

Debate

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Inspire, enlighten, disagree

Ten ways to ensure strong journalism in a digital media world

Abstract: Digitalization is transforming journalistic processes and ways of working. The sector must resist being subjected to the logic of markets and products. Reflecting on the standards and objectives of journalism is vital. In ten propositions, this paper outlines the tension between journalistic autonomy and technological change, calling for confident journalism that trusts both editorial offices and the audience to play a more proactive role.

Digitalization in journalism is expanding all the time. So what? What more is there to say? A lot. In our view, the work journalism is doing on understanding its own role – which would be the key to it accompanying (or even leading or at least influencing) the cultural and technological transformation – is too half-hearted or simply insufficient (cf. also the main topic of *Journalism Research*, Vol. 1[2]). Instead of discussing what an editorial office wants and can do in *journalistic* terms and how it can achieve its goals *journalistically*, debate too often focuses on which structures should be built or abolished and which corporate goals and performance indicators need to be met.

Journalism is thus under pressure on two fronts. On the one hand, digital production processes and concepts like ›design thinking,‹ ›useability,‹ and ›community management‹ are taking over media houses and competing with conventional journalistic resources like research, fact checking and expert skills – not least in an age of increasingly limited financial means. On the other, and at least as seriously, mechanisms of the digital attention economy are increasingly penetrating journalism at its very core – from the topics selected, to where topics are positioned, and even the way in which journalistic stories are told.

In our view, both of these pressures are clear evidence that journalism is being influenced by factors that are not only changing it (which would be entirely normal), but also endangering it. Journalism has a harder time understanding its own role, as these developments are accompanied by alleged (perceived, or perhaps even stirred up) or real generational conflicts within the editorial offices, increased economic pressure, demotivating reorganization and instructions to save money, new demands on the media brought about by digitalization, a lack of practice at reflecting honestly on journalism's own role – and the collective despondency of a sector that senses its own loss of importance, be it genuine or merely perceived. This makes it all the more important to clarify what matters both now and in the future – and what does not.

The propositions below are intended to help advance this process of clarification. Needless to say, we cannot answer exhaustively, or even address, every key question here. We see the propositions emphatically as food for discussion, not as statements of truth.

1.) Inspire and shed light – good journalism is good journalism

Good journalism sheds light on the reality in which we live; it gives people orientation, offers them perspectives and insights that go beyond the reality in which they themselves live, and even confronts them with new and unfamiliar points of view. Good journalism is not only informative; it questions power structures and highlights wrongs. It conducts research even where it encounters resistance. Good journalism critiques realities in society, but is not only critical, also demonstrating constructive options for resolving issues. Good journalism takes its audience seriously, devotes itself to its audience, but can also serve up uncomfortable truths. Good journalism is diverse and forces diversity on others. It is open to new ideas. A digital media world changes the framework conditions, the formats, the way journalism is conducted, and the way it communicates with its audience, but it does not change the essence of journalism. Good journalism remains good journalism.

2.) User interest is no substitute for journalistic criteria

Digitalization offers entirely new opportunities when it comes to the relationship between the audience and the editorial office. Analysis tools can be used to poll and analyze what users need, while digital channels create connections between editorial offices and recipients. For journalism, this is an opportunity to get closer to the way people really live. But user interest is not a substitute for journalistic criteria. Not everything that the audience, or a certain section of the audience, wants and likes, is journalism. The click count for a podcast is no

more a replacement for journalistic criteria than ›likes‹ received – regardless of how many – on social media platforms. Data analysis and surveys can improve journalism but, for this to work, journalism must be seen as more than simply serving user interests. It is not about teaching or converting people; it is about breaking out of cycles that simply confirm one’s existing opinion. Replacing journalistic criteria with user interests ultimately harms not just journalism, but the users as well.

