

# CHARTING THE EVOLUTION OF JOURNALISM: THE HORIZON OF DEMOCRACY

Peter Dahlgren

PREGLEDNI RAD / UDK 070.19:004.087, 070:321.7, 070.422 / PRIMLJENO: 14.10.2010.

**ABSTRACT** *The contemporary developments within journalism raise many issues about its future. Working with a rather wide brush, this article looks at some key factors that are shaping journalism at present. The author sketches some general parameters that apply to most Western societies; the perspective draws especially the US, where the crisis has been extensively analyzed. Every national context, however, has its own version of journalism's evolution. The author emphasizes what he sees as being journalism's fundamental raison d'être, namely to facilitate and enhance democracy. This includes nourishing its norms, values and practices; journalism must touch us, inspire us, and contribute to our daily democratic horizons. The article begins with a quick glimpse at the various structural factors that are shaping the transformation of journalism. From there, the author probes some of the contemporary technological developments and their impact on journalism, and looks at how the audiences for journalism are changing, along with their roles as citizens and consumers. In the final section the article explores the intensifying multi-perspective character of the emerging journalistic landscape, and some of its implications.*

## KEY WORDS

JOURNALISM, CRISIS OF; JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY; JOURNALISM AND NEW TECHNOLOGY; JOURNALISM, PROFESSIONALS; JOURNALISM, AUDIENCES FOR

## Author Note

**Peter Dahlgren** :: Lund University, Sweden :: peter.dahlgren@kom.lu.se

*A few sections of this text appear, in different form, in author's book Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009, and in my chapter 'The troubling evolution of journalism', in Barbie Zelizer, ed. (2009) The Changing Face of Journalism. London: Routledge.*

Journalism appears to have reached an historical juncture, one that we can find very troubling. At the same time, we gain no clarity, we can find no fruitful way forward, if we simply lapse into alarmism. The present situation is very complex, and we are still very much in the middle of things, trying to sort out what is going. Moreover, there is no one, unified story about journalism – there are many, having to do with different countries, different genres, different media. Journalism is not about to vanish from human civilization, but it is fair to say that it is facing major crises. In this essay I will try to elucidate some key developments within journalism, not so much from a professional or practical point of view, but from a broader, societal perspective.

I am working here with a rather wide brush, trying to sketch some general parameters that apply to most Western societies. My main referent will be the US case, where the crisis is perhaps most acute among the older, established democracies. However, the newer democracies, for example in post-communist Eastern and Central Europe, manifest much of the same logic in terms of economic pressures. They also have to varying degrees the problem of not having a long liberal press tradition to refer to, and in some cases can still feel remnants of the authoritarian past in terms of how power holders deal with journalism and journalists.

At bottom, I emphasize what I see as being journalism's fundamental *raison d'être*, namely to facilitate and enhance democracy. Democracy, however, is not just an abstract or formal system, but must also embody a way of life, whose norms, values and practices impact on everyday contexts. From that perspective, the role of journalism extends beyond the basic goals of providing correct and relevant information: it must also touch us, inspire us, and nourish our daily democratic horizons. Journalism needs to promote civic cultures. This is of course a tall order – especially in those societies where such traditions have historically been weak – but nothing less will do.

I begin with a quick glimpse at the various structural factors that are shaping the transformation of journalism. From there I probe some of the contemporary technological factors and their impact on journalism. Thereafter I look at how the audiences for journalism are changing, along with their roles as citizens and consumers. In the final section I explore the intensifying multi-perspective character of the emerging journalistic landscape, and some of its implications.

## THE FADING OF CLASSICAL JOURNALISM?

As an institutionalized set of practices located within the media, journalism evolves with the transformation of society, culture, and media institutions. Its traditions are not just predicated on professional practices, but also on the institutional and material circumstances that frame them. Already two decades ago authors were asserting that the 'high modern' or 'classical' paradigm of journalism was waning. (Altheide and Snow, 1991; Hallin, 1992). This historical mode took shape early in the previous century and based itself on traditional liberal ideals about democracy and citizenship.

