain.

One key input (and output) for contemporary journalism that from the start is concerned with sharing – Twitter – provides a good example of why we need a practice approach to capture its diversity. A practice approach will automatically look for the diversity in whatever set of potential practices it is considering: it will avoid assuming, say, that the users of Twitter are doing just one single thing. Twitter, the microblogging platform founded in 2006, supports a number of *different* practices which, as forms of life, need to be distinguished. To name a few: individuals with indirect access to official media access can use Twitter as a means of unauthorised commentary (for example footballers tweeting of the arrival of a new

player ahead of the official club announcement); second, individuals with personal high media status (celebrities) can use Twitter to maintain a constant online presence, whose informality is geared to building a fan base; third, groups can cohere around a particular twitter address or hashtag, to which commentary or other information can be sent: if successful, this becomes a form of groups without previous identity or symbolic capital acquiring a digital presence.

These are just three distinct practices to start with, and they suggest broader patterns: on the one hand (which does not look like the acts of a mass audience at all) specialist networks on Twitter, such as the community of political commentary or policy debate, in London and no doubt many other places, where everyone is both a producer and an audience member; on the other, and looking remarkably like the old mass audience situation, the large numbers that follow the Twitter account of a celebrity but do not generally tweet at all themselves. So it is clear that the degree to which Twitter as platform is integrated into people's wider daily practices will depend very much on *which* practice of Twitter use we are talking about: the first pattern may be closely integrated into what people in the policy or political community do in both their work and leisure, while the second may be relatively unimportant to its users' daily practices (just a passing pleasure).

Twitter: A platform for sharing information, news and commentary

In this section we aim to present a number of examples of how the sharing of information and news is changing the journalistic field and producing new and emerging media practices, some of which could be considered hopeful, others more problematic. It could be argued that journalism was traditionally about not sharing in the immediate – think of the important role of ‘the scoop’ in building a reputation for a journalist and a media organisation alike.

Nowadays the sharing of news, tidbits and comments on a rolling basis is one of the main hallmarks of the twenty-first century networked or distributed journalist (Beckett 2008; Anderson 2011). Sharing practices in traditional journalism are situated at the level of the individual journalist, as well as the media organisation and culture of which they form part – their habitus to put it in Bourdieusian terms.

In terms of the latter it could be argued that changes in sharing practices are intimately connected to changes at the level of the temporal dimensions of news production and the field of journalism. The stopwatch culture of deadlines (Schlesinger 1987) and the importance of the scoop have not entirely disappeared, but the news cycle today is dynamic and continuous (24/7) rather than more episodic as was the case in the past (Crary 2013). Not so long ago there were two to three core-moments in the day that news was communicated to audiences; in the morning when the newspapers were published and at noon and/or in the evening through TV news. Radio enabled more flexibility, but also tended to be limited to hourly bulletins. The emergence of satellite broadcasting, 24/7 news channels and especially the increased prominence of the internet in people's everyday lives have not only radically changed the temporality of news, but arguably also its spatiality (Rantanen 2005). Today, news and information provision can be seen as a permanent flow 'shared' with us on and through a variety of media and platforms, which includes traditional media such as print and broadcasting, but also blogs and above all social media.

Twitter has in many ways become the medium *par excellence* for a variety of actors, journalists and other media professionals, political and cultural elites, political activists as well as ordinary peopleⁱ, opening up a whole range of new media practices as well as substituting old ones (Murthy, 2011; Hermida 2013). We could argue that the microblogging platform Twitter is used by elites as well as activists and audiences 'to broadcast', that is, to

share information with their peers, fans, the general public and journalists. It is therefore very much a tool in strategies of ‘presencing’; for example, making a piece of private information a common resource, building social capital or using it for personal or organisational branding purposes.

Besides this, Twitter and social media more generally have also increasingly become a platform through which news is produced; political and cultural elites use it to broadcast independently, which subsequently gets amplified by journalists and media organisations, but also by ordinary people re-tweeting elite or celebrity discourses. At the same time, ordinary people as well as activists use Twitter to share information and commentary or to make collective struggle visible. Finally, Twitter is also increasingly used by media elites as a generic term gradually replacing references to ‘public opinion’.

