

The growth of new media



News has seen many changes over the years – newspaper to radio, radio to TV and now TV to web 2.0, an ever-changing and vast, floor for interactive news, views and content. No one can argue journalism, when practiced well, is of public value in a free and democratic society, it provides, entertainment, information and acts as a ‘whistleblower’ on inequality and corruption within our countries and states. However, the field of journalism is currently under scrutiny, Hillel Nosssek comments: ‘It seems that the great threat facing journalism is de-professionalization, which means that everyone can be a journalist and nobody actually is one.’ (Nosssek, 2009: 358) In this essay I will try to weigh up the positive and negative impacts of news’ recent evolution to the internet. I will focus on the new ethics involved in such things as ‘citizen journalism,’ the resulting ‘Churnalism’ that has resulted from the speed and resourcefulness of web 2.0 ; weighing up the positive and negative impacts on journalists and journalism as a whole.

I

The first point I would like to raise focuses on the idea of ‘Citizen journalism’ and a paper written by Dr. Damien Tambini titled, ‘Media Ethics in the New Media Landscape.’ The paper comments on a current debate revolving around the question: ‘How is the rise of new media and online journalism affecting the traditional journalistic standards of objectivity, accuracy and verification?’ (Tambini 2010: 1). In answer, he focuses around the ethics of so-called ‘citizen journalism,’ and how this reflects upon the ethics, the rights and the privileges of professional journalists. ‘Citizen journalism’ is a term used to describe bloggers and tweeters who, using investigative journalism mainly based on online research and second hand sources, break

stories and news, using the internet. This is a change from the traditional, professional ethics to mixed media ethics.

The stories these ‘ citizen journalists’ produce – being from second hand sources – are widely disregarded as inaccurate and therefore soil the reputation of the field of journalism, and its ethics. In an interview conducted in “ Changing Journalism” the editor of a regional paper said: ‘ It irritates the hell out of me. It’s not news. It’s people wanting their five minutes of fame and it’s not accurate because they haven’t spoken to anybody’ (interview with Editor of a regional newspaper by Peter Lee-Wright 2008: 33). In response Bloggers argue ‘ that new media are developing their own ethical systems based on distributed intelligence and the wisdom of crowds.’ (Tambini, 2010: 1) In a sense this point of view could argue citizen journalism could have a positive impact, as Rebillar and Taboul comment: ‘ views of the web 2. 0 associate liberty, autonomy and horizontality’ (Rebillar and Taboul 2010: 325) and I think this raises a good point – how can you argue against more democracy, accuracy and equality?

The Tambini paper also raises questions asking ‘ Are the newcomers also sharing the responsibilities? Are they obeying the rules, and sharing the costs of implementing them?’ (Tambini 2010: 4) He then points out – citizen journalists are now getting access to protection of sources, freedom of expression and public interest defences. These were previously considered exclusive ‘ Lobby passes’ for Journalists. Because of the loss of the exclusivity in journalist’s rights and privileges, it puts into question the whole profession of journalism and what it means to be a journalist and I refer back to the Nossek comment in my intro, that in theory ‘ anybody can be a

journalist.’ This would argue a strong case for the de-professionalization of journalists and would infer that changes in social and economical changes to the field are affecting the occupation of ‘ professional journalists,’ but not the ethics of the field itself. Even so, Nick Couldry did a survey in 2010 finds little evidence for what he calls ‘ writer-gatherers’ muscling in on professional space.

On the other hand, Tambini expresses this still worries journalists, simply because journalists seem to say the ‘ citizen journalists’ constantly flout the ethical rules in place, in the ‘ race to the bottom.’ The lack of communication with original sources and huge inaccuracies are bound to come about within this tussle for speed, and this would have a negative effect on the ethics of reporting of news online. Journalists also argue that this is ‘ in turn putting more pressure on journalists to rush stories and take less care in sourcing stories and policing conflicts of interest,’ (Tambini, 2010: 1) creating what author Nick Davies describes as ‘ Churnalism.’

II

This ‘ Churnalism’ is the concept the second part of my essay will focus on. ‘ Churnalism’ is a word invented by Nick Davies. In his book ‘ Flat Earth News.’ It describes a hugely negative impact of new media, journalistic practices. Davies explains:

‘ Journalists are pumping out stories without checking them – stories which then circle the planet. And so now, in a way that was not true in the past, mass media are not merely prone to occasional error but constitutionally and

constantly vulnerable to being infected with falsehood, distortion and propaganda' (Davies, 2009: 51).

