

CONCLUSION

A Social News Media Network

The first decades of the new millennium have seen further fundamental transformations of the practices and processes through which we generate and engage with the news, and online and social media have been central to these transformations to an extent that we could now speak of the thoroughly integrated complex that includes conventional news organisations, alternative and citizen media outlets, professional and citizen journalists, industry and freelance newsmakers, dedicated social news curators and ordinary social media users, as a *social news media network*.

Social media have clearly been crucial drivers of these transformations. In the industry, “a ‘new’ dynamic of newsgathering, production and dissemination is taking shape that affects journalistic practices” (Heinrich 2008: 3), while amongst news users “there is a growing demand for more open, accessible and informative news media. People like journalism so much they are prepared to help create it themselves—for free” (Beckett 2010: 3). This has led to the central role that social media now play in the context of breaking news events, as we have seen in Chapter 3, and to the habitual, demotic everyday newsharing practices that are enabling social media to become an increasingly important source of news for a growing share of Internet users, which we examined in Chapter 4; it has also forced journalists to develop strategies

for engaging more directly with their readers and viewers by developing their personal social media presences, as outlined in Chapter 5, to an extent that would have been unthinkable during the first wave of citizen media; and it has led the news industry as a whole to confront social media as a tertiary space beyond its own imprints in which user engagement with the news must be anticipated, should be addressed, and can be measured, as shown in Chapter 6. These transformations, finally, have also led to the emergence of genuinely new and innovative hybrid journalistic formats, such as the liveblogs we examined in Chapter 7, that seek to incorporate some of the most attractive features of social media news curation while maintaining the primacy of conventional news outlets; and they have highlighted the questions that we asked in Chapter 8, about the future structure of ‘the’ public sphere in a media environment that is now dominated by a network of myriad overlapping spaces from personal publics through event and issue publics to thematic spherules, and beyond, rather than by a handful of mass media outlets conducting a public debate amongst elite actors on behalf of their audiences.

In spite of widespread talk of a ‘crisis’ of journalism, these developments also show that news itself is as important, and as popular, as it has ever been. Similarly, alongside the legitimate concerns about financial and operational sustainability that have been raised in many established news outlets—amidst a considerable number of staff cuts, mergers, and closures—there has also been a wave of new outlets, projects, formats, and approaches to doing journalism in a social media age. Not all of these new initiatives will be successful in the long term, and it would be unrealistic to expect them to be, but after a considerable period of relative stagnation the news industry is now innovating at a rate that has rarely been seen before. If Gans is right that the “news media can exist only if they include news organisations”, then in spite of all the worries about their imminent demise the future of the news media seems safe for now (2003: 30).

But what is changing quite fundamentally in this environment are the practices of professional journalists in the industry, as well as of the users engaging in para-journalistic activities outside it. Many more of the activities previously conducted on the backstage, out of view, have moved to the front-stage, into plain sight for news users; “it seems that the methods of a ‘closed’ operational sphere of journalism are overcome and being replaced by a highly dynamic process of information exchange” (Heinrich 2008: 3). This continues the trends already observed during the first wave of citizen media, but at a much larger scale and with much broader take-up throughout society. Conventional news outlets clearly remain central even in a social news media

network; “the news that is most read, shared, and discussed in social media is produced by professional news organisations” (Newman *et al.* 2015: 82). But many other sources are now also directly accessible, and variously offer first-hand information, alternative interpretations and news frames, insightful or ideological commentary. As a result, traditional journalism is “under even greater pressure ... to offer the user something unique: analysis, comment, collation and so on” (Ahmad 2010: 152).

The Journalist as Gatekeeper, Gatewatcher, and Curator

In these conventional news organisations, then, gatekeeping still remains important, at least to a point: “gatekeeping still yields considerable networking power, as most socialized communication is still processed through the mass media, and the most popular information Web sites are those of mainstream media” (Castells 2011: 780–81). But the selection decisions made by professional journalists and editors no longer determine whether or not a given piece of information or news will circulate in the public sphere: they merely affect how difficult it will be for the news to achieve widespread circulation. Without mainstream media endorsement, the news will have to rely on the collective but largely uncoordinated efforts of millions of individual social media newsharers to achieve a substantial reach—but this more circuitous route to audiences can ultimately be just as effective.

And the move towards a social news media network has also revealed that even in conventional news outlets, gatewatching has now taken its legitimate place alongside, and as a key input to, gatekeeping practices. As the BBC UGC Hub’s Silvia Costeloe has put it, by searching social media and other online user-generated content spaces for material “sometimes you’re finding the story, and sometimes you’re just finding new angles on the story” (qtd. in Stray 2010: n.p.), yet both of these practices clearly constitute acts of gatewatching that have gradually become part of the everyday journalistic routine. Indeed, from another perspective this growing acceptance of broad-based gatewatching serves only as an acknowledgment that a much more narrow form of gatewatching has always been part of the job: the watching of the gates of news wires and competitor outlets in order to make sure that one’s own news organisation does not miss out on covering any major emerging stories. Viewed in this way, the result is simply that

a new inflexion of gatekeeping has forced itself upon newsrooms' digital operations. Instead of simply filtering inbound dispatches from a limited and well-identified number of channels (with wire agencies at the forefront), news organizations must now accommodate a multitude of interconnected flows of content to extract not only material related to stories deemed worthy of attention but also any bit of digital content that can serve as an ornamental addition to a dense and jam-packed portal. (Heinderyckx 2015: 257)

