

# Advocate, Copycatting or Simply Pragmatic: Reconceptualising Contemporary ‘Marginal’ Journalism(s)

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## ABSTRACT

Journalism(s) at the margins have often been perceived to focus exclusively on public service obligations. The motivation for this lies in the inability and/or unwillingness of mainstream public service and commercial media to provide a range of civic programming that caters to the needs and interests of diverse groups in society. This research, however, shows that evolving socio-political and socio-economic circumstances have had a considerable impact on contemporary marginal journalism(s). Whilst a commitment to public-service goals remains perceptible, this article makes two key arguments. First, the changing conditions in which journalists at the margins operate increasingly compel them to embrace mechanised journalistic routines associated with mainstream media, thereby compromising their public-service function. Second and following on from the first point, marginal journalism(s) have devised innovative media strategies to cope with the evolving circumstances in a manner reminiscent of the concept of the “third sector”. This evidence – based on data gathered through ethnographic research at three selected case study organisations - provides us with an enhanced understanding of current trends in this field. The article highlights these developments and in doing so, makes a contribution to the development of a conceptual framework of contemporary marginal journalism(s).

## KEYWORDS:

advocacy; ethnography; public service; professionalism;  
hybrid practices; commerce; regulation; politics

The Journal of Media Innovations 2.1 (2015), 41–58.

<http://www.journals.uio.no/index.php/TJMI>

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## INTRODUCTION

‘Marginal’<sup>1</sup> journalism(s) – by which I mean media work outside mainstream public service and commercial media often lumped together as part of alternative journalism, community journalism, citizen journalism, or even participatory journalism – have tended to be seen as bounded by a public service obligation comprising a fourfold socio-political function: the production of specific news and other informational content that meets the needs and interests of particular groups, communities and regions; the facilitation of broader involvement in the making of such content; the stimulation of informed and inclusive debate; and the assumption of an advocate and watchdog role (Witschge, Fenton, & Freedman, 2010). In doing so, it is argued, marginal journalism(s) demonstrate distinctive social and cultural value in enhancing democratic practice in ways that mainstream media corporations are unwilling or unable to owing to proprietary, political and regulatory control (Atton & Hamilton; 2008).

However, my research shows that as socio-

1 Because this term is slippery, I use it here particularly to emphasise a relationship to a centre rather than a state of being minor and unimportant.

political and socio-economic circumstances have gradually changed, marginal journalism(s) have evolved in three main ways: sometimes they foreground the socio-political function while, at other times, they imitate the professional journalistic routine inherent in mainstream media that is not always compatible with the former. Still at other times, they exhibit hybrid practice – a combination of values that prioritise the socio-political function and those that emphasise professional journalistic norms associated with rigid hierarchies, elite dominance, and a focus on profit making from advertising revenues. These conflicting values lead to tensions and contradictions that have not been sufficiently studied.

In an attempt to address this gap, I ask two key questions: a) how do journalists at the margins negotiate the conflicting socio-political and professional journalistic values? and b) what does this say about how marginal journalism(s) are currently conceptualised? My main argument is twofold: first, while a commitment to socio-political values remains identifiable, evolving circumstances are increasingly compelling journalists at the margins to compromise these by adopting a mechanised journalistic routine associated with established media that – whilst pragmatic – threatens to replicate the dominant influences inherent in main-

stream media in marginal journalism(s). Second, and of utmost importance, this article contributes to a reconceptualization of contemporary marginal journalism(s) based on how journalists at the margins have navigated the different values and the ways in which marginal journalism(s) have gradually developed innovative media strategies to endure in the wider, turbulent media environment in a way reminiscent of the notion of the “third sector”.

### Methodology

In order to respond to the specified research questions effectively, I draw on perspectives from the political economy of communication tradition, the sociology of news production, other relevant social and political theories, and alternative media scholarship to theorise contemporary marginal journalism(s). This provides the foundation on which I analyse journalistic practice in three media organisations at the margins in Britain and Germany using ethnographic research. Comprising semi-structured qualitative interviews, participant observation, and the study of documentary evidence (including content analysis), I conducted this research between 2009 and 2011 at *AsiaNet* and *Ummah Post* – both newspapers in Britain, and at *Warburg Radio* in Germany and spent a month

at each one of them. I selected these organisations based on longevity (having been in operation for over twenty years), claims to a commitment to both a socio-political function and to professional journalistic values (based on their proclaimed mission and past media work), and the reception of public subsidy. In tune with the conditions under which I was given insider access to pursue this research, I use pseudonyms to refer to each one of these organisations. This ‘privileged’ access to each organisation’s processes of making media work provided me with the most illuminating detail which, in turn, offered an enhanced understanding of such work.

Although far from being representative of British and German marginal journalism(s), these organisations nonetheless reflect contemporary practice in both contexts. Whereas the respective countries exhibit many fundamental differences and given that my aims in this article are not explicitly comparative, I chose to concentrate on and stress their similarities and how these might have shaped marginal journalism(s) in both countries. Such similarities include sharing a relatively common social democratic culture, a similar history of the countercultural era from which journalism(s) outside mainstream media emerged, disillusionment with dominant ideological discourses in public communication, and the prevalence of consid-

erable structural inequities among other things. As we shall see, the last two aspects in particular spur on journalists at the margins in both countries to agitate for some sort of change.

