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Is there a “postmodern turn” in journalism?

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Abstract

This chapter suggests that we might draw on the conceptual tools of postmodernism to understand changes in journalism. The chapter sees evidence for a postmodern turn in a series of interlinked developments. First, the past few decades have seen a catastrophic collapse in the business model of journalism, bringing an end to the certainties and stabilities characterising narratives around the profession. Secondly, scholars have begun to question journalism’s central role in democracy. Thirdly, processes of convergence have brought unprecedented changes to the production, form, content and consumption of journalism.

Introduction

This chapter considers the idea that we might helpfully draw on the conceptual tools of postmodernism to understand changes in the practices of and discourses surrounding journalism. This is a particularly urgent concern at the present moment, given the challenges

to the profession and its practices. The chapter suggests that new analytical tools which have emerged in part as a result of profound changes in the profession may help us to give as much attention to instabilities, uncertainties and contestations as we have previously given to the foundational narratives of journalism and of journalism studies, and may offer new conceptual and methodological approaches for rethinking journalism and its social role and relevance as the “primary sense-making vehicle of modernity” (Hartley, 1996).

The chapter sees evidence for a postmodern turn in a series of interlinked developments. First, the past few decades have seen a catastrophic collapse in the business model of journalism, bringing an end to the certainties and stabilities historically characterising narratives around the profession. Secondly, scholars have recently begun to question the central role in democracy afforded to institutions of journalism, and so central to professional discourses. Thirdly, over the past two decades, processes of convergence have brought unprecedented changes to the production, form, content and consumption of journalism. These changes have, among other things, challenged traditional binary distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity, news and opinion, information and entertainment, producers and audiences, and professional and amateur content. By focusing on these particular changes, I do not mean to suggest that they are the only ones that need to be considered by journalism scholars. The central social role of journalism, however, stems in large part from a series of assumptions that are centrally tied to these certainties now under challenge. Journalism has historically been underpinned by its long-standing financial stability and independence; by the normative presumptions surrounding its central role in democracy; and by the ideal of objectivity in its discursive practices, which has cemented its claims to truth (e.g. McNair, 1998). These transformations highlight the fact that *the industry*, its *practices* and *products*, and its *normative rationale* are not just in flux, but undergoing a radical redefinition in such a

way that we need new conceptual tools to make sense of what we may have taken for granted, and to rethink the social role of journalism.

These changes could be seen to represent a “postmodern turn” in journalism insofar as they challenge conventional the “grand narratives,” certainties and rationalities that underpin the profession and its practices. They inform not only the practices of journalists and their discourses about their profession, but also the preoccupations and analytical tools of journalism scholars. At the same time, the destabilisation of categories wrought by the emergence of convergence and online journalism has been accompanied by a shift in the preoccupations of scholars studying journalism. In particular, emerging discourses of journalism scholarship articulate a deliberate break with the analytical categories of the modernist project.

Postmodernism as an analytical tool in journalism studies

I am here - with some degree of trepidation - taking up a dusty, unfashionable and widely criticised conceptual framework by drawing on the notion of postmodernism. I am doing so on the basis that postmodernism serves as a useful trope for describing changes in the narratives around, and practices of, journalism, despite the broad array of (largely justified) criticisms of this framework. The idea of the postmodern was originally spelled by Lyotard in 1979 in his book, *The Postmodern Condition*, as an intervention into broader debates about the nature of knowledge in scientific fields, aimed at the ways in which realist representational world views are legitimated through the discourse of philosophy (Lyotard, 1979). First and foremost, the definition of postmodernism was established through its juxtaposition with the idea of the modern (see also Callinicos, 1989, p. 3):

I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadisclosure...making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth...I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it (Lyotard, 1997, pp. xxiii-xxiv).

