

NEW MEDIA, JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY: FIGMENTS OF A NEO-LIBERAL IMAGINATION?

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Abstract

In the last decade news media have seen many changes marked by a history of marketisation, globalisation, deregulation and technological transformation that has resulted in both a thrilling story of abundance, as the space for news in the digital age is expanded, and a sorry tale of retraction as the business model for commercial news practice falls apart.

In considering these changes this paper begins and ends with the quest not just to reconsider what news is now or has been in the past but what news ought to be and how its potential value to society can be realised.

Keywords

Journalism; Democracy; News; New media; Digital.

Introduction

In the last decade news media have seen many changes. There has been a tremendous growth in the number of news outlets available including the advent of, and rapid increase in free papers, the emergence of 24 hour television news and the popularization of online and mobile platforms. Newspaper circulation and readership levels are at an all time low. The way news is produced and distributed is faster than ever before and often takes place on several platforms at once. These factors have contributed to what we know today as news but they are not the whole story. These changes are part of a more complex history of marketisation, globalisation, deregulation and technological transformation that has repeated itself in many places around the globe and resulted in both a thrilling story of abundance, as the space for news in the digital age is expanded, and a sorry tale of retraction as the business model for commercial news practice falls apart. Both stories have purchase in reality. But a critical evaluation of each demands a re-consideration of what we want news for and how it can be delivered in the future. This paper begins and ends with the quest not just to reconsider what news is now or has been in the past but what news ought to be and how its potential value to society can be realised.

Of course, as soon as the value of news to society is invoked, the contribution of news to the public sphere and consequently its relationship to a healthy democracy follows suit.

Indeed, freedom of the news media is often seen as a key indicator of democratic life; news as the life-blood of a democracy. In this conception of news the value of news journalism is in its contribution to vital resources for processes of information gathering, deliberation and action. And in this manner, the relationship between journalism and democracy is frequently understood as causal. The more news we have the more democratic our societies are; the less news we have the less democratic we are, triggering a presumption of an inevitable sequential relationship. But democracy is far more than the quantity of news and many so-called developed democracies have a plethora of news media but a public sphere that is severely impoverished (Aalberg, Aelst and Curran, 2010). The mythology of the naïve pluralism that equates more news with better democracy chimes with a very similar one about the internet – just because there is an abundance of space online and digital media works at such speed it expands the news we read or hear, opens our minds, enables us to monitor, and hold to account the powerful and to facilitate and maintain deliberation – all factors that are critical to a functioning democracy. However, neither journalism nor the internet *creates* democracy and democracy does not invent journalism or indeed the internet. So when we advocate this relationship we should also add a critique of the different types of democracy situated within particular social and political configurations and the nature of news media situated within each so-called democratic formation before we ask: what more could and should the news media, old and new, do for democracy, and what is beyond their power to do? And when we do that, invariably we find a news media that is flawed and a democracy that is left wanting.

There are very many studies that elucidate the failings of a news media to serve democracy. Habermas (2006) sums up several of them in relation in particular to developed neo-liberal democracies when he writes of:

... "the intrusion of the functional imperatives of the market economy into the "internal logic" of the production and presentation of messages that leads to the covert displacement of one category of communication by another: Issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment. Besides personalization, the dramatization of events, the simplification of complex matters, and the vivid polarization of conflicts promotes civic privatism and a mood of anti-politics." (Habermas, 2006:27)

This is now a common refrain in political communications. The debate often begins with the nature of democracy itself. Within liberal democracies power is gained by winning elections. Winning elections requires persuasion, which means engaging in impression management – what Louw (2005) refers to as "image making, myth making and hype" on behalf of elite political actors. The media, hungry for news fodder, routinely access and privilege elite definitions of reality and are claimed to serve ruling hegemonic interests,

legitimize social inequality and thwart participatory democracy.

There are many other contributory factors to this political malaise. Cottle (2003) claims that commercial television news is primarily a commodity enterprise run by market-oriented managers, who place outflanking the competition above journalistic responsibility and integrity. It is charged with being in the business of entertainment attempting to pull audience for commercial not journalistic reasons, setting aside the values of professional journalism in order to indulge in the presentation of gratuitous spectacles and images that *create* superficiality while it traffics in trivialities and deals in dubious emotionalism. In other words, mainstream news has systematically undermined the crucial arrangement which is meant to operate between a working democracy and its citizens. This, it is claimed, has contributed forcefully to our political disenchantment.

