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The Theoretical Perceived Transgressing Role and Identity of Contemporary Journalism: Revolution or Evolution?

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Abstract. Journalism as a definition emerged more than two centuries ago and became actively promulgated in the study of media by core Western countries. Meanwhile, this term is often interpreted too freely, the term and practice are transgressing in the 21st century. This is a theoretical paper that seeks to understand how the role of journalism and mass media have mutated and why as interpreted by scholars. On the one hand, it is followed with a lack of its complex essence is hindered by contemporary political, social, economic and technological challenges that occur in the way of its development. It is caught between the utopian and idealistic theoretical and conceptual projections that are intended to be the basis of its social capital and legitimacy and the practical dilemmas and hardships (economic and political) of the contemporary era that shift the profession away from the aforementioned ideals.

Keywords: journalism and media transgressions, mediatization, globalization, politicization, commercialization

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Теоретическое восприятие трансгрессивной роли и идентичности современной журналистики: революция или эволюция?

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Аннотация. Журналистика как понятие и одновременно ярко выраженное явление социальной действительности возникло более двух столетий назад и с тех пор активно используется в академической литературе применительно к изучению СМИ в различных странах. Между тем сам термин «журналистика» сегодня нередко трактуется слишком широко, что делает его неопределенным, а подчас и выводит его за рамки научного пространства. Цель данной статьи — понять, как именно трансформировалась в наше время роль средств массовой информации и журналистики и почему они трактуются так, а не иначе. С одной стороны, упрощенные трактовки становятся возможными вследствие целого ряда социально-политических, экономических и технологических вызовов, с которыми сталкивается современная медиасфера и которые влияют на журналистскую профессию. С другой стороны, восприятие журналистики подвержено влиянию бесконечных иллюзий, возникающих в современную эпоху и только усиливающихся с ее развитием. Все это подчас приводит теорию журналистики к «состоянию неопределенности» как среди теоретиков, так и практиков, что выхолащивает ее сущность и напрямую влияет на эффективность ее практической реализации.

Ключевые слова: журналистика, медиатизация, глобализация, политизация, коммерциализация

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Introduction

While not ignoring the basic fact that national media systems are often quite different in terms of their history, culture, current political priorities and law being one way or another connected with the relationship between the governmental institutions and media themselves. There are some common challenges that journalism has been facing, especially in the wake of the globalization of media and journalism through ownership and international editions of national media outlets (e.g. *The Guardian* and the *Huffington Post*). When approaching these challenges, researchers tend to pick a narrow selection of them, but they all fully relate to political management affecting national media systems [43. P. 31]. This can be a national political system that originates the state of the media, for instance such one that historically evolved in Russia [28] or specific representations of cultural, legal or economic priorities [27. P. 281–292] or political, historical and social influences on journalism [8. P. 1–40, 35].

It is unlikely to deny that these signs influence identity, and definition of journalism itself [17; 20. P. 17, 6]. At the same time, the set of components that determine the development of journalism in modern world is vast and diverse that it often makes it difficult to understand the essence of this profession. This review paper seeks to take a broad look at the essence of contemporary journalism and several main factors that affect this field of social activity across boundaries as noted by academic scholars. We seek to understand how precisely the challenges and opportunities are affecting the perceived mission and role of journalism as a communicator in terms of the modern mediatization reality.

Journalism as practiced today seems to be different from the initial concept of journalism, mainly due to a very diverse understanding of its essence by the academic community and its professional practice. There are therefore two pivotal questions, to narrow our inquiry. Firstly, what are those environmental factors that influence the academic perception of journalism's identity, role and mission? And secondly, given current media environment, how the process of journalism change can be understood: as an evolution or a revolution?

Journalism as an academic definition and a professional activity is often involving set practices and values working towards outcomes, such as the independent pursuit of accurate information about current or recent events that are relevant and affect the publics [7. P. 36]. Transgression is the process of modernity that can bring about changes in the boundaries of institutions and practices [5], which in this case not only involves the academic understanding of journalism, but also the professional practice. Yet the current changes occurring in journalism are being presented as a threat to the idealised academic notions of what journalism

“should” be and how it is theoretically and conceptually defined. We view journalism as a carrier of mediatization of contemporary life, and this present article is intended to be a comparative study of the various influences and effects on journalism and hence the function of qualitative functions of mediatization.

A journalistic text, initially has always been understood through the written word or image to awaken in society the pursuit for truth and justice [16. P. 18], and a more contemporary investigation into the role played by emotions [42]. The problems and challenges faced by journalism and journalists are simultaneously both old and new, which become more acute and pronounced as the distance between its rhetorical foundational values and contemporary practice continues to grow. Academic literature and reflections in journalism point to this critical dilemma, but often without a solution for an exit.

