'NETWORK JOURNALISM': CONVERGING COMPETENCES OF OLD AND NEW MEDIA PROFESSIONALS.

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1. Introduction

The impact of the Internet and other new information- and communication technologies on the profession of journalism should not be underestimated. The Internet is changing the profession of journalism in at least three ways: it has the potential to make the journalist as an intermediary force in democracy superfluous (Bardoel, 1996); it offers the media professional a vast array of resources and sheer endless technological possibilities to work with (Quinn, 1998; Pavlik, 1999); and it creates its own type of journalism on the Net: so-called *digital* or rather: *online* journalism (Singer, 1998; Deuze, 1999).

This contribution will take the developments in journalism on the Internet as the starting point for a discussion about the changing face of journalism in general. The key characteristics of journalism on the Net - convergence, interactivity, customisation of content and hypertextuality - put together with the widespread use and availability of new technological 'tools of the trade' are putting all genres and types of journalism to the test. The outcome seems to suggest a turn towards what the authors of this article call *'network journalism'*; the convergence between the core competences and functions of journalists and the civic potential of online journalism.

This contribution will first briefly discuss the developments and characteristics of journalism on the Internet, drawing on our research covering the range of scholarly and professional literature, discussions on mailing lists for (online) journalists and relevant newsgroups. Secondly, the paper will refer to the public journalism debate, paying more specific attention to the shift towards the audience (or: *publics*) in contemporary journalism.

Concluding the authors argue that convergence as such takes place on several levels: technological, professional and cultural (see also: Jenkins, 2001). The combination of these levels of convergence socially constructs 'network journalism'. Although convergence as it is introduced in this paper – in the context of journalism on the Internet – has a powerful deterministic component in terms of (the uses and impact of) technology, it must be stressed here that technology in

itself cannot be seen as the determining factor in defining what professional convergence and overall change in journalism means.

This last point turns back upon the notion of the role that journalism plays in a given democracy: reinforcing the ideal of participatory citizenship through effective dissemination of public information. It must be noted though that in an individualised, electronic society, notions such as social integration, political participation, community and debate, are definitely becoming less self-evident and seem to be in need of redefinition in a contemporary context (see Bardoel, 1996; Schudson, 1999).

2. Journalism and the Internet

The fourth kind of journalism - next to radio, television and print - is online journalism, seen as gathering and distributing original news content on the Internet. Research shows that the genre has outgrown the status of 'shovelware' production: online journalists do not merely repurpose content for the Web, and more of them are generating original content (see for example the Ross and Middleberg online journalism surveys of 1996-2000; Deuze, 2000). The definition of journalism online and indeed journalism in general has posed researchers for problems throughout the history of journalism studies (see for example debate in Sparks and Splichal, 1989; Scholl, 1996). A working definition of journalists in general and online journalism in particular should nowadays be sensitive towards calls in the literature for a broader and wider notion of journalism - in other words: a call for a more 'catholic' definition of journalism (Sparks, 1991: 67). Such a definition would adopt hierarchical elements of journalism varying from the micro level of the communicator and the meso level of his or her professional environment (i.e. the workplace) to the macro level of (inter-) national economics, politics and culture influencing the individual media professional. At the same time a wider definition would include a horizontal view on journalism, looking at the range of different genres, niches and specialisation's contemporary journalists work for (Deuze, 1999). In the context of the Internet, a definition must have a technological dimension, since the practice of journalism online is in its essence hardly different from any kind of other journalism; its main determining