Yet perhaps this underestimates the true magnitude of this transformation. Well beyond dedicated journalistic units such as the BBC UGC Hub, it is now true that "contemporary online journalists can hardly be called gatekeepers. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that online newsrooms have reduced gatekeeping to its simplest expression" (Le Cam and Domingo 2015: 123). There is a marked difference between merely monitoring a few more channels for emerging stories, and becoming embedded as one node in a much wider network of newssharing and news engagement that will readily persist even in the absence of a given news outlet's participation; a social media platform such as *Twitter* "blurs long-standing distinctions between newsmaker, news reporter and news consumer" (Hermida 2013: 304), and thereby upsets the power relations between these roles. As we have seen in Chapter 3, a social media news curator like Andy Carvin, for instance, was doing a great deal more than simply filtering a broad range of channels for content to be added to NPR's news portal, in the way that Heinderyckx envisages; instead, working directly on *Twitter*, "Carvin was not simply broadcasting, but was immersed in the culture of a media environment that privileges relationship over information delivery, interacting and conversing with others to co-construct the news" (Hermida 2014: 368). Even the journalists publishing curated social media content to the liveblogs hosted on their news outlets' own Websites are doing more than merely sourcing a handful of tweets as added colour for an otherwise conventional news story; they are ostensibly still operating according to a social media logic, even if they do so outside of the infrastructural boundaries of contemporary social media spaces.

In deciding what of their gatewatched material to post or not to post, to share or not to share, the journalist continues to make a series of discrete gatekeeping decisions, then, just as these are made by the citizen journalist or the social media newssharer who are similarly drawing on gatewatching processes to identify the material they work with. But in social media (and liveblog) contexts these decisions no longer determine what stories are in the news; instead, they contribute to the curation of a continuous feed of news

that is constructed from the actions of professional journalists, citizen parajournalists, and ordinary newssharers, is beyond the control of any one news outlet, and exists across a broad range of platforms. In this light, “processes of curation may be better conceptualized as *drawing information in* rather than keeping it out” (Thorson and Wells 2015: 27). Users may tap into the resulting feeds through any number of access points—by following individual journalists on *Twitter*, liking the pages of particular news outlets on *Facebook*, reading liveblogs on particular events and topics, or going to the apps and Websites offered by a range of old and new news organisations—and in doing so will gain a variety of divergent perspectives on current developments that they are then also likely to recirculate (alongside their own supportive or critical readings of the situation) to their own networks through newssharing.

As Jarvis suggests, therefore, “in the future ... organising news will be the most important role of news organisations” (2008: n.p.), and Beckett further points out that the approaches that they take to this task can also serve as key points of distinction from competitors:

counter-intuitively, the abundance of disintermediated information may ... give quality networked journalism a market advantage. The plethora of data sources and competing platforms and outlets means there will be a premium (or ‘freemium’) for authoritative and trustworthy curating and filtering of news. ... The demand for transparent and relevant mediation will increase. Networked Journalism as a kind of intelligent and pro-active search engine will create quality by adding value to search. (2010: 17)

Algorithmically and Communally Curated Flows of News

In contrast to this comparatively optimistic view, Heinderyckx also foresees a darker side to this move towards news curation, however: because the volume of news content in mainstream and social media channels that should be monitored is now “simply out of reach for human operators”, he predicts the automation, and thus the “algorithmification”, of such curation processes, and suggests that this will introduce a fundamental “change in the nature of news selection. The mysterious process that could never be fully theorized and accounted for has nevertheless been fitted into technologies that require not just guidelines and broad principles but also rational operationalized decision trees” (Heinderyckx 2015: 257). Such concerns are no doubt justified; more

so in computer science than in journalism and media studies, problematically, there are already many projects that seek to algorithmically surface emerging and important news stories, especially in social media contexts, and *Twitter's* and *Facebook's* famous 'trending topics' lists constitute two prominent examples of some comparatively basic algorithms that have are by now very well established.

But several scholars have also pointed out that this algorithmification remains in its infancy, and that at least so far human agency has proven crucial in effective curation. Liu states categorically that "curating cannot solely be done through algorithms. Curation still requires human skill and discernment" (2010: 22), while Nielsen outlines some of the significant issues that an effective curation algorithm would need to overcome:

automated display decisions may lead to filter bubbles (where we only get news that confirm our existing views), algorithmic discrimination (where news is customised in ways where people miss out on important information, for example, poor people getting little or no financial news), and raise privacy concerns (as they are based on collecting individual-level data about users). (2016: 112)

By current indications, at least, news curation algorithms are still a considerable way away from being able to replace human curators, regardless of whether the latter are professional journalists or social media collectives. As Bell points out in relation to the *Facebook* newsfeed algorithm, each decision about what types of news to highlight "means reprogramming the algorithm which selects types of news stories. Facebook might see this as an engineering task, but these simple decisions are also editorial" (2015: 90). Even *Facebook* itself had therefore chosen to augment its algorithmic selection of trending news stories with oversight by a team of dedicated editorial staff; it sacked this team and switched to a fully automated approach only when the existence of the team was revealed in May 2016 and questions about their possible political and other biases were asked. In turn, the results of this move towards full algorithmic news curation were deeply problematic, with fake and offensive news stories pushed to considerable prominence (Thielman 2016).

This episode demonstrates clearly the considerable hurdles that any algorithmification of curation choices in conventional news outlets as well as in social media platforms would still have to overcome; if even the exceptionally well-resourced *Facebook* has not yet solved the algorithmic curation challenge, there is little likelihood that smaller-scale news organisations will be able to do so on their own. Thus, "news organisations are stuck as to how

to respond, particularly as they lack any scale or technological solutions that might match those created by Silicon Valley” (Bell 2015: 90); but in fact to expect solutions to emerge only from the developers at leading technology companies—or more broadly from computer science—is already to look in the wrong place. Any technical interventions will only ever be as good as the conceptual frameworks upon which they are based, and here journalism as well as media and communication studies have an immensely important role to play. *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and other companies in the new social news media network would be well advised to engage much more deeply and centrally with these disciplines of research than they have done to date. Meanwhile, until they do so, in light of their increasingly central role as news platforms even *Facebook* and *Twitter* may now need to hire (or re-hire) journalists, editors, and other professional news workers to manage these aspects of their operation, manually.

