

New journalism 3.0 – aggregation, content farms and Huffinization

The rise of low-pay and no-pay journalism

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Abstract

Journalists in the 21st century are expected to work for different platforms, gather online information, become multi-media professionals, and learn how to deal with amateur contributions. The business model of gathering, producing and distributing news changed rapidly. Producing content is not enough; moderation and curation are at least as important when it comes to working for digital platforms. There is a growing pressure on news organizations to produce more inexpensive content for digital platforms, resulting in new models of low-cost or even free content production. Aggregation, either by humans or machines ‘finding’ news and re-publishing it, is gaining importance. At so-called ‘content farms’ freelancers, part-timers and amateurs produce articles that are expected to end up high in web searches. Apart from this low-pay model a no-pay model emerged where bloggers write for no compensation at all. At the Huffington Post thousands of bloggers actually work for free. Other websites use similar models, sometimes offering writers a fixed price depending on the number of clicks a page gets. We analyse the background, the consequences for journalists and journalism and the implications for online news organizations. We investigate aggregation services and content farms and no-pay or low-pay news websites that mainly use bloggers for input.

Introduction

Digitalization means different things for journalists. They are expected to work for different platforms, develop techniques to gather and check online information, acquire skills to become multi-media professionals, and learn how to deal with contributions of amateurs and citizen journalists. Producing content is not enough; moderation and curation are the new buzz-words of the trade; while it’s also gate-watching instead of gate-keeping. In general this has led to higher demands in terms of output – in quantity – because revenues from traditional media decline while income from digital operations is still marginal and competition is fierce (Picard, 2010). A possible answer to this development is producing more content at lower costs for these new platforms. This has led to new models of low-cost or even free content production.

Many of these enterprises are very successful. The Huffington Post, mainly relying on free work from bloggers, and one of the most visited news websites in the US, was sold for \$350 million to AOL in the beginning of 2011. Google News, relying on algorithms and search robots has versions in dozens of countries. Pulse, one of the most downloaded news apps for the iPad uses only RSS-feeds from media websites for its content. Discussion about these services have been lively – also about the fact that they don’t rely on professional journalists for their content. The Huffington Post was threatened by a lawsuit on behalf of 9000 unpaid bloggers, Pulse was summoned by the New York Times to remove their RSS-feeds from the service (an action later reversed) while Google News was forced by Belgian French language publishers to remove all their content from Google News. Google responded by removing all Belgian French language content from their database – also a decision later reserved.

Background – the economics of online content production

Generating income from digital operations has been troublesome for most news organizations to say the least. In the last decade of the 20th century most content was offered for free while it was expected that advertising, e-commerce and marketing (offering subscriptions through the website) could make up for the cost and maybe even show some profits. Growing competition – resulting in low advertising rates, and the economic crises of the 21st century made media companies move to

other models: paid and metered access, registration, premium access for paid subscribers, pdf-version, paid archives, pay-walls and paid access through apps on iPads and other tablets. Basically three streams of revenues dominate online news operations.

Subscription and single copy sales – meaning direct payment by users for content, is successfully used by specialized publications like the Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times and by sometimes by news organizations with a more general focus like The London Times and some local papers. Also subscription to pdf-papers and apps for the iPad fall within this category. Notwithstanding the 30% cut Apple takes from all sales through their App Store, many newspapers and magazines now embrace this model. Prices, however, is generally lower than for the physical product.

Advertising and e-commerce like banner adds, pop-ups, sale of products, preroll video ads and other advertising formats are used by almost every news organization; also subscription websites, paid apps and non-profit services often use advertising. Most blogs have advertising “adds by Google” on their website. Social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn carry ‘targeted’ advertising. Many websites use the online operations – with news – to promote other activities like workshops and seminars.

Sponsoring, donations and non-profit public funding are the most-used noncommercial options for sustaining a news website. Public broadcasters are sponsored by their mother-organization because they see it as part of the remit to publish on every platform; non-profit organizations (like Amnesty International, universities, governments) provide news on their websites. Public funding has become one of the growing sources for news websites, demonstrated by examples like Spot.us, The Bay Citizen, SF Public Press, ProPublica (US), helpmeininvestigate.com (UK) and De Nieuwe Reporter (the Netherlands). Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson state: “Financial support for reporting now comes not only from advertisers and subscribers but also from foundations, individual philanthropists, academic and government budgets, special interests, and voluntary contributions from readers and viewers” (2010, p. 56).

