DIGITAL JOURNALISM
RETHINKING JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE IN THE
ERA OF DIGITAL MEDIA

Ján Višňovský[*], Jana Radošinská and Anna Predmerská

University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Nám. J. Herdu 2, 91701 Trnava, Slovak Republic

Abstract

Current trends in development of digital communication technologies indicate that it is more than accurate to say that we live in a remarkable era which could be hardly compared to any previous historical epoch. Media technologies provide us with a practically unlimited access to information and entertainment while ignoring the traditional boundaries of space and time completely. The range of communication content is constantly expanding; however, we may state that some media are able to adapt to this specific communication environment better than other. The authors focus on the issue of so-called digital journalism, a relatively new way of disseminating information via the Internet. They work with a basic assumption that there are many reasons that define the Internet as a communication environment which is able to offer a space for publishing news and opinions effectively and at reduced costs – these aspects are related to contemporary culture, economy, and social situation. The goal of the text is to reflect on the term 'digital journalism' in relation with ever-transforming journalistic practice that corresponds with today's communication processes.

Keywords: new media, communication, Internet, information, entertainment

1. Introduction

The reasons why the Internet is becoming the most effective and widely preferred communication tool for publishing journalistic content are associated with the specific living conditions in 21st century and current socio-cultural situation. It follows that digital journalism, one of the defining trends in journalistic communication of the contemporary era, cannot be discussed only in terms of economic advantages of digital information dissemination, but also in the context of globalization processes, transformation of culture and various cultural forms as well as dynamically changing needs and expectations of the media audiences related to media use. These trends are, however, hardly new. During 20th century radio 'overtook' press in terms of speed of information

[*]E-mail: jan.visnovsky@ucm.sk

dissemination only to be quickly replaced by television as the most popular mass medium in general. Television has been keeping such 'leading status' ever since, although current development tendencies clearly show that radio and television – as well as other 'traditional' media – have to face a new competitor of an utmost importance – the Internet.

A certain primary 'distrust' aimed at the Internet has declined relatively quickly, mostly thanks to its fast technological improving and emergence of many opportunities for both media producers and media audiences. The Internet is currently perceived as an extremely popular medium, particularly in case of young and middle-aged generations. Besides it has become an effective tool for education and a communication space that offers a wide spectrum of working, marketing and commercial activities as well as entertainment. Of course traditional media cannot ignore these aspects, on the contrary – they adapt to requirements and expectations related to media consumption and strive to use the advantages of the Internet for their own benefit. Print newspapers which stepped into the electronic, i.e. Internet environment at the turn of the millennium are no exception. Online newspapers, despite their relatively short existence, have become a significant information source and, at the same time, they have offered the journalists, staff in newsrooms and publishers a new space for disseminating news and opinions based on different news production cycles.

Back in 1990s, the use of the Internet in terms of journalism was considered mostly with certain doubts; however, the following years pointed to an entirely different direction. H.A. Kurtz, a former journalist of American elite daily newspaper *The Washington Post,* currently working for American television *Fox News Channel,* wrote a text titled *Aboard the E-Train* in 1999 and stated: "Like some raging computer virus, the Net seems to be devouring the media culture, shattering the usual definitions of news and eclipsing more traditional subjects. The so-called old media are invading this brave new world with near-revolutionary fervor, fueling a growth industry that might be called e-news." [H.A. Kurtz, The Washington Post, 21 October 1999, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/features/daily/net102199.htm] The Internet has assumed positions of both good partner and strong competitor of traditional media. Past two decades of development of journalism, on a global scale as well as in Slovakia, were influenced by many changes; the use of the Internet as a new platform aimed at publishing and spreading information was one of the most significant of those changes. Despite the fact that nowadays there is no general consensus, which would define and specify the ways the Internet have changed journalism, interested theorists as well as journalists themselves do not doubt that they witness many ongoing transformations of journalistic practice. The speed related to these changes is, however, the probable reason why journalistic theories and practical aspects of journalistic work have a hard time coping with the latest trends.

