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Habits of Practice, Habits of Thought

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The years since the launch of this journal in 2000 have been as bountiful for scholars of journalism as they have been painful for practitioners scrambling to keep up with the dizzying pace of change. Our observations and explorations over time suggest that journalistic activities – what we might call ‘habits of practice’ – seem to be changing far more dramatically than practitioners’ ‘habits of thought’, or the ways in which they conceptualise what they do or why they do it.

To put it another way: The evidence we have amassed suggests dramatic change in what journalism is, offset by an equally striking resilience of core perceptions of what journalism should be.

Habits of Practice

Changes in journalistic practice, especially in response to technological affordances and their repercussions for newsrooms and news organisations, have been traced in the pages of this journal since the very first issue: Williams and Delli Carpini (2000) used the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal as a vehicle for highlighting the ‘virtual elimination’ (p.61) of the gatekeeping role within a mainstream press demoted from sole source of political information to just one source among a virtually unlimited number – yes, even then. In the years since, the gatekeeping function has been the subject of hundreds of articles in this journal alone.

Journalists’ use of particular formats and tools also has been closely scrutinized. Audio, video, blogs, social media in general, and Facebook and Twitter in particular, have each attracted an enormous amount of scholarly attention. Practices around audience engagement – as well as disengagement, particularly in the context of the distance journalists have sought to put between themselves and commenters, bloggers, and social media contributors – have been examined. Working conditions of legacy and digital journalists have been analysed, with occupational tasks, expectations, and pressures carefully documented.

And of course, the multi-faceted impact of these transformations on the business of journalism has been unmissable. Effects highlighted within these pages have included the reconfiguration of production processes to draw on audience labour (Nixon, 2017) and to align with data from audience analytics (Schlesinger and Doyle, 2015); the conflation of editorial and commercial imperatives and the trend toward closer working relationships between those once-disparate areas (Comia et al., 2018); and journalists’ own conceptual and performative responses to increasingly precarious conditions of employment (Deuze and Marjoribanks, 2009; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Gómez, 2018).

Habits of Thought

Yet amidst all the upheaval, conceptions about what journalism fundamentally is about have barely budged. These ideas encompass both the purpose of journalism and the procedures seen as proper for enacting that purpose.

For my money, no one has come up with a better phrasing of an overarching purpose of journalism in democratic societies than this: ‘to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing’ (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014: 9). Despite some variations in exactly what journalism serving that purpose might look like, notably around culturally diverse notions of the value and operationalisation of ‘objectivity’, this deceptively simple statement evokes a range of broadly accepted markers of journalistic quality. These include, among others, a reporting process built on verification; a set of normative precepts with fairness at their core; and a cluster of principles including honesty or truthfulness, independence, and accountability for actions taken and content produced. In the absence of such attributes, the premise goes, the information available to citizens will be flawed, and democratic society will be damaged as a result.

A digital era exerts pressure on each of these idealised aspects of journalistic purpose and practice. Citizens are inundated with information, some of which quite evidently does not guide them toward sound civic decisions. The need to produce multimedia, multi-platform, and social content – under continuous deadlines and with a significantly reduced newsroom workforce – leaves a vanishingly small amount of time for verification. Independence is potentially compromised by the obliteration of occupational space separating journalists from everyone else in a globally interlinked network.

Journalists have responded to this recipe for cognitive dissonance primarily in three ways, in my view. One has been to evoke nostalgia for a past that arguably never existed, what Buozis and his colleagues (2018) call a ‘mythic golden age when the news was better made and better respected by the public’. Although a way of making individual and collective sense of occupational change (Spaulding, 2014), a nostalgic approach leads journalists to assign blame elsewhere for the disappearance of those glory days rather than to examine their own occupational values or practices (Usher, 2010). It also makes it unlikely that those who remain in the workforce – and many of those holding this view do not – will ever be happy with the contemporary newsroom environment.

A second approach, also inherently conservative, has been reiteration and reification of core perceived values. The problems with the contemporary information society, according to this frequently articulated view, derive precisely from the glut of available information that has not been guided by professional norms. Ubiquitous misinformation and disinformation, some of it masquerading as ‘real’ journalism, pollutes the discursive environment; much of what is left is flotsam of little or no civic value. This approach ultimately involves drawing and patrolling normative boundaries between journalists and non-journalists (see Carlson and Lewis, 2015; Lewis, 2012; Wolfgang, 2018), as well as perpetually articulating the reasons why the former is on the side of the angels.

I confess that aspects of this argument resonate with me. Ethical reporting and presentation of information are indeed indicators of quality journalism and are central to the validity of journalism's claim to public service. But danger lurks in at least two corners.

One is that the norms evoked tend to be those crafted in a media environment that no longer exists; it is risky to assume some immutable suitability to a communication space that is far less controlled and far more visceral. A second danger is that the continual evocation of paradigmatic standards sets journalists atop a pedestal of their own construction, one from which they are easily knocked off. Being neither saints nor super-heroes, journalists make both bad decisions and honest mistakes. Each time an individual practitioner screws up, public trust in the collective journalistic enterprise goes down a notch, taking another chip of credibility along with it in what risks turning the news media into a rubble of irrelevance.

A third approach to resolving the tension between old ways of thinking about journalism and new ways of doing it, while also rooted in the past, is more open to the future than the first two. It involves a rationalisation of change in an attempt to bring contemporary practice in line with long-standing norms and roles. It can be seen in studies of topics ranging from the application of verification processes to user-generated content (Johnston, 2016); to the accommodation of a gatekeeping paradigm to Twitter's culture of participation and sharing (Bentivegna and Marchetti, 2018); to the incorporation of data analysis and other computational methods within traditional journalistic workflows (Gynnild, 2014); and to the use of novel techniques for engaging audiences in public-service investigative journalism (Chattoo and Green-Barber, 2018). In these examples and many others, we can see journalists engaged in the process of folding innovative activities within more traditional understandings of how those activities should be performed or what goals they should seek to achieve.

Habits of Tomorrow?

Over the next few years, a 'digital-native' wave of journalists will flood the newsroom. A digital, social media world will be the only one they know, and their habits of practice are likely to seamlessly integrate forms and format that still seem 'new' to older generations.

Will they also bring new habits of thought with them? That's a question for the next 10-year anniversary issue of *Journalism*, but from here, it seems somewhat unlikely. Today's journalism students seem to associate 'change' with technology rather than with anything more fundamental to their occupational norms or roles (Singer and Broersma, 2018). They continue to accord high value to notions of fairness and balance, even when they see those goals as increasingly difficult to achieve in practice, and alternative journalistic norms of interpretation or advocacy spring far less readily to their minds (Williams et al., 2018). Although they place high value on their own self-actualization, US students continue to be motivated by a desire to improve the world, and they identify the main role of journalism as being the provision of fact-based information (Coleman et al., 2018).

In the end, is this openness to changing habits of practice but resistance to changing habits of thought a good thing for the industry and, more important, for democratic society? Again, time will tell. Journalists and their employers seem likely to remain under enormous occupational, economic, and socio-political pressure for the foreseeable future. Nostalgia is unproductive, and norms can be too readily misapplied in the service of boundary protection. Journalists will have to think very carefully about which among their values and practices is the baby and which the bathwater – and how best to convince audiences not to pull the plug.

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