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Special issue: Future of Journalism Conference

Introduction: Changing relationships between news organizations and audiences

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This special issue of *Digital Journalism* represents a selection of papers from the 2017 Future of Journalism conference which grapple with the challenges of the profession in the context of the digital era. The conference, which has been held on a biennial basis since 2007, was organised by the School of Journalism, Media and Culture (JOMEC) at Cardiff University, and took place from 14 to 15 September 2017. In keeping with its accustomed forward-looking agenda, this year the conference focused on the theme of "Journalism in a post-truth age." It featured over 150 papers from international speakers, presented across 40 sessions, with keynote speeches from Guy Berger, Linda Steiner, Silvio Waisbord, and Claire Wardle.

Based on the established publishing partnership between the journal and the Future of Journalism conference, the special issue features a selection of short and timely articles highlighting ground-breaking work in journalism studies, selected from all the papers presented at the conference. Articles accepted for this special issue have been through a

rigorous process of peer review, in the first round managed by the conference organizing team, with a subsequent set of blinded peer reviews managed by the *Digital Journalism* editorial team.

The papers selected for the issue engage with key challenges of journalism in a post-truth age and a range of associated issues. All converge on a preoccupation with the changing relationships between news organizations and audiences in the digital era, and frequently do so in a way that challenges received accounts of both professional practices and audience behavior. Within the context of this broad theme, papers (1) questioned notions of fake news, filter bubbles and echo chambers, (2) charted transformations in journalistic practices and audience behavior, (3) critically assessed the transformative potential of emerging models of news production, and (4) considered the methodological implications associated with studying these models.

First, several of our contributions provide counter-arguments to the dominant narrative which suggests that the affordances of digital media have created a fertile environment for filter bubbles and fake news. Social media, in particular, and digital platforms, more generally, have been identified as the main culprits of an emerging post-truth age by undermining established professional practices and advancing new channels for the spread of misinformation (e.g. Alcott and Gentzkow 2017, Sunstein 2018). However, as articles published here demonstrate, we need more nuanced vocabularies, methodological approaches as well as contextualised analyses to understand the changing media ecology.

Most fundamentally, Claire Wardle's keynote speech challenges us to dispense with the notion of "fake news" in favor of a broader engagement with "information disorder." Wardle cautions journalism scholars to acknowledge that much of the content which is described as "fake news" is not actually fabricated, but instead "used out of context or manipulated." To this end, Wardle develops a spectrum of categories of information disorder, ranging from satirical news - the least harmful type type - to fabricated content - material that is 100% false, and designed to deceive and do harm. As Wardle points out, we can only combat information disorder through careful empirical research - something which is reflected in several contributions.

Alongside an interest in practices of *producing* misinformation, scholars have, in recent years, turned to examine what is being done to *combat* it. This has led to a significant scholarly interest in the new and growing journalism fact-checking sector (e.g. Graves, 2016). Though much of this research has traced the work of such emerging actors in Western contexts, David Cheruiyot and Raul Ferrer-Conill build on that established body of knowledge through their research on leading fact-checking organisations in sub-Saharan Africa. These data-driven organisations, while situated at the periphery of news media, operate at the heart of journalist goals and practices. Examining a geographic context where institutional changes to the media ecology are particularly pronounced, Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Connill argue that online independent fact-checking is becoming an integral part of journalistic processes and, at the same time, is reformulating classic forms of fact-checking within news media. As such, the study shows how digital platforms provide a means for not just the distribution but also the investigation and correction of misinformation.

Richard Fletcher and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen interrogate a further dimension of current discourses around 'fake news' and 'post-truth' environments – the echo chambers and filter bubbles that are seen to prevail in the digital era (e.g. Pariser 2011). In their research on 'Automated Serendipity', they use survey data from four different countries to explore how search engines shape news consumption. They find that using search engines to access news in fact *increases* user sources of online news and the likelihood to view news of diverse political leanings, and thus advances a balanced news diet. Their results demonstrate that prominent understandings of the role of digital media in creating one-sided information environments do not apply to all contexts and require critical interrogation. Their article is part of a larger - and very important project of overturning received wisdom around the narrowing and fragmentation of our information universe(s) (e.g. Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017). Instead, they suggest, the affordances of digital media foster incidental exposure to news that would otherwise never have appeared on our radars. This argument is backed up by Anja Bechmann and Kristoffer Laigaard Nielbo's research. In their paper they employ distinct, inductive methodological approaches to understanding different types of news content from Danish Facebook feeds and find only limited evidence for the existence of polarised filter bubbles. They also provide analysis which aims to nuance our understanding of why filter bubbles exist where they are detected, arguing for a greater appreciation of the role of human agency and self-selection than studies which have emphasised the power of social media algorithms. Together, these contributions suggest that while significant technological change - such as the invention of social media and their associated algorithmic governance - rightly causes concern, we cannot take their effects on news audiences for granted.

