Entrevista

# New media and journalism in change

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"Churnalism" é o termo que Natalie Fenton, professora de Jornalismo e Media em Goldsmiths, Universidade de Londres, utiliza para se referir a um novo tipo de jornalismo que se baseia no "corta e cola" e que viola os valores de ética necessários a uma esfera pública democrática.

Natalie Fenton estuda a influência dos media na formação de identidades e democracia. E considera que no contexto das sociedades capitalistas, profundamente desiguais, também vivemos num dominado por ideias e identidades em circulação. A investigadora orienta o seu estudo nos pressupostos impostos pela necessidade de compreender a relação entre a autonomia individual e liberdade e a construção social da identidade num ambiente muito dominado pela influência mediática.

Neste contexto, a professora de Goldsmiths, Universidade de Londres, fala-nos sobre a emergência de um novo paradigma de jornalismo, ou simplesmente a replicação de "mais do mesmo" em múltiplos canais.

**Sónia Lamy – In your latest book "New Media, Old news" you argued that the agenda remains the same, despite the use of new media. Do you think that the news agenda has become wider with the development of new media? Or, on the other hand, do the mainstream media impose the main agenda?**

**Natalie Fenton** – In our research we found that the internet has indeed modified news and journalism, sometimes in positive and productive ways. New voices have found expression in blogs and alternative news sites operating out of civil society have found space and voice online. The Internet has also enabled established communities of interest to be more efficient in their circulation of communication and sharing of information with one another. And of course as a repository of information and knowledge the internet is unparalleled.

However, it is important that the impact of new media on the news environment is not seen in a vacuum. Technology has changed the way news is gathered, written, edited, disseminated and read but it has done so as part of a complex history that also includes the extensive marketisation of news and deregulation of corporate communications industries, particularly in the UK. This combination of factors has transformed the world of mainstream news – newspaper cir-

culation and readership levels are at an all time low and key advertising revenue has reduced sharply. We have seen a tremendous growth in the number of free newspapers, emergence of 24 hour television news and the popularisation of online and mobile platforms. This has presented the newspaper industry with some real challenges. Maintaining profit margins and shareholder returns is increasingly dependent upon the use of fewer journalists doing more work in less time to fill more spaces in a multi-platform, online news environment. This results frequently in greater use of unattributed rewrites of press agency or public relations material and cut-and-paste practices that are now commonly referred to as 'churnalism', a practice that is antithetical to the kind of public-interest values upon which the democratic public sphere depends.

Our research revealed journalists being thrust into news production more akin to creative cannibalization than the craft of journalism – as they need to fill more space and work at greater speed while also having improved access to stories and sources online – they talk less to their sources, and find themselves captured in desk-bound, cut and paste, administrative journalism that quite literally re-circulates news found elsewhere online. In a bid to maintain a competitive edge, journalists spend a large amount of time monitoring other media online, the news wires and user-generated content. Rewriting stories gained through this constant monitoring is the main task of many journalists (especially in online newsrooms). Analysis of the content of mainstream online news further revealed that much of the abundant news online is the same: news organizations often cover stories from the same angles and different news organizations repeatedly present the same information in their stories. Ready-made fodder from tried and tested sources takes precedence over the sheer difficulty of dealing with the enormity of user generated content or the overload of online information. Rather than the transformative new world of journalism fuelled by countless sources once deprived of a voice in the public sphere, we found a news environment driven by the principles of commercialism wherein news organizations foreground rationalization (by cutting back on journalists) and marketization (through the increasing commodification of news) at the expense of ideal democratic objectives in a way that has led to the homogenization of content rather than the increased plurality promised of the digital age.

Many commentators suggest that the internet brings new ways of collecting and reporting information into newsrooms. It brings forth a new journalism that is open to novices, lacks established forms of editorial control, can stem from anywhere (not just the newsroom), involves new writing techniques, functions in a network with fragmented audiences, is iterative and delivered at great speed. It reinvigorates democracy through increasing plurality, accessibility and participation. But the internet is just a tool and the possibility for new forms of journalism it conjures up must also play out in the same social, political and economic structures as so-called 'old' journalism and traditional news media.