Lyotard and other proponents of postmodernism pointed to evidence of a crisis in representation, reflected in a process of destabilization in science and other emancipatory grand projects of modernity - including accounts celebrating progress and the success of liberal democracy (e.g. Crouch, 2004). Postmodernism fell out of favour in the 1990s and onwards, as scholars questioned its insistence on the decline of the grand narratives of modernity, suggesting that this account in itself constitutes a grand narrative (e.g. Jameson, 1997). Furthermore, critics of postmodernism from across the political spectrum have discerned a depoliticizing and individualizing impulse in the postmodern position in its dismissal of large-scale normative and political projects - ranging from the institutions of established religion to Marxism and liberalism (e.g. Callinicos, 1989; Jameson 1990; Gellner, 1992). In its position on the contingency of truth claims, postmodernism has been associated with a normative relativism which refuses moral judgements.

Through a critical engagement with the claims of postmodernism, scholars across humanities and social sciences fields have built on its insights, developing concepts that have been influential in shaping contemporary sociological thinking. However, most scholars have held on to the idea (and grand narrative) of modernity while emphasizing profound change. Indeed, the idea of profound change has been central to social theory for much of the 20th century. One of the most prominent earlier theorists to think through these shifts was Joseph Schumpeter (1950), who proposed the capitalist societies go through cycles of “creative

destruction.” For Schumpeter, processes of renewal operate through destruction of “old” technologies and modes of production:

[T]he same process of industrial mutation ... that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in. (Schumpeter, 1950, p. 83)

Schumpeter’s themes of destruction and renewal have profoundly shaped recent thinking in journalism studies as scholars have grappled with understanding both failure and innovation (e.g. Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015; Bruno & Kleis Nielsen, 2012; Wahl-Jorgensen, forthcoming).

For scholars engaging with the insights of postmodernism, Schumpeter’s understanding of creative destruction as part of the inevitable process of “industrial mutilation” in capitalism has served as a useful – and often implicitly invoked – conceptual backdrop. This, for example, is evident in the work of Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) on the notion of “reflexive modernization” which stipulates a profound historical break and discontinuity between what the authors describe as “first” and “second” modern societies. This break, integral to processes of modernization, is accompanied by an “ontological change of social organization and cultural imagination as a change in the system of reference.” (Beck, Bonss and Lau, 2004, p. 10). This ontological change contributes to destabilise the legitimisation processes associated with key institutions in society. Here, we may include journalism as one such institution whose legitimacy is under threat from multiple directions. For Beck and his colleagues, the language of “modernization” represents a deliberate challenge to the arguments associated with postmodernism (e.g. Beck, Bonss and Lau, 2004), even if many of the processes they describe are similar.

Along those lines, Bauman (2000) proposed the idea of “liquid modernity” to describe the fluidity, uncertainty of flux characterising contemporary life, and its challenges to social life and organisation in a range of areas, including “emancipation, individuality, time/space, work, and community” (p. 8). As Mark Deuze’s (e.g. 2007; 2008) has argued, in liquid modernity, journalism is witnessing profound shifts that shape the way audiences and citizens engage with the institution:

Beyond the individualization of society, the ongoing de-institutionalization of the way individuals interact with society, and the largely self-referential nature of the creative process within journalism, it is possible to argue that the output of the news industry also contributes to an overall sense of disempowerment and disenchantment with traditional social institutions. It is thus important to note that any consideration of the future of news and political communication has to involve not only an awareness of how the social systems of journalism and politics self-organize to adapt to new circumstances while maintaining their internal power structures, but also an understanding of how the contemporary condition of liquid modernity and its sense of permanent revolution wreaks havoc on the very foundations of these institutions. (Deuze, 2008, p. 856).

What unites these approaches, then, is the idea of understanding major transitions “in everyday life, in the character of social organization and in the structuring of global systems within the framework of modernity” (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994, p. vii), and thus drawing on the resources and tools that social theory has used to understand institutional structures, rather than assuming a dramatic departure from these. This is a useful cautionary note for anyone wishing to engage with postmodernism. At the same time, it is also important to note that the language of social thinkers critically engaging with postmodernists draws on equally dramatic language, liberally using phrases of revolution, disruption, break,

transformation and disruption. What is clear is that the profound changes to social structures and institutions – including journalism – are uncontested and have been cemented following the postmodernists, but that the mechanisms through which these changes take place remain contested.

