

Drowning or Waving? New Media, Journalism and Democracy

Natalie Fenton

News is often claimed to be the life-blood of a democracy – news journalism as contributing vital resources for processes of information gathering, deliberation and action. The ethos and vocation of journalism is embedded in a relationship with democracy and its practice. It is also embedded in a history of commercial practice, regulatory control and technological innovation – it is the tensions between these aspects that underpin this book.

Journalism comes in many forms – from the entertainment-driven and celebrity-laden to the more serious and politically focused; it is many things to many people. Here, we are concerned to address news and current affairs journalism that purports to be for the public good and in the public interest, even if this is experienced as no more than an ideal ethical horizon both by those who produce it and those who consume it. In a world of communicative abundance this ethical horizon is still pertinent: there remains a sense that there are many things that news journalism ought to be doing – to monitor, to hold to account and to facilitate and maintain deliberation – that forms a line in the sand against which contemporary practice can be critiqued. It would be wrong, however, to see such an approach as peddling a ‘golden age’ thesis that harks back to a time that never was. We are more concerned with a time that is yet to come but is nonetheless worth aiming for. In a world of information overload and one-click communication, news matters (maybe more than it ever has) and interrogating the nature of news journalism is one of the most urgent challenges we face in defining the public interest in the modern media age.

News is also what journalists make it. How journalists make news depends on their working environment. Their working environment is shaped by economic, social, political and technological factors, all of which form a dense inter-meshing of commercial, ethical, regulatory and cultural components. If we are to understand the nature of news in contemporary societies then we must interrogate news in all of its contextual complexity. This book attempts to do just that: it is a book about journalism, news and

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new media in the digital age.¹ It explores how technological, economic and social changes have reconfigured news journalism and the consequences of these transformations for a vibrant democracy.

The discussion is rooted in empirical enquiry from one of the first large-scale studies in the UK into new media and journalism.² Using interviews, ethnography and qualitative content analysis to investigate news production processes in a representative sample of news media, the research combines macro-social critique with micro-organizational analysis to gain a complex, critical understanding of the nature of news and news journalism in the digital age. Our central concern in this endeavour is to subject to empirical scrutiny the ways in which new media, news and journalism contribute to democratic political practice and feed public interest. This book is not, therefore, an edited collection of loosely connected chapters. It has been written by the entire research team engaged in this investigation. Although each chapter considers a different dimension of the research, all are closely inter-related.

Many commentators have claimed that journalism is undergoing a fundamental transformation. One of the key reasons cited for this transformation is the changing nature of technology, which is claimed to impact directly upon the practice of journalism and access to the profession. The nature of this transformation is considered variably as a negative and a positive development. The judgments made are usually based upon the perceived contribution of news media to fully functioning modern democratic systems and hence upon journalism's role in contributing to the public sphere (Habermas, 1989). In all approaches what is described, in one way or another, is the dismantling of the structures of news media as we know them. Certainly, on the face of it there has been a step change in the nature of news productivity. Ofcom (2007b: 34) reports that the

Daily Telegraph launched the first UK online national news operation – Electronic Telegraph – in 1994, followed three years later by the BBC's news website. The last major UK national newspaper to launch its website was the Daily Mail, in 2004. Within the last decade, web-based operations have come to be viewed as essential for newspapers – national, regional and local – and for all major broadcasters and news agencies.

These debates raise critical questions that run throughout this book: Has new technology revitalized the public sphere or become a tool of commerce for an increasingly un-public undemocratic news media? In what ways have economic and social change contributed to this process? Has technological, economic and social change reconfigured the job of the journalist and the production of news in terms of enquiry (including

media-source interactions), observation, research, editing, and writing? Who are the journalists and how do they exert influence on one another? Does this influence support or challenge economic and/or regulatory constraints within the newsroom? In what way is technological, economic and social change influencing the prospects for and nature of online news and participatory journalism as well as increasing the role of citizen journalists and NGOs as news sources?

