

Goldsmiths Media Research Centre

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A Media Manifesto for the Digital Age

I want to use my time to pull out a couple of the main arguments in the book that we are launching tonight and illustrate why we wanted to hold this event.

The production and circulation of independent, quality news is a hallmark of democratic societies with a complex history of commercial practices, regulatory controls and technological innovation. The demise of the existing business model of the local and regional press and of broadcast news in the regions together with the struggle for survival of many national newspapers demands a critical consideration of what we want news for and how it can be delivered.

The Goldsmiths study provides empirical evidence that 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. 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. Rather, as the economic model for traditional news production stumbles and falls in the digital age, professional journalism has become the first casualty, the second, if we're not careful, and pretty close behind will be the health of our democracy.

The research draws on over 170 interviews with a range of professionals from a cross section of mainstream news media, as well as news sources and new producers online including bloggers and people operating in the realm of alternative news; we added to this, 3 newsroom ethnographies and a content analysis of online news across mainstream news media, online alternative media, social networking sites and YouTube.

We looked at the role of structural factors such as commerce, finance and regulation along with the cultural complexities of journalism, journalistic subjectivities and working practices.

And we found an industry and a practice in trouble.

Some of the Main Conclusions:

- Newspaper circulation and readership levels are at an all time low; 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 news and the popularization of online and mobile platforms; a decline in advertising revenue alongside cuts in personnel. With regard to local and international news

production, the lack of economies of scale means that it is increasingly commercially unviable. The Newspaper Society notes that 101 local papers closed down between January and August 2009. In those that are surviving – less people, doing more and more work – now I know we may all say that about our jobs, but in journalism what we see is the perfect storm – a history of marketisation, deregulation and globalisation, throw new technologies in to the mix (bringing about yet more speed and space and more need to invest in technical infrastructure) – these factors combined have had a negative impact on journalism for the public good and in the public interest.

- The working context of news media has increased pressures in the newsroom to fill more space (through the expansion of online platforms), work at greater speed (to fill the requirements of 24 hour news and the immediacy of online communication) with fewer journalists in permanent positions and more job insecurity.

In the old days you had to get up in the morning and read all the newspapers, listen to the Today Programme [...] Now, in addition to all of that we also have to keep an eye on websites, blogs of others, just in case stories crop up [...] As on the Internet what we have to contend with is hugely increased sources of information. (Political Newspaper Editor, National Mid-Market)

.. when you're under those time constraints, the Internet is fabulous but it's dangerous as well. And I think that, a lot of the time people get things wrong, particularly on 24-hour news channels, it's because they're relying on the Internet. (Political Editor, Commercial Broadcasting)

- In this environment there is evidence of journalists being thrust into news production more akin to creative cannibalization 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. 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 leading to an homogenization of content as ever increasing commercial pressures add to the temptation to rely not just on news agencies but on all cheaper forms of news gathering.
- Given the speed of work, and the sheer amount of traffic and noise that journalists are exposed to every day, it is less easy for ordinary citizens and non-elite sources to make direct contact with reporters in mainstream media. In order for journalists to pick out the important information from the 'blizzard' online they are forced to create systems of 'filtration' based on known hierarchies and

established news values. With so little time at their disposal journalists tend to prioritise known, 'safe' sources. So,

- Mainstream news on-line has not expanded to include a broader diversity of voices or shifted focus according to information filtered through social media.
- And 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 dominance of a limited number of players that control news, information content and public debate. In other words mainstream news matters, maybe more than it ever has done – and most people, most of the time get most of their news from it. Furthermore the organisation of web search tends to send more users to the most popular sites in a winners take all pattern. It seems ever likely that the voices on the web will be dominated by the larger, more established news providers in a manner that, yet again, limits possibilities for increased pluralism.
- In some newspapers, the combination of staff reductions and speeded up production schedules mean that only the most established senior, journalists, with the highest level of personal autonomy, have the luxury of leaving the office to talk to people, phoning a number of different people to verify information, or probing for alternative views or contradictions. But its not just the young journalists whose working practices have been transformed:

They [journalists] don't even try to talk to you, they just watch breaking news upstairs. I pass them every day when I come in, I pass one of the rooms and I see them watching telly and they're banging away on the typewriters, all of them [...] When I first came here [...] it would be rare for that Lobby not to include some journalists, and sometimes it could be as many as ten or a dozen or twenty. Now, the only people you see in the Lobby are the fellas in the fancy breeches looking after the place [...] I think it's the advent of 24 hours news. (Labour MP)

What we're left with is a contradiction between the transforming potential of new technologies and the stifling constraints of the free market.

