

NEWS IN THE DIGITAL AGE – WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR MEDIA LITERACY?

Abstract:

It is now more than 10 years since the deadly July 7 bombings in London. With hindsight, and setting aside the human tragedy, the attack represented a defining moment in modern journalism when mobile phone images taken by those trapped in the wreckage of underground railway carriages opened up a new perspective in newsgathering. Today, as consumers of news, we would be surprised not to see such “user generated content”, whether it be from the Boston marathon bombing, the beheading of an off-duty soldier outside his barracks in south London or the propaganda machine of ISIS. But the digital revolution encompasses far more than the uploading of mobile phone images. This paper explores just how the practice of journalism has changed in those 10 years that have witnessed an explosion of social media, the tortured introspection of the Leveson Inquiry and the surveillance society revealed by Edward Snowden. What does this mean for our concepts of media literacy and emotional literacy?

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*Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(which was rather late for me) -
Between the end of the "Chatterley" ban
And the Beatles' first LP.*

Philip Larkin (1922 – 1985)

1. Introduction

When the poet and novelist Philip Larkin wrote the celebrated lines of *Annus Mirabilis* he did more than just comment on London's "Swinging 60s", he captured a turning point in British culture and society. It is easy to forget that only a few years earlier, the British public had to travel to Paris to buy books by authors such as Henry Miller and Laurence Durrell, banned under law by those whom George Orwell referred to as "the striped-trousered ones who rule." Larkin's poem seized on more than just the sexual revolution that was taking the nation by storm in the 1960s. Indeed, the courts did overturn the ban on DH Lawrence's sexually explicit novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, homosexuality would soon be decriminalized and abortion was legalized. But equally, in 1965 the death penalty was abolished in Britain and society began to undergo fundamental changes on a broad front.

This paper, based on a keynote presentation on media literacy and news delivered at the 2015 Media Education Summit in Boston, casts back to Larkin for two reasons. Firstly, Larkin's *Annus Mirabilis* illustrated how seismic shifts in culture and society cannot always be pinned down neatly to one specific event in history. And secondly, he captured a period when literature, as represented by the novel, and other forms of art were breaking out of their familiar containers in a way that was both exciting and challenging. So too, I will argue that today's news journalism is breaking out of its normative forms as represented by newspapers and broadcast news bulletins. I will first touch on how that happened and explore whether there were key turning points in the revolution. I shall then examine what I believe are some of the less well rehearsed

changes in the practice of journalism and seek to identify some clear trends. Finally, I will consider the implications for concepts of media literacy when related to news. In the context of news, that for me means understanding how news media inform, create meaning and engage individuals and society, coupled with our ability to produce and critically evaluate news media.

2. Shifts across a decade

So between which points should the radical shift in news media, as part of today's globally connected, digital world, be located? Some trace key changes back to the mid-1990s when America Online was taking off (when I first went to live in the United States in 1996 as the Americas Editor of the news agency Reuters it was notoriously unreliable. In fact we dubbed it "America *Offline*"). But the Internet was soon booming and fuelling the infamous dot-com-bubble). It wasn't long before the Clinton presidency was shaken by what today would be viewed as a very normal blog. The Drudge Report, born out of a Hollywood gossip column run by journalist Matt Drudge, broke the story of Clinton's affair with the intern Monica Lewinsky in 1998. The "heavy lifting" journalism had been carried out by the "old media" magazine Newsweek and its reporter Michael Isikoff. But when hours before deadline Newsweek's executives pulled the story, Drudge stepped in ahead of the Washington Post.

