

Journalism we don't teach at journalism schools

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Abstract

Although basic features of journalism have remained the same over the last decades, the tasks journalists perform, the skills they need and the position they have within news organizations have changed dramatically. Usually the focus in the discourse on changes in journalism is on *skills*, especially on technical multi-media skills or research skills. In this paper we focus on changes in professional *roles* of journalists, arguing that these roles have changed fundamentally, leading to a new generation of journalists. We distinguish between different trends in journalism. Journalism has become more technical, ranging from editing video to programming. At the same time, many journalists are now more 'harvesters' and 'managers' of information and news instead of producers of news. Thirdly, journalists are expected to gather information from citizens and social media, and edit and moderate user-contributions as well. Lastly, many journalists are no longer employed by media but work as freelancers or independent entrepreneurs. We track these trends and provide a detailed description of developments with examples from job descriptions in the Netherlands.

Key words: journalistic roles, aggregation, moderation, community management, content management, data journalism, programming.

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Introduction

Twitter. Social Media. Blogs. At journalism schools we are definitely teaching a new journalism compared to ten years ago. But basically we're teaching new tools, not new journalism, suggesting journalism itself did not change that much. It is still about gathering news, but with new tools and publishing on other platforms. The basic rules of the game are still the same. But are they?

What do journalists actually do these days? What kind of journalism do they practice on a day-to-day basis? Are they surveying the environment? Covering the local government? Interviewing politicians, sportsmen, and crime victims? Working as foreign correspondents? Report on demonstrations and protests? Investigating businesses, governments and institutions?

Sometimes they do but often they don't. New journalistic practices have emerged that bare little resemblance to journalism as we knew it. Not because journalists use different tools but because they do different things.

When we look at recent hiring and firing practices in the Netherlands it becomes clear that the trends go far beyond new tools and digital skills.

New models in journalism

In 2010, the largest newspaper publisher in the Netherlands, Telegraaf Media Groep (TMG) launched its hyperlocal news portal *Dichtbij.nl*, and announced that they would hire more than 120 new staff members for an operation that would cover the whole country, more than half of the jobs were for journalists. In the Netherlands news about journalistic jobs usually involve massive lay-offs. When new staff members were hired, this was always on an individual basis. Hiring dozens of journalists by one employer was certainly something the country had not seen for a decade or more. The job description for the new journalists, however, contained the title *community manager* instead of journalist. Tasks were:

“Getting content from the community”, “encouraging readers to contribute news and other content”, “making articles interactive with links, photo's, video's, polls and maps”, “moderating and stimulating discussions”, and “writing in an inviting way that fits the audience” (*Dichtbij zoekt Community Managers*, 2011).

In other words: the focus was more on letting audience members participate and handle these contributions than on producing original content.

In the same year, David Montgomery, at that time still CEO of pan-European newspaper company Mecom, introduced the concept of the *professional content manager*:

“Journalists will increasingly become managers of content rather than simply sourcing one story next to another. Managing content across many different sources: user generated content, content from public services, social organizations. It’s increasing – the individual journalist will harvest all of those different platforms. (...) We have to rethink all of the roles and we should give to the people different job titles than the traditional ones, which inflect only the print functions.” (Karda & Krawczyk, 2011)

In 2012, Dutch regional publisher BDU announced that it would terminate almost all journalistic jobs (50 in total) at their newspaper *Barneveldse Krant* and the free weeklies they published. The journalists that were let go could apply for freelance contracts. The newspaper kept two reporters. Content managers at the paper would process and publish material from these reporters and the new army of freelancers that would contribute material. They were expected to:

“Analyse the incoming news and information from external suppliers like online sources, press agencies, government, freelancers and citizen journalists. (...) Automatically generated content is checked. Other content is published through different channels, like the website, social media, newspapers and magazines (Zuurman, 2012).

National press agency ANP ended contracts with all photographers in 2011. These photographers could apply for new freelance contracts. But not all photographers were granted a contract while those who were, were expected to take on other (commercial) assignments to make up for the loss of income.