The emergence of so-called new media have become a 'herald' of a new communication era of human civilization, influencing all social processes, culture included. The new media revolution allows us to communicate all forms

of culture, from production through distribution and dissemination to reception and interpretation, via computer technologies and other electronic devices. Russian media theorist Lev Manovich claims that new media represent a convergence of two intertwined historical trajectories – computers and media technologies – and defines their basic principles by using terms such as numeric representation, modularity, automation, variability and cultural re-coding [1].

2. Theoretical outlines of 'digital journalism'

New information and communication technologies and their social establishment require a certain transformation of traditional definitions of mass communication and its models since these models practically carry such new communication forms. While historically older definitions mention mostly one-way flow of communication and anonymity of recipients, new media audience is more specialized. Similarly Internet communication seems to be generally accessible, non-dependent on time and place of its realization. Such advantages of communication via the Internet – speed, availability and interactivity – are pointless to doubt. Current fields of study related to communication as well as other scientific disciplines, especially Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology, take into account the influence of new media on human socio-communication activities and the society as a whole.

It is necessary to point out that similar thoughts were included also in works of media theorists linked to the Toronto School of communication theory, mostly in texts written by H.A. Innis and M. McLuhan back in 1950s and 1960s, and therefore helped define a new development phase of media theory. According to M. McLuhan the influence of electronic media – the Internet included – is much more significant because they tend to change psycho-social conditions of human life and behaviour. In McLuhan's understanding the media function as an extension of human senses – such 'extensions' related to media communication shape our central neural system and thus transform all aspects of our social and psychological existence, including relationships [2].

Opinions of media theorists on communication processes, social relationships and cultural environment as well as on human values spread by dominant electronic (i.e. Internet) communication vary. Besides unquestionable positives of the Internet and new media in general, many media theorists focus their attention on negative aspects of their influence, e.g. Christian-oriented theorists such as T. Zasępa. The author critically remarks that the moral context of individuals, families and society as a whole is jeopardized by the media. These tendencies manifest themselves particularly through focusing on consumer way of life, egoism, invoking superficial compassion associated with the society's attitude to marginalized social classes and utter disrespect of the media in terms of keeping secrets (taboo) [3]. However, recent researches, for instance research results published by N. Vrabec, D. Petranová and M. Solík, indicate that media audiences that are particularly vulnerable in terms of media persuasion – in this case young people in Slovakia – ... "are aware of the fact

that media intentionally, and in the most intensive form, stimulate the public with different affective incentives. It is primarily the case of a wide spectrum of emotional stimuli not only in TV series or films, but also in their ever growing extent in the news coverage, journalism …" [4]

Media philosophers S. Gálik and A. Modrzejewski discuss the influence of electronic media, particularly the Internet, on human cognitive processes. This influence is, according to the authors, a result of technological revolution caused by the emergence of communication technologies – this technological revolution includes, besides other aspects, miniaturization and digitization: "Electronic media, especially Internet communication, support image, hypertext and discontinuous thinking. The result is so-called rhizome recognition that brings together different information each person creates himself. The new media have brought radical new ideas about time, space and reality." [5]

Nowadays it is almost pointless to remark that media content is not distributed only verbally or as a plain text. Television provides complex audiovisual content and the Internet, in its nature, even offers multi-media content which allows the users to 'step in' actively. Multi-media content may be created, distributed and perceived in the forms of text, graphics, image and sound; it may also combine these elements by using appropriate technologies, e.g. computer animation and special effects. Since it is digital, the users are able to re-create and re-distribute the given information [6]. Modern forms of electronic communication minimize all time-space disproportions (SMS, chats, messengers) or eliminate them entirely (Skype, web cameras, etc.). Moreover, Internet communication has brought a brand new form of text – hypertext. The hypertext has disrupted the traditional understanding of print document since its content is constantly changing in accordance with the online environment.

These types of texts are thus "unstable (since it is possible to update them continually), they are fragmented and atomized into a form of minimal parts while these reading units … do have their own life, they are not dependent on each other. Software tools offer an opportunity to create and use hypertext links providing an access to other texts and different kinds of media. The readers may proceed from one text to another and do not perceive specific works as separate but as connected instead." [7] The 'openness' of information sources and therefore both access to information and activities of the users related to non-linearity of the Internet content are frequently discussed issues of media studies associated with online journalism.