In this framework, mass media journalism is seen as providing reports and analyses of real events and processes, and contributing to defining the public agenda. Through its narratives, classical journalism lays claim to accurate and impartial renderings of a reality that exists independently of its telling, and which is external to the institutions of journalism. It is aimed at a heterogeneous citizenry that basically shares the same public culture, and citizens use journalism as a resource for participation in the politics and culture of society. Journalism in this mode serves as an integrative force and as a common forum for debate. Even if journalism in the real world has never fully operated in this way, this paradigmatic normative model of how it should be has guided our understanding and expectations of it, and provided criteria on which to base criticism.

## THE MOTORS OF CHANGE

Journalism is embedded in the media industries, and today these industries are following the general patterns found in the global economy. Massive media empires have emerged on a global scale, concentrating ownership in the hands of a decreasing number of mega-corporations. As the commercial imperatives of the media have hardened over the past few decades, the delicate balance between public responsibility and private profit has been steadily tipping in favor of the latter. Within journalism and its media environment we have by now become familiar with the harsh market imperatives that increasingly bulldoze over journalistic values, and what this means in terms of allocation of resources, staffing, news values, and so forth.

Also, pressures from political power centers often raise issues of bias, or of a lack of political nerve in defining the topics and events to be covered. There are many variations here, given the diversity of models of democracy and media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). If the example of Berlusconi's Italy is extreme in terms of the Western democracies, there are innumerable other problematic examples of inadequate journalistic independence and initiative. In the US the failure of the mainstream media to critically challenge the Bush administration's efforts to justify the Iraq war is well known. On more mundane, everyday level, critical commentaries in all democracies often take journalism to task for being more of a lapdog than a watchdog in its relationship with political power.

Further, the rise of an array of new genres in the media that in various ways compete with journalism also contributes to putting mainstream journalism in a defensive position. For example, the very definition of what should be deemed journalism (as well as who is and is not a journalist) becomes cloudy, as journalism's boundaries become challenged on several fronts by public relations, advocacy political communication, non-news information, ad hoc or citizen journalism, user-generated content, and not least various strands of popular culture. This leads to difficulties even within journalism education: what profession and job market are they preparing students for, what are the suitable qualifications, and professional identity?

Journalism has always had its (necessary) critics, but in these changing circumstances, it appears increasingly demoralized and powerless, as expressed by journalists themselves as well as academic critics. In journalism as elsewhere in the cultural industries, the intensification of the drive to maximize profits impacts all the more on the social relations between technical innovators, corporate owners, government, and citizens in ways that are detrimental to democratic ideals. News and the functions of information distribution end up the hands of businesspeople and managers who have little exposure to or engagement with the traditions and ethics of journalism; the critical watchdog function and the protection of freedom of expression are not part of the cultural traditions of these actors.

This media concentration not only reduces diversity, it contracts the potential domain of critical journalism. Journalists employed by a large mega-corporations will generally avoid topics that might damage the wide-ranging interests of the conglomerate. When they don't, when they tread onto sensitive terrain, the consequences can be devastating for their careers (See the collection of accounts of the dire personal experiences among journalists in Borjesson, 2002). C. Edwin Baker (2002; 2006) argues that relying on market forces in the media industries is turning into a disaster for journalism and democracy. Moreover, such policies do not even 'give the people what they want': people's tastes are not primordial, and can be gradually habituated to what is being offered.

### SPIN: JOURNALISM AS A JOINT PRODUCTION

Journalism is a part of the broader domain of political communication, and the "field" of journalism, as Bourdieu expresses it (see Benson and Neveu, 2005), is shaped by its interface with other spheres of institutionalized activity. Today we can observe an ever deepening pattern of pluralization and specialization in regard to the institutional actors that shape the contours of journalism. In fact, a good deal of journalism originates with non-journalists: an emerging stratum of professional communication mediators are altering the way journalism gets done and the way political communication takes place. An expanding occupational group of spin doctors, PR experts, media advisors, and political consultants using the techniques of advertising, market research, public relations and opinion analysis have entered the fray to help political actors and economic elites shape their communication strategies (Louw, 2005).

Public relations in the commercial realm has a long history, but in recent decades it has become ever more entwined with political communication, thereby further blurring the distinctions between journalism and non-journalism. We encounter on a daily basis a variety of media and genres that contain political messages or information of one kind or another: political communication is no longer neatly bounded, and the position of journalism in relation it becomes problematic. While journalism may still help us to critically identify spin, it is increasingly implicated in fostering it.