Despite the important criticisms of postmodernism discussed here, the concept has retained a resonance for scholars across humanities and social sciences disciplines. For scholars of journalism in particular, postmodernism is - despite its limitations and significant conceptual baggage - helpful for understanding aspects of the profound changes to the institutions, practices, texts and audiences of journalism.

I am not the first to draw on postmodernist ideas in discussing journalism – rather, these have informed a variety of projects and areas of research over the past few decades, and have frequently been deployed to analyse forms of journalistic storytelling. Ettema (1994) discerned the possibilities for a postmodern journalism which would reject metanarratives and instead represent human suffering through the focus on small, concrete and localized stories about specific individuals and their experiences. Stuart Allan (1995) critically interrogated the ideal of objectivity and the “will to facticity” in journalism. For Allan (1995), postmodernism’s critique of realist theories of representation enables us to question the truth claims of “objective” journalistic accounts, and the ways in which they depend upon a shared and hegemonic construction of the commonsensical. Allan’s (1995) use of postmodernist insights highlights the epistemological limitations of the journalistic project of objectivity, giving us a language for talking about what journalism scholars have long known: It highlights the fact that news, rather than objectively representing a reality, actively manufacture or construct it (e.g. Tuchman, 1972; Fishman, 1978). Similarly, Bogaerts and Carpentier (2013) have written more recently about the postmodern challenge to journalism, suggesting that we should take seriously the decline of “high modernism” in journalism, in

the face of developments including broader contextual changes “such as detraditionalization, individualization and globalization” as well as the “end of a consensus-based politics and an increasing economic insecurity” (Bogaerts and Carpentier, 2013, p. 61). All of these developments have informed a decline in the epistemic authority of journalism. Bogaerts and Carpentier suggested that journalism “holds on to its self-proclaimed authority” (2013, p. 61) in the face of contemporary challenges, through a forms of boundary work defending their profession. They proposed that culturalist approaches to journalism - derived in part from the conceptual tools of postmodernism - can help scholars problematise the socially constructed nature of journalism - in terms of both texts and professional practices and identities.

If anything, critiques of the modernist ideology of objective journalism - and observations about its increasingly unstable nature in the onslaught of technological and social change - have only gained renewed relevance in recent years. Melissa Wall (2005), in examining blogs during the second Iraq War, argued that their style was characteristic of postmodern journalism understood in a slightly different sense:

Analysis suggests that these blogs are a new genre of journalism that emphasizes personalization, audience participation in content creation and story forms that are fragmented and interdependent with other websites. These characteristics suggest a shift away from traditional journalism’s modern approach toward a new form of journalism infused with postmodern sensibilities. (Wall, 2005, p. 153)

This development, she suggested, is associated with a broader shift away from a traditional alignment between journalism and the representational ideals of modernity, including “a sense that reality could be observed and documented from an objective viewpoint, an emphasis on constant change and timeliness, and a belief in being able to represent reality accurately” (Wall, 2005, p. 154). As I will argue, Wall’s (2005) analysis highlights larger trends signalling epistemological shifts in journalism. I will begin by

discussing the decline of the metanarrative of progress as a fundamental rupture in discussions about the profession and its key role in society.

The decline of a metanarrative of progress in journalism

If ideas of progress have been central to the modernist project, these have been severely undermined over the past few decades in the face of a well-established crisis in the business model of journalism, particularly in its print form (e.g. Boczkowski, 2004; Blumler, 2010; Lee-Wright et al. 2011; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). To rehearse the well-established consensus, this crisis is in part the result of longer-standing trends of decline in newspaper readership across the Western world, but has accelerated rapidly with the changes wrought by processes of convergence and the emergence of online journalism. This, in turn, has caused the collapse of advertising revenues as well as income from sales and subscriptions. With plummeting resources and prospects, newspapers have been forced to close down shop or drastically reduce their staff, resulting in a dramatic decline of both the quality and quantity of journalism. The changing fortunes of the profession have been reflected in the everyday experiences of journalists, who are also living the realities of “reflexive modernisation” (e.g. Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994) which have resulted in the increasing precarity of their careers (Elefante and Deuze, 2012).

