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## **MORBID SYMPTOMS**

### **Between a dying and a re-birth (apologies to Gramsci)**

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*This paper argues that despite an appearance of rupture, journalism is in an era of good fortune. While it would be both premature and historically naïve to point at a new ‘golden era’, there is reason to see a strengthening of journalism’s sense of core responsibilities emerging from the challenges and opportunities which new technologies present. With an eye towards journalism’s history as a force with the potential to feed contemporary debate, this paper will briefly survey the relationship between technological innovation and role perceptions of journalism. Against this backdrop, it will then evaluate the discourses of professional ideals and norms within the elite press in Britain in 2011 and 2012, in the context of new media technologies.*

**Keywords:** crisis, history, journalism’s reputation, journalistic metadiscourse, new media, role perceptions, social media, technological change, WikiLeaks

#### **Introduction**

It would seem fair to say the role and reputation of journalism have had fluctuating fortunes. These have been affected by, among other factors, changes in the ways in which journalism has adapted to technological developments. From printed news challenging elite patterns of communication and dissemination of taste, to the industrializing of journalism in the nineteenth century, there have been debates over the extent to which journalism and journalists have had to change in order to survive. At times the changes have appeared to make the work of the journalist more professionalized and more valued by both society and economy; at other times, the incorporation of change has threatened to tear journalism asunder.

Definitionally, of course, there are connections between journalism’s emergence as a distinct set of communication practices and its engagement with technological change. However, the necessary profit motive within journalism has often been downplayed as almost a subsidiary concern, while the heroic narratives of the journalist as champion of the people or journalism as the Fourth Estate, the public’s watchdog, and telling truth to power have been promoted.

McQuail (2013, 171) argues that technological change has at certain points had more than an incremental effect on journalism, often enabling new generic or cultural features. Moreover, he argues it has been the “scale and reach” of journalism which has been augmented by technologies. Deuze has written interestingly about the “amplification effect of technology” (2009, 82) although we might ask whether the technological changes he considers are “disruptive” as he claims, or better understood as formative? In this context, we might like to consider the concept of “permeation” as technologies have found their way into journalistic traditions, practices and communicative claims.

The first significant “amplification” which impacted upon journalism’s professional identity came as a consequence of the commercially astute decision to invest, in 1816, in the König Bauer steam printing press. This provided the *Times* with the ability to produce and distribute newspapers at such a volume and such a rate that it was able to rapidly build up sufficient profits to establish the sort of information network which would humble that of the government of the day. The reach of the newspaper and its particular brand of journalism would dominate the mid-century and raise the reputation of journalism as a maker and breaker of governments. The journalism of record had come of age.

Yet this early industrialization of the press occurs roughly contemporaneously with the high point of the radical press in Britain (Thompson 1967). Up until this point as Smith puts it, journalism had evolved very much as an organ of expression for the propertied classes and as a means of social communication it was “a non-starter” (Smith 1984, 164). The Unstamped press may have demonstrated that there was a need for a wider, political press which spoke to ordinary people in predominantly political terms but this was quashed by a combination of overt political measures and more subtle economic manoeuvres. Industrialization allowed a certain vision of the bourgeois commercial press to graft itself onto a wider articulation of its political relevance. The liberation of journalism from the shackles of taxation in the 1850/60s was a free-market experiment which enabled the profitable to survive and marginalize anything which did not fit within that capitalist model. It had long-lasting consequences for the shape and emphasis of the news media which Curran (1978) has claimed are forms of control on knowledge every bit as powerful as the laws and taxes which preceded this ‘liberalisation’.

The dropping of taxation realigns publicists to profit; circulations can be bigger, capital investments in technology need to be larger and advertising revenues need to cover increased costs. This effects the start of a shift in emphasis within journalism’s definitional role from an educational ideal to a representational one (Hampton 2004). Journalism may claim that its commercial success from this point onwards constitutes a triumph for democracy but its focus narrows increasingly on consumers rather than citizens and its claims to monitor the powerful in society are tempered by the imperative of maintaining good relationships with the economic and political status quo. In contrast, its rhetoric of liberty is backward looking to the traditions of Burke and Wilkes.