These spin specialists take seriously the fact that the communication of politics in today's world involves different media and encompasses many different actors, contexts,

cultural frameworks, power relationships and communicative styles. Moreover, spin tactics can also be used by the less powerful, opening the doors for marginal movements to get their messages onto the public agenda via their incorporation into journalistic coverage. However, in the long run there is the question of the impact of superior resources and influence in determining whose messages become adopted by journalists; an environmental group is quite the underdog against a large corporate adversary. Also, while the professionalisation of political communication often helps various power holders and special interest groups to pursue their goals, it tends to take a manipulative stance towards the public. The critical role of journalism becomes eclipsed, further inhibiting a strong, participatory democracy.

## PROFESSIONAL RESPONSE

If the crisis is very visible in the US, we should not simply assume, in some deterministic manner, that all of Europe will automatically follow down the exact same path. Yet the American situation is of great interest, not only because of the US position in the world, but also because there has traditionally been a strong tradition of journalistic professionalism there. Thus, the response of concerned members of the profession can be edifying for European observers. The most ambitious effort in this regard is found in the above-mentioned annual reports on The State of the News Media ([www.stateofthemedias.org](http://www.stateofthemedias.org)). They offer a detailed annual online report; the current one, for 2010, is its seventh. The seriousness of the situation is reflected on the first page of the first report: "Journalism finds itself in the middle of an epochal transformation, as momentous as the invention of the telegraph or television."

While these reports offer detailed accounts and statistics of the decline in traditional journalism and the difficult transitions to a new media alignment, they also offer a sustained, probing analysis, looking at the different media, audiences, economics, technologies, while identifying trends and offering measures in both the long and short term perspective to facilitate the transitions in ways that will be as fruitful as possible. The crisis of journalism in Europe may generally be less pronounced, at least in some of the countries, and is no doubt as serious in a number of others, especially the newer democracies. Even if some of the circumstances are different in Europe, the journalism profession on this side of the Atlantic could benefit immensely by letting itself be inspired by this work and emulating in its own national and regional contexts (in a similar vein, see also Downie and Schudson, 2009).

## TECHNOLOGY'S AMBIVALENT SIGNALS

### Adapting to the cyber-environment

The internet and other related/integrated forms of ICT have, as in so many sectors, revolutionized the way journalism gets done, altering the processes of newsgathering, production, storage, editing, and distribution. Not least the multimedia character of news

production is transforming the basic patterns of production and dissemination. Newspapers and other traditional news organizations are going through a tumultuous time of difficult restructuring. While traditional news organizations have developed their online presence, the host of newer, 'non-press' actors such as Yahoo and Google, also compete for audience attention.

Moreover, we also find specialized providers catering to target 'communities' for particular news, ads, and life-style information (about, for example, financial matters, hobbies, health) as part of this new mix. From another horizon we see alternative news organizations, such as Indymedia ([www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)), now found in over 150 countries. It takes as their point of departure alternative ideological premises than those operative in the mainstream. Further, we must mention sites that engage in critical analyses of mainstream news and information, e.g. MediaChannel ([www.mediachannel.org](http://www.mediachannel.org)). For example, Corporate Watch ([www.corpwatch.org](http://www.corpwatch.org)) monitors the actions of major corporations and financial institutions, while One World ([www.oneworld.org](http://www.oneworld.org)) emphasizes news about environmental issues and democracy and PR Watch.

Turning our attention to mainstream online journalism, the work of Boczkowski (2004; 2009) and Deuze (2007; 2009), deriving from their respective field studies of how newswork is carried out in the new environment of multimedia newsroom, illuminate in a helpful way what is going on. From Boczkowski we understand that the extensive infrastructure of mediation, with journalists and editors all the more monitoring one another, obstructs diversity. In an almost paradoxical manner, the increase in both the transparency and the number channels of journalism, together with the amplified economic pressures, tends to intensify mimicry, with more voices saying the same things. This is lamentable; it suggests a missed opportunity for traditional mainstream journalism to diversify, though given the power of economic logics, our level of surprise should be moderate.