A certain theoretical context that reflects on the transformations of relationships between readers, authors and texts is, as L. Manovich points out, offered by Italian semiotician U. Eco, namely by his concept of 'open work'. This conception takes into consideration variability of the textual meanings and places emphasis on active role of the readers within the process of meaning construction – like poststructuralist literary theory. Moreover, the hypertext allows the users to create individual versions of the original text based on their preferences, creating a notion of originality and uniqueness: "the logic of neomedia technology reflects the new social logic. Every visitor of a website

automatically receives its version that is personalized in accordance with database, whether we talk about the language of the text, the content itself or the advertising." [1, p. 34-41]

The context of new media provides the media content with a whole new set of formal aspects and features. This fact refers to its electronic nature since such media content is created by computers, i.e. by transformation from analogue sources and is based on digital (binary) code that determines the digital media content's numeric nature. L. Manovich, while discussing the given issue, mentions so-called 'neomedia' works that may be described mathematically [1, p. 34-41]. Other features of such media texts include static modular structure – specific elements of these texts are able to preserve their separate identity – and variability. Variability provides an opportunity to create additional content in an infinite number of new versions. A media product is thus no longer – as was in case of 'old' media – definite and static, but rather ever-changing, we may even say it is a 'liquid' work.

3. Selected aspects of journalistic practice in the Internet era

As we mentioned above, the Internet has brought a significant breaking point in terms of accessing information. It is undeniable that the users may work with a huge amount of information related to all aspects of social life which are provided by public service media, state authorities and institutions, commercial companies, etc. As far as news media are concerned, their key role lies in selection of events linked to social reality and shaping the events into form of media content which results in creation of a specific kind of their 'added value'. A couple of years ago production practice showed that media organizations were rather unwilling to recognize those processes in the online environment. One of the various reasons of quite low primal trust in relation with using the Internet was the fact that media organizations had a hard time finding optimal business models which would have allowed them to continue in gaining profit by selling media products and advertising space. Paradoxically, an important part of the process of refusing online communication was linked to prejudices of traditional media and their distrust of the Internet as such. It is important to point out that similar development tendencies are still present in television industry – many broadcasters often refuse to provide online television broadcasting, fearing that Web television would put in danger their profit related to selling advertising space.

Such a 'cannibalization' of profit seems to be, however, a far more serious problem in case of print media. Content of print newspapers may be transformed and put online easily – most of newspaper editorial offices currently do so. Information – or more accurately partial information – is mostly provided for free. However, there is a bigger, so-far-unresolved problem the online news portals have to face; how to effectively gain profit through their websites. Some newspapers are trying to experiment with monetizing their online news content or its part (paid access to the website). Practical experience of many foreign

print newsrooms shows that newspaper publishers are starting to use the Web as a tool for supporting and maintaining good relationships with subscribers of the print issue of the newspaper, e.g. by providing them an access to newspaper archive. The Internet has, on the one hand, made the access to information easier but, on the other hand, it has changed also the ways users perceive the news content. While traditional media provide content that may be defined as 'closed' (newspaper issues, CDs, television programs, etc.), the Internet offers communication content in the form of specific products (journalistic texts, songs, videos and so on) and hyperlinks may combine these specific elements in accordance with preferences of specific users.

Taking into account this perspective, it may seem that – in case of print newspapers – online communication provides a lot more information and a much wider spectrum of topics. Paradoxically, the results of comparative study titled *Print and Online Newspapers in Europe* conducted in 2003 which compared front pages of nation-wide dailies and their online versions in 16 European countries showed that, as far as news-making is concerned, thematic offer of news included in print and online newspapers is – to a significant extent – similar [8]. However, results of a different research aimed at agenda setting which was conducted in The Great Britain in 2004 confirmed certain differences between topics preferred by typologically different categories of the press. Whilst themes typical for elite newspapers dominate mostly online and far less in print issues, tabloids aim their attention at show business events, entertainment and popular sports [9]. After all, the analysis of British newspapers *The Guardian, Daily Mail* and *The Sun* indicated that typologically different categories of the press work with entirely different sets of news values and thus prefer different kinds of news. Elite newspapers place emphasis on values such as impact and importance of an event, social establishment of a topic and personification of an event. This fact significantly influences the process of selecting topics that will be placed on the front page. Serious events related to foreign and domestic politics and economy are dominant. On the contrary, tabloids often turn their attention to information associated with private lives of publicly known persons. Entertainment and controversy have become 'traditional' values of the tabloid newspapers which do not hesitate to publish half-truths and 'juicy details' or use methods of gathering information that are often balancing on the edge of the law [10]. The context of cultural studies considers the entertaining nature of media products – not only those disseminated by the mass press – as one of the most significant factors which motivate the recipients to consume such products in the first place. J. Radošinská and S. Hrotková state that "from psychosomatic point of view, we have to pay special attention to individual effects of media entertainment such as excitation transfer, sensual stimulation and pleasure as well as consider their impact on inner conviction of individual audience members – on the system of moral and ethical values, experiences and education" [11].

