

Online Journalism in the Information Age

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The understanding of our world requires the simultaneous analysis of the network society, and of its conflictive challenges. The historical law that where there is domination there is resistance continues to apply. But it requires an analytical effort to identify who the challengers are of the processes of domination enacted by the immaterial, yet powerful, flows of the network society.

Manuel Castells (2000: 382)

Introduction

Bold declarations about the importance of journalism for modern democracy, typically expressed with the sorts of rhetorical flourishes first heard in the early days of the newspaper, are sounding increasingly anachronistic in the brave new world of the internet. Familiar appeals to journalism's traditional role or mission, its social responsibilities vis-à-vis a citizenry actively engaging with the pressing issues of the day, appear to have lost much of their purchase. Public criticism – if not outright cynicism – about the quality of the news reporting provided by mainstream media institutions is widespread. Journalists themselves are more often than not seen to be troubled, some quietly lamenting the lost traditions of a once proud profession, others loudly resisting market-driven obsessions with 'bottom line' profitability. Journalism's commitment to championing the public interest, many of them fear, is being replaced with a cheap and tawdry celebration of what interests the public.

It almost goes without saying, of course, that these types of concerns about reportorial integrity are as old as journalism itself. What is striking from the vantage point of today, however, is the extent to which competing projections about the very future of journalism – encouraging or otherwise – recurrently revolve around a shared perception. That is to say, there appears to be a growing awareness that what is going to count as journalism in the years to come is being decisively reconfigured, at this very moment, by the rise of the network society, to use Manuel Castells's (2000) evocative phrase. In his view, we are witnessing the emergence of a new form of capitalism – characterised as much by its globalising reach as by its flexible adaptability to change – that is actively re-writing the imperatives of time, space and distance around the globe. While it is currently difficult to discern precisely what the implications of this new form of capitalism will be for journalism, there is little doubt that a key promise of the 'digital revolution', namely to enhance the knowledge and participation of citizens in their own government, is under threat.

The use of information by the powerful and privileged as a means to reinforce, even exacerbate, the structures of the 'digital divide' is well documented. In our view, however, insufficient attention has been devoted to examining the evolving forms,

practices and epistemologies of online journalism in this context, especially with regard to its potential for shaping democratic deliberation and debate across what are ever more globalised public spheres. At stake for this article's discussion, then, is the need to help establish the basis for a critical mode of enquiry into the ways in which journalism's status in an online environment is being transformed by the informational dynamics of the network society.

The Network Society

A new world is beginning to take shape before our eyes. In making this observation, Castells (2000) argues that the appearance of its organising principles may be traced to the last three decades of the previous century. It was around the early 1970s, he maintains, that the historical coincidence of three processes became evident: the information technology revolution, the economic crisis of both capitalism and statism (and their subsequent restructuring) and the 'blooming' of cultural social movements (2000: 367). In examining the interaction between these otherwise independent processes, together with the responses they engendered, he discerns the emergence of 'the network society' as a new dominant social structure.

By introducing the phrase 'the network society', Castells is attempting to pinpoint an underlying logic that informs social action and institutions throughout what is an increasingly interdependent world. The network society is the social structure of the Information Age, being made up of networks of production, power and experience. Its prevailing logic, while constantly challenged by social conflicts, nevertheless gives shape to a distinctive system of norms, values and beliefs. More specifically, Castells maintains that at the heart of the network society is a dialectical interaction between modes of production (goods and services are created in specific social relationships) and those of development (technological innovation). This interaction is neither linear nor mechanical in the manner that it operates. Nor, crucially, is it contained within the authority of the nation state. Rather, the network society is characterised by a new power system, where the once sovereign nation state is submitted to an array of powers and counter-powers largely beyond its control. These competing sources of power, each bearing down on the nation state in accordance with its own logic, find their basis in 'networks of capital, production, communication, crime, international institutions, supranational military apparatuses, non-governmental organizations, transnational religions, and public opinion movements' (1997: 304). Moreover, he adds, below the state 'there are communities, tribes, localities, cults and gangs,' all of which place limits on its capacity to act. It follows, then, that nation states are becoming effectively de-centred, that is, increasingly little more than 'nodes' of a broader network of power.