### Theorising Marginal Journalism(s)

Marginal journalism(s) aim to facilitate democratic communication through the provision of relevant news and other informational content to diverse groups in a manner that is meaningful to them and with their collaboration and support – a phenomenon that has become known as “native reporting” (Atton, 2003a: 46). Such content is filling the gap left by established media which are proving unable to provide a full range of public service programmes that cater to diverse publics. This is largely attributed to two crucial developments: first, the structural changes in the global media industry that unfolded in the 1980s owing to deregulation, audience segmentation and technological changes forced mainstream public service media to reorganise their news departments in order to cope with fierce competition in the ensuing deregulated media environment (Curran and Seaton 2010). In doing so, they dispensed with many public service obligations perceived to be less profitable yet of essential socio-political value (Murdoch & Golding 2005).

Second, political economists of communication argue that the concentration of ownership of media corporations into a few hands generates enormous power which can potentially be exercised to control media and cultural content (Hesmondhalgh, 2006), something that has a twofold implication: firstly, particular events and themes are selected and packaged as news content in a bid to attract and reach maximum audiences in higher spending groups likely to purchase the products advertised therein (Keeble, 1998). In this scenario, audiences are seen as consumers, the content is considered inadequate in aiding them to make informed and meaningful civic choices, and journalists who depend on business revenue are susceptible to advertiser influence and pressure which can lead to tensions (Croteau and Hoynes, 2001). Secondly, control facilitates the reproduction of dominant perspectives while discrediting views outside of what is generally considered to be acceptable (Hackett, 1984).

Furthermore, key sociological studies on news production have highlighted the standardised news-making routines and the role of professional journalistic values that guide mainstream media journalists in their work. The former constitute a “newsgathering net” which constitutes reporting personnel and equipment (Tuchman, 1978), the

typification of newsworthy events (Molotch and Lester, 1981), inter-relationships with advertisers and other institutions (Fishman, 1980) and sources (Soloski, 1989) while the latter draw on objectivity and its associated norms of balance and impartiality that require journalists to report news “without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way” (Schudson 2001: 150). Scholars have found that the interplay between these factors generates “biased”, “constructed”, “commoditised”, “palliative”, “comforting”, “simplified” and “de-contextualised” news content (Murdock and Golding, 1977; McNair, 1998; Harcup, 2005) which “undermines intelligent and rational debate” (Curran, 2002: 226).

Such views have motivated journalists at the margins to provide alternatives to prevailing media systems. Drawing on social and political theory and alternative media scholarship, such journalists have tended to see their primary role as enhancing the public sphere - a “social space where information, ideas, and debate can circulate in society and where political opinion can be formed” (Dahlgren, 1995: ix), and where ideally, “access is guaranteed to [everyone]” (Eley, 1992: 289). In Nancy Fraser’s words, they argue that since “full parity of participation in public debate and deliberation is not within the reach of possibility” for ordinary people,

marginalised views and disempowered groups owing to “the basic institutional framework [in established media which] generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination” (1992: 121), marginal journalism(s) have a twofold obligation: to challenge dominant ideological frameworks by engaging in counter-hegemonic cultural activity (Downing *et al.*, 2001) through providing a platform to articulate and express perceived peripheral opinions, needs and interests in society, and to provide relevant and civic content that caters to the needs and interests of diverse groups.

## CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN MARGINAL JOURNALISM(S)

From the 1970s onwards, my research showed that marginal journalism(s) served a predominantly socio-political function. News and other informational accounts were concerned with what was happening in diverse local communities and regions. More importantly, such accounts were produced with the support of the respective communities. Founded in 1972 as a community newssheet, *AsiaNet*, for example, reported on issues revolving around racism and discrimination faced by Gujarati and Hindu communities resident in London. In doing so, interested community members with or without prior media experience were given the opportunity to participate in the news production processes at the paper. Similarly, *Warburg Radio* – in its inception in 1974 initially as an underground newspaper and later as a pirate radio before obtaining a broadcasting licence in the early 1990s - targeted the then East German countercultural scene with accounts that advocated resistance to institutional rules and all sorts of social control imposed by communist rule. Like *AsiaNet*, *Warburg Radio* depended on the enthusiasm of activists and volunteers to provide accounts of the latest developments in the countercultural scene from within.

In the late 1980s, *Ummah Post* was established as a newsheet to serve the growing Muslim community in London which was not catered to by established media. According to Malik, one of the co-founding chief editors of the paper, this target audience which is “ethnically very diverse” and adheres to “different strands of Islam” needed a “Muslim medium” which reflected Muslim views on issues in the wider society. As we shall see, this was particularly the case in the aftermath of the controversy caused by Salman Rushdie’s book *The Satanic Verses* when the paper encouraged and invited wide commentary and opinions on the crisis.