Western journalism has put on the agenda the concept of being the “fourth estate” [40]. The pivotal idea construed initially, from the first steps of media evolution, was that the journalism profession should act independently from the state. The separation of journalism from formal political institutions was extremely significant from the very beginning as its theoretical background and influenced all the subsequent development of this field of activity. At the same time, in practice this was initially not an easy task, taking into account that journalism could never exist outside the socio-political space, which has always had a significant impact on it [22].

Method and approach

Internet-based searches were made using the key search terms: “challenges to journalism,” “evolving journalism,” and “changing journalism.” A snowballing technique was applied to the relevant hits in the search results, when an appropriate article was found, an additional search was conducted of the content that was recommended under “related” or “recommended” articles. The approaches to textual analysis include content analysis (quantifications of different elements in text), argumentation analysis (the structure of argumentation used), and the qualitative analysis of ideas in the content (with a focus on values, norms and practices of journalism) [3. P. 7–9]. The combination of these approaches is expected to yield results on the ontology (what exists) and epistemology (knowledge and how we ‘know’ things) of academic and mass mediated textual depictions in a literature review of the evolution versus revolution in journalism. The objects of study include power, people, norms and values, journalism and politics and so forth [3. P. 1–2]. The academic and popular texts then contextualise the relationships according to perceived and projected power in the constructed social world’s order.

This shall be conducted within the frame work of Schutz on social phenomenology [34], being an example of studying social interaction that involves two senses of understanding interpretive understanding. The first sense

occurs where people interpret or make sense of the phenomena of the everyday world. The second sense of understanding concerns generating “ideal” types from which to interpret or describe the phenomenon being investigated.

Defining identity, missions and roles of journalism

Initially conceptual ideas of journalism carry with it expectations associated with the notion of it as the “fourth estate”. McNair [26. P. 19–20] defines the function of the “fourth estate” as “an independent institutional source of political and cultural power which monitors and scrutinises the actions of the powerful in other spheres.” This is tied to classical liberal theory that postulates the press as a defender of public interests and a watchdog on the workings of the government [12. P. 84, 14]. One of the popular myths of journalism is its supposed power to influence people and events. However, the presumed power is increasingly being called into question with some saying it is merely a public record of events as they unfold [37]. Simultaneously, it is impossible to deny that if journalism affects the audience, which it does it not from the calculating viewpoint but rather from moral sentiments.

There is also a great deal of myth and symbolic power associated with journalism as the “fourth estate”. The elements of journalism as defined by Kovach and Rosenstiel [22] include: journalism’s first obligation is to the truth; its first loyalty is to citizens; its essence is a discipline of verification; its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover; it must serve as an independent monitor of power; it must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise; it must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant; it must keep the news comprehensive and in proportion; its practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience; citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news [21]. From an academic and practitioner’s perspective, these obligations are an ideal conceptualisation of journalism’s professional and moral duty to society. As such, there are expectations and benchmarks set in terms of values and norms to be adhered to, which can create confusion and contradictions.

The exact meaning of ‘objectivity’ with regards to journalism is deeply problematic due to the term being used very often. How to measure this definition and who is going to be a judge about this context? “Objectivity has long been advanced to legitimise journalism practice, even while the journalism profession struggled to articulate objectivity as a norm” [19. P. 289]. Yet, the 20th century, driven by an economic model pitching the “news product” to mass audiences at an affordable price has created a specific type of journalism [9]. Furthermore, scarcity of resources in the early broadcasting era solidified the idea of a necessary separation between news and opinion [30. P. 569, 32]. This necessitates understanding the separation and implications of commentary, opinion, analysis and facts.

However, the advent of cable news and social media has had a dramatic effect on the information sphere by making obsolete the issues of scarcity and creating an environment where almost anyone can be a producer as well as a consumer of information [4; 13; 41].

The act of communication is vital to not only being human, but also for guiding social interaction. As such, it generates several dilemmas, one of most important of which is its morality. This implies the pursuit of ethical practice insofar as doing the ‘right thing’ and an adherence to a certain social duty and moral responsibility [2. P. 2–3]. Currently there is an increase split of perception on how journalism explains its public duty and how the public interprets their actions. Often journalism is deemed to be an essential element of a healthy democracy due to formal isolation of the former from state institutions that was established initially. What we have nowadays is, following Fenton [10. P. 31], is “the prevailing dominance of state legislatures but not state-bound due to globalization” [10. P. 31].

One of the global trends observed has been the incremental concentration worldwide of mass media ownership into fewer and fewer hands. As such, this trend has a potentially negative effect on transparency and accountability in a political system as Baker fairly argues [1. P. 6–37]. It also potentially weakens the effects of supposedly insular ‘national’ media systems as media outlets become parts of global corporate empires. This in turn, negatively influences the professional standards of journalism, and manifests in a number of tangible ways within its content and behaviour which is becoming more politically and economically biased.