Although we may claim that online newspapers tend to prefer topics similar or identical with those preferred by print newspapers and even do so

under one brand, the content itself is arranged in different ways. While front pages of the print newspapers tend to offer complex information or refer to the most interesting topics included in the issue, 'front pages' of the online issues mostly provide a larger amount of hypertext links leading to news that can be found and read by clicking the links. Front pages of the print issues are, thanks to these differences, rich in terms of content whilst websites are more structured but less content-saturated. Additional differences result from technological particularities of both versions, taking into account their functionality, as well as from diverse intentions of editorial teams. Every front page of online news portal serves as a navigation tool for its users, all website headers attract attention of the users, functioning also as propagation tools and 'eye-catchers'.

4. New media and their influence on collective and individual forms of journalistic practice

Development of information and communication technologies has radically influenced a wide range of processes related to production of newspapers. This statement seems to be a bit paradoxical considering the fact that the essence of journalistic work as such – searching, selecting, gathering and transforming information – remains unchanged. The Internet's impact on journalistic content has to be discussed as an important factor of working routines of online journalists and making online news in general. This impact implies, besides specifics related to form and content, also economic reasons because technologies associated with Internet communication allow the producers to precisely define their target audiences and thus increase the efficiency of advertising. Other economic opportunities linked to electronic news-making include minimization of expenditure for printing and distribution. However, as R. van den Wurff and his team state, costs of producing a new content of media communication (a journalistic text, a television show, etc.) remain very high. Production of a new online media product is practically as expensive as creation of products presented through traditional media [12].

'Multi-mediation' of all aspects of journalistic work determines the nature and character of current organization models related to editorial teams as well as their individual staff members. Media convergence and economic questions related to existence of the press, particularly the context of production expenditure and advertising profit, contribute to continual rationalization of specific production phases – in other words, to reduction of costs in the sphere of human resources and thus merging of different journalistic professions. Traditional and time-tested journalistic working routines are therefore weakened by the above-mentioned multi-mediation which results in convergence of two different journalistic platforms that used to be strictly separate – newspaper redaction and Web redaction. These new development tendencies can be observed also in various aspects of journalistic profession since nowadays it is necessary to be able to effectively work with the Internet, 'smart' phones, video cameras, etc. Czech theorist and journalist J. Čuřík specifically mentions

a developing profession of a multi-media journalist and discusses the changes in traditional journalistic routines, e.g. non-existence of deadlines in online journalism [13]. All activities of newsroom employees that also publish online news indicate that traditional journalists have become multi-media journalists. It means that these journalists contribute to both print newspaper content as well as to making online news, including the processes of editing; their work results are not limited to texts and provide various multi-media materials, i.e. videos, audio files, audiovisual content recorded by smart phones, microphones, etc. Contributing to both print and online journalistic platforms leads to ignoring the traditional journalistic specializations associated with basic media typology. It also accumulates various activities that were originally performed by different members of newsroom staff. This fact leads us to an assumption that the current level of difficulty in terms of journalistic profession has increased, especially in terms of verification of information sources, field-work, lingual and stylistic quality of news and ethical aspects of the given line of work. However, we cannot simply say that the quality of journalistic profession is decreasing.