characteristic is that it is being practised in an online (or 'wired') computer-mediated communication environment (Singer, 1998). Journalism in general is defined here as the professional selection of actual news facts to an audience by means of technological distribution methods – which general definition allows for a particular discussion of online journalism in a distinctly technology-driven context (Bardoel, 1997). Especially in recent years the role of technology in effectively distributing media messages has changed and has taken centre stage in the modern journalistic theatre and should therefore serve as essential or even starting point of any scholarly venture into online journalism (Deuze, 1998). With respect to the individual communicator this means that journalists are those individuals working within an editorial board or newsroom (be it full-time or freelance) who perform one of four core journalistic tasks: selecting, researching (or: gathering), writing (or: processing) and editing news more or less exclusively for the World Wide Web (Scholl, 1996: 335; Deuze, 1999). In short, this refers to editors and reporters working within an online newsroom of a media outlet and/or organisation. An editorial board or newsroom is an independent working unit within a media organisation - whereas a media organisation can be referred to on two levels as a broadcast, print, cable or online media outlet and as a media organisation incorporating more than one media outlet. As such, online journalism can be functionally differentiated from other kinds of journalism by using its technological component as a determining factor in terms of (operational) definition. The relevance of defining online journalism in this way, and its meaning for the profession as a whole can be summarised quoting Dahlgren's observation that:

"Journalism is carried out in specific institutional circumstances, within concrete organisational settings and under particular technological conditions. The advent of cyberspace will inevitably impact on the factors which shape how journalism gets done - and may well even colour how we define what journalism is" (Dahlgren, 1996: 60).

The literature suggests that the essential characteristics of online journalism are interactivity, customisation of content, hypertextuality and convergence or rather: multimediality – which characteristics all contribute to the time-space distantiated

and potentially asynchronous nature of news and information online (see Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996; Singer, 1998; Pavlik, 1997 and 1999; Deuze, 1999 and 2001a). The convergence of communication modalities leads to an integration and possible specialisation of information services, where the existing unity of production, content and distribution within each separate medium will cease to exist (Bardoel, 1998). Media professionals can for example produce news content which then can be published through a variety of communication channels - so-called 'windowing' of content (see this argument already offered in Fulton, 1996). This in turn means that more and more emphasis will be put on the journalistic core function of gathering and disseminating of updated information that will not be directly linked to existing media types, genres or ways of distribution.

The developments on the Internet in terms of news and journalism lead to a classification of its key characteristics:

- *interactivity;*
- *customisation of content*
- *hypertextuality;* and
- *multimediality.*

Although other media have also a claim to the fame of *interactivity* - one could think of Talk Radio - this aspect is generally referred to as the main discerning characteristic of the online environment. Especially when looking at online news, the interactive element seems to be of essential importance. The key to understanding this is to see interactivity as a purely audience-related feature. It has not so much to do with the speed of news and journalistic activity - although it does facilitate fast work - but with the fact that online news has the potential to make the reader/user part of the news experience. This can be done through a number of ways: through direct or indirect e-mail exchange between the journalist or staff and the user, through a bulletin board system available on the newssite, through a 'send your comments'-option box underneath each news story or, more recently, through Web chat possibilities, even introducing the people who are featured in the story to the users together with the journalist responsible for the piece in an ultimate interactive environment.

The second essential element is not surprisingly also an audience-related feature: *customisation of content*. Although the literature speaks of 'personalisation' or 'individualisation', a reflection on the current practices and ideas in online journalism suggests it is better to use customisation of content as the defining characteristic here, since personalisation also implies a trend associated with the debate on the modern-day blurring of the lines between the public and the private sphere - especially in the media. The technology of the Internet not only allows for fast interaction between journalist, organisation and user, but also for customisation of that particular interaction (especially by the user). This would not mean adapting the paper or the program to the perceived needs and wants of a faceless audience probed by marketing research firms. This means putting a journalistic product together to cater for the individual citizen. Examples of such customised news products are 'pull' content (the online archive is the obvious example), 'push' content (subscriber news pushed to individual computers, very popular a few years ago, now in decline) and 'custom content'. This third option could be described as a hybrid between push and pull used by news sites like CNN as well as search engines such as Excite and Yahoo, and gives the user an option to create his or her own homepage at the search- or newssite, consisting of pre-selected news topics and services such as horoscopes, stock quotes and so on. Such services - called 'custom news' as for example "my.cnn" - allow the reader to login at any time to a certain Web page and watch their personal picks of the moment's news. The central point remains the same: customisation of content is one of the key discerning elements of online journalism.

