

How can new technologies be harnessed to create an enhanced public service media environment?

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Introduction

In this paper I will show how new technologies can be harnessed to create an enhanced public service media environment. However, I should say at the outset that I feel that there is nothing inevitable about this. Nor do I believe that the current concepts of public service are adequate to describe the way forward. And in addition, I believe that journalism itself must and will change to adapt to the new circumstances. There will be a lot of variables in play. Ultimately, I take the normative position that there is a moral context to this process. It is part of a political debate in the same way that we can argue over all kinds of social change. However, the position I take on the future of journalism and public service in policy terms is relatively open. I am convinced that the future of the news media must be different from current paradigms of public and private, for example. But I do not feel it is right or worthwhile to prescribe exactly what structures would work best.

The new technologies of journalism mean it will be morally changed in the very way it works. I describe this as Networked Journalism [1]. This idea that Networked Journalism is, in itself, politically different is not simple technological determinism. Social, economic and cultural factors will have too much influence upon the future of journalism for that to be the case. But the fact is that Networked Journalism will present all of us with ethical choices we do not have right now.

The current Mainstream News Media (MSNM) [2] can provide a good platform for public debate but it is a platform that is looking distinctly out of date and with very limited space for real openness and innovation. There are certainly questions as to the limits to the current public service media model when seen in an international context. And anyway, the status quo is simply not an option because of changing technological, social and political circumstances. The future offers multiple alternatives which can be reduced to two extremes:

1. A dystopia of an increasing digital divide and a declining investment in journalism.
2. An optimistic scenario of a networked journalism that fosters civil society, governance and media literacy.

It is impossible to generalise globally about these issues, national media markets remain relatively differentiated. In this paper I am inevitably writing from a UK, US or Western perspective. However, I do think that the concepts involved do travel, albeit at different speeds and with differing real-world outcomes.

1

Main trends and dynamics in the mainstream media sector at present

Some people [3] refer to a Golden Age of news journalism in the UK. I think is a myth. They refer to a previous age of seriousness, intelligence and authority and fairness. I agree that MSNM in the UK is one of the great cultural constructs of the 20th century. Globally, there are many other examples of strong national news media in the last half century including the pioneering mass news media in America. Globally, since 1989 it has been largely accepted that a free media and a free market in journalism is a political good. And the record of MSM in providing a platform for public debate globally should not be underestimated. Competitive organisations such as AFP, AP, Reuters, CNN, BBC, and others have created extensive structures for delivering authoritative information and analysis internationally. I would argue that for now, in many countries, we are living in a period of unsurpassed access to information and debate provided by the news media. The public has never had so many facts, so quickly, so cheaply and with such opportunity to voice itself.

Globally there are reasons to be cheerful. The last two decades have seen political changes that have opened up free expression across whole regions such as the former Soviet Union. That means more journalism. Old technologies such as radio and print are still the dominant medium in most of the world and will remain so for the next decade. Their expansion contributes to a degree of understanding and debate that would have been undreamt of pre-1989 when most of the people in most of the world were not just without news information – they were *denied* it by their governments.

In countries like India the liberalisation and expansion of the economy combined with increased educational resources mean that there is a rapidly expanding market for news media, especially language newspapers.

In Africa, despite relative economic and political underachievement there is an increased uptake of new technology, of improving elementary and further education and a degree of liberalisation which encourages the growth of free news media. Mobile phones and the internet are increasing access to information from a greater diversity of sources although basic infrastructural problems continue to restrict the impact of either old or new media journalism on civic society.

However, even where free markets have been created in news journalism it is no guarantee of social and political benefits. One example will suffice. In the former Soviet Union there now is apparent press plurality and an open market in the news media. But oligarchs have replaced central state censorship with a culture of editorial compromise and commercial and political control. Some would argue that means that there is not a real variety of views and journalistic excellence. There is a 'virtual reality' of media freedom and a very limited public service environment.

Does the 'mainstream media' currently provide an adequate platform for public debate?

But even where it works, the liberal mainstream news media is severely limited. Conventional TV news bulletins, radio bulletins and newspapers can now be seen to be relatively clumsy, formulaic, self-contained, self-referential, and elitist. My argument is that the gains of political and economic liberalisation in the last two decades must now be built on with the thorough-going reform of journalism offered by new media technologies and Networked Journalism.

2

New media – threats and opportunities?

I do not know any serious person in the news media who argues 'against' New Media journalism any more. A couple of years ago it was still possible to stand against the tide in the hope that there would remain islands of MSNM in the incoming New Media tide. Two paradoxical facts are now obvious.

Firstly, much of the MSNM will survive over the next decade or so. The Internet Evangelists who portrayed MSNM as dinosaurs were simply wrong. Newspapers, for example, still sell in vast numbers in even the most advanced New Media markets such as the US and UK and will continue to for some time. MSNM organisations have also proved themselves fairly adept at climbing on board the New Media bandwagon to support their core activities.

