

# News as conversation, citizens as gatekeepers: Where is digital news taking us?

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*This paper considers the implications of recent shifts in the digital news landscape for democracy and the public sphere. It discusses the role of participatory news platforms and the claims made about the new elevated role for citizens as participants in and even producers of news. The paper concludes by arguing that rhetoric suggesting a radical upheaval in power relations between citizens and professional news media risks obscuring the real benefits of new modes of audience engagement.*

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## **Introduction: Revolution in the air?**

Consider a scene scarcely imaginable 10 short years ago: of the hundreds of millions of English language blogs tracked by blog engine Technorati, a majority deal in topics that are the traditional preserve of mainstream journalism (politics, technology, business, film, celebrity, sport and so on). Most aren't just confessional diaries or online photo albums (though often those elements are blended in). Technorati's research suggests blogs tend *not* to be made on a whim and then rapidly abandoned: 85 per cent of them have been active for more than a year. About a third of American blogs have more than 1,000 unique visitors every month (Sobel 2010). On Twitter, Middle East opposition protests, earthquakes and celebrity scandals unfurl in real-

time via tweets from innumerable and often uncertain sources, and mainstream media struggle to keep up given their time-consuming responsibilities for fact-checking and analysis. Mainstream media, in turn, are being relentlessly fact-checked (and often found wanting) by dispersed but collectively potent online networks.

So-called ‘crowdsourcing’ sees once disaggregated citizens pooling resources, poring over British MPs’ expenses accounts or scandalous documents released by WikiLeaks – too copious for professional journalism to monopolise. Internet users compile their own news agendas, circumventing the editorial craftsmanship of broadcast news bulletins or print news editions; the very term ‘edition’ connotes a snapshot temporality at odds with today's incessant news flows or ‘ambient journalism’ (Hermida 2010).

News has become *unbundled* and *modular*; tools such as Google News and RSS Newsfeeds allow users to compile a *Daily Me*, a concept prophesied by Nicholas Negroponte (1995) some 15 years ago. Or, via platforms like Facebook or Digg, audiences concoct news diets shaped by friendship and social networks. The expertocracy of news has been radically undermined. This is not to claim that our dependencies upon professional news outlets have loosened (quite the reverse may be true) but only that they have become more intricately mediated. The shift is more profound than one from analogue *table d’hôte* to digital *à la carte*. In terms of their role in shaping our information diets news providers are increasingly in the business of supplying ingredients rather than finished meals. Of particular concern to mainstream media, though, is how all this can function as a business at all when such an abundance of information, analysis and commentary is now available free at the

point of delivery, and robust mechanisms for tying content to advertising have so far proven elusive. Murdoch's News Corporation, *The New York Times* and others (in concert with platform providers such as Apple) are, of course, busily engaged in trying to overcome this. It is difficult to see just how exclusively digitization is responsible for the apparent crisis across newsrooms. As we hear stories from around the world of newspaper closures, newsroom 'restructuring', and circulation, subscription and advertising levels foundering (e.g. Abramson 2010; Deveson 2009; Oliver 2010; Pew 2009), somewhat apocalyptic tones have crept into debates about the future of journalism.

Clay Shirky is a leading US commentator on the rise of digital news and journalism (among other aspects of digital culture). With a rhetorical flourish worthy of *The Communist Manifesto*, he says this:

When someone demands to know how we are going to replace newspapers, they are really demanding to be told that we are not living through a revolution. They are demanding to be told that old systems won't break before new systems are in place. They are demanding to be told that ancient social bargains aren't in peril, that core institutions will be spared, that new methods of spreading information will improve previous practice rather than upending it. They are demanding to be lied to (Shirky 2008).

But isn't it equally plausible to diagnose the reverse, namely an over-eager appetite for tales of revolution? Often we seem to demand to hear all that's solid is indeed

melting into air: this certainly makes for better headlines. I suggest that the challenges faced by news media industries, by the journalistic profession and, by extension, by the structures of democracy and public debate are indeed serious but that we are not necessarily in the midst (or on the brink) of a ‘revolution’ in news media, certainly if we use the term ‘revolution’ properly to denote a radical change in ends and not merely in means. The future is certainly opaque but not least because the future is still there to be moulded by journalists, editors and owners as well as by citizens and consumers.

