

A five-year plan: Beyond the crumbling fortresses and the never-ending story

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Abstract

Five year plans are ubiquitous in the financial and business sectors. Some work, some don't. When it comes to the "doing" of journalism, any five-year plan must include not only multimedia storytelling tools but also entrepreneurial skills, and flexibility. Without them journalists will fail to navigate the impact of technological innovation on professional practice.

In an always switched-on twittering world, the citizens—formerly known as the audience (Rosen, 2006) —have more access than ever before to a plethora of information, and more opportunity to disseminate it themselves, without need of an intermediary. The time of journalists as "special figures of authority" (Rusbridger, 2010) is gone. Clearly, some editorial roles will not survive the age of information abundance; but new ones will be created.

The newspaper as we have known it in the first world is dying, the fortresses that supported mainstream journalism crumbling and the jury is still out on the pay wall options for online content. (Horrocks, 2008). The business end of journalism is already adapting. Journalists though are at a "migration point" (Rosen, 2008) and will have to embrace a cultural change in journalism. According to Beckett (2008), "[we] must show the public we understand our roles have changed from that of gatekeepers to networkers". Journalism will survive, but in what form?

Introduction

Debate and discussion about the ongoing ructions in the journalism industry have focused on the lack of a viable business model for mainstream newspapers and other media, the Internet, its evolutionary technologies and its impact on journalists. Chiefly, how it has forced journalists to change the way they do things; why it is detrimental to time-honoured news gathering skills; and what it will mean to "quality" journalism. The director of the BBC World Service, Peter Horrocks (2009) has tagged the turmoil currently experienced by the media, "the end of fortress journalism", a world where journalists work in institutions with thick walls, with the "simple job of battling other journalists from other fortresses". This industry view is under challenge; and it requires practitioners to be part of a "profound change in the mindset and culture of journalism" (Horrocks, 2009).

It has to be said that the BBC as a publicly funded media organization has put considerable effort into changing its culture, not only by improving its internet-based journalism, but also by considering user experience. Audience research data made available to staff on a continuous basis has become a driver of organisational and cultural change. BBC news was rebranded in 2008, and reorganised along multimedia lines. Each morning one single conference of all BBC news takes place. The mini-fortresses of competing departments have come down (Horrocks, 2009).

The BBC has an obligation to check in with its audience. Commercial media has been slower to respond. In general, economic pressures are threatening the upkeep of media strongholds; pressures exacerbated by internet-based journalism. The newspaper industry in the industrialised western world has been largely stripped of its “rivers of gold”. “Quality” journalism, particularly in newspapers, has always depended on advertising revenue for funding. Consumer migration online has not been the saviour some might have expected. In its 2010 State of the Media report, the US Pew Centre Project for Excellence in Journalism identified a struggling newspaper industry (print and online) with advertising revenue down 26 per cent, a decline more than 50 per cent steeper than a year earlier. Every news media sector saw revenue declines except for cable. Every revenue drop means fewer jobs for journalists.

The economic slide aside the other great challenge is how the convergence brought by digital technology is propelling *cultural* change in journalism. In legacy terms, consumers or the people formerly known as the audience (Rosen, 2006) accessed journalism through products such as a newspaper, a television program or radio broadcast. Now, a single platform can deliver to users—with a click or two—all the information they need. For consumers a “single, unified news universe” is theirs (Horrocks, 2009). The “brand” of news is perhaps not as important since they can control what they receive, and when. The Pew Project (2010) found that increasingly online “consumers are hunting news by topic and by event and grazing across multiple outlets”. This finding also has implications for the pay wall model. A national phone survey conducted between December 2009 and January 2010 found only about 7 per cent of all Americans who get their news online would be willing to pay for news online. Add to that, aggregation technology that allows the content to be brought together in one space and it is a scenario in which no one brand can claim the entire story or the audience.

From this perspective any decision to make the consumer pay for online news, previously available gratis, may be seen as a replication of an old and failing business model. Media mogul Rupert Murdoch has intentions to buck the trend.

Quality journalism is not cheap, and an industry that gives away its content is simply cannibalizing its ability to produce good reporting . . . The digital revolution has opened many new and inexpensive distribution channels but it has not made content free. We intend to charge for all our news Web sites. (Murdoch, 2009)

In 2010, negotiations to do just that are underway just as Apple announced the iPad—a technology that sits somewhere between a mobile smart phone and a net book in size, and will allow downloads of newspapers and books wirelessly. Only time will tell if “building pay walls around online news is a bad business decision” (Jarvis, 2010).

