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TRAJECTORIES:
Trajectories in Digital Journalism: Embracing Complexity
Jane B. Singer

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When the Journalism Studies Interest Group of the International Communication Association was formed in pre-Katrina New Orleans in 2004, online journalism looked very much like offline journalism. Yes, content was available on a computer screen rather than on a piece of paper or over the airwaves. But otherwise, it was much the same: produced by a news organization, dominated by text, consumed but not created by an audience.

By the time the interest group became a division two years later, a hurricane had swept through the media world, and very little was the same as before.

Journalism Studies as a distinct scholarly discipline has matured in this age of Web 2.0, a term that came into vogue only in late 2004 as innovators began to engage with the medium as a platform for participation and not just for traditional one-to-many publishing. As the practice of journalism has been transformed over the past decade, so too has the study of that practice.

Yet practitioners and scholars both have struggled to adapt to the transformation. Journalists have moved only slowly away from the reification of old practices and toward implementation of new ones. And scholars have only tentatively begun to venture outside the comfort zone of long-standing theories as devices for understanding the nature of change. This essay looks at some of the ways in which an evolving realization of the medium’s distinctiveness has brought fundamental change to the synergistic enterprises of journalism practice and journalism studies.

Journalism Practice

So much has been written about changes in journalism over the past decade that the whole topic by now seems terribly trite. That is, in fact, the point: There has been so much written precisely because the shifts have been substantive, pervasive, and multi-faceted. They go well beyond changes in practice, calling into question nearly everything that journalists thought they understood about their audiences, their approach to meaning-making, and their role in democratic society. Their response has compassed both resistance and accommodation – varying over time and by individual – but to date seems to have led primarily to a professional reaffirmation of a central social function bolstered (not always convincingly) by claims of adherence to core ethical principles.

Ten years ago, journalists worked in a world that contained only rudimentary voice- and text-based mobile technologies and did not contain “social media” at all; in 2004, Mark

Zuckerberg was still at Harvard and so was Facebook, founded in February of that year. Instant verbal and visual information, news and views created and published by anyone from virtually any spot on earth, was years in the future. The mining of databases for stories was still referred to as “computer-assisted reporting” – a remnant of a time when reporting was not all but universally “computer-assisted” – and looking back from the vantage point of “big data,” the data involved now seem quaintly small. Other data produced by audience metrics were also rudimentary and generally accessible only to newsroom executives rather than widely shared within the newsroom and, in the form of lists of “most-read” items and their cousins, with the public. And not more than a handful of pioneering newsrooms were wrestling with “convergence,” trying with limited success to implement logistical and cultural structures that would enable them to seamlessly combine text and video (and the separate and mutually wary staff who created one but generally not the other).

These and a host of other changes have transformed not just how journalists do things but also, and more crucially, how they think about the things they do. The tools of their trade have changed logistically – increased technical proficiency across platforms, the incorporation of Twitter into the daily routine – and conceptually. Journalists who once talked almost exclusively with sources and colleagues now must maintain and even nurture “relationships” with readers, viewers, and users. The prerogatives that accompany the occupational role as information providers no longer belong exclusively or even primarily to journalists, who now must continually negotiate any claims to that role. Competitors, once finite and known, today are neither; perhaps even more confusingly, the same can be said of collaborators. Accompanied by, and intertwined with, the collapse of familiar economic models for news, those changes have been ones of significant occupational substance and not mere storytelling style.

Summarizing the response of thousands of individuals in a multitude of diverse institutional and cultural settings inevitably is risky business, but I’ll attempt it anyway: By and large, journalists in democratic societies have tended to fall back on assertions of traditional ethical principles to define what is essential about their enterprise of informing the citizenry. That is, they have evoked long-standing professional norms – impartiality (and sometimes its more problematic cousin, objectivity), accountability, a commitment to truth-telling – and actions taken in service to those norms, such as verification practices, as occupational banner and boundary marker. The banner identifies the “real” journalists as those who uphold, or at least aspire to uphold, the core principles; the boundary marker excludes the pretenders who do not. Under such a formulation, readily available tools may enable anyone to be a publisher, but to be a journalist requires something more, something beyond the remit of technology.

