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Journalism Coming of (Global) Age, II

Simon Cottle

When invited by the editors of this journal almost a decade ago to reflect on the future of journalism, I argued then that journalism studies though evidentially now well established as a subject field within the academy had yet to come of global age. By this I meant that journalism scholars, with too few exceptions, had yet to recognise and research 'global journalism' and how journalists reported on the proliferation of interpenetrating global crises, from climate change and ecology, to humanitarian disasters, forced migrations and new wars, to pandemics, energy crises and financial meltdowns – and all from a global perspective. It is in respect of today's accelerating and deepening global crises, I suggested, that we need to take the notion and the practice of 'global journalism' seriously (Cottle 2009a). Global journalism, then, not simply as 'foreign news' or the accumulation of distinct national journalisms but rather as the professionally purposive, globally aware and critically engaged orientation and forms of journalism that report on, from or about faraway places, (as well as at home) and do so by recognising and revealing the global interdependencies and inequalities involved (Berglez 2013). The constitutive nature of media and communications within the public definition, elaboration and, importantly, subsequent unfolding of global crises (and hence blurring of the ontological and epistemological dimensions of crisis) had also, I suggested, yet to be fully recognised and theorised (Cottle 2009b). These arguments still stand today. The key challenge facing journalism (and the rest of us) is a globalized world that spawns proliferating and potentially catastrophic crises. These have only intensified and become more apparent in recent years - and this is set to continue.

Certainly, almost a decade on, we co-habit a world where Europe has become politically shocked and potentially undermined by impending Brexit; the rise of populist nationalisms and their underpinning by barely concealed racisms, as well as fortress responses to the desperate plight of migrants, morally defile us all; and, for the time-being at least, we daily observe the grotesque spectacle of an ego-centric, inarticulate misogynist straddling the White House as if his own corporate fiefdom. But the fact that these and other seeming retreats to behind national borders and away from what the late Ulrich Beck, theorist of world risk society, intelligently and humanely discerned as today's emergent 'civilizational community of fate' (Beck 2006), misses the point. Such developments can only be properly contextualised and understood as reflexes to those very global forces they purportedly seek to evade or oppose. When seen from the vantage point of those longer trajectories of human society, progressively intertwined and entangled on world and planetary scale, such 'reversals' may yet become radicalising moments of 'enforced enlightenment,' to borrow another of Beck's apposite phrases. Globalization's dark side, manifested in the rise of proliferating and interpenetrating global crises, may yet prompt new political initiatives and the redoubling of civil society efforts, both within and beyond national borders and in pursuit of a transnational politics and cosmopolitan vision based not on walls of exclusion, fear and hate but on recognition of our common humanity and shared world community of fate.

It is in this context that the challenge and necessity to protect and promote journalism's coming of global age is all the more apparent – academically, professionally and physically. *Academically* it is incumbent, I feel, to regain a deeper

historical (better, ‘depth history’) appreciation of and approach to the societal impulses embodied in those communicative forms and communicative ambitions that have become institutionalised in what we now term ‘journalism.’ Here something akin to Jeffrey Alexander’s conceptualisation of the ‘civil sphere’ helps (Alexander 2006) – a normative moral sphere not confined to Habermasian rational public deliberation and argument, or even more recent centring of affect and emotion in mediated public communication and visual spectacle, but ‘civil sphere’ as a social imaginary, and no less consequential for that, in which collective hopes and future horizons premised on deep-seated ideas and sensibilities of justice, of what *should*, *ought* and *could* yet be find public expression and, sometimes at least, become a vehicle for progressive social advance. Theodore Parker (a Unitarian minister and prominent American abolitionist) uttered the memorable phrase, later rendered famous by Martin Luther King: ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’ This has no less empirical warrant today. Not because it can simplistically be put to rhetorical work and serve as an apologia for ‘Western civilization’ and thereby help dissimulate its long history of brutal human carnage (Pinker 2012), but because, in the context of human society’s ‘expanding circle’ (Singer 2011), it is historically true.