### **Citizens, consumers and gatekeepers**

This paper is concerned with the implications of digitization for civic, rather than commercial, values. However, whilst the focus will not be on paywalls, advertising revenues or the future of free news on the Web, it is vital to recognize that the fates of journalistic business models *and* of democracy are inextricably linked. This is especially so in our highly commercialised media ecology. It is always tempting for the media analyst concerned with democracy and civic functions of news media to place disproportionate emphasis on the potential of those institutions at one remove from the constraints (for some ‘distortions’) of the market. In the UK, for example, the BBC and the Scott Trust-supported *Guardian* newspaper, though facing serious pressures (Davoudi and Fenton 2009; Fenton 2010), can seem like beacons of civic purpose amid a sea of cut-throat commercial competition.

Moreover, both institutions have been key innovators in developing digital news platforms. And yet, realistically, the environment in which they operate (and from which they are only partially insulated) is overwhelmingly commercialized. In smaller

markets, there is often an inverse correlation between the perceived necessity and viability of public service alternatives to markets dominated by few (often overseas owned) commercial players (Puppis 2009).

In the face of near-ubiquitous commercialism across news media, it is tempting to romanticise the still relatively non-commercialised (or only nascently monetised) domains of citizen journalism, blogging and social media (where content retains relative independence from monetized platforms). The following argument will suggest an ongoing and vitally important democratic role for professional journalism – one that cannot be disentangled from commercialism. A sense of market realism is required for assessing the civic functions of news media in the digital age and advocates for a democratic public sphere need to engage commercial media in critical dialogue and acknowledge their imperatives. If, as I will argue, we should uphold the importance of professional journalism in the era of citizen journalism and social media, then it is unhelpful to treat commercial logic with lofty disdain as defenders of the ‘public sphere’ (Habermas 1989; Garnham 1992) are often wont to do.

The commercial news market, I suggest, is an insufficient but essential part of the public sphere. To those who believe that the commercial news market is essential *and* sufficient for a democratic media ecology – those who perceive non-market mechanisms such as public funding as distortions not remedies – the concept of ‘citizens as gatekeepers’ invoked in the title of this paper will seem unremarkable, possibly tautological. The liberal free press dream is one in which citizens determine the news – or get the news they deserve – by voting with their wallets and/or their attention (Curran and Seaton 2003: 346-62). Others, though, would argue that the

roles of citizen and consumer, though not intrinsically contradictory, cannot be so easily merged (Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). The kinds of news and information that empower us as citizens are not always those we would be drawn to by our immediate desires. Uncomfortable truths are often unpalatable in the short term and their value is only realized in the longer term. In any case, consumers can never be truly sovereign in a commercial news marketplace: citizens have always been partial gatekeepers in a range of complex power-sharing arrangements that include editors and journalists selecting, filtering and framing the news before citizens get to vote with their wallets or time.

This is not a critical claim. As citizens, we require professional newsmakers to exercise good judgment on our behalf about the news agenda, and all the more so in a digital environment now characterised by information overload and by dense and inter-connected news delivery systems. What matters from a democratic perspective is what values and imperatives are driving those selection and filtering decisions and how media literate the public is in terms of understanding newsmaking processes. It is unconvincing and even regressive to hear the gatekeeping functions of professional news media referred to as if they were, by definition, some kind of affront to democracy, a kind of feudal power bloc to be swept away by opening the information floodgates of the internet.