Deuze (2007; 2009), in his work, underscores a political economic perspective on the conditions of online journalistic production. As in the mainstream media, the increasing 'casual employment' among journalists serves to weaken their professional standing. Generally, the culture of the new capitalist era that drives the restructuring of journalistic work signals a deterioration of working conditions: functional flexibility, outsourcing, and off-shoring all contribute to sapping professional solidity. The goals of productivity, efficiency and profitability pushed traditional journalistic values even further to the margins, while putting the staff under more pressure. And with so much information circulating in cyberspace, journalistic work encompasses all the more editing and packaging, and less original writing. We can do doubt find exceptions to this pattern, and in the massive transitions underway, it would be foolish to conclude that such will always be the case. However, it does underscore that 'better' technology does not always automatically lead to 'better' journalism.

### **Enter the amateurs – with professional tools**

Increasingly, however, it is not just professional journalists who are engaged in journalism online. We can note, for example, the increase in citizen-assisted journalism, where people send in their material, often cell-phone images, to established journalist organiza-

tions ("Are you at the scene of the disaster? Contact us!"). Or, they simply interact with established journalists, replying, adding information, posing questions, offering corrections. This certainly can enhance classic journalism – but it can also be expensive: just replying to readers' e-mails can take a lot of time and add to the costs of journalistic operations.

Yet, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Today, citizens' journalistic activities are expanding, thanks largely to the array of new and relatively inexpensive multimedia platforms and applications available to the general public – often labeled as 'Web 2.0'. Who is and who is not a journalist in this context becomes increasingly fuzzy as a variety of information functions arise to sort, sift and funnel data electronically in differing organizational and societal contexts. Some efforts of do-it-yourself citizen-journalism such as Wikinews (wikinews.org) adapt a modified identity of professional journalism, while other groups and individuals operate with other guiding norms. Wikileaks (wikileaks.org) for example, is an explicitly political activist whistleblower in its releases of classified information, and has recently generated world-wide attention with its massive releases of documents.

There is a massive electronic civic information-sharing in cyberspace; citizens are more and more able to circumvent the traditional production and dissemination of journalism and retrieve – and produce – information for themselves, thus in a sense 'eliminating the middleman' of journalism. Groups with sophisticated information skills are not only providing their members with useful materials, but are in some cases functioning as sources for mainstream journalism organizations. For example, environmental groups or consumer activists who target the sweatshops of transnational corporations can also pass this information on to the mass media.

What is emerging can be called civic cyber public spheres (CCPS) – a sprawling, seemingly infinite universe comprised of the blogosphere, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, individual and group productions, including efforts by social movements and activists of every imaginable persuasion – political and religious groups, life style advocates, hobbyists, and much more. What we have here is an intensely stirred cyber-pot consisting of facts and opinions, debates, gossip, nonsense, misinformation, the insightful, the deceptive, the poetic, all mixed together, scrambling the traditional boundaries between public and private. Obvious questions arise, about accuracy, accountability and transparency of all this information and the actors who present it (who can we trust? on what grounds?). Also, we have the issue of the fading story-telling role of journalism, which has historically been an important feature: it is through narrative telling that facts and information generally take on meaning and transmit significance. Can this be fully replaced by massive amounts of 'information'?

These developments evoke questions about the extent to which journalism can reinvent itself and still be seen as 'traditional' journalism. Yet I suspect that it is here, in the chaotic, messy, and shifting domain of CCPS's that we will see the contours of a new journalism emerging and stabilizing. It will probably not be 'classic' in its form or modes of expression; we can only hope that it will be classic in the sense of its contribution to democracy – helping citizens to participate in the shaping of their society.

## CITIZENS, AUDIENCES, CONSUMERS

### Protean audiences

The changes within journalism have to do with what is happening both within its own institutions as well as in the larger socio-cultural landscape of late modernity. For example, we can understand from the above discussion that journalism's position within people's ensemble of information sources has been downsized. What the public knows about the world is to a declining degree a result of traditional journalism; its role in democracy is thus being altered, reduced. It is not just a question of a diminished audience, but also one that is evolving in its social and cultural profiles. Media audiences today parallel the major tendencies at work within the overall changes in contemporary society, where concepts such as heterogeneity, fragmentation, niche-building, and individualization have become emblematic.

