THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

In an age of digital media and economic uncertainty

The “age of digital media” is witnessing innovation and radical change across all aspects of journalism, creating economic difficulties for legacy media and a frenzied search for alternative business models to fund a sustainable journalism for the future. The global recession since 2007 continues to deepen the sense of economic uncertainty arising from a period of unprecedented change with significant and wide-ranging consequences for the journalism industry as well as scholarly research in the field of journalism studies.

The Future of Journalism conference hosted by Cardiff University on 12 and 13 September 2013 was convened by the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, to address these concerns via five broadly framed questions concerning the current circumstances and future prospects for journalism. How are developments in digital and mobile media, for example, creating new possibilities for producing, distributing and consuming journalism and, in turn, informing an innovatory journalism practice? What are the implications of these changes for traditional business models and for the emergence of new financial strategies to fund journalism? How are these developments evidenced in particular national contexts with their bespoke journalism cultures, histories and professional practices? What are the consequences for journalism education, training and employment, along with journalists’ changing perceptions of their professional roles? Finally, what are the implications of this fundamental restructuring of journalism for the ethical, political and democratic life of communities locally, nationally and globally?

The subtitle of the conference, “The Future of Journalism: In an Age of Digital Media and Economic Uncertainty”, was chosen to encourage a particular focus on developments in digital media, but also on the financial strategies designed to resource a viable and democratic digital journalism. The presence of Robert Picard as plenary speaker was intended to underscore that latter focus. The 2013 conference attracted 200 scholars from more than 35 countries, with 184 authors presenting 113 research-based papers in 30 seminar sessions across the two days.

The Future of Journalism 2011–2013

By way of setting the agenda, if not risking what Tony Harcup called stating “the bleeding obvious” (Harcup 2011), this is undoubtedly a significant time in the history of journalism when almost every aspect of the production, reporting and reception of news is changing. The significance of the future of journalism, with its many implications for communications within local, national and international communities, for economic growth, the operation of democracy, and the maintenance and development of the social and cultural life of societies around the globe, is all but impossible to overstate. But it is the pace of change, as much as its
character, which is striking and which leaves publishers, industry analysts and academics struggling to make their research findings and scholarly discussions relevant and timely. Shapiro, for example, describes the speed of the transformation of journalism as “dizzying”, but laments that publication schedules too often transform cutting-edge findings into “yesterday’s news” (Shapiro, 2014). The modest ambition for this Introduction is to record what seem to be key developments and trends emerging between the Future of Journalism conferences in 2011 and 2013. The hope is that it might signal some of the concerns highlighted by subsequent contributions, provide some brief context for these contributions, as well as offering some signposts to the infinitely variable but possible future(s) for journalism: to help us to explore what has been described in a wonderfully expressive phrase, as “this moment of mind-blowing uncertainty in the evolution of journalism” (Domingo, Masip, and Costera Meijer, 2014).

The Crises of “Financial Viability” and “Civic Adequacy?”

The contraction of legacy media continues apace, characterised by falling audiences, readerships and advertising revenues. Editorial staffs are still shrinking although more slowly than during the 2008–9 peaks and at differential rates reflecting the circumstances of distinctive media platforms, media sectors and national settings. The number of daily papers in the United States has fallen from 1611 in 1990 to 1387 in 2009; editorial jobs are also down with the Paper Cuts website reporting 16,000 job losses in 2008, reducing to 1850 in 2012 (Paper Cuts 2014). Pew’s State of the News Media 2013 report, perhaps a little optimistically, characterises newspapers as “stabilizing but still threatened”, despite a fall in print advertising for the sixth consecutive year: and by a substantial $1.8 billion in 2013, or 8 per cent. Measured by revenues, the newspaper industry in the United States has shrunk to 60 per cent of its size a decade ago. Newspaper companies struggle to meet pension and debt commitments and continue to reduce news staff, while some papers have shrunk publication frequency to three times a week. Major newspaper titles have sold their presses and “aggressively” seek to contract out printing: “imposing headquarters buildings … are relics … and with the real estate market improving, selling makes more sense” (Edmonds et al. 2013, 8).