As part of that shifting culture, two major global news events stand out from those early stirrings in the 1990s – the Sept 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington DC in 2001 and the Asian "Boxing Day" tsunami in 2004. Both encapsulated many elements of the change: they were image-driven stories, drawing heavily on what has today become known as "user-generated content"; they were live on air or (in the case of the tsunami) virtually live and became part of a shared experience watched by a globally connected audience; and both were sensational, with a true capacity to shock. For me personally, a key turning point in this sequence of changes came with the July 2005 bombings in London, known as 7/7. Precisely because news teams could not go down into the Underground tunnels to access the bombed carriages, mobile phone pictures came into their own. Those caught up in the attacks sent the grainy images through to the likes of the BBC, enabling the public to see what would otherwise

never have appeared in news bulletins. It is around the time of the Asian tsunami and London bombings that the phrase “citizen journalism” entered into our everyday news vocabulary (Allan, 2013: 9). Crucial to this was how mobile technology enables ordinary citizens to capture major breaking news stories when they happen to be on the scene. It was the 7/7 bombings that prompted the BBC to set up its “social media hub”. Helen Boaden, who was the BBC’s Director of News at that time, identified the attacks as a watershed and “the point at which the BBC knew that newsgathering had changed forever (2008)”. In a reflection on the changing news landscape and 7/7, she wrote:

“Within 24 hours, the BBC had received 1,000 stills and videos, 3,000 texts and 20,000 e-mails. What an incredible resource. Twenty-four hour television was sustained as never before by contributions from the audience; one piece on the Six O'clock News was produced entirely from pieces of user-generated content. At the BBC, we knew then that we had to change. We would need to review our ability to ingest this kind of material and our editorial policies to take account of these new forms of output.”¹

Within a few years, the practice had become taken for granted. Certainly many “professional” journalists do not consider this to be “proper” journalism and are vociferous in labeling it “amateur.” But equally, the presence of user-generated material is ubiquitous. So much so, that when the Boston marathon was also subject to a bomb attack in 2013, images from bystanders were uploaded to news web sites almost immediately and were a critical element of the coverage. I will discuss the immediacy, subjectivity and perceptions around the authenticity of such images later in this paper, but the point I want to make here is that by 2013, less than 10 year after the Asian tsunami, the cultural shift had become deeply embedded in the culture of news journalism. It has indeed entered the psyche not only of journalists but also of those they cover. So much so that in the same year, when the off-duty soldier drummer Lee Rigby was hacked to death outside his barracks in South-East London,

¹ The BBC was one of the first major news organizations to set up a user-generated “hub”, acting shortly after the 7/7 bombings. Earlier doubts from senior BBC news executives that social media would undermine the BBC’s code of accuracy, impartiality and objectivity were put to one side after the bombings revealed the value of material from the public (Belair-Gagnon, 2015).

one of the killers, Michael Adebolajo, calmly waited at the roadside, bloody meat cleaver in hand, waiting for a passer-by to film a political statement on her mobile phone². Today, of course, our news agendas are filled with images of terror and propaganda distributed by ISIS as the Middle East crisis in Syria and Iraq lurches from one crisis to the next. Using the full range of social media tools, ISIS manages to enthuse and recruit young Moslems from European nations, while at the same time striking terror into the heart to western democracies.

We live then in a media age when new and old conflicting forces are at play. It is a world, as Deuze observes (2012), in which media are ubiquitous, pervasive and cannot be switched off, effectively a mundane mark of existence. Nowhere, I would add, is this truer than in the world of news journalism.

3.1 The changes we now take for granted

As I have attempted to set out, many of the changes over the past decade are now taken for granted and embedded in today's news ecology. This much we know: we are all potentially journalists, thanks to the mobile phone, of which there are more than six billion in the world. News is available anywhere, at any time, on any platform (it is no longer a case of the British public school-educated foreign correspondent telling his audience what he wants to tell them, when he wants to tell them). The advertising-based business model that served media companies from the late 19th century has been fundamentally disrupted by the Internet, with dire consequences for the profitability of news and for jobs. As a result, there have been serious cuts to newsgathering budgets, well documented in the news itself and through academic study; equally desperate finances have spawned desperate practices of journalism, leading in the United Kingdom to the so-called "hacking" scandal and subsequent Leveson Inquiry³ (Davies, 2014) into the press. According to an Ipsos

