Legacy Media: A Case for Creative Destruction?

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Abstract

Digital media have transformed the journalistic profession in decisive ways, so much so that journalism has become fuzzy and its borders and standards have been blurred. In this theoretical, narrative paper, we look at some implications of the process for media management, as organizations try to cope with a new kind of media ecology. The digital transformation has brought to light concerns about responsibility and standards that spark a healthy debate about the future of "legacy media," with interesting precedents in the past.

Keywords

Legacy media, journalism, media management, media ecology, journalistic practice. (Source: Unesco Thesaurus).

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Legado de medios: ¿un caso para la destrucción creativa?

Resumen

Los medios digitales han transformado la profesión periodística en formas decisivas; tanto así, que el periodismo se ha vuelto difuso y sus fronteras y las normas se han desdibujado. En este trabajo teórico y narrativo nos fijamos en algunas de las implicaciones del proceso para la gestión de medios de comunicación, mientras que las organizaciones tratan de hacerle frente a un nuevo tipo de ecología de los medios. La transformación digital ha traído a la luz las preocupaciones acerca de la responsabilidad y las normas, lo que ha provocado un sano debate sobre el futuro de "los medios de comunicación heredados", con interesantes antecedentes en el pasado.

Palabras clave

Legado de medios, periodismo, gestión de medios de comunicación, ecología de los medios de comunicación, prácticas periodísticas. (Fuente: Tesauro de la Unesco).

Legado de meios: um caso para a destruição criativa?

Resumo

Os meios digitais têm transformado a profissão jornalística em formas decisivas. Tanto assim que o jornalismo se tornou difuso e suas fronteiras e normas desfiguraram-se. Neste trabalho teórico e narrativo, fixamo-nos em algumas das implicações do processo para a gestão de meios de comunicação, enquanto as organizações tentam enfrentar um novo tipo de ecologia dos meios. A transformação digital trouxe à luz as preocupações sobre a responsabilidade e as normas, o que tem provocado um debate saudável sobre o futuro dos "meios de comunicação herdados", com relevantes antecedentes no passado.

Palavras-chave

Legado de meios, jornalismo, gestão de meios de comunicação, ecologia dos meios de comunicação, práticas jornalísticas. (Fonte: Tesauro da Unesco).

Introduction: Social Responsibility as a Normative Principle

Digital media have transformed the journalistic profession in decisive ways, so much so that journalism has become fuzzy and its borders and standards have been blurred. In this theoretical, narrative paper, we argue the need to look also at publics and digital outlets that produce and distribute news content from their tablets and smartphones, and do not consume media in "old" ways. The process has many implications for media management, as organizations need to be modified to cope with a new kind of media ecology. Besides, the digital transformation has brought to light concerns about responsibility and standards that spark a healthy debate about the future of "legacy media," with interesting precedents.

Following a long tradition of responsibility, there has been widespread recognition that media companies are somewhat unique in their social impact (Picard, 2005). This *consensus* traces its origins to the Hutchins Commission in the US, and has also influenced European Union media regulations. However, we see a steady decline in support for this normative principle; responsibility can no longer be taken for granted. There also are differences of opinion over whether or not social responsibility in media will be prioritized without legal mandates, as well as the current problem of lack of enforcement.

The concern about the role of journalism in environments where technologies have changed rapidly is far from new. The Hutchins Commission (1947) dedicated its third chapter to "The Communications Revolution". It offered valid suggestions to media, governments and citizens to shape a society where there is genuine participation: a key goal of responsibility in the field.

There is an education in responsibility that allows us to move from freedom of information to information for freedom (López-Escobar, 1993). Since Siebert, Peterson and Schramm wrote their "Four Theories of the Press" (1954), its principles "have profoundly shaped thinking on how the media does and should operate." Their idea of responsibility also connects

with the classic concerns about vigilance, correlation and transmission of a cultural heritage underlined by Lasswell (1948). Christians (2009) has updated earlier work by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm with a thoughtful overview of social responsibility theory, which has also been highlighted and articulated in research about public service broadcasting in Europe (Lowe & Hujanen, 2003).