With *hypertextuality,* we can refer to the specific nature of journalism online, which is the professional aspect of offering information about information - producing 'beyond information' if you will. The phenomenon of hypertext and hyperlinks can be seen as the starting point of the World Wide Web, whereas the journalist online may use this characteristic to supply original news content with for example hyperlinks to original documents such as press releases and annotated reference material which could include links to the pros and cons in the issue at hand, links to other sites with information and a selection of material in the news archives (Pavlik, 1999). With the explosive increase of information on a worldwide scale,

the necessity of offering information about information has become a crucial addition to the journalist's skills and tasks (Deuze, 1999). This redefines the journalist's role into an annotational or orientational one - a shift from the watchdog to the 'guidedog' (which term comes not surprisingly from the *civic* journalism movement in the USA – see Black, 1997). For the user, this means that he or she can opt for either concise or in-depth reporting, thus further eroding the traditional difference between types of news (cf. broadcast and print) and genres within the news (cf. reporting and commenting).

The fourth characteristic is *multimediality*. Multimediality in the context of online journalism is the convergence of traditional media formats - (moving) image, text, sound - in one story told online (Guay, 1995). In this respect, one could argue that this characteristic is the technological media component of hypertextuality. The Word Wide Web offers the individual user the option to choose between the respective elements of the story and offers the journalist to 'play around' with these elements: every single story can have a different angle, a different way of telling the story. The technology for full multimedia content is not generally available at the time, but will be in a matter of years. The fact that there is a choice - for both user as well as journalist - is the discerning element here. Content analyses show the online newspapers may be better – if applied at all, that is – in offering interactivity, while broadcast media online generally are better at supplying the surfer with multimedia (Schultz, 1999; Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000).

Interactivity, customisation of content, hypertextuality and multimediality are redefining journalism from the perspective of the Internet, yet their components have implications for journalism in general. Such impact can be contextualised when one considers online journalism as the catalyst for change in the profession as a whole; whereas the journalist used to depend on a media organisation to offer him or her full-time employment and therefore job security, the new journalism is a job with multiple skills, formats and employment patterns at the same time – an at once functionally differentiated and more holistic profession (see Weischenberg and Scholl, 1998). In terms of journalism education this is translated at a call for multi-skills training (Bierhoff, 1999; Deuze, 2001b). Still, some influential authors feel this interpretation of convergence is a dangerous road to take – especially in

journalism training (Medsger, 1998). Multiple formats requite the journalist to be much more aware of possible entries into the news story – leading towards alternate ways of storytelling (Rich, 1997). Finally, employment patterns in recent years suggest that more and more journalists are changing jobs frequently (especially within broadcast journalism), opting for part-time contracts or even freelance reporting (see for example remarks made in journalist surveys worldwide reported in Weaver, 1998). This may not be a direct result from new media technology like the Internet, but the online environment and communities certainly facilitate new directions for the professionals involved. This also reflects on the redefinition of the audience/publics-journalist relationships, which features particularly in the online journalism characteristics of interactivity and customisation. This paper will now explore the terrain of the public, in particular in terms of its relationship with media professionals in society.

3. Journalism and the Public

Network journalism might well change the relation between the journalists and their public in a fundamental way that affects the profession as a whole; its major characteristics as we have pointed out before seem to reflect clearly a shifting balance of power between information suppliers and users. We shall examine this changing relationship on three levels: technological, social-cultural and professional.

It is clearly the *technological convergence* that is the prime drive for the changing communications relations we are assessing here. Digitalisation and computer networks offer the opportunity to combine existing communication modes and media that operated separately before, thus creating - in the now dominant economic vocabulary - new distribution channels or information 'value chains', in which 'windowing' becomes a common practice (Bardoel, 1997). As a result new intermediary practices come up, in which journalism is just one of many 'middlemen', whereas at the same time *disintermediation* - as a result of an increasing self-service facilitated by the combination of new technologies and active information seeking individuals - becomes possible. This is not to say that the end of mediated communication is near, but it only shows that due to new

technology the exclusive hold of journalists on the gatekeeping function to private households comes to an end. Ironically, it was the old (newspaper) technology that has brought journalists in this privileged position, and it is the new (on-line) technology that might remove journalists from that position again.