For Castells, it is knowledge generation, together with information processing, which are the primary sources of value and power in the Information Age. Evolving alongside the network society, he contends, is a new informational/global economy, as well as a new culture, which he describes as the culture of real virtuality. Turning first to the dynamics of this emergent economy, Castells believes a new international division of labour is appearing, one which is underpinned by informational-based production and competition. This increasingly global economy is characterised by its 'interdependence, its asymmetry, its regionalization, the increasing diversification within each region, its selective inclusiveness, its exclusionary segmentation, and, as a result of all these features, an extraordinarily variable geometry that tends to dissolve historical, economic geography' (1996: 106). Of critical importance here, then, is the

extent to which the material foundation of this new global economy is grounded by 'informationalism' as the technological basis of economic activity and social organization. 'Under informationalism,' he writes, 'the generation of wealth, the exercise of power, and the creation of cultural codes came to depend on the technological capacity of societies and individuals, with information technology as the core of this capacity' (2000: 367). The enhanced 'flexibility' of capitalism, it follows, is directly attributable to the role played by new information technologies. This role may be broadly characterised as revolving around the provision of 'the tools for networking, distant communication, storing/processing of information, coordinated individualization of work, and simultaneous concentration and decentralization of decision-making' (2000: 368).

Taken together, these factors are broadly constitutive of a new kind of culture, which Castells terms 'the culture of real virtuality'. In his words, it is 'a system in which reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic existence) is fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which symbols are not just metaphors, but comprise the actual experience' (2000: 381). To clarify, this culture is real, but at the same time virtual in that it is constructed primarily through processes of communication that are electronically based. This virtuality is, in effect, our 'fundamental' reality. That is to say, in Castells's view, it is 'the material basis on which we live our existence, construct our system of representation, practice our work, link up with other people, retrieve information, form our opinions, act in politics, and nurture our dreams' (2001: 203). Hence, in trying to elucidate the lived materiality of this culture at the level of experience, it is crucial to recognise that all domains of social life are implicated ever more deeply in the time-spaces of networked communication media. The influence of information technology in transforming the social relations of inclusion and exclusion is not to be underestimated – indeed for Castells, it is of vital importance in understanding how networking has recast social life, more often than not in unexpected ways where political interests are concerned.

Cyberspace, then, is a contested terrain, crisscrossed by countervailing logics of domination and liberation. Castell's conceptual approach is richly suggestive of new ways to investigate the changing dynamics of power. 'In an informational society,' Castells argues, power 'becomes inscribed, at a fundamental level, in the cultural codes through which people and institutions represent life and make decisions, including political decisions' (2000: 378). Power, it follows, can be both material and immaterial. In the case of the former, the consolidation of power may provide certain individuals or organisations with the means to enforce their interests or decisions, quite possibly in the absence of consensus. At the same time, however, its immateriality is implicated in the production of a new consensus around these ruling imperatives. In this latter sense, power assumes a hegemonic quality in that it encourages the framing of life experience within the boundaries of certain preferred categories, thereby furthering ruling prerogatives as a question of legitimacy (as opposed to coercion). For instance, Castells writes:

if a population feels threatened by unidentifiable, multidimensional fear, the framing of such fears under the codes of immigration = race = poverty = welfare = crime = job loss = taxes = threat, provides an identifiable target, defines an US versus THEM, and favors those leaders who are most credible in supporting what is perceived to be a reasonable dose of racism and xenophobia (Castells 2000: 378-379).

It is in this context, then, that Castells elaborates upon his thesis that ‘cultural battles are the power battles of the Information Age’ by bringing the role of the news media to the fore. It is across the field of journalism, in his view, that these cultural battles are primarily waged. Power, it follows, does not reside within the news media in the sense that they become power-holders; rather, it ‘lies in the networks of information exchange and symbol manipulation, which relate social actors, institutions, and cultural movements, through icons, spokespersons, and intellectual amplifiers’ (2000: 379).