Even against the backdrop of the gradual algorithmification of so many aspects of everyday life, this points out the continuing relevance of journalism as a distinct practice. As Heinderyckx puts it, journalists

have the experience and the intellectual capital to regain their footing in society as institutions capable of sorting through a mass of events and information and dividing the wheat from the chaff. ... They must reinvent themselves and supply relevance and sense making, knowing that the task at hand means capturing the faint signals drowned in deafening background noise. They must achieve this in the new context where they [have] forever lost their monopoly. (2015: 264)

But such tasks are now carried out in an informational environment in which journalists are less central as producers and disseminators of news and information than they are as curators; as Lewis and Usher describe it, this repositions journalism as knowledge management, and displaces “the newsroom as the center of newsgathering. Instead, journalists would be helping to bring together all of the accumulated knowledge that people have contributed across open-source platforms and social media venues. Journalists would be curators in a community conversation” (2013: 612).

They will, however, not be alone in this, and although—following Heinderyckx—journalists who accept the challenge may be especially well-suited for taking on curatorial roles (whether in social media spaces themselves, or through liveblogging and similar formats), other professional and non-professional participants and collectives will also be able to build a reputation as constructive curators. Professional domain experts and amateur enthusiasts

are just as likely to be able to curate meaningful newsfeeds on their specialty topics; shorter- and longer-term collectives and communities that form around shared issues of interest and concern will be able to collaborate on gatewatching, sharing, and evaluating a considerable volume of information on their constitutive themes. In other words, even in the context of the same story or development many different news curators will be vying for attention, competing but often also cooperating with each other in an effort to offer the most useful and insightful stream of updates and analyses. Thorson and Wells describe this as a multitude of “curated flows”, which are now “created through the overlapping curating activities of journalists, strategic communicators, individuals, social networks, and online display algorithms in the contemporary media environment” (2015: 25).

As news users engage with this network of curated flows, joining some of them for a while only to move to others that offer more up-to-date news or an alternative framing of events, “every mouse click reassures news consumers that news does not convey *the* truth but *a* truth” (Broersma 2013: 43). As we have pointed out, as a result the news is revealed as socially constructed by a myriad of gatekeeping, gatewatching, newssharing, and news curation decisions made by professional journalists, citizen para-journalists, and ordinary news users, and as Broersma argues, “the crisis of journalism is thus one of vanishing authority and vaporizing trust because citizens have more access to information and can assess alternative representations of social reality” (2013: 44).

Further, Heinderyckx claims that this crisis of authority is essentially also a crisis of truth itself; he suggests that “one key component of the original concept of gatekeeping is losing ground dramatically: verification. In the traditional news chain, verifying the accuracy and authenticity of information was the key to one of the locks of the gate” (2015: 258)—yet now that the gates of individual news outlets can easily be bypassed by information and misinformation alike, there is a concern that what circulates as or alongside the news online and in social media spaces only gives the appearance of factuality while no longer holding up to verification. But while this may be true, it does not mean that such misinformation necessarily circulates unchallenged: as Russell points out,

the growing number of internet users now practiced at fact-checking is vastly surpassing the capabilities of most stripped-down newsroom staffs. At the best news sites, the commitment to accuracy on the part of the staff is matched by the commitment of the readers. Errors are called out and stories are updated all the time. (2009: 366)

Indeed, it is notable that past years have seen a considerable push towards the establishment of dedicated fact-checking units in many leading news organisations (even though, in principle, fact-checking should already be a core element of journalistic practice, of course). These units are charged with reviewing the public statements of politicians and other societal leaders, and assess them against the available evidence; often, they also initiate their activities in response to requests from the news outlet's on-site and social media userbase, and involve those users in the fact-checking effort. Arguably, such initiatives are therefore at least in part also motivated by the crowdsourced verification processes that are already a core part of user-driven news curation activities in social media spaces. This development might thus be seen as an example of a more general trend in which mainstream and social media "draw from and contribute to the strength of the other, while holding each more accountable" (Newman *et al.* 2012: 17).

Very evidently, such welcome initiatives have not managed to fully combat the circulation of what is now often referred to as 'fake news' through the channels of both social and mainstream media. But in spite of the new term, such 'fake news' is far from a new phenomenon: this mis- and disinformation is usually simply political propaganda, circulated by its originators to promote their own causes and discredit their opponents. Propaganda of this form has been prominent, to often highly damaging and destructive effect, across many epochs of human history, regardless of its contemporary media environment, and to blame current media—especially social media—for its recent resurgence would be overly simplistic, therefore. Rather, propaganda gains influence whenever considerable groups in society feel so disenfranchised from it that they are prepared to trust the apparently simple solutions to their problems that populist leaders and movements present to them, and to spread these messages—offline as much as online—through their own networks. Indeed, they will then do so even when presented with rational explanations for how such populist solutions cannot possibly succeed, if they perceive their personal circumstances to be so dire that they are prepared to trust in any solution that subverts the *status quo*. They may then even be prepared to actively share such propaganda in a tactical, calculated fashion although they know it to be factually untrue, as long as doing so disrupts the power structures they oppose. The structure of the contemporary social news media network, whatever it may be, plays only a very subordinate role in this—such groups will tactically appropriate whatever media technologies are available to them, from samizdat printing through amateur radio to social media. What is more important is

that mainstream actors in society will be able to successfully neutralise such propaganda only if they address the root causes of the disenfranchisement that lead ordinary citizens to support and share it—no amount of fact-checking and quality news reporting will be able to do so on its own.