At the same time we should be cautious not to mix up technological possibilities with social realities; technology does not determine what will happen here, but it will take a patient process of 'social shaping' that determines what will be the impact of the new communications technologies, especially in the private sphere. Therefore it is important to look at social-cultural trends that either reinforce or hinder the acceptance of the opportunities that new technology offers.

Looking at relevant *social-cultural developments* we however see a good chance for new services where they are linked to dominant soci(ologic)al trends such as individualisation, 'time-space distantiation' and the privatisation of information provision. Greater individual freedom of choice can be symbolised by the supermarket metaphor for (post) modern media consumption. At the same time the new communications technology allows for new, virtual community formation, on a global, local or special interest basis, thus blurring the boundaries of the existing nation-state. Apart from new societies, less dependent of geographical distance or - better - nearness, a new type of citizen emerges, less involved - according to Giddens (1991) - in old-fashioned collective 'emancipatory politics' but engaged in individual 'life politics'. Instead of quite homogeneous collectives we see very heterogeneous individuals that belong - thanks to the death of distance and the increased span of control caused by new technologies - to many communities - big and small, near or distant - at the same time. These new (post) modern citizens need, because of the multiple lives they live and the multiple communities they are part of, more information and orientation then ever, but in a new, non-paternalistic manner. For journalists it is quite a challenge - or should we say less ironically a threat - to serve this multi-faced and fragmented public, for whom the news 'product' is no longer sacred in se. Since the scarcity of the offering has turned into abundance people can make a choice, for journalistic selection and scope or for other information intermediaries. This, again, shows that the power relation is shifting.

At the - third - level of the *journalistic profession* we see that, as we have pointed out earlier, after journalism's self-liberation from ideological prerogatives and hierarchical conditions by means of increased professionalization, the public in turn is liberating itself by means of individualisation. The shift in the relationship between supplier and user to the advantage of the latter, changes the old, paternalistic relationship into a new, more pragmatic arrangement and leads to a new emancipation of the information user (Bardoel, 1997). Traditional journalism is, more then the profession realises or is willing to admit, a product of industrial society with its centralised, hierarchical and paternalistic characteristics (Heinonen, 1999). In embracing the professional model not only the value of independence, but also the interest of autonomy and self-sustainability were served. As a reaction to this self-satisfaction and irresponsiveness waves of criticism, both from outside and inside the profession, were heard from time to time; the debate on public or civic journalism in the US is maybe the most recent illustration of this concern (see for example Black, 1997). Because of trends described above the primacy of political journalism might lose ground and the journalists' activity, as an inevitable intermediary between the citizen and the outside world, will assume a more voluntaristic character. Journalism will become a profession that provides services not to collectives, but first and foremost to individuals, and not only in their capacity as citizens, but also as consumers, employees and clients. Of course these trends are going on already, as anyone can see who reads newspapers, but it is clear that the new technologies might well reinforce these trends. As a reaction to this blurring of distinctions and to the increased competition, the profession will need to emphasise its added value. The convergence of information supply and the competition of communication professions will force journalism - on-line and off-line - to become more transparent, responsive and indeed interactive. These are all, in our opinion, great new challenges to an old profession.

Nevertheless, the situation brings *threats* as well. Journalism might become, because of the increased opportunities for targeting and feedback, more 'market-driven', whereas the blurring of editorial and commercial contents and of formulas and formats - cf. the rise of 'infotainment' and 'edutainment' - represent similar

risks for public communication. And the multimediality of on-line content and the windowing of content might result in a weakened 'grip' of the journalistic professional practice and culture on mediated content, and with it a tradition of the struggle for independent information provision during the last one or two centuries.