The chapters that follow present insights from across a range of perspectives employed to interrogate these questions. From an historical perspective – through a critique of past (mis)conceptions of the power of technology to transform perceived inadequacies in public culture and democracy; an economic perspective – through an investigation into the market dynamics, pressures and technological responses of the news industry; a regulatory perspective – through a consideration of the opportunities for and threats to the practice of ethical journalism; a socio-political perspective that seeks to understand journalism and politics from within a critique of the cultures of new capitalism; an organizational perspective – through analysis of journalistic practice in different news production contexts; a socio-cultural perspective that examines how old news sources are adapting to the new news environment and how new news sources are emerging and the consequent impact this may have on news content – we explore the nature and context of new media and journalism and its contribution to democratic practice.

In adopting a holistic, multi-dimensional approach we have sought to challenge traditional divides in media and communication studies that tend to prioritize either structure (mostly from within political economy) or agency (largely situated in cultural studies) (Fenton, 2007), to reach a position that understands the place of both and seeks to uncover the dynamics of power therein. Although the political economy and cultural studies have often been seen as entirely contrasting with irreconcilable differences (Garnham, 1995; Grossberg, 1995) this research reveals that in practice such distinctions are less clear-cut and there is much to be gained from embracing a dialogic inter-disciplinarity. To understand new media and the news requires a consideration of the role of structural factors such as commerce and finance along with the cultural complexities of journalism and with it, journalistic subjectivities.

It should be clear from this introduction that we do not attribute the nature of change to technology alone but rather the convergence of many forces that may be contingent upon local circumstance at any one time. In his study of American online newspapers, Boczkowski (2004) stresses that 'new media emerge by merging existing socio-material infrastructures with novel technical capabilities [...] this evolution is influenced by a combination of historical conditions, local contingencies and process dynamics' (2004: 12). In other words online newspapers merge print's old

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ways with the web's new potentials in an ongoing process in which different local conditions may lead to different outcomes. In this manner, we foreground technical novelty rather than technological determinism and place the research within a media landscape structured by a contemporary history of globalization, deregulation and marketization.

Our approach is particularly mindful of the fact that there has always been 'new' technology in one form or another and it has usually been accompanied by eulogizing on its democratic potential, its ability to become a tool of the people wresting power from the elite structures of society (explored here in Chapter 2). These debates echo the celebrations of plurality, accessibility and participation. Likewise, journalism and journalists have faced a long history of criticism. The (supposed) decline of journalistic integrity and the professional standards of journalism have been attributed variously to journalists' egomania, their being parasitic, exploitative of human tragedy and generally squalid and untrustworthy. Hargreaves (2003: 12), a former journalist, writes:

Journalism stands accused of sacrificing accuracy for speed, purposeful investigation for cheap intrusion and reliability for entertainment. 'Dumbed down' news media are charged with privileging sensation over significance and celebrity over achievement.

It is no surprise that new media has offered a fresh means of anxiety and an extension of these concerns but the hopes and fears of new media are not new. Importantly, we acknowledge from the outset that these concerns do not arise because of the technology per se or indeed because of the diminishing ethical behaviour of journalists. Rather, they are part of a more complex socio-economic, political and cultural history.

Since the mid 1990s a number of studies have explored the implications of the internet for journalistic practice (for example, Reddick and King, 1997; Miller, 1998; Singer, 1998; Deuze, 1999; Garrison, 2000, 2001, 2003; Rivas-Rodriguez, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). They have looked at the nature of news content, the way journalists do their job, the structure of the newsroom and the shifting relationships between journalists, news organizations and their publics (Pavlik, 2001). In their quest to make sense of the impact of new media on the news they have considered the interactive nature of the internet; the complexity of its content in volume and variety as well as its accessibility and its convergence across previously distinct media. The majority of these studies report that the internet brings new ways of collecting and reporting information into the newsrooms. This new journalism is open to novices, lacks editorial control, can stem from anywhere (not just the newsroom), involves new writing techniques, functions in a network with fragmented audiences, is delivered at great speed, and is open and iterative. In this manner the technology of the internet is said to have reinvigorated democracy.