News and Its Users

In the news environment away from such fringe developments, meanwhile, it is virtually unavoidable that “journalism’s ideological commitment to control, rooted in an institutional instinct toward protecting legitimacy and boundaries, [is] giving way to a hybrid logic of adaptability and openness” (Lewis 2012: 851), and this must then also affect the shape, structure, positioning, and power of the news industry as a societal institution. Ultimately, as Beckett suggests, “it is difficult to see how news media culture can remain the same if the journalism alters” (2010: 15). Crucially, this will mean the development of even more opportunities to engage with news users—especially in social media environments—in even more meaningful ways; with more and more news work being conducted in the tertiary, third spaces of social media platforms, a positioning of journalism as exceptional and separate from the day-to-day newssharing and news engagement of ordinary citizens can no longer be maintained.

As we have seen, the news industry has traditionally sought to position itself as central to, but also separate from society; Deuze has summarised its fundamental aim as “telling people what they need to know” (2005: 455), and in this formulation—which many journalists would likely endorse—there is also an underlying sense that those people, left to their own devices, would not be able to build up enough knowledge to successfully deliberate and decide on the possible futures for their own societies. But the reasoning here is circular: the news media may once have been irreplaceable for the purpose of informing society simply because at the high point of the mass media age they provided by definition the only society-wide channels for the circulation of news and related information. The news industry could make its paternalistic claim ‘you need us to inform you’ not because of some inherent natural law that meant that modern societies must necessarily come to rely on this industry, but simply because the political economy of the media environment that was prevalent at the time made it difficult to establish credible, sustainable alternatives to a centrally organised, commercial industry of news production and dissemination.

Today, however, that political economy has changed fundamentally. In the contemporary media ecology, it is very evidently possible for the dissemination of news and related information, and for the public debate and deliberation that the circulation of such information enables, to route around the representatives of the mainstream news industry, and to actively engage and argue with their coverage and framing of the world around us. “The once privileged position occupied by the journalist has been reclaimed, as it were, by those citizens who want to participate more directly in the construction of the public sphere. The media, from their point of view, is no longer required to mediate any more; they can now choose to get their news directly from the sources they choose to consult—or else they simply make it themselves” (Turner 2009: 391). Writing in 2006, Habermas still claims that this cannot add up to meaningful public debate:

in the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend[s] instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics. Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication ... when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines. (2006: 423)

However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, with the subsequent emergence of generalist social media platforms that enable a broad range of uses from the personal to the political this claim no longer holds: the publics that exist on these platforms—from personal publics through topically focussed and short-lived issue publics to longer-term thematic public spherules—now intersect and interact on an everyday basis, and information passes between them through the habitual newsharing activities carried out by a majority of users.

This is not to claim that established and emerging news media no longer play an important role in these environments, of course, but they are now embedded participants within these spaces rather than separate actors. The imprints of news media outlets no longer serve as the structural centre of online (or offline) debates; rather, publics form around the events and issues that are currently driving societal debates, and are given a digital manifestation on social media in the form of user-defined *Twitter* hashtag communities, *Facebook* pages and groups, and networks of interaction between users within their overlapping personal publics. For journalism, this means “a slow and subtle shift ... in the consensual notion of serving the public, as it moves from a pri-

mar[il]ly top-down meaning to an increasingly bottom-up application” (Deuze 2005: 455).

It is important not to misread this as a simple replacement of one medium of news dissemination and engagement by another, then; what has happened here instead is the emergence of new channels for a more multi-directional, networked discussion and evaluation of the news amongst multiple actors that have gradually shifted the power over news agenda-setting and framing away from the established news industry. Therefore, our understanding of

the emergence of digital and social media needs to move beyond simple models of substitutions versus complementarities, as they have created a much more complex ecosystem for the creation and distribution of news. Similarly, any simple view of competition versus substitution of the Fourth and Fifth Estates needs to be refined to encompass this more inter-related ecology. (Newman *et al.* 2012: 17)

We must also avoid a merely technological perspective on these changes, as Hermida warns: “by and large, journalism practices have become more technologised, with reporters doing old things in new ways, rather than negotiating the transition to a post-industrial knowledge society” (2014: 364). New social media technologies have clearly enabled the development of a range of new practices amongst both journalists and news users, yet in doing so have only, finally, provided the technological supports for forms of news engagement that had already long been envisaged or demanded by journalists, journalism scholars, and news audiences. Talking back at the news and challenging the news frames offered by mainstream media is nothing new for news audiences—they have done so in private since before news became an industry. Social media have simply provided a new channel through which news users can do so more directly, more visibly, and with more hope of kickstarting a public discussion that may also involve other news users and even the journalists and societal actors directly involved in a given story.

Ultimately, then, “the question now is not whether journalism has changed, but *how* it is changing” (Tandoc Jr. 2014: 560), and what implications this has for the relationship between journalists and news users, between news organisations and their intended audiences. “Journalism as we know it is in search of a redefinition of its purpose and social contract, as well as a reconstitution of its boundaries, which have become alarmingly fuzzy with the rise of participatory modes of communication” (Hanitzsch 2013: 200), and Hermida suggests that in this redefinition of journalism’s purpose it is crucial that “participation is prioritised over publication, shar-

ing over owning, change over stability, abundance over scarcity, relationships over information delivery” (2014: 365). If this seems to be a radical departure from traditional modes of journalism, then in light of the rapid transformation of other aspects of society in recent years it this is only appropriate and necessary; however, there is reason to hope that journalism can survive this transformation, as Hanitzsch points out: “even in a time of an ongoing and partly fundamental reconstitution of public and private communication, to which the internet has contributed in many substantial ways, the essence of journalism has remained remarkably robust over time” (Hanitzsch 2013: 202).