Elites’ Twitter practices

Elites such as political actors or celebrities will use Twitter as a tool to produce news themselves, to brand themselves and to connect with their constituencies/fans. Ultimately these practices by elites should be seen as attempts to control and steer the news agenda. For example, the UK royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton was first announced on Twitter by the Royal Palace (@ClarenceHouse, 16 November 2010). Indicative of the necessity for elites ‘to be’ on Twitter was the recent – and thus very late – joining of Hillary Clinton (in June 2013). As the tweets in Figure 22.1 expose, her use of Twitter cleverly combines the personal with the political and demonstrates that the personal is intricately political:

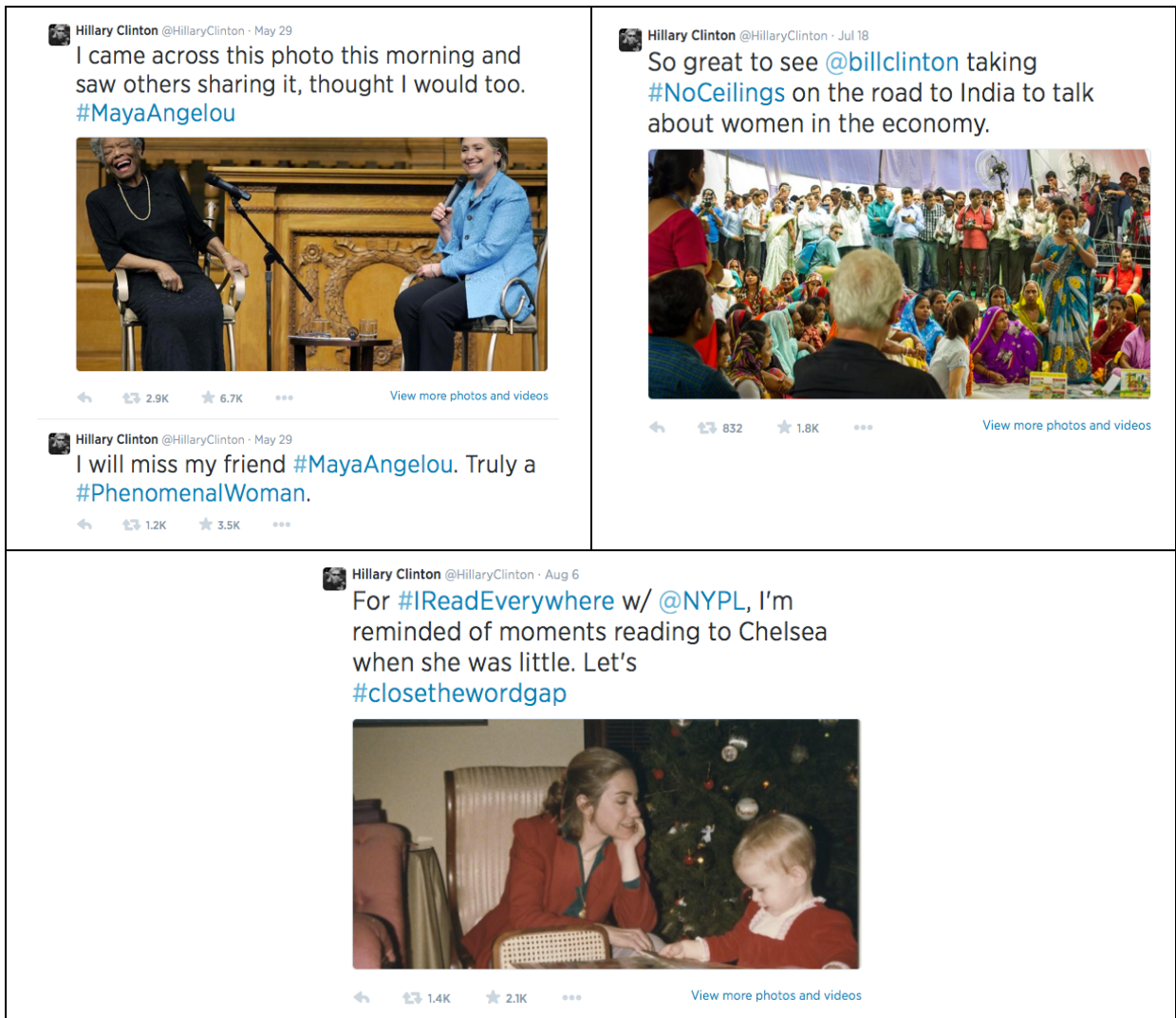


Figure 22.1 Selection of Tweets from @HillaryClinton mixing the personal and the political, 2014

At the same time, Twitter has obviously become a major source of information for journalists, *sifting out* tweets from political and cultural elites. Some of these tweets in themselves become major news stories, like when Hillary and Bill Clinton announced the pregnancy of their daughter Chelsea in a coordinated fashion via Twitter (cf. @HillaryClinton and @BillClinton, 18 April 2014).

Another important use of Twitter by political and cultural elites, and as also shown in Figure 22.1, is providing commentary on an event, the death of another public figure or a news item. This then in turn often gets picked up by mainstream media who reports it as

news, and precisely because it often concerns opinion or commentary by elite voices on a story or event that is already in the news it ticks many of the news value boxes (cf. Galtung and Ruge 1973). This particular use serves particularly well as a way of establishing presence in the public space.

The death of former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in April 2013 led to a deluge of very mixed reactions from cultural, economic and political elites on Twitter. Some examples of the variety of comments posted on Twitter after the announcement:

- Current Prime Minister of the UK, **David Cameron**:
 - ‘It was with great sadness that I learned of Lady Thatcher’s death. We have lost a great leader, a great Prime Minister, and a great Briton’. (@David_Cameron, 8 April, 2013)
- Entrepreneur and Member of the House of Lords, **Alan Sugar**:
 - ‘Margaret Thatcher died today. A great lady she changed the face of British politics, created opportunity for anyone to succeed in the UK. RIP’. (@Lord_Sugar, 8 April 2013).
- Left-wing Member of Parliament, **George Galloway**:
 - ‘Tramp the dirt downⁱⁱ’. (@georgegalloway, 8 April 2013).
- Comedian, Sarah Millican:
 - ‘A lot of miners are discovering they can dance today’ (@SarahMillican75, 8 April 2013)

After an event like this, Twitter tends to really buzz and this was no different in the aftermath of Thatcher’s death. Unsurprisingly, the negative comments especially generated a lot of moral indignation from the British – pre-dominantly right wing – media.

Political activists' Twitter practices

Just as Hilary Clinton cannot afford to not be on Twitter, neither can a social movement these days. As argued elsewhere by one of us with reference to Foucault (1997), activists use social media as a technology of self-mediation (1) to disclose, with a view to transmit counter-hegemonic discourses or to mobilise for action, (2) to examine and reflect, in order to coordinate and adapt strategies and (3) to remember through capturing, archiving and sharing slogans and images (Cammaerts, 2015). Because social media possess affordances that are relevant to all three levels, the use of social media by protesters became very prominent and observable in recent years. The overlap here with broader practices of 'showing', 'presencing', 'sifting out' and 'archiving' already mentioned are clear.

We could refer here to the important role social media played for example during the protests against the banks and the capitalist system that underpins them, and against the policies of austerity enacted in the wake of the 2008 bail-out of the financial system (cf. Spanish Indignados, Occupy Movement). The Occupy Movement was arguably born on Twitter after the Canadian anti-consumerism organisation Adbusters.org tweeted the following message: 'Dear Americans, this July 4th dream of insurrection against corporate rule <http://bit.ly/kejAUy> #occupywallstreet' (@Adbusters, 4 July 2011), which then subsequently led to concrete plans for a march on Wall Street two months later. In relation to Occupy, Yochai Benkler (quoted in Preston 2011: np) denoted the role of the internet and social media as 'critical' especially because of 'the ability to stream video, to capture the images and create records and narratives of sacrifice and resistance', which can be related to the practice of 'archiving'.