In the United Kingdom, national, regional and local newspapers confront similar problems, but the larger city-based, daily local papers have suffered disproportionate losses of titles, circulation and staff, compared to the traditional weekly paid newspapers. The loss of advertising revenues has been critical in shaping this decline. By 2017 newspaper advertising in the United Kingdom is projected to have fallen to £1.9 billion (11.2 per cent of market share), while significantly, digital advertising spend will grow from £7.1 billion (47.5 per cent) in 2014 to a prominence above all legacy media at £9 billion (53.8 per cent) in 2017 (Reynolds 2014). Leading newspaper group Johnston Press, which owns 250 local newspaper titles (approximately one-quarter of the UK local newspaper market), announced losses of £248.7 million in the first
six months of 2013 (McCulloch 2013). This “crisis of financial viability” is closely related to a “crisis of civic adequacy”, to employ Blumler’s preferred terms (Blumler 2010). Starved of economic and editorial resources, these local newspaper watchdogs are constrained on a tight financial leash, no longer able to hold local politicians and governments to account. Research in the United States (Fico et al. 2013) and Sweden (Karlsson and Holt 2014) signals that the newly emerging participatory, hyperlocal news organisations are insufficiently resourced to substitute for the democratic oversight provided by the disappearing local papers; they are “imperfect substitutes at best for most newspapers when it comes to local government coverage” (Fico et al. 2013, 166).

But, intriguingly and counterintuitively, Neil Thurman’s recent analysis of on and offline newspaper reading trends in the United Kingdom revealed that in 2011, 96.7 per cent of the time domestic audiences spent reading was devoted to print editions (Thurman 2014); so some good news, for those allegedly suffering from “crisis of journalism” ennui and fatigue (Chyi, Lewis, and Zheng 2012).

Paywalls: A Viable Business Model?

Paywalls are being erected at break-neck speed, seemingly reversing the earlier industry mood that “news must remain free”. But they are also being demolished—and promptly. In mid-August 2013, for example, The San Francisco Chronicle announced the collapse of the paywall erected in the previous March. Others—if not collapsing—are “softening” and reducing prices in the face of competition. A study by Pickard and Williams (2014) notes that the New York Times’ “metered” paywall has halved its free offer of 20 stories to only 10.

The reasons for all this tumbling masonry are apparent. A recent eight-country survey of paywalls (Myllylahti 2014) found that they deliver only 10 per cent of media companies’ revenues, while Business Insider magazine posed the killer dilemma: while the average print subscriber generates $1100 a year, the equivalent figure for a digital subscriber is $175. Mylylahti concludes that paywalls are “not a viable business model”. Paywalls, moreover, contribute to a democratic deficit by using “the ability to pay” to gatekeep exclusion from quality news (Pickard and Williams 2014). In this way, paywalls constitute a modern version of the enclosure movement in which the common pastures of high-quality, wide-ranging news reporting—which were open and accessible to everyone— are suddenly fenced off to allow access to only a privileged few. Add to this the fact that a study of content provided on Die Welt’s online edition, before and after the erection of a metered paywall in December 2012, detected no discernible improvement (“no added value”) in the quality or uniqueness of published news stories, above that which was available for free elsewhere on the internet, and the rationale for “paying for news” becomes inexplicable. The study concludes that “the rather remarkable result is that welt. de now
demands money for content and services [in the Business and Finance section] which the news website offered for free before erecting the paywall and which users can get elsewhere on the Web without payment” (Brandstetter and Schmalhofer 2014).

“Multiple Revenue Streams” or “Low-pay, No-pay Journalism?”