In Western Europe, the relatively homogenous and unified public cultures that existed in of the first decades after World War II have become more diversified. The situation where a limited number of radio and TV channels were available, and where access to transnational media was limited, has given way to a new abundant and fragmented media environment. On the one hand this can be seen as a democratic gain: more media output and more choice – at least where abundance does not simply mean more of the same. On the other hand, the increasing heterogeneity of public culture, marked by increasing individuality of patterns of media consumption, mean that the audiences for journalism become more dispersed, and – with the newer technological innovations – more mobile.

The notion of the 'audience' has been evolving along with the media and with researcher's shifting theoretical and empirical orientations; in the age of interactive media it becomes especially challenged (Livingstone, 2005). Also, the relationship that people have with the media – both the traditional mass media and the newer digital media – are becoming more multidimensional, as media encounters become contextualized in new ways within people's lives. Not least, the new technologies give people much more control over what kind of information they receive, and when and how they receive it.

Among media audiences we can also note declines – to various extents – in the 'reading publics' of most Western democracies, especially among the young, as image-based media take on stronger positions within news and current affairs. Also, while citizens are becoming increasingly socially fragmented amongst themselves (i.e. seen horizontally), specific market niches emerge from continuing societal segmentation, thus making a hierarchical (i.e. vertical) differentiation more pronounced. Overall, the strong concept of 'the public' as the voice of the inclusive citizenry moves more toward a weak version of media spectatorship, complemented by a plethora of smaller, more exclusive and often interactive, online publics.

Audiences become more 'nomadic', make more individual choices, and have more technological capacities at their disposal; thus they are increasingly moving away from being the traditional 'sitting ducks' of mass mediated communication. As the media in



their various forms saturate daily life, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify the specific attention a specific group of people accord a specific media output. The situation becomes fluid, and difficulties measuring audiences multiply: the 2007 report by Project of Excellence in Journalism on The State of the News Media formulates it this way: "With audiences splintering across ever more platforms, nearly every metric for measuring audience is now under challenge as either flawed or obsolete..." (www.stateofthemedias.org). While this is sociologically very interesting, it is of course a problem from the standpoint of commercial economic rationality.

While inadequate journalism can be seen as a failure for democracy, a form of disempowering, it is also the case that at some level democracy, if it is to flourish, requires responsibility from citizens as well. Translating this normative postulate into some fruitful policy remains elusive, however. It can be argued that contemporary journalism has been contributing to the lowering of audiences expectations as it drift further from the traditional ideals of the profession. However, it is not the case at this point in history that simply reverting to 'quality journalism' in the traditional sense will automatically attract larger audiences. High quality journalism is no longer a guaranteed formula for financial solvency. This is a real economic dilemma, even for those who firmly espouse solid journalistic ideals.

### **Attentive – but disconnected citizens**

According to international comparisons (see Milner, 2001), those nations where quality journalism is available, where public service broadcasting is still viable, and where citizens attend extensively to these media, tend to have higher participation in elections. What Milner (2001) calls 'civic literacy' does make a difference. However, it may well be that in the case of the Nordic countries, for example, who rank highly in terms of voter turnout, that one cannot simply specify the news media per se as the decisive factor. One must take into account the larger picture of media, the political culture and the relative responsiveness of governments in these small and still rather homogenous societies.

There are strong indications that it is precisely this ensemble of factors that in the long term is critical: that it is not just a question of media performance alone, but also of how democracy is actually working and how citizens experience the political process that will determine the character and extent of civic engagement. A recent ambitious study (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007) in the UK took as its point of departure the concept of 'mediated public connection', i.e., that that citizens share an orientation to the public world beyond their private concerns, and that this orientation is maintained chiefly via various forms of journalism. However, they found that audiences must also feel that they can actually use journalism in some way. One of the mainstays of traditional journalism has been that it offers news and information precisely so that citizens can participate in a meaningful manner.

Yet this is predicated on the assumption that the political mechanisms for such civic input are functioning. Thus, we have to take into account how democracy is actually functioning. The major problem identified by the authors is that the majority of the respond-

ents who still maintained this public connection still do not feel that there is a clear link between such attention and any opportunities for any civic action. The authors found “little evidence of UK citizens having had access to ‘communities of practice...through which they could act together in the public world’ (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007: 188). Journalism made little difference in their roles as citizens, because it cannot compensate for serious deficiencies in the political system itself. Thus, any serious concern about journalism must also turn its attention to how democracy is functioning; the two are ultimately inseparable.

