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2017

Duffy, A., Tandoc, E. C., & Ling, R. (2018). Frankenstein journalism. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(10), 1354-1368. Doi:10.1080/1369118X.2017.1313884

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/85315>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1313884>

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<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1313884>.

Downloaded on 26 Apr 2023 16:37:55 SGT

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Information, Communication and Society

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1313884>

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Abstract

Confronted with circumstances altered by the Internet, professional working practices have the option to change or to stay the same. This paper looks at how newswriters in the new form of digital newsrooms have adapted the old location- or topic-based ‘beat’ system, now that they are called upon to curate or aggregate news stories which arrive fully-formed from legacy news websites or emerge from social media. Stories like these are often valued for their virality—that is, how far and fast they have already spread—and their power to attract clicks from readers. Today, a growing number of news websites aggregate or curate such stories as part of their own news offerings. Yet curating these stories bring challenges to journalists’ identities and work practices, which demands a response. Based on an ethnographic study of eight digital newsrooms, we report how newswriters use journalistic rituals to legitimise these second-hand stories flowing into the newsroom. We observed the use of rituals of objectivity, multiple sourcing and comparison with other news outlets as mechanisms that newswriters used to validate and justify their use of second-hand content.

Key words: Ritual; gatekeeping; gatewatching; journalism; aggregation; newsroom

Frankenstein Journalism

Thunder crashes, electricity courses through machinery, sparks fly and slowly the creature raises a hand: “It’s alive!” Victor Frankenstein’s reanimation of dead body parts into a living, breathing creature is the stuff of a dozen films and a thousand Internet memes. This paper takes the idea—although not the science—and applies it to news websites which aggregate stories from other outlets and by a process of editorial alchemy galvanise them into a new life. The questions raised are both practical and ethical: what is the process, and what kind of life is given?

We place this phenomenon in the context of work practice, specifically how gatekeepers control ICT flows that stream into digital newsrooms—that is newsrooms which may or may not be connected to a print publication, but which are accessed by their readers through the Internet. In the US, the *Huffington Post* would be an example of an online-only digital newsroom; while the website of the *New York Times* is a digital newsroom linked to a traditional print publication. The bigger picture beyond that is the crisis in (Western, first-world) journalism. According to the Pew Research Center, newspaper readership is falling in the US where just 20% of adults get their news from paper-based newspapers, down from 27% in 2013 (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthell & Shearer, 2016). The shift is most pronounced among 18-29-year-olds where only one in 20 get their news from newspapers. The material shows that 38% of all adults and fully half of all 18-29-year-olds get their news from online sources. Examination of the economic situation of newspapers also shows an industry in pain. According to Barthel (2016), circulation in the US fell by 6.7% between 2014 and 2015, and advertising revenue fell by 7.8% in the same period.

Studying ICT-engendered flows into newsrooms, scholars have been pre-occupied with the role of the public and the question of “Who gets a voice?” (Berkowitz, 2009, p. 109). This ‘voice’ has three forms: web analytics make known which stories are most clicked on and shared, which gives readers a say in what is promoted on a web page and even what is written about (Author, 2014, 2015); citizens armed with smartphones can photograph, record, video, edit and share directly with the public or via a traditional news outlet opening up the gates to their own ideas and observations (Hermida, 2011); and online articles have space for comment, feedback and dialogue with the reporter (Robinson, 2015). Given Berkowitz’s

question, it is not surprising that so much attention has been paid to public access to and impact on journalism. However, this has happened at the expense of consideration of how *existing* news stories flow into newsrooms, and how newswriters respond to them. This paper, therefore, is more concerned with arrivals from other journalistic sources rather than from the public.

Traditionally news outlets subscribed to wire services such as Associated Press and Reuters. Today, content curation on aggregation sites—which acquire stories, videos and photographs from other outlets and repackages them for a local audience—has also become a feature of the news landscape. But while newswire subscription was a straightforward commercial transaction, content curation is less clear-cut; stories may be lifted wholesale—paid or unpaid—credited as a form of acknowledgment, rewritten, or several stories may be mashed together into ‘original’ content.