There seems to be no agreement (within the journalism industry or the academy) about the appropriateness of particular alternatives to the advertiser model, as legacy media experiment with various mixes of paywalls (Myllylahti 2014; Pickard and Williams 2014), advertising on mobile devices (Reynolds 2014; Nel and Westlund 2012), the sale of newspaper apps (Franklin 2013a), crowdfunding, crowdsourcing and co-creation (Aitamurto 2013), hyperlocal business models (van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014), not-for-profit models which secure funding from international non-governmental organisations, private foundations and think-tanks (Requejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando 2014), a mix of public funding, sales and subscription to finance minority-language journalism (Zabaleta et al. 2014), efforts to monetise hyperlinks (Doherty 2014) and, finally, even the bizarre-sounding but expansive provision of machine- or robot-written news (Clerwall 2014; van Dalen 2013). The latest digital media innovation which offers the promise of a revenue stream is grabbed with all the enthusiasm previously reserved for lifebelts on the Titanic, rather than with any sense of certainty about resourcing a sustainable new era of journalism. But Picard (2014) is ultimately optimistic, celebrates the diversity of business models and revenue streams, and concludes:

What is clear is that news providers are becoming less dependent on any one form of funding than they have been for about 150 years. Multiple revenue streams from readers and advertisers, from events and e-commerce, from foundations and sponsors, and from related commercial services such as web hosting and advertising services are all contributing income. It is too early to assess fully the efficacy and sustainability of these sources, but they provide reason to believe that workable new business models are appearing in news provision. (Picard 2014) scholars such as Piet Bakker demur from this assessment arguing that increasing pressures to produce cheaper content for digital platforms by using “aggregation, content farms and Huffinization” have given rise to a “low-pay and no-pay journalism” where content is no longer King and, following its abdication, “part-timers and amateurs” rather than professional journalists proliferate (Bakker 2012).

Four Hundred Million Tweets Posted Daily—and Growing!

The expansive popularity of social media, especially Twitter, offers a further development of consequence for the future of journalism. On the occasion of its seventh birthday in March 2013, Twitter claimed more than
200 million active users, with 400 million tweets posted daily (Hermida 2013). The use of Twitter by journalists as well as readers—surely the definitive “blurring boundary”—is clearly significant. For journalists, Twitter is a substantial and invaluable source of breaking news but, as Farida Vis’ study of covering the London Riots in 2011 revealed, it is also a significant platform for reporting breaking news (Vis 2013). It is, moreover, an important vehicle for more participatory forms of citizen journalism, even if the 140-character format requires the journalistic skills of tabloid compression to be highly developed. Journalists’ uses of Twitter for news-gathering and reporting have become a normalised aspect of their professional practice (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012), although the extent and regularity with which journalists use Twitter and other social media, in their private and professional lives, varies substantially reflecting their age, and professional attitudes (Hedman and Djerf- Pierre 2013).

The implications for legacy media seem significant, although occasionally some claims risk challenge for hyperbole: Siapera, Papadopoulou, and Archontakis (2014), for example, assert that “if the advent of the internet did not undermine the existing media system and journalism, then the rise of social media surely did”. Other research studies counsel greater caution concerning the role of social media in two ways. First, Ju, Jeong, and Chyi (2014) argue that the business strategy of newspapers concerning the contribution of social media to revenue streams risks replicating the errors of their earlier “web experiment by seeking eyeballs before locating a revenue stream, giving content away for free and granting audiences access to aggregators”. Their analysis of 66 US newspapers revealed that while the distribution of newspapers’ content through social networking sites has become “common practice”, their “contribution to … advertising revenue seems underwhelming” (Ju, Jeong, and Chyi 2014). Second, research has also revealed the dissonance which can characterise social and legacy media evidenced in

newspaper editors’ choices of content and the topics chosen for sharing by social media users (Twitter, Facebook, Google+, Delicious, Pinterest and StumbleUpon). A study of the New York Times and the Guardian revealed that while newspapers emphasise sport, the economy, entertainment and celebrity stories, users of social networking sites, in “sharp contrast”, prefer to share opinion pieces as well as local, national and global news stories. Consequently, despite their prominence in both newspapers, sports stories, for example, “fail to actively engage the social media audience” with only a quarter of sport-related articles published by the New York Times featuring on Facebook or Twitter. The study also highlights the marked differences between the social media presence of newspapers, with 86 per cent of Guardian articles appearing on Facebook and a very striking 96 per cent on Twitter, compared to 40 and 36 per cent, respectively, for the New York Times, perhaps reflecting the presence of a paywall at the latter paper
Mobile Devices and News on the Move

