Networked Journalism: How to Save Journalism So It Can Save the World

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Will journalism continue to exist?

That is one of the questions that Jo Bardoel (1996) asked after discussing the impact of the World Wide Web on traditional journalism. Like him, many critical thinkers in the field have long been expressing concern about the future of journalism as a field and as a practice. The basic "technological" argument to show that journalism is indeed fading can be summed up this way: the new media challenges traditional journalism as readers, listeners and viewers start to see how they can be "journalists" themselves – situation which, in turn, is causing big changes in media economics and consumption (e.g. see Bird, 2009).

With the "demotic turn" of popular culture (Turner, 2004; 2009), many think that the Web has become a threat to mainstream media owners and practicing journalists (Brennen, 2009).

Despite the proliferation of these "millenarian prophecies" (Curran, 2009), Charlie Beckett is one of those who are optimistic that these changes in news production and consumption will not end journalism as long as journalists are able to cope with these changes. Beckett, the founding director of POLIS (a journalism and society think tank), is an experienced journalist himself and a teacher-researcher at the London School of Economics. He is also the

author of ***SuperMedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save the World***—a book that offers to show how journalists can deal with the changes going on in the media landscape where they are currently functioning. He calls this concept "Networked journalism."

How Journalists Can Cope with the 'Threats'

Beckett starts to explain his point by convincing the readers that the ongoing changes in the new media landscape can be problematic to mainstream media. According to him, among the "threats" to the current news media business model are:

- the loss of audience not because of a declining audience interest but because of the gradual loss of a generation that pays attention to conventional news;
- the loss of revenue because mainstream networks follow the trend of making everything available online for free;
- the fragmentation manifested in the audience's choice of news to consume;
- the loss of diversity due to economic pressures and increase in perceived work efficiency that has led to the firing of journalists "not because of innovation but because of revenue reduction" (p.26);
- the current trend of producing "free newspapers" as an effort to make audiences get back to reading papers, which opens issues on cost subsidy and sustainability; and
- the loss of news quality as a result of "tightening profit margins and multiplying deadlines" (p. 28).

Beckett then shifts the discussion to the status of the public sphere as the "consumer" of the news. He says that the changes that we are experiencing in the public sphere's behavior toward news consumption are expected as society is not static. Since society evolves, journalism should re-evaluate "its core functions and values" to make society pay attention to social issues (p. 35). The best way to do that is through "Networked journalism."

Journalism jargon aside, networked journalism simply means that both the professionals and so-called "amateurs" should collaborate to piece together a news story and report to the "public" what really happened. This collaboration would open "old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, [and]

perspectives" (p. 46) as it allows the "public" to engage in every process of news gathering and reporting and on to "reflection" and action. This turns the journalist into a facilitator rather than the sole news source. New media allows the journalists and the public to have a multi-dimensional interaction and provides multiple news sources and modes to communicate.

The coming together of this large virtual community of professional journalists and citizen journalists who engage with each other and aim to report the news has created a modified and somewhat grander type of journalistic institution: the SuperMedia.

In Chapter 3, Beckett discusses the implications of a SuperMedia on political news reporting, citing convincing evidence in UK and Africa that show networked journalism can work. The issues on terrorism are discussed in Chapter 4, arguing that networked journalism allows a journalist to have a more holistic view of a situation that results in a more informed citizenry. The last chapter reiterates the basic point that networked journalism should be participatory in its approach to news reporting in order to empower the public.

Limitations of Beckett's Discussion

This concept makes it somewhat different from, but related to, Bardoel's (2002) idea of "network journalism" which focuses on the characteristics of the World Wide Web as an avenue for journalism. Clearly also, this concept goes beyond the idea that journalists merely "use" their "social networks" to perform their tasks. This makes Beckett's concept unique, if not novel, as the implications of technologies and evolving social behavior are focused strictly on journalistic realms and concerns, purely from a journalist's point of view.

Beckett also fails to give his own definition of the concept that he is strongly advocating. Instead he quotes Jeff Jarvis, a media commentator, to let him do the "defining." Although Beckett adopts somebody else's definition of "networked journalism" (which is odd), he, however, illustrates clearly how this concept works by using a "compare-and-contrast" approach using a "from-to" pattern (e.g. *from* expensive *to* cheap media; *from* deadline *to* continuous news, etc.), implying a shift in journalistic practices in general. Also, by using a hypothetical scenario, a diagram on pages 56 to 57 illustrates how the interaction of journalists and the public (and the new media) can help shape a news story. This approach makes for

a good strategy in discussing the concept with practitioners and with students as well.

However, he does not discuss in detail the question of the accuracy of news reports produced by a networked journalist. Beckett seems not to think that this is an issue. "Of course," he said, "we may have to apply the 1 percent rule that Professor Jay Rosen of New York University uses for citizen journalism. Only 1% is of high quality, 10% is acceptable and the rest is poor or banal. But it can all contribute to Networked Journalism" (p. 53). Does this mean that news accuracy should be sacrificed when journalists allow the public to take part in the process?

Beckett gets so preoccupied in discussing the concept and in giving practical suggestions on how this can work in the real world that he fails to address the resulting issues and general implications of the concept. The more important questions, such as: "For whom will the networked journalism write?" and "What would be its implications on media effects research?" are not given enough attention. Also, he gives much more focus to the application of networked journalism in political news reporting even though journalists have tasks other than this, for example, reporting scientific breakthroughs. Because of this limited view, a question such as "What is the implication of networked journalism on science reporting (and on other news topics)?" was not answered.

But one good thing that Beckett achieves in the concluding chapter of the book is in pointing out that the academe is not exempt from having to cope with these changes. Chapter 5 encourages educators to re-evaluate courses on Media Studies to include networked journalism and to address other net-related issues such as Creative Commons, Freedom of Expression and Net Neutrality.

Implications on Journalism Theory

The image of all other kinds of journalism outside the mainstream is usually constructed as an alternative to the traditional one and, in most cases where a critical lens is used, as a "challenger" that seeks to emancipate voiceless citizens (e.g. see Eksterowicz, Roberts & Clark, 1998; Harcup, 2003). This dichotomy has made many people think that the two could not mix, at least theoretically, as debates have constantly been discussed in scholarly literatures (e.g. Haas & Steiner, 2006).

Beckett, however, succeeds in demonstrating that mainstream journalism and citizen journalism can go together. In fact, he argues that networked journalism is a hybrid of the two (p. 86). His idea is plausible since there have been several scholarly papers that find citizen journalism existing hand-in-hand with traditional journalism, sometimes operating to complement each other (e.g. see Matheson, 2004; Lowrey, 2006). This shows that the supposed conflict between the two seemingly opposing sides may actually be more feared than real. Beckett has found the answer. The only thing journalists need to do is to change their attitude, convince themselves to give networked journalism a try, and see if it works.

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