All digital operations compete for audience attention while most of them also compete on advertising. Few news organizations can rely on subscription as the main source of revenue, except for specialized (financial) news providers. The iPad has made digital subscription an option for news organizations but it is yet too early to tell whether this can grow to a substantial revenue stream. Operations that can ask users for (high) subscription prices usually also can ask advertisers for higher advertising rates as they offer a specific audience.

Picard (2010) argues that online news providers would benefit from specialization, targeting niches and providing high-end quality journalism at high prices. This may be so, but for many news organizations this is not (yet) a viable option. They don’t have the focus, the audience, the reputation, the brand, the staff or the resources to go for that strategy. Their basic approach is to go for a larger general audiences with general news offered for free and produced at low cost. Lewis, Williams and Franklin (2008) and Davies (2008) provided examples of this behavior by UK newspapers. Fewer staff is asked to produce more output in less time, partly because of the urge to fill not only the printed newspaper but also keeping the website up-to-date with news. Whether local audiences can be defined as a niche with possibilities of online subscription and higher ad rates or as a general audience to which news must be delivered for free is mostly depending on the number of competitors on the market. If users can choose between substitutes offering more or less the same content, chances of paying for content are slim.

More content at lower costs

News organizations have three options when it comes to controlling costs and increasing output, they can save on staff or have staff members work differently; they can make compromises on content or go

for cheaper content; and they can employ technologies to replace staff, produce content or increase their audience.

Staff options

Staff options are employed with the overall objective of having less (or less expensive) staff producing more content, “increasing the volume of news and information” is according to Picard (2010, p. 84) the first strategy news organizations turn to.

Reducing staff is the obvious first option and a phenomenon that can be observed worldwide.

Alterman (2011) states that between 1990 and 2008 a quarter of newspaper jobs in the US have disappeared. Website Papercuts (newspaperlayoffs.com) keeps track of all recent changes in US-newspapers – it shows dozens of lay-offs per month. A job lost at the newspaper also affects the online operation as most news media operate both channels integrated.

Replacing journalistic staff by non-unionized staff, technicians or community managers works particularly well in countries where unionized staff has better pay and working conditions. In the US, the UK (Greenslade, 2003) and France (Wilcox, 2005) conflicts around this issue – including printing - date from the pre-internet era. Online it means that technicians, re-writers and staff who’s duty is it to stimulate others (bloggers, volunteers) to contribute, are replacing journalists.

De-integration of print and online operations as personal for online are usually paid less or are not even considered as journalists. In France La Depeche du Midi replaced the journalists working for the offline and online editions with a separate rewrite staff with technical knowledge of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) (Smyrniaios & Bousquet, 2011). De Belgian Persgroep, owner of four Dutch newspapers since 2010, has taken all online duties away from the journalists of the papers and formed a new combined online newsroom for the websites of the four titles. Mostly younger – and less expensive – staff is employed for the new operation.

Paying less for items; particularly for photo’s the prices freelancers receive per photo have dropped. Dutch news magazine HP/De Tijd cut the payment for photo features with 40 percent to €300 in 2011, Dutch newspaper publisher Wegener (part of the Mecom group) pays less than €50, De Telegraaf Media Group– the largest publisher in the Netherlands - pays €18 for a picture for most of the freelance pictures. Second newspaper AD pays €120 for half a day work in which the photographer is expected to make as many pictures as possible. Also reviewers of concerts, plays and movies have seen their pay drop.

Demanding more output from staff members is a general trend. For the UK, Lewis, Williams and Franklin (2008) showed that the remaining staff members were expected to produce more content. America Online (AOL) moulded this strategy into a system of ‘scaled production’ whereby it calculated that costs per item would go down from \$99 to \$84 while page views would increase. Writers of the online news service Seed were expected to use the system first, whereby the cost of a written article would not be more than \$25; the cost for a video would be \$340.

Replacing regular staff with freelancers could result in a fifty percent costs saving on articles. Dutch newspapers have been focusing more on the core business of the news operation, meaning that features, culture and specials subjects are outsourced to freelancers (Bakker et al., 2011). Picard argues that “there is a widespread and growing use of freelance journalists, heavy reliance on acquired content from news, video, and feature services” (2010, p. 83).