This crisis has profoundly changed not just the realities on the ground for journalists and the organizations within which they work, but also the stories journalism scholars tell about the profession and its past, present and future. Conventional modernist accounts of journalism’s history and its present were premised on an assumption of inevitable progress towards a brighter future. In 1974, James Carey wrote about the problem of journalism history, drawing on Herbert Butterfield’s critique of a “Whig interpretation” of history which

emphasises “certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present” (Butterfield, 1965, p.1). For Carey (1974), conventional journalism history narrated:

the slow, steady expansion of freedom and knowledge from the political press to the commercial press, the setbacks into sensationalism and yellow journalism, the forward thrust into muckraking and social responsibility. Sometimes written in classic terms as the expansion of individual rights, sometimes in modern terms as growth of the public’s right to know, the entire story is framed by those large impersonal faces buffeting the press: industrialization, urbanization and mass democracy (Carey, 1974, p. 3).

While Carey did not dispute the fundamental premises of the Whig interpretation, he argued in favour of a richer and more diverse cultural history of journalism. Rereading Carey’s work some 30 years later, however, I would suggest that the certainties of progress have in fact been severely undermined by changes in the material circumstances of journalism as an institution and a profession, as well as by broader shifts in the social and political structures underpinning it.

The Whig interpretation of journalism history has nonetheless prevailed in some quarters up to the present day (see Wahl-Jorgensen, forthcoming). It has survived in the era of digital journalism through accounts celebrating the liberating potential of new technologies.¹ This view of technological change as progress towards a brighter future is exemplified by the work of scholar-advocates like Clay Shirky (e.g. 2008; 2010) and David Gauntlett (e.g. 2011, 2015), for whom the birth of social media and Web 2.0 heralds an unprecedented age of creativity. Shirky (2010) argued that the networked age enables 21st century individuals to spend their leisure time more productively, creatively and altruistically:

This linking together in turn lets us tap our cognitive surplus, the trillion hours a year of free time the educated population of the planet has to spend doing things they care about. In the 20th century, the bulk of that time was spent watching television, but our cognitive surplus is so enormous that diverting even a tiny fraction of time from consumption to participation can create enormous positive effects.

Despite this reading of the exciting technological present as a harbinger of a hopeful future, scholars within journalism studies who have used qualitative methods to understand the lived experience of the profession are increasingly painting rather a different picture, calling attention to the difficulties experienced by journalists on the ground. For example, Ekdale et al. (2014) carried out in-depth interviews with journalists at an independently owned media company in a mid-sized US city that had recently gone through a round of layoffs. They found that the growing “culture of job insecurity” in the newsroom hindered adaptation to change “as those who fear their jobs are in danger are unlikely to risk altering well-understood practices, while many others who perceive job security would rather accommodate than initiate change.” Similarly, David Ryfe’s book, *Can journalism survive?* (2012), presents a devastating picture of a profession in terminal decline, in part due to its inability to respond to the challenges of the Internet, on the basis of long-term ethnographic work at US regional newsrooms:

What did I find? The short answer is that journalists have not adapted very well. For the most part, they continue to gather the same sorts of information, from the same sorts of people, and package it in the same forms they have used for decades.

Newspapers have the same look and feel they have had since the 1930s, and newspaper websites still look uncomfortably like newspapers. When journalists have tried to break from tradition, their efforts largely have come to naught. I know of no

recent innovations in news that were invented in a metro daily newsroom, and no newsroom, to my knowledge, has adopted the new innovations in a comprehensive way.

Ryfe's (2012) sobering account is representative of a small, but growing body of work on the nitty-gritty everyday life of journalists who are struggling to come to terms with profound changes in their professions. Together, this body of work represents a profound challenge to the metanarrative of progress. It begins from the position that journalism, as one of the key social institutions of modernity, is under profound existential threat, and the industry that underpins it is in decline. And it suggests that the production of scholarly knowledge must take into account profound ruptures in the fabric of journalism - ruptures which are, at the same time, closely tied to broader social and political transformations. This, in turn, implies that if we abandon the quest for the certainties of progress, we are better able to see the complex and often uncomfortable realities on the ground

