>>Chapter 1<<

INTRODUCTION: NETWORKED JOURNALISM

Overview

The media are changing. This is obvious to anyone who has been paying attention, but over the last decade the pace of change has increased beyond even the ability of the language we use to describe it or the rules we use to govern it. Who is a blogger, really? What is citizen journalism? Who operates under what privileges? A new media ecology has emerged, one that is social and fluid, and trades on connections and collaborative relations. This shift is fundamental to everything we do as journalists and journalism trainers. This is the ecology of the new media environment. This book proposes a new way of examining the practical skills that are necessary to thrive as a journalist, and the principles governing the new media ecology for those working within it, consuming it and researching it.

Key concepts

- Citizen journalism
- Connections
- Media landscape
- Networks
- New media ecology
- Relationships
- Reporting
- Social media
- Traditional media
- User-generated content

Introduction

An ecology is an interdependent network of living things, each fulfilling its own function within the system, but with no one thing dominating or monopolising it. You do not control it, or master it: you find your niche, your relationships, your dependencies and you thrive – as long as the system thrives.

This book is a guide on how to find – or create – your niche in the ecology of new media, and how to understand and nurture the connections that will allow you to thrive. Throughout this book, you will be encouraged to think about relationships, to think about the rest of the system – the other players and participants (not only other producers, but audiences and advertisers as well) – and to work with them, not against them, to create great journalism.

We propose a new way of talking about and operating within the news environment, a new way of examining and defining the media landscape for those working within it, consuming it and researching it. We are not hoping to pin down the definition of what the news landscape now is, but to describe its trajectory in a way that is flexible and dynamic enough to explain both the contemporary ways of reporting, and to illuminate the changes we know will come, although we don't yet know what they are.

A broken model

As the news environment has expanded and fragmented, coalesced and converged, the meanings of terms like 'newspaper' and 'television channel' have become harder and harder to pin down, and more organisations exist for which we have no simple definition. The dichotomy of 'old' and 'new' media is likewise becoming meaningless – talking to a room full of students who were not yet born when the World Wide Web was invented and referring to it as 'new' makes one realise how meaningless 'new' actually is in this context. What is 'online' in a world where those of us who have physical 'lines' to connect to the internet are increasingly in the minority, and where more people have smartphones, tablets and laptop computers than have television sets?

And this change and confusion is not just on the institutional level – individuals working within (and outside) these organisations have found themselves increasingly unable to define what they do in a single sentence, although they know what they are doing, and are doing it well.

Traditionally, news organisations were constructed and determined by their output mechanism, and hence by their technology. Once the printing press was invented, the newspaper was an almost inevitable consequence; and radio and television engendered the news broadcast. Since the technology was both the prerequisite for production, and the locus of a substantial financial investment, we named these organisations for their technology, not their content. We still speak of 'the press' as though the hulking steel machinery in the basements of Fleet Street was the soul of the news media, and the broadcast towers have only recently vanished from the logos of television stations worldwide – as they are vanishing from the physical landscape.

The internet was the agent of this change. We used to measure the importance of a news outlet by the speed of their presses, or a radio station by the power of its antenna, which were themselves functions of the size of their capital investment. We can't measure these new outlets by the clock speed of their servers, or the size of their disk array, although the servers perform the same function the presses and towers did for newspapers and broadcasting. We don't do this because, relatively speaking, a server costs a pittance compared with the cost of a printing press or, and much more importantly, compared

with the cost of the people who make the content that is distributed by mechanisms new and old. Almost anyone can set up a site, anyone can create a blog, a Twitter account, a Facebook wall, a platform from which to spread a message – the technology is no longer the stumbling block; the content and connectivity are.

Just as the technology determined the nature of the enterprise, it also had a huge influence on the content that was produced. News organisations produced news in recognisable shapes and formats for recognisable outlets consumed by recognisable consumers in predictable ways. As the technology changed, more and more sources of news became available online and competed with other sources of information and news, in myriad new shapes and sizes. You can still find the third-person-objective inverted pyramid news story and the traditional 'package' for broadcast on the internet, but you also find live blogs and Twitter feeds from people on the ground and in the office, satirical animations of news events on YouTube, and first-person reports, Twitpics, blogs, alternative news sites, aggregators and discussion forums, in all sorts of voices and styles all mixed in together, linked, referenced and cross-posted to a range of places and formats. In this environment, the traditional definitions of what journalism is have inevitably shifted, as have the skills and techniques required to participate in it.

