

Journalism Research

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Courage journalism

Why we should not just let our profession be abolished

By Peter Welchering

Abstract: Does the profession we call journalism have a future? It is time that journalists finally went back to the guardian function they are tasked with. Critical journalism challenges power structures. This paper demands journalism that takes responsibility and is committed to the values of enlightenment.

The future of journalism is a topic of frequent discussion, often involving effusive demands for the profession's reinvention. But one thing is often forgotten: The crisis of journalism is first and foremost a crisis of journalistic personalities – and there are a lot of sides to that.

Journalistic personalities are an endangered species. Instead, we increasingly see a far-reaching lack of thought and failure to take a stance. Simply broadcasting with taking a stance, or filling pages with any old content, does not display any journalistic intention – and those who do not pursue a journalistic intention will fail to inspire or challenge their readers, listeners, or viewers.

Journalism needs journalists to take a stance and back it up

By failing to pursue a journalistic intention, journalists avoid antagonizing. No politician, ministry official, holder of public office, lobbyist, businessperson or stakeholder will take action against journalists whose content is entirely neutral – but they certainly will against authors who present their journalistic intentions, perhaps forcefully.

The manager of a television broadcaster recently argued that the problem with critical journalism is that it is a lot of work, both during and afterwards. Cease-and-desist proceedings, investigations into betrayal of secrecy and requests for justification, presented due to political pressure, undoubtedly take up resources. Media houses, publishing houses, and broadcasters are currently not willing to accept these inconvenient consequences of serious journalistic work.

As a result, we increasingly see ‚journalism presenters,‘ who either mercilessly read straight from the autocue or are at least able to sprinkle the ten most important buzzwords from media bingo into every program and discussion.

Many colleagues see writing and broadcasting in every direction not as failure to take a stance, but simply as their job. They do not account to themselves for what they do. As a result, we need to return to more reflection on professional ethics, rather than just soap-box oratory about it – and to journalistic training that pursues goals, not just purposes. Above all, we need journalistic personalities – people who antagonize. Without that, journalism will not find its way out of this crisis.

Journalists need to rediscover their passion for thinking thoroughly. After all, our industry is guilty not only of not thinking enough, but especially of not thinking systematically enough, and often of not thinking fairly or honestly.

Thinkers are often unpopular. And if they start reflecting on professional ethics – and this reflection is undertaken by the reader, listener or viewer – they often meet resistance. We can keep a few moral observations – superficial, if you don't mind – for the soap box.

Ethical consideration has disappeared from everyday journalism. "Thinking is generally overrated," said one Senior Editor recently, and he was not joking. This attitude gives rise to the failure to take a stance that now plagues the profession. We journalists find ourselves in a crisis of our own making.

Journalists do not account to themselves for what they do. Senseless writing is the result. There is a lack of people with a stance, of journalistic personalities. Even at the Federation of Journalists, when I talk about journalistic training that pursues goals, not just purposes, people look at me incredulously.

The profession is in a serious crisis – one with identifiable reasons and one that we journalists have helped to cause. Scrutinizing these causes is the only way to overcome them. We have to stop preaching, meet our readers, listeners, and viewers, and discuss with them on an equal footing. We have to address the deficits in our methods and expertise. There is a lot to do.

Many journalists no longer conduct research, as they find it too difficult. Others refuse to learn forensic methods of research. Reflection on professional ethics is lacking across the board.

Most journalists reject the idea that the crisis in journalism is in part a personal failure. They have carved a comfortable position for themselves in the journalistic mainstream and go to great lengths to avoid antagonism. Instead, they simply want to get through the working day without too much exertion and enjoy some success with the mainstream. Of course, I need to be very careful in my criticism of this situation if I want to change it.

Communication is the way forward here. We do not want to frighten the horses. In my experience, journalists are especially easy to frighten. We need to reach an understanding on the state of journalism in the age of its worthlessness. Many people no longer see journalism as valuable, as it has lost its values. Too many journalist presenters and media agents have moved away from the duty of truthfulness as the fundamental value on which this profession is built.

Economic factors are often listed as the causes of this crisis in journalism. Although the economic

consequences of the structural changes in communication in society do of course magnify the symptoms of the crisis in journalism, this explanation alone is too simplistic.

The link between credibility and the search for truth

In my many discussions with listeners and viewers, I am constantly confronted with the huge need for cleanly-researched, well-told stories. But our readers, listeners, and viewers also have an increasing desire to know how a story comes about, which source material the journalist had access to, and what the individual steps in the research were. We need to work more transparently here - needless to say without violating the requirements that data protection places on journalistic work.