### TRouBLING TABLOIDIZATION VS. POSITIVE POPULARIZATION

One could argue that the media industries’ economic response to journalism’s difficulties has to a considerable extent taken the form of increased tabloidization. The term has several connotations, and in the introduction to a milestone anthology on this topic (Sparks and Tulloch, 2000), Sparks delineates several basic aspects. A dominant one is the pattern in which news values lead to a focus on scandals, entertainment, celebrities, sports, etc., to the neglect of traditionally important areas such as society, politics and economics. Thus, less attention is given to serious news in the context of the overall media mix. That which is “important” is not necessarily that which is deemed “interesting”. And much that is presented as interesting may not be of importance for the life of democracy.

However, even if much of journalism consists of sensationalism, scandal, personalization, excessive dramatization, and the derailing of civic-oriented news values, democracy can still be nourished if the overall mix in society’s journalistic output continues to contain relevant information that is useful for citizens, regardless of what forms it may take. I would insist on the importance of many styles and genres of journalism, addressing different tastes, different modes and levels of linguistic and analytic competence. Yet, to the degree that the core elements of traditional journalism continue to evaporate, the warning signals should rightly go off.

The media have always wanted to reach large audiences, and it can be argued that tabloidization is but an extreme form of popularization, that is, simply strategies to gain larger audiences. This is intrinsically neither good nor bad – popularization in practice need per se not be negative (see for example, Dahlgren and Sparks, 1992), even if the distinctions between acceptable popularization and deplorable tabloidization will remain contentious. Popularization can mean making the public sphere available to larger numbers of people via more accessible formats and styles of presentation, helping people to feel incorporated into society as citizens. It can involve taking up topics and experiences from the realm of private experience and introduces them as important and contestable topics within the public sphere. In a diverse media landscape, popular forms of journalism can address those segments of the population who may feel excluded by more highbrow formats and discursive registers; popular forms can engage, evoke, and provoke, serving as catalysts for discussion and debate.

There are, in other words, versions of popularization. Thus, while popularization can lead directly to the obvious pitfalls and becomes, simply, tabloidization in the negative sense, especially if the bedrock of relevant civic information vanishes, it is not always certain that merely clinging to traditional journalistic formats per se is the best way to defend democracy in a time of dramatic socio-cultural change. We should shift our attention from tabloidization as a negative trajectory and instead look to how popularization can be fruitfully used to enhance civic involvement.

The media bear a responsibility in structuring the horizons of expectation: offering more fun and placing less demands on the audiences leads to expectations of, well... more fun and less demands. Such developments are at the heart of much of the controversy within journalism today, and they will continue to evoke debate. The big challenge, it would seem, is to develop new popular forms that will both resonate with large audiences and also communicate in meaningful ways about important matters.

### **Plural realities**

A cornerstone of traditional journalism has always been its commitment to truth. Yet one need not be a professional philosopher to understand that the notion of 'truth' can be slippery. Once we move beyond simple correspondence theories of truth and basic, incontestable factual reality, things can get complicated. Yet complication does not justify capitulation to creative invention about what actually took place during an event. In a time when relativism appears to be gaining some legitimate ground, both journalists and readers need helpful tools for orientation. Notions like "structural corroboration", as well as others, can and should still serve as practical, critical criteria for assessing the veracity of texts, even if our understanding of situated perspectives, value horizons, and so become more developed (I will return to this theme below). In journalism, a commitment to the truth must remain a part of the bedrock, even if this commitment has to be tempered by insights into the difficulties in attaining the truth, as well as in defining it in complex situations.

### **Prismatic truth**

If the classic problems of knowledge and truth, however, will always remain with us, we cannot avoid confronting relativism. Relativism is not a nasty, unnecessary disease, but arises out of the Enlightenment's understanding of our epistemological limitations; since Kant we have become quite aware of the conditions that shape and delimit our knowledge of the world. To occasionally engage in self-reflection on what we know – and how we know it – is not just useful but should also be essential to the craft and profession of journalism (as well as just about any other human context). To acknowledge that our knowing is situated and contingent does not mean that we cannot know things, that truth – in the sense of accurate knowledge and understanding about human affairs – is always beyond us. Rather, such self-deliberation encourages us not least to check our facts. More profoundly it can also help us maintain a degree of humility about our knowing and a curiosity about that which lies beyond it.