In stark contrast, others (see below) denounce the impact of new media on the news environment largely from a position of criticism of neo-liberalism more generally. Often these are the same voices as those that take a dim view of the present concentration of ownership and dominance of commercial imperatives. Whatever their take, all studies coalesce at some point around three central characteristics of the internet in news production: speed and space; multiplicity and polycentrality; interactivity and participation – which taken together, are argued to have created a new brand of journalism (Deuze, 1999). It is these debates that have informed this study and it is to these that we now turn.

New Media and the News: Reinvigorated Democracy or Throttling Good Journalism?

Speed and Space

The argument begins simply enough: more space equals more news. The sheer space available online is said to open up new possibilities for news presentation that cannot be found in hard copy form. Through archiving facilities the ability to provide more depth of coverage is increased exponentially. Similarly the ability to update regularly is vastly enhanced. The space for multimedia formats also allows news to be presented in innovative and interesting ways (Gunter, 2003).

Space is also linked to geographical reach. Some theorists believe that the web is capable of linking communities of interest across the globe, thereby creating greater political participation. Reach is further enhanced by speed. The speed of the internet enables journalists to get to data without having to leave the newsroom (Quinn, 2002). Reports can be downloaded in seconds, public databases interrogated in a fraction of the time it would have previously taken. These changes signal potential improvements in the relevance and timeliness of news and journalism.

But there are also negative assessments where speed and space translate into 'speed it up and spread it thin'. Researchers describe how established news organizations are encouraged by the speed of the internet to release and update stories before the usual checks for journalistic integrity have taken place (Gunter, 2003; Silvia, 2001); how the increasing emphasis on immediacy in news coverage is frequently satisfied by reporters working for news agencies (Ofcom, 2007) to the detriment of original reportage (Scott, 2005; Davies, 2008), turning journalists into 'robohacks' (Hargreaves, 2003) practising 'churnalism' (Davies, 2008), rather than reporters and editors.

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An intensification of pressure in the newsroom to produce more articles in less time is claimed to have led to fewer journalists gathering information outside of the newsroom. In these accounts, often the entire production process is a desktop activity with journalists not only writing but also composing a complete presentation package on-screen. This form of multi-skilling has been argued to lead to a reduction in levels of professionalism associated with standards as individuals are expected to do everything from acquiring the pictures, to writing the copy and designing the page (Gunter, 2003). As newsrooms have become increasingly decentralized and flexible, employing staff with a different range of skills from those traditionally associated with journalism, so working conditions are also reported to have become more flexible and workforces more transient (Pavlik, 2001), bringing with them less journalistic autonomy as job security becomes paramount.

Multiplicity and Polycentrality

The space available also gives rise to the potential for a plurality of news providers that threatens the monopoly of provision from major transnational corporations, opening up news production to all citizens able to get access to a computer and the right software. The internet is claimed to provide a many-to-many model of information dissemination, putting the smaller and the smallest news providers on an equal footing with the transnational conglomerates (Rheingold, 1993). This in turn, unlocks the possibility for smaller online news providers providing spaces for minority views and news that do not make it into the dominant news media because of their apparent lack of appeal to a mass audience (Rivas- Rodriguez, 2003).

McNair (1999: 213) states that a proliferation of news platforms calls into question the notion of the public as a single, monolithic construct 'defined and serviced by a metropolitan elite', and encourages its replacement with a vision of 'multiple publics, connected in key ways'. As a result online journalism is claimed to offer audiences a view of the world that is more contextualized, textured, and multidimensional than traditional news media.

In this space it is more difficult for journalists to claim privilege and for anyone fully to control its flows. The internet provides a space where interested readers can check the validity of one news report against another and even access the news sources referred to. The nature of news gathering is exposed like never before, placing notions of journalistic objectivity and impartiality, the holy grail of professional journalism, under scrutiny. In online journalism these normative anchors become dislodged in favour of the acknowledgement of the impossibility of objectivity and an increased awareness of subjectivity. The multiplicity of

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views and voices from a diversity of cultures and viewpoints is claimed to keep the mainstream news 'on its toes' and render its construction more transparent. The omnipotent voice of the journalist is diluted and journalist–audience distinctions blurred (McCoy, 2001).