Rather than change the kind of events that become news, our research revealed a levelling out of news to the lowest common denominator as organisations chase sales and audience rather than stories of genuine journalistic value. The consequences of these developments appear to be particularly stark for original newsgathering, investigative reporting, foreign and local news – none of which can provide the necessary economies of scale to buck the financial down-turn. If change has taken place, it has been change for the worse rather than change for the better. The technology may hold the potential for expanding news, increasing it's depth and range, bringing more sources to more journalists thereby offering up the possibility of an enhanced public sphere. But this potential is left firmly in the starting blocks as commercial priorities dominate the direction mainstream news takes.

**S.L. – Could social media change what we considered as news, or create news events? Should we see social media as a communication tool especially for news sources?**

**N.F.** – Social media have certainly changed how we communicate. Research shows that the average global daily time spent on

Facebook is 25 minutes compared to 5 minutes for a popular news site. In informational terms, use of the internet clearly has the potential to influence the capacity of 'ordinary' citizens and resource-poor social or political groups to gain information and expertise through vastly increasing the range of information that is freely available to any internet user, on virtually any subject imaginable. In communicational terms, sites like You Tube, Twitter, Facebook or MySpace have acquired billions of users in only a couple of years largely by 'word of mouth' – or at least, via millions of communications carried out through online social contacts. These social networking sites are claimed to break down the barriers between traditionally public and private spheres of communication, putting power in the hands of the user thereby giving the details of private concerns a public presence and enabling the public domain of the official political and institutional realm to be more easily monitored by the private citizen. Hence, social networking is argued to bring forth a means of communication that is for the public by the public.

On the other hand there are those who propose a more critical assessment viewing the form and nature of communication on display as no more than an incessant version of a 'daily me' that personalises and depoliticises public issues and simply re-emphasises old inequalities while feeding corporations the necessary data for online marketing, business promotion and the exploitation of private affairs – a specifically anti-democratic turn leading to civic privatism. This approach emphasizes political economic concerns reminding us that the internet does not transcend global capitalism but is deeply involved with it by virtue of the corporate interests it supports and the discourses of capitalism and neo-liberalism that the people who use it are drenched in. In this manner social networking is claimed to further inscribe the neoliberal production of self in forms of mediation that are deeply commodified while also being conducive to sociality. In other words, in developed Western democracies where social media exist within social and political contexts that foreground individualization, embedded in technological developments that encourage pervasive communication and an ever connected online presence, social networking sites are seen as extending neoliberal ideology rather than contesting it.

Of course, situating a discussion in a sterile binary framework with the optimists on one side and the pessimists on the other is often how debates on new technologies begin (whether referring to the radio, television or the computer). But both approaches in isolation are reductive (either in relation to technology or in relation to largely political economic factors) and can never fully appreciate the form of communication they are commenting upon. As a result, each approach misunderstands the nature and impact of the media (in this case of digital social media) on the social and political contours of contemporary life and in doing so misunderstands the nature of the social and the political and the complexity of power therein. Part of this misunderstanding comes from a media centrism that resists a deep and critical contextualisation of social and political life. The millions of people who use social networking sites inhabit a mediated world that offers the possibilities of more control than mainstream media, is mobile, interactive and holds endless creative potential, but is nonetheless mythic. The claimed ubiquity of the internet and social media stress the significance of always being tuned in and on-line. The seductive power of this mythic centre circulates around social life and serves to obscure the reproduction of dominant values of neoliberal society.

Social media are not inherently liberatory; network openness does not lead us directly to democracy. The practices of new media may be liberating for the user but not necessarily democratising for society. We would be wise to remember that the wider social contexts in which networks are formed and exist have a political architecture that predates the Internet. While social networking forces us to recognize the destabilisation of the producer and the consumer and the blurring of the social and political public spheres, to be fully understood it must be considered contextually. In certain contexts, expansions in networked communications media reinforce the hegemony of democratic rhetoric, fetishizing speech, opinion and participation. It suggests to us that the numbers of friends you have on Facebook, the number

of page-hits on your blog are markers of success. This networked communication may well expand the possibilities of contestation but may also increasingly embed mainstream media's priorities and interests ever more deeply into what we think of as political. This helps further to establish the norms and values of commercial media while diverting attention from corporate and financial influence, access to structures of decision making and the narrowing of political struggle to reality entertainment.