There can be no question that enlightened, responsible media users remain a guiding principle. But the proportion of responsible readers, listeners, and viewers is by no means as small as we like to think. This minority may often be silent, but it is growing.

These media users demand that journalists pursue their profession based on values and communicate this set of values clearly. Journalists must be prepared to take responsibility for their value orientation. To do this, however, they need a value orientation in the first place - something that many colleagues lack. Furthermore, this dialog with media consumers requires a form of journalism that is both enlightened and enlightening. Only then can journalists communicate with media consumers on an equal footing.

However, this way of viewing journalism as a service for the citizens of a free and democratic constitutional state has simply gone out of fashion. Instead, we see content marketing as a journalistic service, journalistic products being replaced by purely entertainment formats, and the senseless repetition of prescribed stereotypes of power narratives in politics and society.

This has plunged our profession into a very serious crisis of credibility. But instead of reflecting on how credibility is linked to the duty of truthfulness and the duty to inform, we journalists resort to excuses for why we no longer take our work seriously or why we cannot or do not want to do so. As a result, we lose even more credibility.

One truth is undeniable: No-one needs or wants journalism without values. Journalism that fulfils its duty to the ever-present values of enlightenment takes effort. But it is worth it.

After all, the segment of journalism that is in the deepest crisis is the mainstream - conducted by colleagues who work to serve politics disguised as journalism or who are primarily focused on self-marketing. Both cases are special forms of advocacy journalism, which in itself produces an attitude of self-presentation in which the journalist himself completely overshadows the story. Journalists become journalist presenters.

Hot air is becoming a journalistic virtue

One of these neo-German demands is for the journalist to become a brand. Journalistic personalities cannot be sold, as they are a thing of the past. But self-marketing has to be the main role of journalists. Of course there have always been show-offs who produce a lot of hot air and blow it into the media world. Now they are officially sanctified. Hot air is becoming a new journalistic virtue, washing away the duty of truth, research skills, and stylistic ability.

New journalism, I am assured, does not need any of these hopelessly outdated values. I have now stopped attending conferences on the topic of journalistic training altogether, as I can no longer bear the bullshit bingo that goes on there.

All too often, journalism is no longer about the truth - clueless self-presentation is all that counts. In doing this, we journalists are making ourselves surplus to requirements, as we are no longer fulfilling our role in society. The open celebration of cluelessness as a new journalistic virtue is simply appalling.

We need good, systematic training in journalism skills at all levels. It must be based on the rules of professional ethics, forms of presentation, research techniques, and presentation forms that have developed, and it must develop them further. All this sort-of training that produces sort-of journalists (drone journalism, social media journalism, data journalism, investigative journalism, breaking news journalism, lifestyle journalism, and goodness knows what else) is no use - it teaches no journalistic principles, just the froth on top. Anyone who goes into a live situation with just this froth is doomed to fail.

Of course, I have nothing against an advanced seminar in data journalism, for example. But anyone who thinks that this can replace fundamental journalistic knowledge is mistaken.

Ridiculously, many of these sort-of training courses do not even teach the principles required for a discipline that is intended to supplement journalism. When a colleague returns from a seminar on data journalism unable to apply graph technology to an extensive research project and with no idea what normal distribution is, he has wasted both his own time and that of the editorial office - even if he can now supply any round of bullshit bingo with the relevant hashtags.

Forms of sort-of journalism devalue the profession

A seminar that teaches the supremacy of social media in breaking news situations only helps if its participants have clear knowledge of classic news factors, cross-searching, and clean presentation from a professional ethics point of view - however retro the innovative new media zeitgeist might find this.

On the other hand, this is exactly the quarter that laments the potential extinction of our trade. They

are then quick to demand that journalism be recognized as a charitable activity, including for tax purposes. Some even want to lead journalism into a magnificent, cross-media age, without stating exactly what they think this means.

This lamentation is nothing new, but that does not make it bearable. New funding models, new ways to limit access to what was once the freest of all professions... and there are murmurings of new forms of journalism that will replace the dusty old profession of the age of print and broadcast.

Depending on your point of view, the future of journalism lies in drone journalism, data journalism, or robot journalism. New degree programs are springing up, claiming to secure the future of journalism, but in fact merely applying 1980s segmentation theory to journalistic training - in the same way that back then Music Studies became a specialism in medieval flute playing.

