

Journalism Research

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2 | 2018 | Vol. 1

HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

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Quo vadis, Journalism?

The Future of an Old Media Profession in the Digital Era

By Horst Pöttker

Abstract: Rising costs, outsourcing, mass layoffs, diminished circulation, rapidly sinking revenue from advertising: there is a general consensus that the print media are going through a crisis and that the underlying causes for this are to be found in the revolution of digital media. There is also a widespread concern among journalism researchers, and more recently also among democratically oriented politicians, that this crisis could lead to a decline in the journalist profession.

Which prospects does journalism have in the light of these challenges? How must it adapt to overcome the crisis, and what must be maintained to still be able to speak of a journalist profession? I see journalism as a profession that is dedicated to the task of establishing an optimum *public sphere*, allowing for as much transparency with reference to societal developments and relations as possible by imparting accurate and important information to the greatest possible number of people (Pöttker 2010).

The argument is composed of the following six steps:

1 Is journalism coming to an end?

“The century of journalism is past,” as Siegfried Weischenberg claims (Weischenberg 2010). The reference is to the 20th century, at the beginning of which the concept of journalism as “self-observation of society through observation from an other”. This concept involved professional elements such as the self-image of an impartial observer, the focus on the function of spreading news, or advertising revenue as the primary source of financing, and a relative autonomy towards party politics.

It can hardly be doubted that the period of *this* type of journalism is, indeed, coming to an end. Nevertheless, there is enough reason that journalism as a *profession dedicated to the creation of publicness as a public good* will go on. Could it be that we are not experiencing the end of journalism, but that now after 100 years the difficulties confronting all institutions have begun to impact this profession, too: that fossilized standards are losing their significance since at another

level socio-cultural developments have progressed further? Optimism in this regard relies on two arguments:

The first is a theoretical, sociological one. Journalism will survive the crisis of the press because its existence stems from a fundamental societal need for a public sphere which no development in the media could cause to disappear. Modern societies without a journalism with a concern for its own autonomy are not sustainable, as e.g. the collapse of the socialist societies in Eastern Europe has demonstrated.

The main reason behind the emergence of the journalist profession is the extreme complexity of modern societies whose human subjects require accurate and salient information beyond the scope of their immediate experience in order to participate in their culture. Without an optimum on unrestricted social communication, complex social formations are not able to become aware of their problems and to regulate themselves. What guarantees them this resource of self-regulation is journalism.

My second argument is an historical one. Journalism in the sense of a profession dedicated to the public was already around before at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century it took on the form that many now consider to be journalism per se. If we take into account the etymology of the word “profession” (from Latin *profiteri* = confess), then it seems to be constitutive of the journalist profession to acknowledge one’s dedication to the public sphere, even in order to make it clear to society that journalists contribute something that is worth monetary compensation. This became observable for the first time at the beginning of the 18th century among literary publicists such as Daniel Defoe. Not coincidentally, that was in England, at the time the most advanced country in terms of the emergence of civil capitalist society (Pöttker 2011a). But as early as the 18th century, in Central and Eastern Europe there were also writers like Lessing, Heine (Pöttker 2016), or Pushkin (Pöttker 2006), who worked for contemporary publications and were consciously focused on producing publicness and a public sphere. They influenced journalistic genres of presentation such as the reportage (Pöttker 2000) long before the heyday of the electrical telegraph, the rotary press, or the self-image of the impartial observer.

In the digital media era, journalism might just regain some of those features which were characteristic of it in the period of “literary journalism” (Baumert 2013).

2 From spreading the news to providing orientation

Journalism’s function of transmitting *news* to its audience is on the decline in the digital media era, as quickly absorbable information on current affairs is no longer primarily supplied by journalist mass media, but, instead, engulfs the public from all sides. Even while waiting for the subway, it is practically impossible to avoid being confronted with the latest catastrophes, politicians’ proclamations, or football scores. The tie between journalism and disseminating news is also

loosening because non-journalist communicators (or communications organizations) that can participate in society's communication networks with the help of digital media technologies, but without proportionately increasing investment costs, can profitably make use of presentation techniques developed by news reporting.

It is apparent that in this situation journalism must be on the lookout for other functions it can fulfill. One such function that has been a secondary one up to now is to help its public achieve a deeper understanding of the increasingly complex societal state of affairs (Stephens 2014). This function can be called *providing orientation*. While spreading news is dependent on events and on short presentation forms that rank them according to their significance, providing orientation is more closely linked to concepts of process or interconnection. Especially suitable here are more comprehensive forms of presentation (Bespalova et al. 2010) which require thorough research and more engaged forms of appropriation on the part of the audience.

Journalists are not educationalists, as they are expected to consider their audience to be fully mature. Journalism, then, can only provide orientation by making complex relationships transparent and in this way helping its audience to develop their own understanding of the world.