He explains the introduction of the internet has led to information being sent around the globe at unprecedented levels. Shown in incidents such as 'The millennium bug' where he explains 'The ethic of honesty has been overwhelmed by the mass production of ignorance.' (Davies 2009: 28) The result is a decline in journalistic quality due to the way news rooms have become 'News factories,' pumping out stories not properly sourced, checked and constantly recycled. He describes a young reporter writing in the 'British Journalism review' in 2004 explaining: 'Of all the impressions I had of the profession... relying on telephone interviews and the internet for so much written work was not one of them' (Davies 2009: 55). Reliance on the internet as a saver of time and money Davies argues is a big contributor to 'Churnalism.' However, evidence has been found of other people within the field, in particular editors, who have taken a more nuanced view to new media: 'I wade through the rubbish every day, but then I think that some of the most exciting stuff I read is online and through blogs and all of that. So I would want journalists to get excited about it rather than being defensive about it' (Interview with a Section editor, national newspaper by Peter Lee-Wright 2008: 33). These conflicting views have sparked much debate within news rooms. Even though the question still stands to the effect of new media within the newsroom, Davies extensive research into 'Churnalism' has found its effects to be quite devastating, in regards to wider journalism.

As part of his research into 'Churnalism' Davies also investigated news stories running in four of the most prestigious daily newspapers: 'The Times'

‘ The Guardian’ ‘ The Independent’ and ‘ The daily Telegraph.’ He commissioned a group of specialist researchers who, tracked over 2, 207 incoming news stories and where possible tracked backwards to find their source material. They found quite astounding results. 60% of these stories came direct from wire copy and/or PR material, with another 12% simply containing elements of the same, 8% source material they were unsure about and only 12% of stories was sourced by the journalists themselves. They also found that a staggering 70% of them passed to print without any corroboration at all (Davies 2009: 52). This is clear proof of Davies’ ‘ Churnalism’ and the implications of this show an image of news as a pawn of PR scams instead of a voice on behalf of the people and democracy. Clearly, this depicts a rather appalling prospect for journalism’s future.

‘ Flat Earth News’ also raises the issue the internet has created a growing demand for immediacy and the negative effects this has had on new media. He refers to Pete Clifton ex-head of the BBC’s ‘ News interactive’ who was quoted saying: ‘ Our site came on top with a load time of 0. 85 secs to beat the likes of ITV and Sky (1. 63 secs).’ (Davies, 2009: 70) Davies goes on to expand on this clash of traditional journalism and the new high speed ‘ Churnalism,’ using the example of the official BBC guide which is given to all staff on News interactive. Which on one hand urges: ‘ Your story must be accurate, impartial, balanced and uphold the values of BBC news... Never publish anything that you do not understand, that is speculation or inadequately sourced’ and then in complete contradiction: ‘ Get the story up as fast as you can... We encourage a sense of urgency – we want to be first’ (Davies 2009: 70) It then gives a five minute target for breaking news. This is

clearly an impossible task for any journalist. Time constraints have also been made harder by declining staff and lack of ground-up resources, which are rampant throughout the newsrooms. This is due partly to the free cost of internet news and internet's ability to put fewer limitations on what a single journalist can do. Contradictions such as this create huge difficulties between the mediums of traditional journalism and new media ethics.

III

Even So, many can see the positive impacts of new media practices such as fast breaking news. In this part of the essay I will try to explain the positive impacts the web has had on journalism. Firstly, Anna Mainwaring is a producer in the BBC News UGC (User generated content) hub who describes it as ' a revolution in News gathering.' In an interview conducted in ' Changing Journalism' Mainwaring commented: ' Instead of teams going out to get stories, stories are coming to us,' on a story the year before about a number of young males being stabbed in London she says: ' In the old days, we would have sent a team of hacks to doorstep, knock on doors... Now we sit in the newsroom and the girlfriend has already contacted the BBC message board. We've got her e-mail. A journalist phones and interviews her and she's on air in minutes... The speed is phenomenal' (Anna Mainwaring, interview conducted by Peter Lee-Wright 2009: 34) This is a great example of how the speed and the vast networking capabilities of the internet have increased speed output and accuracy of stories, two very important principles for traditional journalism.