Moving through human history and across geographical, political and social space is the growing recognition of others as not so different to ourselves. This has nudged forward slowly, unevenly, often violently, but progressively incorporates and sees others within national borders (Elias 1994, Taylor 1994) as well as, later, those beyond them, as increasingly worthy of human recognition, respect and, eventually, as the sovereign embodiment of human rights (Hunt 2007). This is now widely culturally normalised and also institutionalised into international law (Robertson 2012). The ‘empathic civilization’ (Rifkin 2009) and expanded human circle (Singer 2011, Ignatieff 1998, Nussbaum 2014) not only encompasses other humans, all human beings, as worthy of human recognition, and therefore regards public torture, violent punishment and inhumane treatment as morally repugnant, but so too, increasingly, other sentient animals and also the eco-system on which we all depend in today’s humanly shaped Anthropocene. Journalists and journalism is performed within and through the deep vortices and contradictory impulses of history and it variously contributes to their enactment.

Professionally of course, much remains deeply problematic about journalism’s institutionalised basis and alignment to structures of power. Journalists too often bang the drums of war, propagandize on behalf of corporate elites and serve the venal interests behind the public displays of bellicose nationalism; but, as we have heard, they can express and perform much more. There is more to journalism than the political economy of dominance, the sociology of routines and elite access, the culture of contending discourses, and the suturing of news consumption and its new technological dispersal within the temporal and spatial flows of everyday life. We need to better recognise the democratising possibilities and potential that inhere within the practices and professional aims of journalism, wherever it is practiced, by whom and disseminated by whatever hybrid means in today’s complex media ecology. As well as seeking out journalism’s democratic deficits, distortions and denials of justice, therefore, we should also acknowledge and better understand journalism’s historical contiguity with struggles for change and encourage its constitutive enactments of the civil sphere in the present. We find, for example, something of the civil sphere instantiated in the depth social democratic impulses discerned in the early moments of public service broadcasting that helped to democratise public space, incorporating for the first-time ordinary voices and experiences and did so notwithstanding the BBC’s ethos of paternalism and unique

relationship to the British state (Scannell and Cardiff 1991). We see something of journalism's enactment of the civil sphere in the dramaturgy and moral discourse mobilised in and through television's capturing of the US civil rights protests and the shaming violence and naked racism that became visually relayed across the nation, and beyond (Alexander 2006). And we see it in the exposes of injustice and the increasingly empathetic reporting of victims and survivors of war and humanitarian disasters, as well as in occasional reporting of marginalised and (by other media) denigrated and stigmatized minorities. Journalism is also not, it seems, professionally predetermined to always report through an institutionalised 'calculus of death' prism, that is to say, in ways that are cynically detached, geo-politically aligned and emotionally evacuated (Cottle 2013). On occasions, as with Channel Four's coverage of the 2017 Rohingya massacres in Myanmar and subsequent exodus to Bangladesh, we see inscribed within journalist reporting an 'injunction to care'. And so too, on occasion, can we discern the deeper appreciation of lived experiences and improved understanding by correspondents when living in close proximity to those they report on and/or when in circumstances of 'beneficent embedding.'

Physically, as we have just noted, journalists are now often positioned in difficult and dangerous places and many of them pay the ultimate price for doing so. Journalists killings we know are generally increasing year on year around the world (Cottle et al 2016). In a globalised world, the professional commitments of journalism and journalists spatially extend beyond the nation state and, in a digitally media-contracted, transnational world, this too contributes to the furtherance of the 'expansion of the human circle,' shining a spotlight on the dark side of humanity. Journalists working in danger zones and through their sense of moral commitment to *what should be*, not simply *what is*, give expression to depth historical impulses (democratising, humanitarian and human rights aware) that increasingly demand we recognise the plight of others wherever they may be. Neither the adrenalin rush argument nor the political economy of ratings, readers and revenue does justice to the normative outlooks and commitments of many of those journalists who are prepared to risk life and limb to report, as a felt obligation, on the mortal jeopardy and iniquities threatening others in some of the most uncivil places on the planet (Cottle et al 2016, Armoudian 2017). The confluence of historical and globalising impulses position many of them in service of the 'civil sphere' now transnationally mediated and digitally contracted. Ideas of the civil sphere need to be premised on a deeper sense of the multiple, complex and sometimes contradictory trajectories of human society unfolding into the present as well as the incursions of the global into national daily life. We need to better understand how the crises and conflicts of globalisation increasingly enmesh and threaten us all, demanding solidarities of recognition and response. It is in these two fundamental respects of the historical and the global that we are able to better understand the global crises and challenges that now confront journalists and why it is that so many of them are prepared to report on and from such uncivil places around the globe. If many journalists are historically compelled to feel and enact their responsibility to report from dangerous places it is incumbent on all of us, for no less historically compelled commitments, to try and keep them as safe as possible (Cottle et al 2016).

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