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Journalism in a Network
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The occupation of journalism has changed very dramatically very fast. Until the 1990s, journalists produced content for a single outlet, such as a newspaper or television program, and they produced it in a single format – printed words, say, or sound, or moving images. Most of them worked in stable media industries that, thanks largely to a lucrative advertising-based revenue model, had been highly profitable for decades if not centuries, and they had something close to a monopoly on providing news to the public. Outside the newsroom, almost all their work-related communication was with sources; only rarely did they interact directly with readers, viewers, or listeners.

None of those things is true today.

This chapter surveys changes to journalism since the rise of the internet as a popular medium, as well as the challenges of managing the transition. It touches on shifts in journalists' tasks, roles and self-perceptions, and occupational culture. The overarching message for those preparing to enter, manage, and study the media workforce is: Be flexible. More change is the only thing you can count on.

Changing tasks

Perhaps the most obvious change to journalism has involved the introduction and rapid incorporation of new tasks and the tools needed to accomplish them. Journalists always have been storytellers, and they still are. The best journalists are the most skillful at that core task. In the past, they developed, nurtured, and refined that skill within a single mode of expression; a writer honed the ability to choose and use just the right words, a photojournalist became adept at capturing the most compelling images, and so on. Today, skillful storytelling requires knowing how to tell stories across different media – and, importantly, knowing which medium is most effective for which type of story or even for which component of a single story.

Christine Young, an investigative reporter at the *Middletown Times Herald-Record*, a 70,000-circulation newspaper in New York's Hudson Valley, had a powerful story to tell about a man locked behind bars for 20 years for a murder Young was sure he did not commit. Had she held her job at the time of the murder, she would have told it with words, supplemented by a few images from a staff photographer. But Young's investigation took place in the late 2000s. Her story, which won an Online News Association award for outstanding investigation by a small website (thr-investigations.com/lebrewjones/), was built using a greatly enhanced toolkit. Videos enable us to see and hear the victim's mother, the prisoner's brother, and others whose experiences and emotions enrich the story. Interactive maps and timelines let us sift through the clues. Links take us to digitized versions of the autopsy report and evidence list, among other documents and background information. Each piece contributes to an immensely compelling narrative – one that resulted in freedom for a man who never should have lost it.

This multimedia story, like many others that go beyond routine coverage, was a team enterprise, requiring collaboration and coordination to produce. Young worked with photographers, videographers, graphic artists, programmers, and editors, a total of 10 people in

all – some wearing multiple hats. For example, photographer John Pertel also served as website designer, multimedia producer, videographer, and video editor. He is the sort of "multi-skilled" journalist whom editors increasingly seek to hire: ones fluent in a much wider range of "languages" than in the past, including text, images, sound, and animation.

This story did not incorporate material from users, but working closely with both content and contributors from outside the newsroom is another, arguably even more significant, change in journalistic tasks. The creation of "j-blogs," individual or collective blogs by journalists, has provided a way to cross the sometimes-restrictive parameters of conventional news storytelling; equally important, it has created a forum for an exchange of ideas with users. J-blogs were virtually non-existent a few years ago, today, it is hard to find a news website without them (Bivings Group, 2007). In addition, most sites provide opportunities for a wide and widening range of "participatory news" options (Deuze, 2006), from comments on stories to recommendation systems to user blogs. Many more options are certain to appear between the time I write this line and the time you read it.

The motives of newsroom managers for opening up the media space typically have been some combination of the democratic – a belief in the value of civic discussion about the issues of the day – and the economic; a user engaged in conversation with journalists or other users is more likely to return repeatedly to the website to continue talking, thus building traffic and, by extension, the potential for advertising revenue. In reality, however, much of the discussion has been somewhere south of civil (Singer & Ashman, 2009; Hermida & Thurman, 2008), and journalists have had to take on the additional task of online moderator. This new job involves everything from keeping the conversation on track to discouraging or outright deleting the most obnoxious of the detours.

The key word for all these tasks, in fact, is "additional." New storytelling platforms, new tools and formats, new collaborations, and new responsibilities for user contributions all come on top of the news work expected of earlier generations of journalists. And they are just the most tangible of the ongoing transformations.