A broader set of questions informing the changing relationships between news organizations and their audiences is posed by the transition from print to digital journalism. This monumental transformation is the focus of Neil Thurman and Richard Fletcher's study of reach and readership for *The Independent*, a UK national newspaper that went digital-only in March 2016. Thurman and Fletcher found a modest growth in net domestic readership following the newspaper's transition to publishing online-only. However, this was matched by a staggering decline - 81 per cent - in the total time spent with the newspaper by British audiences, explained "by huge differences in the habits of online and print readers." As Thurman and Fletcher argue, this "suggests that when newspapers go online-only they may move back into the black, but they also forfeit much of the attention they formerly enjoyed." This, in turn, raises fundamental questions about the viability of journalism - as a practice and an institution - in the digital age.

For several of the papers in this special issue, questions around the viability of journalism in the digital age are investigated with attention to changing practices of journalistic labour. In 'The Networked Freelancer?', Kathryn Hayes and Henry Silke address these issues through an investigation of the increasing normality of self-employment in the media sector. Here, they focus on the role of technology, contractual conditions and work/life balance. Employing the concepts of 'digital labour' and 'precarity', they argue that the growth of freelance labour has significant implications for journalistic practices and living conditions, but also for the types of journalism that are advanced, leading to particular risks for investigative and research-intensive journalism. Yet rather than finding a homogenous

trend, their fine-grained study identifies significant differences between established freelance journalists and new entrants.

While digital infrastructures affect content, news access and working practices, they also require new business strategies. In their article 'Comparing Innovation and Social Media Strategies in Scandinavian and US Newspapers', Katja Lehtisaari and her co-authors investigate innovation in media production, business models, funding sources and social media strategies across different countries. Drawing from both market data and interviews with media managers, they find few traces of radical innovation and instead a rather slow process of technological adaptation as well as new combinations of existing business strategies. Their research offers caution towards over-enthusiastic expectations of digital transition in the media industry.

At the same time, the affordances of digital news also contribute to the emergence of the "quantified audience" (Anderson 2011) and the increasing prominence of the ideal of interaction. In her article, Nicole Blanchett Neheli considers the pressures on, and opportunities granted to, journalists and editors by access to real-time online audience engagement metrics and analytics. She draws on lengthy, rich ethnographic observation of reporters in Canada, and a large number of interviews with journalists and other newsworkers, to ask how audience data impact upon news content, editorial decisions and journalistic practices. Her rich, grassroots perspectives from the newsroom add substantially to our understanding of digital news work, as well as on-going conversations about issues such as click-bait, and the relationship between reporters and their newsroom managers.

Klaus Meier, Daniela Kraus and Edith Michaeler, in their article, "Audience Engagement in a Post-Truth Age," take a different approach to changes in journalistic understandings of the audience. They suggest that to embrace the ideal of engaging with audiences, news organisations must move away from an understanding of journalism as a "lecture" and towards a conception of journalism as dialogue. Such a conception, they argue, entails a shift in the organisation and forms of labour within news organisations - a shift which also necessitates changes in the training of journalists and the culture of the profession.

A final set of papers looks at how journalistic practices and audience relations are shifting in the context of emerging high-profile models of news production, including hyperlocal journalism, digital native news sites, data journalism and immersive journalism. These models represent particularly vibrant grounds for research: Although they have now, in each case, been around for at least a decade, their form, sustainability, use and spread remain unsettled and subject to change and contestation. As such, these articles highlight one of the key challenges facing scholars of digital journalism: That of studying phenomena which are constantly shifting before our eyes.