Traditionally journalism was studied from the point of view of government, corporate or educational perspectives. However, what is necessary is to look at it from journalistic perspectives, because there is no journalism without journalists [29]. Academics can be forgetful that journalism cannot exist without feedback from the audience, expressed in people’s opinions that can regularly emerge in the press or on air. Without it we have a right to raise a question of the gradual death of professional journalism [24. P. 3–10].

However, there are different opinions. McNair [25] declared that journalism is not heading for extinction, but rather an evolution, and added to this point that this has always been a priority for journalism to undergo changes. This fits with the views of other academics that speak of a renewal of “neo-journalism” being adaptive to the changing environment [15]. Simultaneously these changes are sometimes referred to as being in a “crisis” [23, 33]. At times there is also a tendency to look back to perceived “golden” periods in history as a guiding force to overcome the ‘crisis’ and thus prevent any evolution. A ‘crisis’ is construed as being an extraordinary event, something not within the realm of what can be considered ordinary or business as usual.

Meanwhile, these transformations do not really account for why the changes are currently occurring. Andrew Fowler attributes the “decline in journalism” to the following reasons: 1) mainstream media disconnect (in terms quality/relevance

of information product and declining public confidence); 2) the loss of money and power by news media; 3) failing business models; 4) acting as echo chambers for powerful interests [38]. Thereby, he stresses a dependence on journalism on real circumstances while ignoring strict limits of the profession. In this regard, Tumber [40. P. 95] also explains that journalism is “attacked” by two distinct sources/areas: 1) pressure from owners and media conglomerates, which has exacerbated traditional problems with professional news output; and 2) new forms of political and government communication with the public. In meeting these challenges, different media outlets have attempted different solutions to overcoming the challenges and obstacles, which some observers describe as a “splintering” of the fourth estate from a model that was viewed as being homogenous [34].

Conclusion

Journalists and journalism are important components of the mediatization of society as they enable consumers the possibility to access events and people through narrated and communicated information, which enables the public to experience these indirectly. Journalism has built its image and reputation as being an indispensable public institution that functions as a public good through the concept and term the fourth estate, which in turn is a means to accumulate social capital and a sense of legitimacy for their role and mission in society that is expressed through a branded identity. However, it is not something that remains static and unchanging with time and circumstances.

The key underlying conceptual foundation of Western journalism, the fourth estate, is not only an academic concept that describes its function and mission, but also a professional (pragmatic) promise to various stakeholders in society (the public, politicians, business community and so forth). However, this ideal has come under increasing pressure concerning with it still remains an actual contemporarily practiced standard or not, within academic discussions on the matter. This does not mean that the profession of journalism is prepared to rhetorically set aside one of its foundational myths, even if it has been taking a battering in the field of public and academic perception and discussion. The reason being is that the ideal of the fourth estate is much more than a brand or a practice, it is also a professional identity that defines its mission and goals.

There are a host of weaknesses and threats in the wider informational realm, especially in terms of pressures and influences from political and economic interests, which threaten the viability of the fourth estate and how journalism is narrated in terms of its role and mission in society in academic debates. Various academics have identified the various and increasing influences of powerful political and business interests on news tone and content, which is not something that is recent or groundbreaking. It has, however, created an evolution in the debate and characterisation of journalism, away from the ideals of the fourth estate towards “interpretive” journalism and churnalism. These represent a shift

away from the desired ideal towards something that is working much less in the public good.

In addition to the weaknesses and threats coming from political and economic interests, there are additional weaknesses that are derived from a lack of clarity and imprecise or broadly interpreted values that guide the work and ethics of journalism and journalists. Journalism has gone through an evolution of different key guiding ethical philosophies in their work, directed towards such utopian ideals as “the truth” or for “objectivity” in the production of news content. One of the pivotal problems that has emerged is that these ideals of best ethical practice are not clearly and sharply defined in terms of the realistic practical operationalisation. Consequently, these ideals remain utopian in the face of dystopian practical realities of a non-ideal physical world that subverts these theoretical and conceptual cognitive constructions.

As a result of the interactions and reactions between the cognitive imaginations of the ideal form of journalism and the physical realities of the forces that shape and affect the profession there is a sense of transgression. The institutional boundaries and practices of the profession are under a great deal of strain between the ideal imaginations and expectations and the less than ideal actual practices transgress those hopes and desires. Each of the incremental steps has proven to be an evolution in the identity, role and mission of journalism in contemporary society, but the cumulative effect of the parts is a revolution from the original academic vision and conception.

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