This benefits the reader who has access to more content delivered in one place, unconstrained by the limitations of print. But for the industry as a whole it is harder to find a positive spin. Given journalist’s commitment to uncovering secrets and finding scoops, second-hand news like this may be construed as a lesser form of their craft. The question for this study is how newswriters justify and legitimise this new work practice by exposing it to journalistic rituals (Tuchman, 1972; Ehrlich, 1996) which connect it with a higher purpose than simply ‘copy and paste’; and how they consider associated ethical concerns of such curated, aggregated content.

We argue that newswriters in digital newsrooms expose these curated and aggregated stories to strategic rituals of legitimacy, in order to allow them to maintain their position as authoritative media based on legacy practices (Karlsson, 2010; Singer, 1997). This novel form of ICT-engendered stories is validated through the practice of traditional news rituals. Based on gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), we report on an ethnographic study of eight digital newsrooms in Singapore to observe where newswriters get their stories, and how they work with them.

The news industry in Singapore finds itself not facing the crisis evident in Western liberal democracies, but also not enjoying the readership of developing countries in Asia and Africa either. The Singapore news model is idiosyncratic: politicians have long considered the role of the media to support them in their nation-building work, an agenda described by Lee Kuan Yew the founding father of the nation in 1971 as “Freedom of the press, freedom of the news

media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government” (Chua, 1998, p. 151). Some have criticised the media for being controlled, and Singapore came 153rd out of 180 countries in the 2015 Reporters Without Borders report on press freedom. But from its own perspective, the country reflects a history of Confucian respect for authority and its ascent from third world to first in two generations (Lee, 2000) gives strong internal support for the media model that helped this growth. That said, the Internet has also opened up the possibility of more varied perspectives and has led to an emerging species of alternative news websites which are not necessarily oppositional or anti-government, but which seek to offer a different viewpoint.

Literature review

Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping is a theory of news selection. It seeks to describe a standard newsroom practice, a process through which information about events and issues is selected by passing through a series of gates, usually controlled by journalists, and end up as news items (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). These gates operate under layers of influence, with forces facilitating or constraining the flow of information. In the first empirical study to apply the metaphor of gatekeeping to the study of journalism, White (1950) focused on the decision-making process of a newspaper’s wire editor, finding that the editor’s personal preferences and his perception of what audiences prefer affected his decision to use or reject wire stories. Since then, gatekeeping studies have explored other influences on news selection beyond the level of the individual journalist. Shoemaker and Reese (2014) identified five levels of analysis to understand influences on media messages: individual, routines, organisational, extra-media, and ideological. Initial conceptualisation argued that these levels operate in a hierarchy, from micro to macro (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), but more recent work has questioned this assumed hierarchical structure (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

More recent studies argued that extra-media influences such as pressure from the audience have become stronger, especially in the context of decreasing economic support for traditional journalism (Author, 2014; Vu, 2013). This economic pressure also results in adjustments in journalistic routines, such as the rise of news aggregation practices, leading other scholars to question the relevance of gatekeeping as a theory of news construction (Bruns, 2005). For example, Bro and Wallberg (2014) argued that “it is high time to reassess, rethink and remodel the concept of gatekeeping at a moment in history where the empirical basis on which the original study was made has vanished” (p. 102).

Given the large amount of news items emerging from traditional news organisations engaged in gatekeeping, audiences and other online publications have engaged in news aggregation, a process that is essentially about watching what comes out of the traditional gates. Bruns (2005) referred to these practices as *gatewatching*, or the “observation of the output gates of news publications and other sources, in order to identify important material as it becomes available” (p. 17). Traditional news organisations initially frowned upon news aggregation and privileged original reporting. But the Internet made available a multitude of stories, both professional and citizen journalism, bringing greater choice to the audience and more competition to traditional news organisations. Soon, in order to give choice to the audience and to counterbalance the competition, these organisations started to aggregate information uploaded by audiences onto social media, and many of them also repurposed content from other publications. These practices gave rise to new routines—and rituals—in the newsroom that can potentially alter how the process of gatekeeping works.

Rituals of Legitimacy

News as ritual was introduced by Tuchman (1972), with objectivity being the pre-eminent exemplar of a ‘strategic ritual’ that reporters perform to protect themselves from criticisms of bias and inaccuracy, invoking objectivity “almost the way a Mediterranean peasant might wear a clove of garlic around his neck to ward off evil spirits” (p. 660). Rituals of objectivity allowed news journalism to legitimise its activities and its entire existence by claiming that it is the form of communication most committed to truth (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Zelizer, 2004).

