

## **The existential predicament when journalism moves beyond journalism**

Alfred Hermida, The University of British Columbia, Canada

*Journalism* (2019) 20(1): 177–180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918807367>

*Accepted version, published December 19, in Journalism 20th Anniversary Special Issue: The Challenges Facing Journalism Today* <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/joua/20/1>

‘High priest of journalism’s existential angst’ was how the Toronto Star headlined a pro- file of the late New York Times journalist, David Carr (English, 2012). The headline captured the turmoil facing journalists as the high priests of news, toiling away in cathedrals of journalism, at a time when fundamentals about their profession are being questioned and challenged. The angst goes beyond ways of working or the nature of the news. It extends to an existential question of what is journalism and who is a journalist?

The transformation of journalism from a relatively stable form of knowledge production in the late 19th century to a more open and contested form in the early 21st has been a consistent theme in journalism studies. Much of the research has explored these existential questions (see, for example, Carlson and Lewis, 2015), as practices commonly associated with journalists have been undertaken by actors outside of the formal structures and institutions of journalism.

Over the past two decades, scholars have looked at how journalism has been affected by developments that enabled others to bypass the media and instead reach audiences directly (Pavlik, 2000) – from blogging (Matheson, 2004) and citizen journalism (Wall, 2015), to participatory journalism (Singer et al., 2011) and social media (Hermida et al., 2012). To say the profession of journalism is in a state of flux is self-evident. This is not to suggest that journalism has been a static object over time. But journalistic identity has been cemented by an occupational ideology that has remained fairly consistent, founded on professional claims to represent facts, truth and reality (Zelizer, 2004).

The occupational ideology of journalists presents perhaps the single biggest challenge to journalism, given the scale and extent of social, cultural, economic and technological transformation of media. Journalists operate in high choice media environments where news is ubiquitous, literally ambient, fuelled by always-on, networked lightweight connectivity that enables the pervasive, persistent and perpetual social awareness of life (Hermida, 2016). These environments are characterised by ‘the pervasive use of mobile devices for various communication aspects of daily life, the almost constant connection to social media platforms, and the recurrent access to news stories on those platforms’ (Boczkowski et al., 2018: 11). Media is a mix of the personal, professional, public and private, with world and local news jostling for attention with celebrity stories, gossip, funny animal GIFs, opinion, rumour and more, all powered by personal preferences, social interactions and platform algorithms.

The practices and processes that make up journalism are happening in novel spaces in novel ways outside of the institutional confines of cathedrals of the profession. Most people get their news from a multiplicity of sources via a mix of devices and platforms across a range of times

and places. Of note is that two-thirds of news consumers are reaching the news via a side door, such as search, social media and email (Newman et al., 2017), with the figure rising to 73 per cent for the under-thirty-fives. Journalists remain key providers of news in these spaces, but contend with other players, platforms and publics to 'define, describe and explain bounded domains of reality' (Gieryn, 1999: 1).

Here lies the paradox for journalism in the 21st century: News is everywhere and nowhere. It is fragmented, atomised, remediated in places, products and platforms that are not designed to deliver the news. People don't carry mobiles or go to Facebook for news. They are used for social purposes, to communicate and connect with others. Yet news is a part of the everyday social practices taking place on these devices and platforms, where stories and issues can rise to prominence through practices of listening, selection and redaction in an always-on ambient environment.

Journalism ideology cannot escape the consequences of new technological, socio-cultural and economic forces. Instead, there is an imperative to acknowledge, understand and respond to the challenge of mass media logic that was prevalent during most of the 20th century. As Van Dijck and Poell (2013) suggest, the emerging media ecosystem is characterised by the interplay between the two distinct but mutually reinforcing logics of mass media and social media. The four elements of social media logic – programmability, popularity, connectivity and datafication – 'are pivotal in understanding how in a networked society social interaction is mediated by an intricate dynamic of mass media, social media platforms, and offline institutional processes', (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013: 11).