The work of the late Walter Annenberg and the commission that was established around his foundation can also be considered part of that process. His stated intention was to "advance the public well-being through improved communication." That led his foundation and activities to become "champions" of a model of public television and to fund its initiatives. Following those lines, Overholser *et al.* (2006) wrote their report "On Behalf of Journalism: A Manifesto for Change". The report stated: "The essential role of a free and responsible press must be made a primary concern of the public. Only they can protect and sustain it. The discussion should be brought to public attention." It also considered digital technologies as opportunities for change: "New forms of media, the engagement of a richer array of people in producing media, and new ways of using media are transforming the landscape. An understanding of these changes, their potential and the challenges they pose, is essential to addressing the problems and opportunities confronting journalism."

In recent literature, there has been an increasing concern with externalities (Tsourvakas *et al.*, 2010). Part of the media managers' job is to identify risk (Artero, 2009) and to have a "nonmarket strategy". Media companies have lost credibility and that emerges as one of the worst possible "externalities". With the erosion of trust, audiences are lost and social needs are not met. Audiences look for substitutes to satisfy their need for information and understanding.

Our research (Pérez-Latre & Tsourvakas, 2013) highlights some key public expectations about responsibility in the media. Valid information, freedom of expression and ethical standards appear to be implicit demands that are highly valued by relevant audiences. In economic terms, therein

lies part of the value creation that media companies can offer to audiences. They are also a crucial part of media managers' expectations in an industry that has seldom been considered exclusively as profit-driven and where power, prestige and influence have always played a role.

Adams-Bloom & Cleary (2009) consider there is a need for a model that combines high ideals and considerations of responsibility, while recognizing the economic realities of today's corporate environments. In their opinion, theoretical writing has not kept pace with reality. Therefore, they propose a dual responsibility model that acknowledges the equal weight of the economic responsibility to stakeholders and advertisers, as well as responsibility to the audience.

This paper maintains the diffusion of content that ennobles and builds a better society is at the core of responsibility in media companies, leads to increasing levels of trust, and is an innovation source. In this framework, media companies are envisioned as having a dual responsibility: one to owners, investors and advertisers, the other to society at large. Media management theory should be concerned with the issues of public interest that are at the core of the social responsibility theory. Following the normative tradition, public interest is understood here as not so much what interests the public, as what the public ought to be interested in.

In other words, the market is necessary in the media business, but it is not enough. Profits are a matter of survival, but more nuanced social tools might also be needed to evaluate success. In the media industry, effectiveness is also social effectiveness, and new value creation metrics might be called for to take that into consideration. Responsibility, what some have called the media's "duty of care" (Puttnam, 2013), should be added to other industry KPIs (key performance indicators).

Media companies have a responsibility to two markets. Therefore, a dual market goods perspective might be useful, since responsibilities to each market are varied and often contending. In fact, pleasing stockholders and advertisers will not necessarily please audiences, and vice versa. You know

that, but it is not evident here. So, the feeling is too simplistic. Besides, in Europe, there is a dual system in broadcasting comprised of public service and private commercial sectors.

The literature about public service media could also shed some light on this need for new tools (Benington & Moore, 2010; Lowe & Martin, 2014). Lowe & Martin have underlined the tensions faced by public service media that need to give evidence of their economic value, defined by commercial rules, while delivering social value in fulfilling their largely not-for-profit public service mission and functions. Dual expectations create significant complexity for measuring their overall "public value" that becomes a controversial policy concept. Although mainly applied to the public sector, these authors' principles could be more broadly applicable and useful. The notion of public value can be especially valuable, as it relates to the formation of a "public sphere". As a part of that, media organizations and managers need to reflect about what adds value to the public sphere.

Picard has also described the broad responsibility of the media: "James Hamilton has observed that 'news outlets that cover public affairs have always struggled with the tension between giving people what they want to know and giving them what they need to know'". They do so to serve what Robert Entman calls "the key democracy-enhancing purposes of news': its core functions of illuminating policies, power, ideology, and self-interest; that is, helping people monitor and cope with the world, exposing them to debates on issues and ideas, and mobilizing them to participate in society. The goals and purposes of journalism are traditionally rooted in ideas of how media and journalism should affect audiences and society and how individuals can be induced to respond in desirable ways" (Picard, 2010, p. 17).

The Professional Practice of Journalism in Times of Vanishing Periodicity and Migratory Audiences

The concept of legacy media is used often and with different meanings. For the purposes of this paper, legacy media are characterized as mainly mass media companies, usually large and always old. They have had significant resources to hire large numbers and have been required to pay well and to

provide various social benefits. As they decline so, too, do the potential for employment and the degrees of security.