Indeed, perhaps the most fundamental change here is not in how the news industry generates its stories, but in how it engages with its users. Deuze foresees a “shift towards a co-creative mode when engaging with contemporary society” (2009: 315), and this shift is represented perhaps in former *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger’s vision of “a mutualized newspaper. . . . We have to get over this journalistic arrogance that journalists are the only people who are the pickers of authority in the world. I don’t think anybody believes that now” (2010: n.p.; cf. Bruno 2011: 38 ff.). For Rusbridger this means that

our readers have become part of what we do. They write commentaries for our Comment is Free site—they have helped with investigations into tax avoidance and police brutality. They form communities around individual reporters and issues, lending a hand with research and ideas, bringing us up short when we get things wrong. They have collaborated on big projects needing resources beyond our scope. We have done things that would have been impossible without them. In return we give them a more diverse form of journalism and the visibility that comes from a platform that reaches some 30 million unique users a month—two thirds of them outside the U.K. (2009: n.p.)

In this context, it is no surprise that *The Guardian* was also one of the leading early proponents of the liveblogging format ahead of its gradual adoption by a broader range of online news outlets; the liveblog, in its blending of news media and social media logics, serves as a key example for the mutualisation of news processes between journalists and users that Rusbridger sketches out here.

Other leading journalism scholars agree with this aim: as Beckett writes, for instance, “journalism is too important to be left to journalists and too valuable to be left to chance or crude market forces. Networking journalism is not just an option, it is an imperative and a necessity” (2010: 16). This repositions both the journalists and their audiences, of course: while it pushes journal-

ists to move further towards the curatorial role we have explored in previous chapters, it also requires news users to engage in an active, constructive, and sustained manner with the reshaped journalistic content they can now encounter and share. Only this also makes it possible for journalists to move “beyond the ‘us’ and ‘them’ arguments ... and [explore] ways of collaborating with readers, bloggers, and other generators of ideas, words, news, analysis, pictures, and data” (Rusbridger 2009: n.p.). In the end, the more such ongoing, equitable, and respectful engagement between journalists and news users becomes the norm, the more it may also “help the profession reconnect with their community and rebuild its faith in the social function of the journalist” (Turner 2009: 392).

Not least because some hold-outs amongst professional journalists continue to cling against all odds to their privileged societal positions as gatekeepers and agenda-setters, rejecting any increased engagement with ordinary news users as an affront against their professional self-understanding, and because some segments of the news audience, rightly or wrongly frustrated with the mainstream coverage of ‘their’ topics, have come to reject the news industry altogether, the rebuilding to such mutual trust still faces considerable hurdles. Away from such extreme positions, however, the growth in participatory initiatives that build on “the recognition of a new or modified power relationship between news users and producers, as well as between amateur and professional journalists” (Deuze 2009: 316), especially as initiated by some of the leading global news organisations, offers some hope for more constructive engagement between journalists and news users. Indeed, Lewis even points to “the emergence of an ‘ethic of participation’, seeded in a hybrid resolution of the professional–participatory tension, that envisions audience integration as a normative goal of a truly digital journalism” (2012: 851–52). Those news outlets that were ‘born digital’—carrying no organisational or attitudinal baggage from a previous, pre-digital existence—may be best placed to take an early leadership in this endeavour (Newman *et al.* 2015: 17); however, it should be noted that venerable news organisations with a long history in other media forms (such as the BBC or *The Guardian*) have also established themselves as major innovators in the field.

This may be important also because—in spite of the considerable public take-up of social and other digital media across many developed and developing nations—the future of journalism still cannot consist of digital solutions alone. As *BBC News* director James Harding has pointed out,

the digital future is fabulous, but it is not fair. The internet is enabling us to tell more stories in more engaging ways to more people than ever before. But there is a widening information gap between people online and those offline, an emerging generational divide in news consumption, a greater imbalance in reporter numbers between news organisations and uneven patterns in the fewer stories that seem to get ever bigger audiences and the many more that do not. (2015: 86)

Those—mostly older—news organisations that span multiple media forms, from digital to broadcast or even to print have a particularly crucial role to play here, as they are also best able to carry active public debates from digital into non-digital contexts and vice versa. More can perhaps be done here to ensure the greatest possible inclusivity, for instance by attempting to translate some of the innovative participatory approaches now being utilised in online environments to complementary offline formats, by facilitating unhindered information flows across these different formats, and by ensuring that public discussions and debates can thus become disconnected from the platforms on which they may be conducted. But news users also have a crucial role to play here, and have traditionally already played it: crucially, as we have already seen, their newsharing activities not only involve the horizontal passing on of information from one social media public to another, but also the vertical sharing of information gleaned from social media spaces to face-to-face communication and other forms of interpersonal engagement. This must continue, and any retreat into purely digital environments would be counterproductive.

An Industry in Transformation

As Schudson puts it, then, “whether the current moment of transformation should be welcomed or deplored is something on which people may differ” (2013: 194). On the one hand, Rusbridger suggests that “this feels like some kind of emergency” (2009: n.p.), and Deuze similarly anticipates—somewhat more contradictorily—“an inevitable catastrophe that hopefully will not take place” (2009: 317). Both write this in 2009, however, and the crisis narrative has now been around in journalism for so long that it has itself become normalised; journalism has managed to outlive its imminent death for a surprisingly long time by now. One reason for this may be that journalism has always been in flux: “much is changing today, and changing quickly, but it is not changing from a settled, static set of practices” (Schudson 2013: 193). In

other words, eternally concerned with the new, the currently happening, perhaps journalism itself is also eternally transforming, eternally adjusting to the media and communicative environments within which it operates—“journalism continuously reinvents itself” (Deuze 2005: 447).