For journalism, as for all of us in our everyday lives, much of the world consists of non-negotiable factual truths, in the sense that they are solid, they cannot legitimately be negotiated or bent. In this realm, journalism simply has to get the information right. Others domains of human activity, however, are more open to interpretation, their meanings can be negotiated or contested, e.g. the statement "The prime minister is having big political problems". Yet, even with solid facts there can be different ways to frame them, using different premises, and so on. The tensions around truth thus include not just disputes over facts, but also over the significance that should be attributed to the facts, which in turn often has to do with frameworks of perception and normative pre-dispositions. This can be readily illustrated by comparing CNN with the English language transmissions of Al Jazeera.

In the face of some degree of inexorable relativism, a defense clinging to a stilted notion of formal objectivity will not help us much. The truth may in fact be multidimensional, and even if not all versions have equal validity in our own eyes, others may see it differently, depending on ideological premises: e.g., does deregulation to increase market forces enhance or restrict freedom in society? Thus, journalism's commitment to the truth, its focus on the facts, remains crucial, yet this will not alleviate it from having to deal with the plural nature of social reality.

This has in a sense always been the case, but I would suggest that we could expect that this epistemological challenge to journalism will continue to grow, as more and more social actors are using a growing number of outlets on the sprawling Web. As I mentioned above, we can anticipate that public knowledge will continue to derive increasingly from non-professional or non-traditional journalistic sources, with more new genres and hybrid forms emerging. This is being fed by the growing diffusion of, access to, and skills in using new media technologies, especially among the young. Within journalism, high standards must of course be maintained in regard to the accuracy of facts, source veracity, document authenticity, and so on. And we should not forget that while there are many possible ways to tell the same basic story, in the world today, the ultimate choice may have more to do with power relations than free journalistic judgment.

### **MANY JOURNALISMS: TOWARDS A 'MULTI-EPISTEMIC ORDER'?**

With the growth of explicitly alternative and activist journalism, we become all the more alert to a prismatic notion of truth; we understand and accept that all storytelling is situated, all perspectives on society are contingent – not in least in a world where political communication is dispersed within a complex media matrix of global character. However, at the same time we will continue to need workable criteria for distinguishing better stories from less good ones, accurate accounts from distortions, truths from falsehoods. How will traditional journalism position itself within this new, emerging 'multi-epistemic order'? What will in fact constitute 'journalism' under these new media conditions?

The answers to these questions would require a well-functioning crystal ball, but I strongly suspect that at least the traditional referent of 'objectivity' will recede as a compelling professional and ideological strategy for legitimacy in the new media environment, while the notion of 'truth' will remain operative, despite all its difficulties. We may therefore consider falling back on some of the other notions closely associated with objectivity – and still find them viable – and promote them to front rank criteria for evaluating journalistic quality in the new epistemic order. Thus, we have:

- >Accuracy: adherence to that which is factually indisputable;
- >Fairness: representing a pluralism of voices;
- >Transparency: via self-reflection and self-revelation, making visible the production process, as well as the limits to one's own knowing;
- >Accountability: checks and consequences for malpractice, such as lies, errors, and disinformation.

These seem to me to retain their value as solid criteria for journalistic quality, and at the same time allow for a sense of the plural nature of reality. In practice, however, what is troubling is the degree of non-communication we already see between disparate actors in the public sphere as well as in certain forms of competing journalism. The classic danger of the fragmented public sphere comprised of disparate political actors with little or no common communicative ground risks being compounded by the development of a multi-epistemic order within journalism itself. Maintaining a minimal shared public culture so that political adversaries – in the street, home, parliament, online – can talk to each other in a meaningful way is essential. However, if the multi-epistemic environment means a cognitive segregation among groups, where respective worldviews are reinforced by journalists that do not connect with each other, democracy's dilemmas will be deep indeed.

Journalism within late modern democracy will remain a terrain of institutional difficulty, professional uncertainty, and political contention. We will have to hope that it will also remain a terrain of imagination and creativity. The social and institutional conditions that gave rise to traditional journalism have evolved; obviously journalism must and should change as well. The questions, at bottom, become: can we find ways of filling the traditional function of journalism within an altered societal context, but via new means, new genres, and new relations with their audience – in ways that will still promote a healthy democracy and the civic culture necessary to engage citizens? And can we develop new and viable criteria for defining quality within these altered journalistic practices?

