

News for a less flat earth

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2008-10-16

I am giving a paper on Networked Journalism and the business future of news at a journalism/academic conference happily entitled [The End Of Journalism](#). Here it is:

Networked Journalism: News For A less Flat Earth?

Charlie Beckett

Polis

London School of Economics/London College of Communication

Introduction

This paper sets out the idea of Networked Journalism and how it is changing the practice and possibilities of journalism. It is based on two years of research and debate at Polis, the LSE/LCC Media think-tank, and on my career as a newspaper, broadcast and Online journalist. The core ideas are set out in my book *SuperMedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save The World*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008). In this paper I will attempt to move beyond the explanation of Networked Journalism to explore implications for the news media business model and journalism education.

I will argue that mainstream journalism is combining with public participatory elements of citizen journalism and audience interactivity. This coincides with a technological, social and economic upheaval in the news market. The result is a challenge to established journalistic practice and the advent of new relationships between public and news production.

The journalism 'business model' is shifting from product to process, from a transaction to a relationship and from a manufacturing to a service industry. In the process journalism is being redefined by the new technology and the new relationships with audiences. Ideas of temporality, ethics and professionalism are being challenged.

Is this a revolutionary shift? There is a continuing need for core journalistic functions and the resilience of traditional media brands. There are questions as to the degree to which this changing media practice will affect the wider social context such as democratic discourse and political practice.

It certainly implies a new business model. Even publicly funded journalism will have to create a new compact between the citizen and the news organisation. News media in the market place will have to find new ways of funding journalism. Part of the solution will be a drastic restructuring that will include severe reallocations of labour

and resources.

What is also needed is a radical change in attitudes to media literacy and journalism education that recognises the significant shift in the news media's social role and the potential for an enhanced place for journalism in society.

Next Media is Networked Media

I am going to assume that we are all familiar with the statistics. The Internet is now a significant and expanding space for news. It has not yet displaced or revolutionised traditional 'offline' journalism, but it is the most dynamic force in changing the way we make and consume news. Many people continue to see this as a battle between Old and New Media as if the two were mutually exclusive. However, as Tom Armitage [1] has observed, all journalism is now digital to some extent and so we should be simply talking about 'Next Media'.

Things really are changing. The old business model is broken. The audience is shifting its attention and altering its behaviour regarding news. There are technological, social and economic reasons for this, but here are some consequences in the way that media works:

Old Media: Next media:

That list of changes has implications that change the way journalism is produced, although they do not spell the end of journalism.

The core functions of journalism are to report, analyse and comment on the world around us. Journalism acts as a filter, editor and packager of information. It is about information and entertainment. All this continues with Next Media but as a much more public participatory and connected process.

The citizen and journalism

New media giveth and it taketh away. It has taken a lot of public attention away completely from mainstream media and taken it to a variety of Online activities that often have no connection with news. This is a particular problem for mainstream media in its role as a place for entertainment and distraction.

Now here is the "giveth". Infinite technology and low barriers to entry now mean that the citizen can practice

independent journalism. As NYU Professor Jay Rosen defines it, this is:

“When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, *that’s* citizen journalism.” [2]

Look at the flourishing of *YouTube* – it produced more video in six months than a major US Network has made in the last half century. Look at *Flickr*, which uploads about 3,000 images a minute. Read some of the 120 million blogs active at present.

Now you might wish to apply the 1% rule of user generated content. Only one per cent of UGC is any ‘use’ as journalism: the rest is personal, inaccurate, repetitious, derivative or simply incompetent and unintelligible. That still leaves a lot of ‘journalism’. Most of mainstream media has been sensible enough to realise that this is an extraordinary resource.

