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Journalism Has No Future: A Hypothesis for the Neo-Liberal Era

Before moving to the central claim of this piece, let us start by suggesting a grammatical hypothesis. Journalism is a non-count noun just as words like furniture or homework. As such a noun it has many variations and forms none of which can be stripped away from the plurality of identity that is key to its character. This plurality was identified with great lucidity in an exchange between two British titans of the late Victorian era where George Newnes, the founder of the hugely profitable *Tit-bits* wrote to the man famous for his work on the *Pall Mall Gazette* often credited with introducing American innovations into the British daily newspaper. Newnes wrote to Stead:

There is one kind of journalism which directs the affairs of nations; it makes and unmakes cabinets; it upsets governments, builds up Navies and does many other great things. It is magnificent. This is your journalism. There is another kind of journalism which has no such great ambitions. It is content to plod on, year after year, giving wholesome and harmless entertainment to crowds of hardworking people, craving for a little fun and amusement. It is quite humble and unpretentious. This is my journalism (Friederichs, 1911: 116-117).

This plurality Newnes was writing about has multiplied significantly into the present and combines both the historical and the functional. For example, journalism, so often claimed as a central component to democracy was during one of its self-proclaimed Golden Ages, the early to mid-nineteenth century, co-existent with slavery in the US, complicit in the discriminatory rules on the franchise in the UK, a facilitator of repression in Latin America and a fellow traveller with Tsarist censorship in Russia. Indeed the norms of objectivity which have been identified as emerging in American journalism of the mid-nineteenth century, its professionalising drive we might say, are articulated explicitly against the sort of pioneering advocacy journalism which enabled women to become full participants in the political process. By the end of the nineteenth century with Pulitzer, Harmsworth and Marinoni we could say that rather than establishing a singular set of Enlightenment ideals, journalism had merely come to a full accommodation with industrial capitalism.

History is an essential consideration in the future of journalism. Historical awareness allows us to appreciate that journalism in all its various forms and claims has adapted to a bewildering variety of technological innovations from the printing press to social media. None of them were designed with journalism in mind and journalism has been created and recreated to fit the contours of those technological landscapes. In the encounters between journalism and technology context is all and context cannot be planned. The context of journalism is a function of the present while sitting firmly within a space structured on patterns of behaviour and expectation that have grown out of the past and into the present.

The inspiring series of conferences in Cardiff from 2007 have taken the Future of Journalism as their main theme. In the main, this has produced a rich crop of papers and subsequent publications ranging through business models, information subsidies, technological incorporation to the deployment of personnel. Yet from within both the academic and professional communities presenting their thoughts, there have only been rare attempts to definitional approaches to journalism or to representational implications of journalism in the contemporary era. Much of this research seems to be framed by the accommodation of journalism itself to neo-liberalism and academics' attempts to extrapolate the future out of that accommodation. This implies that journalism is either a stable set of practices that can be grafted onto new environments or that journalism is entirely pragmatic in its ability to find ways of adapting to new challenges even if these challenges threaten certain of its core claims.

It may be clear by now that the author considers the latter to be the case. Journalism has never planned its own delivery mechanisms. It has adapted to them as they have encroached from outside its prevailing set of practices. The main reason for this opinion is that journalism has become such a varied set of practices at the same time as its practitioners are more divided over who counts as a journalist and what constitutes journalism. This is exacerbated by the extent to which social media in general are contributing to journalism, the challenges that the uncritical incorporation of PR material in established news media outlets, the power and limitations of citizen journalists or bloggers, the fragmentation of previously stable forms of revenue and information subsidy and the decisions of managers of media organisations to use technological innovation as a way of driving down costs to maintain profit instead of optimising the quality of their content. To that extent journalism has never had a future and there is no need for it to start having one now. It must root itself in the present and in how it defines itself within a distinct framework of economic and technological challenges just as it has always had to. In the context of these challenges we need to call upon historical reflection given that journalism emerges from and is shaped by the contours of its history, traditions and mythologies which lionize as they idealize.

One of the problems besetting journalism as a set of myths is its lack of self-recognition; tenaciously defending its right to claims that are underexplored and lacking in any correlation with contemporary reality. How do, for example, journalism as watchdog, journalism telling truth to power or journalism as objective, impartial reporter fit into the widespread scepticism towards mainstream news or the lack of any awareness of the onset of financial crash of 2007-8? How do we square these claims to the increasing trend towards an abandonment by nationally based news media of any sense of impartiality and the retreat into a nineteenth century model of national chauvinism at the outbreak of international hostilities? Journalism is global but it all too often perceives itself as either an Anglo-American model or at least an Anglo-American template. One consequence of this is the misrecognition that journalism is intrinsically linked with democracy. It has in the past and certainly demonstrates

in the present an aptitude to lubricate many other forms of governance, not only democratic.

In the contemporary configuration of journalism, anxious as it has been at many points in the past for its survival, core questions are being asked once again about the nature of the practices that comprise journalism. Are the digital disruptions merely shaking the foundations or are they bringing about epistemological changes to journalism? History would indicate that there have been moments when politics and technologies have combined to produce such shifts in the understanding of public communication: the first was printing, the second was the industrialisation of journalism and the rise of the 'reporter'. Is it possible that we are living through a third era of epistemological change that sees the boundaries of journalism's definitions clarify themselves in the direction of democratic engagement or a further refinement of profitable business models?

Journalism has no future to the extent that it has never planned for its own evolution. It has been driven and shaped by extraneous factors always as a pragmatic response to particular circumstances whether these were technological or political. Yet ultimately journalism surpasses both technology and political structures to boast a fundamental socio-cultural set of imperatives, closely linked with humanity's need to communicate reliably. Journalism has never had a route map. Business models, technological visions and political projects may have had futures that needed to be fulfilled but how these are communicated may not be as important to the core functions of journalism as we imagine.

The main threat to journalism in all its variety and vitality and all its enormous promise is that the playing out of digital disruptions within a particularly influential socio-economic formation may fatally damage its ability to respond pragmatically as it has before. Industrial capitalism required broadly educated citizens and journalism as populist educator for all the limitations of that function provided that. There is no reason why neo-liberalism may not restrict its needs simply to a market for information. Such a stripped-down singularity is very different to any definition of journalism we currently have.

Journalism may have no future in that it has always been rooted in the pragmatism of the present but it would do well to consider its past as it moves towards new challenges. In this way it may well perceive a need to develop a more robust definition of its purposes in the plural, as a non-count noun. To sustain any future a radical change is required in the present; not to subserviently follow trends embedded within the economic exploitation of technologies but to return to its fundamentals in order to align its relationship to the myriad forms of public communication now emerging. If journalism does not reconsider its past and its definitional contours, a history may be all that it has; a footnote to the march of neo-liberal communication flows.

Friederichs, H. (1911) *The Life of Sir George Newnes*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