Ehrlich (1996) notes that Tuchman does not clearly distinguish between routine and ritual. But the distinction is important. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) define news routines as “Those patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs ... to deliver, within time and space limitations, the most acceptable product to the consumer in the most efficient manner” (pp. 105, 109). Routines are to do with efficiency. But ritual transcends routine. As there is no clearly agreed definition of what ritual is (Ehrlich, 1996), we follow Grimes (1990) who has considered ritualisation as a quality of ‘*how* things are done’ rather than ‘what is done’. A routine task assumes the mantle of ritual when it is both goal-oriented and principle- and identity-oriented. It transcends the task in hand and connects with an ideal. Ritual describes any formalised action which has meaning and significance and embodies values which go beyond the everyday (Couldry, 2000). In journalistic terms, rituals of newsgathering and reporting connect both story and identity of a reporter with high ideals

such as truth and democracy. These confer legitimacy on the (occasionally unwholesome) activity of news reporting.

Over the years, scholars have sheltered other aspects of newsgathering under the umbrella of ‘ritual’. Journalists keep an eye on what the competition is doing to make sure their own coverage is comparable, and highlight how important a story is by watching how much coverage their rivals give to it (Ehrlich, 1992; Berkowitz, 2000). Looking at how *Time* and *Newsweek*, and CBS and NBC each keep tabs on the other, Gans (1979) points out that this is a self-reinforcing loop or echo-chamber as newspapers look at each other to see what is newsworthy, how it is covered, and to judge their own performance. Similarity of approach and product legitimises both the observer and the observed, which is both a strength and a drawback. Lee and Maslog (2005) state that newswork follows predictable rituals such as reliance on elite sources. Reporters depend heavily on officials whom they perceive to be authoritative, credible, knowledgeable and powerful (McLeod & Hertog, 1998; Paletz & Entman, 1981). Legitimacy is also given to the authorities when their opinions are given play in the news; and it is given to newspapers who can turn to authoritative sources. This places the media within structures of power, even as it purports to be a check on these authorities. More recently, and considering digital news, Karlsson (2010) argues that the objectivity norm has been to an extent superseded by a transparency norm—that is, the provenance of information and the way it has been selected must be made clear—which has led to ‘rituals of transparency’. Finally, sourcing stories also remains “a crucial tenet in the strategic ritual of ‘doing journalism’” (Berkowitz, 2009, p. 112). This ritual also favours those in authority as legitimised news sources, reinforcing power structures of dominant ideologies (Sigal, 1973). Rituals have been adopted to legitimise newswriters’ activity over the years; it may be reasonably anticipated that they will be a factor in the new breed of digital newsroom, too.

Research Questions

Journalism is opening up thanks to the Internet, with new ICT streams flowing into newsrooms. This challenges existing rituals of professional legitimacy. Gans (1979) identifies story ideas as a central responsibility of the reporter, which is linked to the beat system; they develop expertise and contacts which make it easier to find new ideas. Bantz, McCorkle and Baade (1980) call it ‘story ideation’, a series of routinised processes which turns an idea into a news story. To put it another way “raw material has the potential to become news only if it is recognised as having that potential by someone in the news construction business” (Becker

& Vlad, 2009, p. 64). One study found that most stories for a television news programme came from other news outlets (wire services and newspapers), press releases and calendar events (Altheide, 1976). As a result, consideration of how journalistic rituals are employed to maintain professional status while being tested by new ICT-engendered news flows led us to two research questions of how newsrooms in transition between traditional journalistic rituals of legitimacy and a new digital news paradigm embrace or rebuff these new flows:

RQ1: How do newswriters access stories from digital news sources in their everyday routines?

RQ2: How do newswriters employ rituals of legitimisation to accommodate the flow of news from other news outlets?