Networked Journalism is about connecting to public participation and making it a part of mainstream media production. This is partly about news organisations going online. That in itself opens up public participation. People post comments, send emails, they interact with the product. Beyond that it is possible to integrate public involvement throughout the journalism production process. The BBC has led on this. Radio 4’s iPM programme asks the audience to choose the stories. BBC Berkshire put up Google Maps with citizen content during last year’s flooding. BBC correspondents use the News website and viewer emails as a way of gathering information and case studies for specific stories. BBC Online links to relevant bloggers.

The BBC is very concious, however, of keeping control. This is typical of mainstream media. I have no problem with the idea of moderation as long as editorial practices are transparent. However, Next Media expands the power of the citizen, even where Mainstream Media seeks to retain control. For example, it allows the citizen the power to act as the watchdog rather than rely on Ofcom, the PCC or the courts.

An international example is the way the blog *Little Green Footballs* [3] uncovered the fake Reuters Beirut photo in 2006. Domestically, political bloggers like Paul Staines, aka blogger *Guido Fawkes* [4] are good at holding mainstream Westminster correspondents to account. I argue in my book [5] that Guido had a significant impact on stories such as the John Prescott resignation by enervating mainstream media coverage.

This may not mean a democratic revolution in the production of news media. The means of production and the power to frame narratives remain largely in the hands of mainstream media organisations, for now. However, the way they make the news has changed and will continue to do so.

Changing news

News is no longer a product, it is a process. It is no longer an object, it is a service. Journalists must increasingly see themselves as facilitators not gatekeepers. This does not mean that mainstream journalists should stop doing original reporting or investigations. It does not imply that their authority or impartiality is irrelevant. In fact, their ability to produce distinctive and trustworthy content will now have a much greater premium. The ability to act as an efficient and reliable editor and filter is needed more than ever as the citizen struggles with an abundance of information.

However, the Networked Journalist will no longer be able to rely on privileged access to data. They will not be able to take the audience's attention for granted. In addition, they will not be able to be complacent about the superiority of their opinion and judgement.

Quite the opposite. They will realise that much of their work was repetitious and derivative, partial and ill-founded. It is what Nick Davies calls "Flat Earth News" [6]. Davies blames capitalism and public relations and warns that the Internet can only make things worse. I disagree. Davies book is a brilliant exposé of the worse kind of journalism, but his thesis fails to account for a much deeper crisis in journalism. It has always been full of nonsense, rubbish and bias. Now the public has a choice. So do professional journalists.

I would argue that a more Networked Journalism practiced as I have outlined above can have the following impacts.

- <!--[endif]-->Rebuild trust
- <!--[endif]-->Conquer temporality
- <!--[endif]-->Build in reflexivity
- <!--[endif]-->Connect audiences
- <!--[endif]-->Cross boundaries
- <!--[endif]-->Redefine the public service role of media

If journalism is more open and involves the public in production then it loses its mystique but gains trust. I believe that trust is an oft-mythologised concept that acts as a figleaf for an honest discussion of power and responsibility in the news market. [6a] At present trust is based on an exchange of information for money. The formerly passive public no longer values that contract. It has active alternatives. A partisan independent political blogger may now be perceived by some people as more 'trustworthy' than a Westminster lobby correspondent. A Networked Journalist responds with more openness. So the BBC's Nick Robinson [7] now blogs about how he works and attempts to show the inner workings of his craft.

Networked Journalism conquers temporality in journalism in a number of ways. Stories now live forever online. That means that mistakes and falsehoods can, too. It also allows for continual contextualisation, revision and

connectivity. Hypertextuality means that there is no excuse not to build in links to citizen journalism, related sources, and differing viewpoints. The lack of deadlines means that journalists are no longer under the same pressure to provide the definitive first draft of history. Instead, they are, in effect, building a wiki for every story or issue.

I would suggest that this builds in reflexivity for both producer and consumer of news. In the past reaction was unrelated to the initial process. Now critical oversight and evaluation is taken out of the hands of the Editor and shared. Instead of relying on a vague understanding of sales or viewing figures, the journalist can respond to direct input from colleagues and the public. The danger is a mindless pursuit of the lowest common denominator and 'mob' influence. I think that is a lesser danger than disconnected journalism created for the profession not the public. It also helps correct mainstream media's bias tendency towards groupthink and 'conventional wisdom'.