The material conditions of contemporary journalism (particularly unprotected 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.

What is the relationship between news media and democracy?

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. In a world of one click communication and information overload protecting and enhancing a news media that can aim for this ethical horizon has

actually become more important rather than less important. Without it we are left scrambling through the blogosphere, drowning in opinion, with no known serious fact-checking, no requirement to put stories in context, no real way of holding the writer gatherers to account. Where the well resourced and the already powerful are able to shout the loudest, twitter their way to the top of the pile while everyone else whispers in the wind.

How do we preserve it and should government have a role in media structures and behaviour?

Any government who truly believes in the basic principles of democracy should be prepared to provide the means by which it can function. This means regulating news media to provide the freedom to operate in the public interest rather than purely for commercial gain. To ignore this is to accept that the market can 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 practice is swept aside in pursuit of financial stability.

How do we do it?

My view - We need to move towards a system of post-corporate, low profit or not-for-profit news supported by government funding that comes not from the Licence fee but from practices that are popular elsewhere in Europe such as industry levies and the charging of news aggregators that exploit news content.

The launch bit

I'm not going to tell you about the book because you've heard me rabbit on and you've got the summary and really now you should just buy it and read it. But you're not getting off that lightly because I do want to say a couple of things.

A writer died and was given the option of going to heaven or hell.

She decided to check out each place first. As the writer descended into the fiery pits, she saw row upon row of writers chained to their desks in a steaming sweatshop. As they worked, they were repeatedly whipped with thorny lashes.

"Oh my," said the writer. "Let me see heaven now."

A few moments later, as she ascended into heaven, she saw rows of writers, chained to their desks in a steaming sweatshop. As they worked, they, too, were whipped with thorny lashes.

"Wait a minute," said the writer. "This is just as bad as hell!"

"Oh no, it's not," replied an unseen voice. "Here, your work gets published."

So this is the little slice of heaven that comes at the end of the sheer hell of writing and researching. Only with this research and this writing I can genuinely say that it wasn't really hell at all. And that is all down to the team because this was a genuine team endeavour:

James Curran – God

Nick Couldry – Saint Nick

Aeron Davis – the holy ghost (in NZ) affectionately known as Eeyore

Des Freedman – Derek the demon

Angela Phillips – our thorny devil

Tamara Witschge and Joanna Redden – our guardian angels

Peter Lee-Wright – the fallen angel (a.k.a Benny Hill)

And I of course am the Virgin Mary – otherwise known as Madonna

We are a big team, with big personalities and most importantly with very divergent perspectives – huge analytical benefit

We spent many pleasurable hours arguing, critiquing, analyzing and then arguing some more.

We spent 6 months debating what the word 'the news' meant.

Sometimes the process was frustrating, often exhausting but always fascinating and always done in a spirit of intellectual ardour, academic passion and good humour (Peter).

Indeed it was as all good research projects should be.

When we started I remember saying I'm not doing it unless its fun – and in all honesty I can say it was and it's not over yet.

2 more books on the horizon and a host of other publications on this research

I should thank the advisory group, the rest of the Leverhulme programme, the people whom we interviewed, the BBC, MEN and Guardian for letting us in and of course Sage –

And I should say that despite appearances to the contrary in terms of the cover – as my 9 year old son Isaac said as I was leaving – what your launching that book with the tea stains on it; or indeed the type face - this is not the secret diaries of Natalie Fenton aged 13 and $\frac{3}{4}$ that's a whole other story, but it is it my totally unbiased opinion, a book worth reading and I hope you think so too.

Thank you for coming