The proliferation of communication technologies such as the telegraph in the late nineteenth century further intensified the capitalization of news production, meaning that there was more information to select from. It is within this nexus of technological and commercial changes that the modernist perception of the journalist as reporter emerges (Carey 1974). These became very different in activity and outlook than their predecessors who had been a range of gentlemen scribes, publishers and the politically motivated publicists – all writing, in the main, for their own kind. The figure of the concerned citizen writer is quickly eclipsed by that of the reporter avid for information and his driving motivations became sensation and human interest. One of the first manifestations was a growing self-awareness, leading to a clamour for journalists to be recognized as professionals and the related but slightly contradictory push for unionization (Conboy 2011, 168-170). However, this clarification of role perceptions among journalists was not accompanied by any improvement in their social standing.

As the technological enhancement of commercial journalism cast its reach wider and wider to ensure regular readerships among the working class towards the end of the century, anxieties were expressed about the nature of this newly popular journalism. Arnold's fears (1886) were based on the "feather-brained" nature of the New Journalism while others were fearful of the impact of cheap popular daily newspapers on the morals of the working classes. The fact of the matter was that popular newspapers acted with commercial pragmatism, in restricting the diet of information to the periphery of political engagement and at the same time prioritizing the needs of advertisers; a prioritization which is one of the shadow definitions of journalism throughout the modern era.

The journalism which emerges into the twentieth century is conceptually linked with the technologies of the era of the mass press and journalism becomes a characteristically modernist institution (Hallin 1992, 2006; Zelizer 2004). It may have prompted assessments which foreground its role in the establishment of communities of nation and locality (Anderson 1987) yet it has never become wholly integrated within communities other than as a) part of the routines of consumption and identification through everyday activity and b) through profit-making imperatives. Since the Anglo-American model of journalism gained its majority throughout the same period as first industrialization, then mass suffrage became embedded within society, this has led to a correlation of journalism with 'democratic market society' (Schudson 1978) and its professionalized elevation of Schudson's "objectivity norm" (2001, 151-152).

The steady visualization of journalism from the nineteenth century has also acted to cloud its reputation. Photography was introduced cautiously by elite newspapers while being embraced enthusiastically by the popular press; for example, from 1880 the *Daily Graphic* had used half tone photograph. This was fully exploited by the *Daily Mirror* on its relaunch as a daily pictorial paper in 1904 while the *Times* waited until 1914, demonstrating:

an unstated prejudice that pictures were somehow for the less literate, and the gentlemen of the fourth estate were very careful to preserve their real or imagined status as highly literate purveyors of the written word. (Wright 2003, 65)

Similar concerns were aired in relation to televised news (Postman 1986; Thussu 2008) and the spread of visuals in newspapers is often cited as a symptom of 'tabloidization' (McLaughlin and Golding 2000) as further demonstrations of the impact of what is perceived as an entertainment genre on the substance of informational journalism.

Radio was deliberately developed in the UK as a form of "social technology" (Williams 1990, 24). On account of anxieties linked to the perceived pervasiveness of radio through the general population and its potential appropriation by unscrupulous politicians the BBC was mandated to provide impartial and balanced reports and prohibited from editorializing. In contrast to anxieties about the visual, journalism's discourse of truth-telling became amplified by the mythic performance of the BBC's broadcast journalism during the Second World War; a technological boost for the reputation and esteem of the public service journalist. The very respectability of radio and then television journalism, in fact, allows a subsidiary discourse of newspaper journalism to emerge as the edgier, more scurrilous hounder out of truth and exposé of scandal.

The first generation of computer-generated change during the Wapping Revolution of 1986 did not usher in a Golden Age of small-scale publishing opportunities but rather established a treadmill of ever-demanding schedules for a shrinking band of journalists (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008); not a brave new world of new publications but the consolidation of the already established media conglomerates (Ursell 2001) and the steady reduction of investigative journalism compromising the ability of journalists to live up to their civic and political aspirations (Davies 2008). This confirms a trend evident since the introduction of steam printing. Technology has tended to work with capital within developments in journalism to squeeze to the margins any opposition to the commercial mainstream unacceptable to advertisers.

At the same time as we interpret technology's role as a series of negotiations between hardware and the multiple political and social functions of a specific form of public communication (Conboy 2011, 81), we need to appreciate that these same technological shifts generate shifts in conceptualizations of the role of the journalist. In fact, journalism has proved itself conservative both conceptually and in its appropriation of technology. Its engagement with its public has become more and more opaque over time and its rhetorical dependence on eighteenth and nineteenth century ideals, have become increasingly detached from contemporary reality. Technology and cultural form have always been key sites for the discussion of the potential to make journalism closer to its idealizations but to a large extent these have provided a litany of failure and missed opportunity. Institutionally, the Royal Commissions on the Press from 1949, the Calcutt Report in 1990, the Hutton Report in 2004 and the recent Leveson Report have all articulated concerns about the role and function of journalism but none of them have enabled journalism to engage with its engagement with a public through changing technological configurations.