Clearly, if it is successful then Online journalism can connect people. It certainly brings the mainstream media and the public in to closer proximity. It also brings the public into connection with each other. Some argue that this actually exacerbates social fragmentation as groups or individuals seek out their like. It is very difficult to measure this. Did readers of different newspapers in the past exchange views more than they do when reading the Online versions? I see a lot of evidence to the contrary as we witness readers with very different views clashing in places like *The Guardian's* "Comment Is Free". [8]. It may not be pretty but it is certainly an exchange.

Certainly, Networked Journalism can cross boundaries. We can see this in global networks such as Reuters' Global Voices blogs. We have all seen the citizen journalism that emerged from places like Burma to connect to mainstream media outlets. Again, it can distort. The reason that the Boxing Day tsunami was covered was down to citizen media. The reason that it was covered to such a degree was the fact that a lot of Western tourists were involved and most of them had video cameras with them.

Networked Journalism could also be effective at crossing other boundaries, of class or faith. I do not always equate crossing boundaries with peace, love and understanding. The Cartoon controversy showed how a global conversation could turn into a violent argument. That, however, is a core function of journalism. It offers a space for a robust exchange that allows disputes to be aired and some kind of discourse to emerge. The difference is that the citizen can directly access this space.

Finally, Networked Journalism redefines what we mean by public service value. In the past, this was about elites in government deciding what they valued. Institutions then protected the resources that facilitated this. In the best examples, there was a complex system of checks and balances with token gestures at public accountability. Value was determined in terms of content and only secondarily in terms of the social function of media. Issues of media literacy were largely ignored. Like much of the British post-war welfare state, it was a producers' charter.

This is not to ignore the impressive achievements of the Public Service Broadcast sector. However, under the pressure of convergence and digitalisation the old structures for defining public service in institutional terms are collapsing. How can we sustain these values in a Networked Journalism environment? One way is to redefine values beyond content.

If we are to invest public money in the Networked News Media, it can still be for the social goods that we want in terms of geography, subject or standards. We can still choose to invest in international or local coverage, arts or children's content. Increasingly this will be done regardless of a particular organisation and more in terms of the service itself.

Three concepts may help to shape how we define the public value of journalism in the future: media literacy, editorial diversity and relevance.

Media Literacy as public value

Media Literacy will become more crucial. In an age of abundance, choice and participation, the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create media becomes a vital part of citizenship. Our lives will depend increasingly on information for wealth, health and happiness. The quality of that information and the ability to shape it will depend on our media literacy. It should become an integral part of life-long learning. Media literacy is not just a non-academic version of media studies (although some might argue that media studies is already non-academic). It is about empowering and enabling the individual to play a full role in a communications society.

Networked Journalism in itself supports media literacy. So support for media literate networked journalism is justified in terms of creating public value. Networked Journalism is the right model for the news media as a business. It takes the process to the consumer and ensures that the customer is connected to the service provider. It requires investment in the technology and the skills. Sometimes this investment should be through the state but through a wider range of agencies than simply Education Departments. Media Literacy is a way of supporting citizenship and economic efficiency and so should be invested in by any authority, agency or business interested in creating social capital.

Editorial Diversity

Part of the commitment to a new sense of public value is the idea of editorial diversity. This is partly the regular meaning of having journalists who reflect their communities. I have always thought this makes sense in a business context. Networked Journalism helps to build that diversity into the process. What diversity will mean increasingly is an ability to harness and incorporate different sources, viewpoints and approaches. It requires a deliberate attempt to share agenda setting and evaluation. It means consciously fostering greater creativity among the community of producers, especially through public participation. It involves recognising that mass media has tended to focus on a narrow news agenda which is explored in formulaic and predictable ways.

