

INTRODUCTION

THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

Risks, threats and opportunities

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Andrew Williams, Richard Sambrook, Janet Harris, Iñaki Garcia-Blanco, Lina Dencik, Stephen Cushion, Cynthia Carter and Stuart Allan

Today journalism, as an industry and a profession, is characterised by ever-increasing turbulence and change, for better and for worse. Profound transformations affect every aspect of the institution, including the economic health of journalism, the conditions and self-understandings of its practitioners, its ability to serve as a watchdog on concentrations of power, its engagement with and relationship to its audience, and its future prospects. This emerging and dynamic ecology can be viewed as a unique constellation of challenges and opportunities. For these reasons, the fifth Future of Journalism conference, held in Cardiff on 10–11 September 2015, focused on the theme of Risks, Threats and Opportunities. The conference saw over 120 papers from around the world presented across 34 sessions, with keynote speeches from Dan Gillmor, Stephen Reese and Jean Seaton. This introduction briefly outlines some of these key risks, threats and opportunities, drawing on work presented at the conference, as well as insights from the field of journalism studies.

Risks and Threats

The current disruption to journalism raises threats to journalists themselves, but also for the public, as well as to business models, and established journalistic roles and practices. Risks and threats to journalists themselves come in many forms. For journalists around the world, their profession can be a dangerous one (Cottle, Sambrook, and Mosdell 2016). The risks and threats stem from geopolitical changes as well as a perceived loss of neutrality for journalists. Where once they were trusted intermediaries now they are seen as either “with us or against us”. There are direct and often physical threats to reporting—particularly in conflict zones. According to figures from the International News Safety Institute, more than 1000 journalists have died on the job in the past decade—often local journalists reporting on the news in volatile conflicts (<http://www.newssafety.org/about-insi/>, accessed May 16, 2016). However, threats are not limited to conflict zones—as papers presented at the conference showed, even in European countries with protections for the media journalists face harassment and intimidation. As journalist casualties continue to rise there are further dimensions to physical risk, such as gender (where we have seen some high-profile sexual assaults on

women journalists in the Middle East) and technology, where new developments enable journalists to get closer—often secretly—to conflict or crime at increased personal risk or make journalists vulnerable to surveillance by hostile governments or groups.

In addition, there are the well-documented and long-standing institutional threats to journalism. While the crisis in the business model of journalism has been ongoing for decades, it has sharpened since the global recession of 2007, and led to the demise of some of long-established and well-regarded institutions, includes most recently the *Independent* in the United Kingdom and the *Tampa Tribune* in the United States. Commercial newspapers and broadcasters have been losing audiences and advertising revenues and making cutbacks across the board, often leaving journalists at both national, regional and local publications stretched thin. The challenge to the economic model of journalism has resulted in the growing casualisation of the workforce, which means that employment is less secure, and freelancers are taking on more responsibility for reporting, with the rise of “low-pay, no pay” journalism (Bakker 2012). Technology has facilitated a de-professionalisation of journalism with many economic, quality-related and ethical questions raised as a consequence—alongside opportunities for greater participation. Sometimes these changes impact in surprising ways. For example, although the greater use of freelancers is a result of resource cuts and undermines job security, freelancers and other “entrepreneurial journalists” may also contribute to introducing innovation into newsrooms (Gynnild 2014).

The emergence of the so-called “fifth estate” (Dutton 2009) of networked bloggers contributing through alternative media was supposed to herald a wider role for the audience in journalism, articulating important news, generating public debate and facilitating new forms of accountability. However, it is increasingly clear that audience inclusion has not been as participatory as expected. Research into news organisations’ use of social media reveals that it does not always provide the heralded opportunities for the audience to become more active in the news-creation process, with limited user participation on websites and users rarely allowed to set the agenda. As a consequence, social media users can be sceptical about user contribution to the news, and far from social media being a means of widening the representation of sources, journalists’ approach to sources remains largely unchanged. Research has demonstrated time and again that mainstream media news is dominated by elite sources—predominantly politicians and their spokespersons—and this has not changed despite the emergence of social media and other technologies that facilitate and broaden participation.

There are other institutional threats. As barriers to entry to media fall, the once clear lines between independent journalism, public relations and advertising, and activism or propaganda have blurred with new corporate and government players entering what once would have been deemed the journalism arena—but not always with the same public-interest intent. The “fake news” controversy in Ukraine is one high-profile case in point. Here, it is also important to note the emergence of “native advertising” which, as Carlson (2015) has noted, complicates the long-standing division between editorial and advertising. These factors contribute to a perception that independent journalism, and the traditional accountability roles of the fourth estate, are under significant threat. Certainly at a local level, the economic viability of professional journalism is under serious pressure with the traditional democratic role of local news being undermined as costs are cut and newsrooms hollowed out (Franklin 2011).