These debates are discussed in more detail in a forthcoming book (James Curran, Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman, 2012, Misunderstanding the Internet, London: Routledge)

**S.L. – Do new media enhance public participation or on the contrary is there a risk for people to be more passive before such information?**

**N.F.** – Multiplicity, or sheer abundance of information available to us has been argued to breed misinformation and lack of understanding because the daily habits and rituals of news have changed. People are no longer required to sit in front of the television for a set period of time each day or to read the newspaper over breakfast. Instead we do news snacking. But there are so many other more tempting treats on offer that 'healthy' news snacking is rapidly replaced by the more immediately gratifying tasty tit-bits of e tertainment. Even more worryingly researchers identify a pattern whereby in a high choice media environment the less-well informed are more inclined to opt for entertainment while the better informed include the news junkies leading to increasing inequality of knowledge between the more informed and the less informed. Similarly, the high speed of new media communication is said to lessen learning and feed quick news fixes over longer more considered forms of consumption.

This raises important issues for news and information in a world of social media where genre categories are also blurred and often difficult to tell apart. How do you distinguish between the facts – albeit contextualized and problematised – and the noise and increasing and ever expanding volume of comment, opinion and propaganda?

Another argument is the same in reverse – that there is so much audience content online that it enables journalists to see a broader world and connect with a wider range of news source that will ultimately democratise the news product itself. But even when audience content gains from sources such as social media, and is used as a means of generating news stories, it is usually in a very restricted range of areas relating largely to popular culture and human interest content rather than news/informational content.

The notion that power is spread more widely in an environment where anyone can set up a website, can also be challenged on the grounds that social and political elites have greater cultural and economic capital at their disposal to harness the power of social media to their advantage. It is inevitable that as soon as a form of technology is seen to be a useful means of relaying information and connecting with people, particularly people that may otherwise not engage with their message then political elites will try to find ways of exploiting it to their advantage. So political leaders post video blogs on to YouTube senior politicians apparently Twitter their way through their days while attempting to perform their political duties.

**S.L. – The way through news comes to civil society had definitely been changed. Do you believe this will cause some kind of change in what civil society understands as news? The new media can be a tool of struggle for groups related to equality or minorities?**

**N.F.** – The digital age has also of course, brought with it increased possibilities for civil society including groups related to equality issues and minorities to campaign and publicise their work. However, in the rush to be heard, resources (financial and staffing) have become more rather than less important (as claimed by many new media evangelists). Many large and well resourced civil society associations have been able to respond to a media saturated environment through a growth in press and public relations offices increasingly staffed

by trained professional journalists. These professionals apply the same norms and values to their work as any mainstream newsroom albeit with different aims and intentions. They use their contacts and cultural capital to gain access to key journalists and report increasing success in a media-expanded world.

The resource poor, however, find it much more difficult to keep up with changes in technology and the explosion of news space and much harder to stand out amidst the countless voices online that all compete for journalists' attention. Early exponents of the advantages of new communication technologies proclaimed that new media increase access and create a more level playing field. In reality, however, resource-poor organizations have been forced to rely on long-standing credibility established by proven news-awareness and issue relevance. They find it much harder to keep up with changes in technology and the explosion of news and information spaces, and much harder to stand out amidst the countless online voices competing for journalists' attention.

To be noticed, civil society associations are now expected to embrace all of the opportunities available to them in the digital world – from blogging, podcasts, and social networking sites to their own online news platforms and beyond. Servicing these different communication channels and technologies requires investment of time, money and technical skills, resources that are not equally available to all. Certain organizations, and particularly those that are resource-rich, may be getting more coverage (often online). But even in these cases, to better secure coverage, civil society associations must modify their content to fit pre-established journalistic norms and values – a media logic that has led to what I have called "news cloning." News cloning refers to the practice by groups in civil society of providing news that mimics, or indeed matches, the requirements of mainstream news agendas diminishing their ability to advocate on particular causes and issues in their communications. So new information and communication technologies are far from expanding access to, and representation in, mainstream news media amongst resource-poor groups, as much of the early literature envisaged. Resources, in particular the ability to spend time and money on keeping up-to-date with technological advances and feeding an insatiable news space still structure access and determine levels of representation.