Other agents in this complex power-sharing arrangement include, of course: journalists' sources and PR professionals; advertisers (and their particular target demographics); shareholders and, in some cases, old-fashioned proprietorial powers, though this kind of power has often been over-egged as a product of our appetite for

demons – the economic power and market behaviours of large media empires have done more than the eccentric and ideologically-driven personalities of their figureheads to shape the increasingly globalised media landscape of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

But power-sharing arrangements have started to shift dramatically during the last decade with the rise of the internet and especially Web 2.0 or the ‘participatory web’ of bloggers, citizen journalists, YouTube and news recommendation engines hooked into social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. Clearly, we can see citizens themselves exercising more gatekeeping power with ever greater choice, personalisation and unbundling of news as well as enriched opportunities to discuss and even shape the news agenda (Deuze 2008; Hermida and Thurman 2008). Clearly, too, we see challenges to the roles of some of the established gatekeepers: editors whose *raison d’être* appears called into question in the era of the *Daily Me* (a strong *raison d’être* can still be argued for but the point is it now needs arguing for and has lost its axiomatic status—see Gans 2010); proprietors and shareholders who see the internet steadily eroding their advertising, subscription and cover-price business models (Harris 2010); and journalists incredulous at the apparent hypocrisy of a blogosphere so acutely critical of ‘mainstream media’ and yet so often sloppy in its own journalistic standards and ethics (O’Dell 2010).

### **Google isn’t ‘just a tool’**

A key issue for public ethics is how transparent (or opaque) are the mechanisms of public sphere institutions including media and information industries. Digitisation is not simply about power shifting between two blocs – citizens and professional media.

The emergence of other gatekeeping powers complicates the picture. At an institutional level, this means the major online players – Google, Facebook and Twitter especially. At a professional level, this broadly means software and interface engineers. It is not the case that Google exercises the same kinds of gatekeeping powers as news providers: its influence is at the level of information architecture, not content. And yet it is also not the case that the software driving Google’s search and news engines are neutral gateways to information (Beer 2009). Neither, for that matter, are YouTube’s search or recommendation engines, or Facebook’s Newsfeed algorithms. These are man-made systems designed to sift, rank and filter information flows on our behalf. They are, for the most part, proprietary (and jealously guarded commercial secrets) and subject to less critical scrutiny or public awareness than even the relatively mystified domain of the newsroom.

Neither is there anything intrinsically natural about the 140-character limit on Twitter; nor the assumption made by Facebook that the kind of news I am exposed to should be determined by the things that cause my ‘friends’ to click a ‘like’ button. Such features have all sorts of attractions and benefits but they are man-made interfaces that shape the way we consume news. The same holds for conventions of ‘traditional’ media: there is nothing natural or timeless about daily newspapers or hour-long tea-time news bulletins.

These are historical, man-made artifacts. It does not necessarily mean we should want to get rid of any of them. But it does mean we should always be thinking critically about their benefits and limitations, their usefulness and their fitness for purpose at any particular historical juncture. And at this point in history, just as we ponder the



fate of the ‘dead tree’ newspaper (often misleadingly conflated with, or used as a metonym for, the fate of professional journalism), so our critical scrutiny must also now extend to the various online platforms and news delivery systems that are shaping our news consumption and, by extension, our conversations and our debates.

### **The digital world isn’t flat**

An ethical perspective on digitisation requires us, of course, to consider equality of opportunity. It is undoubtedly true that, for all the constraints, features and quirks of these new online delivery systems, citizens are granted unprecedented opportunities to shape the news agenda for themselves and, in many cases, for the peers in their networks. This undeniably represents a form of democratisation. But the idea that there is a broad devolution of power from the few to the many, from professional media to the citizenry at large, is of course simplistic. Power is not distributed evenly among the citizenry and new communication tools can create new forms of inequality just as they can help to level others.

The so-called digital divide is usually viewed from a supply-side perspective, as a primarily socio-economic and geographical (especially urban versus rural) problem requiring redress through infrastructure investment. But one major factor often overlooked (because it lacks clear policy implications) is the divide between the time-rich and the time-poor. An abundance of news sources to navigate and opportunities to ‘join the conversation’ (whether blogging, re-Tweeting stories or commenting on newspaper websites) scarcely ‘democratises’ news for citizens who work double shifts or have round-the-clock care responsibilities. Of course, we are led to believe that we are all leading increasingly busy and more time-pressured lives. Under time

constraints, we look to professional news media to provide packaged digests of the important news of the day: this can be a useful antidote and complement to the more amorphous news flows of the web.