Method: Ethnography and Analysis

“The strength of newsroom ethnographies, old as well as new, is their documentation and analyses of journalistic practice” (Willig, 2012, p. 2) and the move from analogue to digital news production and consumption offers rich pickings. Cottle (2000) points out that most newsroom ethnographies had historically been done from an organisational studies perspective, and called for a broader evaluation of practices within newsrooms. For this study a team of six researchers spent over 200 hours in eight digital newsrooms in Singapore where they observed and interviewed 60 editors, reporters, designers, photographers and videographers. These eight included digital newsrooms linked to traditional print outlets (*The Straits Times*, *The New Paper*, *Today* and *Lianhe Zaobao*, referred to hereafter as ‘digital-traditional’); online-only newsrooms in legacy news organisations (STOMP and AsiaOne, referred to as ‘digital standalones’); and digital-only news websites (Yahoo, Mothership and the Middle Ground, referred to as ‘independent news sites’). Staff numbers in each team ranged from six to sixty people, and these digital newsrooms represent a sample that includes the major English- and Chinese-language newspapers; emerging online-only news start-ups; and outlets relying on citizen journalism and curated content. This yielded 400,000 words of transcripts and observation field notes for analysis.

The six researchers spent time in the digital newsrooms with full IRB approval and consent from the newswriters they observed. They interviewed and observed reporters and editors as they went about the work; undertook ethnographic interviews (Tracy, 2013); did semi-structured one-on-one interviews guided by a set of questions; and attended morning pitch meetings where reporters suggest news ideas. In the interests of professional discretion and

anonymity, all the names have been changed in reporting the findings of the study. The researchers spent shifts of four to six hours in the newsrooms, and wrote up their notes immediately after the shift was over. They spent between four and eight shifts in each digital newsroom, which were chosen as a naturalistic setting where attitudes and behaviours could be best observed (Babbie, 2011).

The initial stage of data immersion was undertaken by three researchers, two of whom had not been involved in the fieldwork and could thus look for fresh insights. One intention of the ethnography was to consider digital news production and consumption, and one emerging aspect of this was the flow of information—in particular news stories—into newsrooms. This was particularly germane given the idea of news aggregators and content curators, which take stories from multiple sources and present them in a single outlet. Following Glaser's (1992) approach to grounded theory, the three researchers met to discuss the data. This initial open coding (Charmaz, 2006) of emergent themes included the topic area explored in this paper. This formed the basis of a codebook for more detailed analysis to answer the two research questions, with secondary-level coding based on patterns among the data, and possible interpretations (Tracy, 2013). The interview transcripts and field notes were analysed by hand for a thick, rich description of how newswriters characterised the flow of ICT-engendered stories into the newsroom, where it came from, and how they processed it according to journalistic rituals.

Findings

This section will first give examples of what kind of ICT-engendered news stories flowed into the digital newsrooms; and second the reaction of the newswriters and the rituals they performed to have these stories conform to professional norms. It is worth mentioning that many of these digital newsrooms also perform traditional journalism. They cover diary events. They have beats such as sports and entertainment. Press releases arrive and are worked up into news stories. Freelance writers pitch ideas. Even family and friends make suggestions: *"Strangely enough, a lot of news comes from my mum because she likes to spread those scam messages"* (Bob, editor, digital-traditional newsroom). Online-only news sites, which previously focused on aggregation, are now also increasing their original content from on-the-ground reporting, but this is considered extra content rather than the main core of their work. However, as these traditional routines are not novel or related to digital news story flows, they are not included in this study. Instead, we look at how stories are adopted,

adapted and improved as they flow into digital newsrooms from other news outlets and social media.

RQ1 asked how newswriters in digital newsrooms accessed ICT-engendered news flows from other news outlets, and we observed three ways. First, they take stories wholesale from other outlets and reproduce them, curating or aggregating the content. This has been standard practice for many years, with newspapers subscribing to newswires such as Bloomberg and Reuters to access news from their global and expert networks. For one digital standalone site which is primarily a news aggregator, most stories come from publications in the same parent company, while international partners include newswires such as Agence France-Presse and Reuters, as well as CNBC and the *Wall Street Journal*. Others have agreements with multiple news organisations, each of which has guidelines of what elements of each story can be used and what can be changed. It is standard professional practice for all of these aggregating, curating digital newsrooms to hyperlink their stories to the original article. This link is in itself a nod to the journalistic ritual of crediting sources as a means to demonstrate independence and objectivity and the new transparency norm (Karlsson, 2010); the written words are not the opinion of the journalist, and were sourced with care and rigour from a reliable source. The source is identified for the reader to be equally reassured that its provenance makes it credible.