In seeking to assess the specific implications of this new geometry of power for online journalism, then, the ‘informational politics’ of the internet warrant particular attention. To the extent that access to government is mediated by interests outside of democratic forms of control and accountability, Castells argues, the use of information becomes the ‘privileged political weapon’ in the age of the internet. Precisely how, and in what ways, journalism must evolve and change to counter the powerful influences of the new communication system is anything but clear from the vantage point of today. The capacity of the internet to transform the news industry – even at the most rudimentary level of reconfiguring what counts as ‘news’ or ‘journalism’ in the first place – is only now beginning to register where it matters most, that is, in the minds of the people who make up its publics. People’s lived experience in the Information Age, their engagement with the im/materiality of cultural forms in the contexts of their everyday life, is of paramount concern when systems of representation are at stake. It is in making use of information or analysis available from varied sources, especially those situated well beyond the borders of any one nation state, that people can refashion new forms of collective creativity, identity and attachment as global citizens. How best online journalism might contribute to the broadening of these distant relationships, and in so doing facilitate processes of democratization, thus becomes a pressing political question.

Online Journalism

The network society, to the extent that it is being built around the communication networks of the internet, promises to refashion familiar conceptions of the global. In attempting to pinpoint the ways in which online journalism operates within these communication networks, it soon becomes all too apparent that this is by no means a straightforward task. To contend that its emergent forms and practices are subject to the forces of informational capitalism is one thing, but to demonstrate how they are shaping its development is a challenge of an altogether different order. There can be little doubt, however, that this process of transformation is uneven, contingent and frequently the site of intense resistance. For every journalist who heralds the promise of new technological possibilities, there are probably several more who are calling for restraint to be exercised. In order to better situate the online media within the network society, therefore, there is value in pausing to consider the changing practices of the industry itself.

Scholarship on new media journalistic practices, as one might expect, is hampered by the rapid changes taking place in what is still a relatively young industry. Research undertaken before the dot.com bubble burst in 2001 would have found a quite different work situation to that after, when an estimated 500,000 jobs were lost in internet industries in the US alone (Bowman 2003). Technologies and work practices are also changing rapidly, making it difficult to discern any sense of a

consolidation of practices since the development of the World Wide Web, its colonisation by commercial news providers and the ballooning of online usage in the mid-1990s. In the opinion of one internet commentator, the year 2001 was the start of a third wave of online journalism, with 'more-sophisticated owners and better-trained staffs, end-users dependent on traditional news organizations for the daily global report, proliferating mobile platforms and new software that enables powerful forms of publishing, such as wireless push and immersive technologies' (Pryor 2003). Still, such predictions are nonetheless waiting to be tested by research. A number of scholars also warn that we must problematise the claim to newness of new media, exploring the relationship between continuity and change at both social and cultural levels (Silverstone 1999). Quinn and Trench (2002) identify a similar problem of trend-spotting, where it is often difficult to discern if scenarios are based on contrast with past practices, on claims to be able to identify representative contemporary practices or on predictions – or even hopes for the future (2002: 6; see also Urry 2003).

Any collation of research evidence must therefore be cautious. We look at three issues here, with the aim of discerning the broad contours of online journalism's position within the politics of informational capitalism. Specifically, our discussion will focus on: changes in the boundaries between work tasks and job descriptions; changes in the para-ideology of the journalist; and changes in textual practice. We set against these issues particular concerns about the potential for online journalism to empower collective dialogue and debate beyond the confines of dominant structures of power and knowledge.

A) The Online Newsroom

One major strand of research on new media practices concerns changes in work roles as a result of new digital technologies. As Ursell (2001) notes, many critics have associated the introduction of new technologies into newsrooms with falling journalism standards, namely because they have entailed changes in the nature and demarcation of tasks. Such critics point not just to the transitional matters of technical experts with little journalistic knowledge dominating early online newsrooms, but to more fundamental shifts in work practices across media. So a number of traditionally print and broadcast organisations now require their journalists to work across media forms. There are many examples. In Britain, the website associated with *The Guardian* newspaper carries audio clips from correspondents. It is common practice among the country's news broadcasters to require journalists to produce radio, television and online versions of reports. The prospect of 'non-platform specific', in the jargon, reports which can be 'repurposed' for delivery to a range of media from WAP telephones to radio bulletins, has attracted the interest of news managers (Tait 2000).