The sheer scale and pace of the growth in ownership of mobile phones and tablets by journalists and the public has been extraordinary. The Guardian (21 August 2013) claimed the sale of tablets in the first six months of 2013 had doubled compared to the same period in 2012; PCs and laptops have rapidly become yesterday’s news. In the United Kingdom, mobile advertising revenues are forecast to overtake newspaper advertising revenues in 2014 as they rise to £2.3 billion from £1.9 billion in 2013 while newspaper revenues (national and local) continue their decline from £2.2 billion to £2.1 billion across the same period (Reynolds 2014). In the United States, Pew’s State of the News Media 2013 report’s section on “Tablets, Smartphones and Social Media” claims:

Even if growth slows from exponential to merely fast, each of these three platforms has become huge and stands to get bigger. Nearly half of US adults have smartphones and 31% have tablet devices … A rising share of news consumption goes to each of these platforms. Some digital business analysts see mobile largely supplanting desktop/laptop consumption within two or three years. (Edmonds et al. 2013)

Mobile devices are undoubtedly a game changer, offering journalists liberation from the newsroom in a way that John Pavlik anticipated more than a decade ago (Pavlik 2001). Journalists can use smartphones and tablets to access legacy and social media news reports, use them in turn as news sources, respond to them and upload their own reports and/or post comments. Technologically, mobile devices provide the necessary preconditions to make “news on the move” a reality.

Oscar Westlund’s (2013) concluding observation in his magisterial overview of research studies of mobile devices, that six billion people worldwide now enjoy network access via a mobile device which is a greater number of people than are connected to electricity, makes it difficult not to speculate about the possible implications of this compelling statistic for the future of journalism.

Data Journalism and “Emerging Forms of Story Telling”

A significant development since the Future of Journalism conference 2011 has been the emergence of new “genres” of journalism, most notably data journalism, defined and understood as an “emerging form of storytelling” which combines the skills and techniques informing journalists’ professional practice with data analysis and programming skills (Appelgren and Nygren 2014). Data journalism involves interrogating large data sets, that may be crowdsourced, and hence initial assessments of the possible contribution of
data journalism is judged to be to enhance news production, with particular emphasis on the potential to invigorate investigative journalism (Gray, Chambers, and Bounegru 2012). Data journalism has affinities with what Meyer (1991) termed “precision journalism” and (Flew et al. (2012) designated “computational journalism” (Karlsen and Stavelin 2014). In the United Kingdom, the Guardian newspaper has done much to pioneer practitioner developments in data journalism, while in the academy this new genre is emerging rather than established and scholarly literature is relatively sparse; a special issue of Digital Journalism (3.3) intends to profile this new area of scholarship within the journalism studies field.

Journalism’s Culture, Professional Roles and Ethics

The Leveson Inquiry raised significant concerns about journalism’s professional culture, journalists’ professional roles, ethics and identity; and all this in the context of a debate about journalists’ relations with sources, especially politicians, as well as a heated debate about regulation and the balance between privacy and press freedom (Dawes 2014; Franklin 2013a). Phone hacking by journalists at the News of the World shocked the public, led to the closure of the title, and witnessed the charging and arrest of journalists and newspaper executives. At the time of writing, the case against Andy Coulson, previously editor of the News of the World, and Rebekah Brooks, the former Chief Executive of News International (News UK since 26 June 2013), is ongoing.