All three organisations demonstrate that the socio-political function was at the heart of their work. But as socio-political, socio-economic and technological circumstances evolved from the 1980s onwards, marginal journalism(s) professionalised: journalists covered broader subject matter partly to reflect the transformation in society and to tap into new markets that diverse, hitherto unserved communities provided. In part, the move towards professionalization was fostered by the pursuit of an authoritative voice on specific issues both nationally and internationally, and a claim to the adoption of professional journalistic values which were exploited for commercial benefit as I show below.

## ASIANET

Until the 1980s, *AsiaNet* focused on news stories that concerned resident Gujarati and Hindu communities in London. It was from these groups that the paper recruited volunteers to help in the news production process as a call for participation read:

Any member wishing to help in any way whether by donating cash, contributing to articles, proof-reading, distributing or assisting in any other way is warmly welcome. No previous newspaper experience is required [...] Only commitment and the willingness to perform tasks as necessary is what it takes... (*AsiaNet*).

From the 1980s onwards – owing to the dynamics of changing demographics in British society, journalists at *AsiaNet* began targeting the entire Asian population across Britain according to Gopal – founder and chief editor:

In the 1980s, the Asian population in this country was growing and doing well in business, education, the civil service, name it. Asians were dispersed across the country, in Southwest England, in the East Midlands, in Yorkshire etc and we wanted to reach as many of them as possible [...] The point I think at

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which we began national distribution must have been around 1991, maybe 1992. It was a few years after we opened the headquarters in India from where we were able to get news from the sub-continent. There was quite a lot of interest in news from Pakistan and Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as well.

The opening of headquarters in India in order to source news from the subcontinent paved the way for professionalization at the paper, especially in terms of task allocation, newsgathering, and the selection of news events and sources. Where *AsiaNet* strongly encouraged broader involvement in news-making prior to the 1980s, the evolution of the socio-economic climate from the mid-1980s onwards compelled the paper to adopt a much more structured way of working in response to competition from the “[m]any [Asian] families [that] came into [the newspaper] business” as Gopal recalls. By the early 1990s, *AsiaNet* had gone from a biweekly to a weekly format and the number of its pages had increased from about a dozen to over thirty – most carrying advertisements as documentary evidence revealed. In order to achieve even more efficiency, the paper was structured in sections with specific tasks and full-time journalists hired. It was no coincidence that many community news workers and volunteers left during this period owing to a grow-

ing disaffection with these changes. This inevitably limited broader participation in news production at *AsiaNet*, thereby marking the beginning of the erosion of socio-political values.

Today, the editorial section is headed by Gopal as chief editor supported by four full-time journalists and a host of freelance authors with more or less specialised fields of expertise. The other sections include sales and advertising, accountancy, and graphics. The sales and advertising section comprises six employees, two of whom normally spend a significant amount of time canvassing business, advertiser, and sponsor support. Overall, this section seeks to exploit the full potential of the paper by encouraging both old and new advertisers to use more space, offering different forms of advertising and assisting with the design of the advertisements. A study of the content showed that the advertising input from this section accounts for the biggest share of the paper's pages which suggests a high commercial orientation of *AsiaNet*.

While an individual runs the section responsible for the paper's accounting, the graphics section consists of two individuals who are responsible for the layout and printing of the newspaper. Whereas this high level of task specialisation appears to be effective and productive, and harmonises with pro-

fessional journalistic values, it inhibits wider involvement in the meaning-making process and appears to be motivated more by profit making which suggests a pragmatic approach to ensuring survival in the marketplace at the expense of socio-political values.

Each morning during my fieldwork at the paper, journalists in the editorial section perused other newspapers – both mainstream and marginal, and listened to radio broadcasts. News stories perceived to be interesting and worth following up on were scanned. Journalists received news tips on the phone and via emails and press releases from several public institutions. In addition to canvassing business and advertiser support, one news worker, Ankit, normally covered any scheduled press conferences and followed up on potential news stories.

On one occasion, I accompanied Ankit to a press conference at the Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in London at which the then Minister of State for Farming and the Environment, Jim Fitzpatrick, had invited journalists working in journalism(s) at the margin to report on the dangers of importing fish, poultry, meat, and dairy products from countries outside the European Union. This had followed reports of an increased incidence of foot and mouth and bird flu

diseases allegedly caused by the importation of “illegal foods” in personal luggage. Materials from the press conference were edited to fit the space available without offering any contextual details, something that is out of tune with socio-political values.

During the course of the day, interviews with sources were arranged: either sources came to the premises (though rare while I was there) or journalists went out. I soon discovered that journalists only went out if interviews featured “big people”, usually high-ranking mainstream politicians and elites, community leaders, and business people. On no occasion did I witness journalists going out into the community to gather news or find out what was happening there nor did I see community members involved in news production other than when sending brief commentaries that were a couple of words long. The mechanised journalistic routine means that only editors gather, select, process, and write news accounts often relying on a pool of elites and institutions as news sources as Parveen's comments, one of the editors at *AsiaNet*, indicate:

I do many interviews with a lot of big people, say like community leaders, spiritual leaders, businessmen, lawyers and people like that. They know much more about what goes on in their fields or if not, they

can always refer me to someone who might give the information I want. I have a list of their names. Depending on the topic, I just need to call to arrange an interview...

