Digital Journalism: defined, refined, or re-defined

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Abstract

Observing the limitations driven by a certain path-dependency in most scholarship on digital journalism, we argue for favouring a direction that privileges 'digital' over 'journalism'. Rather than seeing it as a digital iteration of journalistic principles, as has been a persistent theme in academia to date, it would see consider journalism as an embodiment of digital principles, one of the many domains of social life which is increasingly restructured around digital technologies. Digitisation sets the agenda for journalism to follow, rather than journalism setting the agenda for its digital incarnation to live up to—or not. Such an approach is a continuation of existing but limited scholarship which could open up new paths and expand current avenues of research, and reflects an emerging paradigm where digitisation is the dominant partner.

Keywords: Digital journalism, path-dependency, scholarship, definition,

Gone digital

It is hard to disentangle journalism from digital technology. Considering print journalism, for example, the entire process from finding a source to recording an interview, to the pecking and tapping on a smartphone or tablet or laptop, to the writing, editing and sub-editing, to the layout, printing and distribution is more than likely to involve digitisation. Only physical, foldable newsprint remains resolutely analogue. Digitisation has brought speed, innovation, complexity, sociality, connectivity, storability, searchability, and above all flexibility to journalism. Outside the newsroom, meanwhile, the computing power to distribute information digitally is now available cheaply to the public, who can write, post, share and comment to large

audiences bypassing traditional media channels. This access to computing power among the 'digital haves' has changed the face of the news media industry and its associated scholarship. We argue, then, that an updated definition of the term 'digital journalism' should begin not with 'journalism' but instead with 'digital'. In this conceptualisation, digital journalism is not journalism that is transformed by being digital; it is digitisation as it is embodied in journalism.

A starting point for a definition of digitisation is "the way many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures" (Brennan and Kreiss 2016: 385). By way of illustration of some of these domains, digitisation impacts on journalism's social affordances as people share news stories via social media, for instance. It impacts on the cultural domain as the Internet distributes news beyond national boundaries and allows for a related flow of information and opinions around those stories that crosses borders and cultures. Its professional dimension includes the fresh possibilities presented by user-generated content, and increased awareness of audiences based on web analytics. Digitisation today, however, goes beyond Brennan and Kreiss's definition centring it on social life, opening up new legal vistas in the domain of privacy, with emerging data protection legislation on the one hand and evolving notions of personal privacy online on the other. It drives new assessments of transparency in an era of big data gathered and applied by corporations and governments, as well as fake news (e.g. Tandoc, Lim and Ling 2017). While journalism as the 'first draft of history' has traditionally represented the fixity of fact, in its digitised incarnation it now represents the fluidity of flow.

Following the '4Vs' model of big data, digitisation has changed the volume of news the public receives, the velocity with which it is delivered, the variety of sources it comes from, and the audience's assessment of its veracity. Together, they add to the uncertainty which surrounds news journalism. One impact of this digitally engendered uncertainty has been both to drive readers and viewers away from news as a whole as untrustworthy; or paradoxically to drive them back towards reputable, credible, traditional news brands. Either way, digitisation leads and journalism follows.

Looking backwards to move forwards

Such an approach preferring digitisation over journalism as a baseline would broaden and extend a trail that several scholars have already blazed, such as Wahl-Jorgensen's essay arguing against the 'newsroom-centricity' of journalistic research which has favoured study of its routinised elements over its innovative aspects (2009). Hermida (2010), meanwhile, has explored 'ambient journalisms' as a phenomenon driven by digital technologies and their widespread adoption into everyday life in many societies. This essay builds on studies by them and similar scholars to offer a refined redefinition of what digital journalism *is*.

An editorial in the first issue of this journal sketches out the perimeter as "digital technologies for the practice and study of journalism" (Franklin 2013: 1), setting the tone by observing the fundamental changes in journalism wrought by digitisation. Franklin extrapolates from there to the implications for the "economic, social, political and cultural life of communities and nations". Early on, therefore, this journal established a series of agendas which

may have constrained what is of interest. One might critique the journal's gaze as having a wide reach, but consequently lacking a focus. And while this offers invaluable guidelines for submission, it appears to have led to a particular outlook towards digital innovation (Wahl-Jorgensen 2017).

To continue moving scholarship on digital journalism forward, therefore, we return to the starting point by assessing the 1,675 keywords and key terms for the 277 original research articles published in *Digital Journalism* between its launch in 2013 and issue 6.5 in mid-2018. This allows us to see how the map has been drawn thus far with a view to refining it. Keywords are of interest not because they represent what has appeared in the journal but because they appeal to what scholars anticipate will be of interest to future generations.

Digital Journalism's emphasis on *journalism/journalists* is expected and evident, appearing 312 times among keywords, while *digitised/digital* (60 keywords) is most often of significance as it relates to journalism rather than vice versa. Digital technology is often analysed as it fits into existing newsworker patterns of sourcing, verification and breaking news (e.g. Verweij and van Noort 2014). *Mobility* (16) concerns news production and MOJOs more than as a means for news to fit into an audience's mobile digital lives. *Blogs* (9) are either assessed in terms of their linking norms to professional journalists and institutions, or refer to journalists' live blogging rather than non-journalistic bloggers contributing to the news. At the lower end of the scale are *robots* (11) and *drones* (9), while *government* and *law* each appear three times and *truth* only once.