But as and when time allows, active and motivated citizens (motivation is also unevenly distributed) want and need longer-form journalism in order to understand issues sufficiently and this too is a vital antidote and complement to the bite-size chunks of news flowing especially around platforms like YouTube and Twitter. Can mainstream media do both the long and the short well?; both the wide-area survey and the deep-drilling? This seems a tall order, perhaps reflected in much criticism of TV news which stands accused of failing on both counts with both excessive soft news padding and a shortage of in-depth coverage: too long and too shallow are common complaints.

In terms of the digital divide, however, the issue is not simply the question of who has sufficient access, time and cultural capital to participate. There are various power dynamics emerging within online platforms. In blogging, the A-list blogger phenomenon is now well-known: Huffington Post and Instapundit may have challenged entrenched mainstream news power but have become concentrated powers in their own rights (Farrell and Drezner 2008; Sunstein 2007). Compared to mainstream media, there are low barriers to entry to the blogosphere and social media and also fewer instances of producer loyalties divided between audiences and advertisers. And yet there are certainly first-to-market advantages and snowball effects: in an incredibly crowded marketplace like blogging, traffic is driven largely by word-of-mouth (its online equivalent, anyway), by referrals and links, not to

mention profiling in the mainstream media: visibility begets visibility in what is essentially an 'attention economy' (Lanham 2006). This is not to claim that top blogs can sustain their position in the long term if audience satisfaction falls significantly (indeed, few mainstream media institutions have ever enjoyed such cushioning); brand loyalty doesn't run too deep in such a competitive market. But it is to suggest that new entrants to the market face considerable hurdles in gaining the kind of visibility required to compete.

We also see power laws at play in other aspects of online news consumption. The social news media site Digg.com has, since its beginnings, had a small fraction of users responsible for submitting a majority of the stories that get voted onto its front page because those power users accumulate visibility and influence and their stories are more likely to be seen and then voted for than those submitted by lower profile users. Under criticism that this looks more like a popularity contest than a platform for deciding the merits and newsworthiness of stories, Digg has made attempts to tweak the algorithm that weights votes for stories to mitigate this snowball effect: in turn, it has then come under fire for using secretive algorithms to undermine the meritocracy of a system that rewards the hard work and success of power users. Either way, 'democratising news', it turns out, is no straightforward business.

Recent research (Cha et al 2010) shows some striking things about Twitter. It tracked 54 million users and almost 2 billion tweets across an 8 month period in 2009, looking at 3 different measures of network influence: first, who gets the most followers; second, whose tweets are most often re-tweeted through the network; and, third, whose names are mentioned or cited most often in other tweets. The research

found little overlap between these measures (less than 10 per cent): the ‘million follower fallacy’ mistakenly assumes that the Twitter users who recruit the most followers are necessarily the ones shaping the agenda and the conversations on Twitter. It seems Twitter is not just a popularity contest. But the research found strikingly low levels of reciprocity which cautions us against celebrating Twitter as some kind of gigantic water-cooler or digital coffee house. Steep power laws characterize all three measures of influence: the influence of the top 100 users (across all three measures) is exponentially greater than the top 1,000 whose influence is exponentially greater than the top 10,000. Outside the top 10,000, influence becomes statistically negligible—and this from a dataset of 54 million users!

Of course, there are plenty of water-cooler conversations occurring on Twitter but it is structurally closer to a broadcast medium than many realise: many followers and few followed; many tweeters and few re-tweeted; many commentators and few commented upon. There are agenda-setters and gatekeepers. Some of these are mainstream news outlets. In the research just cited, Twitter accounts with most followers include outlets like CNN and *The New York Times*, alongside various celebrities and politicians. But with sources that were most commonly re-tweeted (a better indication of who are the agenda-setters than who has the most followers) it seems traditional news outlets are largely eclipsed by successful new players: news aggregator services are important new gatekeepers in this environment with services like TweetMeme amplifying the power law by aggregating the most popular links and drawing yet more traffic to them in a self-propelling spiral.