The understanding here is that journalists at the paper gravitate towards authoritative sources by virtue of the expertise they possess. In principle, this makes sense considering that such “sources are consulted precisely for their presumed expertise and not merely as proponents of a certain point of view” (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 102). But for a newspaper whose thrust is to serve members of the entire Asian community in Britain, news coverage appeared to reflect more the “bland, cautious and professionally balanced journalism” associated with mainstream media (McMillian, 2011: 8) rather than relevant and detailed news and informational content that reflects the lived experiences of the paper’s readership. I argue that whereas coverage at *AsiaNet* continues to address topics of interest and concern to the British Asian community in line with socio-political values, the brevity of the news accounts in favour of more advertisements and the significantly reduced involvement of community members in the meaning-making process – either as contributors or as news sources - point to a prioritisation of professional journalistic norms, a

scenario that compromises the socio-political function.

It is worth noting that journalists at *AsiaNet* do not appear to consciously ignore the perspectives of their readership because they are socialised into learning “common news narratives that help them quickly choose which social story should be told and which kinds of people should be involved in its telling” (Berkowitz and TerKeurst, 1999: 127 – 128). Other scholars have identified a similar trend. Atton and Wickenden in their triangulated case study on the sourcing routines of an activist newspaper in Britain found that although news workers favoured the views and opinions of ordinary people and strove to incorporate them as “native reporters” into the news production process, the primary definers of the issues under coverage remained elites hierarchically structured as those for established media (2005: 350). Similarly, in their study of news making at a diasporic newspaper, Bailey *et al.* (2008) found that the primary definers of events covered were mostly an elite formed by the community’s own journalists and expert contributors (2008: 93).

## WARBURG RADIO

Between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s, *Warburg Radio* - both as an underground newspaper (*Das Untergrundsecho*) and later as a pirate radio (*Die Landfunker*) - targeted the left-wing scene in an effort to try to prevent the scene from disintegrating amidst heavy repression by the East German Communist government. Many of the news accounts were contributed by activists from a position of engagement within the countercultural scene as Ulrich, one of the founding members, comments:

Back then *Das Untergrundsecho* was disseminated in different parts of the city where the left-wing scene had numerous small hubs. It provided the latest news on various developments [within a number of working-class neighbourhoods]. We got much of the news from the left-wing scene in West Berlin. And when *Die Landfunker* came, its news was rather unique and very popular with the scene because it advocated undermining the Socialist Unity Party [the ruling political party of the former East German government] particularly for its brutal repression. There wasn’t anything else comparable to *Die Landfunker* at the time. Its information programmes usually lasted just under an hour or so but it was just enough to elec-

trify the scene [...] Hungry as the scene was for news and information, both *Das Untergrundsecho* and *Die Landfunke* really helped to quell that hunger and keep the scene together.

This changed from the mid-1980s onwards when the radio station sought to expand its listenership after the first signs emerged that the East German government seemed to be crumbling as Heinz, the station manager, remarks:

When it became clear that the controls [against pirate broadcasting in the 1980s] were becoming increasingly lax, [we] began targeting more and more people who began regularly tuning in [...] People were sympathetic and supportive. The programming was very popular with people both young and old in part I guess because it was rebellious. People were not used to that at all. But it was also in many respects the only source of news about the last years of the Cold War that was not manipulated by the [Socialist Unity Party]. Although there was a risk of drastic punishment if caught listening in, more people tuned in nevertheless. [The government media] were very centralised and dull. People had grown tired of them because they always produced the same slogans.

With the demise of communism from the late 1980s onwards, *Warburg Radio* underwent a further period of transformation in which the station took on a more community-building role alongside its watchdog function. This role comprised the incorporation of social project work into news and information programming in tune with the socio-political function. Through its wide scope of news and information programmes, *Warburg Radio* today attracts a host of diverse audiences ranging from school children, youths, and students to sections of the wider public considered to be at risk such as the elderly, the long-term unemployed, the disabled, and immigrants.

One of the ongoing social projects at the radio station during my ethnographic research targeted people with physical and mental disabilities, the long-time unemployed, and immigrants. Funded partly by subsidy from Europe and partly by the local government, the project aimed not only to report on the difficulties that these groups faced on a daily basis, but it also worked to equip group participants with basic media competence and a range of other relevant professional skills in a bid to help integrate them better into community and public life, particularly into the labour market.

Such project work was routinely developed into news stories framed in a broader context, for

example, what it means to live with a physical or mental disability or how to cope with the routine of an author, musician or performer as a person with a disability. This provided insights into the lives of these people which presumably would not be obtained anywhere else in such detail. In doing so, people with disabilities were given an opportunity to make contributions “based on the authority of their personal experience of and subjective engagement with the issues under discussion” (Atton, 2007: 21).