George Monbiot, a former journalist and now part of the progressive commentariat in the UK, echoes some of these concerns while adding some of his own talking about local papers in the UK:

... this is the universal view of the national media: local papers, half of which, on current trends, are in danger of going down in the next five years(1), are all that stand between us and creeping dictatorship. Like my colleagues, I mourn their death; unlike them I believe it happened decades ago. For many years the local press has been one of Britain's most potent threats to democracy, championing the overdog, misrepresenting democratic choices, defending business, the police and local elites from those who seek to challenge them. Media commentators lament the death of what might have been. It bears no relationship to what is. (Guardian 9 Nov 2009)

Local newspapers, he says, entrench the power of local elites and do nothing to hold power to account:

It's true that the vacuity and cowardice of the local papers has been exacerbated by consolidation, profit-seeking, the collapse of advertising revenues and a decline in readership. But even if they weren't subject to these pressures, they would still do more harm than good. The local papers fail to challenge the powerful because the powerful own and fund them... Yes, we need a press that speaks truth to power, that gives voice to the powerless and fights for local democracy. But this ain't it.

In the UK, it would seem, there is a relationship of sorts between journalism and democracy but a largely dysfunctional one whose breaking points pivot on issues relating to the concentration of ownership and deregulation, commercialism and marketisation. Journalism, it is worth reminding ourselves, is not only democratising it can also be de-democratising.

And then came the Internet. The internet, we are told (Garrison, 2000, 2001, 2003; Rivas-

Rodriguez, 2003; Gillmor, 2004, Pavlik, 2001), brings new ways of collecting and reporting information into newsrooms. It brings forth a new journalism that is open to novices, lacks established forms of editorial control, can stem from anywhere (not just the newsroom), involves new writing techniques, functions in a network with fragmented audiences, is iterative and delivered at great speed. It reinvigorates democracy through increasing plurality, accessibility and participation. But the internet is just a tool and the possibility for new forms of journalism it conjures up must also play out in the same social, political and economic structures of democracy as the old journalism and traditional news media. Accordingly, the internet can also be de-democratising.

New media and the news

Recent work undertaken at Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre (Fenton, 2010) argues that journalism in the digital age challenges utopian visions of the internet as a brave new world with everyone connected to everyone else, a non-hierarchical network of voices with equal, open and global access. Rather, this latest 'new' world of 'new' media has not greatly expanded the news that we read or hear or changed mainstream news values and traditional news formats; neither has it connected a legion of bloggers to a mass audience. Instead, this research points to an industry and a practice in trouble.

Conclusions from this research support the now familiar retort that news media are in crisis. A crisis that emerges from some of the changes outlined above that have resulted in a decline in advertising revenue combined with increased investment in new media technologies to attract audiences online, alongside cuts in personnel as profit margins have decreased resulting in a negative impact on journalism (Freedman, 2010). Put simply, in the digital age the space for news has expanded exponentially and the speed at which it has to be delivered is virtually instantaneous with fewer professional journalists employed to do the job. The depreciation of the current business model together with increasing commercial pressures is, as a result, devaluing the pursuit of news journalism that is in the public interest and impacting in particular on original newsgathering, investigative reporting, foreign and local news – none of which can provide the necessary economies of scale to buck the financial down-turn. In a context where the business of news is failing and news as a product is fast losing its market value to advertisers as much advertising migrates online, the market rationale for the provision of news for the public good and in the public interest comes under scrutiny. In other words, recognition and development of the product's contributory value to democratic society leading to reinvestment in news journalism is superseded by market ambition and the desire to deliver extensive profits to shareholders.

Currently, news that is surviving is, on the whole, suffering the consequences. Our research reveals journalists being thrust into news production more akin to creative can-

nibalization than the craft of journalism – as they need to fill more space and to work at greater speed while also having improved access to stories and sources online – they talk less to their sources, are captured in desk-bound, cut and paste, administrative journalism (Phillips, 2010) that quite literally re-circulates news found elsewhere online. Journalists spend a large amount of time monitoring other media, the news wires and user-generated content. Rewriting stories gained through this constant monitoring is the main task of many journalists (especially in online newsrooms). Analysis of the content of mainstream online news further reveals that much of the abundant news online is the same: news organizations often cover stories from the same angles and different news organizations repeatedly present the same information in their stories (Redden and Witschge, 2010). Ready made fodder from tried and tested sources takes precedence over the sheer difficulty of dealing with the enormity of user-generated content or the overload of online information. In a commercial environment, news organizations foreground rationalization (by cutting back on journalists) and marketization (through the increasing commodification of news) at the expense of ideal democratic objectives in a way that has led to the homogenization of content (Redden and Witschge, 2010) rather than the increased plurality promised of the digital age.