Taking up one of the most widely heralded emerging models for news production, Carina Tenor's paper examines how hyperlocal entrepreneurs interpret and undertake responsibilities associated with media accountability. Through a series of in-depth interviews, Tenor traces the complex self-understandings of this emerging group of producers, which includes those who see themselves as experienced journalists, semi-professionals and amateurs, as well as non-profit and profit-making in their aspirations. She

discerns distinctive views of journalistic responsibility and accountability across these groups, though ultimately demonstrates that they all share a commitment to serving the public interest, and a recognition of traditional ideals of professional journalism.

In their paper, Florian Stalph and Eddy Borges-Rey investigate the sustainability of data journalism through the use of Scenario Network Mapping. While data journalism has been widely celebrated as a new avenue for watchdog journalism, following on from high-profile cases such as Wikileaks and the UK parliamentary expenses scandal, there has been a process of growing normalization of the practice, followed by a tempering of claims regarding its potential. Stalph and Borges-Rey point to a generalised failure to adopt data journalism at the local level, with most of the local news media remaining unable to afford the human and technological infrastructure required for this practice. Ultimately, their study offers measured optimism regarding the future of the practice: While they suggest that elementary data journalism skills are likely to become essential for news professionals, advanced data science skills are likely to remain a specialist competence.

António Baía Reis addresses yet another area in which journalism's relationship with its audience is changing, and which is challenging the previously stable boundaries of the form of news. He offers a historical approach to constructing a detailed and coherent theoretical framework for analysing virtual reality (VR) news as examples of "immersive journalism" (De la Peña 2010). Drawing on established work in journalism studies about immersion and presence, and discussing how previous canonical journalistic work has sought to immerse the audience in its subject matter in order to connect readers with its texts, his piece will help current and future researchers understand how VR technology can "replicate real

emotions, feelings and memories in a new way of experiencing news" in a critical, reflective way.

Taken together, the papers published in this special issue suggest that a nuanced understanding of the future of journalism entails not only an appreciation of emerging practices and distinctive contexts, but also the development of new methodological approaches. Here, Lily Canter's contribution is particularly significant. In her article, she invites journalism researchers to re-examine dominant approaches to understanding news values when using content analysis to evaluate popular (often populist), multi-platform digital news organisations such as *Buzzfeed*, the *Huffington Post* and *Breitbart*. Noting very high readerships, the variety of ways of consuming such news, and the increasing influence of this "liquid journalism" (Karlsson and Stromback 2010), she challenges the methodological and theoretical elitism of much recent news values scholarship. She calls for addressing the "vacuum of empirical data" in this field by taking these sites much more seriously and provides a provocative, detailed and useful discussion of methodological concerns around how this might practically be done.

The articles published in this special issue suggest that rigorous empirical and conceptual work around changing journalistic practices and audience relations in the digital era contributes to undermining simple narratives - whether in the form of Doomsday prophecies or utopian fantasies - of the future of journalism.

The papers gathered in this special issue point to a fertile research agenda centred on methodological and conceptual questions around journalistic and audience labour. With

respect to journalistic labour, they raise questions which might inform future research in the following areas: How can new forms of journalistic work, such as fact-checking, contribute to combatting "fake news" or "information disorder"? How, in the context of growing precarity and financial constraints, can established and emerging models of news production sustain a journalism that holds powerful institutions to account and provides necessary information to citizens? How does the increasing emphasis on audience engagement, participation and measurement *trans*form and *in*form work in the newsroom? How do new categories of journalists - including entrepreneurs, hyperlocal journalists and data journalists - see themselves and their roles? How can these emerging practices contribute to producing forms of news and storytelling? And, last but not least, how will news organisations fund the labour of journalists at a time of rapidly declining revenues?

Conversely, the articles also open up for new questions for research about audience labour. Most fundamentally, they urge us to consider how we as researchers consider the consumption of digital news differently in digital contexts. What happens to our news consumption behavior when we make the switch from print to mobile? How does the algorithmic curation of social media reshape audience engagement? And what methodological tools do we need to study this emergent landscape of news consumption?

Taken together, they challenge the "presentism" and technological determinism that is always a danger of research focusing on swiftly changing fields, including journalism studies (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). Instead, these rich and varied contributions facilitate a deeper understanding of how transformations in the profession are reshaping our media ecology, but not always in the ways we might expect.

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