This kind of credibility is associated with authority. Looking for news stories, reporters watch respected sources such as the *Guardian* or the *New York Times*, as well as tweets and the Facebook pages of senior politicians; information from the first are considered newsworthy because they have been through the gatekeeping process of a news organisation; the second because they have passed through the news filter of ‘prominence’. In both cases, the stories conform to the journalistic ritual of using authoritative sources. One outcome of using this kind of authoritative source is to maintain power in the hands of the elite, first among the politicians whose social media is being scanned, and second among the more established newspapers which become the ‘go-to- places to find news for aggregation and curation. As one editor of a smaller newspaper said, the system as it stands

mainly services the bigger websites and papers. Because reproduced articles have to cite their sources and provide people with information on the original author, reproducers of these news articles act like a ‘promoter’ for the bigger groups (Jessie, editor, digital-traditional newsroom)

Curation and aggregation raise a different newsroom problem, too: that of missing good stories that other websites pick up, which is analogous to the legacy news value of scooping and being scooped. At one pitch meeting at a digital standalone site, the editor scolded her team for missing out on local stories which she had seen on competing websites but which they did not have. The journalistic ritual of comparing performance against other news outlets is a feature of digital newsrooms. It is a common ritual for newswriters to monitor their competition to make sure their coverage is comparable (Ehrlich, 1996), both as a form of professional solidarity (Rothenbuhler, 1998) and to reassure that the newswriters have something different. This duality is not without its problems, and Frank (2003, p. 444) elegantly sums up the dilemma: “Editors become nervous about printing what the other papers do not have and about not printing what the other papers do have.”

Second, stories are also assembled from multiple secondary news sources to create an ‘original’ news story. Working on a story about turbulence affecting an Etihad flight, one editor was observed to have several windows open, all looking at unofficial (ie non-news organisation) sites—Google, Twitter, Facebook, Soshiok and Mashable—and to be selecting information from each. Newswriters also give credit to these outlets as sources for the story for four reasons: first, it shows professional respect; second, to avoid accusations of plagiarism; third, as a ritual of objectivity by assembling many sources; and fourth, because it allows the reader to gauge how much credence to give to the information.

Third, news flows into the newsroom via reporters’ social media networks: *“Very often we all discover stories on Facebook through our own news feed, or through people sharing. Usually how I find stories is my friends share, then I see it, then I’m like, ‘Hmm, can be a story’”* (Brandon, editor, independent news site). At the risk of stretching our analogy, Frankenstein used both human and animal body parts to build his creature: journalists turn to reputable news outlets and to more dubious social media sources for their stories. We observed a flurry of activity in the half-hour before a morning pitch meeting of a digital standalone aggregator site as reporters scrolled through their social media sites looking for trending or viral videos to suggest as contributions. In the pitch meeting itself, ideas were routinely presented by the reporter holding up a smartphone to show the video or page to catch the interest of the editor. This represents a significant change. The pattern used to be that social media discussed what people had seen in the traditional media; now it is as likely to be the other way round. The newswriters interviewed and observed said that chatrooms and local forums such as Hardwarezone provide information on trending topics of

conversation, and tell digital newsrooms what is important in their readers' lives. Hence these chatrooms take on one of the roles of the reporter to operate as news filters or gatekeepers:

Most of the time we rely on, really, social media and also online forums for information. So usually when something big happens, right, you would see this uptake in people talking about an event on social media, and also on forums... And maybe once you see it on your Facebook feed, like maybe 20 of your friends who are totally, like, from your political space, or from young Singaporeans who don't even care about it, sharing on the topic right, you know this is something big. (Brandon, editor, independent news site).

Curation thus becomes a question of crediting sources, consistent with established journalistic professional practice and rituals, assembling stories from multiple sources to give them a veneer of legitimacy, and recognising that social media is a potential source of news stories rather than being considered primarily a locus for their own stories, or to give publicity to the news organisation's own web platform.

RQ2 asked how newswriters employ rituals of legitimisation to accommodate the flow of stories from other digital outlets. Once the news story enters the newsroom, the next step is for it to be legitimised according to newsroom norms in three ways: the story is angled or packaged in accordance with a new ritual of multiple-sourcing (which is itself a version of a traditional mechanism for achieving objectivity) and this process is presented as a new skill which professional newsroom workers must master; facts are checked in accordance with rituals of accuracy; and the journalistic ritual of fast, fresh news is invoked.