An open door policy versus high walls

The Internet is bringing down the walls on the fortress competition model. The World Wide Web promotes a new link economy that “rewards openness and collaboration”. Jarvis (2010) has argued “pay walls curtail a news organization’s relationship with its public, with its customers. On the Internet, it’s in those relationships where value lies”. The Guardian editor, Alan Rusbridger, suggested charging for news “removes you from the way people the world over now connect with each other. You cannot control distribution or create scarcity without becoming isolated from this new networked world” (Rusbridger, 2010). The argument is being made for a “collaborative” journalism, a linked approach where each organisation contributes what they do best to the whole. Horrocks (2009) described it this way:

I might like BBC for video news, the Telegraph or Daily Mail for sports results and the New York Times for international news. I can penetrate the barriers of the fortresses with ease.

Jarvis coined it: “Cover what you do best. Link to the rest.”

While there are already situations—for example, sporting events such as the Olympics where media organisations pool resources to *get the story out*—“collaboration” by different media to produce news describes a new type of journalism far removed from the competing fortresses. It means a significant change in the culture. It requires journalists to think outside the news unit or program they work for, and do so with a wider frame of reference.

According to Beckett (2009) this involves “professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions answers, ideas, perspectives”. Perhaps this is the key to getting the stories out that matter.

ProPublica is a non-profit online publication that has embraced collaboration as part of its mission to produce quality investigative journalism that effects change. It partners with up to 50 different publishing parties, including with established legacy media to get the story out. In almost two years of operation it has reported 200 long-form investigations. Managing director Stephen Engelberg sees the collaborative process as essential. It provides a way of pooling resources and maintaining excellence in the journalism produced. He is adamant though that the non-profit model cannot replace what has been lost with the decline in legacy media. ProPublica depends on philanthropy, foundations and individual donations for funding. It must move from a start up to a more sustainable model to survive. What that might be is not clear but more diverse funding is a must.

This networked journalism has two principle characteristics: public participation and connectivity. Public participation involves bloggers, user-generated content, online video, file sharing and crowd sourcing. Ordinary citizens have been empowered by direct access to the means of producing content; they are bypassing big media organisations to disseminate it. This is especially an issue when the characteristics of openness and collaboration fostered by the web have permitted the “citizen” to participate in the news gathering process, and at times lead it. Much has been written about how citizens circumvented government censorship through use of Twitter during the 2009 Iranian election. Mainstream media relied on citizens for information on the ground. The citizen is part of the production of news at every stage, working with

professional journalists or by themselves. What digital connectivity allows is a 24-hour link to what participants are experiencing and perceiving—something Hermida (2010) refers to it as the “emergence of ambient journalism”. It is not surprising Twitter has been rapidly adopted in newsrooms as an essential mechanism to distribute breaking news quickly and concisely, or as a tool to solicit story ideas, sources and facts (Posetti, 2009). Fewer jobs for journalists mean fewer reporters are out there to get the facts. There is another reason journalists must embrace these networking technologies: if they don’t, they will be left out of the information loop by an increasingly fickle citizenry.

A changing journalism culture

Social media technologies like Twitter are part of a range of Internet technologies enabling the disintermediation of news and undermining the gatekeeping function of journalists. Micro-blogging is a form of participation that does not require the journalist to instigate contact. More and more, companies and government are employing the direct sharing and distributing of information to communicate with citizens without the journalist as intermediary. These two factors are changing the production, consumption and indeed the very nature of news itself in profound ways (Beckett, 2010).

Both public participation and connectivity pose a direct threat to the role of the journalist as the “special figure of authority” whom the audience trusted to filter news and information, prioritise it and pass it on as accurately and fairly and quickly as possible (Rusbridger, 2010). “While journalists may remain *one* source of authority, people may also be less interested to receive journalism in an inert context” where it can’t be responded to, challenged or linked to other sources. The Pew State of the Media report points to the lack of loyalty to brand online. This challenges journalists’ view of themselves, and their role in the information economy. It is also frightening for some journalists working in the large fortresses, because it raises questions about what journalism is, and who can or should do it.