Also, there is a theory that even the public's supposedly damaging, inaccurate, 'publish first-correct later' (Tambini 2010) attitude, could have a positive impact revolving around the idea of 'networked journalism.' A new concept Charlie Beckett argues is fundamental to new media's compatibility with modern journalism. He argues that 'To retain value journalism must engage with the public. It must shift power from the newsroom to the connected online and digital world. It must become "networked".' (Beckett, 2008) This theory depicts, that the rise of the internet could see a of return of Habermas' 'public sphere', whereby the users can immediately pick up on inaccuracies in stories and report them back and discuss, through 'active reception and living response' (Williams, 1983: 304). This could have a very strong positive outcome for the ethics of journalism, democracy and national and international development. It also takes power away from big international news agencies and who are more recently regarded as biased and greedy monopolies of news output.

The introduction of internet technology has also increased dissemination, as stories can reach huge audiences across the globe at no extra cost. This is good news for the newspaper companies and journalists alike as Jeff Jarvis argues in his book 'What Would Google Do?': 'Google allows people to find stories that, in the old days they wouldn't have seen.' (J. Jarvis 2009: 124) this has proved true in the coverage of a number of significant events – the so-called Green revolution on the streets of Tehran's streets after the 2009 presidential election and the 2007 monks 'saffron' rebellion in Burma. This is a positive outcome of modern media ethics and is an important development to keep in mind in terms of the future of new media ethics.

Increases in other technologies such as camera phones and digital cameras are also increasing user generated content and journalist's possibilities for capturing news. The subtlety of camera phones and the decreased size in reporting equipment and a visible crew, with up to twenty large silver boxes of equipment, has given journalists and their producers increased flexibility. A good example is in the Zimbabwe 2008 elections whereby all journalists were banned from reporting within the country. As Robin Elias managing editor of ITN says in N. Fenton's 'New Media, old news': 'We actually presented an evening new programme from the centre of Harare, during the crackdown, during the election, when we weren't allowed in there let alone to broadcast out of it and we broadcast over a garden wall over a BGAN mobile phone, a satellite phone and it sort of dawned on everybody... that there's virtually nowhere in the world that's inaccessible now' (Robin Elias, interview conducted by Peter Lee-Wright, 2010: 72). Other examples include the tidal disaster in Japan in 2011 where the internet was swamped with a multitude of videos of the disaster. The combination of modern technologies such as email, mobile phones, digital cameras and easily accessible editing software coupled with sites like 'Youtube,' Twitter and other blog sites; add to more variety and a much more diverse media landscape, changing the way we now absorb our news. It also reinforces this idea that many 'networked' contributions towards coverage of breaking news is hugely beneficial to new media ethics.

In conclusion:

In May 2011 the number of internet users worldwide reached over 2 billion (internetworldstats. com). The Guardian's online readership now exceeds

<https://assignbuster.com/the-growth-of-new-media/>

30million compared to only 300, 000 print readers. The undeniable pressures of the web have put journalism's and more importantly journalist's position, into very turbulent disrepute. The editor's have had to adapt in a time when news is free and news can be taken from other organisations without paying for it. The pressure has, in turn landed on the journalists, expecting them to use newer technologies to churn out more content with less time. ' The digital revolution' has also given ordinary citizens the tools to contribute UGC and interact with journalists and stories. A strong negative impact of the web is that Smaller to medium sized print firms are either dying or have died as a result of the rise of the internet, as adaptation has become increasingly difficult. This is due to advertisement becoming the main source of income for all news outlets and advertisers at the same time that advertising firms are sweeping onto the next big website to catch it's much larger readership. Also other technological advances such as the kindle and Guardian ' Apps' on smart phones are leaving newspaper's business models in constant limbo. It seems to me that the future of online journalism is unclear and we can only sit back and put any positive or negative implications into context. The positive implications of the web, if properly channelled, are an exciting prospect in favour of democracy and challenging dominant forces. It does however have seem to have had a rather negative impact on ' professional journalists' themselves, who's roles are now challenged from many, many angles.