

The Specialist Amateur: A New Threat to the Professional Journalist (guest-blog)

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Feeling threatened?

While listening to the International Journalism Festival panel on *Democracy After Journalism*, moderated by POLIS Director Charlie Beckett I was challenged by a new question about the future of journalism. Through the enlightening debate over journalism's watchdog function and impassioned discussions of what democracy should be, an underlying theme arose that begged the question: What happens to journalism when real-life "experts" become journalistic "amateurs"?

This report by Beth Lowell

Panelists Adrian Monck, director of communication for the World Economic Forum, Marco Pratellesi, head of online for Conde Nast, Italy, Stephen Shakespeare co-founder of YouGoc and Paul Staines, founder of the Guido Fawkes blog all referenced the implications of emerging untraditional participants in the journalistic profession but it was Staines, perhaps unsurprisingly considering his own background, who first raised the term "amateurs".

He immediately clarified that he used the term with implied quotation marks and maintained that "most journalists are generalists," asserting emphatically that he took no issue with content contributors who lack the

journalist title as long as they produce high quality work. Shakespeare echoed Staines sentiment to his degree in his discussion of specialists' work as "amateur" news producers. He highlighted the role of platforms such as Twitter in enabling direct access to expert opinions on specific news issues.

In his assessment, these specialists, with an unparalleled degree of knowledge in their field, can often provide superior information with a "higher level of thinking". In particular, he singled out academics as participants with the potential to surpass journalists in terms of high-caliber information and analysis.

Specialist Amateur

Staines and Shakespeare were hardly the first festival participants to raise this concept of the "specialist amateur". An overwhelming number of sessions touched on the growing role of the citizen journalist, members of society with no professional journalistic experience who have something on a story, be it a first-hand account, an expert opinion, or an inside source, that the trained journalist does not.

Yet it was Pratellesi who provided the most guarded response to this trend towards the glorification of the specialist amateur. He directed his caution specifically at politicians as information disseminators noting that when politicians assume the role of "amateur" journalist, establishing a direct line of communication and news dispersal to constituents, the result runs dangerously close to propaganda. In his assessment, the emergence of amateur journalists does not nullify but rather amplifies the importance of the trained journalist's role by intensifying the importance of the watchdog function. He argued that "journalistic truth, may not be full truth but it's an honest truth" and it remains an obligation of the profession to strive for the production of this content through the skilled mediation of amateur content to work collectively towards the most reliable version of truth.

A further defense of professional journalism came from the crowd as BBC Global News Director Peter Horrocks

raised the point that specialist participation in information construction can result in a breadth of material that the average citizen has neither enough time nor expertise to understand. In these instances, he claimed, professional journalism plays a “complementary role” to the expert information Shakespeare valued so highly. In the interplay between specialist amateurs and professionals, successful results are “clearly about that complementary ecology”.

Horrocks and Pratesi’s promotion of collaborative efforts between professional journalists and specialist amateurs seems best oriented towards service of the public interest. However, it looks to be continuously threatened by assertions that the concept of the journalistic specialist is itself becoming obsolete. For as long as the importance of journalistic expertise is undervalued, the necessity of professional journalists will continue to be questioned. However, should the profession ever actually become extinct, I suspect the journalistic amateurs, no matter how specialized in their particular field, would prove poor replacements for the expert journalist of today.

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