In this context, protecting and enhancing a diversity of media content is ever more vital. Even though there is now a plethora of media outlets, and citizens and civil society can publish media content more easily than ever, there still is a significant threat to pluralism given the domination of a limited number of organizations that control the flow of news and the contours of public debate. Citizen media maybe growing but it is still overshadowed by the major international news organisations. The large traditional news organizations with a strong market position and extensive and established news production infrastructure have responded to the current climate by investing heavily in online platforms. UK citizens predominantly use online news sites that are run by existing news providers further asserting the already significant dominance of the major players. Furthermore the organisation of web search tends to send more users to the most popular sites further entrenching the dominance of mainstream media. It seems ever likely that the voices on the web will be dominated by the larger more established news providers, rather than any form of citizen media, in a manner that limits possibilities for increased pluralism.

**S.L. – Advertising investments and profits on new media are not yet too significant for the consolidation of a business. Portugal is now experiencing a severe crisis, with a great impact on the media. Can new media be a profitable new market for journalism business?**

**N.F.** – First, it is true, of course, that whole swathes of the media – and not just the news – have been affected by the recent downturn in advertising and wider economic instability. Advertising has only just emerged from a sustained slump and managed to increase by 5 per cent in 2010. The four leading regional publishers in the UK, Johnston Press, Trinity Mirror, Northcliffe and Newsquest, have all suffered huge falls in income, including the

loss of £1 billion in classified revenue from 2008 to the present.

There are two main responses to this particular situation. First, there is an attempt to search for additional revenue sources and, in particular, to monetise digital audiences through the creation of paywalls and digital subscriptions. It is too early to assess the success or otherwise of, for example, the Times in erecting a paywall for its online edition but it is notable that, unlike FT.com, it does not provide any specialist information. It seems unlikely that paywalls will be a successful model for 'generalist' news in the short-term. As long as there is at least one source of news that is free in a similar format, there will be little reason to pay and therefore little certainty that revenue from digital sales will compensate for lost advertising and print sales.

Second, there is the view, held by a large proportion of the news industry, that news organisations must do whatever it takes to ensure their survival. Cost-cutting, bureaux closures, the pursuit of multi-platform efficiencies and the intensification of competition within specific market segments are all justified by precarious economic conditions. Above all, no additional economic or regulatory demands should be imposed on companies in such dire financial circumstances.

The situation is particularly acute in regional and local news where conglomeration has seen a diverse ecology of media ownership now reduced to a handful of major media groups who have bought local and regional news businesses using leveraged debt finance. The leveraging that has taken place to finance this conglomeration has led to groups requiring returns of around 30-40 % each year to service debt and enable dividends to their shareholders. This has led to aggressive business plans that have undermined news.

However, what these responses fail to make clear is that the highly challenging circumstances currently facing news organisations have not suddenly turned the whole news sector into a financial disaster. Indeed, profits in 2010 for the bulk of news providers and distributors in the UK were significantly up from 2009.

| Company | Profits in 2010 (£m) | Up or down from 2009 |
|---|---|---|
| Trinity Mirror | 101.5 | Up 39.6 % |
| Daily Mail and General Trust | 247 | Up 22.9 % |
| Telegraph Media Group | 60 | Up 53 % |
| Northern and Shell | 30.3 | Up 240 % |
| Archant | 8.2 | Up 157 % |
| BSkyB | 1170 | Up 157 % |
| ITV | 321 | Up 200 % |
| Pearson | 670 | Up 28 % |
| Press Association | 5.7 | Down 12.3 % |
| Newsquest* | 88.5 | Down 52 % |

* Figures from 2009 and 2008 respectively. All figures taken from company reports.

When it comes to Google, an increasingly powerful actor in the news industry, the situation is particularly encouraging. Google Inc's profit before tax was £6.98 billion in 2010. While Google, as well as some other companies listed in the table above, do not make the bulk of their profits from news, we can nevertheless conclude that some major organisations active in the British news and media industries continue to make substantial profits despite the volatility of the period.