A century ago, the notion of journalism as a profession emerged from a similar ethics-based response to technological and cultural upheaval (Schudson 1981; Mindich 1998). Such a self-definition remains imperfect, in part because journalists’ collective allegiance to their own standards is less than impeccable but more broadly because it provides a ready excuse for resisting rather than embracing innovation originating outside the occupational borders. The line between ethics as calling card and ethics as crutch – shaken in righteous anger by the professionally wounded – can be a fine one. Nonetheless, the use of normative principles rather than overt activities as definitive of the occupation signals recognition of the existential challenge facing journalism again today.

Journalism Studies

The field of journalism studies also has changed dramatically over the past decade. In many ways – signposted by the flood of submissions to journals such as this one and the rapid growth of the ICA unit to its current status as one of the largest in the organization – it has

come into its own, emerging from the “mass communication” umbrella to define and defend itself as a unique discipline. However, the identification of appropriate objects of study has come more readily than the development of appropriately theorized tools for studying them.

In 2004, it was still possible – difficult, but possible – to keep up with the published scholarship about “digital journalism.” Today, it no longer is. Indeed, it can seem that journalism studies scholars all over the world, at all stages of their academic careers, are concerned with little else. Until recently, most of that work fell into one of two camps. One camp was made up of research that was primarily descriptive: It used content analysis, survey, or interview data to paint a picture of products or practices or perceptions. This approach is valuable when a field is in its infancy, as it helps researchers define what their object of study is all about, but becomes less useful as the field matures.

The other camp was more conceptual, but the concepts or theories applied in an effort to understand the sweeping changes highlighted above were holdovers from an earlier age of communication scholarship. The domination of that earlier era by media effects theories exacerbated the problem. Particularly in the United States, effects theories formed the bedrock of mass communication research for much of the 20th century, building on Harold Lasswell’s 1948 formulation of the field as the study of who says what, through which channel, to whom and with what effect. But although nuanced in many ways, effects theories inherently rely on the conception of communication as a linear process. There must be a distinct and identifiable communicator, communications act or product, channel, and recipient, as well as an effect that is identifiable in some way.

The media world of the internet has long been recognized as non-linear (Newhagen and Rafaeli 1996). In the past decade, we have gone well beyond nonlinearity; we have come to see our hyper-mediated existence as immersive, an environment in which we live constantly rather than a separate thing that we use occasionally (Deuze 2012). In such an environment, it is difficult if not impossible to identify any of the components of effects theory. How are we to understand the impact of any set of media messages when message senders and recipients are interchangeable, when messages in disparate forms arrive continuously through a myriad of channels, and when everyone’s information diet is wildly diverse and personally unique?

Other “mass communication” theories also have proved to be clunky fits. Diffusion of innovations theory, for example, has been widely applied (and widely supported), but is more useful in describing how change occurs in news environments than in helping us understand what happens once it does. Political economy theories struggle to retain their explanatory power in an environment in which communicative power is so fragmented. Normative theories, which undergirded the earliest efforts to conceptualize journalism by scholars (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2013) as well as practitioners, also face new challenges. Is transparency the new objectivity, as some have suggested (Karlsson 2011; Hellmueller et al. 2013)? Is interaction replacing independence, or can they somehow co-exist? What are global norms of journalism – or, better, universal ones, principles that apply to communicators not just across national borders but also across social roles, social strata, and other intangible divides?

In short, journalism studies has struggled to break away from the safety net of the known – descriptive and theoretical – and to fulfil its own key social role: enhancing understanding of the unknown. Yet despite the difficulties, crucial steps have been taken to lay the necessary groundwork, and those steps have universally involved looking beyond traditional institutions and conceptions of journalism (Steensen and Ahva 2014). Zelizer’s (2004) outline and critique of the field’s inherent (and often disjointed) interdisciplinarity has been key. So too have been efforts by Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch to identify broad conceptual stages of journalism research leading to what they call the contemporary “global-comparative turn” (2009: 6), marked by a dissolution of borders between public and private,

between professionals and amateurs, and between production and consumption, among others. Growing numbers of other scholars also have emphasized an imperative to find ways to make sense of something much bigger than the study of a bounded occupational endeavour. Steensen and Ahva (2014) highlight some of the terms used to articulate this goal: news is seen as an “ecosystem” (Anderson 2013), a “landscape” (Peters and Broersma 2013), an “ambient” environment (Hermida 2010), a “network” (Heinrich 2011; Russell 2013).

Whatever the name, the impetus toward the incorporation of complexity rather than the isolation of effects pervades all these nascent efforts to engage in and with journalism, shaping the enterprise in ways relevant to the fluid, hypermediated world that has emerged from the one we knew a decade ago.

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