4. Network Journalism

The arguments in this contribution lead to the conclusion that 'network journalism' indeed can be seen as a new form of journalism that cannot be insulated though to the new media alone. Because of the converging nature of the new technology the borders between new and old media become blurred and in turn increase competition between information providers and stimulate new distribution ways, like windowing. Consequently journalistic practises gradually break free from existing media formats and consequently the (redefinition of) core competencies of journalism will become more important then ever. Technology will not become more important, but at the contrary may prove to be less relevant at the end of the day.

However, this journalism of the future will not be just the same 'good old journalism' that we know at present. We have seen that new media technologies and trends in civil society force us to rethink journalism as a traditional top-down profession - a profession that used to control the 'megaphone', to put it in the words of Katherine Fulton in a Columbia Journalism Review special of 1996. The journalist of tomorrow is a professional who serves as a node in a complex environment between technology and society, between news and analysis, between annotation and selection, between orientation and investigation. This complex, changing environment cannot be kept outside of journalism anymore - the journalist does not work in 'splendid isolation' anymore – particularly because of the sheer abundance of information and the fact that the publics are perfectly capable to access news and information for themselves, as well as the fact that institutional players (profit, governmental, non-profit, activist) are increasingly geared towards addressing their constituencies directly instead of using the newsmedia as a go-between.

The shifting balance of power between journalism and its publics, and the rise of a more self-conscious and better educated audience (both as producers and consumers of content) do not, as often suggested by technological optimists, only decrease the need for mediation by media professionals. As a matter of fact disintermediation becomes, as indicated already, a realistic option made possible by the combination of network technology and active consumership, but an increasing need for orientation of citizens that are faced with a growing information capacity and selection problems in an information driven society is the other side of the same coin. Citizens will become more direct and active information seekers on subjects they are already familiar with, while they will continue to favour assistance in fields they are less familiar with (see also Stetson's concept of the 'monitorial' versus the 'informed' citizenry; in: Schudson, 1999). More in general the new opportunities will, as always, favour the privileged, while people on the other side of the 'digital divide' will stay to rely on public service orientated mediators. When in a converging and competitive context journalistic mediation becomes an option instead of a necessity the profession will have to position itself much better then it does at present by proving its added values, and it has to show much more proactive responsiveness (instead of paper-reality responsibility) towards its clients.

What network journalism actually is or can be is largely determined by the convergence of core competencies of both old and new media professionals and should therefore be seen more or less disconnected from a single medium format, type, genre or modality (see also: Altheide and Snow, 1991). New journalism is not only online journalism for example; technology and technological skills are not the buzzwords that solely define the tools of the network trade. Journalism, as it can be seen traditionally or classically, is all about giving a critical account of daily events, of gathering, selecting, editing and disseminating public information - of serving as a resource for participation in the politics and culture of (a democratic) society. This general notion of journalism can be applied to all media. If one accepts the structural changes and developments in journalism and society as outlined above, one can look at the profession with the eye set on defining the competencies of new or 'network' journalists. Should these professionals be part-time public opinion pollsters? Should they all know their way around HTML-coding,

image or font editing? Should they become travel guides to the World of Information instead of critical watchdogs of the status quo? The answer to all of these questions is no.

The core competencies of journalists are not changing due to the developments in society, just like the core competencies of doctors are not changing because of the arrival of new medical technology. But when the tools a surgeon can work with and the sheer amount of information on all the specific diseases multiply and develop at increasing rates the requirements of the job have to develop as well.

Network journalism is first and foremost journalism for any medium genre, type or format. The same story can be published in manifold ways and the journalist should be able to consider the implications of each way before telling the story. This does not mean that the journalist should be a technological freak, knowing her or his way around the complicated technology of today's newsroom. For example, those online news sites that are doing well and receive international acclaim - the BBC online comes to mind - are so successful because their journalists do not have to worry about media format translation; the technological team is integrated into the newsroom and they have developed their own 'content production system'.

Secondly, network journalism needs to be orientated towards a specific audience instead of a created (and therefore faceless) one. This does not imply that any individual journalist should conduct reader research all of the time, but it does mean that a journalist should be able to consider an audience and thus know an audience before telling this audience the news story. This may seem as obvious, but research shows this kind of conscious and interactive audience orientation is virtually non-existent in especially national media (as opposed to many local media; see Schultz, 1999; Pavlik, 1999; Kenney, Gorelik and Mwangi, 2000).