As far as understanding what is already there in the world is concerned, it is necessary to be familiar with the laws governing nature. Good scientific journalism attempts to vividly impart the fundamental laws of nature and to make their interconnections with the life-world of the audience transparent.

But things are different with respect to the *cultural* part of our environment, which consists of material (e.g., buildings or clothing) and immaterial (e.g., norms or language) products of human activity. Since they are man-made, cultural phenomena vary between societies and are subject to constant transformation. They have become what they are and, thus, have a history. Cultural phenomena cannot be understood if it is not clear how they have come into being. This provides journalism with an opportunity to help its audience attain a deeper understanding of the present by making transparent the events of the past.

Since historical journalism needs to be up to date, its own form of professional quality control leads to a motivation for observing the past from the perspective of the present and for establishing connections between past and present. Nietzsche distinguished three ideal types of such connections between the present and a historical narrative—a distinction still in use today with somewhat different terminology: the *antiquarian* (genetic) one, the *monumental* (exemplary or analogous) one, and the *critical* one (Nietzsche 1874; Rüsen 1990; Pöttker 2011b).

Scientific and historical journalism are just two branches for which can be outlined what could be meant by considering journalism's function of providing orientation, which Mitchell Stephens is calling "wisdom journalism". The possibilities for imagining the concrete forms of the paradigm shift from spreading news to providing orientation are limitless. In court reports, for example, the shift could mean turning one's attention to civil trials, probing into which would involve a number of

orientation guides for the audience's everyday life.

A shift from spreading news to providing orientation will certainly undermine the news value factors of journalism which have been the subject of much research in communications theory since the 1960s. Research on news values examines the criteria according to which journalists select *news* for publication. If in future, journalism proves to be less about spreading news and more about providing orientation, then *research* on the news value will also lose some of its relevance to the practice of journalism.

3 From detached observer to independent actor

Which self-image does the digital media era requires of journalists? Since we cannot understand the present without being familiar with the past it comes from, an historical approach is recommended here also.

Regardless of when we consider journalism to have begun in its own right (Kiesewetter & Pöttker 2011): in the mass media era, when the traditional professional self-image surfaced, the only technological and organizational instrument of public communication was the *press*. For printed newspapers that are actually physically transported somewhere, there is inevitably a time lapse between the event reported and the audience's reading the report. This promoted the self-image of the *detached observer* who is not part of the event on which is being reported and is not allowed to be part of it, either. Within this framework, *independence* and *impartiality* is equated with *non-involvement*, and the professional commitment to truth is interpreted as an obligation towards disinterestedness and detachment.

In the meantime, media culture has taken on a completely different appearance. In contrast to the press, electronic and digital media share two qualities. First, there is not necessarily a time lapse between event, report, and reception. Second, the audio-visual impact plays a much greater role. Both of these factors lead to a greater immediacy of media content, which entices journalists to want to have an effect on the reality they should be reporting on. This situation, then, provides plausible illustrative examples to support the idea that journalist professionalism is on the decline.

Yet, it seems that we also need to take a close, self-critical look at the traditional journalist self-image of the detached observer from which a spontaneous skepticism emanates. This requires a more comprehensive view of the cultural transformation brought about by the media revolution at the beginning of the 21st century. The concept "media culture" has been used to characterize the social formation so strongly influenced by the new media era. What is meant is the ideal type of a culture in which the production of public perception and plans of action oriented to such perception have become hegemonic factors that override the specific logic of other spheres of action (Imhof et al. 2004). For example, political parties nominate their most telegenic members as candidates, not their most competent ones. Or, professors prefer being interviewed by media to dealing with their students.

Journalism in the new media era must, above all, confront itself with the fact that it, like it or not, can become the cause of events and conditions that it only intended to report on simply *because* it reports on them. This begins at a very basic level, for instance, if at the topping-out ceremony at a construction site, the wreath is pulled up not only once, but three times because the cameraman was dissatisfied with the first two photos. And it ends with terrible events like someone running amok, 9/11, or decapitations in Iraq, which were, not least, terrorist actions staged for the media and, in the lack of globalized, live television reporting would perhaps not have taken place in this way.

The traditional self-conception of journalists is in need of revision in a society in which media have become major factors in constituting reality. The point is that journalism, like it or not, must be understood as a factor that from the outset is always involved in the events reported on. Up to this point, there has been little reflection on what this might mean in a concrete way. Criteria for such considerations are missing in the ethics codes for journalist behavior. The most important insight to be gained here is that the desirable *independence* and *impartiality* of journalists cannot (that is, can no longer) be equated with their *non-involvement* (Pöttker 2017).