The second paradoxical fact is that the biggest threat to journalism at this time of unprecedented digital plenty, is the New Media. The very force that promises infinite information is endangering the system of human activity that does so much to originate, process and distribute the type of information we call News. New Media (in its widest sense including shopping, gaming and so on) is taking audience away from the MSNM. Online Advertising revenue is still small but it is doubling annually and is taking away the profit margins from MSNM. It is also fragmenting audiences. A whole generation of young people are not getting the conventional news habit. They are getting used to obtaining entertainment and information online and particularly from social networking sites. This is posing two major challenges to MSNM. It means that there is a generational time-bomb. The next cohort of news consumers may simply never pick up a paper or turn on the telly for their journalism. And more importantly, when they do go online it is not for a replica of MSNM. They are now used to the informal, the empowering and self-organising practice of social networking sites. They trust the Wiki principle, the wisdom of crowds and the primacy of choice. And they want it for free. This is not how MSNM journalism is used to operating at all.

How Mainstream News Media is changing in practice

As these two lists show, Old and New News Media (NNM) [4] journalism is very different. At this point it is important to remember the wider effect of digital as well as internet technologies. Digital cameras, mobile phones, satellites can all work without the internet but have had a similar effect. They all reduce production and distribution costs, save time, and increase interactivity. It is now possible for a journalist to film and transmit live from anywhere in the world for a few hundred dollars. We are familiar with the internet effect but that is set to increase exponentially with so-called Web 2.0.

Old media characteristics:

- **Crude technology**
- **Deadlines**
- **Top-down**
- **Unreactive**
- **Barriers to entry**
- **Expensive**
- **Single platform**
- **profitable**

Digital/new News media characteristics:

- **Infinite technology**
- **24/7**
- **Consumer-led**
- **Interactive**
- **Easy access**
- **Cheap**
- **Multi platform**
- **Unprofitable**

Technology:

Recent developments in improving broadband access and storage capacity means there is effectively infinite informational resources online. Humankind has never had this intellectual resource before. One laptop can access all the information, video and graphics that are now online or put online by a news organisation. Before, the tape would run out, the paper would fill up, or the radio run out of time or broadcast spectrum. Now online networking allows potentially infinite access for the consumer to images, words and facts, limited only by download speeds and human comprehension.

24/7 and consumer-led

The combination of digital compression and market liberalisation means that the industry is now consumer led. Instead of waiting for the news to be delivered it can now be accessed at any time. The new News media is continuous with access to news channels, websites and permanent broadcasting.

Because there is so much choice (including not consuming journalism at all) the news media has to be "consumer-led". It has to respond to what the consumer wants or lose their attention. This does not mean simply going for the lowest common denominator. But it does mean that they must engage the consumer.

Interactive

Previously the news media responded only to longer-term trends in its audience. Now it must build in constant, almost pre-emptive communication with the audience. In the short-term this is about building a 'community' around the brand, long term it means creating Networked Journalism. News producers can now be more interactive as mobiles, texting, landlines and email allow audiences to communicate more

easily. Audiences already want to be producers, as we see from the growth of user generated content which is flooding on to social networking sites and beginning to trickle on to news outlets.

Access and costs

The start-up costs for new media can be virtually zero (for a blog) and national 24 hour TV stations can be set up for a few hundred thousand dollars. Running costs are generally much lower as everything from licences to camera technology becomes cheaper.

And where before there was only one platform for any news information there is now access to many outlets for any one journalist or news organisation.

Profit

Before, journalism could be a licence to print money or to have a heavily subsidised life. But now all this competition from non-journalistic as well as other sources of information means that MSNM is losing profitability. It has to invest heavily in new technology. Its clients want to share in efficiency gains. This means there is even less cash around for journalism. Many MSNM organisations are considering a period of retrenchment, low dividends and service reductions. There are some exceptions such as South Africa, India and China where the news media is booming. But the news media sector in many advanced economies as well as developing countries is going to enter a period of profit reduction precisely at the moment when new technologies offer the potential for product development. I believe that the best way to close this gap is through Networked Journalism. However, this is much more than an economic necessity. If it is treated as such it will fail. If it is treated as a way of securing some 'free' content to make up for cut-backs then it will most likely not achieve the goal of enhancing the public service media environment.

3

Towards Networked journalism

I have described the main components of the new News Media environment above. I have outlined the opportunities it offers but also the threats that it poses. I now want to show how Networked Journalism offers a concept for realising the opportunities.

First let us look at a couple of examples of what I would cite as Networked Journalism in action already. They are examples of how the use of the mix of digital and online technologies has created increasing opportunities for public debate.