The digital age has, of course, brought with it increased possibilities for civil society to campaign and publicise their work. However, in the rush to be heard, resources have become more rather than less important (as claimed by many new media evangelists). Many large and well resourced civil society associations have been able to respond to a media saturated environment through a growth in press and public relations offices increasingly staffed by trained professional journalists. The resource poor, however, find it much harder to keep up with changes in technology and the explosion of news space and much harder to stand out amidst the countless voices online that all compete for journalists' attention. Furthermore, the increased pressures on journalists to fill the expanded space for news in record time, combined with the pressures on civil society associations to maximize news coverage, result in many civil society associations feeling compelled to provide material that conforms to pre-established journalistic norms and values, diminishing their ability to advocate on particular causes and issues in their communications (Fenton, 2010a).

In this context, protecting and enhancing a diversity of media content is ever more vital. Even though there is now a plethora of media outlets, and citizens and civil society can publish media content more easily than ever, there still is a significant threat to pluralism given the domination of a limited number of organizations that control the flow of news and the contours of public debate. Citizen media may be growing but it is still overshadowed by the major international news organisations. The large traditional news organizations with a strong market position and extensive and established news production infrastructure have responded to the current climate by investing heavily in online platforms.

UK citizens predominantly use online news sites that are run by existing news providers further asserting the already significant dominance of the major players (Ofcom, 2007). Furthermore, the organisation of web search tends to send more users to the most popular sites in a "winners take all pattern" (Hindman, 2009: 132). Added to this, Ofcom have found that, of the top ten news websites by unique user, four were run by internet-based organizations. These were Google News (a news aggregator site that produces none of its own content), Yahoo! News, AOL News, and MSN News (all sites that rely almost entirely on news agency reports) (House of Lords, 2008). It seems ever likely that the voices on the web will be dominated by the larger more established news providers, rather than any form of citizen media, in a manner that limits possibilities for increased pluralism.

This situation is repeated in varying degrees across the globe. To mention just two studies, Downie and Schudson (2009:2) note that in the US "the economic foundation of the nation's newspapers, long supported by advertising, is collapsing, and newspapers themselves, which have been the country's chief source of independent reporting, are shrinking literally. Fewer journalists are reporting less news in fewer pages".

The Open Society Institute Media Program has investigated the impact of the financial crisis on media and news delivery to citizens in 18 countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States: Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. The research analysed media performance in 2009 compared with the previous three years exploring in particular "the cost-saving measures taken by [] news carriers, and the effects of these measures on output, breadth and depth of coverage, scope of investigative reporting, and opportunities for open public debate" (OSI, 2010). It reveals that media across the region had lost 30 to 60 per cent of their income and were forced to adopt cost-saving measures, including reduced volume, staff layoffs, reduced investigative reporting, and cuts in international and provincial coverage. They relate the changes to the global Financial crisis that brought about severe constraints in news production as well as ownership changes resulting in an overall drop in the quality of news delivered to citizens and as a consequence a news media that has become shallower, more entertainment-centred, increasingly isolationist, more prone to political and business influences and lacking in investigative bite.

The current collapse of the news economy has been blamed partly on new technology whilst also turning to new technology as its saviour. It is true that the need to invest in online platforms has taken investment from human resources and in particular, investment in journalists (Lee-Wright, 2010). It is also true that the internet has led to the decoupling of classified advertising from news as it shifts to the likes of Craigslist (in the US) and Gumtree (in the UK). And, as outlined above, new technology has brought with it new practices of journalism that have changed the very nature of the production of news where

'speeding it up and spreading it thin' has become the norm. But new technology is also endowed with the potential to save news, delivering a form of collaborative journalism more suited to the post-Enlightenment period – it may be paper-less but it will be people-full, participatory and, as a result, more democratic.

