

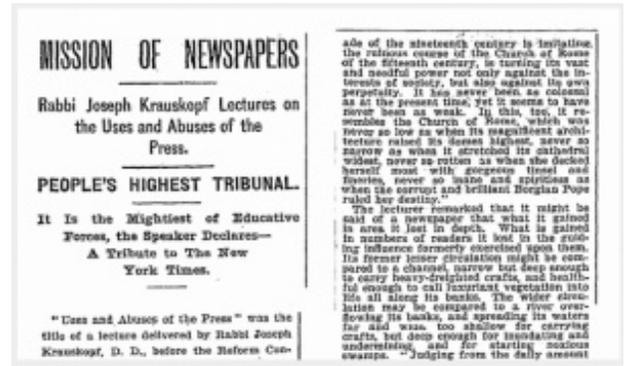
Does being networked change journalism? (guest blog)

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I have been preaching the gospel of [networked journalism](#) for years. I think that public participation and interaction are now a routine part of all kinds of news media and it's also become a regular fixture in [our teaching about journalism](#) at the LSE. But what difference does it make? In this guest article by LSE student and Polis intern [Claire Manibog](#), first published on her blog, she looks at whether being networked makes any difference to the idea of insider/outsider journalism. Over to Claire.

“The average sermon reflects the thought and belief of but one man, the average newspaper often reflects the thoughts, the observations, and the experiences of a hundred different minds, many of which find a readier response in the heart of its readers than do those of the preacher in the heart of his hearers...” – [Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf, New York Times \(January 24, 1897\)](#)



The fun part about exams is getting to play with theories and concepts: throwing them in the ring, watching them throw punches, and seeing which ones stand up after the fight. One such attempt was a paper I wrote on the ethics of network journalism and the public. Sounds complicated, but here are some clarifying definitions:

“Public” = You and me. People who read, watch, listen to, or tweet about the news.

“Network journalism” = When you and I participate in making the news, or as networks expert Adrienne Russell puts it, when we act “as creators, investigators, reactors, (re)makers, and (re)distributors of news where all variety of media, amateurs and professional, corporate and independent products and interests intersect at a new level” (Adrienne Russell, [Networked](#), 2011).

The question is, does participating in the news bring us together or split us apart? With the past year’s flagship events like the Arab Spring, the London Riots, and the Occupy Movement, it’s hard to deny that social movements, social media, and news-making have some sort of relationship – but what is it? And is it always a good one?

Some theory, for good measure

My argument grounded itself in some provocative concepts from Geraldine Muhlmann’s 2008 book, [A Political History of Journalism](#), where Muhlmann proposed that journalists play a role in “unifying” and “decentering” the public by doing the work they do.

Her concepts mean more than what they do at face value: “unifying” isn’t simply the idea of bringing people together, but a consequence of what Muhlmann calls journalists’ “uneasy allegiance” to norms of objectivity and fairness. In other words, by sterilizing news from subjectivity, journalists serve each of us a clean plate of news. And that’s supposed to be a good thing because it helps us see the world as a common experience.

“Decentering”, in turn, isn’t simply the direct opposite of “unifying” or the idea of splitting us apart. It’s a journalistic process of representing ‘otherness’ by giving voice to alternate views. Muhlmann argues that by allowing unfamiliar voices to speak (say, a victim of a massacre in a faraway country), our sense of community becomes destabilized. That is also a good thing, because that presents us with the truth about what’s out there in the world.

A new kind of journalism?

So what does this actually mean for networked journalism? If you and I start tweeting news, then it's by nature "soiled" by subjectivity and should therefore split us up rather than represent what we have in common. At the same time, it's arguably more "true" because, as direct witnesses to certain events, we can report more truthfully than any journalist.

With this in mind, I look back at Rabbi Krauskopf's statement in the 1897 New York Times (shown above) and wonder whether his observation, which is now more than 110 years old, still has relevance today. He basically argued that newspapers can get publics to engage way more than any sermon because they reflect everyone's views, rather than just one man's.

So I tried to see if network journalism redefines the role journalists play in "unifying" and "decentering" the public. And this is what I came up with:

"Network journalism offers three new possibilities: (1) 'decentering' through fragmentation, thus reducing the authority of the 'witness-ambassador' and allowing multiple publics to emerge in terms of news consumption; (2) 'decentering' through greater inclusion of multiple perspectives in terms of news production; (3) and, 'unifying' through a subjective, socialized process. As such, 'decentering' is given greater possibility to prevail, contrary to Muhlmann's original argument."

Okay, so what does that actually mean? It means that networked journalism does open up more possibilities for decentering the public, theoretically speaking. And that's a good thing because it opens us up to seeing more truths about our world. (That's what journalism's for, right?)

At the same time, it is unifying because networked news is shared via social media — via our existing networks of friends. So network journalism holds more promise for giving access to truth while keeping us within our social comfort zones.

But the dreaded question is: how does it 'work' in practice, at least in the terms of the idea of centring/decentring?

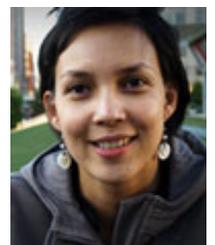
Citizen journalism put to the test

I tested it out on a well-known citizen journalism project — possibly the best example of decentered journalism — and argued that it doesn't work. It doesn't work because some citizen journalism websites cater to rather homogeneous audiences — groups that are already quite unified.

So a citizen journalist site might have stories posted by citizen journalists from all over the world, but its audience might be entirely, say, American (granted, globally-minded Americans) rather than a group of people that reflect the true diversity of its stories.

In other words, while network journalism might operate under the promise of democratizing news, it might just merely solidify our existing communities.

This article by [Claire Manibog](#) @cmanibog



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