Social media

These changes have created a more social way of doing journalism. More people can be heard. More voices can be included. The focus is less on what platforms to use or what products to produce, and more on whom to speak to and connect with, and how to go about doing that. Everyone steers their way through the network via connections and exchanges, making sense of the content they encounter or use. Journalists are no different.

Relationships emerge as a key unit of currency. These relationships exist at many different levels, but without these voices the web would be nothing more than a structure of portable pieces of code lacking any meaning. News organisations are re-evaluating how they interact with 'the people formerly known as the audience' (Rosen, 2006). They have moved towards curated or humanised approaches to distribution rather than automated feeds and abstract 'packages' of news. Strangers help us find content through recommendations or reviews. Friends contribute to making that journey more relevant and real (Pickard and Catt, 2011).

Out of these relationships grow communities. Journalists have to appreciate how to act within a community, and take an active part in growing and developing them. In this ecology, journalism trades on participation and connections rather than a top-down approach. It is no longer the case that the moment you signal your need you are given everything you desire. This is a culture of collaboration, not co-optation. There's a wealth of information in the crowd, but journalists need to understand how to collaborate with users, not simply take from them. Talking, interacting, thanking and crediting all become key. There are new skills and rules to consider if you are to become a trusted and respected part of the online network.

And the crowd – not journalists – are in control. The crowd can seek out imposters and regulate itself, just as they can amplify and ring out changes. The web community expects transparency, even as identities ebb and flow in different spaces. Journalists have to tell people what they are doing and how they are doing it. This new culture of social media in which journalists operate has to be understood if you, as a participant, are to thrive.

A word about terminology

The terms that define this new landscape are by no means set, and there is considerable confusion regarding what they mean. For this book, we take 'social media' to mean all forms of new media production whose primary function is interaction – not simply presentation of information. Any news product or piece of information that is presented in order to be commented on, discussed, circulated and used within a network of social interaction is, for us, 'social' media. This includes what are increasingly thought of as the 'social media' applications – Twitter and Facebook – but also stories presented for comment online, television panel shows that incorporate audience commentary, live blogs that curate and collect material from multiple sources, and myriad other ways (some not yet invented) in which the audience and the producers meet and talk.

The new media ecology

In this landscape, there's more than one way to define media organisations and individual journalists. Traditionally, newsmaking was a process that took events and turned them into recognisable reports or news packages, using the 'third-person-objective' voice of authority that we have come to associate with news. This voice still exists, and plays an important role in conveying events to people. These are the shaped, formatted and edited packages that we most easily recognise as journalism. After all, we can't all physically attend news or events; neither would we want to. We rely, inevitably, on reporters to reach out and expand our worlds, our discovery, our understanding.

But in the social media ecology, this is not the only version of events that exists. Social media have allowed for a vast expansion of voices and participants, sites and streams. We may watch edited news, but we may also listen, watch or participate in the loose, unedited, stream-of-consciousness voice of social media: the personal blogger or tweeter, or the chaotic and unedited video footage taken by a participant in a protest. The news products here are more divergent, incorporating multiple voices and channels, but creating an environment where one user may need to have access to hundreds of sources to provide an understanding of events.

This brings us to the question of gatekeeping. In the past, edited and polished news products were traditionally closed off to the public; professional journalists in the traditional sense constructed the news product based only on their sources and research, and presented a sealed and finite news product to a passive audience. But social media allows for those gates to open, and the public are given potential access to the news production process, more opportunities to participate in and guide the news agenda. In social spaces, the distinction between journalist and audience has vanished completely: the gates have crumbled away.

From our perspective, the news landscape is becoming more and more social, requiring new perspectives on the interplay between the voice and intent of journalists and media outlets. Even the most traditional news organisations have set out an agenda to become more engaged; they are including live blogs of events on their websites, incorporating amateur video into their feeds, and encouraging user comments and feedback in formal and informal ways.

Journalist by definition

The opening up of the new media ecology to include an infinite array of news producers and providers leaves us with plenty to ponder. What is journalism, anyway, and what makes one news organisation different from another?