However, multiplicity does not always translate into diversity. Content analyses of online news have found that mainstream newspapers with online versions use a fraction of their print stories in the online edition (Singer, 1997); use mostly the same news stories with similar news judgments (Redden and Witschge, this volume) and operate under similar financial constraints. In other words it is more of the same only in a less extensive manner.

In an online world multiplicity does, however, add up to increased quantity. There are now more news platforms available to more citizens than ever before. Quantity, of course, has never been a predictor of quality. Finding information can be an ever more difficult task as people attempt to navigate their way through a morass of search engines and news sites. Many have argued that the sheer abundance of news across a range of different media is nothing more than sophisticated marketing and the ever-increasing commodification of the news product. This, it is argued, leads us irredeemably down the path of tabloidization and infotainment. More simply means more opportunities for the news market to sell its wares – in a manner that maximizes audiences (and hopefully profit) rather than public interest. Issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment. The idea that in a fragmented news environment with the most popular online interfaces being situated in social networking sites (such as Facebook and MySpace) personalization is on the increase is argued to have a negative impact on the processes of rational, democratic thought processes. Sunstein (2001: 192) writes that 'a market dominated by countless versions of "Daily Me" would make self government less workable [and] create a high degree of social fragmentation.' News, we are warned, will be transformed further into a discourse of personalization, dramatization, simplification and polarization.

In this argument more translates into more of the same. The major news sites online are said to provide little by way of original material and have a heavy reliance on the limited news spread of the major news agencies. Paterson (2003) discovered that major news organizations simply provided almost verbatim foreign news reports from AP and Reuters 43 per cent of the time. The major internet portals like Yahoo and AOL provided unaltered Reuters and AP material 85 per cent of the time. Similarly, Ofcom (2007: 3) reports that despite the proliferation of news sources, 'news outlets of all kinds often tell the same stories, from the same perspective, using much the same material.' Our own research (Chapter 5) found that journalists frequently use rival news organizations

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as news sources. Hoge (1997) puts a different slant on this, arguing that the internet provides information aplenty on the news agendas as fixed by the dominant news players but little on subjects of which we may know hardly anything. Far from providing a diversity of views we are left with a public discourse that is largely homogenous (see Chapter 10).

Interactivity and Participation

These negative consequences are rebutted by those who proclaim that the interactive and participative nature of the web means that everyone or anyone can be a journalist with the right tools. Civic journalism is increasing and access to public information and government services is expanding (Pavlik, 2001). Citizen journalism is said to bleed into mainstream journalism and vice versa. The blogosphere has been credited with taking on the major news corporations through instant feedback that is often lively, openly subjective and highly critical. In the more renowned cases bloggers have been attributed with helping to topple Senator Trent Lott and the New York Times editor, Howell Raines from their offices; helping to organize and co-ordinate protests over the Iraq war; boosting the presidential hopes of Howard Dean and Barack Obama by gaining them followers and cash contributions (Hachten, 2005). In the online environment, it is argued readers can have a greater impact on the news through an increase in the intensity of their exchanges with journalists and for example the presentation of their own views in online papers. News online is thus open to a higher degree of contestation than is typical of traditional news media. This demystification of journalism is claimed to break down the barriers between audience and producer facilitating a greater deconstruction of the normative values embedded in the news genre and a re-imagining of what journalism could and/or should be.

But for many, the open and iterative world of online commentary is not seen to be taking journalism to new heights. Rather the limitless opportunities for anyone to have their say on anything, is decreed to result in opinion and vitriol replacing the hard-won gains of investigative journalism. One-off fragmentary commentaries are the norm rather than sustained analysis. 'Old news' values are argued to be replaced by populist ranting or those more interested in self-publicity than the ethics of public value. Spaces for online discussion blur into the wider provision of news. The lack of accountability and anonymity of those responding online also introduces concerns of verification, accountability and accuracy. There are criticisms of the blogosphere as doing nothing more than opening the floodgates to unverified, de-professionalized gossip (Silvia, 2001). Similar concerns are voiced regarding consumer-generated video and audio material. Worse, it is feared that this new interactive multiplicity threatens

to economically undermine traditional professional journalism with grave consequences for politics and public life (Singer, 2003).