## References

- >Altheide, David and Robert Snow (1991) *Media Worlds in the Post-Journalism Era*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- >Baker, C. Edwin (2002) *Media, Markets and Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- >Baker, C. Edwin (2006) *Media Concentration and Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- >Benson, Rodney and Erik Neveu (2005) *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- >Boczkowski, Pablo (2004) *Digitalizing the News*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- >Boczkowski, Pablo (2009) Materiality and mimicry in the journalistic field, pp. 56-67 in Zelizer, Barbie (ed.) *The Changing Faces of Journalism*. London: Routledge.
- >Borjesson, Kristina (ed.) (2002) *Into the Buzzsaw: Leading Journalists Expose the Myth of a Free Press*. Amhurst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- >Couldry, Nick, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham (2007) *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention*. Basingstoke: Intellect.
- >Dahlgren, Peter (2009) *Media and Political Engagement*. New York/Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- >Dahlgren, Peter and Colin Sparks (eds) (1992) *Journalism and Popular Culture*. London: Sage.
- >Deuze, Mark (2007) *Media Work*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- >Deuze, Mark (2009) Technology and the individual journalist: Agency beyond imitation and change, pp. 82-97 in Zelizer, Barbie (ed.) *The Changing Faces of Journalism*. London: Routledge.
- >Downie, Jr, Leonard and Michael Schudson (2009) The reconstruction of American journalism. *Columbia Journalism Review* (Oct.) Available online at: [www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the\\_reconstruction\\_of\\_american.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php?page=all)
- >Hallin, Daniel (1992) The passing of the "high modernism" of American journalism. *Journal of Communication*, 42 (3): 14-25.
- >Hallin, Daniel and Paolo Mancini (2004) *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- >Livingstone, Sonia (ed.) (2005) *Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere*. Bristol: Intellect.
- >Louw, Eric (2005) *The Media and the Political Process*. London: Sage.
- >Milner, Henry (2001) *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens make Democracy Work*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- >Sparks, Colin and John Tulloch (eds) (2000) *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates Over Media Standards*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- >The State of the News Media (<http://www.stateofthemedi.org>).

---

## SKICIRANJE EVOLUCIJE NOVINARSTVA: VIDOKRUG DEMOKRACIJE

---

Peter Dahlgren

**SAŽETAK** *Suvremeni razvoj novinarstva otvara niz pitanja o njegovoj budućnosti. U ovom članku daje se uvid u neke od ključnih faktora koji trenutačno oblikuju novinarstvo. Autor skicira neke od općih parametara koji se odnose na većinu zemalja Zapada, s posebnim naglaskom na analizu kriza u SAD-u. Ipak, verzije evolucije novinarstva različite su u različitim nacionalnim kontekstima. Autor ističe ono što sam vidi kao temeljni raison d'être novinarstva, ono što omogućuje i jača demokraciju, a to uključuje jačanje novinarskih normi, vrijednosti i prakse. Zadaća je novinarstva dotaknuti nas, nadahnuti, pridonijeti našem svakodnevnom demokratskom vidokrugu. Članak započinje kratkim pregledom različitih strukturnih faktora koji oblikuju proces transformacije novinarstva. Dalje autor istražuje neka od suvremenih tehnoloških dostignuća i njihov učinak na novinarstvo, kao i promjene publika koje se zbivaju paralelno s promjenom njihovih uloga kao građana i konzumenata. U završnom poglavlju članak istražuje intenzivirani multiperspektivni karakter novinarske okoline u razvoju, kao i neke od njegovih implikacija.*

---

### KLJUČNE RIJEČI

KRIZA NOVINARSTVA, NOVINARSTVO I DEMOKRACIJA, NOVINARSTVO  
I NOVE TEHNOLOGIJE, NOVINARI PROFESIONALCI, PUBLIKE

---

*Bilješka o autoru*

**Peter Dahlgren** :: Sveučilište u Lundu, Švedska :: peter.dahlgren@kom.lu.se

*Dijelovi ovog članka objavljeni su u autorovoj knjizi Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009. te u poglavlju "The troubling evolution of journalism" u knjizi Barbie Zelizer (ur.) The Changing Face of Journalism, Routledge, London, 2009.*