Challenges to the metanarrative of journalism's role in democracy

Closely associated with the decline of the metanarrative of progress is an emerging set of questions about journalism's key place in democracy, so central to modernism. Journalism has long been seen as a "fourth estate" in liberal democratic societies, playing the role of a watchdog on concentrations of power. For example, as Street (2001) explained it, the aims of the media:

...should be, firstly to enable people to choose between those who wish to stand for office and to judge those who currently are in office and, secondly, to provide a platform for interest groups to publicize their concerns and claims. This means

informing citizens about their (prospective) representatives' plans and achievements; it also means reflecting the range of ideas and views which circulate within society, subjecting those who act in the name of the people to scrutiny, to make them accountable. (p. 253)

The view of journalism as an institution embodying central democratic responsibilities has served to naturalise claims about its importance - both for society as a whole, and for the citizens who inhabit it. Indeed, the close relationship between citizenship and journalism has been the building block of the Whig interpretations of journalism that Carey (1974) discussed, with progress measured in terms of improvements in the ability of journalism to serve its democratic role. However, this dominant narrative has been called into question in recent years. For example, a recent special issue of *Journalism* focused on “Decoupling Journalism and Democracy,” in the context of a challenge to the dominant normative paradigm through which journalism has long been assessed - and often found wanting (Joseph, 2013). Barbie Zelizer (2013) questioned whether the shelf life of democracy in journalism scholarship has been overextended, describing the “journalism/democracy nexus” as closely linked to a particular understanding of modernity:

Prevalent from the late 19th century onward, their version of modernity rested on an association with rationality, certainty, consent, reasoned thought, order, objectivity, progress and universal values, all of which journalism was expected to promote in order to create the conditions needed for an optimum public life (Zelizer, 2013, p. 463).

For Zelizer (2013), the narrow focus on very particular understandings of both democracy and journalism – and the relationship between them – has hindered a productive engagement with a broader range of practices. Similarly, John Nerone (2013) aptly

deconstructed journalism as a modernist belief system which makes disciplining distinctions that designate appropriate forms of practice and exclude those that are found normatively wanting:

Journalism is an ism ... That is, it is a belief system. In particular, it is the belief system that defines the appropriate practices and values of news professionals, news media, and news systems. All societies have some sort of news system, because any society requires a mechanism for monitoring change and deviance. But only some societies, and in particular modern societies, feature journalism as a discipline governing parts of their news system: I say parts because any form of journalism will distinguish news that falls under its discipline from other forms of news. In the modern era, for instance, journalism has designated its 'other' in various ways as gossip, tabloid news, sensationalism, partisanism, and so forth. It does not deny that these are news practices, but it does question whether these are journalism (Nerone, 2013, p. 447).

Nerone (2013) here called into questions foundational assumptions of the modernist metanarrative around journalism's key role in democracy, reflecting an emerging set of preoccupations amongst journalism scholars. The boundaries between normatively "good" and "bad" forms of news have been increasingly widely debated over the past decade or so, starting with discussions over the increasingly close relationship between politics and popular culture (e.g. van Zoonen, 2005; Sandvoss, 2012). These debates – often initiated by scholars from outside journalism studies with an interest in popular culture - have encompassed the rise of entertaining news genres and forms of satire TV such as that exemplified by the *Daily Show*, which intervene significantly public debate even if they challenge conventional modernist definitions of what constitutes journalism (Jones, 2005; Jones et al., 2009). While few observers are, in fact, willing to radically decouple democracy and journalism, this

debate calls attention to the fact that the modernist narrative has blinded us to the many things that news media *also* do, sometimes very well, including entertaining the audience and providing broader opportunities for involvement. Some of these may have little or nothing to do with democracy but are still important for societies and social life. This, in turn, suggests that if we take heed of postmodernism's insights into the instability of categorical distinctions, we may be able to find practices of journalism – but also practices of broader forms of audience participation and engagement – in places where we haven't previously looked. For example, amongst scholars studying political communication, such an approach is evidenced in engagement with practices around political fandom (e.g. Sandvoss, 2012; 2013), as well as everyday political talk in non-political online spaces, or “third spaces” (Graham, Jackson & Wright, 2015). Journalism scholars are similarly operating with increasingly broad definitions of what constitutes journalistic practices, encompassing everything from fashion blogging (Rocamora, 2012) to posts on Twitter, YouTube and Flickr (Poell & Borra, 2012). At the same time, as proponents of reflexive modernisation and liquid modernity have argued, the instability of categories does not mean that such categories are easily dispensed with but are instead hotly contested, defended and policed – and here we can usefully draw on the emerging study of boundary work in journalism to understand the meanings and consequences of such contestations (e.g. Carlson and Lewis, 2015).