The arguments are multi-faceted and contradictory because the terrain of their discussion – new media, journalism, news and democracy – is uneven (across many different types of news industry and news platforms), and often in uncharted territory (what do people do when they are given the ability to challenge the ‘facts’?). In this volume we hope to provide the first steps towards a detailed examination of these issues in all their complexity.

A Note on Methodology

Analyzing the practices that enact apparent technological and social/political transformation helps us to understand them and contemplate their potential consequences. Social histories of the news media have demonstrated how institutional and technological factors have shaped the news over the last 200 years (Schudson, 1978; Blondheim, 1994), establishing that news is a culturally constructed category. Ethnographic accounts have revealed how local contingencies impact upon the reporting therein. Carey (1986: 180) summarizes this body of work, writing that news is not ‘some transparent glimpse at the world. News registers, on the one hand, the organizational constraints under which journalists labor [and] on the other hand, the literary forms and narrative devices journalists regularly use to manage the overwhelming flow of events’. The understanding of these ‘organizational constraints and ‘narrative devices’ was key to our study; so not surprisingly, journalists and their tools were central subjects of analysis.

But we also needed a research design that could reflect the massive changes in the nature of news and news production over the last two decades. We have seen the globalization of news (Boyd-Barrett, 1998) take hold; the concentration of ownership increase; and technology transform. A non-technologically deterministic and anti-essentialist approach suggests that studying new media and news still purports that news is what those contributing to its production make it. And this is precisely the point – those who contribute to its production are changing. The social actors involved in the construction of news have expanded and extended outside of the newsroom resulting in the expansion of the locus of news production.

These new voices form a crucial part of this research. They include the news users who, by voicing opinions in chat rooms, forums and interactive news pages, may seek to shape what is seen as newsworthy and how it is reported. But these voices are not the only ones increasing in relevance. In an era of electronic news media marked by economic

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liberalism, globalization and the potential of the internet, other crucial voices, often forgotten, enter the fray with ever more importance. For example, advertising and marketing personnel influence what gets covered via topic selection and budget allocation to a greater extent than in traditional media as online news sites strive to be profitable. Technical and design personnel also have a greater contribution to play in how news gets reported from the use of multimedia and interactive tools to the visual interface (Boczkowski, 2004). News is as much about these actors as it is about journalists and we were at pains to include these voices in the research.

To reflect the changing dynamics of news production the research was based on three methodological strands. The first was based on 160 semi-structured interviews³ with a range of professionals from a cross-section of news media, stratified by type of media, geographic reach and professional roles (generalists, specialist correspondents, dedicated new media staff, production and editorial staff, managerial and business personnel), and from commercial and public sector broadcasting relating to news. These included interviews conducted with a range of personnel in local and national (UK-based) print newspapers and local, national and international (UK-based) television news (both public service in the form of the BBC and commercial) with particular emphasis on their online services. We also interviewed representatives of news agencies and freelance journalists.

We did not presuppose control or dominance of the news agenda by news professionals and we were conscious to include a range of news sources. This part of the sample comprised of traditionally privileged and authoritative voices such as Members of Parliament (MPs) and those with traditionally less news authority such as NGOs. New news sources were clearly important and a range of bloggers, 'citizen-journalists' and producers within alternative news platforms were also interviewed.

In order to flesh-out the interviews and add contextual depth the second strand of research included mini ethnographies in three places of news production: the BBC, Manchester Evening News and the Guardian. At the time of writing a further ethnography is being negotiated with another national newspaper with a contrasting history and ethos to the three studies to date. Although the time spent in each place was not long in ethnographic terms (up to two weeks), it did allow for a greater sense of the organizational texture and better insight into the daily realities of working life in contemporary newsrooms.

To further critique emergent findings a third research strand, a qualitative analysis of online news content, was undertaken.⁴ This analysis tracked a range of story types across online mainstream news media, online alternative media, social networking sites and YouTube.