The 2011 Arab Spring constituted further evidence that social media played an increasingly important role in terms of mobilising for and mediating protests, also beyond a

Western political context. For sure, the inflated claims of Twitter-revolutions in the Middle East is an enormous exaggeration (Khondker 2011), but despite this, it is still undeniably the case that social media did create a distinct set of mediation opportunities (Cammaerts 2012) for activists on the ground. At least, social media served to spread the protests to a variety of Arab countries and above all to internationalise the conflicts and make violent state actions highly visible to a Western and international audience (Hermida, et al. 2012), which in turn led to strong pressures from Western governments and even to a military intervention in the case of Libya.

Social media can also become constitutive of resistance rather than merely instrumental or facilitative. In the aftermath of Margaret Thatcher's death, Twitter and other social media platforms became a space of contestation and resistance, celebrating rather than lamenting her death. As already invoked by George Galloway's tweet, quoted earlier in this chapter, music and protest songs played an important role in this highly symbolic online resistance. Playlists were compiled and shared of anti-Thatcher protest-songs of the 1980s.

Besides this a social media campaign was started to get the *Wizard of Oz* song 'Ding Dong! the Witch is Dead', sung by Judy Garland, to number one in the charts. With 52,605 copies sold it reached number two. The BBC was forced to play the song but only played 5 seconds of the 51 seconds song. In a rather patronising tone, Ben Cooper (2013) the controller of BBC Radio 1 justified it as such:

[...] we should treat the rise of the song, based as it is on a political campaign to denigrate Lady Thatcher's memory, as a news story. So we will play a brief excerpt of it in a short news report during the show which explains to our audience why a 70-year-old song is at the top of the charts. Most of them are too young to remember Lady Thatcher and many will be baffled by the sound of the Munchkins from the *Wizard of Oz*.

In this example, we see emerging a repertoire of sharing practices aimed at the standard measures of the popular music industry, but with a clear intent to generate *political* news.

Journalistic Twitter practices

When news breaks today it is usually through Twitter first. Rumours and unnamed sources tend to play an important role in this regard. In 2009 the Hollywood entertainment website TMZ beat all the major news organisations to announce Michael Jackson's death through Twitter and their websiteⁱⁱⁱ. Using Twitter as a broadcasting tool, sharing spectacular information with the world, enabled this relatively small player to be ahead of major news networks in the case of this particular news event.

TMZ broke the news of Michael Jackson's death 18 minutes after he had been pronounced death and about 6 minutes prior to the coroner's office being alerted (Stelter 2009). Unlike TMZ major news organisations such as CNN (which is paradoxically owned by the same company as TMZ, namely AOL–Time Warner) waited for official confirmation and as a result it took them almost two hours longer to come to the same conclusion. This provided TMZ with an invaluable amount of exposure online and increased kudos offline. Harvey Levin (quoted in Collins and Braxton 2009), the managing editor of TMZ, reacting against the lack of crediting by competitors claimed '[n]o matter what they say, people know we broke the story'. It was calculated that about one hour after the announcement of Michael Jackson's death by TMZ more than 30 per cent of all messages on Twitter related to him and his death; Twitter even had problems coping with the sheer amount of messages (Cashmore 2009).

However, as argued above, Twitter is not only a platform to break news, but also to gather news. An interesting new phenomenon in this regard are real-time online aggregator pages in the wake of an unfolding story or breaking news. This can be denoted as a *beyond audience*

practice, thriving on the vast amount of information and comments that are shared by elites as well as ordinary people. When a media event or breaking news occurs, the websites of newspapers as well as TV broadcasters increasingly have social media teams at hand who monitor and *sift out* the online space for links to other websites, tweets, Facebook messages, photos or video-footage. This is then all posted on a live-updated page, in many ways similar to the live newswire of old, but now accessible to us all rather than only to the journalists.