First, not everyone working in journalism has the same intentions. The intent of a news organisation varies tremendously from the traditional, mainstream, commercial and industrialised mass media to organisations whose production of news is entirely secondary, or even accidental, to their main goals. News producers may be registered professionals, subject to the oversight typical of their national context, which sets rules on the dissemination of news and the behaviour of news outlets, or they may be activist journalists dedicated to spreading the truth in aid of a political or social cause, or they may be accidental journalists – passersby caught up in events, whose stories and pictures become part of the narrative. All of these people, and the institutions in which they may or may not work, have different ideas on what they do, what they should do and what it means in the greater scheme of things.

As an example, consider the uprisings that racked Egypt in 2011, and dominated the news around the world, as Tahrir Square in Cairo became the focus of the frustrations and hopes of not only the Egyptian people, but people all over the world. A wide variety of reporters and journalists descended on the square to tell the story.

Purely journalistic institutions – the BBC, CNN, New York Times – would cover Tahrir Square because it fulfils a traditional idea of what news is, and claim to do so in an 'objective' way. They would refer to President Mubarak and protestors in the most neutral way possible. Then there are the news organisations that have overt social or political goals. A newspaper with a clearly stated belief in social justice would cover the same events, referring to Mubarak as a dictator or despot and the protestors as campaigners or activists. There are also organisations in which the journalistic goals are less important than the political or social goals. Groups and related blogs may provide reports from Cairo relating directly to the action of the people of Egypt against state repression. At the far extreme, there are organisations whose journalistic goals are incidental to other goals. WikiLeaks's release of diplomatic cables relating to Egypt, and other documents, are not simply journalistic, but include an element of anarchy, of subversion of power on the principle of it.

In this new media landscape news outlets have to carve out a space and identity alongside all these other forms of news. They find themselves having to coexist with blogs and aggregators online, or reports from people and organisations that have goals other than becoming a formal, commercial news organisation, such as 'zines, radical news outlets and activist groups online.

There is also a changing relationship between producers and consumers. It is a rare news organisation or journalist who does not invite contributions from the public, feedback or sharing. In its broadest form this has sparked a range of discussions relating to where the boundary lies between journalists and non-journalists, users and producers, curators and sense-makers.

As a result of this cacophony of competing voices and ideas, it is little wonder that traditional journalists have felt under threat from the fact that anyone can and does produce content and distribute it. Citizen journalists (the very meaning of which is debatable) have been seen as stepping into the terrain previously guarded as the professional journalistic field, but that is not strictly accurate – their goals are different, so how do they fit into this new media ecology? And what is citizen journalism or user-generated content, anyway? Language and terminology struggle to cope with the multitude of ways in which the traditional barriers of the journalistic profession are breaking down as a result of the changes in technology brought on by social media.

Although many definitions exist, and there is no consensus on meaning, in this book we distinguish citizen journalism from user-generated content based on the final product: citizen journalism is its own discrete product, while user-generated content exists within and forms part of a mainstream news product. This can be a complex distinction, especially where commercial news organisations construct their own news sites for the contribution of user-generated content – which can exist both as a discrete product and provide material for the main site.

Individual journalists

These questions have sparked a re-evaluation of what a journalist actually is and what makes us different from anybody else. For almost as long as there have been journalists there has been a struggle over journalistic identity. What, exactly, are we? As actors in society, newsmakers have laid claim to being culturally or socially more significant than plain citizens or even other professions. The role of finding out what is going on and reporting it to others is deemed to have a certain significance, a certain privilege.

The individual journalist has become more visible as the traditional media landscape has exploded and fragmented. In a social-media landscape, the voice of the individual becomes clearer. Journalists working within (and outside) media organisations find themselves in direct contact with audiences and with more options than ever as to where they source or output their work. They are increasingly unable to define what they do or slot their role and interactions under neat labels. They exist in an evolving network of connectivity, across sources and outputs.

Many people have framed this debate as being about the conflict between bloggers and journalists, a perceived standoff between formal and informal journalism. In the new media ecology, however, neither the products journalists produce nor the resources on which they draw are fixed. As a result, the meaning of the word 'journalist' has dissipated. There are lots of people operating as journalists, but they may be bloggers, freelancers, tweeters, YouTube commentators or mainstream reporters – or any combination of these. The waters have become increasingly muddied because amateur journalists can publish material and aggregate content as much as anyone bestowed with a press pass, salary or academic qualification (Knight and Cook, 2011).