3.) Journalism is journalism – not a ›product‹

Journalism is produced, and this production is subject to framework conditions. But journalism is not a ›product.‹ Journalism has value in and of itself, beyond product categories that are defined in terms of economics. A ›product‹ needs to please people, needs to be ›sold,‹ needs to bring a ›return on investment‹ – while production costs are reduced at the same time. Although these economic aspects are part of the business of journalism, too, they do not define its quality. Funding public service broadcasters from a license fee is a deliberate attempt to free journalism from commercial interests. To turn public service journalism into a ›product‹ is to betray its fundamental principle. Of course private companies also enable (good) journalism, as demonstrated by the long and rich tradition of many publishing houses. Yet the main feature and the scale of their journalistic success and their credibility depends on their guaranteeing their editorial offices the greatest possible independence – and not misinterpreting their journalistic efforts as merely sales objects.

4.) Journalism provides a service – but journalism is not a service product

Journalism has a value for society. One could also say that journalism serves society – not the state or its institutions – by enabling people to live and thrive together. As such, journalism hopes to have an impact on society, and cannot be satisfied to remain only in a specific niche. It must address the full breadth of society. There is good reason why ›relevance‹ is such a central criterion for journalistic work. It means that journalism needs to access a lot of people – from the widest possible range of groups in society. But good journalism does not have to be liked by everybody, or even anybody. From a negative point of view, journalism should not lecture people or evangelize – equally, in a positive sense, it should educate, inspire, and challenge. This means not underestimating its own audience, but believing that its audience is open to new, bold, stimulating content – and often even for content that is complex or contradictory. Many people argue that one of journalism’s roles is to reduce complexity. That is not wrong, if what they mean is making content easy to understand. But the real challenge

lies in highlighting the complexity of social and technical processes and phenomena and enabling communication beyond sheltered circles of experts. Serious research means familiarizing oneself and the audience with complexities. This is not only a service to a fully differentiated society; in contrast to the dangers of simplification, it is also a service to democracy.

5.) The user is king – journalism's (not so) mysterious self-sacrifice

Personalization and individualization are two central properties of the digital transformation process. It is a process that is well described by the term »singularities« (Reckwitz 2019). Creating and cultivating (alleged) individuality is a feature of the digital economy. This makes it all the more tempting for media companies to offer users content that is as individual as possible, is relevant to them, and meets their individual interests – an attractive concept for ›product‹ thinking. But journalism's interest should be a different one. If it wants to enlighten and inspire, it cannot serve only individual interests. A functional society is more than the sum of the individual interests of its members. In other words, a society is more than the sum of its bubbles and echo chambers. Journalism that is relevant to society cannot be designed to serve individual user interests as efficiently and accurately as possible. Given recent debate on the level of financial contribution to be paid, the fetish of user interest may promise agreement and acceptance for those responsible at public service media houses in particular – but it is ultimately nothing more than populism at the cost of public service.

6.) Emotionalization, personalization, intensification – the three key mistakes of digital content

Facebook, YouTube, and all other successful media companies produce their content in line with the three principles of emotionalization, personalization, and intensification. This ›content manufacture‹ is guided by the economic interests of global digital technology companies. Yet over time, journalism that adopts this process will become surplus to requirements. Given the range and networking effects of the digital world, simply copying non-journalistic tricks and mechanisms purely designed to generate attention is a surefire way to achieve insignificance. Journalism that simply takes on the economic concepts and storytelling of digital corporations, including default individualization as a distribution concept, is failing to fulfil its role in society. A ›product‹ cannot shed light on issues. Instead, what is needed is attractive forms of presentation and storytelling concepts that give transparency to complexities in society and inform the audience about societal processes in a clear, comprehensible, and captivating way; pieces that use insight and examination instead of empty short-term emoti-

onal effect (»How does this make you feel?«) and psycho-social tempering (»That topic is too difficult for the weekend«), thus creating space for substantial dialog and discourse.