The research team of nine (all represented in this volume) included two journalists. Each member of the team took part in data collection and

analysis. Interview data was analyzed with NVIVO software and a central databank maintained allowing all team members access to all data. Each author(s) explains in more detail the precise nature of the data under discussion in each chapter.⁵ However, all of the data collected informs, at some level, each of the chapters since a critical part of the research process was the regular research team meetings where we discussed at length each aspect of the research practice. All data collection and analysis was cross-checked and critiqued by members of the research team, often leading to further data collection or re-appraisal of analysis. This form of team interrogation and critique enabled ever deeper mining and explication of the empirical data.

Conclusion: Drowning or Waving?

What follows is a critique of an industry and a practice in flux. There have been massive changes to the way in which news is produced and journalism performed. We should remember that the history of communications technology shows us that if innovative content and forms of production appear in the early stages of a new technology and offer potential for radical change this is more often than not cancelled out or appropriated by the most powerful institutions operating within dominant technological and socio-political paradigms (Curran, Chapter 1). 'Newness' of form and content is quickly smothered by predominance, size and wealth (Winston, 1995). But history does not always repeat itself.

The argument that in a digital age, the relations of power remain on the whole the same to the increasing advantage of global media conglomerates is difficult to dispute yet similarly simplistic. It is true that analyses rooted in models of media ownership and control show nothing more than a deeper entrenchment of power and neo-liberal consensus. Undoubtedly, as our interviewees remind us, news media are (mostly) businesses and the news is a product. The economics of news remains stacked against newcomers on the national news stage be it in traditional or new media. Concentration of ownership is likely to filter ever outwards to the internet – and how to make online news profitable is still a puzzle waiting to be solved (see Chapter 2). As mainstream news providers plough more resources into online operations that are generally lossmakers, this research explores how further commercial pressures are likely to increase the temptation to rely on cheaper forms of newsgathering to the detriment of original in-depth journalism (Chapters 2, 5 and 10). It seems ever likely that the voices on the web will be dominated by the larger, more established news providers that will duplicate the same commercial interests according to the same understanding of how news fits those commercial concerns, leading to anything but increased diversity.

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But we should equally be wary of economic reductionism. The frameworks of news on offer in the digital age are articulated by the nexus of interests producing them. This is neither a straightforward nor direct relationship between wealth and power. The codes and conventions of professional journalism are being challenged as they are being reinstated. The cultural dynamics of capitalism and markets are concerned not only with economics but also with questions of representation, identity and meaning. A straight political economic analysis misses, or cannot account for, the possibility that under certain conditions 'journalism or journalists' (whoever these may be) may transform power relations both within their own domain and in others. The increasing presence of non-professional or 'citizen' journalists is suggestive of a type of journalistic autonomy that may be able to disrupt and change institutionalized journalism in particular ways in certain circumstances (although currently these instances are rare).

So where does this leave us? This book argues that the two prominent views outlined in this introduction are wrong. The techno-optimists who see the internet as reinvigorating democracy, enabling active citizenship and forging new connections across old frontiers within news remain firmly wedged in the starting blocks of potential. The techno-pessimists who see new media as commodified by corporations and the market as any 'old media' have also missed the point. The Luddite pessimism that subscribes to the socio-economic logic of capitalism in which any change operates inevitably in favour of a business model and against the public good is misleading. The internet has modified things, sometimes in positive and productive ways. New voices have found expression—from soldiers' online complaints (Couldry, Chapter 8) to alternative e-zines in civil society (Curran and Witschge, Chapter 6); new means of brokering intelligent dialogue across nations have emerged. It has enabled established communities of interest to be more efficient in their circulation of communication and sharing of information with one another (Fenton, Chapter 9). Alternative interpretations of news and current affairs have found space and voice online (Redden and Witschge, Chapter 10). And as a repository of information and knowledge the internet is unparalleled.