² In a video shot by a by-stander, Adebolajo said: "*The only reason we have killed this man today is because Muslims are dying daily by British soldiers. And this British soldier is one ... by Allah, we swear by the almighty Allah we will never stop fighting you until you leave us alone....*" Extract cited by The Daily Telegraph, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/10075488/Woolwich-attack-the-terrorists-rant.html>

³ The British Prime Minister David Cameron announced a two-part inquiry investigating the role of the press and police in the phone-hacking scandal on 13 July 2011. The "Inquiry into the Culture, Practices

MORI poll in early 2016⁴, only one in four UK citizens trust journalists to tell the truth (although this is marginally higher than at the time of the Leveson Inquiry). And we also know that in this environment, a number of new start-ups are trying to make their name, from BuzzFeed to VICE News.

I want instead to concentrate in what follows on trends that are arguably less well documented and that go to the heart of understanding how media “works” today to inform, create meaning and engage the public - the very stuff of our media literacy.

3.2 Culture of New Visibility

The first of these trends is what has been called the “new visibility” (Thompson, 2005) and relates to the all-pervasive nature of media and specifically images referenced, for example, by Deuze (2012) and Altheide (2014) in their analyses of media-driven social change. The latter argues that news is increasingly oriented towards the visual, with images woven together from multiple sources and evolving as a platform of fear, danger, excitement and risk (ibid: 3). This new visibility manifested itself in events we would never previously have seen such as the Asian tsunami or the 7/7 bombings on the Underground; often this was through the impact of social media as in what were the heady early days of the Arab Spring when north African dictators lost control of the “message” in the face of street protests. The key to this new visibility is that we can now often witness such events in what is virtually real-time (Allan, 2013: 92). When reports first emerged of a chemical weapons attack on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta in August 2013, there was no hiding what had happened. Graphic video footage in August of children writhing in agony was uploaded almost immediately and caused international outrage, sparking a UN investigation. Nabila Ramdani, a French-Arab journalist who had worked extensively in Syria, recounted how her contacts in the country sent her almost simultaneously video film of children dying from the effects of nerve agents. Even the most sanitized

and Ethics of the Press” was chaired by Lord Justice Leveson. Its 2,000 word report, published in November 2012, recommended a new body to replace the widely discredited Press Complaints Commission and was highly critical of the newspaper industry, saying some of its behaviour ranged from the criminal to the indefensibly unethical, including the illegal “hacking” of phones.

⁴ See: <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3685/Politicians-are-still-trusted-less-than-estate-agents-journalists-and-bankers.aspx>

images, she wrote in *The Observer* newspaper (2013), were considered unpublishable to a wider audience. Compare that with 1988 when Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons in to kill about 5,000 of his own citizens at Halabja. There were no mobile phones to capture the horror and it took days for still pictures to emerge. I was based in Bahrain at the time as a Middle East correspondent for Reuters and handled some of the copy filed by my colleague Patrick Worsnip who had been flown to Halabja by the Iranian military. Transport restrictions and poor communications meant it took five days for the story to emerge in public. Social media images, gathered from citizens, traffic cameras, and other sources have also helped shed light on the downing of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine at the height of the conflict with Russia in 2014. The subsequent Dutch Safety Board investigation established it had been shot down by a surface-to-air Buk missile system but was careful not to attribute blame to one side or the other. It was left to journalists to track the movements of the mobile missile launcher, providing ample evidence that it had been located in an area held by Russian separatist/ rebel forces.

Most recently, a third ingredient has since been added to this increased visibility in the form of what have been called “perpetrator images” or the “terrorist selfie” through which social media are used to celebrate acts of violence (Linfield, 2015):

“We live in the age of the fascist image. The cell-phone camera and lightweight video equipment - along with YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and all the other wonders of social media - have allowed perpetrators of atrocities to document, and celebrate, every kind of violence, no matter how grotesque.”