As Roy Greenslade, veteran journalist, former Daily Mirror editor and Guardian columnist and blogger put to the Future of Journalism summit in Sydney in 2008, “Anyone can be a journalist, anyone can contribute to journalism . . . journalism does matter, but journalists do not”. A provocative statement that serves to focus attention; that part of what journalists do, can be done just as easily by citizens without any professional training. Practitioners are understandably worried. As Deuze (2005) observed:

[C]oping with the emergence of hybrid producer-user forms of news work is easier for some than others, and tends to clash with entrenched notions of professionalism, objectivity, and carefully cultivated arrogance regarding the competences (or talent) of “the audience” to know what is good for them.

Journalists have put various arguments against this hybrid; the main one being that “citizen” journalists—unbound by the ethical standards of the profession—also bypass the editing process found in traditional journalism practice. The potential is there for “mass misinformation”. A counter argument is that journalists mess up their own ethics code quite regularly, and can and do get it wrong. And the citizens know it. Mainstream media and journalists cannot ignore the fall in the numbers of readers, viewers and

listeners at the same time that YouTube has become part of the everyday lexicon, and blogs number in the millions.

News and citizen participation

Will public or citizen participation in the production of news pull back the decline of the news industry? “Participatory journalism in its pure bottom-up form” cannot be framed as a satisfactory answer to “the decline of the news industry’s marketability or credibility, nor is it likely to facilitate the survival of news formats outside of the online realm” (Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger (2007). The “bottom-up” refers to the individual and collective self-expression of the digital culture by the people “formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006). This contrasts with the industry-driven top-down relationship, where participation is encouraged as part of customer-relationship management and labour cost-cutting measures (Deuze, 2007).

In case studies, Deuze et al. (2007) studied participatory models in four countries: Australia, Germany, The Netherlands and the United States. Examples showed the varied ways that citizen participation had become part of the news gathering process. They concluded citizen journalism still depended to a large degree on established news organisations, and that it harnessed the communities of users to debate the mainstream media’s output. Increasingly though, mainstream news is incorporating content generated by users to replace vox pops and opinion polls, and even partially for editorial. It is perilous to ignore citizen participants.

Whether the practitioners in either tier of news publishing are enthusiast participants in the process or not, the process of increasing hybridizations and convergence between the bottom up and top-down models of news work is already in full swing around the world. (Deuze et al., 2007)

The case studies included the Indymedia network, which largely continues to use an open approach with immediate publication of all submitted stories, and the Korean OhmyNews, which combines a growing army of tens of thousands of citizen contributors with a small team of professional content editors to ensure quality control.

Efforts where participatory journalism does produce news relevant to the communities they serve tend to suggest that:

professionally enhanced participatory journalism has legitimacy as a form of news production in its own right, well beyond the apparent ambition of some news barons to harvest bottom-up news as a cheaper alternative to the content produced by costly in-house staff. (Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007)

There is the danger that journalists will be replaced by talented content providers who know how to use the newer technologies to aggregate information but without the experienced analysis that comes with years on the job.

Engaging in the public conversation

Ultimately, digital and networked journalism in whatever shape or form must be seen as a praxis that is not exclusively tied to salaried work or professional institutions any more. (Deuze et al., 2007)

As already outlined in this paper, the Internet is allowing citizens to conduct their own public conversations without the journalist as gatekeeper. The web’s technologies

means citizens are making their own stories without the credentials and ethics of either a profession, or the resources and/or limitations of a media organisation. This can be seen as another challenge to established journalism culture.

Participatory ideals do not mesh well with the ideal of professional distance in journalism; notions which tend to exclude rather than to include.(Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007)

Journalists have to be prepared to come out of their fortresses and acknowledge they do not hold the keys to all the doors, or the entire story. It may be that journalists maintain and build trust with the citizenry not by the “doing” of journalism but the *social function* their journalism performs. In a discussion on the “survival of media platforms for journalism”, managing director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Mark Scott, described the challenge for the public broadcaster:

I think we all know that when you're editing a paper you know as editor you know a little bit, the news room knows a bit more, but the readership knows the full story, and part of the journalistic challenge is to extract the story from the readership, and then you provide your journalistic standards and processes to it. But they know a lot more than you know, and there's no doubt that newspapers and media outlets will be better when they make it easier for stories to come in . . . in future we'll always be broadcasting, but increasingly we're going to host the conversation. (Scott, 2008)