This situation makes it possible to speak of a range of alternatives to how news is funded and organised in order to ensure that resources are made available to produce independent, quality journalism, to protect editorial standards and to promote ethical behaviour. Such alternatives might include:

– Levies on the turnover of profitable communications companies to finance new news outlets with specific remits to serve communities and constituencies currently under-served by the news media.

– The extension of VAT exemptions to cover digital advertising and sales but only on condition that the recipients make a specific commitment to maintain sufficient resources for quality journalism or to support new public interest news ventures.

– Amending charity law so that local newspapers may be operated as charitable organisations.

– The introduction of tax incentives for community groups and co-operative bodies to fund takeovers and investment and to facilitate transfers.

Many of these arguments are further developed in the 'Funding Models' briefing paper produced by the Coordinating Committee for Media Reform UK. For more information, please go to www.mediareform.org.uk.

**S.L. – Internet will be more useful for entertainment or journalism?**

**N.F.** – Although online newspapers are growing and their print versions are declining, empirical evidence shows that people use the internet mostly for entertainment purposes and online they are more likely to seek out only those fragments that are of particular interest to them rather than the pursuit of news and current affairs information more generally. And although news consumption online is steadily increasing there is very little evidence to support the view that the internet has been established as a primary source of news except for a very small minority. It is also argued that the abundance of choice available online results in less exposure to news and current affairs – just as it may be easier to find it is also easier to avoid (Prior, 2007). Similarly, Patterson (2011) argues that an abundance of news does not necessarily enhance democracy, even if consumption is high, if the nature of the news content serves the interests of the news industry over the public's information needs. Furthermore, it is worth bearing in mind that audiences in the UK are still predominantly focussed on traditional media with 43 per cent stating a preference for offline media compared to 26 per cent online and 70 per cent stating they prefer print compared to 17 per cent who prefer an online source (KPMG, 2010). And of course, issues of the digital divide are still very much with us with over a quarter of households in England still without an internet connection direct to their home and 11 % of UK households still unable to get broadband at 2MB (Ofcom, 2009).

**S.L. – Do you think that the Internet could democratize information?**

**N.F**. – Of course, the age of the internet has given rise to the interactive and participative characteristics of the Web that opens up the potential for everyone with the right tools to play the role of a journalist through the sharing of news and information. This impact comes in three main forms. Firstly, civic journalism is increasing; secondly, citizen access to public information and government services is expanding; and thirdly, citizens are more and more able to get direct contact with news sources themselves. Our own research revealed several examples of where citizens had stepped into the fold and set up their own online news service.

There is a wide range of content from local organizations (including voluntary organizations, charities, churches) and local people available especially on the internet. Websites of various organizations, blogs, email lists, newsletters, Facebook pages, MySpace, Twitter as well as printed leaflets, handouts, information on notice boards etc. all provide information and sometimes news that are of local importance. The sources and contents of such information are however fragmented and often difficult to find for local people. We also identified many non-journalists producing hyper-local content, often in innovative ways. These individuals (or groups of individuals) characterized themselves neither as news makers nor as journalists and were insistent that they could not and should not be seen as replacing journalists.

This informal, ad hoc non-journalist produced local content is of value when people know where to find it but it is also intermittent, unpredictable and particular to the individual producing it. These types of news are innovative but they do not represent alternative business models. They are mostly self-financed and rely on the work of volunteers. Volunteers tend to work on issues that are of personal

interest to them and they often have difficulty finding the time to do the work required resulting in an inevitable fragmentation of the public sphere. As such these sites are piecemeal, driven by the interests of the few and often struggling to survive.

**S.L. – What should we set as good journalism today?**

**N.F**. – In an ideal world, unfettered by the pressures of failed business models, new technology and plummeting sales and circulation figures, news media would survey the socio-political environment, hold the Government and other officials to account, provide a platform for intelligible and illuminating debate, offer incentives, maybe, for citizens to learn and become involved and encourage dialogue across a range of views. This is an ideal relationship, however, and it's hinged very much on a conception of independent journalists functioning in the public interest linked to notions of knowledge, political participation and democratic renewal.