It is tempting to say that terror organizations have repeatedly used images of their victims or hostages in the past – think of the Red Army Faction’s operations in what used to be West Germany and their habit of sending newspapers crude black and white photographs of those they had kidnapped (for example the former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro abducted in 1978). But there are two aspects of today’s perpetrator images that are very different: firstly the sheer scale, intensity and speed of their circulation, and secondly the celebration of extreme violence. Still images and highly produced videos of ISIS insurgents pointing a knife at an orange clad U.S. hostage are burned into our minds through constant media exposure, perpetuated by

the ability of new technology to freeze frames and loop images in a never-ending repeat. While the extreme levels of violence are a hallmark of ISIS and other death cults, the style of production is distinctly western, employing the aesthetic of Hollywood films such as *Hunger Games* or that of console games such as *Call of Duty* (Parkin, 2016). It is this that makes them so uncomfortable for us.

Similarly, when the gunman Amedy Coulibaly took hostages in a Paris supermarket in the wake of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo massacre, he came armed not just with a Kalashnikov but also a GoPro⁵ camera strapped to his torso. He tried to e-mail footage of his attack, including his killing of three shoppers, from the supermarket but was ultimately frustrated in his attempt by the lack of Wi-Fi.

3.3 A tonal shift towards more emotion

This new visibility and culture of the extreme image is leading inexorably to a second trend, a tonal shift in news media which is laying bare age-old tensions between, on the one hand, journalistic norms of objectivity and detachment and, on the other hand, the need to engage audiences. As Seaton has observed, the reporter's first fear is of being boring and the best news is "hot", demanding attention. Far from being emotionally neutral, it is designed to stir, arouse and manipulate (2005: 231). But until recently, I would argue, mainstream serious news media have generally managed to square that circle, relying on a number of stylistic devices to inject emotional elements into stories while maintaining at least a pretence of objectivity. The most common method has been to "outsource" emotion (Tuchman 1972, Wahl-Jorgensen 2012), a process by which the journalist cites through quotation or describes the emotions of the protagonists in a story without implicating themselves.

However, a clear trend is emerging in which this convention is faltering in the face of the torrent of user-generated material now flooding into newsrooms and into the final news output to audiences. "UGC hubs" or social media desks, such as that situated at the heart of the BBC's newsroom, are now taking in raw, unedited images. Traditional lines between engagement and detachment are being blurred and we are

⁵ The GoPro company was founded in 2002 and specializes in small video cameras that can be "worn" and are typically used to capture action photography and extreme sports.

experiencing open displays of emotion in televised news bulletins. The near instantaneous uploading of images from citizens witnessing news in the making is sometimes perceived as *more* authentic than traditional reporting which is seen by some members of the public as institutionally biased or contrived (Allan, 2014: 139). This new type of content is unapologetically subjective and its impassioned redistribution (via, for example, “re-tweets” and “shares” on social media) may well be deemed as providing a truer picture of what is happening on the ground (ibid).

A new generation of young journalists, hired sometimes for their social media or language skills, are staffing these UGC hubs and handling graphic images throughout the day. In the meantime, the newsroom, once perceived as a “safe” zone away from the conflicts and disasters covered by foreign correspondents, has been dubbed the “digital frontline” as increasing numbers of those working on such desk report symptoms of stress and trauma. A survey of journalists working with user-generated content by Eyewitness Media⁶ concluded (2015: 16):

“Office-bound staff who used to be somewhat shielded from viewing atrocities are now bombarded day in and day out with horrifically graphic material that explodes onto their desktops in volumes, and at a frequency that is very often far in excess of the horrors witnessed by staff who are investigating or reporting from the actual frontline.”

Such content is now finding its way into broadcast news bulletins and every form of social media reporting from news websites run by established names to the newcomers on the block. In news coverage of the 2015 attack on the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine in Paris, the public was able to see video and still images of one of the gunmen shooting dead a policeman at short range. The dramatic video of the killer of drummer Rigby, meat cleaver in hand, led to nearly 680 complaints from members of the public who had watched news bulletins of the event. The regulator Ofcom later warned British broadcasters the BBC and ITV to include specific warnings about graphic content and not to loop footage in a gratuitous fashion.