Bromley (1997) has described such developments as 'the end of journalism' as practised for a century, leading to a fragmentation of journalists into 'entrepreneurial editors' on the one hand and overworked 'machine hands' on the other (1997: 346). Sparks's (1991) concern that the 'unitary core' of journalism is under threat from such convergence of media and multiskilling of practitioners is similarly pertinent here (see also Ursell 2001). Other critics argue that the lines between journalist, technician and salesperson are becoming blurred, with the result that staff are required to do more work and that journalists' ethical principles come under threat (e.g. Williams 1998). This is a particular issue in online journalism, where multimedia content is central to

the claim to distinctiveness, where younger journalists predominate (Deuze and Dimoudi 2002; Singer et al. 1999), and where innovation can be expected to have been more rapid than in established newsrooms. Furthermore, concerns have been raised about the division between advertising and editorial in the organisation and the culture of the newsroom, the recurrent fear being expressed is that this division is weaker in online newsrooms than in traditional ones (see Boczkowski 2002; Borum 1998).

Digital technologies certainly enable, even facilitate convergence and cross-over between media forms. But the empirical evidence suggests that workplace changes in journalism are fluidly contingent, and as such must be necessarily seen in a wider context than just that of the diffusion of technology. Avilés and León (2002), for example, found in a study of two Spanish television stations' shift to digital newsrooms that, while on the one hand, new digital editing technology allowed for a reduction in staff, on the other hand, staff numbers have not been reduced. Similarly, each staff member has been required to learn more tasks as digitisation has blurred boundaries between reporter, technician and editor. Their workloads have increased, and computerisation has made it easier for editors to make last-minute changes to items, increasing editorial control. Yet, at the same time, reporters apparently felt that their control over their own work has also improved. Technical limitations such as those on editing or on the use of archive material have reduced, yet journalists also seem to spend more time on technical issues. Ursell (2001) similarly finds complex changes underway in the newsrooms of three British broadcasters as they adopt digital technologies, and explains those more by the responses of executive personnel to institutional factors and competition between news providers than by the technologies themselves (see also Cottle 1999). Indeed, in the British context, increased competition, the weakening of trade unions and softer media regulation in the 1980s and 1990s led to waves of redundancies in television newsrooms, a casualisation of the workforce and increasing workloads, well before digital technologies were widely used there (Ursell 2001).

These types of changes, then, are not solely about technology, yet nor are they separable from the opportunities such technology affords. Much of the research emerging regarding relations of power in the newsroom appears to suggest that processes of centralisation and decentralisation are underway at the same time. Viewed from within the contexts of changing work routines in the wider society, however, we can perhaps perceive a logic at work here. We can detect an increased emphasis both from within workplaces and from the wider cultural context upon the worker as an individual situated within rapidly changing networks – as Castells (1999) puts it: 'The "organization man" is out, the "flexible woman" is in' (1999: 402). Power in the network society, as noted above, does not reside within the limits of monolithic institutions. The ability of individual reporters to ride the responsibility, uncertainty and higher skills and workloads of this context is valued. The multimedia reporting developing on some large and well-resourced news sites – what Stevens (2002) calls 'backpack journalism', where a reporter on assignment carries a range of equipment to record and package text, audio and video material for further editing in the newsroom – clearly fits such a model. We can therefore recast what could be dismissed as a conservative reaction to change in newsroom jobs as an understanding of journalism's implication in changing relations of power in employment patterns more generally—a redistribution of earning power and symbolic capital from those entrenched within institutions, such as newsrooms, to those able to cross those boundaries.

At the same time, boundaries between forms of knowledge and distinct media are becoming permeable, as a result of the twin trends of digitisation and the dominance of large cross-media corporations (McChesney 2000). There is cultural pressure too upon news organisations to aim products at consumers familiar with the blending of genres and music, image and language on a music video or the multimodality of a magazine layout (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). Although the telecommunications infrastructure currently places severe constraints on the online multimedia packages, the news product can only become more fluid, and the task of the journalist include more and more the marshalling of elements of text, sound, still images and video.

B) Practices of Newsgathering and Writing

A concurrent change in newsroom practices noted in a number of studies of new media, particularly of journalists working in online news, is in the para-ideology of the journalist. There is some evidence that online journalists see themselves as distinctive in their purpose and practices. Deuze and Dimoudi (2002) argue, on the basis of a survey of Dutch journalists, that those working in online environments are perhaps de-emphasising the traditional journalistic 'fourth estate' roles of critically investigating politics and business and providing analysis. Instead, their respondents' focus:

seems to be on a combination of the traditional disseminator/interpreter roles combined with a powerful sense of the public's wants and needs as reflected in the desire to provide the widest possible audience with new ideas, a platform for discussion and a more or less pluralistic analysis of the issues in the news (Deuze and Dimoudi 2002: 93-94).