The fluidity across these spaces may also spark legal and ethical considerations – if the law or the state recognises 'journalist' as a specific class of person, with differing privileges and obligations to those of the general public, then who can be a journalist becomes a legal, as well as a personal, question.

In both practice and principle, journalists have much to acknowledge and synthesise if they are to thrive in this new media ecology. They need different skills as they move around networked spaces. It is important for a journalist to understand the rules of engagement when sourcing content from the crowd, just as they need to know how best to verify information, avoid being hoaxed, or how to operate fairly. We need to have a clearer sense of what legal and ethical implications our decisions have. Similarly, there's a vast scope of considerations in how best to tell and disseminate stories when the range of possible outputs is so vast. Journalists need to understand their choices in social storytelling for networked distribution. When and how should you produce speedy updates compared to immersive packages in rich media? In terms of practical journalism skills, this book advocates that social-media activities run concurrent to the core principles of traditional reporting.

As journalism re-boots itself within these new parameters, there can be a wealth of exciting opportunities to define great journalism anew. This is a time for innovation. Journalists are looking for ways to reinvent their careers, and are flexing their muscles launching dynamic sites, services and products. We recognise the valid place in the new media ecology for such media entities, which may exist in a more structured way to a freelance journalist, and the increasing likelihood for journalists to work within, alongside or indeed launch such organisations.

This book frames a clearer understanding of a journalist's work as a matter of connections, expectations and reporting norms. Journalists must carve out a new relationship between sources

and output, aware of the much wider culture of social media. How you navigate this space is up to you. The amount of time, energy and interest you show in the different sourcing and output practices help you understand what works for you as a journalist. This allows individual reconfiguration of defined roles based more on connections and relationships than saying you are a 'blogger' or a 'local newspaper reporter'. A journalist defined by connections and networks can occupy more than one space within this fragmented media ecology.

Conclusion

As you read through this book, a number of themes and ideas will become apparent. We have, as much as possible, tried to blend discussion of practice and principles together. We have, however, broken the book up into four sections, some more practical, some more theoretical. Throughout the book you will find cross-references to more detailed discussions in other sections, as well as boxes defining terms, giving further reading and discussion, relevant quotes and definitions of terms. The links to further readings, technical information and resources are then included at the end of each chapter, and a complete glossary of all defined terms is found at the end of the book.

The first section of the book, The Networked Journalists' Toolkit, deals with the finding, creating and distributing of news and information, which is what journalists, fundamentally, do. In this section you will find concrete advice on how social media has affected the practice of journalism – the changing relationships with sources and the changing forms of output that penetrate all aspects of life as a contemporary journalist. It looks at how stories are sourced, and then packaged and distributed in an iterative cycle, offering both practical guidance and a way to frame an understanding of how sourcing practices influence doing journalism.

The next section, The Networked Ecology, takes this process wider, and examines the new contexts and environments in which journalists work, and the newer (and older) entities and ideas which now operate within these spaces. This is the most theoretical section of the book, giving as it does the underlying concepts and ideas of this new landscape, as well as practical advice on working within it.

The New Rules of Engagement discusses the conduct in a space that is not quite public, not quite private. It delineates guidelines and best practice for working ethically and morally in the connected new media ecology. Issues of authenticity and verification in the virtual world, pivotal to the function of a journalist, are also tackled.

The New Economics of Journalism then examines the all-important question of money – how to make enough to keep going, to expand, and to make your name and fortune. It acknowledges that media entrepreneurs are finding new and innovative ways to take their place in this landscape, reinventing what it means to do news.

The concluding chapter lays out a typology and mechanism for understanding the landscape of this new media environment: we provide a pair of matrices that examine and define the macro (institutional) and micro (individual) levels of this new ecosystem.

The book is intended both as a primer on how to become a journalist in this new ecosystem, as a guide to navigating the space for experienced journalists, and as an introduction to the theoretical and philosophical ideas which both underpin and rise out of this new landscape. Each chapter and section can be read separately as a guide to the specific issues raised within it, but the book as a whole should serve as a guide to the entire system – the one book which the new, social, connected journalist should