The death of a capitalized market for information may require a reconsideration of journalism's potential. Journalism has traditionally had little to do with 'real' audiences and been happiest when structuring its content around the needs of advertisers and stereotypes of readers, viewers and listeners. It had always been a little reluctant to engage with its actual audience maybe even a little frightened of them. It never required a business model which elevated the spontaneity and unpredictability of actual people, as it steadily adopted "a managerial discourse of acting 'for the good of the public'" (Peters and Broersma 2013, 3).

Deuze (2006) sees the end of high modernism and an entry into 'liquid journalism' from the 1960s. Among the complex web of social and political characteristics of this shift (Krotz 2007), changes in the technological delivery and organization of journalism have certainly played their part. Although the end of high modern journalism was heralded as early as the early nineties, well before the advent of the commercial internet (Altheide and Snow 1991; Hallin 1992), the contemporary discursive dislocation between journalism's rhetorical claims and its actual performative status, may represent something much more systemic and potentially different this time. We may be in the midst of a particularly creative sort of crisis.

### **Creative or Created? Journalism's crisis and its responses**

Inasmuch as journalism faces a crisis, in broad terms it has been one of its own making. Through its approach to technologies, audiences, profits, and the identification its own roles, journalism has arrived in the twenty-first century grappling with these dynamics under crisis. Yet in capitalizing on renewed discussions of its role, an invigorated civic engagement and articulations of a traditional identity mapped onto technologies hitherto unseen, there appear to be signs of opportunity amidst the crisis. We will turn our attention to how journalism in this contemporary era is talking about its own crisis.

#### *Locating opportunity within crisis*

To assess this metadiscourse, texts were identified using Boolean searches of LexisNexis databases of the *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *Times* content from 2011 and 2012 by searching for the terms 'watchdog', 'fourth estate', 'truth telling' ('truth-telling'), 'audience', and 'citizen' in association with 'media' and/or 'journalism'. Texts were further constrained manually to isolate those that included journalistic metadiscourse. The following sections will evaluate this metadiscourse for the expression of crisis or assertions of journalistic identity. These expressions of identity emerge shaped by journalism's sense of crisis to assert its distinct place in society (Bourdieu 2005; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). What remains to be seen is whether these identities are connected to new media technologies.

#### *Crisis and its reactions*

In focusing on 2011 and 2012 and elite British newspapers, we locate discourses at a time of very public review of journalism's profession and identity, one that has prompted expressions of journalism's idealised roles and excoriates those who fail to uphold them (Eldridge 2013a). At the same time, the rise of new and social media such as Twitter and blogs and those entities that claim to be journalism, such as WikiLeaks, provoke discourses from traditional journalism that attempt to reassert idealised definitions of journalism. These discourses enflame distinctions between an in-group of journalism and out-group members: "Journalists receive extensive training on media law, but bloggers often have no knowledge of the legal implications of what they publish" (*Times*, November 26, 2012). As much as these challenges posit aspects of crisis, they also prompt moments of reflection, invigorate definitions of journalism and foreground lauded aspects of journalism's identity (Carlson 2013).

The press' metadiscourse continues to foreground a democratic role and emphasises a legacy of British media history above its commercial or professional aspects. "Call a truce, before centuries of free speech are brought to an end", reads one headline in the *Daily Telegraph* atop an article that sets this history against pressure from Members of Parliament, hindered in their efforts to curtail the press by a "constitutional obstacle: the newspapers are not theirs to control" (November 23, 2012). In the *Times*, the potential for press regulation is presented as "very dangerous to our democracy" (March 22, 2012). In the *Guardian*, this is put forward as a reminder of its role as a check on government: "It is perhaps no surprise that parliamentarians are no great fans of the fourth estate", as they are, "still smarting after the [2009] expenses scandal" (March 28, 2012). In the *Daily Telegraph*, the continuation from the expenses scandal "now looks like it may escalate into MPs ending Britain's 317-year tradition of press freedom" (November 23, 2012).