Changes in the epistemology of journalism: Questioning the modernist ideology of objectivity

As discussed above, one of the main ways in which the postmodernist framework has shaped work in journalism is in the questioning of the modernist ideology of objectivity as the cornerstone of the profession. Technological change has further fuelled these debates, because the affordances of new platforms and modes of communication have facilitated new

forms of story-telling. This encapsulates a key paradox affecting not just journalism, but also a range of other social institutions: If technological change has always been a key engine of modernity, and a driver of modernization (e.g. Landes, 2003; Beck, Bonss and Lau, 2003, p. 7), it has also at the same time wrought the dissolution of journalism as one of modern society's key institutions and discursive practices. The changes occasioned by technological transformations could be understood as a postmodern form of journalism because they have destabilised conventional (a) physical, stylistic and genre distinctions; (b) differentiations between amateur and professional content, and (c) distinctions around the truth value of objective versus emotional content.

First of all, storytelling has been transformed in part because new genres have enabled new ways of presenting information. To some observers, this constitutes a shift in the epistemology of journalism, as formats and platforms such as blogs and Twitter have enabled journalists to develop more personal, informal and subjective styles (e.g. Matheson, 2004; Papacharissi, 2014; Wall, 2005). These shifts, in turn, are aligned with a move to a form of “subjective journalism” which privileges personal voice, alongside a broader democratization of opinion – both of which deal a blow to modernist understandings of news journalism as the voice of authority (Coward, 2013, pp. 116-117). This trend introduces a more emotionalized form of public discourse – and hence a way of knowing - which is described by both audience members and newswriters in juxtaposition to ideals of objectivity (see Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014).

A second and closely related transformation pertains to the blurring of the line between audiences and producers of media content, and the corresponding increase in the role of the audiences in participating in the generation this content (e.g. Singer et al., 2011, van Dijck, 2009).ⁱⁱ These developments have variously been referred to as the rise of “participatory journalism,” “citizen journalism” or “produsage” (e.g. Hermida, 2011, p. 15,

Bruns, 2005) to name just a few of the labels that describe “the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman and Willis, 2003, cited in Hermida, 2011, p. 15).

What these developments share is a profound challenge to modernist conceptions of journalism. First of all, they represent an overturning both of the authority granted to the profession of journalism, and of the ideal of objectivity as a privileged mode of knowledge production. Instead, they enable a particular form of subjective journalism by encouraging more personal forms of story-telling, based on the lived experience of “ordinary people.” Along those lines, Stuart Allan (2013) has written compellingly about the epistemological consequences of the increasing place of citizen journalism in the news landscape. To Allan, citizen journalism “may be characterized as a type of first-person reportage in which ordinary individuals temporarily adopt the role of a journalist in order to participate in newsmaking, often spontaneously during a time of crisis, accident, tragedy or disaster when they happen to be present on the scene” (2013, p. 9). Citizen journalism implies a more personal and often subjective stance, free of the constraints of objective journalism. Allan succinctly summarized the main arguments around the epistemological consequences of citizen journalism advanced by critics and proponents. Its proponents suggest that citizen journalism may serve as a welcome paradigm shift challenging the “dry, distancing, lecture-like mode of address” of traditional journalism (Allan, 2013, p. 94):

Journalism by the people for the people is to be heralded for its alternative norms, values and priorities. It is raw, immediate, independent and unapologetically subjective, making the most of the resources of web-based initiatives...to connect, interact and share first-hand, unauthorized forms of journalistic activity promising fresh perspectives (Allan, 2013, p. 94).