7.) *Likes and clicks – today's fetishes*

The undersheriff of the journalistic ›product‹ is the number of clicks. This figure defines targets, serves as the basis for evaluation processes, and determines whether a journalistic ›product‹ has paid off or was ›too expensive.‹ Keeping an eye on economic factors is rightly an important criterion – not least in the public service sector, which is funded by license fees defined in law, rather than people choosing to pay for a ›product.‹ However, economic efficiency is not a sufficient criterion for journalistic quality. Yet it is exactly this kind of qualitative, rather than quantitative, criteria that are spectacularly absent from everyday journalism. Has journalistic reporting had consequences for society? Has it enriched the debate on an important topic? Created a platform for a relevant voice? Was the storytelling attractive and appropriate to the topic? It falls to communication sciences and journalism studies, with their tradition of researching quality and performance, and not least the management of media houses, to develop criteria specific to each editorial office and to discuss them with the journalists. Criteria like this, which are appropriate to the role and working practices of journalism, are urgently needed in order to set priorities and create a basis for editorial work in a digital media world – not least in an age of ever tighter budgets.

8.) *Social media does nothing to improve poor journalism*

Good journalism is not afraid of social media. But social media is seductive and makes no allowances for journalistic criteria. It rewards fast *soft news*, trivial excitors, cheap celebrity stories. It also rewards simple professions of belief, exaggerated criticism, pure malice, and moralizing self-presentation. All this endangers serious journalism and journalistic integrity. In addition, the sheer speed, the real-time nature of communication, and the bypassing of editorial controls all make social media much more liable to errors. Journalists do exactly what they are constantly advised to do: Present themselves as a brand, strike a pose, keep producing content. At the same time, they form camps – their own bubbles and communities of fans and enemies. What does, or could, all this have to do with good journalism? Our impression is that there is too little discussion, as long as everyone (or perhaps just some people?) is ›active‹ and ›present.‹ There is undoubtedly a place for journalism on social media, as long as it is actually journalism. Ideally good journalism.

9.) *Space for research, not merely a snapshot of the here-and-now*

With public life taking place in real time, speed is nothing special any more. What counts more than ever is substance. Moving beyond quick news updates, journalism can only retain the upper hand if it has more to offer than that which anyone can google themselves in seconds. As a result, expert journalists are not losing relevance, but becoming more important than ever in the digital media world. A commitment to this is often heard, only for these standards come up against the pressure of editorial reality, where shifts need to be manned and the day's news presented. Everything else has to wait until there is time. Having so little time is dangerous. It is not only about large-scale research and revelations (although they are crucial, too) – it is about the day-to-day substance. Such substance can only be achieved by establishments with an editorial office that gives individuals and teams the opportunity to get to know their fields in great detail and to remain with them for longer periods. The covid-19 pandemic has shown a lot of people just how vital it is for media houses to have skills in scientific journalism. Many do not. The same goes for many other topics of reporting. Generalists are always useful – but only if editorial offices also have enough people who are familiar with the details of a topic and able to drill down deeper.

10.) *The courage to expect compromise from others*

Many editorial offices have now realized that they are not diverse enough. They want to do something about it – and not a moment too soon! This lack of diversity extends from the people, i.e. the journalists (too few people of color, too many children of the middle classes etc.) to the topics, perspectives, and opinions covered. Good journalism is curious about all of society. It gives a voice and a forum to those who have little or no power (even those who do not themselves cry out to be heard). Good journalism considers the world from numerous points of view, looks in every corner, listens. Moral criteria are important here. On the other hand, however, journalism must not only report on and give a voice to those who consider themselves the »good,« or whom the editorial offices consider »good« (perhaps they are, but who knows?). Journalism that makes choices strictly based on opinion, is divisive. Good journalism builds bridges between different sections of society, but must not ignore social contradictions, conflicts, and rifts, nor paper over them with superficial reporting. Achieving greater diversity in editorial offices and reporting means not expecting everyone to share the same opinion. It takes the virtue of open-mindedness, paired with a »discursive generosity« (Frick 2020: 149) that leads to constructive conflict – and includes the courage to expect compromise from each other.

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