So while the self-mediation practices of citizens, social movements, activists and protesters are often individualised accounts of an event, seen collectively they can potentially become a powerful alternative citizen- or activist-based narrative of that event, which can then subsequently be picked up and re-enforced by journalists. Kate Day (2009: np), a Social Media and Engagement Editor for the *Telegraph* at the time, commented on the increasingly important role of Twitter when reporting the 2009 G20 protests in London:

finally Twitter has shifted from being the story to becoming a tool with which to tell the story. [...] It's been wonderful to sit here at my desk and follow all sorts of observations, pictures and videos coming from people in the heart of the throng in central London as well as from those watching from afar.

In terms of newsgathering, ordinary people's social media use can also potentially become news through *beyond audience* practices. A fascinating example of this, also pointing to the complexity of the spatial dimension, is this tweet by IT consultant Sohaib Athar from Abbottabad, Pakistan. His tweet read: 'Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event)' (@ReallyVirtual, 1 May 2011). As it turned out, unwittingly he became the first to report on the US operation led by Navy Seals to eliminate Osama Bin Laden. During natural disasters such as earthquakes or accidents such as plane crashes, ordinary citizens also often turn to Twitter and other social media, which is why in such circumstances social media become a prime space for journalists to do crowd-newsgathering – a new form of *audiencing*

of potential long-term significance. The affordance of the #hashtag grouping tweets on similar topics is of crucial importance here as it is precisely the #hashtag and the close monitoring of trends on Twitter which makes Twitter so powerful as a newsgathering tool, but also as a way to construct a communicative space.

Finally, as a result of this profuse use of Twitter by elites, ordinary people and journalists alike, social media is increasingly positioned by some as a way to gauge public opinion. It is easy to imagine a political strategist asking: ‘So, what’s the mood on Twitter today?’ In the aftermath of the protests against the shooting of Michael Brown, an African American youngster by US local police in Ferguson, Missouri (August 2014), two journalists of the *Washington Post* wrote an article with the following headline: ‘Twitter starting to wonder why Hillary Clinton has not addressed events in Ferguson, Mo’ (Williams and Butler 2014). Increasingly, Twitter and social media is thus being referred to as if it were a subject with a common will or as a reflection of public opinion.

It is not uncommon for Marketing and PR companies to tap into social media and produce ‘emotional’ data for their clients on how they are being perceived, what the sentiments are regarding a story, an event or a person. After Margaret Thatcher died, the marketing company Meltwater (2013) analysed all tweets relating to Thatcher for 12 hours; they concluded that 43% of tweets were negative, 19% positive and 29% neutral. In some way by producing data like this and through its subsequent mediation via mainstream media platforms and social media, it is implied that Twitter opinion is in fact congruous with public opinion.

Tensions and contradictions

The practices of various actors as discussed above are not free of tensions and issues that could be seen as problematic or open to critique. We will not here develop a wider critique of discourse which constructs the social through ‘social’ media (see Couldry and Van Dijck, 2015), yet even so it is important to avoid the trap of unfettered celebration when it comes to these ‘sharing’ practices. While not denying the opportunities the increased sharing of information and news has for various actors and for journalism there are also serious issues of concern.

Elites

The mainstream media’s obsession with political, cultural and economic celebrities, the 24/7 news cycles which requires the production of an abundance of content, as well as the practice of re-tweeting by fans, followers and supporters, makes Twitter an ideal tool for elites in terms of perfecting their *presencing* and self-branding strategies and practices. There is nothing surprising here: elites have always used all the possible media at their disposal to disseminate their views, protect their interests and re-enforce their power. Given the celebrity-obsessed societies many of us live in it is also to be expected that media and journalists would reproduce in bulk elite discourses transmitted via Twitter.