Moreover, the news stories reported on the nature of help and care available and how this could be accessed. Many participants were significantly involved in putting together these news programmes through gathering, processing, and disseminating such relevant information to a wider audience, thereby demonstrating journalistic skills. This shows that journalists at *Warburg Radio* continue the tradition of putting the needs and lived experiences of the communities they serve at the centre of their work, and in doing so, make effective use of core journalistic skills, all of which reflects hybrid practice – a skilful and successful blending of socio-political and professional journalistic values.

Another social project that highlights hybrid practice in news making at *Warburg Radio* commemorated the twentieth anniversary of German



Unification in 2010 through gathering perceptions of German people (and those of foreigners) about the progress of German Unity as Ulrich explains:

This is a project that I and [a colleague] started. We came up with the idea after the [media supervisory body] commissioned a project to commemorate 20 years of German Unity. 2000 Euros were made available for the project. My idea was: okay, it's 20 years since [the Berlin Wall] fell but there's still a lot of tension and lots of misperceptions on both sides [former East and West Germany]. The [Berlin Wall] is still very much present in the minds, at least in the minds of those living in the country. So, we thought, how did the Germans living outside Germany experience the fall of the Berlin Wall? How do they view the unified Germany from the outside? Is it a view with emotions different from those of the Germans living here? Since the project had to demonstrate some connection with the state of Thuringia, we sought to hear from voices of people who either originated in Thuringia or were connected to this state in some way before they emigrated or so. We felt a lot had been written, sang and said about German Unification but nothing of the like – at least to our knowledge - was ever done. We also decided to include the voices of immigrants who lived in Thuringia before [the fall of the Berlin Wall]. We wanted to know how they

viewed things. We wanted to know how significant people thought German Unification was. Did it play a role at all for people, say, from [former] Yugoslavia or people from France?

As it turned out, there was a very high rate of responses to the call for contributions. This was not surprising given that Thuringia was at the forefront of the Cold War in many respects. Most notably, more than half of the inner-German border that separated the two German states during this period ran across Thuringia's 763 km long landmass. As such, most contributions came from Germans who emigrated after they had been dispossessed of their land and property to make way for the border. A significant portion of news coverage was derived from these contributions and fitted into the wider context of both the Cold War and the twentieth anniversary of German Unification.

Whereas the incorporation of social project work into news and information programmes in this way at *Warburg Radio* is not new, what is relatively new (and has the potential to cause problems) is that nearly all social project work at the radio station and the related programming are dependent on subsidy which, like advertiser support, brings with it issues and tensions. Between the 1970s and mid-1980s, journalists at the margins gener-

ally covered a relatively limited set of themes and in doing so, relied on advertising, sponsoring, and fundraising to break even (Comedia, 1984). Many rejected public subsidy for fear of appropriation into the Establishment which they held responsible for perpetuating the structural inequities they challenged, while others' requests for public funding were ignored altogether (Downing *et al.*, 2001). By contrast, some contemporary journalists at the margins report on broader subject matter often only with the help of public subsidy which, in many cases, meets the costs of their survival. Like advertisers who influence journalists' news decisions, public funders' decisions whether or not to fund a social project or civic campaign activities can have a negative impact on the autonomy of journalists at the margins.

A case in point concerns a dilemma that journalists at *Warburg Radio* faced as a result of their persistent critique of the policies of the local conservative party generally perceived to be drastic and too commercially-driven. Journalists habitually mobilised citizens against these policies, and in doing so risked the revocation of their broadcasting licence as Heinz recalls:

Just about seven or eight years ago our licence was almost revoked because of a [perceived] biased [news]

report [...]. We know factions in the conservative party were behind this as they had been waiting for a chance to strike back. So we've had to tone down our reporting on their policies so as not to risk having to lose our licence...

For journalists at the margins engaging with critical and expository news programming around social and civic project work, political controls through constrictive regulation pose a huge challenge. Although there seemed to be no indication of any more challenges of this nature, journalists at *Warburg Radio* intimated they had become "cautious ever since" which, one could argue, equates with self-censorship. Although this signals pragmatism in a bid to retain their broadcasting franchise, in all likelihood journalists at the radio station could be deterred from engaging with media work that might stir controversy, a situation that has the potential not only to jeopardize the radio station's socio-political values, but also to undermine its quest for promoting democratic practice.

## UMMAH POST

In the late 1980s, *Ummah Post* was founded with the remit to provide a space in which issues of interest, concern, and relevance to the Muslim community in London would be reported, debated and discussed, and the involvement of community members in this process encouraged. *The Satanic Verses* crisis at the time precipitated the paper's inception as Malik, co-founding chief editor, recollects:

Until [*The Satanic Verses*], there had been no serious Muslim media. You saw maybe a magazine or flyers lying around in mosques or at [Muslim] events [...] But after [*The Satanic Verses*] crisis, things changed because it was clear that mainstream media were biased in the way they reported things. They didn't understand that Muslims are ethnically very diverse and believe in different strands of Islam [...] I thought: how is it [possible] there was actually no medium for Muslims in London? Not even anywhere else countrywide? I thought Muslims needed to air their views on the scandal and other issues that concerned them [...] Having had some experience with [a Muslim newsletter] I had started during my Polytechnic days [in South England] and later writing for two youth Muslim magazines, I started *Ummah Post* with three

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colleagues. We wanted *Ummah Post* to report Muslim views on *The Satanic Verses* crisis and also other issues concerning Muslims here in London.