Simpler research looking only at the volume (rather than influence) of Twitter traffic found the most prolific 10 per cent of users posting more than 90 per cent of tweets (Heil and Piskorski 2009): most people use Twitter primarily to hear rather than to speak (not necessarily a bad thing as I shall argue later). And there are numerous other examples of how variations on the 80:20 rule prevail in social networks. Social networks are not flat: they are hierarchical and often less conversational than we assume.

Does this matter? There have always been opinion leaders holding disproportionate influence within communities. It is true that their potential reach is greatly extended in online social networks. But this does not render such communities undemocratic in and of themselves. In fact, online social network research is at such an early stage that we do not have a clear picture of whether and how much hierarchies of status and influence among peer networks are artificially bolstered by network design or merely a reflection of wider social hierarchies. The point is that the resilient myth of blogging, citizen journalism and social media driving us closer towards some kind of egalitarian nirvana in the news where anyone can become newsmaker or opinion leader, where merit has truly triumphed over status, is deeply problematic.

### **News as conversation**

Assessing the civic implications of digitisation involves questioning quality and not merely equality of opportunity. It is undoubtedly true that a number of positive things have emerged: greater choice, access and opportunities for participation, and a massive reduction in economic barriers to entry for aspiring amateur and even semi-professional newsmakers. It would be misleading to claim this is not a form of

democratisation. Democracy is not simply a quantitative matter of *how much* choice, participation and opportunity is gained, though. The issue is also what citizens can do with these extended opportunities to engage with news and journalism.

Dan Gillmor—champion of citizen journalism and author of the hyperbolically titled book *We the media* (2006) – argues that the internet has been steadily transforming news from a lecture into a conversation. But this risks setting up a false dichotomy. The idea that news should nourish and stimulate conversation is not contentious: without conversation, citizens lack the wherewithal to test, refine and enrich their interpretations of and responses to the news they read, hear and watch. Clearly the internet enhances opportunities for citizens to engage in conversations with peers and with newsmakers. But the idea that news should *become* conversation is deeply problematic. It misses the importance of listening first before expressing opinion. To see journalism itself as conversation smacks of juvenile impatience or attention deficit. We risk celebrating instantaneous feedback and downgrading the values of reading below the fold and processing at a pace fitting for the complex issues news throws up. Tellingly, etymology links the word ‘lecture’ (for all its contemporary negative baggage) to the act of reading.

Gillmor himself, though, does not run amok with this rhetoric of news as conversation. He is, in fact, deeply concerned with the quality of the conversation and worries about the fate of careful reflection. Recently, he has suggested we might need something like a slow news movement analogous to the slow food movement (2009; see also Shapiro 2010). Notwithstanding the point made already about the constraints on time-poor citizens, there is something useful in this concept. We tend to focus on

the supply side of shrunken news cycles and competitive scoop-fests trumping the time-consuming journalistic practices of analysis and even, on occasion, verification. But we often neglect the demand-side: a slow news movement would have to be one that encouraged audiences to slow down, chew their news slowly and moderate their portion sizes rather than assuming more is better, to appreciate dishes that have been marinated and slow-cooked, which is just what the most valuable long-form, investigative journalism tends to be.

The ‘morselisation’ of news (Atkinson 1994) is, I suggest, not merely a supply-side but also a demand-side issue. This is not to deflect criticism of professional news media nor to support the simplistic claim that outlets serving up morselised news are just giving audiences what they want: supply and demand are shaped by numerous exogenous factors and also by each other. Moreover, it is not to support the claim that market realism dictates an inevitable drive towards faster, softer, more bite-size news. Such a claim constitutes fatalism rather than realism. It is simplistic at best and condescending at worst to fall back on the assumption that few outside the chattering classes want serious long-form news and current affairs any longer. So the point here is *not* that the public merely gets the news it deserves. However, there are some serious demand-side issues at stake here and we misread the problem, I suggest, if we do not acknowledge them. These issues are about citizenship and civic engagement.