This almost certainly also involves the further transformation of journalism’s industrial structures, and the observations made throughout this book point to a number of possible developments in this context. Heinrich envisages “network journalism” as “a completely revised organizational form of the entire media system as such, which impacts all news distribution platforms from print, via radio through to television as well as online journalism”, and “explains the structure of journalistic systems in the digital age” (Heinrich 2008: 5); one of the obvious questions emerging from this, then, is what the individual journalistic components connecting with each other in this networked system are going to be.

To begin with, Deuze has pointed to the considerable changes in the relationship between journalists and news organisations: writing in 2009, he notes that

the international news industry is contractually governed by what the International Federation of Journalists in 2006 euphemistically described as ‘atypical work’, which means all kinds of freelance, casualized, informal, and otherwise contingent labor arrangements that effectively individualize each and every worker’s rights or claims regarding any of the services offered by employers in the traditional sense. (2009: 316)

In this environment, whose rules are set in part also because of the considerable economic challenges facing a news industry that struggles to remain financially sustainable, journalism has become a precarious profession; a growing proportion of graduates from journalism courses now find their employment in more or less closely related jobs outside the news industry proper, for instance.

But the picture is more mixed than this downbeat assessment might indicate. For instance, while Turner similarly acknowledges that “the prospects for traditional journalism are looking grim”, he also points out that “at the same time, the public has never had such comprehensive access to news, and new kinds of journalism are emerging through online or satellite platforms” (2009: 390). In this environment, even as employment prospects in conventional news outlets decline, the more personal branding of journalists as important voices in the news that we have observed in Chapter 5 may also create new opportunities for newswriters prepared to go it alone and build a sustainable freelance career.

Tunstall therefore suggests that “increasingly it will be selected individual journalists, rather than newspapers, who will be able to demonstrate their integrity, independence and good judgement” (2009: 389), and even envisages an entertainment-derived system in which “journalists will have agents who will get them onto more and more platforms” (389). At the same time, however, this may also raise new questions about the motivations and integrity of the journalists who depend on constant public exposure in this way; “the expansion of the supply of news has not necessarily opened the door to a journalism which defines itself through professional training, a code of ethics, an editorial regime, and a principled focus on verifiable news and information” (Turner 2009: 390), and the growing personalisation of journalistic branding may result in the end in a further transition of professional roles from journalist-as-reporter to journalist-as-pundit.

At the same time, Russell usefully reminds us that “that gloomy story is a narrow business story, where the mainstream news industry is conflated with the much wider news, information and communication culture” (2009: 365). If we widen our perspective beyond the conventional frameworks of industrial news production, it also becomes obvious that quality news content continues to be generated, if sometimes in new, unfamiliar forms and frameworks and conducted by new journalistic or quasi-journalistic institutions with limited track records in the industry. Lowrey suggests that this is typical for an industry experiencing substantial disruption and transformation:

this emergence of small entrepreneurial entities during disruptive times can encourage boundary spanning by larger entities. When emerging entities develop recognizable boundaries, larger organizations interact with them, usually without changing their core practices This describes the digital era, as news outlets partner with journalism startups (some of whom are former employees). (2015: 146)

A range of recent cases exemplify this trend. Before its more recent descent into becoming an outright partisan propaganda pipeline favouring a range of so-called ‘alt-right’, neo-fascist causes and organisations, for instance, the *WikiLeaks* model was not only to serve as an independent platform for the release of whistleblower documents, but also to partner with leading worldwide news organisations in order to ensure the broadest possible impact for its revelations. Even if such collaborations proved unsustainable in the particular case of *WikiLeaks* itself—due chiefly to the diverging personal agendas of the leading actors involved here—the overall “logic of the leak” (Bieber 2013)

that *WikiLeaks* established in its heyday has outlived it, and a variety of other whistleblower platforms and frameworks have emerged to replace *WikiLeaks*.

Baack, for instance, has demonstrated this extension of *WikiLeaks*' "logic of the leak" in the 2016 coverage of the 'Panama Papers', a vast collection of information about the activities of Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca in facilitating tax evasion for its global client base. He notes that "the work and discourse around the Panama Papers read as ... an attempt not to copy *WikiLeaks*, but to adapt the practices ... while simultaneously maintaining and expanding long-standing journalistic practices and identities" (2016: n.p.). Crucially, the processing of the leaked information was facilitated by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), "a journalistic organisation that has been around much longer than *WikiLeaks*" (n.p.) but which has risen to global prominence only much more recently. "The Panama Papers demonstrate how much news media have normalised leaking since *WikiLeaks* 'disrupted' journalism in 2010. ... The way journalists deal with and rationalise those leaks has been 'routinised' and fit into their professional identity" (n.p.), and ICIJ has become a key institution in facilitating this normalisation.

The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists is one example for how "the unprofitable heartland of investigative ... news is seeking to remove itself from the market completely with non-profit funding models and broad-based alliances" (Newman *et al.* 2016: 32), and across various national mediaspheres we are likely to see an increasing number of such alliances between news outlets and journalists, but also with other, non-journalistic organisations that have a meaningful contribution to make to such initiatives. This addresses Heinrich's call that "organizational structures in today's print, broadcast and online platforms need to be reassessed according to the dynamics of an evolving global news sphere—not least through developing a 'new' sense of connectivity" (2008: 2). Indeed, the same sentiment is echoed by the BBC in 2015's major *Future of News* report, which also highlights the significant complexity of many major investigations:

are there ways to look at healthcare, the drug trade, modern slavery, energy, cyber security that are properly global? The atomised approach news generally takes to such stories may be inadequate for domestic and global audiences—not because our audiences suddenly see themselves as global citizens but because of the nature of the stories. (BBC 2015: 24)