The key question is, how can we provide the environment that is necessary to enable journalists to do the jobs that most of them want to do, to scrutinise, monitor, hold to account, interrogate power, facilitate and maintain deliberation? What are the conditions necessary for that journalism to function to its absolute optimum? The burning question then becomes: can we regulate for the relationship between news and democracy while retaining independent journalism and freedom of the press, and if so, how?

Regulation of the press has always been seen as tantamount to authoritarian rule; as deliberate interference with and the inhibition of the freedom of the press and as being profoundly anti-democratic. Yet we have to now face up to the fact that in the UK at least, such an approach has actually done precious little to protect the public interest in the provision of news and its contribution to democratic life. Regulation does not necessarily destroy journalistic freedom. Public service broadcasters in the UK follow clear regulatory frameworks and this is where we see some of the very best investigative journalism. It may not be perfect but it does expose the argument that imposing standards on a news industry inevitably leads to anti-democratic practice and diminishes journalistic integrity. If we accept there is a connection between news and democracy, that news provides the vital resources for processes of information gathering, deliberation and analysis, then surely it's not unreasonable to accept that it's any democratic government's responsibility to ensure that the conditions are in place to promote democratic practice. An excessively liberalised press has failed to provide the freedom to practice independent journalism in the public interest. Markets do not have democratic intent at their core. When markets fail or come under threat, ethical journalistic practice is swept aside in pursuit of financial stability.

This leaves us with some critical questions:

– How do we invest commercial news with public interest priorities?

– How do we address issues concerning the economic performance and sustainable growth of the news industry?

– How do we develop new funding models that will sustain local and national news ventures in the public interest?

I believe the answer lies in a post-corporate, not-for-profit, independent news media freed from the shackles of commercialism that prioritises the relationship with democracy.

**S.L. – Are there any new media business models that you consider an example, as a role model to journalism?**

**N.F**. – Citizens have not stopped reading the news – they have just lost the habit of paying for it. Online, only very high volume sites are capable of funding themselves through advertising because the cost of advertising is now so low. But 'high volume' precludes small-scale local news outlets, which are the starting point for most news stories and the training ground for most news journalists. In this environment 'niche' news about: money, sex, gambling, sport and technology do reasonably well. General news sites are close to un-sustainable. New business models will emerge over time but we should also look for ways of subsidising journalism in the public interest. There are several ways of doing this:

– Levy the news aggregators. Google news and Yahoo News have led the field in changing the way people read news, allowing them to browse free services rather than enter through a specific portal. Just a 1 per cent levy on UK turnover would allow these companies to give back £20 million to the people who report the news. The French government has advocated such a tax.

– Search and Social Media advertising. Social media is mopping up the advertising that used to pay for journalism. It also encourages people to browse for individual items rather than go direct to news sources – thus breaking down audience loyalty. These social game-changers could be asked to give something back to the industry it has destroyed and help to keep democracy alive. Sweden already raises a 10 % levy and the Netherlands a 4 % levy. Just a 1 % levy in the UK would raise over £50 million per year.

– Internet Service Providers. Broadband suppliers benefit from free online content, including that provided by news organisations. Taxes on telecoms are already in place in France, Spain and Hungary (though they are currently being challenged in the European court). A 0.9 % tax levy in the UK would yield £40 million annually.

The Money raised from these levies could be used to reinvest in journalism. It could nurture the roots of journalism by providing a fund for starter jobs at local levels for reporters covering the local authority/health service/schools/courts etc. It could give priority to start-ups who are independent and rooted in the community. These jobs would be platform neutral and could be in video, radio, print, online or multi-platform. To apply for the fund local newspapers would need to demonstrate that all the time of the journalists employed via this fund was dedicated to 'real' journalism. Such a model would follow on from examples in the Netherlands where journalism jobs are already subsidised.

Funds raised from levies could also be used to encourage News Cooperatives: employee owned mutualised organisations that operate on a low-profit or not-for-profit basis and are likely to be more accountable to their readers and more likely to promote public interest journalism than commercially owned titles. By subsidising news cooperatives jobs in the short-term, co-ops could be given the breathing space to develop sustainable businesses in the long-term.