

Introduction

“The Dailyplanet.com”

Why We Must Save Journalism So that Journalism Can Save the World

Three scenarios convinced me that my trade had changed forever. The first was standing in my TV newsroom trying to decide whether to show the public a series of cartoons published in a Danish newspaper that had caused riots around the world. It was an acute ethical dilemma that raised profound political and editorial questions that could not be answered in the 45 minutes we had before we went to air. The second was standing next to the River Nile with *Channel 4 News* presenter Jon Snow in the run up to the G8 meeting of world leaders at Gleneagles in Scotland in July 2005. We were broadcasting the program live every night from Uganda in an effort to give the African perspective on world events. We took our state-of-the-art Outside Broadcast paraphernalia on the back of a huge flat-bed truck to locations such as a remote Ugandan village. There we found children were still dying of malaria because of a lack of something as cheap as anti-mosquito nets. I got off the plane from Africa that week and had to rush in to the studio to edit an extended program dominated by the bombing of London by British-born Muslims. The wrecked bus and smoking underground stations were all minutes from where I lived and worked. Three stories: the Cartoons, Africa, and the London Bombings. All with extraordinary resonances and in some way all linked. Something told me that these stories and the way we were telling them were quite different from anything that had been possible or predictable even just a few years ago. When I joined ITN's *Channel 4 News* in 1999 the newsroom had only a couple of Internet terminals and mobile phones were still rationed. When I left to set up a new journalism think-tank at the London School of Economics in 2006 these had become the basic tools of all journalists, including those I met in Uganda. But more important than

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the change in technology was the new interconnectedness I detected. I was convinced that journalism was at a “tipping point.” This book is my manifesto for the media as a journalist but also as a citizen of the world. As a journalist you are constantly being told that the news media have enormous power to shape society and events, to change lives and history. So why are we so careless as a society about the future of journalism itself?

It is very difficult to take anything like an objective view of the news media. People who work within it are prone to fierce opinions about the state of the industry, based on their own aspirations and experience. They have the perspective of their particular sector of the profession: broadcast, print, or online. There is also the distortion of their specialist subject: politics, the arts, sport, or foreign affairs. And a journalist will always be very much of their time: the richly resourced Golden Age of TV in the 1970s, the heyday of tabloid newspapers in the 1980s; or the pioneering idealism of the Internet in the 1990s. And, how on earth, do you compare the experience of a journalist working on a news website in Seattle, say, with that of Galima Bukharbaeva, a journalist in Uzbekistan trying to report the Andijan massacre?¹ Journalists are supposed to strive for objectivity and yet, ask them about their own working lives and their business and you will usually get a partial perspective, a personal view. Possibly even a slightly tired and emotional one.

So why not turn to the people that journalists deal with: the politicians, the advertisers, and the pundits? Or even, why not turn to those people that journalists constantly worry about and yet rarely meet: the reader, the viewer, or the listener? All these groups have very strong and incredibly subjective views of the news media that make the average journalist’s opinion look like an unsullied snowfall of neutral and studied reflection. Generally speaking, the public or the audience tends to have a view of the news media based on the last thing they consumed or the last thing done to them by the news media. So a reader tends to talk about the news media based on the paper or magazine she reads (or the dreadful newspapers that she wouldn’t be seen dead with on the train), while bankers, politicians, shopkeepers, or artists tend to judge the news media by the way their business is reported. Thus, the financier despairs at journalists’ failure to understand why their astronomical profits are for the greater good of the economy. The retailer can’t fathom the journalists’ incapacity to stand up for the principle of “caveat emptor.” The artist despairs at the reviewer’s personal vindictiveness and philistine inability to comprehend the truly revolutionary nature of their work. And as for the politician . . . well, funnily enough, they do despise and resent the work of the news media, but they

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also recognize kindred spirits. Political and journalistic hacks share a lack of time, an adaptable morality, and a love/hate relationship with the public, power, and the truth.

So I am afraid it is back to the journalist this time to try to understand what is happening to our news media. I do not pretend to be objective. I never really have as a journalist. I strive towards fairness, accuracy, and thoroughness, but I refuse to pretend that I am merely a cipher, a neutral medium through which facts and opinions pass unhindered to the public. So let me set out briefly the basis for my assessment of journalism and its future. As will become clear, this is not a history of journalism. Nor is it an attempt to survey its current state in an exhaustive manner. That is a task which, at the moment, is like writing on water. Of course, the past and present shape journalism and its future as well. But what I want to understand is the editorial forces that currently create what I insist can be called “good” journalism. And when we talk about contemporary journalism we mean, in effect, digital journalism. This book is above all an essay about the politics of journalism, its impact, and its potential for facilitating change. What drives this book is a conviction that journalism is at an unique moment in human history.

I hold these truths about journalism to be self-evident:

- News information has never been more plentiful and journalism has never been more abundant.
- Journalists have never had more resources to reach people, anytime, anyplace, anywhere – and the audience has unprecedented accessibility to the news media.
- Journalism has never been more necessary to the functioning of our lives as individuals and societies and for the healthy functioning of global social, economic, and political relationships.
- There is the technological, educational, and economic potential for a vast expansion of journalism’s impact and for that impact to be beneficial.