Changing roles and self-perceptions

Less tangible but at least as important are associated changes in journalists' roles and self-perceptions. The role of "moderator" is one manifestation of a broader change in the traditional journalistic role of gate-keeping. That information-management role involves "the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by news media" (Shoemaker et al., 2001, p. 233). More fundamentally, it describes a world in which the journalist controls the flow of information to the public. That world no longer exists.

In response, journalists have adjusted their self-perceptions in two related ways. One has involved an assertion of boundaries between themselves and other content providers in the open environment of the internet; journalists have sought to define who they are and what makes them distinct. The other has entailed new thinking about the role they play in this world; here, journalists are evolving new definitions of what they do.

An answer to the question of who is a journalist is far less straightforward than it once was. Bloggers and others who have never set foot in a newsroom can and do legitimately claim some of the same occupational turf (Lowery, 2006). Access to a printing press or broadcast transmitter isn't required; anyone can "publish," "broadcast," or otherwise disseminate information easily and cheaply online. Access to information sources can't be it, either, as vast storehouses of information are a click away, as are millions of other people. That storytelling

ability discussed above is important, and not everyone is good at constructing a compelling narrative … but a great many fine writers clearly are not journalists.

Increasingly, journalists are instead defining themselves in terms of professional norms, standards, and practices that, they say, are only sporadically shared by those outside the newsroom. Many relate to the fundamental journalistic norm of truth-telling; others have more to do with relationships between journalists and their audiences or sources.

Some of the norms involve gathering information. Examples include obtaining verification or other collaborating evidence; seeking multiple perspectives to provide balance; and acting as an observer of, rather than an active participant in, whatever is being covered. Another set of norms relates to conveying information once it has been obtained. Journalists cannot hide behind the anonymity afforded by pseudonyms, as users who contribute to their websites often do. They have ethical obligations to acknowledge and correct their errors, to find ways to minimize the harm their words or images can cause, and to be accountable for their actions; users, they say, do not necessarily feel such obligations. In short, journalists have assigned themselves a responsibility to behave in a certain way, and they say that responsibility separates them from those who do not share it.

There is an obvious irony here: These are precisely the sorts of things that critics say journalists do *not* do, at least not consistently. Nonetheless, journalists generally see such attributes and practices as not only crucial but also self-defining -- even though they know they sometimes fail to live up to their own standards.

If the question of who is a journalist is difficult to answer, the question of what is journalism may be even harder. The second, somewhat different, response of journalists to the loss of control over the flow of online information has been to redefine the core function of

journalism in society, shifting it to one that is less about gate-keeping and more about sense-making (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Singer, 1997). As the role of watchdog is taken up by other members of the online community, journalists are reclaiming the broader role of guide dog. In this view, journalism involves not just making information available but making it understandable, meaningful, and, ultimately, individually and collectively useful. Journalism is about providing context, analysis, and interpretation – a shift away from strict objectivity toward something that both reflects and invites engagement with the information provided. In many ways, such journalism also is more personal, and there is a clear trend toward the development of individual journalists' public personas (Pew Project, 2009a).

Of course, journalism has always been about those things; the current changes are arguably just ones of emphasis, with greater weight placed on "guidance" than in the past. More thoroughly novel – and harder for journalists to accommodate within existing self-perceptions – is the role of community participant. Both providing and interpreting information are collective enterprises online and likely to become even more so as media websites integrate additional user contributions in an expanding range of formats.

The role of moderator mentioned above is only one aspect of participation. As journalism becomes a conversation rather than a lecture (Gillmor, 2006), journalists discover they have to engage in that conversation themselves – for instance, as bloggers or social networkers – and look for ways to engage others. They find themselves serving as the hosts of something resembling a gigantic virtual dinner party: keeping the discussion flowing; ensuring there is enough nourishment, in sufficient variety, to keep all the guests happy; steering together people who might enjoy one another's company; and, if necessary, heading off or breaking up any fights.

This is obviously a novel role for journalists, and it takes some getting used to. It is an especially challenging transition for those who see the practice of journalism as necessitating a certain distance from people outside the newsroom, including sources and audience members. Such a change is not simply about taking on new roles; it is about adapting to an entirely new occupational culture.

Changing Culture

So journalists see themselves as people who draw on particular skills to perform particular tasks in fulfilling particular social roles – and all those things are changing rapidly and dramatically, forcing practitioners to change their perceptions of who they are and what they do. Together, such changes contribute to a massive shift in the occupational culture of journalism.