From the early 1990s onwards, *Ummah Post* leapt to global heights by addressing an international readership as reflected in the coverage of the First Gulf War in 1990 and the Bosnian War between 1992 and 1995. In doing so, journalists at the paper adopted a more objective and critical reporting style while claiming to be empathetic to Muslim concerns:

Throughout *The Satanic Verses* crisis and later the Iraq War [in 1990] and the Bosnian War, we did our homework well and reported critically on what was happening even though we empathised with Muslim concerns. Not everyone liked our coverage, but that's not the reason we were in the business. Many mainstream journalists consulted us on some issues and wanted to collaborate with us [...] We knew we had to get things right if we were to establish ourselves in the UK and build an international audience at the same time. It is during the Iraq War [in 1990] that we realised we had a much bigger international audience than we thought. People contacted us from all over the world with their views and support but also with critique. Some of it helpful, some of it just nonsense

[...] It was a real achievement for us to see so many people reading our paper a few years after we had launched (Malik).

It seemed the successful navigation between the objective and empathetic reporting styles earned journalists at *Ummah Post* a credible reputation both in Britain and abroad and points to hybrid practice at its best. Indeed, three archived mainstream British newspapers I looked at dating from 1990/91 during Gulf War I either quoted commentary and interviews from *Ummah Post* or featured pieces co-authored with *Ummah Post* editors – something that demonstrated their newly-acquired authoritative standing on Muslim issues. Having made a name for themselves as a successful newspaper with a seemingly loyal and international following, “attracting [businesses] to advertise [in the paper] was easier” as Malik remembers. One might argue that journalists at the paper made effective use of professionalism to make money. I am not arguing that this is undesirable. I merely highlight that this development points to a considerable aspect of change at *Ummah Post*.

Today, *Ummah Post* continues to cover news stories and provide informational content for its

global Muslim readership in line with its ongoing subscription to the socio-political function. More importantly, my fieldwork showed that journalists at the paper allocate their readership a crucial role in helping to make meaning around shared lived experiences at multiple levels: local, regional, national, and international. This is reminiscent of recent studies on citizen journalism which found that mainstream journalists are no longer considered to be the sole arbiters of knowledge on specific subjects and that ordinary people’s expertise if harnessed can be equally valuable (Ornebring, 2008; Peters & Broersma, 2013). This clearly demonstrates hybrid practice which merges values that prioritise the socio-political function with journalistic norms associated with established media.

The downside to this is twofold: first, although contributors are given an opportunity to get involved in the meaning-making process, I learnt that they have to be socialised into adhering to professional journalistic values beforehand: “separating fact from opinion, providing a balanced account of a debate, and validating journalistic statements by reference to authoritative others” (McNair 1998: 65). Whereas this facilitates the production of fair and comprehensive news content, it does not allow contributors to engage with the meaning-making

process on their own terms.<sup>2</sup> Second, Malik noted that hybrid practice does not necessarily translate into the contribution of a constant stream of good quality news and informational content on a regular basis. In an effort to ensure that a stable supply of news is produced regularly to reduce the risk of relying on contributors and volunteers, journalists at *Ummah Post* are increasingly adopting a mechanised news production routine similar to that at *AsiaNet*: editing public announcements considered relevant to the readership into short news stories with little or no contextual details and consulting mostly elite sources. Pragmatic as this approach may be, it is already threatening to push socio-political values to the periphery under the guise of sustaining the paper’s work.

In an effort to bolster its community-building and advocate roles in tune with the socio-political function, *Ummah Post* introduced news programming around its annual awards event. According to Malik, the awards event aims to bring together Muslims to honour fellow Muslims (also occasionally non-Muslims) who make outstanding contri-

<sup>2</sup> This is especially the case online where contributors are only given the opportunity to grade or comment on content already produced in what Ornebring terms “customisation” (2008: 774).

butions to the British Muslim community. This event is a culmination of a nomination process in which the Muslim community is encouraged to nominate “an individual, a project or an initiative that [members] think deserves recognition and can serve as an example to [the entire British Muslim community]”. Nominees are entered into an awards category which comprises sixteen different areas, random examples of which include:

Arts: for excellence in the visual and performing arts and architecture;

1. Creativity in Islamic thought: for excellence in the development of a new and challenging approach to understanding and application of Islam;
2. Media: for fair, accurate and balanced reporting on issues involving Muslims nationally or internationally;
3. Good citizenship: for showing courage and determination in securing rights for British Muslims;
4. Enterprise: for excellence in business and commerce (*Ummah Post*).

During my fieldwork at the paper in 2009/10, one of the hotly debated topics concerned the perceived Islamophobic sentiment which seemed to have been taken to new heights in Europe, particularly

after the Swiss had voted in a referendum to ban the construction of minarets in their country in the autumn of 2009. The vote, so the official government explanation went, was not a ban on practising Islam in Switzerland, but rather one on building minarets. Much of the news commentary and analysis at the paper interpreted this as an attack on Islam and focused primarily on the theme of “good citizenship”: what it meant to stand up for the rights of one’s faith “in the face of adversity” as Malik put it.