Deuze and Dimoudi point to similarities between this sense of task and the ethos of the civic journalism movement in the US, in which journalism is understood to be an active participant in civic affairs rather than an observer, and as a more service-oriented activity than other forms of journalism (2002: 95, 96).

Caution must be exercised in trying either to extrapolate from Dutch journalists to other contexts, or from journalists' self-definition to their actual practices. In the early literature on online news practice, one common finding already has been that journalists' understanding of a more interactive communication relationship with users is at some distance from the highly limited and controlled communicative space evidenced in many of their texts (see also Paulussen 2002). But the change in self-perception is itself significant. In a study of a mid-1990s online newsroom on the west coast of the USA, Riley et al. (1998) found the staff expressing considerable disdain about direct email contact with their audience. One told the researchers:

When a story is printed, I'm already doing the work on my next assignment—I'm calling sources, checking out information, on my *next* story. I can't live in the past and keep answering questions about old stories or I won't make my next deadline (cited in Riley et al. 1998: 7).

Such statements, which seem to regard the potential for online journalism to operate within a less massified form of communication as a threat to professionalism

(Newhagen, 1998: 117, cited in Boczkowski, 2002: 74), arise less in journalists talking to researchers five years later. Findings such as Deuze and Dimoudi's (2002) allow us to tentatively propose an emerging ethos of the online journalist which differs in terms of the relationship offered to the audience.

In particular, there appears to be less emphasis in many prominent online journalists' self-understanding on assembling facts for passive audiences and more emphasis upon connectivity. Dan Gillmor, a journalist at the *San Jose Mercury News* who keeps a weblog for the publication, argues that readers feel more empowered by the personal contact possible online with journalists. He suggests from his experience that: 'We're in the midst of a change, where journalism is changing from a lecture into something that resembles something between a conversation and a seminar' (interviewed in Lasica, 2001b). McAdams (1995) seeks to define the experienced online journalist partly in terms of this mode of thinking:

A journalist with little online experience tends to think in terms of *stories*, *news value*, *public service*, and *things that are good to read*. These are the staples of a one-way medium. But a person with a lot of online experience thinks more about *connections*, *organization*, *movement* within and among sets of information, and *communication* among different people (McAdams 1995; emphasis in original).

Although, again, research to substantiate such claims is scarce and is quickly at risk of being out of date, it is clear that online news practice is situated within a discourse which values such 'horizontal' interaction highly (see also Bardoel 1996; Tankard and Ban 1998; Schultz 1999). It thus stands in contrast to the discourse surrounding print and broadcasting, where quality of communication is linked to the professional authority and judgement of the journalist, who stands in a 'vertical' relation to audiences, claiming to speak for them and know their needs (Quinn and Trench, 2002: 33; Soloski, 1997).

Newhagen (1998) is among many to account for such change in terms of the information architecture of the internet, where the distinction between knowledge producer and consumer can become somewhat blurred. Quinn and Trench (2002), by contrast, ask whether we should interpret this emerging new media para-ideology instead as 'a form of demagoguery that masks a marketing agenda?' (2002: 13). It can, of course, be both, held together perhaps by a new cultural matrix, a spirit of informationalism, if you will. The online journalist, who sees herself as situated individually within a communication network as much as within a corporate hierarchy, is situated culturally quite differently to the print journalist of only 10 years ago. She relates differently to the consumers of her product, motivated perhaps less by ideals of a fiduciary relation, in which the reporter acts on behalf of readers to monitor power élites, and more by ideals of a service relation, in which the reporter provides citizens with access to the knowledge and power which those same élites seek to monopolise.