Lord Justice Leveson opened the hearings for his Inquiry on 14 November 2011 by stressing the fundamental importance of newspapers to the broader democratic functioning of a polity. The press, he announced “provides an essential check on all aspects of public life. That is why any failure within the media affects us all”. It follows for Leveson that the “one simply question” at the “heart of this inquiry … may be: who guards the guardians?” (Leveson Inquiry 2012). The central proposal of Leveson’s final 2000 page report, published on 29 November 2012 (Leveson Inquiry – Report 2012), which recommended the establishment of a statutory body to oversee the new independent press regulator (the “guardian” who “guards the guardian”), was promptly rejected by Prime Minister Cameron. On 9 July 2013 the successor to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO 2014 http://www.ipso.co.uk/), was announced but derided as a “cynical rebranding exercise” (Hacked Off 2011).

Scholarly comment on the hacking affair has been perhaps predictably slower to emerge, but in an effort to explain the press’ “longstanding resistance to accountability”, Thomas and Finneman (2014) analysed four “meta-discourses” (catastrophisation, self- affirmation, minimisation and localisation) encoded in press reporting of the phone-hacking scandal. Their concern was to explore journalism’s own views about Leveson and
press regulation or, in their preferred phrase, “journalism about journalism”. In aggregate, these four discourses signal an “institutional ideology” which is “quick to assert rights” but reluctant to accept any reciprocal responsibilities (Thomas and Finneman 2014).

But the journalism “Hunters” in turn became the “Hunted” when in August 2013 the Guardian began to report the ease and regularity with which the American National Security Agency (NSA) and the UK’s Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), seemingly hack everyone; especially journalists, but also citizens, other governments and even the private mobile phones of heads of state—including Angela Merkel (Oltermann 2013). The “whistle blower” on this occasion was Edward Snowden whose prominence in the news coincided with the sentencing of Chelsea (previously Bradley) Manning to 35 years imprisonment for releasing classified information to WikiLeaks. Both cases raised important issues concerning the protection of sources and government accountability, as well as sparking boundary disputes about “interlopers” and precisely who is a journalist, along with shifting perceptions of journalists’ roles in the context of organisations like WikiLeaks (Eldridge 2014).

Implications for Journalism Studies

Finally, these developments have, in turn, helped to reconfigure the scholarly agenda of journalism studies and this is wholly appropriate, if not inevitable, given that a good deal of research in the field seeks to reflect on changing professional practice and to be relevant to such changes. Consequently, new journals are blossoming in response to the impact of digital media on journalism practice and theory. In February 2013, the publisher Routledge Taylor & Francis launched Digital Journalism, which has enjoyed considerable editorial success and a burgeoning readership, with a decision to move from three to four issues a year taken within six months of the journal’s launch. Sage has similarly launched a new journal, called Mobile Media and Communications, which will undoubtedly find a similarly enthusiastic readership. Major innovations and developments within the field deservedly and therefore inevitably require the establishment of new journals to offer a forum for the discussion and publication of relevant research; as I expressed it in the launch Editorial for Digital Journalism, journals should be “A place to hang out … a place of intellectual companionship … a place to hang our intellectual hats” (Franklin 2013b).

But the transformation of journalism in this “age of digital media” has not merely created new topics, themes and subjects for scholars to investigate and explore to complement the existing concerns of journalism studies. Rather, the considerable changes to all aspects of journalism, noted in the contributions to this collection, have challenged and contested even the most enduring and fundamental theoretical concerns of journalism scholars, prompting them to revisit and confront again, albeit in a fresh
context and guise, such perennial questions as What is journalism? and Who is a journalist? The posing of existential questions and the analysis of “blurring boundaries” seems ubiquitous in contemporary discussions of journalism studies. In much the same way, radical changes to journalists’ professional practices and journalism’s online and digital products increasingly require new methodological tools and research strategies to generate evidence and argument to inform the field of “digital” journalism studies (Strömbäck and Karlsson 2010). Consequently, scholars are conducting a re-examination of the theoretical and methodological foundations of journalism studies. One example of this intellectual reassessment is a series of special issues of academic journals devoted to exploring the scholarly implications of recent developments. In addition to this “Future of Journalism” collection, there are issues planned and in press exploring “Theories of Journalism in a Digital Age” (edited by Laura Ahva and Steen Steensen) in Digital Journalism (3.1) and Journalism Practice (9.1), and “Research Methods in the Age of Digital Journalism” (edited by Michael Karlsson and Helle Sjøvaag) in Digital Journalism (4.1). Seth Lewis’ issue devoted to the analysis and consideration of “Journalism in an Era of Big Data” (Digital Journalism 3.2) and Stuart Allan’s collection exploring “Photojournalism and Citizen Journalism: Cooperation, Collaboration and Connectivity” in Journalism Practice (9.4), continue this theme of examining fundamental shifts in the academic and scholarly terrain of journalism studies.