When we hear about trends of declining voter turnouts in Western democracies, declining political party memberships, declining audiences for television news and declining newspaper readership figures, especially among the younger generation, some will proclaim a lamentable deterioration. Others, though, will say that matters

are not necessarily deteriorating, only changing. After all, young people in particular may be increasingly disaffected with mainstream national politics but engaging in new and different ways: protests, petitions, online campaigns and the like. So too, a turn away from traditional news sources such as newspapers and national TV news does not signal a decreasing interest in news and current affairs. Quite the contrary, in fact, as an array of new outlets for news, and opportunities to interact with the news, are being tapped into. This may be a cause for optimism unless one believes that, whatever the diverse array of debates and conversations going on at local and global levels, there is also vital importance in the kinds of shared conversations required to keep a democratic light shining on the national polity and its key players (both elected and unelected). If increasing numbers of, particularly younger, citizens are turning away from those conversations then there is a much wider social issue at stake, I suggest, than the quality of the news. To highlight the shortcomings of mainstream news media does not oblige us to single out and scapegoat the media for the state of the contemporary public sphere.

### **Google isn't evil**

In a similar vein, it is not helpful to scapegoat the new media players for the perceived crisis in mainstream news and journalism. Google, whose unofficial motto is 'don't be evil' is, of course, the devil incarnate for Rupert Murdoch who argues that it has been brazenly stealing his content. Others, though, cite Google for other sins. In particular, it is seen as one of the major driving forces behind the unbundling of news: it deep links audiences into news stories, bypassing front-page portals with the advertising and branding that brings with it; and it fosters a fragmented, decontextualised approach to news consumption, encouraging greater morselisation and less critical



scrutiny of the source behind the content. The tradeoff between unprecedented choice in news and information brought about by digitisation and the unprecedented fragmentation of public life it threatens represents a major dilemma from an ethical perspective.

Google and its rivals have, indeed, impacted on the way news is accessed and consumed. But whilst this allows audiences to skim rapidly across the surface and enjoy superficial engagement with news, the very same platform allows audiences to plumb remarkable depths on a story, issue or event. It takes reading below the fold to new levels and allows citizens to interrogate and assess the credibility of news sources through cross-referencing and fact-checking. It also allows suitably motivated citizens to sift the hard news from the soft, to filter out the infotainment or ‘noise’ that seems increasingly prevalent in the bundled news of broadcasting and the press. A technology such as Google can have such profoundly contradictory consequences precisely because its consequences are not hardwired into the technology: they are very strongly contingent on users and their social context. Again, this is about the demand-side as much as the supply-side.

As Fallows (2010) suggests, Google is attempting to redress the reputation it is acquiring for damaging both the business models of commercial news outlets (and especially newspapers) and the culture of long-form journalism. He profiles several projects designed to get Google partnering more constructively with mainstream news outlets. One example is the open source *Living stories* experiment designed to allow the automatic collating of reports on a story (one that might develop over a period of time) on a single page that will be prioritised in Google search results. In other words,

Google is exploring ways to adapt the information architecture to encourage curation of stories on the producer side and deep reading on the reader side, redressing the decontextualisation or morselisation it is commonly held responsible for. As Fallows points out, not only is Google far from the sole factor driving the fragmentation of news, it also has no vested interest in the corrosion of quality, in-depth journalism: quite the opposite, in fact, as such corrosion is detrimental to its own value as a news gateway.

If it is reassuring that Google would encourage us to access in-depth, credible journalism, this is still under the auspices of the bespoke *Daily Me*. Again, Google can't be held solely responsible for the so-called 'echo chamber' effect where citizens seek out sources that reinforce their own views and prejudices without exposure to alternative or challenging perspectives (Sunstein 2007; Farrell and Drezner 2007). Google's outgoing CEO, Eric Schmidt, has an answer to this that calls the 'serendipity principle'. In other words, his vision of a healthy online news environment is one in which individuals can get finely grained bespoke news whilst still stumbling across unanticipated topics and perspectives. This sounds like a healthy balance. But it leaves shared conversations about matters of common public interest very much to the whims of trending memes. If personalised news diets and micro-conversations are increasingly dominant, then perhaps the role of mainstream media is increasingly one of complementing (rather than competing with) the *Daily Me*, to regularly draw people out of their news bubbles and to convene debates on matters of public interest fueled by in-depth coverage of salient facts and perspectives. Such a claim will no doubt appear futile, nostalgic or paternalistic to some.