As evidence of the limitations caused by this 'newsroom-first' approach, one persistent theme in *Digital Journalism* has been that digitisation brings opportunities to journalism that have not been realised. For example, Borger, van Hoof, Costera Meijer and Sanders (2013) find that scholars express disappointment at the passivity of users and journalists. Similarly, the shock of encountering real rather than imaginary readers causes discomfort to newsworkers who then compromise on quality to please readers with the result that both end up disappointed (Aitamurto 2013). Similarly, articles primarily consider how journalists use social media to source, verify and report—how they use it to accomplish established journalistic tasks (e.g. Thurman 2018). Caple (2014) reports that newsrooms using user-generated content photography need to place more emphasis on editing and packaging to ensure quality for readers. New media are assessed according to old media norms: Price (2017) asks of a new publication "Can *The Ferret* be a watchdog?" The use of Twitter to brand journalists is similarly analysed according to journalistic norms (Molyneux and Holton 2015), while Hedman (2015) finds that tweeting journalists do not depart from core newsroom values. Reader comments are also made to fit in with journalistic routines and values (Carlson 2015, Wolfgang 2018).

The clearest evidence of journalism's dominant place in *Digital Journalism* (and we extend this beyond the journal itself to include most current scholarly interpretations of the subject) is therefore the recurring theme of boundary work. Domingo and Le Cam (2014) note that journalists maintain a hegemonic position over narrative by dismissing alternative voices and preferring institutional ones. Loosen (2014), in looking at how boundaries blur in journalism,

questions whether the new term ‘de-boundedness’ is just a catch-all term for the changes being faced by the industry. This blurring of boundaries shapes journalists and journalism, introducing new questions such as who decides who is to be the audience? Journalism’s boundaries now encompass audiences, algorithms and analytics. Editors consider page views and viewing time to attribute value to news stories while, at another level of analysis, every audience ultimately decides what they consider is valued as news by paying or not. In the digital space, the audience has a larger say, too, and news consumers have unintentionally and indirectly become ‘news’ producers through easier access to digital content creation and distribution technologies.

Consider one little-discussed embodiment of audience-turned-reporter that is shifting these boundaries: online vigilantism. The scenario for online vigilantism making the news begins with traditional media ignoring or overlooking offending behaviour, for whatever reason. Non-journalistic digital media then acts: first, netizens go online to seek out digital information to uncover further incriminating details about the aberrant person; they publish it digitally with a view to naming and shaming, and perhaps harassment. Only at this stage, because of the virality of the content as it is shared through digital social networks, is it picked up by traditional journalists to become news. In some countries, notably China, such online vigilantism has led to officials being convicted of corruption and jailed. Such convictions and subsequent press coverage lend credence to online vigilantism; people start to ask, what is so wrong with breaches of privacy if it results in the convictions of corrupt officials? The capabilities of citizens and their relationship with traditional news media has been changed.

Yet in scholarly studies, audiences are more often considered insofar as their perceptions of journalism conform to or depart from newsworkers norms (e.g. Schmidt and Loosen 2015). Many news organisations had existed for decades with only a rudimentary and indirect understanding of who their audience was. Now, any focus on consumers has been forced upon news organisations by financial pressures. Yet, while laudable, any attempts to target the reader pose increasingly urgent questions over the extent to which the readers’ interests should be catered to—questions which could be glossed over in the days before digitisation delivered such precise knowledge of who they are and what they like.

The most significant change wrought by digitisation as a factor in journalism is this renegotiation of boundaries. Lines blur between producer and consumer, between gatekeeper and audience, between catering to the reader and letting the reader choose, between the privacy of those reading and those written about, leading to fundamental questions being asked again. What is the main aim of journalism? For political ends? For entertainment? Or to evoke emotions? What makes people click? Interest? Anger? Fake news? Is there a need to be balanced? If so, should each individual media outlet itself be balanced so that a reader receiving news from only that one organisation would have a reasonably nuanced view of the world? Or would it suffice if the eco-system as a whole was balanced? Digitisation promises far greater choice; but that does not oblige it to deliver on that promise.

Other fundamental questions being asked include that of privacy, long a core issue for journalism, making digitisation in journalism a matter for policymakers as much as for media

organisations. Digital journalism is under greater responsibility to address privacy not as a legal obligation such as the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) but as an ethical one. It is easier to invade privacy in a digital environment; as the incidents in China show, it may be easier to hold public officials accountable through digital journalism. But what of the average citizen? The GDPR can protect the individual's personal data, information that by itself can identify the individual, typically for purposes of marketing or surveillance. But such privacy rules cannot guard against the release of secrets, which is one interest of journalism. Privileging the digital therefore also means that journalists need to be more self-reflective, relying more on ethics than the law, because too much of the definition of privacy and its intrusion is context-sensitive (Loosen, 2011). Wider policies for digital media as a whole thereby impact on the boundaries of what is and what is not permissible for journalism.