When framed by crisis, journalism's role as a Fourth Estate and watchdog is consistently defined as, "a noble and independent estate motivated by truth-telling, holding power to account and serving the public interest" (*Guardian* November 30, 2012). These discourses are enhanced by overt reminders of the positive role of journalism, idealised in contrast to profit motivations:

Although his commitment to fearless journalism is undoubted, he [Rupert Murdoch] is perfectly prepared to sacrifice truth-telling to whatever his commercial interest may be. (*Times*, July 9, 2011)

At times, there appears to be an awareness that the inquiry is self-inflicted, suggesting an element of introspection: "no journalist should fool themselves. The fact that the industry is now threatened with statutory controls is no one else's fault" (*Guardian*, November 30, 2012). While the sense of crisis is never absent, there are opportunities for renewal expressed through noble ideals and roles, and reminders to be built upon. Much of this focuses on reinvigorating traditional elements, and isolating those of political and profit-driven media barons:

lost in the phone-hacking privacy maelstrom is that this has been much more a problem of the nexus between politicians, police and media moguls than it is about day-to-day journalism. (*Guardian*, March 28, 2012)

Through strongly defensive language, this role is framed as a guard against corruption: "harm investigative journalism and make it easier for public figures to abuse their positions" (*Daily Telegraph*, December 8, 2012). It is further defined as imperative for democracy:

The fourth estate of the free press, in which we are of course one interested party, is one of those institutions. It should check and balance political power from the outside, while itself being held in check by the ordinary processes of the criminal law. (*Guardian*, July 1, 2011)

This "sacred role" (*Daily Telegraph*, October 17, 2012, quoting MP Francis Maude) is carried out by the Fourth Estate "in the public interest" (*Guardian*, September 8, 2011). This idealised identity discourse is further engaged with in the way the press expresses its civic role with the public and its audience.

#### *Consumers v. Citizens: The eyes have it.*

Journalism's relationship with its audience has always had elements of tension. Journalism has blamed its lot on the loss of an audience of consumers, and in crises discusses readers through their absence (Siles and Boczkowski 2012). In some cases from 2011 and 2012, disputing *The Daily Mail* editor, Paul Dacre's, view of press credentials, the challenges "for civic-minded bloggers to get the same opportunities to scrutinise their elected representative as the mainstream press" are lamented (*Guardian*, February 8, 2012). In others, the crisis of inquiry prompts united discourses of collective impact, referring to "our newspapers" (*Daily Telegraph*, November 23, 2012) and the *Guardian* referencing "revulsion" to phone hacking beyond the typical sphere of its own readership (July 11, 2011).

This interaction can be found in prominent campaigns particularly in the *Guardian* and the *Times*. The *Times*' 'Cities fit for cycling' campaign won an award for its "use of crowd sourcing and citizen journalism" that "generated 'lots of reader stories with details and insights'" (June 23, 2012). The *Guardian* harnessed a vast amount of social media interactions to report the 2011 London Riots. As Chris Elliot, *Guardian* readers editor, wrote:

[Reporters] Paul Lewis and Matthew Taylor covered the riots extensively for the *Guardian*. Lewis used Twitter as a crowd-sourcing and reporting tool over four nights, gathering 35,000 followers. (*Guardian*, July 9, 2012)

There are further references praising readers and their potential for contribution as "gutsy, determined citizens who operate outside of the employment of big legacy media businesses" and as "civic-minded bloggers" (*Guardian*, February 8, 2012). In the context of the London riots, they offer "unheard voices" (*Guardian*, July 9, 2012) harnessed through social media.

Enter the citizen and the crowd. Not in the familiar context of journalism's duty to inform citizens for the benefit of democracy or society, but rather 'citizens' as a conduit of information. They provide an extra lens, a participant in the journalistic process, and a feedback loop which "is fast and often furious" (*Guardian*, December 24, 2012). This conflation of audience and crowd speaks to scale, and Deuze's (2009) technological 'amplification', and the ways technology offers broader engagement. In terms of citizen interaction and alliances with audiences, scale also reduces journalism at times to "sifting, redaction and analysis, helping readers digest the information overload" (*Guardian*, January 17, 2011). While there is still a dynamic of boundary preservation, this interactive element appears enhanced and within discourses that focus on aspirational ideals, the civic relationship between journalism and its audience is foregrounded.

Not all engagement is positive though. Editorial guidelines and controls are challenged by user-generated content "that has not been commissioned by" the newspapers (*Guardian*, May 14, 2012). The *Daily Telegraph* pans the *Guardian*'s high level of interaction with user content and "'mission'" to mix "its stable of traditional journalists with so-called 'citizen' writers and photographers with no formal expertise" (October 9, 2012). In the *Times* unbridled citizen journalism in "'endless forums, chat rooms, blogs, and social networking sites'" is described as "increasingly pervasive" (November 26, 2012). Even when "the rise of citizen journalism" is lauded, it is challenged later in the same headline: "but can it be trusted?" (*Guardian*, June 11, 2012). These in-group/out-group discourses betray an otherwise open engagement with audiences, but are typical of journalistic identity processes (Eldridge 2013a; 2013b).