Such challenges, however, are likely to be addressed most effectively by a mix of greater international collaboration *and* greater topical specialisation. Alongside the major international alliances between leading news organisations and global collectives such as ICIJ, therefore, we also find a growing range of bespoke initiatives that focus closely on particular journalistic practices or specific thematic areas. This includes, on the one hand, non-profit investigative outfits like *ProPublica*, which

give away to traditional newspapers the products of their investigative reporting. ... These mostly small and scrappy organizations are dedicated primarily to investigative reporting or ‘accountability journalism,’ as most conventional newsrooms are not. They are finding ways to make the best of new technologies and new opportunities without giving up the professional dedication that has sometimes, over the long century of its emergence, made journalism worth our highest regard. (Schudson 2013: 199)

On the other hand, Russell also points out that “the market for consistently delivered well-edited beat reporting remains” (2009: 365); topic-specific news outlets that remain in many ways inspired by the citizen journalist sites of the first wave of citizen media have therefore also made a comeback across a range of speciality domains. But rather than situating themselves in opposition to a mainstream media that does not cover these particular topics in sufficient depth, they are now seeking to actively collaborate with such media outlets, and vice versa. Former *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger outlines how such arrangements were established during his tenure:

the *Guardian* has six reporters doing the environment, but that’s not enough to do the environment in reality. There is great content on the environment out there on the web. And so we went to the ten or 20 best web sites and said, why don’t you sit on our platform? That way we get great content and they get access to this enormous audience, so I think the collaborative possibilities of the web are the interesting ones. (2010: n.p.)

Even in spite of the downturn in non-professional journalistic activities as the first wave of citizen media faltered, therefore, these practices persist at least in topically specific fields where experts and enthusiasts can operate para-journalistic sites that generate a sustained flow of quality information. This form of citizen journalism “is now so intertwined with the workings of the professional news media that it is hard to imagine citizen journalism—or whatever one wants to call it—disappearing” (Wall 2015: 807).

In this networked, collaborative environment involving a variety of organised and individual, journalistic and non-journalistic stakeholders, then, Heinrich sees public service media organisations as the “supernodes’ within an evolving globalized network journalism culture that is characterized by ‘interactive’ practices of newsgathering, production and dissemination” (Heinrich 2008: 1). This central role for public service media emerges largely in response to the pointed question of “who will pay for the resources required by investigative journalists, foreign correspondents and other categories of high-maintenance news-maker?” (McNair 2009: 349): although far from unaffected by the economic struggles of the overall news industry, public service media—relying directly or indirectly on state funding—are somewhat more insulated from the immediate impacts of the troubled revenue models of the commercial news industry. As a result, public service media organisations such as the BBC have become major leaders in journalistic product and process innovation.

Alongside such state-funded models, which are especially popular in European nations with a strong tradition of building state-owned universal infrastructure to address or avert market failure, a range of other models attempt to provide a steady source of funding that is not immediately dependent on the commercial success of the news outlets it supports, and enable those outlets to adopt a strong and independent not-for-profit stance. As Rusbridger explains, for instance,

The Guardian is currently loss-making, but is supported by the Scott Trust, which owns a number of highly profitable businesses. The profits from the non-core businesses are there, according to the trust deed, to support *The Guardian’s* journalism in perpetuity. The idea of readers feeling a kind of ownership of our values and of our editorial content has a more cogent feel to it than if we were in more conventional ownership. (2009: n.p.)

But citizens and their governments will also be required to act in order to safeguard the continued existence and independence of professional journalism from market and political forces. Several news outlets, from small political newsletters to *The Guardian* itself, operate voluntary donation and subscription schemes that draw on the willingness of audiences to financially support quality news outlets even if they are able to freely access their content; such schemes can at least help to subsidise journalistic ventures, even if they are unlikely to fully fund them. Governments, too, could further support the news industry by providing more favourable tax breaks and other initiatives that

ease the financial stresses currently facing the industry, without creating a perception of political interference with the freedom of journalistic coverage. “In the end we have to confront the question of how we subsidize something society needs and where there is evident market failure. For the first time since the Enlightenment, communities are faced with the prospect of living without verifiable sources of news” (Rusbridger 2009: n.p.)—and while, as we have seen throughout this book, social media now play an increasingly important role in news dissemination and engagement and could thus address some of this market failure, journalistic news outlets do remain an important source of the news that circulates here.

Towards a Social News Media Network

Against the backdrop of the preceding discussion, which highlighted as yet unresolved problems with the current business models of existing news operations and pointed only to possible solutions that have not yet been tested outside of a handful of special cases, it may seem surprising that Russell stated confidently in 2009 that “the practice—if not necessarily the profession—of journalism might be seen as heading in the best possible direction” (2009: 366). However, as we have seen time and again, the disruption of the established news industry by digital and social media was not actually caused by a growing apathy towards the news, but rather by the desire of millions of news users to become more actively involved in identifying, sharing, and discussing the news. From this perspective, then,

yes, business models are in flux, jobs are vanishing and the news industry as we have known it is in late-stage critical condition. But as anyone with an internet connection knows, news is thriving. Profits may be down but information is up. The amount of news material produced each day, access to that material, varieties in form and content, participation in the making and disseminating of it—it’s all booming. (Russell 2009: 365)

This assessment continues to hold true today, and as a result professional journalism has become “enclosed, challenged, and partly subsumed by a more expansive sense of news production, which blurs definitions of what constitutes news and its producers” (Revers 2014: 809). Further still, Bell suggests that with the growing centrality of social media as platforms for all forms of news engagement “the existential question of a decade ago ‘who is a journalist?’ ... has been replaced by ‘who is a publisher?’” (2015: 89). Once answer to this,

surely, must now be *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and the many other established and emerging social media spaces through which journalism and news engagement is being conducted in the contemporary media environment, even if—for legal and regulatory reasons—such platforms themselves have so far sought to distance themselves as much as possible from any formal responsibility for the content that their users share here.