Turning to the first of these, stories taken from existing outlets are routinely re-angled and repackaged for the local reader, often through interviewing local newsmakers, conducting a poll, or choosing a new angle that makes it relevant for the audience.

Recently there was a BBC news, they wrote about a study saying that Singaporeans get the least number of hours of sleep, so from there we took the news and then we repackage. We go and do our own survey and then find our own... specialists or whoever to interview, and then write it (Kenneth, reporter, digital-traditional newsroom)

This was a repeated theme in the observations and interviews: a digital-traditional newsroom took a story about maids from Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* and reproduced its

format and presentation incorporating text, videos and pictures to do a similar story on domestic workers in Singapore. A BuzzFeed video about ‘the Asian squat’ was reinvented as a video of Caucasian people in the newsroom trying to squat on their haunches—the intention was to bring an Asian perspective to the story. Newswriters were keen to position this skill among the panoply of professional practices that newswriters have to master. One interviewee couched it in terms that conflated the old and the new, placing editing and curating as equivalent, exchangeable functions: *“The newsroom editor’s / curator’s job is a lot more fragmented nowadays. You have to look at so many different social media outlets, look at news wires, look at what other publications are picking up on certain stories... [and] part of it is dealing with partnership content and learning how to curate and aggregate as part of the skill set”* (Helen, editor, independent news site). A corollary of this is the ritual of transparency in which the newsroom declares the original source of a story. This is both a matter of ethics, to give professional credit where it is due; and a nod to the legacy newsgathering ritual of objectivity by attributing information to a third party.

The second way in which old stories flowing into the digital newsroom are legitimised involves the newsmakers taking what they see on Facebook and turning it into a news story by applying journalistic rituals such as fact-checking and going to sources. Taking the example of a celebrity announcing her divorce on Facebook, one newswriter explains:

Anyone can write a story based on the personality’s Facebook post—who and who has divorced. Paste the text in, that’s it. But in terms of news reporting, you will go and talk to the person to clarify whether they posted it. Did you post it? Is it true? It could be anyone hacking in, so verification is important. Asking for information: is it because there was a mistress? You ask other people around, who may say, they heard the couple has separated for a while. These are the subsequent news that nobody can get from the person’s Facebook page. This is additional reporting—what the media is doing. (Richard, reporter, digital-traditional newsroom)

When newswriters go to less reputable sources as Mashable and BuzzFeed, they legitimise their actions by giving a link to the original source. This has the effect of distancing them from the content and allows them to maintain their own moral high ground of objectivity. Again, this is similar to the standard newsgathering practice of citing sources. Finally, newsmakers were invariably committed to traditional news practices and values. As a result,

innovative news writing methods such as click bait (tempting headlines which offer more than the story delivers such as “You Won’t Believe The Five Ways These Celebrities Lose Weight!”) were not considered worth the readers they might attract if they did so at the cost of compromising the newsroom:

it's very important that the newsroom understands this as we go, as we work faster, and that we publish more online, the basic discipline, the basic DNA of the newsroom in terms of good practices: Checking your facts, making sure that people who are put in a bad light in a news report has the chance to respond to allegations; that you do not put out a report based on hearsay; that you have at least two sources for example confirming a piece of information (Charles, editor, digital-traditional newsroom)

A third ritual of legitimisation or stamp of journalistic approval placed on these stories is the tradition of speed, of getting the story out while it is still fresh and, if possible, of scooping the competition. Ironically, this ritual is used even when stories have already appeared on a different outlet, as in the following awkward conversation at a morning pitch meeting in digital standalone newsroom, regarding a rewritten story that appeared a full day after the original story:

Editor: “I thought this was released yesterday evening? What happened yesterday? Why were there so many things undone?”

Reporter: “We had to do a lot of write-ups.”

Editor: “What kind of write-ups?”

Reporter: “There were four stories...” [details what they were]

Editor: “Well... alright... but let’s try to get these stories up ASAP.”

Yet timeliness itself has become a moveable feast on the Internet, and an acceptable speed-to-publish is elastic. One idea which was accepted at a pitch meeting surprised our observer who had seen it online a full year earlier. Another story was picked up five minutes after a dramatic post on Facebook and was written within a few hours but was still considered slow: “we were not the first to come out with the story, but we did have additional things, so that was how we justified our slight delay” (Brandon, editor, independent news site). By contrast, readers approved of another story about a food stall which had acquired 14,000 Facebook

likes, even though the stall had publicised that milestone six months previously. The need for speed does not extend to pre-empting their sources, however, even when that is possible; commonly when digital newsroom editors in large news organisations have agreements to acquire content freely from their sister publications, these come with the proviso that they upload it *after* the original has hit the news-stands to avoid scooping them.