These developments suggest that some journalists now mainly *process* content instead of producing it, and also that an increasing number of journalists who *produce* content, are self-employed and are do other things ‘on the side’. Journalists are also expected to have much more technical skills for gathering and publishing content, for instance by using social media, making content interactive, being able to make online polls, work with maps, photos and video, and publishing content online. These trends will be covered more in depth in the sections below.

The similarity between these new jobs is that these journalists are chained to their desk and glued to their screen, looking for content, asking others for content, editing content, and combining content. Producing original content is no longer the dominant task.

And... usually none of these jobs are taught in journalism schools, they are learned “on the job”, which suggests a growing disparity between what happens in journalism schools and in actual journalism.

Background

Audiences – particularly young audiences - show an increasing preference for online content, which is always available on any platform, usually free, and easily accessible. New media initiatives are in most case online platforms while traditional media invest heavily in their online operations. For journalists this usually means that new jobs either involve traditional *and* online journalism or *only* online journalism. In this online revolution three drivers for change can be distinguished that have an impact on journalistic practices.

Online competition is extremely fierce, options for paid models are limited while advertising rates are low, especially for ‘general news’ media. The first driver is directly linked to the problem of low online revenues. The most obvious solution is to cut costs for online platforms. Technology can play an important role in cost cutting practices (Bakker, 2012). Finding, gathering, combining, and publishing content is partly a technical job, but this technology has to be implemented and operated by humans. Content also has to be found by search engines, meaning that also specific writing skills and knowledge of SEO (Search Engine Optimization) are needed. In some cases these new tasks are outsourced to technicians, but at other platforms journalists are expected to perform these tasks as well.

Another challenge is the availability of enormous amounts of raw data online. Not only audiences go online, also governments, research institutions, NGO’s and businesses make more data available. Finding, gathering, cleaning and formatting these data requires new – programming and visualisation – technical skills from journalists.

As audiences move online, they become more active, resulting in making their own blogs, participating on media platforms by commenting or uploading content, and communicating on social media like Twitter and Facebook. These efforts –

sometimes actively asked for by media – have become an integrated part of online platforms. Not only citizens publish an increasing amount of content online, also governments, businesses, and non-profit organisations are active on their own platforms. Harvesting and managing contributions and other online material has become an important task for journalists.

Apart from these online drivers there is the related issue of diminishing job opportunities at traditional media. Print media and broadcasters cut costs by reducing their traditional workforce but at the same time trying to get more (and cheaper) content from freelancers and other sources. There is, in other words, demand for content, but much less demand for full time employed staff. One of the recommendations of Tom Rosenstiel (2013) for the education in journalism was “understanding of business (how to understand audience metrics, revenue, entrepreneurship)”.

Research questions and method

In this article we distinguish between four trends in journalistic jobs: demands for more technical knowledge, an increased focus on harvesting and managing information instead of gathering and publishing original content, community management and a shift towards journalists working as freelancers and independent entrepreneurs. Our research question is whether we can come up with a more detailed description of these trends in terms of qualifications asked from journalists.

We separate these trends below but in practise journalists are often required to perform different tasks simultaneously, content management and technical skills go together very well for instance. We also don't argue that traditional journalism has disappeared, it is very well possible that traditional journalism is combined with tasks derived from the new journalistic roles. Neither do we think that these new roles are a sign of an overall downgrading of journalism. Some tasks, like just harvesting information from other sources, do seem to have this 'promise' in it; but others, like data-journalism, social media publishing or moderating discussions could also be considered as upgrading journalism. We will refrain from normative qualifications on these trends, although we will discuss the possible consequences in the conclusion.

After we offered descriptions of the trends mentioned above we discuss the consequences these new job descriptions have for journalism education. We argue that in order to keep up with journalistic practises journalism schools have to

implement strategies to keep track of how actual journalistic practices develop. Systematic research needs to be conducted. Former students can be interviewed or surveyed, job descriptions systematically analysed, contacts with media formalized. Key is that these methods have to be applied on a reoccurring basis in order to calibrate journalistic education in terms of professional standards.

Our data comes from job descriptions on journalism recruitment websites, while we also use material from online discussions, presentations by new media entrepreneurs and professional literature.