People discuss whether Storytelling or Corporate Publishing with a focus on Native Advertising provide a better promise of employment in the future, or whether Content Delivery will actually be the main form in which the industry practices.

All these discussions completely neglect the fact that journalism only has a future at all if we journalists ply our trade properly. We cannot afford to forget our key role: that of guardians!

This role has many facets, presents significant challenges, and demands a great deal of methodological expertise and enormous passion for the truth, for the system of checks and balances on which a constitutional state is based, and for this democratically-organized society.

This is certainly not as pleasant as seeking salvation in the new forms of sort-of journalism - in the same vein as medieval flute playing. After all, it involves a lot of hostility, a huge amount of hard work, and wrestling for the right words. Put simply, the future of journalism lies in journalists who finally take up the role of guardians that has been assigned to them. It is as simple as that!

Investigative journalism as a sign of crisis

We need to see the fashionable term “investigative journalism” as a sign of crisis. Its very existence is a clear indication that research as a journalistic method is having a hard time German journalism. The term “investigative research” has been invented here to ennoble the way in which data, information and findings are searched for and verified in a systematic and methods-guided way in the journalistic trade.

Many local newspapers have long since done away with journalists who conduct research. Today, undercover research is often considered a shady trade, and working together with informants from authorities, companies, and organizations almost criminal. On the other hand, some colleagues (women are much more restrained than men here) celebrate even the simplest of research activities, such as asking a second source, as an incredible investigative achievement - thus contributing

significantly to the public's skewed view of journalists' research activities. When even simply checking the facts is presented as "incredible investigative journalism" like a high-drama thriller, many readers, listeners, and viewers can only shake their heads in despair.

Even some public state broadcasters have cut research resources drastically in recent years. In some cases, specialist editorial offices have simply been closed down, either for cost reasons or as part of a professed yet totally misunderstood cross-media approach. Research was no longer really practiced. As a result of huge complaints from freelance science journalists in particular, this embarrassing situation became the subject of increasing public discussion a while ago. Even broadcast hierarchies that had little to do with journalism found it increasingly difficult to ignore this unpleasant development. As a result, some media houses set up so-called "investigative departments" as alibis.

There is money to be made from affirmative communication and reporting that helps to reinforce prevailing structures. Critical journalism challenges power structures.

However, since critical journalism can only be maintained in the long term if critical journalists are able to make a living from it and have the financial resources to conduct their time-consuming research, the grand coalition's plan for affirmative communication appears to be working. If the foundation of its business and its business model are abolished, critical journalism with a duty to tell the truth will soon be a thing of the past.

The process is not going unchallenged, however. This kind of critical journalism, with its duty of enlightenment, has become established in blogs and podcasts, on Twitter and on news portals. However, the journalists working there do not make a living from these activities - and that is the real problem.

With a few exceptions, journalism 1.0 is currently having the foundation of its business undermined by the grand coalition of affirmative communication. This is driving its transformation into journalism 2.0 - which has as yet been unable to develop a foundation for its business.

These are exciting, but dangerous, times. If critical, enlightening journalism wants to survive, it needs to develop a business model for journalism 2.0. If it fails, the grand coalition of affirmative communication will have won. Critical journalism, democracy, and this Republic all need viable business models for journalism. It is time to start developing and operating such models for the long term.

Media convergence fundamentally changes the working conditions of us journalists. This offers opportunities, but also hazards, if total buy out contracts mean that creative minds no longer have air to breathe or an economic foundation for their work. Online journalism is seeing the beginnings of a two-tier society between high-class writing and those who simply churn out content. This needs to be stopped.

Cross-media is not an end in itself

The still-patchy protection for informants and the great dream of some security policymakers to monitor journalists using their hoped-for data retention powers are doing the rest. Wage agreement policy, media policy, and social policy all come together in the question of whether professional journalism has a future.

It only does if we go on the offensive to protect it.

Instead of developing cross-media concepts, they stagger from one hectic online activity to the next social media bubble. When that bursts, they pay enormous sums to self-proclaimed consultants who push them into the next media management cloud. In the heat of the battle, they fail to see that what readers, listeners, and viewers really want is not a hodge-podge of social media morsels and instant fragments of information, but well-researched journalistic products.

It is time for all those involved in media to face up to a fundamental fact: Cross-media is dramatically changing the way we work, but not the guardian role of journalism itself.

The journalistic trade is becoming industrialized

We need to take a stand. We will be faced with new editorial and production systems. If we allow publishers and the hierarchies of broadcasters to prescribe these systems to us, we will be allowing them to dictate working conditions that none of us want. In doing so, we will be permitting a form of discount journalism that will undoubtedly eradicate the profession's future.