The notion of fluidity – which applies to the entire journalistic enterprise, including products, processes, and structures of all sorts, from social to physical to economic -- may be useful in considering this ongoing cultural change and the difficulty of managing its negotiation. Journalism once had clear boundaries. We have already discussed the erosion of definitional boundaries around who is and is not a journalist. There also were boundaries of time; journalists worked to a deadline, after which the presses had to roll or the program had to air. There were boundaries of space; journalism was produced within a newsroom and processed by editors who worked in it. There were boundaries around the product itself, too; journalism came neatly packaged within the pages of a newspaper or the minutes of a news show. Reaching the back page or the last minute meant there was no more news.

The internet breached all those boundaries. Deadlines are continuous, and stories are updated whenever new information becomes available. Content of all sorts flows in from everywhere and everyone, and even the bits produced by journalists no longer necessarily are

routed through a newsroom (or an editor) before appearing online. The unmanaged and perhaps unmanageable nature of the network itself, with its myriad intertwined links and updates every nanosecond, creates an essentially infinite, unbounded product.

To accommodate these changes, many news organizations also have dissolved long-standing physical boundaries within the newsroom. The next chapter provides a closer look at "convergence"; suffice to say here that newsrooms worldwide have been radically reconfigured to accommodate creation of this continuous, participatory, multi-platform product. Physical and organizational structures designed to handle the old assembly-line process of making news – reporters in one part of the newsroom, copy editors in another, city editors in a third, visual journalists stuck in a far corner – are vanishing. They are being replaced by content-area clusters or other arrangements intended to facilitate the dissemination of content through digital platforms throughout the day and the channelling of selected portions of that material to legacy products, such as the newspaper, to meet their deadlines.

Collaborative decision-making erases old divisions of labor in the newsroom and, increasingly, draws on external input, as well. The latter is an especially controversial challenge to the occupational culture of journalists, who are quite protective of their status as the ones who decide what constitutes news -- and quite wary about online usage data or comment volume being allowed to drive those decisions, a practice derisively labeled "traffic whoring" (Singer & Ashman, 2009).

None of these cultural changes, which together take most journalists well outside their comfort zones, has been easy. They typically mean more work, and unfamiliar work at that; many journalists have balked or protested, as individuals or through trade unions such as the Newspaper Guild in America or the National Union of Journalists in Britain. Concerns about

increased workload are inevitably tied to concerns about quality: more (and more varied) content must be created, on a never-ending deadline, using new and constantly changing tools.

And if all that weren't enough, the business model that has sustained journalism for centuries appears to be unworkable online, knocking the economic underpinnings of news organizations out from under them. Some long-standing news outlets have folded; others have drastically scaled back operations or have turned to online-only distribution. Many news people have found themselves without a full-time job, becoming journeyman journalists who work for short periods on particular projects – or leaving the profession altogether.

"Even before the recession, the fundamental question facing journalism was whether the news industry could win a race against the clock for survival: could it find new ways to underwrite the gathering of news online, while using the declining revenue of the old platforms to finance the transition?" observers at the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism (2009b) wrote in 2009. The fundamental questions facing journalism are where the money is to come from, how it is to be spent, and whether it will be enough to cover the costs of gathering and disseminating quality information. As of this writing, those questions are unanswered.

Fluidity always brings uncertainty, or at least less certainty than a fixed and stable environment affords. The shape of familiar things has changed dramatically, as we have seen; the shape of things still to come is unclear. Which skills, tasks, roles, principles, or practices will remain vital; which will be transformed and in what ways; and which will become relics of a past that looks increasingly unlike the present, let alone the future? What will journalists expect of themselves, and what will others expect of them? What sorts of collaborations will prove valuable, and how will they be nurtured, strengthened, and extended? What cultural and

economic structures will emerge to sustain journalism – and what will happen to our democratic society if they do not?

Managing these enormous simultaneous changes, adapting an entire occupational culture to accommodate them, finding and implementing sustainable new business models, and coping with pervasive uncertainty at every step of the way are Herculean tasks. Media workers and researchers face the challenge of understanding this volatile occupation and helping it move forward, sometimes reluctantly, often slowly, yet also inevitably. Are you ready?

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