Early in 2010, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation launched ABC Open describing it as:

a project focussing on regional audiences across Australia. The aim is to give people the chance to participate in lots of different ways—to create, share and collaborate with the ABC and each other through ABC Platforms; radio, online, TV and mobile. It's about the ABC helping you to develop and share the skills you need to engage in media to—whether that's in framing photos, or shooting video, working out how to cover an event, writing a blog, collaborating with each other online, joining groups or simply sharing your gardening pics with the ABC and our audience. (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.)

This is not just about journalism; it involves creating regional conversations. It is about the telling of stories within communities by the communities themselves, and the media organisation as facilitator. While dependent on a successful roll-out of the National Broadband Network (NBN), it will employ multimedia storytelling that journalists are using more and more. The BBC has conducted similar digital storytelling projects since 2001—projects such as Telling Lives, and the BBC Wales undertaking, Capture Wales, encouraged ordinary people to learn digital skills and make their stories for the web. Capture Wales ran monthly workshops between 2001 and February 2008. Professional journalists may be threatened by this intrusion into their dominance of the story, or they can see it as a useful way to access largely untapped sources of news that don't depend on public relations news releases or government media conferences. It's also important to remember not all citizens are interested or driven to tell their stories in multimedia formats.

Collaboration and Partnership

In a world of open unedited citizen reporting and commentary the role of journalism would appear to be more important than ever as a source of reliable, verified and balanced information. (Macnamara, 2008)

Quality versus quantity is an issue here. How do expensive newsgathering operations, feeling the effects of the economic downturn, offer balance, and reliability, with less? How might the journalist negotiate this territory? Collaboration and partnership seems to be an emerging theme in the United Kingdom where local news production is under threat. The publicly funded BBC has been doing a major rethink. In a paper on the Future of Journalism, Horrocks (2009) described a number of ideas floated by its director-general, Mark Thompson, for the BBC to partner with other organisations, potentially sharing content, technology, facilities and resources. One of the options could be a partnership to provide regional news on commercial television. A true two-way partnership would involve not just syndicating its content more widely to others, but also taking content from its partners.

Openness and partnership should also help answer the charge from Rupert Murdoch and others that the BBC is economically over-dominant in the news industry. (Horrocks, 2009)

The Guardian editor, Alan Rusbridger, has outlined several instances where the reader/audience's input has contributed to investigative journalism, and successfully helped maintain the watchdog role of the press. One example given is the use of social media and a "widget" to allow 23,000 Guardian readers to sort through hundreds of thousands of documents relating to Members' of Parliament expenses. Rusbridger described the original investigation by the Telegraph as "brilliantly executed"; but without those citizen participants, digesting the complex amounts of data would have been impossible.

Quality journalism and the public trust

Rusbridger (2009) argues mainstream news organisations can harness something of the web's power.

It is not about replacing the skills and knowledge of journalists with (that ugly phrase) user generated content. It is about experimenting with the balance of what we know, what we can do, with they know, what they can do.

His comments describe a public trust journalism that involves the reader, listener and viewer at some, if not all, levels.

Quality journalism, especially investigative journalism, is expensive. In Australia, the public broadcasters—the ABC and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)—remain safe havens for this type of journalism in television and radio, while papers such as The Age, the Courier Mail, the Australian, The Financial Review and the Sydney Morning Herald continue to serve the readership with quality narrative. Flagship television programs such as the ABC's Four Corners, and Dateline on SBS do not have the budgets of previous decades, nor do the newspapers mentioned.

In his 2009 National Press Club address, Chairman and Chief Executive of News Limited John Hartigan challenged the assumption that quality journalism is only produced by a handful of elite publications and programs. Hartigan canvassed the "notion . . . that says quality has nothing to do with relevance, or that popularity is always just populist". He listed a number of stories, including: "John Howard's leadership promise to Costello", "Marcus Einfeld's downfall", and "Bundaberg hospital's trail of death". These stories, he argued, had impact and influence, and resulted in new legislation, and the conviction of criminals; they were all stories broken by tabloid newspapers. Hartigan argued tabloids have run some of the most important campaigns. "Great press campaigns shape new

laws and change history. They build a bridge between public opinion and public policy” (Hartigan, 2009). Despite these examples, the reduced coffers of both broadsheet and tabloid papers without question will make this less possible in the future. It also shows there is more than one definition of quality journalism and what we need to do to maintain it. The publisher of online publication, Crikey.com, Eric Beecher has foreshadowed a 60–70 per cent chance that mainstream newspapers will stop funding what he calls public trust journalism in the next few years. His argument is for public funding of newspapers much like that enjoyed by the ABC.