Radio phone-ins

Radio is increasing its audiences, even in markets with highly developed TV or New Media. It fits in with our increasingly mobile and time-poor life-styles. We can now access radio via TV, the internet or mobile phones. Telephony is increasing for similar reasons. Radio phone-ins are now increasingly possible thanks to increased telephony and especially mobile phones which allow text votes as well as direct audience participation. But for this to be truly participative Networked Journalism the public should be allowed to influence the subject matter for discussion. Ultimately, radio discussion can become more like an MSN conversation than dialing a studio.

Media Web forums

Web forums or blogs provide a direct online way of creating active spaces for discussion and the dissemination of information from public-to-public about the media. They also provide platforms for the consumer to critique and correct MSM. Little Green Footballs [6] for example, revealed how a photographer working for Reuters had faked photos of the recent Israel/Hezbollah conflict. But again, for this to be truly Networked Journalism then the news organizations must be transparent and embrace the criticism – something Reuters has appeared to do in this case with a statement welcoming online corrections and public oversight. Now Reuters is taking that further by setting up a partnership with the Global Voices weblog network which now feeds directly in to the Reuters newsgathering process. [7] It is not an example of total Networked Journalism, but it is heading in that direction.

Networked Journalism

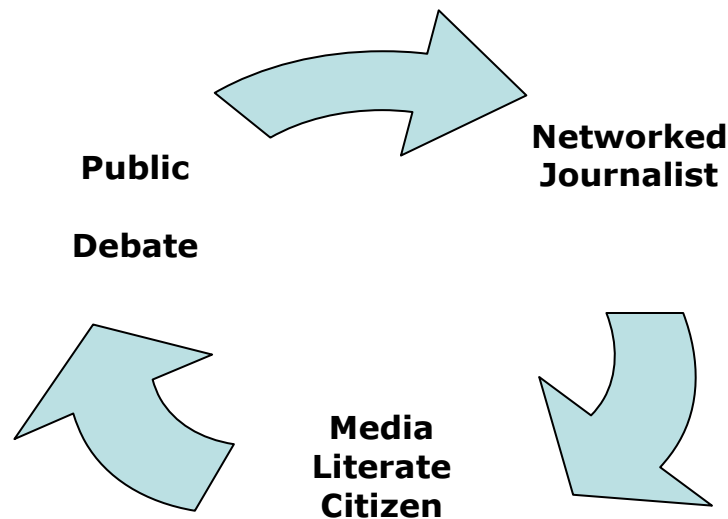
Below is a graphic representation of how these examples of Networked Journalism can move beyond 'interactiveness' in to a complete system. The journalist retains their function of editing, filtering and producing news information. But the 'journalist' may now also be the media literate citizen who may initiate as well as contribute to the news flow. This in turn creates a public debate which the Networked Journalism reports upon – not as a separate public fact – but as part of the process itself.

This is one definition by New media commentator Jeff Jarvis:

In networked journalism, the public can get involved in a story before it is reported, contributing facts, questions, and suggestions. The journalists can rely on the public to help report the story; we'll see more and more of that, I trust. The journalists can and should link to other work on the same story, to source material, and perhaps blog posts from the sources. After the story is published — online, in print, wherever — the public can continue to contribute corrections, questions, facts, and perspective ... not to mention promotion via links. I hope this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as journalists realize that they are less the manufacturers of news than the moderators of conversations that get to the news. [5]

So the Networked Journalist and the Media Literate Citizen and the Public Debate or Discourse can become part of virtuous cycle (see below). Or rather they become a network which is superimposed upon the cycle of communication.

The virtuous circle of networked journalism



How can this happen?

As we have seen with my examples, to a degree this is happening whether we want it to or not. But there are still conditions that must obtain if it is to become the way that journalism works rather than simply one variant.

Media organisations themselves will be the driving force – if they want to stay in business. Increased use of User Generated Content will help close the investment gap and by building user communities around their activities they will preserve their brands and their market worth. Successful Networked Journalism providers will offer the premium service of skilled journalistic functions: editing, analysis, technical support and information packaging. But it will be integrated in to the flow of information from the users. And crucially, the journalist will not act as a gatekeeper but as a facilitator.

This will require a new attitude among journalism trainers and educators. Media organisations are already responding. We can see that manifested physically in the new networked design of the Daily Telegraph newsroom. [8]

The **authorities** will have to review market regulation to allow the free flow of information. They will have to redistribute public service funding away from MSNM and towards public media literacy and resources. This is already being forced upon regulators by new technology. Hence, the analogue switch-off in the UK in 2012. And beyond that regulation is increasingly being made redundant. So what will replace it? Much of this has to happen through a change in public policy in areas that have not traditionally had media policies such as local government. Any authority claiming to represent or be interested in community must now factor in the role of Networked Journalism in to policies aimed at building social networks. And for international organisations there is a huge task of enabling populations to access technology and networks rather than merely support traditional journalistic activities. So for Development Donors putting in public internet access will be as important as

newsroom training or creating media regulation. [9] All governments must also do much more to promote media literacy. This is a practical consideration for education, for example, but it is also about changing governmental attitudes, for example, by promoting openness within the civil services. There is not point having Networked Journalism if there it is not networked to the public sector and democratic structures.