It might be useful to take a look at the self-conception of journalists who consciously engaged in this profession *before* the self-image of the detached observer materialized during the second half of the 19th century. In his work as a correspondent for the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, Heine constantly wrote in the first person since he saw himself as part of the event he was reporting on. At the same time, there was no one who would have asserted his own independence as a journalist more adamantly than he (Pöttker 2016).

4 From advertising revenues to economic and editorial independence

The strongest threat confronting journalism in the digital media era is the rapid loss of advertising revenues for the press, as advertising is increasingly focusing on online media which no longer need to attract their audience's attention with editorial material because they are more precisely aligned with their target group. The resulting crisis for the print media is often understood as a process of assimilation in which journalism now forfeits its hard-won (partial) autonomy from politics for a too strongly advanced integration into the economic system.

It is true that with sinking advertising revenues, the pressure exerted by the remaining advertising customers on journalism increases, which may appear to be a form of colonization of journalism's life-world through the economic system. But advertising revenue is not the only source of financing for journalism. There are also sales proceeds, with which a professional publication service is paid for directly.

With advertisements disappearing from journalist media, these media increasingly need to be financed by their sales revenues. Whether they will survive on the market for journalism products is becoming ever more dependent on their trustworthiness and comprehensibility, that is, on their most fundamental journalist qualities, and on nothing else. But where journalism submits to the

increasing pressure of advertising customers, it will cease to differ from other types of communication within the economic system and, in that sense, will cease to exist *as journalism*.

So, what we are talking about here is *not* a process of assimilation, but instead a classical case of progressive functional differentiation which is certainly purposeful in that it provides greater effectiveness by concentrating on a single function. A major advantage for businesses then is that formerly inevitable losses resulting from unfocused investment now become avoidable. For journalists, the major advantage is that they no longer need to be concerned with expectations placed on their work by advertising customers (Pöttker 2013).

Whether professional journalism will actually become more expensive as a result of this division is questionable. Customers will certainly have to pay more for media that are being financed less and less indirectly by way of advertising revenues. But the public had already paid the full bill for indirectly financed journalism by paying for the advertised goods (Geiger 1988). In any case, it will become *more transparent* to the audience whether and how much it is prepared to pay for journalism.

But there is reason for concern that the product of journalism, in its entirety, will actually become substantially smaller, at least at the beginning. That cannot be understood as consolidation or “streamlining”, since serving publicness and the public sphere requires providing a public that is as large as possible with as much information as possible. For this reason, it is necessary to think about how this slimming down process can be counterbalanced.

Two aspects should be mentioned here:

In modern societies characterized by migration such as Germany, media companies can attempt to ease the economic pressure arising from the crisis by widening their appeal to new customers for their products in the *multiethnic segment* of society. This would require making the traditional criterion of professionalism in journalism, a grammatically and stylistically perfect command of the language, less rigid (Pöttker et al. 2016).

This does not mean that journalists should not write and master the German language well. It rather means that they should not turn their subjective style peculiarities into a standard; that they consider themselves as transmitters of information and not as language cultivators, meaning language as a means of communication and not as a symbol of culture affiliation; that they make use of the possibility of collective editing in teams; and that next to the command of language they recognize and acknowledge still other characteristics of journalistic qualification such as interculturality or special research competence as equally important.

The second remark has to do with the concept of *quality journalism*. Ever since the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture took shape in the course of the 19th century, criteria of professionalism such as principles of separating ads from reporting sections, documentary from fiction, or facts from opinions have become so exaggerated and ideologized in elitist media that they have become social communication barriers (Pöttker 1999). Making the elitist conceptualization of

professionalism more flexible can counteract the slimming down process for journalism's product in its entirety. If journalists make a conscious effort to broaden their conception of politics and take a closer look at everyday life, then there is a chance that more women, more youths, more elderly people, and more of the unemployed will be provided with important and accurate information.

To sum up, then: professionalism in journalism does not mean making general principles from standards that have developed historically under specific conditions, such as a perfect command of the language, but, rather, a *consistent orientation to serving the public sphere* under culturally and historically variable conditions. From this perspective, fossilized and ideologized concepts of professionalism are even among the structural conditions of the perceived crisis of professional journalism.

5 From editorial to digital journalism

In addition to the news function, the self definition as an independent observer and the financing by advertisements there is a fourth characteristic of the variant of journalism to which we have become so intensively accustomed over the course of one century that we generally think of it as journalism. This characteristic has also not yet totally vanished but it clearly loses significance with regard to the question of how the journalistic profession can be practiced and how from the specialization on the public task the continuous chance of earning one's living and support can be drawn which according to Max Weber (Weber 1972: 80) represent the constitutive elements of a profession.

