

What Is Quality In Networked Journalism?

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This is a rough draft of an article I am writing on the idea of 'quality' in journalism in the digital, Internet, Networked Age. Outdated concept or vital idea? These are my opening and unfinished thoughts.

Essentially, the traditional mainstream media definition of quality was a mixture of cultural and political or class assumptions. Quality journalism was for quality people: educated, opinionated, influential, responsible, concerned and powerful.

Quality News?

Other popular media might also inform and educate its audience but that was very much a by-product of its primary function: to entertain. Quality media might also deal with cultural subjects such as art and sport. It might also have crosswords and quizzes to amuse.

However it was different in production, style and above all subject and story selection. It was more expensive and expansive but it was defined primarily by its self-conscious intelligence and its concern with identifying and arbitrating the exercise of power.

Enforce the divide

There was never any regulation or code to enforce this divide between 'quality' and popular journalism. Although in the case of public service broadcasting there were legal mandates on media organisations to provide 'quality'. 'Quality' journalism asserted itself as a product of certain platforms and organisations and styles of journalism, rather than something assured by kite-marks or rules.

It was created by a certain type of people for their peers. It was a product delivered from very few to a large minority, if not an elite. There were no formal professional qualifications but quality media had a distinct bias towards white males from the top Universities.

There was no cartel, and yet the agenda of the mainstream quality newspapers and broadcast media was remarkably cohesive. Certainly there was a spectrum of views, but the while perspectives on issues were differentiated, the actual set of concerns were largely shared.

Destroy, creatively

So what then happens when that editorial production process is disrupted, in Schumpeter's phrase, by the destructively creative forces of new technologies?

If you accept the case I make in *SuperMedia*, that journalism is moving towards new forms of production then this begs the question of what we mean by 'quality' in that reconstructed media environment. I raise the issue in the book, but now that networked journalism is becoming the norm rather than the exception, I think it's a good moment to attempt a further exploration of the implications for the idea of quality.

Lazy Elitism?



For I want to make it clear that I don't have a fundamental problem with the idea that there is something called 'quality' journalism. Yes, it can be an excuse for lazy elitism or complacent coteries. However, the idea that some sorts of journalism can be more difficult to make, more important to society or more sophisticated and challenging in its content is surely something to be encouraged.

I will show in this essay that networked journalism can transform and enhance the quality of news media production by making journalism deeper, more connected, diverse and intelligent. Through greater public participation, interactivity and connectivity it can become more reflective and representative while allowing for greater creativity and critical thought.

I would argue that becoming more networked is vital for journalism to recreate its business model in an era of social media and hypertextual disintermediation. But if being networked is only a defensive response, then we will miss the opportunity to bring greater value – my definition of quality – to this new kind of journalism.

This is not to ignore the threats to 'quality'. Regardless of the mode of production, journalism has and will always be prey to a number of threats: commercialism, underinvestment, political interference, and professional complacency. Nick Davies has well-described the increase in some sectors of 'churnalism' while others have railed against proprietor-driven bias.

Fresh Threats

New technologies also bring with them fresh threats. As journalism becomes more networked there are still choices that we must make as journalists, citizens or politicians to decide what kind of media – what quality of news – we want. There is nothing innately virtuous, democratic or valuable about the Internet.

These are not always new questions. I would suggest, for example, that traditional quality media was just as prone to the 'echo-chamber effect' where by people consumed media that accorded with their own views. But that does not mean that we should not seek for a more diverse, plural and interconnected media through more networked journalism rather than the fragmented 'me' media feared by Cass Sunstein.

It is too early to judge what the actual effect on 'quality' the new forms of journalism are having. It is impossible to separate out the effect of new editorial processes from other economic factors. But let's have a go.

Read a second extract from this draft paper [here](#)

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