Technical knowledge

Asking more technical knowledge from journalists is hardly new. Journalists have learned to work with computers, content management systems and digital equipment since the end of the last century. Teaching digital journalism is introduced in many schools of journalism, although there is still some discussion on how this should be integrated in the curriculum (Hirst & Treadwell, 2011). Teaching ‘social media’ (blogs, Twitter, Facebook for journalists) is often already done because it is expected that these media can offer more sources for journalists but can also be used to promote stories.

The new demands, however, seem to be more diverse and more complex. In the first example mentioned in the introduction (*Dichtbij.nl*), new staff members were expected to promote and interactivity with “links, photos, video’s, polls and maps”. In the example from BDU, staff members were asked to work with “automatically generated content” and publish content on websites, social media, and print media.

According to Tom Rosenstiel (2013) “Teaching of technical skills (how to use different platforms and technology)” is the first requirement for the new journalistic curriculum: “A critical dimension of this teaching is computer science, so journalists can invent new ways of reporting. But given the pace of technology change, technology and platform skill cannot be the singular core they once were. The key is to teach students enough that learn they can master these tools themselves on their own as the tools change.”

Beyond the ‘normal’ use of technology are programming and data-journalism. Both ‘trades’ focus on high-end technology, requiring complicated skills. At the *New York Times* programmers and journalists often work together at projects (Kranenborg, 2012). *The Guardian* is one of the media that has already acquired a reputation on

using data-journalism, for instance using it on reporting on how rumors during the 2011 riots spread on Twitter. Data-journalists analyzed 2.6 million tweets (Procter, Vis & Voss, 2011).

Finding data online, downloading it, cleaning data and using it in journalistic ways requires a high level of knowledge and experience. To help journalists, UK-journalism-blogger Paul Bradshaw published an ebook on the subject in 2013: “*Scraping for Journalists; How to grab data from hundreds of sources, put it in a form you can interrogate - and still hit deadlines*”

Visualization of data is another new trade, turning huge amounts of data into meaningful infographics usually involves teamwork, meaning that journalists have to work together with data-analysts and designers.

Apart from technicians and programmers, knowledge of *Search Engine Optimization* (SEO), is sometimes asked, mainly because these knowledge can be converted into more visits to the website, and therefore to more revenues.

Content management

The main task of beginning journalists nowadays is to gather information from online sources. In the examples mentioned above, *content management* was already covered.

Pure aggregation – an often-used method to generate relevant content for free is usually done by machines, scrapping robots. *Curation*, on the other hand, involves human activity, actively finding content, editing content, enriching content or combining content from different sources.

A rather new task is that of the *live-blogger*. Basically this involves finding as much relevant and recent information as possible from all kinds of sources, and combining these in one continuing storyline. It usually involves using software like Storify, Scribble or Coveritlive, and consist mainly in finding the best information, evaluating information and publishing it as fast a possible. Also one-platform live-blogging for instance with Twitter – is a possibility. We often see live–blogging at disasters, crime coverage, strikes, sports, elections and other kind of news events that need or warrant continuous updating. Broadcaster ITV (UK) started to use it “as the default mode of presentation” for the website (Bradshaw, 2012) while the popular news website nu.nl (the Netherlands) it also thinking about introducing a similar concept for reporting (Hoekman, 2013).

Community management

Engage in contacts with participating audience members to generate content is often expected from journalists. *Community management* means not only surveying the digital environment, but also actively asking people for contributions, encouraging them to contribute and manage and *moderate* online discussions.

Earlier these contributions were referred to as *User-generated Content*. This content was supposed to ‘emerge’ without too much effort from media; the new job descriptions, however, take into consideration that these contributions have to actively asked for, edited and moderated.

Entrepreneurship

US journalism-professor Mindy McAdams (2013) says about the job expectations of journalists: “It’s not about business journalism — it’s about the business *of* journalism.” She is specifically referring to how media make money, and what this means for journalists: “When students are thinking about getting a salaried job at a major media organization, they’re thinking old school”.