Thirdly, network journalism is the combination of critical and orientational storytelling, triggered by a demand from (members of) the public as well as a demand from the profession itself. Although we need professionals who investigate and keep the critical finger on the pulse of for instance government,

culture and economy, the need for orientation, guidance and moderation of information and public debate becomes more apparent every day. Especially in many Western countries with social cohesion issues like multiculturalism and media education high on the agenda like the United States, Australia and The Netherlands, the functional role of journalists in crossing and consciously fighting a 'digital divide' is emphasised. One cannot stress enough that in contemporary Western society where information is becoming the prime form of economic capital, journalists are desperately needed to help us filter out what we have to know – and when we want (and have) to know it.

5 Epilogue

All these arguments make necessary a rethinking of what journalism at the start of the new millennium is - and what it is definitely not. Besides a new definition in terms of 'network journalism', we also have to reflect on the social and cultural relevance and societal position and responsibilities of media professionals. The importance of a free and fair press are generally recognised as cornerstones of contemporary democracies, and as a necessary element for political democracy and social cohesion. In this respect characteristics such as an increased audience-orientation, customisation of content and interactivity can revitalise old democratic ideals of participatory communication, public and civic journalism, a voice for the voiceless and so on (see Bardoel and Frissen 1999). For the same token these characteristics can also be used in a process of continuing commercialisation, that puts negative pressures on the profession (Van Dusseldorp, Scullion and Bierhoff, 1999). In our view it is not fruitful though to construct an absolute opposition between the 'old' newspaper journalism, as the exclusive platform for political debate within the framework of the nation-state, versus the 'new' Internet journalism, as the main vehicle of (post) modern service-driven journalism in the context of a globalising market economy. Both old and new media provide platforms for political, cultural as well as commercial communication. Therefore the new technologies offer new challenges for democratic communication as well as new threats, but who emphasises the latter exclusively might well end up defending the privileges of an established profession instead of the importance of a democratic communication system.

If journalism is in a state of crisis, as is stated frequently in recent years, this is in our view not the consequence of new communications technology or of the growing PR-complex in our society. It is while journalists did not take enough notice of recent fundamental changes in society – and even if they did, without a clearly stated focus and vision of the possible roads ahead. While journalists did not take serious the increasing emancipation of the citizen, the decreasing interest and even decreasing importance of traditional institutional politics in our society, and the increased interest of individuals for what we could call the project of personal life. To put it in Giddens' terms again: 'emancipation politics' is being replaced by 'life politics' (Giddens, 1991). Technology is a mere vehicle through which these socio-cultural trends finally are able to change existing communication relations in society. As a result of these changes in society and of shifting power relations in social communications the journalist of the future will not longer be allowed to speak 'ex cathedra', as the profession used to do before. More horizontal communications relations of network journalism will replace the vertical, paternalistic relationship of industrial journalism. Journalism and journalists will, as every other social institution or profession, be held accountable for their performance and will have to be more open and responsive vis-à-vis citizens and society. If journalism takes up this challenge, it can have a great opportunity in keeping up old values in new media. Until now in network media 'anything goes', without respecting good practices of the traditional news culture such as separation of advertising and editorial functions and explicit reference to sources. It is for this reason that traditional and therefore trusted news organisations attract so many users on their Internet-sites. At the same time we have argued that the tools of the trade - first of all in network media, but consequently also in traditional media, - will change so dramatically that professional training has to adapt fundamentally; to put it differently: 'multimedia' deserve 'multiskilling' (Bierhoff 1999; Deuze, 2000).

The initiative now is in the hands of the public or even the individual - for whom the threshold to enter the public sphere has become lower then ever if one considers the 'old' media situation where the initiative in terms of access and distribution was almost exclusively in the hands of the professional communicators. It is time for

reflection on the consequences of convergence - not just in terms of technology, but also in terms of the competencies of the 'old' and the 'new' media professionals.

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