### **Conclusion: Who is in the driving seat?**

One way of drawing citizens out of their micro-conversations into a shared arena is to actively engage with citizen journalists, amateur bloggers and social media rather than seeing them as attempting to encroach on professional territory or merely paying lip service to them—something the *Guardian* online has undoubtedly led the way in. But it pays not to forget the obvious point that for all the committed bloggers (many of whom are either journalists or consider themselves journalists), a majority of citizens relate to mainstream media as audiences first and foremost and not as participants.

Without trying to reduce news and journalism to conversation, it may be possible to encourage more members of the audience to participate and contribute in order to foster greater engagement with the news and, significantly from a market perspective, with particular news media brands. For mainstream media to treat its audience as intelligent citizens and as potential contributors to an ongoing conversation does not mean treating them as equals. As citizens we tend to look to professional journalists to keep us informed about important events and to access newsworthy places and people on our behalf. But we also look to them to interpret, analyse, sift fact from conjecture and opinion, dig beneath the surface, air different voices, and tell us interesting stories. Despite the rhetoric of ‘democratising news’, citizens do not routinely aspire to be the professional journalist’s ‘equal’ in matters of newscraft, even among those busily blogging and tweeting on a daily basis. Jay Rosen (2006) coined the now well-worn phrase ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ for these citizens. But as we see in other contexts (theatre, live music, television talk-shows and so forth), increasing audience participation does not in any sense render the concept of audience itself defunct.

Clay Shirky (2009) draws an analogy between journalism in the digital age and driving:

Like driving, journalism is not a profession... and it is increasingly being transformed into an open activity, open to all, sometimes done well, sometimes badly... The journalistic models that will excel in the next few years will rely on new forms of creation, some of which will be done by professionals, some by amateurs, some by crowds, and some by machines (Shirky 2009).

There is undoubtedly some truth in this claim. But the analogy with driving is an odd one that diminishes the craft and complexity of journalism, whether or not we want to label it a 'profession'. Truly anyone with basic motor, visual and cognitive skills can be a proficient driver; not so a proficient journalist. Good journalism pushes the boundaries, is creative and involves taking risks; not so, good driving.

Perhaps a better analogy would be with music. Many of us enjoy participating in music as well as listening to it. But picking up an instrument, whilst enjoyable and rewarding, also teaches most of us just how big the gap is between great musicianship and our own efforts. Participating in this way sharpens our appreciation (and critical skills) as listeners. Having some competence in music does not make us less respectful of or less interested in listening to expertly produced music – quite the reverse. And perhaps that is the mindshift needed in respect of blogging and citizen journalism. Mainstream news media need not disdain or fear the growth of amateur

journalism, questioning whether it really is ‘journalism’: it should instead be engaging with it, offering master classes, showcasing the best, and treating it as an opportunity to increase understanding of and appreciation for the journalistic profession.

Again, such idealism should be tempered by a note of realism. Those of us outside the profession should care about the state of journalism because we care about democracy. Journalism is shaped by many forces on the supply-side and also on the demand-side. On both sides of the equation, there are forces which go much wider than journalism itself (including the economic climate on the supply-side and a growing culture of cynicism towards public life on the demand-side). But journalism, new or old, is neither the exclusive cause of nor a potential panacea for the shortcomings of democracy. The internet is bringing citizens greater choices and some extremely interesting opportunities for enriched forms of engagement with, and even participation in, the news. It also brings some risks for citizens: of fragmentation and polarisation, of information overload and dizzying acceleration. But the extent to which the internet can democratise news is a much less important question than the extent to which it can help democratise democracy itself.

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