C) News Texts and Contexts

A third area concerns changes in the textual organisation of news distributed over the internet, and therefore also in its orientation towards space and time. As already noted, change here can be overstated. Much of the news to be found in new media is substantially similar to that in other media. Research on newspaper-owned news sites

(e.g. Martin 1998, Singer 2001) suggests that, certainly before 2000, most online content has comprised a limited selection of print content with minimal changes beyond the rewriting of headlines. Speculative statements such as Pavlik's (2000) that the inverted pyramid structure of the typical Anglo-American news story is 'becoming obsolete in the online news world' (cited in Quinn and Trench 2002: 6) still require further evidence to be sustained. However, the layout and organisation of news online is distinctive, largely, we suggest, due by the widespread use of hypertext. We would follow Dahlgren (1996) in arguing that information in the news text has, as a result, a quite different status in space and time. Yet this is far from simple. Studies suggest a tension between a broadening of the space in which news takes place and a severe constriction of that space, and between a reduction in the news' traditional logic of timeliness – what Schlesinger (1987) has aptly described as the 'stop-watch culture' of news production.

Since the mid-1990s, conventions have developed which have seen online news articles likely to be shorter than print, with larger bodies of text broken up into separate pages connected by hyperlinks, which users could browse in any order (Rich 1999). Special reports, containing a number of multimedia sections, have become common, and these have tended to include not just the latest news, but links to archived material, to texts produced by other organisations and, in some cases, text from other news organisations. Boczkowski (2000) describes editors he studied in one online newspaper as becoming 'gate-openers' as well as gatekeepers, as they opened up access for news site users to information from non-profit organisations. Dahlgren (1996) writes of 'the general sense of the rapid and virtually infinite access one has at one's disposal' in browsing hypertexts (1996: 65). In this analysis, news information is distributed further across space, located in multiple sites, rather than so tightly collected into a package or wrap as in a news broadcast or newspaper. Nevertheless, as Barnhurst (2002) argues, commercial news organisations are typically motivated to try to dominate the internet for their market segment. Like Riley et al (1998), he finds news sites seeking to close down users' navigation, being parsimonious in their use of hyperlinks beyond the site, linking mostly to other stories within the news site, and incorporating news agency feeds and lifestyle or commercial information within their brands rather than guide users to other sites. If not a confused picture, such research certainly paints one of conflicting trends.

There is a similar tension in the temporal status of online journalism. Some critics find that online journalism values instantaneity, with journalists working to continuous deadlines rather than the production schedules of their network broadcast or newspaper colleagues (Singer, 1998: 8). Hall (2001) cites the case of the Columbine School killings as a journalistic coup for online news services, because they were able to report the event while it was still unfolding, ahead of television pictures and many hours ahead of newspapers. Yet others point out that online journalism differs from the continuous flow and transience of news knowledge of which satellite news channels are perhaps the apotheosis. For Hume (1999), online journalism is freed from the 'scoop' logic of being first to publish, so deeply embedded in journalism's heritage, because the fluidity of deadlines makes firstness difficult to determine and because rival publications can publish each others' scoops within seconds. Others find a greater emphasis in online news upon packages which weave together news and background in ways which make them much less transient (e.g. Harper 1998: 73ff.). There is evidence that users of online news appear, as Dahlgren (1996) puts it, 'no longer so bound to the present' (1996: 99). The BBC discovered in 1998 that the archive of its website was used extremely heavily and

altered its page layout to facilitate searching and browsing of old stories on a topic (Egginton, 1999). The function of news online is altered when old material that was previously the preserve of archivists (and journalists seeking a background paragraph to the latest story) is sought out by users.

This complex picture illustrates some of the tensions endemic to the packaging and commercialisation of news information on the internet. It similarly highlights the encounter of two central and interrelated categories of modern western knowledge, namely that of the regulation by clock time and the control of space, with what Castells (2000) calls the 'space of flows'. Within the context of the competing logics of flexible capitalism and the network society, the cultural status of time and space is being actively re-negotiated. New media processes can be interpreted as subject to these simultaneously cultural, political and technological forces, as Castells sets out:

If encyclopedias have organized human knowledge by alphabetical order, electronic media provide access to information, expression and perception according to the impulses of the consumer or the decisions of the producer. By so doing, the whole ordering of meaningful events loses its internal, chronological rhythm, and becomes arranged in time sequences depending upon the social context of their utilization. Thus, *it is at the same time a culture of the eternal and of the ephemeral* (Castells 2000: 492).