But there are serious reservations about whether the internet on its own can fill this gap. Although online newspapers are growing and their print versions are declining, empirical evidence shows that people use the internet mostly for entertainment purposes and online they are more likely to seek out only those fragments that are of particular interest to them rather than the pursuit of news and current affairs information more generally (Hilt and Lipschutz, 2004). And although news consumption online is steadily increasing there is very little evidence to support the view that the internet has been established as a primary source of news except for a very small minority (Castells, 2009: 231). It is also argued that the abundance of choice available online results in less exposure to news and current affairs – just as it may be easier to find it is also easier to avoid (Prior, 2007). It is worth bearing in mind that audiences are still predominantly focussed on traditional media with 43 per cent stating a preference for offline media compared to 26 per cent online and 70 per cent stating they prefer print compared to 17 per cent who prefer an online source (KPMG, 2010). And of course, issues of the digital divide are still very much with us with over a quarter of households in England still without an internet connection direct to their home and 11% of UK households still unable to get broadband at 2MB (Ofcom, 2009).

Just as the demise of news is not a phenomenon entirely beholden to the introduction of new technology, it is unlikely that its rebirth will be either. The demise of news is rather linked directly to the structures of advanced capitalism. This can be illustrated further by a closer look at recent research on local news in the UK.

Local news and the democratic deficit

earlier research (Franklin, 1986), a good decade and a half prior to the impact of the internet, into the influence of local government public relations on local newspapers concluded that 96% of press releases issued by the local authority generated stories in the local press with significant recycling of the same news between newspapers in the same regional newspaper group. Franklin (1986) also points out that press releases were often reproduced wholesale with little evidence of any original journalism. Moreover a newspaper's willingness to engage in what Davies (2008) has called "churnalism" bore a direct correlation with the size of the newspaper and the number of journalists it employed. Clearly, the concern that news media is failing to deliver a high quality news service is far from new (Franklin, 2006; Franklin and Murphy, 1998) and is not simply a consequence of the online environment. Rather, it is linked more fundamentally to the business of news and the prac-

tices of neo-liberalism – the increasing marketisation of news and the ruthless logic of an economic system that demands ever increasing profit margins and share return resulting in less journalists doing more work, undermining the provision of news in the public interest.

In the worst cases local newspapers are simply being closed down altogether. In the UK the Newspaper Society notes that 101 local papers closed down between January 2008 and August 2009. Success in local and regional news now appears increasingly to depend on scale. This means more mergers and more takeovers with larger companies serving bigger regions with less and less relevance for local people. Since the 1990s, following successive relaxation of ownership rules in the Broadcasting Act of 1996 and the 2003 Communications Act, we have seen a rapid consolidation of the newspaper industry in the UK into a handful of regionally based monopolies that dominate the market. The top 20 regional press publishers now account for 87% of all regional and local newspaper titles in the UK, and 97% of the total weekly audited circulation. The key consequence of this process of merger and takeover has been to reduce radically the number of Groups publishing local newspapers from 200 in 1992, to 137 by 1998 and 87 in 2010 (*Newspaper Society Intelligence unit 1 January 2010, ABC/VFD/Independently audited figures*).

Despite consolidation and the economies of scale introduced, commercial local news services have still faced ongoing investment cuts in recent times. Cuts have often been made irrespective of market conditions. In 2006, the *Times* reported that the Trinity Mirror Group, one of the largest owners of local news titles in the UK, had axed 300 jobs in spite of a 'buoyant' market¹. But large organizational structures with significant corporate demands, the very epitome of neo-liberal practice, have now become financial burdens and part of the problem (Picard, 2010). Yet more liberalization of cross-media ownership rules in local and regional media is likely to exacerbate this issue leading to more mergers and takeovers, larger companies serving bigger areas with less journalists, further diminishing the reason people turn to local news in the first place – for local accountability, the scrutiny of power and a sense of local identity and voice (Fenton et al, 2010). Recent announcements by the Coalition Government in the UK reveal that the market remains firmly at the core of all policy considerations that continue to prioritise deregulation over democracy, market-value over social-value.

What is more, the news reading population know this all too well. In our research (Fenton et al., 2010)² there was fierce criticism of what was understood as a long-term decline in

1 The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) in their 2009 submission to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee Inquiry noted that in the 12 months prior to their submission Trinity Mirror had axed 1200 jobs.

2 This research, funded by the Media Trust, was based on 4 in-depth, expanded case studies. The case studies were selected to cover areas that contained both different socio-demographic and different news characteristics – an urban metropolitan area with a diverse population served by thriving local and hyper local news media in the South East; a suburban town that has recently lost its local newspaper to be replaced by an online news service in the East Midlands; a rural area in the North with a successful community radio station used to engage disadvantaged and isolated communities; and an area

the quality of local news journalism which was chiefly associated with content convergence and the increasing primacy of commercial values in local news provision. Interviewees professed a strong sense for the loss of local journalism as watchdog and an equally strong desire for its return. Participants often referred to a form of everyday 'watchdogging' that goes with journalists' actual presence in the community and at events. They called for active, visible reporting that speaks to people, recognises and listens to the various voices in community – particularly those without authority or power, reinforces standards and thereby holds power to account; for a journalism and news in and from the communities they inhabit.