Such legacy media have been credited with preservation of the ideals of journalism and its community-building purposes. In this narrative, legacy media preserve quality and professional standards, while online media and UGC (user-generated content) do not. Bakker (2013) has called for moderation and curation in order to avoid what he calls the "huffinization" of media content with its accompanying tendency towards "low-pay" or "no-pay" journalism.

Collins (2011) suggested the crisis of legacy media is a threat to the future of public service media. The issue has raised interest, and merits further exploration for its relationship to the high ideals that have surrounded legacy media since their inception and the potential threats they might may suffer in online and mobile environments.

However, there seems to be no escape from the fact that publics are not consuming news and information like they did before. Legacy media have been losing audiences' and advertisers' attention in social media, mobile and other digital platforms. New online outlets and some individuals become part of the flux of news and information; this, *per se*, strikes us as a positive development. We suggest that media consumption of "professional content" cannot be mandatory and new outlets might be a source of improvement for the profession. There are also precedents that can be traced along these lines. Following Benjamin and Enzensberger (1970) anticipated that a democratization of voices would increase the number of producers, with healthy social effects.

Some would like to preserve a daily newspaper product because of its "public interest" value, in spite of the fact that audiences are choosing different news sources. However, periodicity has vanished, and now we have a continuous flux of information. Twenty-four hour news cycles are a landscape where journalism standards and production routines need to be renewed or, at the very least, substantially adapted. For example, the role of

technologies like Twitter in shortening breaking news cycles is well documented by Vis (2013) in her study of the coverage of the August 2011 riots in the UK. Unexpected and "ad hoc" journalistic conventions emerge in what she calls "ambient journalism" that uses "live blogging" as a resource. Westlund and Färdigh (2012) have looked into how media are used by the young in such a way that different "media generations" are coexisting: there is a print generation, an online generation and an individualized generation. There is a healthy academic debate about the degree to which digital is displacing print but, in any case, some publics do not seem to be reaching the point of becoming print readers.

Other authors have highlighted the closeness between legacy and online media. In their opinion, we should not think about them as worlds that are completely apart. Maier (2010) and Kelly (2010) have underscored the common ground between legacy and online media. According to Maier, they cover similar issues and use similar sources. Kelly argues that online media typically refer back to legacy media. Edmonds (2013) has commented a survey saying that 92 percent of the time used in news consumption is still on legacy media platforms. According to this study, digital outlets get about half of total media time, but in smaller time units. Legacy media get more extended time. It seems possible that fragmented media lead to increasingly fragmented news items.

Still others, like Papacharissi (2002) or Barnhurst (2011), looked at the implications of digital environments in political communication. In the web, people talk about many things. But the issue is not just that people are talking; we can also look at the content and quality of the conversations. There is a political discussion online. However, what is its contribution to a political community? Will online environments promote culture and citizenship? We often see that online "conversations" are distant from real dialogue. Media have lost part of their gatekeeping function that fostered public debate with higher quality. Activists and "influencers" with specific agendas tend to dominate public discourse, while "silent majorities" remain "sidelined," following the old "spiral of silence" theory. Enlightened debates fall victim to belligerent people with digital media as loudspeakers.

The effect of this great technological change on politics has been remarkable, as digital media have mobilized protest from Athens to Madrid; from Egypt to "Occupy Wall Street"; from Brazil to Turkey. It also appears to be a factor in encouraging "underdogs" to enter the public conversation, which could be a positive effect. Certainly, there are different types of communities (for example, communities of geography, of ethnicity, of interests or practices). It seems that online discussion supports bonding more than bridging, but there are different levels or kinds of community. Nevertheless, will online media enrich communities? In our opinion, that remains an open question.

van der Haak, Parks and Castells (2012) looked into the transformation of news production, distribution of news, and some of what they consider salutary effects:

> the culture and technology of the Internet is constructed as a platform of freedom that makes it difficult for governments and corporations to enforce censorship in the digital networked age. Indeed, censorship is difficult because information circulates in the global Internet networks, open to public view. When information is censored in some countries, the open, networked structure of the Internet allows distribution of information that can be accessed through multiple platforms, including in countries such as China or Iran. Second, countless citizen journalists contribute with their reports, images, information, and opinions, making it possible for the practice of journalism to broaden the scope and diversity of its sources. Third, new journalistic practices lead to a multiplicity of stories.