Online journalism, within this larger context, is an exemplar of flexi-time, the supercession of industrial clock time. In Castells's model, a logic of space dominates that of time, and a logic of flow dominates space, such that the sequence of 'meaningful events' is disordered and fragmented. Virtuality becomes reality. To argue, then, that the event-centred news story and journalists' near-fetishisation of newness (Schlesinger 1987) are under pressure from this transformation appears to be self-evident. Far less obvious, of course, is how converging processes of integration, interactivity, hypermedia, and narrativity will re-infect more traditional journalistic conceptions of truth, fact and objectivity. The tacit, largely unspoken epistemological basis of newswork is being thrown into sharp relief.

In the years to come, we might see some online journalists finding themselves operating much further from the codes of objectivity, defending judgements of succession in their writing and editing, as they are less able to point to time discipline as an externality. We might see others constructing news that is fragmented further into micro-content, organised and re-organised many times a day. In any case, of particular concern in this regard, in our view, is the need to determine how online reporting might be most effectively developed to challenge the processes of social exclusion – the very digital divide – at the heart of the network society.

The Digital Divide

Few issues have attracted greater attention amongst critical researchers concerned with the uneven development of the internet than the digital divide. The term itself assumes varied meanings in different contexts, but is typically used as a sort of analytical shorthand to refer to the inequalities in people's relative access to the internet. These inequalities, which in a given society recurrently revolve around social factors such as age, class, gender, ethnicity, education, employment and so forth, are particularly pronounced when internet access is examined in global terms. The differentiation between Internet-haves and have-nots,' Castells (2001) observes, 'adds

a fundamental cleavage to existing sources of inequality and social exclusion in a complex interaction that appears to increase the gap between the promise of the Information Age and its bleak reality for many people around the world' (2001: 247).

Celebratory claims about the 'global village' engendered by online journalism ring hollow, especially when it is acknowledged that the majority of the world's population have never even made a telephone call, let alone logged on to a computer. To understand the digital divide, Castells argues, involves more than measuring the number of internet connections. Of profound importance is the need to attend to the consequences of being connected or not in the first place. The internet, he points out, 'is the technological tool and organizational form that distributes information power, knowledge generation and networking capacity in all realms of activity' (2001: 269). As a result, he adds, to be 'disconnected, or superficially connected, to the Internet is tantamount to marginalization in the global, networked system. Development without the Internet would be the equivalent of industrialization without electricity in the industrial era' (2001: 269). Precisely how the dynamics of differential access unfold in different social contexts around the world is very much a question of possessing the capacity – or not – to adapt to the speed of change. The imperatives of global communication are being decisively recast by a myriad of competing interests, posing acute difficulties for the very legitimacy of governing institutions from one country to the next. Until the digital divide is overcome, Castells maintains, it will threaten to engulf these institutions in a series of political crises. Here again, he makes a key point for our purposes, namely that as the internet 'becomes the pervasive infrastructure of our lives, who owns and controls access to this infrastructure becomes an essential battle for freedom' (2001: 269).

To close, in our view efforts to understand precisely what is at stake in this 'battle for freedom' across the digital divide must necessarily account for the ways in which the news media are shaping democratic deliberation and debate across the globe. Online journalism, we would argue, has the potential to bring to bear alternative perspectives, context and ideological diversity to its reporting, providing users with the means to hear distant voices otherwise being marginalized, if not silenced altogether, across the network society. Much work remains to be done, however, to develop this potential to help counter the forms and processes of social exclusion endemic to the digital divide. Of the obstacles in the path of this kind of development, perhaps the most challenging concern the ownership of the major news sites themselves. Even a glance at the companies behind the major US sites, for example – such as AOL Time Warner, General Electric Co., Microsoft, Walt Disney Co. and Viacom – makes it obvious that what counts as 'news' will be severely constrained within the limits of corporate culture. At the same time, additional factors include the growing standardization of online formats, which threatens to stifle innovation; the influence of advertising in restricting the range of links on offer; and the ideologically narrow (if all too familiar) conceptions of news values and source credibility in operation, amongst others. Hence the urgent need, in our view, to envisage new forms of online journalism which recognise, as a fundamental priority, its social responsibilities to those who lack even the most basic communicative resources to participate in its ongoing redefinition.

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