Relevance

If media literacy and editorial diversity are achieved then the public value of 'relevance' may be, too. Whether 'amateur' or 'professional' the Networked Journalist must understand that if they want an audience they must gain trust and attention. I call this "relevance". By this I mean it in a very broad sense to describe how "pertinent, connected, or applicable something is to a given matter." This does not necessarily mean useful or personal. It can apply to ideas or arguments as much as information. "Relevant" in this context means that the public is proximate to the information. They trust it because it has been mediated through a network which connects the consumer directly with its production. It may be as simple as the opportunity to email a comment or as complicated as a wiki. It is something more tangible than the old paternalistic, idealised sense of journalism which asked to be taken on trust. This was effectively a claim asserted without negotiation. Networked Journalism now has the technology to facilitate a process of transparency and connectedness that will create that new kind of relevance.

The business model

I argue in *SuperMedia* that there is increasing demand for journalism. We live in an increasingly mediated world where information and debate is vital to our health, wealth and happiness. People are better educated and richer. They are even prepared to contribute to the production of Networked Journalism for little or no gain. This is a great market to be in. However, we all know about the difficulties of monetising online journalism.

Networked Journalism offers a mechanism for creating a relationship where the public values the product but it does not secure a profit by itself. I believe that we will see a mixture of models.

- <!--[endif]-->Traditional news media organisations becoming more efficient (no printing presses, for example) and improving online advertising revenues
- <!--[endif]-->Public journalism created by foundations, NGOs, Universities and governments
- <!--[endif]-->Cross-subsidy of journalism by more diverse media organisations and even by wider service providers
- <!--[endif]-->Monetising search as a form of personal advertising

One should not ignore how certain 'Old media' are currently thriving. Non fiction journalism book sales are up, feature length documentaries are being shown in multiplexes. There is more good journalism being created by more good journalists than ever before. However, there is one unavoidable fact. There will be a great redundancy. As the public access their own information, create their own comment and find analysis directly then increasingly whole swathes of journalism will become redundant and rationalised. Those who merely repete will become obsolete.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Internet journalism will be judged on its 'relevance' not an idealised notion of 'truth'. There is nothing innately democratic about the Internet. There is no inevitably progressive or humane outcome of its work. I recognise that there are those who make greater claims for Online communication. Some are Internet evangelists such as Joe Trippi who are convinced that it will inevitably bring about a more democratic politics. [9] Others are the same Leftist idealists who hope that by taking over any media in the name of the 'people' you can 'manufacture' democracy in the same way mainstream media creates consent. [10]

There are some big questions about this vision of the future of news that we as journalism academics must address critically. How can we measure the flows of news and its values and impacts in this new environment? How much does the public actually want to invest in my model of networked journalism? How far must we accept that the classic idea of journalism as a practice is simply less relevant in a world where social networking may have as much political influence on attitudes and actions as articles or blogs? How far does globalisation create conflict and cacophony rather than a more cosmopolitan international communications?

These are all valid problematics. At present I put my trust and my effort in to the more modest hope of Networked Journalism, where the mainstream news media working with the public creates a more open and connected form of reporting our world.

Footnotes:

1: Armitage, Tom. *New Statesman* July 31st, 2005:

<http://www.newstatesman.com/200607310067>

accessed 11.08.08

[2] <http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/>

Accessed 11/08/08

[3] http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/?entry=21956_Reuters_Doctoring_Photos_from_Beirut&only

[4] www.order-order.com

[5] Beckett, C. *SuperMedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save The World* (Wiley-Blackwell) 2008

Chapter 3, pages 101-108.

[6] <http://www.flatearthnews.net/>

[6a] Monck, Adrian. *Can You Trust The Media* (Icon) 2008

[7] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/nickrobinson/>

[8] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree>

[9] <http://joetrippi.com/>

[10] <http://www.chomsky.info/>

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