Privilege the digital

We do not say that all articles in *Digital Journalism* have privileged journalism, and there are several which examine how digital values are manifested in journalistic practice, such as one article which asks what makes headlines effective to drive click-through (Kuiken, Schuth, Spitters and Marx 2017). Sites such as Buzzfeed, alongside traditional legacy newsrooms, use search-engine optimisation to drive click-through; but while mainstream press sought to apply SEO to their journalism, Buzzfeed emerged *from* the principles of SEO and created a novel form of journalism to reflect the new digital paradigm. Another article moves news away from being a product and imagines it as a service to citizens, shifting the focus away from the producers and towards the consumers which allows for a novel iteration of what journalism is in the digital era (Artwick 2013). Doherty (2014), meanwhile, circumvents the text-orientation and linearity of legacy news journalism to examine how the digital space affords the possibility of hypertext as a new form of narrativity. Likewise, data visualisation is seen as a sufficiently novel area for new technology to set the agenda in evolving new forms of narrative (Smit, de Haan and Bujis 2014); yet Dick (2014) still finds that journalistic and organisational norms define news infographic production. Schifferes and colleagues (2014), meanwhile, keep journalism in the background by asking what kind of technology would be best for surfing social media to find stories suitable for an audience. Wikileaks—a crisis (or opportunity) made possible by digitisation—might be visualised as forcing journalism to confront its own definitional crisis, emerging legal issues, and the complexities of global information flows; that is, to consider how journalism can follow where digitisation leads (Lynch 2013).

The challenge for any attempt to define the term 'digital journalism' is that it will cleave too closely to the first or the second word in the couple. Given the task of defining the boundaries, therefore, we set out instead to refine them. Our suggestion is that the scholarly community should approach digital journalism by privileging the digital.

We therefore define digital journalism as the way in which journalism embodies the philosophies, norms, practices, values and attitudes of digitisation as they relate to society. These include the efficiency of control, storage, retrieval, accessibility and

transmission of data; inclusivity, interactivity and collaboration in the propagation of information and opinion; flexibility and innovation in presenting news stories; and state, institutional and individual ownership of data and its implications for privacy and transparency.

Each of these philosophies, practices, values and attitudes can be through journalism, changing some aspects from the analogue era and maintaining others. Rather than being concerned with how digitisation impacts on journalism, the question becomes how digitisation finds an incarnation in journalism. This involves losing the normative accretions surrounding journalism and starting from the principles of digitisation as articulated through the news media. It requires a continued shift of focus away from legacy news production and how digitisation is being worked into the newsroom, to consider instead how digitisation is a feature of society and how journalism subsequently articulates or informs that. This will allow some established friends into the room: digitisation opens the doors for under-represented communities to speak, for citizens to be heard, for specialist groups to connect, for publics to rally. It introduces novel forms of multimedia creativity, delivering new narrative forms. It makes information searchable, so that it can be repurposed, redirected and revitalised, or misrepresented, degraded and corrupted. Such an approach is not a departure from the existing remit of the journal, of course. Lewis and Westlund have already observed the value in framing the study of digital journalism in terms of a collaboration of human actors and technological actants (2015), while Hermida (2013) has also argued for introducing new paradigms and breaking away from the old. Specifically, for example, focusing on an affordance of digitisation—ease of circulation—rather than on the texts that are circulated (Bødker 2015). We argue only for greater emphasis on this path rather than a complete change in direction.

Finally, there are also practical—and awkwardly commercial—reasons to consider digitisation as a dominant partner rather than a qualifier. Legacy journalism's business model is broken; new ideas are needed from digitisation. It is incumbent on journalism to pursue the digital, then. This will drive change, loss and cost, growth, experimentation and innovation. Each of these will be driven by the cowboy ways of digitisation rather than being corralled, tamed and ridden by journalism. Several authors have looked into digital journalism's economic imperative, considering commercial crossovers between editorial and business (e.g. Drew and Thomas 2018) or where it impacts on audience perception of legacy and online news publishers (Amazeen and Muddiman 2018), or paywalls as a new option—and how unsuccessful they have been in replacing the funding from advertisers (Myllylahti 2014, Pickard and Williams 2014).

We argue therefore that the original parameters for *Digital Journalism* would benefit from loosening. Set tight, the journal's view has predominantly (although not invariably) been from *within* the newsroom. Indeed, one reason digital innovation in journalism has received a chilly welcome in newsroom and news scholarship alike is that it starts from the perspective of journalism—where the question is 'what is being changed?'—rather than of digitisation—where the question becomes 'what can we do?' Starting from journalism has created path-dependency in the face of innovation. Better for 'journalism' to qualify 'digitisation' so that the digital is

embodied in journalism and its relationship with society. Most importantly, these changes are also enacted in response to the need for journalism's survival by evolving as a subsidiary to the successfully—and often profitably—developing digital ecosystem.

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