At London City, a course on entrepreneurial journalism recently started, the website reads: “The journalism industry now expects graduates to be creative, flexible and innovative, and to bring those qualities to a media organisation. Business and entrepreneurial knowledge will enable you to navigate these turbulent economic times, and this module equips you with the skills, attributes, behaviours and knowledge to become entrepreneurs.” In the Netherlands, the University of Groningen will start a similar course in 2013. In the US, internet-guru Jeff Jarvis is professor / Director of the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism.

Conclusion

Going over literature, presentations, job descriptions, hiring practices and online discussions, it is clear that new forms of journalism are emerging. New hyperlocal platforms hire *community managers*, media with online discussions need *moderators*, online media gather information by *curation*; *content management* is sometimes more important than content creation. Working for online platforms involves *live-blogging* and *programming*, knowledge of *SEO* is required for working at online platforms. Programming, scraping and data-visualization have become more important.

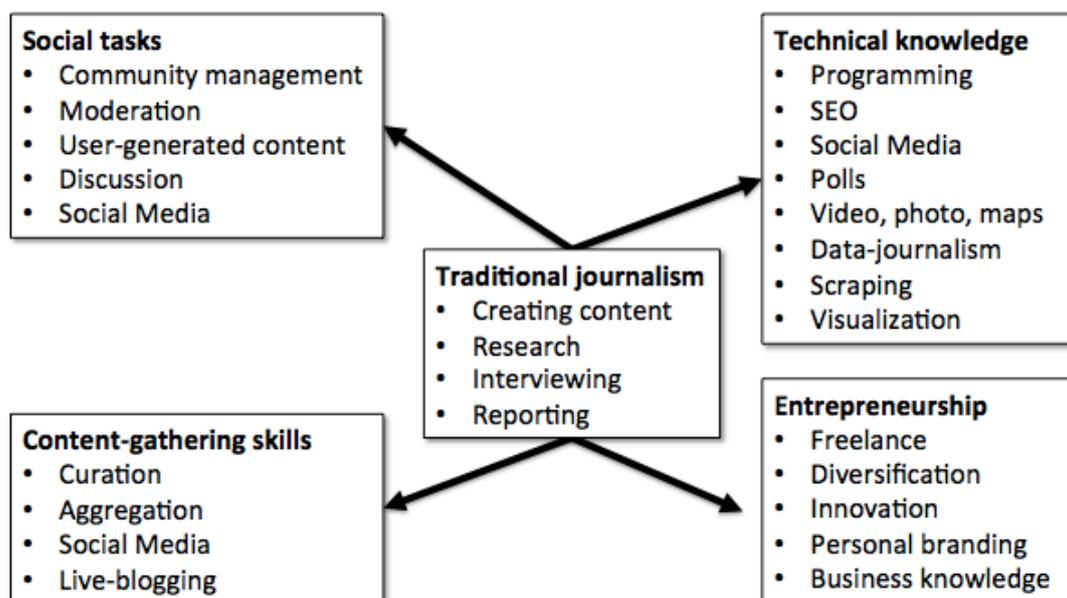


figure 1: four trends in journalism

Usually, journalism schools do not have an answer to these changing demands from the profession. The examples mentioned above are from only a few schools, are often experimental programs or programs that are about to be started. Some of these new roles and tasks are clearly beyond the scope of the majority of journalism schools. Computer programming, data-scraping and visualization are often considered as highly specialized and complicated tasks. Schools neither have the knowledge or staff to cover these new areas. But to meet the demands of the environment, an answer to these demands has to be formulated – cooperation with other schools or departments would be the most logical step.

Other tasks, like content and community management, moderation, and curation are probably suspect because they suggest a dumbing down of journalism. Their main focus is not – like in traditional journalism – on creating original content (research, investigating, interviewing, making first-hand accounts of events) but on finding existing material and republishing this material – sometimes after some intervention in the for of rewriting or combining information. This comes dangerously close to the “gate-watcher” Mr. Gates (Manning White, 1950) who actually did not much more than chose between incoming messages and decide on publishing or the trash. A shift in the curriculum of journalism school to include these kinds of tasks and teach on curation and content management will probably be even more difficult.

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