Our sector is in the middle of an extremely exciting process of industrialization. It is no good harking back to the good old days – we need to get active in shaping this process. By refusing to accept the development, we exclude ourselves from it.

I am always amazed to hear about how rights of use and fundamental changes to copyright law are suddenly causing arguments in collective bargaining processes. In my view, our strategies in professional policy have clearly missed the paradigm shift in journalism.

If we do not wake up and implement intellectual property law that is acceptable to authors, or fail to secure and efficiently protect copyright in the long term, we allow ourselves to be dispossessed as publishers and authors. We have seen industrialization processes like this before. Do we journalists have to repeat all the mistakes of history, just because we are so important that we do not need to learn from the past?

Behind the scenes of this development, many journalists are plagued by deep uncertainty. Many no longer have the courage to base their stories in everyday life, as they are unable to access the philosophical principles of narration.

The first is to amaze. But amazing also unsettles people. Too many journalists want to avoid this. It is also difficult to segue from amazement to a successful dramatic composition. Journalists simply do not want to tackle the challenge, instead preferring to stick to the easy-to-digest, zeitgeisty, largely undefined “storytelling”. It is such a shame!

We really are in a brutalized trade, in which humanity and human sympathy are being pushed out by the idea of news about suffering as a commodity. This superficiality and this suppression of what is truly important in life is worse in journalism than in any other discipline. After a few years in the trade, many journalists become inured to the pointed elbows they need to employ simply to get through the day.

The crisis is caused by self-indulgence

We need to change the situation. But we can only do so if we are clear that inconsiderate journalism has no place in good journalism. The best stories I achieved during my time as a reporter were those in which I got really close to the people. Let me give you an example from 30 years ago.

In Armenia, I reported on war and destruction from the town of Leninakan, as it was called then. An old Armenian woman came up to me and my cameraman as we returned to the foreigners’ camp. She spoke a little German, as her son had fled to Germany before the war – she had learned the language so that she could understand where he lived and what was happening around him.

The old woman said to me, “You are here because you are not indifferent to our plight.” You can tell by the way a journalist works whether the people he reports on are important to him, or whether they are just a means to an end.

We talked for around half an hour about why the people I report on are important to me and about why I truly grieve for everyone who dies in a war. There we stood, the old woman and I. We spoke casually. There is a sense of wanting to find out more that comes from caring for others, far beyond the usual professional curiosity.

The crisis in journalism is linked to the crisis in European culture – a crisis of orientation, stances, and values. This crisis has been caused by self-indulgence. It is the same self-indulgence that wants to make the neoliberal goal of unlimited growth as the internal driving force into the highest value in society. This self-indulgence is inhumane, as the interpersonal values of humans are left behind.

That is why we journalists need to return to the principles of journalistic work based on values. With the concept of moral dignity as its starting point, value-based journalism establishes the conditions for a liberal system that allows each individual to develop by taking responsibility. It sees its key role as examining developments in politics and society for these conditions. This is the fundamental guardian role of journalism.

All journalistic ethics, regardless of the specific political or ideological ideas that shape them, need to be bold in counteracting the reactionary escape from responsibility and the neglect of the ethical dimension of political, societal, and thus journalistic, actions. Value-based journalism demands that the idea of freedom of speech is implemented at all times, in all areas of our society.

Human dignity and responsible journalism

Current arguments are too dominated by utilitarian considerations. In debates on media ethics, we journalists have even permitted the discussion to be shaped much too strongly by utilitarian considerations from policymakers. We need to put the utilitarian considerations back where they belong: as nothing more than tactical considerations.

Those who want to practice journalism with tactical considerations are doomed to fail. Readers, listeners, and viewers have a right to expect journalists to act on an ethical foundation - something that people are now demanding. But we journalists have been much too quick to refuse to accept accountability for our actions.

Instead, we have retreated to simple utilitarian considerations. The causes of this are deeply rooted in society and economics. We accept insufficiency as an economic principle and derive utilitarian considerations from it.

This causes a break in thinking, however - one that we need to overcome in order to maintain a key foundation of our profession, based in media philosophy. This foundation can best be described as responsible journalism, guided by the principle of ethical human dignity. This kind of responsible, reflected journalism forms the basis of a journalistic profession and professionalism that deserves the name and fulfils its role as a guardian. But it takes courage.

About the author

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