Discussion, limitations and future research

Four issues emerge from analysis of this data, related to how gatekeepers control the ICT-engendered flow of stories that streams into digital newsrooms. First, that a multiplicity of source material is being invoked as a form of objectivity ritual in order to legitimise journalistic activity; second, that—despite the multiplicity of sources invoked—there is a homogeneity of sources that may not be leading to alternative viewpoints; third, this in turn leads to aggregated news maintaining rather than challenging newsroom norms, and thus its place in larger structures of power; and fourth, given the uncertainties in newsrooms as staff numbers are cut, newswriters are turning to existing outlets to fulfil their own news offerings. The whole newsroom system itself is thus challenged by the changes.

Looking at the first point, for ritual to supersede routine it needs to point towards some transcendental ideal. In this case, news aggregation appears to connect with Tuchman's ritual of objectivity based on multiple sources, which is performed not so much to present a fair and balanced story as to protect journalists from criticism that a story is *unfair* and *imbalanced* (1972). Further, a revealing unity between newsmakers' own news consumption and their assumptions about their readers hints at the power of multiple sources. When asked where they themselves accessed news, all the newswriters gave multiple rather than one singular source. It is common practice for them to read what their Facebook feed sends, as well as many newspapers' websites and apps alongside more informal sites such as BuzzFeed and Mashable:

I suppose, for myself, I am just, just my view, you become a lot more agnostic like in terms of news consumption, you don't go like 'Oh I must go to BBC, I must go to the New York Times'. I will read all the different sources from different perspectives on different things (Helen, editor, independent news site)

Subsequently, they appear to apply this as a guiding principle to their own work with an unspoken assumption that their readers also go to many sources for varied perspectives:

They may have x number of papers from their country, but maybe they want some things from a more original perspective, they want to see what news is out there that might be contrary to what they are seeing in their national media, the opportunity to look at sites which are not toeing a certain line, then the natural response to go online, let's say OK, what's out there? How is this story being told differently? (ibid.)

This is also comparable to the legitimising journalistic ritual of checking facts against multiple sources; but while reporters habitually go to several newsmakers to obtain a more complete understanding of a story, the assumption is that readers go to several news sources—each with a slightly different angle—to get the full story. This may be understood as multiple subjectivities being assembled to form an approximation of objectivity. The traditional media model placed the newspaper as an authoritative source based on these rituals of objectivity. The sourcing, comparison and rationalisation of differing viewpoints were done by the reporter. Now, however, there appears to be an idea that the reader performs this task, and the role of each individual news outlet is to deliver similar stories but with different angles or perspectives so that the *reader* will combine them to achieve objectivity:

So when we look across what time has changed right, is this phenomenon whereby, now people can judge for themselves as to what is important, rather than having a mainstream media dictating what the agenda is for them
(Brendan, editor, independent news site)

One editor also expressed it in terms of helping develop critical thinking, so that readers were not content with one version of events but could assess, critique and then decide for themselves: “*our aim is to help people think more critically, more thinking Singaporeans, you know, to critically think about issues beyond the news report*” (Brendan, editor, independent news site).

The second area for discussion is that of similarity of sources. Despite claims to variety, different angles and fresh packaging, our digital newsroom ethnography also raised the question of homogeneity of sources accessed by newsmakers looking for ideas, and its dampening effect on journalistic practice. Even with the breadth of choice on the Internet, it was observed that at morning pitch meetings reporters frequently proposed the same story ideas. This suggests either that the same information finds its way onto many websites the

reporters go to for inspiration; or that they are going to the same places for ideas. One reporter who was clearly respected for her originality came from a foreign country and was able to call upon a different selection of news sites for distinctive ideas.