But this book is also at pains to point out that the utopian vision of a brave new world with everyone connected to everyone else, a non-hierarchical network of voices with equal, open and global access, is also far from true. Curran's chapter notes that many of the forecasts of new media visionaries have been risibly inaccurate, though they have often been taken seriously at the time and promoted a media deregulation agenda. Rather, this study is testimony to enduring forces that cultivate continuity and limit change. This latest 'new' world of 'new' media has

not yet destabilized the ascendancy of dominant news brands; it has not transformed news values and traditional news formats sustained by tenacious journalistic cultures – news is, what news always was; and it has not connected a legion of bloggers to a mass audience (Couldry, Chapter 8), or NGOs with limited resources to spheres of influence (Fenton, Chapter 9).

One of the unexpected conclusions of this book is that the internet can in many ways be seen as contributing to the stifling of journalism for the public good and in the public interest. Davis (Chapter 7) describes journalistic ironcages wherein technology is enshrined in news practice that foregrounds rationalization and marketization at the expense of ideal democratic objectives. Phillips (Chapter 5) details how some journalists, subject to the need to fill more space and to work at greater speed while also having improved access to stories and sources online, are thrust into news production more akin to creative cannibalization than the craft of original journalism. As news production becomes more expansive so engagement with the public and news sources diminishes, becomes more symbolic and increasingly ‘virtualized’ (Davis, Chapter 7). Redden and Witschge (Chapter 10) reveal how, far from breeding a diversity of views, online news content is largely homogenous.

New technologies of production operate within the systemic constraints of media institutions. They do not liberate these constraints but are seen more as a technical fix to the increasing problems of cutting costs and increasing efficiency (Lee-Wright, Chapter 4). For newspapers in particular, a decline in advertising revenues and reader figures since the 1970s has forced them to increase output while cutting back on staff and diminishing conditions of employment (Freedman, Chapter 2; Davis, Chapter 7). The material conditions of contemporary journalism do not offer optimum space and resources to practise independent journalism in the public interest. On the contrary, job insecurity and commercial priorities place increasing limitations on journalists’ ability to function ethically (Phillips, and Couldry Freedman, Chapter 3). Indeed, we found little evidence of new media being deployed to allow journalists to do more journalism or to engage the public more effectively (although there were notable exceptions); rather new technology both facilitated and was dependent upon cuts in funding (Lee-Wright, Chapter 4).

But the social and political context of technology is a contested domain. The contemporary mediation of news is complex and contradictory – ranging from traditional bulletins on the BBC to discussions on MySpace to user-generated documentaries on YouTube; the future of journalism is being carried on a tide of uncertainty. Is it drowning or waving? Sometimes it is difficult to tell but one thing is for sure, it is far too important to ignore. Read on.

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Endnotes

1. Though this is a book that is ostensibly engaged with 'new media', the discussion frequently focuses on the internet because our empirical investigation consistently revealed the internet as having the most ramifications for journalism and news. Other new media – such as mobile telephones and digital cameras—figure less prominently because they were not perceived by the various actors in this study to be as important; but also because in an increasingly converged mediascape, most forms of digital media have an online configuration at some point.
2. This research has taken place under the auspices of the Goldsmiths Media Research Centre: Spaces, Connections, Control and funded by the Leverhulme Trust.
3. This is not the final sample. The research is ongoing and data is being collected up to and beyond the submission date of this book. The number of interviews stated here refers to particular sub-sections of our sample. Data excluded from this discussion includes related personnel on national and local radio news, Yahoo! and AOL news and a complete sample of national tabloid newspapers.
4. The research does not extend to an audience study in the traditional sense as our intention was primarily to explore news production. We do not take the view, however, that the audience is absent from this investigation. Our analysis is informed by audience data generated by others while in the interviews, news sources from bloggers to MPs to NGOs were considered both as news source, news audience and news producer; and in the content analysis postings on YouTube, Facebook and MySpace were analyzed in relation to particular news stories.
5. As interviews covered a range of different types of people the conventions employed for attributing quotations differs from chapter to chapter. Some public figures in high profile positions were more comfortable with being named whereas others, either reflecting insecurity about their position, or as in the case of bloggers, protection of their off-line identity, requested anonymity.