The **public** will be the ultimate driver. They will demand Networked Journalism and they will enjoy it. Technology is going to accelerate the process not slow it. The public response to complex global issues such as climate change will also make a more Networked flow of information compatible with the complexity and multi-layered nature of the news stories that will affect our lives as individuals, groups and societies.

Why it won't happen

I have already described one potential stumbling block which is the short-term economics of journalism at present. Networked Journalism requires investment precisely at the point at which profit margins are being squeezed.

There is another major obstacle. Networked journalism goes against virtually all the institutional impulses of the political classes. In the UK for example, this administration has been superficially willing to embrace New Media but in practice the bureaucracy and executive as well as the legislative branches have all been hopelessly slow at putting it in to practice wherever it conflicts with traditional modes of operation. And if you look at countries like Uganda or Russia that appear to have a free and expanding media it is difficult to see governments there taking the lead on entering in to a networked discourse. Some people [10] point out that very few political systems are predicated upon the need for an informed, let alone networked public. It can't be taken for granted and it can't be left to governments. Luckily, it doesn't have to be. In a sense this has always been the case for the public and the journalists. They have always been on the outside of the authorities. At least with networked journalism, the public and the news media would be on the same side.

Conclusion: A better platform?

Networked Journalism is a challenge to us all. Anyone who has seen the kind of heated and fractious debate you get on a blog like *Comment is Free* at the British *Guardian* newspaper's website will see that online debate does not guarantee greater understanding. However, public debate need not always be polite or controlled. One of the points of New Media discursiveness is that it takes on new styles and languages. Political discourse has to adapt in the same way that political parties adapted to mass media in the 20th century. This is a challenge to the current model of the way that society is run and the way it communicates.

The delivery system at the moment is that government governs, the media reports and the people listen and then respond. I would suggest that with spin and 24 hour news the media is already virtually part of government. If networked news brings the people in to journalism that it can only be hoped that it will bring the people closer to power itself. A more networked journalism is happening as part of broader cultural changes [11]. The challenge is how we harness it to create a public service media environment.

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Footnotes:

[1] Networked Journalism is described in the paper at length. In brief, it is best understood in contrast with conventional modern journalism which is hierarchical, professionalised, systemised, and formulaic – it has deadlines, packages and is consumed largely passively.

Networked journalism is not the same as citizen journalism or interactivity, although it combines elements of both. It retains the essential functions of journalism: to report, analyse and comment, to filter, edit and disseminate. But throughout the journalistic process the use of digital and online technologies is at the heart of the process of newsgathering, processing and dissemination. And the news process itself changes from a linear to a networked process whereby there is a constant communication and interaction of information.

Here's a metaphor which I think helps describe Networked Journalism:

It's like when I take a camera on a family holiday. With my old film SLR camera I would hog the camera and take a selection of pictures that we got developed later. Now with our digital camera all the family can take pictures because there is no cost (low barriers to entry), the technology is much easier (citizen journalism). We can share and show and discuss the images amongst ourselves and via email and the internet with friends (interactivity) and we can broadcast the images as far as we want via sites like Flickr to show the world. And the process is not time-structured we can see and change the process as it goes along.

See also footnote [5]

[2] By Mainstream News Media (MSNM) I mean all news media that has online activities as a small or non-existent part of its dissemination platforms. One of the points I am arguing is that the distinction is becoming irrelevant as virtually all MSM has increasing elements of online activity. However, it is still (just) a useful term in that it posits the pre-existing state of news media which is still transferring at variable rates to a more online/networked state.

[3]

cf Reference to Anthony Smith at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,2039587,00.html>

John Lloyd, *What The media Are Doing To Our Politics*, Constable, 2004

[4] By New News Media I mean all journalism that now embraces online and digital technologies. It is not the same as Networked Journalism which is about how those technologies are developed to create a new way of doing journalism.

[5] Jeff Jarvis blogging at:

<http://www.buzzmachine.com/2006/07/05/networked-journalism/>

[6] <http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/weblog.php>

[7] <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/2005/12/13/global-voices-summit-emergence-of-a-conversation-community/>

[8] <http://media.guardian.co.uk/mediaguardian/story/0,,2047742,00.html>

[9] POLIS will publish its report on Media Governance and Development in Africa in June 2007 – contact polis@lse.ac.uk for details.

[10] <http://adrianmonck.blogspot.com/2007/02/why-public-doesnt-deserve-news.html>

[11] http://netpublics.annenberg.edu/alternative_media/networked_public_culture

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