This happy set of assertions is largely to do with new technologies, although it is also about other global trends such as political and market liberalization, the growth in education, and the emancipation of social groups such as women. All this has contributed to an unprecedented expansion of a *relatively* free news media around the world. For all the set-backs for journalists in places like Russia or Uganda, the current state of the world’s news media and the dissemination of topical information is still better than it was

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in the past. And, critically, the potential is far greater. However, we are at a crucial moment. There is nothing inevitable about the present superfluity of news information. There is no guarantee that this relatively beneficent state will continue or progress. There is nothing preordained about the virtues that will flow from it. Quite the opposite. There are great threats to the quality and potential of the news media. The values of openness, plurality, and quality are all contestable and contested. Sometimes this threat comes from familiar forces such as commercialization or political authoritarianism. Sometimes it will be new problems such as the fragmentation that choice can bring trailing in its wake. But I do not think that complaints about the passing of some imagined golden age of quality journalism are a sufficient critique. My fears are based on politics, not nostalgia. I strongly believe that in the rush for the digital development of journalism we must retain the values that sustain liberal journalism as a healthy part of a flourishing society. We should not allow fear to determine the future.

Journalism matters. We live in a much more interconnected world where information is ever-more critical to our lives. And it is journalism that conveys that data and allows us to debate its significance. It is always hard to pinpoint exact moments or to detail precise occasions when journalism has altered the course of events, rather than simply narrating them. It is nigh on impossible to separate out media impact from the general conditions of events. Take one example. It appears that the media failed to expose the failings of the intelligence that supported the Bush/Blair case for war in Iraq. Was this because they were impotent, incompetent, or deceived? We do know that if the media had exposed the flimsiness and partialness of that case earlier, it would have been a very different political scenario and possibly a different chain of events. My point is that while it may be difficult to measure, it is hard to deny the growing importance of the media in global events.

Yet at the same time journalism is itself undergoing profound changes for social, economic, and technological reasons. Some of these changes offer an opportunity for journalism to do much more. In fact, these changes offer the potential for a whole new type of journalism. In this book I will outline what I call Networked Journalism. It is a new way of practicing journalism that is already becoming evident. It is a reflection of emerging realities. But it is also an opportunity to transform the ethics as well as the efficacy of journalism. Networked Journalism offers the chance for the news media to enhance its social role. It is a recognition that mainstream professional journalists must share the very process of production. Networked Journalism includes citizen journalism, interactivity, open sourcing, wikis, blogging,

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and social networking, not as add-ons, but as an essential part of news production and distribution itself. By changing the way that journalists work and the way journalists relate to society, I think we can sustain “good” journalism and, in its turn, journalism can be a greater force for good. It is the only way for journalism to survive the coming storm. Even in this time of plenty there are signs of a change in the weather. Indeed, the clouds have already broken. The immediate future brings a multitude of threats to good journalism, and they are social, political, cultural, and commercial.

This is an “environmental” crisis, which some compare to physical threats such as climate change:

I want to endorse the idea of the media as an environment, an environment which provides at the most fundamental level the resources we all need for the conduct of everyday life. It follows that such an environment may be or may become, or may not be or may not become, polluted. (Professor Roger Silverstone, *Media and Morality*)²

What Silverstone was suggesting here is that journalism could be a catalyst for reform in the way we live that will help address many of the world’s problems – like global warming. But it could itself be a victim of developments that could render impotent its power to communicate change. A failure of understanding among people now has never been more hazardous.

Globally the apparently booming news media business is showing signs of ill-health. Some of the symptoms are obvious. There is the decline in the newspaper industry in the developed world. There is the concentration of ownership in mainstream media in the West. There is the increasing facility with which everyone from *Google* bosses to Chinese politicians are controlling the Internet. There is the evidence that repressive regimes and anti-democratic forces from the Russian mafia to Islamist extremists are proving very successful at reducing freedom of speech. And what kind of journalism are we producing in such abundance? Is the world of cyber-journalism going to be about citizen journalism or amateur pornography?

I estimate that we have five years – perhaps ten – to save journalism so that journalism can save the world. Ultimately, of course, issues like climate change and inter-faith frictions are going to be dealt with by politicians and the public, not by journalists. But think of a world where we try doing anything of great consequence *without* an open and reliable news media. Think of an issue, like the heating of our planet, with all its complexity and its essentially global nature. Then think of how much easier it will be to face

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up to that issue if we have a Networked Journalism that embraces a new compact of mutuality with a cosmopolitan, interactive “audience.” This is my vision of a kind of journalism for this century. I know all about the grubby realities of journalism, be it in a sophisticated newsroom in London, in an African village, or the vast cities of India. But I also know that journalism offers great hope for all those places.

This book will first of all set out a way of understanding where we are. Like travelers in a landscape we are familiar with our immediate surroundings. But as the pace of our journey quickens it is harder to see the topography of journalism. The ground is moving beneath our feet and we will soon find ourselves in a strange country. I can’t describe everything, but I want to suggest that we have now passed through the first phase of coming to terms with New Media. I will take a more conceptual approach to describing how business models and journalism have adapted. And while I take a Western perspective³ I want to indicate how other parts of the world also face seismic shifts. For I believe that Networked Journalism is ultimately most important when seen as a global concept that can offer a new paradigm for international journalism.