Another side to this was to observe what de-legitimised stories: what made them unacceptable. While one editor said “*the most interesting stories are on social media,*” another bemoaned the fact that her reporters pitched story ideas based on ‘what my friends are saying’ and ‘what is popular now’. This was insufficient grounds for the reporter to pursue the idea and she argued that virality in itself was not necessarily an indicator of newsworthiness. Stories were rejected for different reasons: an idea from the *Economist* because the newsroom did not have access to the original data; stories from the Chinese media because they were too ‘gossipy’; stories from local media because they would have already been seen by readers; shocking video-based stories which had gone viral were vetoed because they had no news potential beyond being dramatic—there was nothing the newsroom could add; and one because “*it’s just a cute video*” (Katherine, editor, digital standalone) and there was consensus that there was a plentiful supply of those.

Those journalistic rituals place new behaviour within newsroom norms and professional practice, and thus maintain the power of newsroom ideology. That may be to the good. But it also sustains other structures of power which journalism has long sought to question; and places journalism within those structures of power. Zelizer (1993) has called for scholars to interrogate media’s rituals as a means to examine media power, based on the premise that journalists have placed themselves as arbiters of what is important. Reporting on authorities, quoting authorities, observing authorities, the industry places itself *among* those authorities—all the while purporting to be a watchdog on them. The media itself have their own power which these rituals preserve, and Couldry (2003) says that “media rituals are the key mechanism through which that assumed legitimacy [of the power to construct reality] is reproduced” (2003, p. 2). In this case media is eating itself, however, caught in a self-referential circle of its own devising, reproducing its legitimacy through claims to its own legitimacy in the first place.

A limitation of this study is that, as in any ethnography, the observations may not be generalisable to other digital newsrooms. The study also did not set out specifically to examine rituals of legitimacy in different forms of digital newsroom, but these emerged inductively from the data. A focused study could start from that point and explore whether,

for example, digital offshoots of traditional newsrooms favour legacy newsgathering routines and rituals more than independent digital newsrooms which do not have this kind of background. Future studies could also identify how much content on news websites is original, created by the news organisation itself; and how much is second-hand, reanimated content.

Conclusion

Gatekeeping theory was based on the assumption that journalists must select from an unlimited supply of information because of limited space for news (Bruns, 2005). Such limitations on space, however, disappear online, changing the nature of gatekeeping. Gatekeeping theory also traditionally put the control over news in the hands of journalists acting as gatekeepers. But news audiences are now actively participating in news production and distribution, controlling what their friends and relatives see based on what they share (Hermida, 2011). In addition, news aggregators put ‘pre-gatekept’ content through an additional filter of ritual to validate it, which suggests that—concurring with Bro and Wallberg (2014)—there is a need to re-evaluate the theory. Further studies would indicate which of Shoemaker and Vos’s (2014) levels of gatekeeper has most influence. Is it the individual editor, which raises questions of the use of algorithms over humans to select news stories; or the routines and the ideologies which coincide in the way rituals are employed to validate stories; or the news organisation and associated commercial considerations; or is it extra-media influences, such as the audience preferences as revealed through web analytics?

These changes are unfolding in an era when readers have become used to free content, to the chagrin of news organisations (Chyi & Lee, 2013). Yet one benefit of widely available online content is that it can be used this way by other news organisations. Even so, no one in the digital newsrooms mentioned the irony that even as they themselves struggle to monetise their product, they do not pay for the content they cannibalise to create their story packages. Another unspoken theme in the digital newsrooms was the legitimacy of cherry-picking stories from other outlets as a means to create their own offering. The newswriters did not question the ethics of the digital news flowing into their newsrooms; rather, they sought to legitimise it by applying traditional journalistic rituals such as fact-checking, objectivity, and seeking new facts to supplement existing information. Similar to Frankenstein assembling

body parts into human form, the resulting creature has a kind of life, but it does beg the question first of where the body parts came from, and second of what kind of life it is.

In both cases—Frankenstein and digital newsrooms assembling a daily corpus of journalism from other outlets—the underlying reality is that they are trying to replicate something that is already being done by someone else. For Frankenstein, it is to play God and recreate the divine spark of life; for the new digital newsrooms, it is to play journalist by reanimating the moribund second-hand news stories they take by angling them into something with a new life. It may be no wonder, then, that they seek to construct their new creation according to the rituals they have successfully used to legitimise the original. Nevertheless, it remains doubtful whether it is plausible for newswriters in aggregating, curating digital newsrooms to continue to leverage on their reassuring connection to the transcending journalistic ideals of objectivity, fairness, accuracy and informing the electorate to enhance democracy.

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