This research revealed that people feel a genuine loss of independent reporting that provides information, investigation, analysis and community knowledge in the coverage of local affairs. Independent reporting should reveal not only what local government and private interests are doing but also the motivation behind their actions. It should dig deeper and provide people with insight that takes time and resources to reach. This is the watchdog function of the news and it is a function that is still at the heart of what people want from their local news service – reporting that holds truth to power and keeps local authorities, business and professional leaders accountable to the legal and moral framework of society.

However, in an environment of mergers and regional consolidation, local news is removed from the local vicinity to out of town premises, with journalists who are out of touch with the communities they serve. The local news then ceases to be relevant to local people and something very tangible is lost in the process. The social benefits of local news were recounted time and time again by our participants. When they had lost their local newspaper they felt they had lost far more than news about the area, they had lost a sense of community and belonging that went with it. The lack of a local paper also reflected a poignant sense of vulnerability and powerlessness that contributed in turn to a feeling of isolation and "not being listened to" by local centres of power.

People who read local news wanted independent local newspapers with a physical presence in the locale and journalists who could and would challenge the powerful, investigate wrongdoings and campaign for social change. The local journalists we spoke to also saw this as their role but were structurally constrained by the contemporary configurations of local news production with less and less journalists employed to fill more and more space, often detached and disconnected from the area they were supposed to cover. The clear conclusion is that the democratic potential of news media and the structural practice

that has emerging digital platforms that embrace the use of social media for sharing information and campaigning in the west midlands. The case studies included an analysis of the community news outlets/platforms and their relationship with mainstream news media through interviews with key protagonists and also with mainstream local news providers. 3 focus groups were also held in each of the communities served for each case study (12 in total). The focus groups included up to 8 individuals in each and covered the key variables associated with the local community in question taking particular account of age, gender, ethnicity and social class (the variables that raise most issues associated with either internet usage and /or news consumption). Further interviews with news policy leaders also informed the research.

of local news production and journalism are at odds.

Evidently, the critical relationships between local news and democracy and between journalism and citizenship only work under certain conditions. Currently, on the whole, those conditions do not function for the public interest. The material conditions of contemporary journalism (particularly unprotected, unregulated commercial practice) do not offer optimum space and resources to practice *independent journalism in the public interest*. On the contrary, job insecurity and commercial priorities place increasing limitations on journalists' ability to do the journalism most of them want to do – to question, analyse and scrutinize. Through prioritisation of the pursuit of profit and shareholder returns news organisations that deliver local news have lost sight of their product value – a value recognised and desired by all of the participants in this study. The commodification of local news with little or no regard for its use-value has torn apart the relationship between news and democracy.

Conclusion

This paper and the research it reports upon argues that the relationship between news and democracy is not a given. News media are in crisis. The crisis is being managed by closing papers or shedding staff. These cuts are having a devastating effect on the quality of the news and on local news in particular. I have also suggested that there is a contradiction at the very core of the relationship between contemporary news and democracy – a contradiction between the transforming potential of new technologies and the stifling constraints of the free market. Or put another way, a contradiction between the democratic potential of news media and the structural practice of journalism.

Does the news help make democracy work? It can, when journalists are given the freedom (and resources) to do the job most journalists want to do. But freedom in this context does not simply mean freedom from censorship and interference from government so frequently associated with the term 'freedom of the press'; it also means *freedom from the constraints and limitations of the market*. This research shows that in neo-liberal democracies the power of the market is just as significant as the power of government. In the UK, there is certainly no rush to regulate for a healthy relationship between news media and democracy but there is plenty of urgency about the need to deregulate for the benefit of the market. But the market can not be relied upon to deliver the conditions for deliberative democracy to flourish. Markets do not have democratic intent at their core. When markets fail or come under threat, ethical journalistic practice is swept aside in pursuit of financial stability. A news media that can be relied upon to monitor, hold to account, interrogate power and facilitate and maintain deliberation is critical to a functioning democracy and even more critical to a failing democracy. Only when we are able to re-imagine a post-

corporate, not-for-profit, independent news media freed from the shackles of commercialism, that prioritises the relationship with democracy and exists primarily to aim for this ethical horizon will the true value of news be realised.

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