⁶ The online survey conducted between July and September 2015 took in 122 journalists working with user-generated content in newsrooms around the world. 23% of the respondents were based in the United Kingdom and 15% in the United States.

"We were concerned about the repetition of the same material four times without audio, particularly as this was the first time this material was shown on UK television and no warning had been given beforehand," said Ofcom.⁷

There is little doubt that the prevalence of graphic user-generated content, coupled with the key role social media desks are now playing at the heart of the newsroom, is leading to a tonal shift in news output towards more emotional content. This trend is being reinforced by the financial imperative of news organisations to engage audiences, particularly young audiences with deeply-rooted social media habits, and the growing realization that user-generated content is key to achieving this goal. It is no surprise that journalists arriving on the scene of a breaking news story today often find themselves in competition to buy mobile phone footage from onlookers. As Altheide remarks (2014: 4), it is no longer facts or historical encounters with context that govern our mediated existence, but rather emotional attachments, opportunities to express feelings and experiences that can be shared with friends.

3.4 Performance and ritual are now part of the news culture

As we as citizens become more and more deeply immersed in media, so too the scene of a news story becomes a heightened affective and performative space in which journalists and those they are reporting on act in concert with another on the same stage. This third identifiable trend once again has its roots in past practice but has been given additional intensity by the immediacy of social media. In the not so distant past, the death of Princess Diana in 1997 left indelible images of a sea of flowers and public mourning. Live television coverage created a global community and a shared reality, made cohesive by what Kavka refers to as "affective glue" (2008: 37). The television screen becomes not a barrier separating people between illusory and real worlds but rather it is a "join" that amplifies affect and connects real people on one side with real people on the other side. Today, that phenomenon is no longer the exception but has taken on the status of a well-rehearsed ritual, amplified not just by television but by the multitude of screens that make up social media devices of every

⁷ For Ofcom's ruling on coverage of the drummer Rigby killing see: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/245/obb245.pdf>

kind. We see it through coverage of the European refugee crisis, in terror attacks, air disasters, in fact at any scene of breaking news where journalists gather to cover the story. Once again, as the traditional lines are blurred, journalists and the public constitute a joint scene. Demonstrations, whether they be on the streets of Cairo in the Arab Spring or the streets of New York with the Occupy movement, only become effective when they are fully mediatised. As Butler observes (2015: 91):

“The street scenes become politically potent only when and if we have a visual and audible version of the scene communicated in live or proximate time, so that the media does not merely report the scene but is part of the scene and action; indeed the media *is* the scene or the space in its extended and replicable visual and audible dimensions.⁸”

It would appear that journalists and members of the public know exactly what roles to adopt. After the ISIS-inspired terror attacks in Paris, the ritual of candle-lit vigils for the victims was played out in front of screens. The same was true following the deliberate crashing of Germanwings flight 9525 in May 2015 in which all 150 people on board died. It didn't take long to discover that among the victims was a group of 16 German students and two of their teachers travelling home from a Spanish exchange programme. They quickly became the focus of mass media attention as the world's press descended on the small town of Haltern am See with its 37,000 people. Some of the population were outraged by the media intrusion on their grief but others were only too willing to give interviews, in perfect English, to television crews about their unfortunate fellow students. According to Gavin Rees⁹, the director of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma in Europe, the mass media frenzy transforms a normal space of, say, a town, into what he calls a “heightened performative space” in which the presence of cameras changes the nature of simple acts such as laying flowers into a type of performance. This is similar to what Kavka, in her study of reality TV (2008), calls a mediated and performed televisual intimacy where what is on screen can appear to be more “real” than reality. In her analysis of journalists' ability to create a moral appeal to action (for example in cases of natural disaster), Chouliaraki observes the traditional reliance of journalism on performance, and on the

⁸ My italics

⁹ Interview with the author

images and stories of suffering that situate events within symbolic regimes of emotion and action (2013: 140). As part of that, she sees a dual requirement on today's journalist to witness events as proof of the facts of suffering (an objective dimension) and to witness events as an emotive testimony to the "unspeakable horror of suffering (a reflexive dimension) (ibid).