Arguably, these are elements that go beyond the norms and practices of established journalism. The paradigm of 'all the news that's fit to print' is challenged by the logics of new spaces for news where the paradigm shifts to 'all the news that's fit to share'. The rise of sharing and social discovery has empowered publics to act as secondary gatekeepers (Singer, 2014), making editorial judgements on what they decide is important and worthy of broader dissemination. Such practices give rise to 'cultures of circulation making up the wider communicative landscape of journalism' (Bødker, 2015: 113). Journalists and editors are one set of actors in a contested media landscape where they vie for authority, influence and power to define 'the news' with other players, platforms and publics.

Such communication practices rooted in mediated sociability result in affective news streams, defined as 'news collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinion, and emotion all sustained by and sustaining ambient news environments' (Papacharissi, 2015: 34). Affective news streams contend with journalism's claim on facts, truth and reality. Emergent news values of instantaneity, solidarity and ambience rival established news values of impact, proximity and conflict. Emotion, empathy and experience are the currency of circulation, rather than the cherished journalistic currency of evidence.

New assemblages of journalism are taking place in what Papacharissi (2015) calls liminal spaces where a curious amalgam of institutional players, publics and platforms collectively form the

news. These assemblages contain their own paradoxes. They take place outside of the logic of mass media, yet are influenced and intrinsically interwoven with the institutions of mass media and their journalists. They are more individualised and personalised, yet also more collaborative and collective. There is much here to cause existential angst among journalists and journalism as a profession with a specific claim to knowledge production.

Moving beyond such angst involves making peace with the blurred and porous boundaries between newsmaker, news reporter, news consumer and news distributor. It demands a degree of reflexivity by journalists, going beyond new journalistic practices, and addresses strongly held beliefs of what it means to a journalist. It demands embracing a mindset that engages with the logics of new media spaces, responds to changing information routines and audience practices, and embraces the wide gamut of forces involved in the production, dissemination and circulation of news and information. The opportunity is there for the taking for those willing to take up the challenge.

## References

- Boczkowski PJ, Mitchelstein E and Matassi M (2018) 'News comes across when I'm in a moment of leisure': Understanding the practices of incidental news consumption on social media. *New Media & Society* 20(10): 3523–3539.
- Bødker H (2015) Journalism as cultures of circulation. *Digital Journalism* 3(1): 101–115. Carlson M and Lewis SC (eds.) (2015) *Boundaries of journalism: Professionalism, practices and participation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- English K (2012) David Carr: High priest of journalism's existential angst. *Toronto Star*, 21 September, pp. 6.
- Gieryn TF (1999) *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hermida A (2016) Social media and the news. In: Witschge T, Anderson CW, Domingo D, et al. (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Digital Journalism*. London: SAGE, pp. 81–94.
- Hermida A, Fletcher F, Korell D, et al. (2012) Share, like, recommend: Decoding the social media news consumer. *Journalism Studies* 13(5–6): 815–824.
- Matheson D (2004) Weblogs and the epistemology of the news: Some trends in online journalism. *New Media & Society* 6(4): 443–468.
- Newman N, Fletcher R, Kalogeropoulos A, et al. (2017) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017. Reuters Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford, 22 June.

- Papacharissi Z (2015) Toward new journalism(s). *Journalism Studies* 16(1): 27–40.
- Pavlik J (2000) The impact of technology on journalism. *Journalism Studies* 1(2): 229–237.
- Singer JB (2014) User-generated visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space. *New Media & Society* 16(1): 55–73.
- Singer JB, Hermida A, Domingo D, et al. (2011) *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers*. Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Van Dijck J and Poell T (2013) Understanding social media logic. *Media and Communication* 1(1): 2–24.
- Wall M (2015) Citizen journalism: A retrospective on what we know, an agenda for what we don't. *Digital Journalism* 3(6): 797–813.
- Zelizer B (2004) When facts, truth, and reality are God-terms: On journalism's uneasy place in cultural studies. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1(1): 100–119.