#### *Investigation and Technology: Enhancing the Fourth Estate*

Developing on a sense of journalism for citizens and for democracy, the third aspect of journalism's metadiscourse incorporates an emphasis on investigative and contextual journalism. With several prominent investigative news stories in 2011 and 2012, texts emphasise an investigative role that the press embraces. While a greater acknowledgement of investigative roles in the UK press does not remove the strictures posed by multi-skilling,



shrinking newsrooms, and limited resources (Örnebring 2010a, 2010b), in foregrounding this role more traditional underpinnings are enhanced.

In the first instance, these emerge as, “a reminder that there's more to investigative journalism than illicit intercepts and prurient snooping” (*Daily Telegraph*, August 5, 2011). In the second instance, they focus on defending the press’ ability to investigate in response to the threat of regulation:

Ask yourself: does our media find out too much or too little about what is done in our name? It is no wonder that our politicians then seek to tame these feral beasts. (*Guardian*, March 28, 2012)

Both in foregrounding its value, and defending its honour, journalism’s investigative identity in terms of enhancing information, adding understanding, and providing scrutiny is broadly emphasised. Discourses further promote traditional roles in reaction to WikiLeaks, which “reduces investigative journalists to bit players” (*Guardian*, January 17, 2011, quoting John Lloyd). This is further expressed in the framing of the *Guardian*’s March 2012 investigation of emails from Syria’s Assad regime. When Assad’s emails were provided to the *Guardian*, the stories were framed in terms of the newspaper’s role, its analysis, and its verification processes:

Extensive efforts to authenticate the emails by checking their contents against established facts and contacting 10 individuals whose correspondence appears in the cache. (*Guardian*, March 14, 2012).

Stories call on investigative journalism to make sense of large datasets, and address “information in oceanic magnitude can confuse and confound as easily as it can clarify” (*Guardian*, January 17, 2011, quoting Jaron Lanier). Within journalism’s metadiscourse, investigation is represented not as a lost role subsumed by external data sources, but rather, “a new way of getting leaked information made possible by the internet” (*Guardian*, December 6, 2012). When data is sourced externally, journalism’s discourses foreground its contextual role using elements to highlight its primacy and value: “The *Times* has been in the forefront of investigative journalism, maintaining its tradition of fearless reporting” (*Times*, 14 December 14, 2012). Furthermore, warnings not to take, “investigative journalism that speaks truth to power” (*Daily Telegraph*, November 28, 2012) for granted, establish this role as enhanced by widened technological scale and opportunities, rather than threatened by them.

## **Conclusions**

When left to navel gaze, journalism can lack reflexivity (Carlson 2013), and has historically come to define itself as both victim and victor (Siles and Boczkowski 2012). This dichotomy does not disappear in journalism’s metadiscourse while under crisis. However, within identity-laden discourses, there are signals that an enhanced sense of journalism’s role may be emerging. Far from having realised a new golden era, these symptoms hint towards a reflexive and nuanced engagement with traditional identities and perceptions that signal perhaps a gilded opportunity. Present in these discourses is a mixture of journalism defending its societal and civic necessity in response to inquiry, a more open journalism that

engages with an audience of citizens and the new opportunities they provide, and one that embraces contextual investigative roles as a counter narrative to external actors. These elements indicate a reinvigoration of a classic and idealised self-perception of journalism. While the realisation of these roles beyond discourse remains distant, their foregrounding suggests potential for reinvigoration (Thomas and Finneman 2013).

While the discourses explored here identify an open and engaging journalism, a more defensive posture persists. Where there are indications of a shift and a mapping of traditional roles onto new technologies, eschewing subservience to political whims, fuller audience perspectives warrant evaluation. Furthermore, there is broad scope to evaluate the full strength of these elements. In the context of journalism's disruptive history, its mix of trepidation and exuberance with regard to technology, its capitalized motivations, and its professional insularity, there are further facets of dying and rebirth to be explored.

While this paper focuses on 2011 and 2012, discourses of crisis and rejuvenation continue into 2013 as "countless obituaries for London's Inky Way have been written" (*International Herald Tribune*, June 28, 2013). These death notices though are rarely unaccompanied, with reminders that "newspapers have somehow managed to survive predictions of their demise" (ibid.). This paper has located signals of both, and identified where journalism's roles and identities may yet emerge renewed.

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