Capturing the Moment of Mind-blowing Uncertainty

The Future of Journalism 2013 Conference at Cardiff tried to capture a moment of calm in the “mind-blowing evolution” of journalism and journalism studies to enable discussion and analysis of their uncertain and variously conceived and theorised futures. Many of the papers presented at the conference offered a retrospective glance, cataloguing recent changes, thereby helping to offer a useful balance between diagnosis and prognosis. This Introduction has explored some of the key developments in journalism between the two conferences in 2011 and 2013, along with the different ways in which scholars have analysed and reflected critically upon them, in the hope that they might anticipate the concerns of authors whose work is presented below, while also offering milestones to help explore the developing futures for journalism and journalism studies.

*Digital Journalism, Journalism Practice and Journalism Studies* assign considerable importance to securing an audience for these studies to encourage further discussion, challenge and interrogation, but also to inform readers’ own thinking and research on these significant issues which sit at the head of the research agenda in journalism studies. I hope readers will find the argument and evidence of the various and diverse research
studies published below fascinating, important, but mostly valuable and useful for their own work.

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Appendix

Papers presented at The Future of Journalism 2013
(Presented alphabetically by first name of first author)

Amplifying distortions: How mobile phone content serves to emphasise violence and conflict in broadcast foreign news coverage
Adrian J. C. Hadland and Eddy L. Borges-Rey

A comparative analysis of digital paywall systems: Challenges to journalism of “quality” daily mastheads
Andrea L. Carson

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Andy Williams, Jerome Turner, Dave Harte and Glyn Mottershead

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Anniika Bergström and Ulrika Hedman

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Ansgard Heinrich

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Ari Heinonen, Elina Noppari and Eliisa Vainikka

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Arnaud Anciaux

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Astrid Gynnild

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Barbara Brandstetter and Jessica Schmalhofer

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Bengt Johansson and Magnus Fredriksson

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Brigitte Hofstetter and Philomen Schönhagen

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Carla Maria Batista

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Chris Peters and Marcel Broersma

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Chris Peters and Stuart Allan

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Chris van der Heijden

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Christer Clerwall

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Christian Fieseler, Stephanie Grubenmann and Miriam Meckel

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Christian Nuernbergk

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Christoph Neuberger

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Christoph Raetzsch

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Cristina Archetti

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Daniel Perrin, Mathias Fürer, Aleksandra Gnach and Thomas Gantenbein

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David Conrad
Live reporting terror: Online news and citizen crisis communication
Einar Thorsen

Watchdogging in code
Eirik Stavelin

Live Journal blog platform as a tool for professional work of Russian journalists
Elena Johansson

Media meets climate: Field dialogues
Elisabeth Eide and Risto Kunelius

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Els Diekerhof

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Erik Neveu

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Katerina Sv. Gillarova, Alice N. Tejkalova and Filip Lab

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Florence Le Cam and David Domingo

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Gabi Schaap and Liesbeth Hermans

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Gerard Smit, Yael de Haan and Laura Buijs

Disaster-journalism anno Twitter
Gert van Wijland

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Gunnar Nygren and Esther Appelgren

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Gunnar Nygren, Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska and Maria Anikina

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Halliki Harro-Loit
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Heikki Heikkilä

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Nina Kvalheim

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Peter Bro and Filip Wallberg

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Mr. Gates returns: Curation, community management and other new roles for journalists
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