However, these *presencing* practices do elicit a set of tensions and contradictions that are worth considering in conjunction with the opportunities they afford elites. Presencing practices by elites can also lead to a backlash. Voicing opinions that are deemed to be controversial or leftfield is often met with a vigorous response online that can easily turn nasty. On a weekly basis we are confronted with news of a celebrity causing offence and having to deal with the fallout of a tweet they posted. *Time* magazine, but also other media organisations, even publish lists of the top Twitter controversies each year. Because of

archiving practices and the synoptic characteristics of the ‘viewer society’ (Mathiesen, 1997), once out there transgressive statements by elites uttered on Twitter are impossible to fully delete and contain. Especially expressing overt or implicit racist and sexist views seem to cause easy controversy, luckily. A recent example of the former was BBC’s *Top Gear* presenter Jeremy Clarkson tweeting a photograph of a small black dog in conjunction with the words: ‘This is the latest addition to the pack. He’s called Didier Dogba’ (@JeremyClarkson, 21 April 2014), referring to a football player from Côte D’Ivoire who was playing for Chelsea FC at the time.

What all this also exposes are the contentious debates about whether freedom of speech online is different from freedom of speech offline. As a consequence, this also has implications at a legal level, for example when it comes to legislation to prevent the incitement of racial hatred and discrimination, libel and defamation law or legal restraining orders placed upon the media to prevent it from reporting a story. In recent years there have been a few highly interesting cases in this regard, especially in the UK. One of the most interesting cases from the perspective of media and celebrity transgressions was undoubtedly BBC’s *Newsnight* false accusation that a ‘senior Conservative’ was a paedophile and child abuser (in November 2012). It was not long before the name of Alistair McAlpine, a member of the House of Lords and advisor to former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, started to circulate online. Several media, cultural and political elites started sharing this information through their personal Twitter accounts.

After having been cleared – it was a case of mistaken identity – McAlpine subsequently successfully sought libel damages from those he called ‘high profile tweeters’, which he understood to be those with more than 500 followers (Dowell 2012). From a legal perspective, social media in the hands of elites are here being considered as individual

broadcasters and they are made responsible for the content they transmit. In this regard, the size of your audience matters: while somebody with 100 followers sharing the name of McAlpine got away with it, someone like Sally Bercow, the wife of the speaker of the House of Parliament, who tweeted ‘Why is Lord McAlpine trending? *innocent face*’ to her 56,000 followers was taken to court and sentenced.

We reach here a natural limit of what ‘sharing’ processes can contribute to news production.

Activists

In terms of activists’ and social movements’ usage of social media a different set of tensions and contradictions emerge. Besides emphasising the role of the internet in the mobilisations for and spreading of the Occupy movement, Benkler (quoted in Preston 2011: np) also noted that real change ‘will depend on actual, on-the-ground, face-to-face actions, laying your body down for your principles – with the ability to capture the images and project them to the world’. The problem with online enthusiasm for a given cause is that it often turns out to be rather fleeting and superficial, which is captured by Morozov’s (2009) critique of ‘clicktivism’ in effect being ‘slacktivism’. After analysing a random sample of 25,000 Occupy users on Twitter over a period of 15 months, Conover et al. (2013: 4) came to similarly pessimistic conclusions. The large majority of #Occupy users on Twitter, they claim, were already connected and politically active before the mobilisations and

while highly vocal in the months immediately following the movement’s birth, [they] appear to have lost interest in Occupy-related communication over the remainder of the study period, and have exhibited only marginal changes in their attention allocation habits and social connectivity as a result of their participation.

Along the same lines, it could be argued that the Arab Spring uprisings in various Arab countries and their various mediations have hardly led to genuine structural change in these

countries. Take the example of Egypt, which elected a conservative Islamist government and has in the mean time arguably reverted back to military rule and a docile reverential media (El Issawi and Cammaerts, 2015).