But as the flare-up of public debate about the role of ‘fake news’ in the aftermath of the U.K. Brexit decision and the U.S. presidential election in 2016 has demonstrated, as soon as these providers are involved in filtering, moderating, and otherwise algorithmically shaping the content that circulates on their platforms, they also assume a considerable editorial responsibility, and exercise significant power over public debate. This must ultimately also raise questions relating to news media policy:

in Europe there is a highly regulated media environment. Even in the US commercial broadcasters are licensed to operate. By contrast, the largely Silicon Valley-based companies which are growing vast influence in this area remain largely untouched by media regulation in the US (though they are of course subject to copyright, patents, etc.), and strenuously try to avoid it in Europe and other markets. (Bell 2015: 90)

The challenges in this area are immense, however. Not only will the platform providers inevitably use their considerable financial resources and dominant market position to fight any regulations that they believe to be damaging to their commercial interests, but regulators themselves are also unlikely to be able to find the appropriate policy settings if they operate from an understanding of news media that is informed by the structural environments of the mass media age.

Instead, policymakers in this field—but also students of news and journalism, strategists within the industry, and news users—must likely seek to develop a more holistic model that addresses the entire social news media complex as one network of organisational and individual actors that engage, collaborate, and compete with one another on a variety of levels. Ultimately, this is a matter of media literacy: our ability to fully understand the multifaceted and dynamic news environment within which we now operate will continue to be restricted if we continue to apply categorical distinctions between industrial news production and individual news consumption, between professional and citizen journalism, between private and public engagement, that have now outlived their usefulness. We must instead come to regard news as a networked practice involving a wide variety of stakeholders interacting simul-

taneously—rationally and affectively, civically and socially—through a broad range of platforms, channels, formats, and communicative acts. “Journalism will not die out in this environment, because it is needed on so many social, political and cultural levels. Journalism has a future” (McNair 2009: 347), but for better or for worse its future is now as one of a number of news practices conducted alongside each other on a much more level playing field.

This more comprehensive, holistic perspective also avoids an unnecessary conflation of journalism in the narrow, industrial sense with democratic processes. Habermas notes that “some authors consider the political journalism to which we are accustomed [to be] a model that is being phased out”, and suggests that “its loss would rob us of the centerpiece of deliberative politics” (2006: 423)—yet this is true only to the extent that other platforms and spaces for deliberation, including social media, will not be able to fill the gaps opened up by this decline. Some scholars would agree with this pessimistic perspective—Yardi and boyd, for instance, state with some conviction that “Twitter is hardly a medium for deliberative democracy” (2010: 317)—, but for others the picture is not so clear: Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, for instance, instead find that social media “seem to provide adequate and relevant information to reinvigorate the democratic process” (2012: 329).

The fundamental question here, of course, is how we might conceptualise deliberative engagement, and where in the complex network of social news media spaces that we have sketched out here we might look for it. Close up, the picture is likely to be quite different depending on whether we examine a highly antagonistic *Twitter* hashtag addressing a controversial political issue, or the everyday newssharing and casual political discussions unfolding across a loose network of personal publics on *Facebook*, on whether we follow the curated social media stream on a *Guardian* liveblog or the conversations between commenters on a politically partisan propaganda site. But from a systemic perspective, all of these are already part of a wider process of societal deliberation, and to look at any of them in isolation would be to misunderstand the networked social news media structure in which we now find ourselves:

good societies are engaged societies—they are robust and active, dialogical and diverse, freely sharing ideas and information. We might think of this as a ‘networked’ variation on Habermas[s] idealized public sphere ..., featuring the same animated deliberation, but with a network arrangement that is more horizontal (peer-to-peer), and more representative of marginalized voices *vis-à-vis* ‘coffee house’ interests. (Lewis 2012: 848)

Indeed, what the holistic social news media network perspective emphasises is that news engagement and deliberation takes place across all spaces of communication, rather than only in the ‘proper’ deliberative contexts commonly valorised by public sphere theory. As Webster puts it, “there is around the term ‘political public sphere’ (which Habermas identifies as axial to democracy) a whiff of censure towards those who are less than fully abreast of political circumstances and trends”, even though the fact that “people are less than fully engaged in political matters does not mean they are less than wholehearted democrats. It is merely that politics does not consume all of their lives” (2013: 31). The idea of a network of social news media spaces that stretches from the leading news outlets of our day all the way to the personal publics of ordinary social media users instead follows Wright’s demand for a “renewed focus ... on the informal, everyday political talk that occurs online. Such talk is crucial to civic life and democratic health more generally” (Wright 2012: 7).

This approach realises that in the social news media network, news engagement and political debate “becomes embedded in other contexts in much the same way as face-to-face political discussion might take place in the context of an office, a vehicle, a sporting event, a meal, a pub, or through other public activities. This makes political discourse an extension of other realms of ongoing discourse” (Himmelboim *et al.* 2013: 158), and effectively rescues it from the “political junkies” (Coleman 2003) and other usual suspects who had become most centrally identified with news and political discussion during the late mass media age and the first wave of citizen journalism. This demoticisation is not without its challenges, of course; it can—and as recent developments have shown, frequently does—lead to the questioning of established authorities and the undermining of existing hierarchies of agenda-setting and issue-framing. But however painful and confronting such disruptions may at times be, especially for the news industry itself, “democracy refers to something beyond formal structures and procedures” (Dahlgren 2014: 192). We must trust not simply in its inherent resilience against propagandists and demagogues, but instead in the ability of our societies to build on the powerful tools for information and deliberation provided to us by the new social news media network in order to protect and improve our democratic system.

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