This highlights two key issues: first, that *Ummah Post* clearly interprets its remit as one of an advocate of the British Muslim community which reflects a continued commitment to socio-political values. Second, journalists at the paper do not always adhere to the norm of objectivity as they claim. Although the Swiss vote was clearly not a ban on practising Islam but one on building more minarets in Switzerland, *Ummah Post’s* news accounts appeared to present only one side of the story: that of the Muslim faith being victimised. In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, critics of objective news have argued that objectivity is not possible in journalistic practice because cultural values and norms of journalists influence the process of meaning-making, thereby fostering bias

(Deuze, 2005).

This is substantiated by Hackett’s observation that “neutral value-free language in which the pure facts of the world could be recorded without prejudice is impossible because evaluations are already implicit in the concepts, the language in terms of which one observes and records” (1984: 234 – 235). For *Ummah Post* journalists, therefore, “situating oneself and one’s media work within the complexities and multiple identities” (Atton, 2003a: 47) in an environment that requires treating news with the sensitivity it deserves on a daily basis can be a challenging task. This points to a tension between such journalists’ professional ambitions and the harsh realities of acting as a campaigner for a community’s interests and wellbeing.

The analysis above has shown that marginal journalism(s) are in a state of flux. Some of the key trends thrown up by the organisations under study in this article point to changes that are aligned with the notion of media innovations. To illustrate this, I draw on a typology of media innovations developed by Bleyen *et al.* (2014: 33-35) that categorises innovation into process and product. The former is further subdivided into innovation as it relates to a business model (e.g., a new way of organising an industry, cross-subsidisation), to production (e.g., new means of creating) and to distribution while

the latter is split into innovation reflected in the inner form (e.g., a new stylistic feature of a product) and in the core content (e.g., a new theme or message). Whereas both process and production innovation, according to the authors, encompass new ways of consuming products and services, my analysis above points mainly to innovation as it relates to business models, content and the production process.

By sourcing news in demand from the Indian subcontinent already in the early 1990s to serve a significant immigrant population in Britain, changing to a weekly format and professionalising by hiring full-time journalists, *AsiaNet* widened its thematic foci and reorganised its way of working. Although this appears to have involved merely replicating professional journalistic conventions into the context at the paper, I argue that this still demonstrates a significant level of change in organisation and as such, reflects a new business model and innovativeness in the content produced.

Similarly, both *Warburg Radio* and *Ummah Post* demonstrated the adoption of new business models and innovation in content creation and production processes – albeit in different ways. *Warburg Radio* was founded as an underground newspaper and progressed to being a pirate radio station before becoming a prominent radio sta-

tion. These stages of progression, we have seen, required new ways of organising and structuring. On the back of this restructuring, new and wider themes as well as processes of media production came into effect, the most notable of which are the news and information programming deriving from social project work and the hybrid practice in the news-making process. This is also true for *Ummah Post* which introduced news programmes around its annual awards event, targeted an international readership and declared itself an authority on Muslim issues and an advocate of the British Muslim community.

## RECONCEPTUALISING MARGINAL JOURNALISM(S): TOWARDS THIRD SECTOR JOURNALISM?

We have seen that journalists in the organisations under study balance socio-political and professional journalistic values in ways that demonstrate an intricate dynamic that is not yet reflected in existing literature on journalism(s) at the margins to which this article aims to contribute. This leads me to survey the current conceptual thinking guiding this field and to propose a new way of looking at contemporary journalism(s) at the margins in a way that reflects their latest trajectory.

Marginal journalism(s) have been referred to by various terms<sup>3</sup> in different contexts: alternative journalism, community journalism, citizen journalism and participatory journalism. To Atton (2002: 9 – 10), alternative journalism can be seen as “a blanket term [whose] strength lies in the fact that it can encompass far more” forms of journalism than other terms. But, he qualifies this, noting that “[t]o deploy ‘alternative’ as an analytical term, however, might afford us little more specificity

3 I focus here on the most commonly used terms. For a comprehensive list of other terms in use - albeit rarely, see Glaser (2010: 581).

than saying ‘non-mainstream’ journalism (ibid). Harcup observes that “[d]efinitions of alternative [journalism] are not fixed or universally accepted” (2005: 361) while Comedia (1984: 95) noted that alternative [journalism] was defined in terms of what it was not.

Other scholars are wary of the term because they think it too often positions marginal journalism(s) in a rigid dichotomous relationship with professional journalistic practice which, they argue, is not accurate owing to blurring boundaries in practice and aims (Eliasoph, 1997; Harcup, 2005). Still other commentators have identified that some journalists outside established media consider their role either to be supplementary to mainstream media corporations or even as that of main providers of specific and relevant outputs to certain members of diverse cultural groups and that such journalists “specifically reflect [the] political and aesthetic interests [of the groups they serve]” (Downing & Husband 2005: 210). As such, to refer to their work as alternative journalism does not seem right which renders the term unsuitable for use for my purposes here.