New kinds of journalistic activities have demanded, on the one hand, formation and establishment of new journalistic professions or specializations (within both managerial positions and work activities related to standard employees), while various aspects of traditional journalistic practice are, on the other hand, required less and less. Relatively new newsroom positions include Head of the department of multi-media activities, Editor-In-Chief of the online portal, coordinator of content consistency between the online and print issues, Head editor, online journalist and so on. Working in an online newsroom is, however, still different from organization of responsibilities related to a 'traditional' form of newsroom staffing patterns. We already mentioned the absence of deadlines, which means that specific news are being updated constantly, especially in case of ongoing events, i.e. current 'in-progress' happenings (elections, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, etc.) and also that journalistic work is becoming increasingly time-consuming. The process of producing a journalistic content does not end by writing a text and its submission since the same journalists are usually in charge of Web services too. Interactivity of the online environment has created specific conditions for communication between the authors of the content and the media audiences, which once used to be based on readers' reactions (standard letters or phone calls addressed to editorial offices) received with a certain delay. Discussion contributions or reactions of the readers (users) are nowadays available almost immediately.

Contemporary journalistic practice related to Slovak newsrooms indicates that expansion of online journalistic activities leads to the need for increasing the amount of multi-media journalists and other related professions. An important part of this process refers to current economic situation that favours traditional newspapers less and less. To eliminate such negative economic trends, editorial offices are trying to find an optimal economic and personal convergence between print and online newsroom staff which would be in accordance with priorities of publishing houses and general economic imperatives. Since the

given transformation is definitely a continual process, results of these development tendencies will be visible only in the future.

5. Conclusions

The influence of the Internet on print media, i.e. those media products that offer, above all, information in textual form, is related to both new ways the users (recipients) access information and significant changes in individual and collective organizational aspects of publishing news and opinions. Probably the most substantial advantages of the Internet associated with traditional print newspapers are creation of new ways of offering the readers (users) journalistic content and use of hypertext. In comparison with, for instance, radio and television, print media are less demanding in the context of using the Internet and digital technologies since the Web was originally created as a tool for publishing and disseminating text. Moreover, computers are no more the only devices which offer Internet connection since modern TVs, tablets and mobile phones are also able to provide their owners with access to the Internet. Positive aspects of using the Internet in relation with traditional print media include flexible updating of information, publishing audiovisual materials, interactivity (the recipients are able to react to published information by sending e-mails or immediately address the topic by sharing the content via social networks or using discussion threads placed below) as well as providing the readers (users) with access to archives. After all, the Web's interactivity has helped create the phenomena of blogging and so-called 'citizen journalism'. The term has been thoroughly explained by many renowned media and journalism scholars; one of the most recent elaborations of the issue is offered by A. Momoc [6].

Although the results of technological development, recent economic conditions and shifts in readers' preferences are quite significant in terms of new journalistic practices, we also have to pay attention to the transforming nature of the whole process of news production that should result in offering 'value-added' journalism. Theory of journalism is currently facing a significant challenge related to the new trends in journalistic practice and problems which result from these tendencies. However, such issues may be also understood as a remarkable opportunity for progressive revision of existing theoretical concepts that are, in many cases, quite outdated. Taking into account the globalization tendencies and concentration of media subjects at various levels, contemporary journalistic theory has to consider both local specifics of the media environment and broader global phenomena. As H. Pravdová observes, "we witness the consequences of media logic transformation leading to the origination of post-journalism, i.e. radical change of traditional mission and democratization function of media on the background of establishing post-democracy" [14].

However, it is obvious that theory of journalism is not the only scientific field of study that has to adapt to the influence of ever-changing social and socio-cultural aspects of human life – related to both media producers and recipients – and to the rapid emergence of information and communication

technologies; the same may be said about general media theories, i.e. media studies. Cultural, social and economic situation in the first two decades of 21st century has made the media theorists consider a revised digital media theory that would offer a stable set of theoretical outlines for further analyses of historical development, current status and future perspectives of media production in the context of ongoing digital revolution. M. Solík and J. Mináriková state that, the key social challenge related to the media industry is an integration of business and media activities that would preserve the primary social and cultural mission of the media – their duty to serve in the public interest. The authors mostly talk about 're-vitalization' of journalism as a fourth pillar of democracy and global cultivation of the general public [15].

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