At the same time, some also have argued about perverse effects related to the quantity and quality of the public debate, independence, diversity, accuracy and fact-checking that traditionally have been among the concerns and responsibilities of "legacy media". The new media ecology opens up new questions: Are citizen journalists really journalists? What counts as a journalist? Are they journalists or mainly commentators, bloggers and/or activists? Are they reporters adhering to standards of professional practice or hobbyists pursuing issues of biased importance?

Are "legacy media" worth saving? Discussion and Suggestions for Further Research.

Turmoil in the news industry is far from new, but the wave that swept legacy media took managers, firms and even entire markets by surprise. Companies enjoyed solid profits and margins for decades. There were entry barriers that made life difficult for competitors, and several key markets were, in fact, "oligopolies". In print media, readership had been decreasing steadily, but the advertising market was still doing well.

Internet's development and free consumption diminished content value. There was an abundance of substitutes; consumers could find news and entertainment without cost. Then, the industry was hit by the September 2008 financial crisis that further eroded growth and advertising with it. It was "a crisis inside the crisis". The need for daring solutions was all the more pressing in a context with fewer resources to cope with change.

Technological improvements are beneficial; new products and services are developed from them, and growth occurs. But some legacy media players cannot survive market transformations and there will be casualties: *a healthy creative destruction*, paraphrasing Schumpeter (1975). Schumpeter considered creative destruction as an essential fact of capitalism: the opening up of new markets and the organizational development from craft shops and factories to huge concerns that changes economic structures from within, incessantly destroying the old one and creating a new one.

In a context of creative destruction, legacy media need to increase their capabilities for innovation and creativity, find the best available management options, and foster the culture and leadership "revolutions" that allow growth in times of change, without sacrificing the principles of the journalistic profession.

Journalists who have been laid off in the largest organizations start their own outlets, and a new type of media entrepreneurship may flourish. Many more voices emerge, which strikes us a positive development that does not exclude a system of professional journalism. Such outlets tend to

be more difficult for governments to control than the largest media companies, which usually have been less independent and more inclined to give in to political and commercial pressures. Are such legacy media worth preserving? We are not sure poorly managed companies that lose a lot of money and easily give in to political and commercial pressure should be saved "by decree".

At the same time, the role of standards should not be diminished in this new environment, where there is a deficit of verification and some journalists "tweet first and verify later" (Bruno, 2011). Along the same lines, Puttnam (2013) poses a question worth asking in digital environments: Are the media to inform or to inflame?

In the last ten years, social media have become venues to interact with audiences. They allow media companies to nurture and develop conversations with them, understand their implicit and explicit demands, increase their social, community and environmental accountability, assess risks and, in general, be part of the public debate. Social media are now part of the context and are overrated to some extent, but at least they provide an opportunity to engage with audiences that fulfills media's broad social objectives. New tools for collaboration and participation are opened for legacy media that "suffer" from a kind of transforming tension(Westlund, 2012) as new professional skills are required of journalists, such as community management or curation (Bakker, 2014).

Borger, van Hoof, Costera Meijer and Sanders (2013) have investigated "participatory journalism" (Jenkins, 2006) as a research object. They found four dimensions of the topic: "enthusiasm about new democratic opportunities," "disappointment with professional journalism's obduracy," "disappointment with economic motives to facilitate participatory journalism," and "disappointment with news users' passivity". Their research underlined the tensions that have been described: there is a space where media management, journalistic standards, technologies, contents and new audience capabilities tend to overlap and integrate. That kind of "multifaceted" interaction also could be an interesting area for future research. There is a need

to find "holistic" business models that combine profits and revenues with audiences, content and editorial products.

There is also a concern about the formation of professionals that deserves further exploration. What is the value of journalists? Their value lies in understanding and not just in facts. Information is abundant; understanding and interpretation of current events is scarce. How are these "multifaceted" professionals going to be taught? Society needs rigorously trained journalists who can balance strong humanistic and social science foundations with the ability to understand technology and its potential to be closer to ever-connected and mobile audiences as they work in the diffusion of content that ennobles and is of social value. With all its failures and shortcomings, journalism reminds us of the fact that we are a community, even in a fragmented world.

Online environments have the capacity to help the media fulfill their promise. But new organizations and structures in media companies will need to be put in place. In media management, we will need to consider the multiplicity of publics. In our fragmented landscape, audiences are diverging more than integrating; that is to say, people in various social formations with different, sometimes contending and other times overlapping interests.

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