Likewise, the term community journalism is problematic. Proponents have highlighted its portrayal of the local and regional character of the news production processes (Donohue, Olien & Tichenor,

1997). For others, the term emphasises the identity of a group of people bound by perceived shared values and ties rooted in common cultural settings (Howley, 2009). To critics, however, the term “suggests simplistic, low budget, and low technology production – an approach which can seem, on occasion, to imply a lowering of expectation and standards” (Lewis, 1990: 112). Conversely, my fieldwork showed that many journalists at the margins engage in the making of high-quality news and other informational content that is often circulated regionally, nationally, and in some cases, even internationally with considerable success. To allude to their work as community journalism seems inaccurate and is an inappropriate definitional term.

The term citizen journalism - understood to mean civic practices “embedded within the everyday lives of citizens, and media content that is both driven and produced by those people” (Atton, 2003b: 267) as members of nation states – is problematic. Whereas it captures the ways in which citizens get involved in media processes, it does not seem to account for groups that do not possess legal membership to any one nation state but still participate in the same processes. Of such groups like refugees and illegal immigrants involved in media production, Glaser (2010) asks whether not being citizens invalidates their work while Down-

ing (2010) notes that “the word ‘citizen’ as applied to [journalism] has to be explicitly stripped of its legal connotation” if it is to incorporate these groups. Considering that I encountered a number of “non-citizen” journalists in the media organisations under study in this article, I choose not to use this term.

Participatory journalism as a term appears to mean different things in different contexts. Established media have a long tradition of claiming to facilitate participatory journalism through involving audiences in programmes via “phone-ins” and studio discussions (Murdoch & Golding, 1977; Gillmor, 2006). Some scholars have used the term to depict the wider involvement of ordinary people in media-supported development projects in the global South (Fraser & Estrada, 2001). In New Media studies, scholars speak of participatory journalism to refer to how Web 2.0 technologies facilitate audience interaction with online media content (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007). This ambiguity renders the term inappropriate for use as an overarching definition for marginal journalism(s).

Third sector journalism is the term I prefer to use because it differentiates marginal journalism(s) from professional journalistic practice while acknowledging the blurring lines between the two in a way that the other terms do not. It is based

on the overarching principle of the “third sector”: providing opportunities through participation in community and public life given the intensifying disillusionment with private market solutions and state controlled agencies that are unable to adequately address the needs of ordinary people and of marginalised and disempowered groups (Wigglesworth & Kendall, 2000). In essence, the third sector - comprising both “not for profit”, self-help and advocacy groups as well as small and medium-sized companies that may make profit - fosters institutional diversity, enhances innovation, and inhibits monopolistic tendencies by adding a sphere of self-organisation alongside that of the state and the market (Anheier, 2002). In doing so, the third sector does not delineate itself from the latter but actually draws on their resources in its pursuit of social and political goals (Cory, 2010). For the most part, such goals entail value-driven action which tends to draw on commitment and voluntary participation from individuals, groups and organisations that share similar agendas (Cory, 2010). Just as the goals vary markedly, so do the actors in terms of formality, autonomy, influence and power (Anheier, 2002).

We have seen that the case study organisations in this article exhibit virtually all these characteristics depicted above – albeit with some tensions

and contradictions. Nevertheless, it is in this sense that I propose we look at contemporary marginal journalism(s) for the following reasons: they emerged in response to the unwillingness and/or failure of mainstream public-service and commercial media to provide civic programming that adequately serves diverse groups in society, some make effective use of the voluntary participation of and contribution from such groups in the meaning-making process, they constitute a sector that strives to act as a corrective to the dominance of mainstream media, and they demonstrate different levels of autonomy and influence in their organisation and work. These attributes - coupled with endurance, resilience and a demonstration of innovativeness in media production – reflect similar patterns that the case study organisations share in common.

## CONCLUSION

This article provides insights that help to bridge the gap between current practice and the out-of-date philosophical principles that have tended to guide marginal journalism(s). Contrary to common beliefs that these journalism(s) are amateurish, not-for-profit, autonomous from state and commercial interests and prioritise the socio-political function, we have seen that journalists in the case study organisations make use of professional journalistic norms to deliver factually-based, fair, and comprehensive news content. Some of them exploit journalistic practice to make profit while others struggle with the pressures exerted by commercial and political forces in the same manner as their colleagues in established media. Still others struggle with the boundary shifts between their cultural and professional journalistic identities.

These developments should be viewed in connection with the wider trends in the entire media landscape of which marginal journalism(s) are a constitutive element. The need to cope in an increasingly unsettled and unpredictable media environment has compelled journalists at the margins to innovate, the consequence of which has been the development of an array of processes and products that are captured effectively by the concept of me-

dia innovations: adapting new ways of organising work, engaging with new and wider themes, and embracing new and inclusive processes of making media work. In light of this empirical evidence, the article contributes to the development of a conceptual framework of marginal journalism(s) by proposing a definition - third sector journalism – that captures the dynamic production contexts of this field much more effectively than existing terms do.

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