Journalism plays a key role in democracies around the world, acting as a watchdog on the state and informing citizens about the decisions that affect their everyday life. But journalists face a number of new threats that limit their ability to fulfil their watchdog role. In an increasingly market-driven media landscape, the resources journalists have to scrutinise political elites and expose wrongdoing are increasingly diminished in local, national and international contexts. With cuts to public service broadcasting and a concentration of media ownership, for example, the information supply of local politics and public affairs is threatened.

Similarly, coverage of international affairs is expensive to produce and does not always appeal to audiences. As a consequence, a lack of public knowledge about war-torn countries and humanitarian crises—as much as about social, political or economic events—can leave democratic decisions at national levels under-informed.

In the light of these threats, while the future of journalism is often associated with online and social media platforms, how far they can help enhance democratic citizenship remains open to question. The disruption of traditional journalism models by digital technology and new players raises clear risks for professional journalists and institutions. However, the longer-term threat may be to our civic and public life.

Opportunities

Despite the continued attention to the risks and threats facing the profession, research in the field demonstrates that the journalistic landscape offers a range of opportunities based on technological, social

and economic developments, and forms of innovation. First of all, the blurring of the line between producers and audiences has generated new forms of audience participation, as demonstrated in research presented at the conference on practices as diverse as the use of participatory mapping to advance protection of the Amazon rainforest, to the emergence of news gaming. At the same time, there is evidence of the maturation of more established forms of participation, including user-generated content, social media and citizen journalism.

For both citizen journalists and professionals, the increasing sophistication of smartphones for news production and sharing might offer new possibilities which are particularly significant in enabling reporting in distant locations, and often empowering disenfranchised groups, as demonstrated in research on smartphone-facilitated citizen journalism from the Australian outback. This feeds into an emerging trend whereby citizen journalism plays a key role in covering distant communities, for example, rural areas of Eastern Taiwan. Further, smartphones are transforming the field of photojournalism as non-professionals are now able to contribute content, frequently facilitated through platforms such as Instagram and Flickr.

Social media are now well-established tools facilitating audience participation and journalistic practice. The widely documented normalisation of Twitter (e.g. Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012) has taken place alongside the cementation of Facebook and YouTube, and the growing importance of Instagram. These platforms allow audience members to share news and information and participate meaningfully in local and global debates. Such participation may range from that of “accidental journalists” providing user-generated content, to the social sharing practices that shape engagement with news events small and large. Research presented at the conference shows that journalists increasingly draw on these same social media platforms for crowd-sourcing, to find vox pops, and to enhance their professional profiles and virtual identities.

The normalisation of social media is challenging conventional hierarchies of news. While the presentation of news in legacy media, including print and broadcast, is characterised by (1) distinctive hierarchies of news value, and (2) the explicit separation between contributions from professionals and members of the public, the order in which news is presented to its audiences on newer platforms is no longer based primarily on news values, but rather determined by immediacy.

At the same time, cultural and economic trends towards quantification in journalism are changing the nature, production and reception of news storytelling. “Big data” enables new forms of news-

gathering, storytelling, visualisation and access to information by journalists and the public. The emergence of the “data journalist” as a professional category signals a new direction for professional practice at a time when others may be shrinking. Data journalism has been particularly important in reviving investigative journalism, with areas such as financial data and geodata frequently being used to provide evidence for major stories. It has offered new ways of detecting patterns in large-scale investigations, presenting stories to audiences, and crowd-sourcing the reporting of major stories (Coddington 2015). Similarly, while the increasing role of analytics, and audience quantification (Anderson 2011), has raised alarms around the rise of “clickbait”, and journalism driven by algorithms rather than professional judgement, it is also the case that it has enabled more audience-centred journalistic practices.

Amidst justified alarm over the business models of legacy journalism, there is also reason to be hopeful about the potential of new business models, including crowd-funding projects on platforms such as Kickstarter, which although short term in nature allow news to be produced from a more diversified income than most legacy models (e.g. Carvajal, García-Avilés, and Gonzalez 2012). Alongside attention to emerging business practices, research also demonstrates attention to those digital native news organisations that have successfully bucked the trend of economic decline and manage to survive within an altered journalistic landscape. These include what are by now established players such as Vice, Huffington Post and BuzzFeed. The online and non-profit investigative organisation ProPublica has won three Pulitzer Prizes since its establishment in 2008, while the investigative radio spin-off *Serial* gained funding from donations and sponsors to continue its ground-breaking podcast series, winning a Peabody Award in 2015. Such players, however, remain relatively under-researched, and further understanding their commercial and editorial practices might lead the way to identifying sustainable models for the future of journalism. A few established news organisations have managed to attract audiences to their online offerings, with *The New York Times* now topping 1 million digital subscribers.

It has been common in recent decades to consider local news as an area defined more by serious risks and continued existential threats than promising opportunities. “Good news stories” have been rare in this sector. But changing forms of audience participation have inspired a new wave of research about hyperlocal community news which has unearthed a growing group of hobbyists, entrepreneurs, civic activists, out-of-work journalists, and others using blogs and social media to enliven often moribund local information systems (Williams, Harte, and Turner 2015).

This has led to an upsurge in activity in the realm of the local digital commons as well as (albeit limited) experimentation with business models by an emergent generation of digital community news startups.