Whether that is likely in a society of “user-pays” is uncertain. Australia is also less likely to find philanthropic funding for its quality journalism unless we get the public to care. In the United States, the Internet newspaper, The Huffington Post, has just launched a public fund for investigative journalism, with a start-up budget of US\$1.75 million. Australia’s smaller population lacks America’s culture of philanthropy.

Conclusion

Social media such as Twitter, Facebook and other web tools are being accepted as valid components of a new media landscape. Few journalists would disagree that landscape must also include what Crikey’s Eric Beecher prefers to call “public trust journalism” to form a healthy democracy along with functioning parliaments and courts. The Internet has opened doors for the wider population to have a say on what journalism should be. No doubt more citizens will take the opportunity to use its technology to push opinion, and influence the cycle of what is considered news. Just as the length of the news is changing, so is the definition of news. This is partly a consequence of the ability of communities to select and tell their own particular stories, and for those stories to be sent to a global audience without official intermediaries. It is also because, without “the deadline” of mainstream media, the news story can be never-ending.

Digital technology is also impacting the working journalist in several ways. Firstly, it is less likely a journalist will spend their vocational life in only one of the silos of print, radio or television. Secondly, the skills of each are converging in one newsgathering effort. Journalists more and more are being asked to take on tasks formerly carried out by specialists such as tape editors and cameramen. At the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, radio journalists take video footage while undertaking the more traditional audio interview, and may even read a news bulletin to camera. The merits or otherwise of this approach are being debated. It is now much cheaper and faster to undertake and distribute journalistic work online.

Mainstream media has reinvented itself before—when printing presses changed to cold type layout on computer, and television began using videotape instead of film. To focus solely on the altering technology is to ignore fundamental changes in the relationship of the journalist to the audience/consumer.

Thirdly, the instantaneous nature of online publication has placed the work of journalists in the same playing field as the largely unedited output of citizen journalists who do not hold to the traditional conventions of journalism practice. The sub-editing role usually performed by the most experienced scribes and producers is under pressure; with one argument being made it is unnecessary online where something is only wrong for seconds or at the most minutes. Greenslade (2009) argued in his blog that “our goal should be to train multi-skilled journalists with the ability to do a

complete reporting/writing job". Technological advancement can enhance or conversely diminish the role of the journalist. "The real threat to our viability is our complacency and unwillingness to change" (Hartigan, 2009).

Simply taking journalism online is not the answer (Beckett, 2009). The journalism that will survive and thrive over the next five years is that which takes its social function seriously and listens to, and engages with, the audiences through a hybrid of both mainstream professional journalism and citizen input, using new media technology in combination with traditional practice.

Journalism practice must meet the consumer in multi-dimensional interactions, and encourage public conversations. In an investigation of "quality" journalism, O'Donnell (2009), through the first national study of the annual the Walkley Awards for Excellence in Journalism, found there was support for engagement with regular everyday news consumers and community organisations on the judging panels for the top prizes awarded for journalism. The citizens' role would be to evaluate the social/democratic priorities of award entries. How this might work is not clear. It is at the very least a recognition that public trust in journalism cannot rest simply on journalists' own view of their profession.

What the journalism practitioner has to offer the citizen are the core skills of filtering, editing and packaging, allied with accurate reporting, analysis and comment. It is even more important that there is trust and transparency in the process of gathering information and the social narrative it delivers. As Neuberger put forward:

Journalists must develop a sense of how to reinvent themselves as co-creators of culture. Indeed journalists as the traditional regulators and moderators of public discourse should particularly focus on solving the conflict between open access and the quality of communication. (Cited in Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007).

Journalists must be prepared to fine-tune any five-year plan beyond the crumbling fortresses; that is the nature of the never-ending story.

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