Key to understanding the potential as well as the process of this change is this idea of Networked Journalism. This is already becoming a fact of life, not just in the digitalized newsrooms of the West, but also throughout the world. New technological realities like mobile phones and forces such as political liberalization are giving the public a greater role in the reporting of their worlds. I will show how the very nature of journalism is changing – again. Not for the first time, the way that we report, analyze, and comment upon events is being transformed. These big moments are often technologically driven. Printing, the telegraph, telephony, television, satellites, and now the Internet all changed the way journalism has been practiced. But it is also about a less deferential, better-educated public. I do not know if this is a cultural change akin to the Reformation or the Enlightenment. But it seems to me that a post-modern, post-industrial, multi-faith world demands a different kind of understanding through its news media.

Networked Journalism is a description and an aspiration. It reaffirms the value of the core functions of journalism. It celebrates the demand for journalism and its remarkable social utility. But it insists on a new process and fresh possibilities. It means a kind of journalism where the rigid distinctions of the past, between professional and amateur, producer and product, audience and participation, are deliberately broken down. It embraces permeability and multi-dimensionality. Networked Journalism is also a way

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of bridging the semantic divide between Old and New Media. In this book I will continue to refer to New Media and Mainstream Media as useful ways to describe forces that shape the industry. But, in truth, as Tom Armitage⁴ has said, a better term is “Next Media,” because everyone will be using the “new” technologies at some point soon. Networked Journalism is a catch-all for many types of more connected media practice. But not all journalism will be networked. Some “amateurs” will remain resolutely apart from the “professionals.” And much of the news media will appear relatively untransformed. However, the way that social and technological changes are opening up new audiences, distribution methods and communities demands a new approach. Networked Journalism is one way to describe it and practice it.

The ultimate proof is politics. I will look at the impact of New Media upon the reporting of politics and see if Networked Journalism is having any impact on the way that we relate to the manner in which power is communicated. I will look particularly at the most advanced frontiers in this war between “netroot” activists, journalists, and politicians in the United States. I will then look at the peculiarly intense world of British Westminster political bloggers. But I also want to see whether Networked Journalism and new technology offer a new paradigm for media in places like Africa which traditionally have been seen as still struggling to develop conventional media markets. Of course, that is a relatively narrow definition of politics as being about journalism and governance. There is also a much wider agenda of media and civic engagement that future journalism must respond to as well.

And there is no greater global challenge to journalism than its ability to deal with the complex narratives of terror and community. You do not have to believe in simplistic notions of clashing civilizations to understand that ideas are now as powerful as economics in driving conflict and fomenting frictions. What effect is journalism having as it struggles with these hugely difficult subjects? And as these forces are increasingly mediated through digital forums, can Networked Journalism offer a new compact between different cultures as well as between the journalist and the public?

Networked Journalism offers a solution to another challenge facing journalism. If the news media is to be able to communicate these diverse debates and understand these novel stories then it must be more diverse in itself. By that I mean the kind of people who work in journalism, their class, ethnicity and backgrounds. But I also mean the different approaches they take and the variety of styles, subjects, and stories they tell. At present there is a lack of diversity in journalism. This is at a time when improved education levels and easy Internet access to communications platforms means that the

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news media should be more diverse than ever before. Instead it threatens to be thin and fragmented rather than pluralistic and rich. There is a problem of the diversity of the people in journalism. But there is also the problem of increasingly formulaic, unreflective, uncreative journalism itself – partly as a consequence of technological and economic pressures. Networked journalism offers greater diversity of content and producers if it is thought through properly and imaginatively.

And finally I want to reappraise the idea of Media Literacy. There is no hope for Networked Journalism if the practitioners and the public are not equipped for the task. This is partly about the skills of journalists. This is a particularly big issue in less-developed economies and less-developed civil societies but the need for greater media literacy applies globally. For Networked Journalism to become a reality *anywhere* it is about the public. It is about giving the people – formerly known as the audience – the skills and the resources to be participants in the process. To teach people how to take part in the news media, and to understand how it works. This is much more than the practical task of media studies. It is also about giving people the resources to adopt a critical engagement with journalism. And it is a political education, too. Journalists and the public need to have a sense of their responsibilities, as well as their rights. I firmly believe that, ultimately, journalists – including Networked Journalists – must have a sense of what is objective and what is the truth. This means that while they will be more engaged with society in the process of journalism, they must retain the final, inner arbitration of the ethics of their work. It will be a very difficult balance to strike. It will be much harder to define boundaries and draw up codes of conduct. In the end journalists don't have a choice. Their work will become more networked whether they like it or not. Our task as news media practitioners is to think through the consequences and work harder and more imaginatively to exploit the opportunities. That way, the public, politicians, and journalists can realize the potential role of the digital news media in promoting good governance and development across the world. Then we will have a media with "super" powers. But before journalism can save the world, we must save journalism.