Opportunities in the field of local journalism itself are matched by new chances to re-invigorate our study of local news. Numerous conference interventions employed tried and tested methods to illuminate both hyperlocal and established local news (focusing mainly on the production and content of local news; audience studies continue to be rare, with some notably excellent exceptions). But we were encouraged to view traditional (and even new) local news providers as only partly responsible for the proliferating information flows in local communities. In our attention to the local we were reminded to consider not only shifting audience patterns of production and consumption, but also changes in the traditional roles of local officials, politicians and others routinely cited in news. We no longer interview or observe only local journalists in our research, not least because “the people formerly known as news sources” are now often communicating, unmediated, to local publics using various new media platforms and playing ever-greater roles in framing local life.

As this brief survey demonstrates, the risks, threats and opportunities facing journalism are varied and swiftly evolving. While many of the preoccupations of scholars presenting their work at the conference reflect continuities in the increasingly maturing discipline of journalism studies, and build on themes that have been present since the very first Future of Journalism conference in 2007, we have also seen a growing sophistication of both methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of journalism. We have selected papers that approach these risks, threats and opportunities in innovative and engaging ways from a variety of methodological and conceptual angles, as well as across countries and regions. Together, these papers offer an extraordinary snapshot of the cutting edge of research in journalism studies, demonstrating the vibrancy of a field of research which is as dynamic and diverse as the object of its study.

Digital Journalism

In his keynote paper, “The New Geography of Journalism Research: Levels and Spaces”, Stephen D. Reese urges journalism scholars to consider the challenges of doing research in a shifting domain, where technology has made the concept of journalism itself problematic. A “spatial turn” has made concepts of fields, spheres and networks more relevant than in the past. Understanding these spaces requires thinking in less media-centric terms as we identify newly coupled *assemblages* put together in producing digital journalism, beyond its traditional

institutional containers.

Reese's paper provides a useful conceptual starting point for thinking about journalism studies in a digital era, broadly represented by the papers in this issue. We have grouped them into three distinctive yet overlapping areas of research, beginning with those investigating digital knowledge production (technologies), followed by journalistic roles and practices (production), and finally the analysis of public opinion and democracy (audiences/users).

The first section of the special issue considers the role of technology in knowledge production. It opens with Inka Salovaara's article which examines InfoAmazonia, a data-journalism platform on Amazon rainforests, a geo-visualisation within information mapping. She concludes that the platform represents a digitally created map-space within which journalistic practice can be seen as dynamic, performative interactions between journalists, ecosystems, space and species. This is followed by an article by Neil Thurman, Steve Schifferes, Richard Fletcher, Nic Newman, Stephen Hunt and Aljoshia Karim Schapals who assess how algorithms help journalists identify trending stories, search social media, and verify contributors and content, whilst raising questions about journalistic accountability.

The second section begins with an article by Monika Djerf-Pierre, Marina Ghersetti and Ulrika Hedman, where they challenge the hype surrounding journalists' use of social media. Web surveys with Swedish journalists show that while the use of social media has been increasing, there has also been a decline in journalists' valuations of the platform. Next up is Daniel Bennett's paper in which he assesses whether the adoption of live online coverage has facilitated a more "multiperspectival" journalism. Journalists increasingly use "non-official" sources, he suggests, whilst continuing to depend on traditional news values and practices. This is followed by Lily Canter and Daniel Brookes' paper examining the tweeting habits of journalists at a UK city newspaper. Tweeting types, they conclude, are germane to specific journalistic job roles, challenging redefinitions of the journalist as a universal role. Attention then turns to Zvi Reich and Aviv Barnoy's paper, which presented findings from interviews with 108 Israeli reporters, where the authors found that news leaks are a largely oral practice, the prerogative of senior reporters in print and television, and subject to more editorial cross-checking than regular items. The section is rounded out by Lisette Johnston's study based on interviews with BBC journalists through which she seeks to understand how social media and "citizen journalism" have changed traditional news-gathering.

Turning to the third group of papers, we begin with Kathleen Beckers

and Raymond A. Harder's qualitative and quantitative content analysis of Dutch and Flemish news websites which shows that journalists use vox pops regularly and as a representation of public opinion. Next is Ike Picone, Ralf De Wolf and Sarie Robijt's article, which considers what makes news content worth sharing online. Drawing on a survey amongst Dutch-speaking Belgian users, the piece demonstrates how motivations to share and internet skills are important predictors of sharing behaviour. This is followed by Raymond A. Harder, Steve Paulussen and Peter Van Aelst's article reporting on a content analysis of the 2014 Belgian election campaign coverage. The authors conclude that whilst Twitter was important in launching and shaping stories, established journalists and politicians dominated election news whilst citizens played a modest role. The final paper is by Jan Lauren Boyles and Eric Meyer and examines journalists' role perceptions as the guardian of public trust in an era of data journalism. In-depth inter-views with data journalists in the United States illuminate how they perceive their social responsibility to foster democratic conversation with the audience.

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