A similar form of ritual mourning took place in the wake of a school shooting in the German town of Winnenden in 2009 when a former student killed 15 students, teachers and passers-by in a shooting spree. Within hours, 40 satellite trucks were parked outside the school. But this time, there was a strange twist to the normal pattern of events. The editor of the local *Winnender Zeitung* newspaper, Frank Nipkau, took a stand, criticising the rest of the press for their hunt for victims and the way people traumatized by the shooting were "dragged before the camera."¹⁰ One of the German broadcasters asked him for pictures of the attacker, promising in return to feature his newspaper in the evening news bulletin. He refused. Within the first two hours, Nipkau made a clear decision and told his 35-strong editorial team: "We will not interview any of the victims or any of the bereaved families" (cited in Friedhoff, S 2014: 7). He actually went further, deciding that the *Winnender Zeitung* would not publish pictures of the killer or his victims and that the funerals would not be covered. The mainstream German press showed no such restraint, in fact the mass circulation tabloid *Bild Zeitung* was later censured by the German press watchdog¹¹ for its intrusive and "irreverent" coverage. But in a way he had not predicted, Nipkau's decision to respect the privacy of the bereaved families backfired: some of the families started asking him why they had *not* been interviewed. On the first anniversary of the shooting, he changed his policy and contacted all 15 families of the victims with the intention of publishing their story. Eleven of those families took up the offer.

¹⁰ <http://www.drehscheibe.org/interview-mit-frank-nipkau.html>

¹¹ deutscher Presserat, a voluntary body of self-regulation. see: <http://www.zeit.de/online/2009/22/winnenden-presserat>

4.0 Conclusion

Are we in the midst of a liberating democratization of the media as the marginalized in society find a voice? Or is this then the end of journalism as we know it? I would maintain that there is an element of truth to both sides of the argument and that at a time of flux it would be hasty and mistaken to characterize either the utopian vision or the doomsday scenario as being in the ascendancy.

Certainly there are many positive elements to be drawn from the trends I have set out above. For me, the key tenets of journalism are still firmly embedded in the culture of news, holding power to account, fostering democratic debate and shining a light in dark places. Social media and citizen journalism have helped dilute an over-reliance on elite sourcing and given a voice to many who were previously not heard. As Fenton observes (2010: 3), the ethos and vocation of journalism is embedded in a relationship with democracy and its practice. Only representing one perspective and ignoring the voices of all social classes can surely be considered undemocratic and inclusion of voices “from the street” represents a great advance. For Allan (2013: 94), citizen journalism inspires a language of democratisation. And as we have seen through the Arab Spring and the Middle East conflict, dictators can no longer hide, atrocities are uncovered in near real-time and we are seeing news that would previously have been hidden or, at best, kept out of sight of journalists.

On the other hand, it is difficult to welcome all the changes that are now becoming part of the day-to-day practice of journalism. It has been argued that the visual-driven culture of news media is now producing emotive messages based on a growing theme of threat and fear; and that more information has failed to produce more knowledge or understanding (Altheide, 2014: 11). That may be an extreme view, but I would certainly maintain that the normative values of objectivity, if they ever stood up to scrutiny in the first place, are under threat more than ever as the combination of visual images, immediacy and the sheer volume of user-generated material create a distinct tonal shift towards more emotion in our news. The blurring of lines and infusion of media into ever corner of our lives has brought together the journalist and those caught up in news in a shared performative space which, in turn, reinforces the overt expression of emotions and personal views. As Kavka has pointed out (2008: 8),

information is increasingly being harnessed for the purposes of spectacle and entertainment is more spectacular when based in actuality. Performance can sometimes be perceived as more “real” than reality itself.

These trends are becoming deeply embedded in today’s journalism, disrupting and challenging norms and conventions that have held sway for decades. Recognising these trends, for better or for worse, is essential if we are to understand how news media inform, create meaning and engage individuals and society. Practice is changing and, with it, the way news works.

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