Similarly, while the resistance which emerged after the death of Thatcher was instrumental to vent frustration and to expose the divisive nature of her policies and ideas, it all remained symbolic and inconsequential to the actual structural power relations in society today, which are arguably more asymmetric and unequal than ever before. As the protest singer Billy Bragg wrote on his Facebook page: ‘Raising a glass to the death of an infirm old lady changes none of this. The only real antidote to cynicism is activism. Don’t celebrate – organise!’ (@BillyBragg, 8 April 2013).

By emphasising social media activities of activists and protesters, there is a danger of deluding ourselves that to generate massive online enthusiasm for a cause and as a result get it onto the short-term news agenda, constitutes victory, while it is only then that the real struggle for social or political transformation (and potential longer-term implications for the future of journalism) commences.

Conclusion: Sharing and the future of journalism

Media practices revolving around social media enacted by elites, activists and audiences have serious repercussions for the way news is produced and for journalistic practices more generally. These repercussions also invoke normative and ethical questions about the role of journalism in a democracy in an age of social media and an information and communication saturated society. Questions about what constitutes news today and where the boundaries lie between news, rumour and innuendo.

As amongst others the McAlpine case demonstrates, serious mistakes can be made, with real consequences for real people. The sad thing, however, is that the actual Twitter controversy itself also becomes a piece of news. This focus on the here and the now, on the mutterings and commenting of elites at any given moment in time, detracts from the urgent need for more in-depth analysis and well-resourced investigative reporting (Houston, 2010).

The huge impact that Twitter can potentially have on our media, at a hyperlocal, but equally on a global level, and the affordance of massive amplification, has also not gone unnoticed by political actors either, be they warring factions in a conflict, politicians or protest movements. This makes the media and journalists prone to deception and manipulation strategies, but also to ideological wars of position between antagonistic discourses and interests.

What is lacking so far, to our knowledge, outside moments of insurrection or intense political breakdown, are examples of sustained collaborations across social media to shift journalist agendas and the norms of journalistic practice. All the examples we have considered remain dependent upon the frame of mainstream journalism, often ‘sifting out’ information for us, or refer to symbolic protest at its margins. ‘Sharing’ has not yet emerged as the means, for example, to renew widespread debate about inequality (cf. Piketty, 2014), or to enhance the role of trade unions in sustaining political solidarity (cf. Dardennes’ brothers film, *Two Days, One Night*, 2014). As the most thoughtful review of networked or ‘connective’ activism up until now concludes, we still do not know what ‘a successful transition [to a different politics through social media] looks like’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013: 214).

The reason, we suggest, is that the routes to a new journalism (or a new politics for that matter) based on social media – parallel perhaps to the new journalism that emerged around

1960s counter-culture – have yet to emerge. And the reasons why they are still obscured is because, in turn, sharing via social media is also part of the practices that aim to reproduce existing models of journalism and traditional power structures. In addition to this, the mainstream discourses on and practices of sharing are also highly instrumental in terms of re-enforcing intra-elite relations as well as an individualistic capitalist value system (John, 2013); it is ‘I’ share, not ‘We’ share.

Yet at the same time other, more collective and public-interest, forms of sharing information and knowledge are emerging too (cf. Wikipedia or Glenn Greenwald’s *The Intercept*) and while these forms might be more disruptive at a structural level they are also embedded in a set of values that go beyond profit and/or personal gain and tend to be focussed on the interests of the many rather than the few. It is by tapping into these newly emerging more alternative forms and principles of collective sharing that public journalism might effectively be revived in a digital age.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Note though that Twitter has penetrated much less into the everyday life of most ordinary people than, say, Facebook. Certain types of people are more likely to have a Twitter account than others. Studies in the USA suggest an over-representation of male, affluent, urban and young users (Duggan and Smith 2013). At the same time, because journalists and media organisations are so plugged into social media and especially Twitter, this microblogging platform affects the ‘reality’ presented to us, whether it is close to our reality or not.

ⁱⁱ ‘Tramp the dirt down’ is the title of an anti-Thatcher song written by Elvis Costello (1989) in which he sings about the day when he could finally stamp on her grave.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.tnz.com/2009/06/25/michael-jackson-dies-death-dead-cardiac-arrest>