Dieter Paul Baumert has considered in his still often quoted socio-historical analysis from 1928 which describes the origin and development of the journalistic profession (Baumert 2013), this characteristic as so decisive, that he has named after it the entire period which commenced in the last third of the 19th century and which lasted until the digital media upheaval.

Baumert spoke of the phase of "editorial journalism" thereby wishing to characterize the enormous importance which initially the big publishing houses, then also the radio stations and TV broadcasting companies have had and which today cross medial concerns partly have in their relation to journalists: Large organizations, systems respectively, in which the professional roles of journalism are collaboratively or hierarchically differentiated and where coordinating organization belongs to the most important achievements of especially the responsible personnel at the top.

The enormous importance of editorial and logistic organization for the journalistic production and distribution has in communication studies promoted the system-theory approach (Rühl 1969) which in conjunction with the constructivist paradigm dominates today in Germany research and teaching. System-theory on the other hand has moved questions of organization into the center of investigation of journalism, and has led - especially in view of the conditions which are developing today - to their overemphasis at the expense of an action-theoretical guided investigation of journalistic ways of thinking and work technique. Many young journalists can still imagine their future in this profession only in terms of an employment with a media corporation or carrying out for

such an enterprise a freelance job based on a formulated contract.

The chance for a permanent employment in the newsroom of a media company or a radio station turns increasingly to an illusion because of the previously outlined economic problems of a more or less severe pressure to reduce costs and personnel. This in turn leads to a barren or even contraproductive competitive behavior among journalists where cooperation and solidarity would today be more than ever necessary.

In this connection it should not be forgotten that the changes brought about by the digital revolution in the structures of the media world have actually produced also chances for the journalistic profession which can more and more rid itself of the economical and organizational shackles of its editorial phase and can concentrate on the really journalistic qualities. In the World Wide Web it is possible to publish without incurring those high investment costs which were previously necessary for the printing on paper, the physical distribution of newspapers and magazines or an expensive recording and broadcast technology. Within the Web also individuals or smaller groups are in a position to act as journalists, and if they do that in a creative and professional manner, fully aware that they are acting in the interest of the public, their job can in the long run also be connected with good financial prospects. That some bloggers and specialists of digital publishing can advance to profitable journalistic marks shows that the period of editorial journalism is gradually coming to an end. This is also an aspect which should be considered when the future of journalism is contemplated.

6 The future of journalism has already begun

There are some indications that the future of journalism, as outlined above, has already begun. While daily newspapers must cope with considerable drops in circulation, weeklies, which are based on more in-depth research, background information, analyses, and to some extent literary forms of presentation, have been exhibiting constant growth.

In closing, I would like to mention one of the most puzzling and yet, at the same time, illuminating examples in Germany at the moment: a magazine project that reveals which trends under which factors of the communicative process can provide support for journalism in the future. The magazine *Landlust* has been published every two months since 2005. This rather lengthy magazine with a carefully planned pagination layout and color photos printed on matt paper includes sections on "Garden", "Cooking/Recipes", "Rural Living", "Country Life", and "Nature", but also deals with topics appealing to readers with other interests, such as processing wood for making string instruments. The editor-in-chief is married to a farmer. The small editorial staff consists primarily of female members, and three fourths of the readership are also women, of whom twice as many live in places with fewer than 100,000 residents than is the case for the total population. Within six years, the magazine has managed to reach a circulation of more than one million copies, with annual increases of 20 to 40 percent. *Landlust* is considered to be some sort of success miracle in the crisis-

shaken German media business and has had a number of imitators. But in contrast to these copiers, the success of the original is solely dependent upon its popularity with its public and not on some marketing strategy of advertising customers.

Many observers, and I number myself among them, consider Landlust to be a lifestyle magazine that promotes a cozy atmosphere. But if we were to simply dismiss it for that reason, we would neglect an opportunity to learn something from this example about success factors in the future of journalism that can be transferred to other topics and other target groups. Such factors include: turning away from the attention-grabbing conceptualization of news value and towards an orienting permeation of realities experienced in everyday life; turning away from the large editorial staff with its extreme division of labor and towards the informed participation in dealing with subject matter on the part of small groups of communicators; and turning away from externally controlled definitions of target groups in accordance with certain marketing requirements and towards an autonomous journalist focus on a large and widely diverse segment of the public neglected by journalism to date. Are women of every age and social class who do not live in large metropolitan areas the only large heterogeneous target group whose everyday life is still to be discovered by journalism? Migrants f. e. are such a target group too.

This last point has to do with a feature of journalism that is especially at risk in the light of the digital media era: its *universality*. If truly journalist in nature, the function of providing orientation is fulfilled by information not sought by the audience and, in this sense, capable of broadening his or her horizon. But this simply indicates a direction that future deliberations might take.

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Translation: Thomas La Presti und Johannes Rabe