

Transparency and Civic Journalism: ‘Will journalism be done by you or for you?’ (guest blog report on Heather Brooke lecture)

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When profit becomes the core function of a newspaper, the news falls out of touch with the public. We need journalism that resonates with public purpose, says Heather Brooke, author of *Your Right to Know*, *The Silent State*, and *The Revolution will be Digitised*.

This report by Polis intern Rebecca Chui.

The digital age has removed many of the barriers to journalism. With grassroots e-news groups to Twitter updates on the latest events, journalism has gone public. In the midst of a “digital revolution”, Brooke argues that civic journalism is crucial to holding those in power to account.

Yet Brooke begins her talk with a bleak vision: when journalism is driven by profit, news will become “just another widget in the factory ... subjected to the same efficiency values”. She refers to readers and listeners who grow increasingly alienated from news that fails to represent the interests of the public, sparking public-led initiatives such as the Occupied Wall Street Journal.

This alienation, she argues, happens all around us. Large corporations “manipulate our desire for a better world”, leaving us feeling empty as they merge messages of hope and inspiration with advertisements for the newest clothing lines. Brooke adds: “But when politicians do it too, it gets even more dangerous – it’s the collusion between finance, media and politics.”

Her words echo the meltdown of Iceland in 2008, describing a world where the interests of the financial elite, government and media converged into one and excluded public welfare. The issue of political transparency and public accountability was brought to the forefront.

But is the same happening to Britain? Since the MPs expenses scandal in 2009 that Brooke helped uncover, political transparency has seen some improvement – but Brooke says that this is not enough. To enact radical transparency, access to information is vital. Yet the numbers of dedicated court reporters have dwindled significantly and local newspaper coverage of court developments has become sparse.

With this growing gap between public purpose and mainstream media, there is an increased need to campaign for public interest. Brooke argues that this is a core function of journalism and journalists must bring these issues to light if they want to maintain an audience.

With fewer and fewer barriers to journalism, the public itself should help fight for issues that resonate within them and set the standard for transparency. This is the crux of civic journalism: the obligation to the public good and the involvement of the public as active participants in the creation and dissemination of news.

This digital shift has inspired public-led journalism to thrive, but the consequences of this are yet to be fully comprehended. Will journalists continue to write for the public good, and how will governments respond to increasing civic journalism?

And finally, Brooke asks us all: Who are you working for, journalists?

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