This positive reading is consistent with research on audience responses to user-generated content, which suggests that audiences tend to value because it is seen as more “authentic” than professional content – a view frequently shared by journalists involved in shaping and curating audience contributions. This understanding of authenticity encompasses the idea of an uncensored outpouring of personal storytelling, emotional integrity, realism, immediacy and identification. This is contrasted to the perceived professional distance of journalism, which involves a “cold,” “detached,” “objective” and “distanced” approach (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Wardle, 2010). For example, in describing user-generated content after Hurricane Katrina, Michael Tippett, founder of NowPublic.com, argued “it’s a very powerful thing to have that emotional depth and first-hand experience, rather than the formulaic, distancing approach of the mainstream media” (Allan 2013, p. 94).

The epistemological shifts facilitated by the affordances of digital journalism have been further accentuated by the rise of social media, which have enabled new ways of organizing voice. Events such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring in Egypt have illustrated the ways in which the information architecture of Twitter enable the emergence of “affective news streams” which blend opinion, fact and emotion in ways that are both public and private (Papacharissi, 2014; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012).

Technological change has thus facilitated a fundamental challenge to modernist boundaries between professionals and amateurs, objectivity and subjectivity, and the public and the private. As a result, it firmly questions the epistemic authority of journalism based on its claims to be a privileged provider of our collective truths – rather than one of many voices.

Conclusion

This chapter has proposed that we might see evidence of a postmodern turn in journalism, associated with a series of profound transformations in the institution, its text, practices and

audiences, as well as in our accounts of it as journalism scholars. By making this argument, I do not mean to suggest that we should bring back the (largely discredited) premises of postmodernism, nor do I wish to refute the continued relevance of the metanarratives that have shaped the institution of journalism for the duration of its history. Nonetheless, the chapter has suggested that both the practices of, and scholarly discourses surrounding journalism present significant challenges to the modernist metanarratives of journalism. These have been occasioned by the collapse of the business model of journalism, the questioning of the relationship between journalism and democracy, and the changing storytelling forms and epistemologies occasioned by technological change.

While the chapter has taken seriously the criticisms and limitations of the postmodern position, it has also argued that it serves as a useful analytical tool. Ultimately, it is a tool which reminds us that our first priority as scholars should always be to question received accounts and look for what is missing, what has been taken for granted and what remains unseen. We should pay just as much attention to instabilities, uncertainties and contestations as we have previously given to the foundational narratives of journalism and of journalism studies.

The places where we have seen the most helpful challenges to the received modernist wisdom come from detailed ethnographic studies of the everyday experiences of journalists, and from critical approaches to journalism by interdisciplinary scholars with an interest in popular culture, to mention a few examples. If, as journalism scholars, we have been disciplined to accept the metanarratives we live by, it is also our responsibility to question them with resort to the tools and questions from other disciplines and approaches. First of all, an engagement with the postmodern enables us to interrogate and move beyond the assumptions built into the received knowledge of the field, based on the certainties of modernism. Secondly, it enables us to develop new approaches for studying professional

practices. In particular, the paper's examination of challenges to the financial viability, the democratic role and the epistemology of journalism suggest that the central role of journalism in society can no longer be taken for granted, but that instead we need to pay careful attention to the precise ways in which this role is being challenged and reconsidered. First, to better understand challenges to the journalism industry, we need to study the lived experiences of failure and success of journalists on the ground. Secondly, accepting the challenge to the democratic role of journalism could be put to constructive use by looking for journalism practice and the forms of participation and engagement it facilitates in new and different places. Finally, the challenge to the epistemology of journalism also implicates the privileged truth claims of its discourses. Here, we need to understand how the profession is now increasingly competing with other "truth providers," while its ability to stake out authority are under fire now more than ever. Understanding the shifting terrain in which claims to truth are made, and how these very claims may be articulated in changing ways, is crucial in any analysis of the legitimacy of journalism. Ultimately, an understanding of the postmodern turn helps us in rethinking journalism through seeing what has previously been rendered invisible.

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ⁱ Material in this section draws on an argument made in Wahl-Jorgensen (forthcoming).

ⁱⁱ Material in this section is taken from Wahl-Jorgensen (2014).