Cutting down on international reporting, replacing fully employed foreign correspondents by stringers who get paid on the basis of published articles. The largest Dutch newspaper De Telegraaf ended all but three (New York, London, Brussels) foreign bureaus and started to employ stringers instead. According to Paul Starr (2010) the number of foreign American newspaper correspondents dropped with 30 percent between 2002 and 2006. As foreign correspondents often also maintain a blog, this will result in less online coverage as well.

Outsourcing and off-shoring production means that page-layout, ICT, photoediting, comments-moderating, subediting and journalistic content production is handled by third parties on a regular basis, either to domestic parties (outsourcing) or foreign countries (off-shoring). Australian publisher

Fairfax outsourced subediting to an independent company, also UK newspapers have outsourced subediting. Using foreign subediting can lead to costs reduction because it avoids expensive night shift work. The Pasadena (US) website Pasadena Now hired reporters from Mumbai and Bangalore to cover the Pasadena City Council. Dutch newspaper De Telegraaf has outsourced online comment moderation to a private company.

Using more User-generated content (comments, photo, video) from amateurs, bloggers or social media can result in substantial cost reductions, as this content is usually free. Almost all websites now have this feature, although getting the audience to act and actually send in useful material can be expensive. Employing 'amateur' bloggers or volunteers can result in free content although in some cases these contributors get paid on the basis of clicks on the article or the advertising revenue the articles generates. This last model is used by the US Examiner local website network. In some cases contributors are offered a fixed price, usually a very low price. Content farms like Demand Media is said to pay \$15 for an item. UK-based SnackMedia pays £10 for a 1000 words article. When Roy Greenslade reported on this offer on his Guardian-blog, one commenter posted: "It's ten quid more than many offer". On a more positive note, Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson state that "the ranks of news gatherers now include not only newsroom staffers but also freelancers, university faculty members, students, and 7 citizens" (2011, p. 56). The Huffington Post and the Guardian's Comment is Free website do not pay bloggers at all.

Content options

Apart from strategies concerning staff, also content strategies are used. Media companies usually had a preference for producing as much as possible of their content in-house. The new realities of failing online revenues have challenged this paradigm. Non-original content is no longer a no-go area. Re-publishing content or "repurposing and reutilizing existing news and information" (Picard, 2010, p. 84) has been an often-used strategy whereby articles for the printed or broadcast version were reused, sometimes in an abbreviated format online. Earlier this model was referred to as 'shovelware' (Chyi & Sylvie, 1998) but technology has replaced the shovelling journalist by robots, algorithms and search engines that produce ready-made websites.

Using more syndicated content and content from press agencies (see Davis, 2008). In the Netherlands the most successful news website nu.nl has a small staff that is mainly occupied by copy/pasting and rewriting articles from national press agency ANP.

Using more PR-material and press releases from commercial and non-profit organizations, including video. The UK website churnalism.com tracks the behavior of newspaper and broadcast websites; the number of press releases they use and whether they rewrite the received copy or just copy/paste it. Results show that many of these items are published with few or no alterations or additions.

Using stock-photos instead of original material can be a serious cost-saver. Specialized services for stock-photo's can offer this material for as low as 20 cents per photo. Some media also use pictures from Wikipedia and Flickr for news items on their websites.

Material 'found' online can be used, slightly rewritten, cited, linked-to, translated, 'enriched', combined and sometimes researched further – even without using press agencies copy. This practice is close to 'aggregation' (see below) although it involves more human interference.

Technology

A relatively newly used set of strategies involves the use of technology as an aid to produce more content, make content production cheaper or to increase readership and revenue. Some technologies must be handled by humans, others function more or less independent.

Aggregation is the general heading of strategies whereby automatic websearches (using web-crawlers, search robots and other searches) result in pages with (parts of) articles or article headings on specific subjects. Google News is probably the best-known example but many other services exist, often using Google search as their main tool. Google News depends on automatic searches in news, grouping them into categories (national, international, sports, entertainment etc.) and presenting

links – sometimes with a part of the first paragraph – to the original news items. The most important (most found) subjects are placed on top of Google News. Techmeme does something similar with technology news: presenting only the headline and the first paragraph.

WorldCrunch and Europe Today (translating international news into English) and Presseurop (translating news into different languages) combine automatic aggregation with human labour. These efforts are often described as ‘curation’, indicating that some sort of human selection is part of the aggregation process. Online several ‘content curation tools’ like Scoop.it are available. Also popular US news website Newser combines search engines with work from human beings. Although all items appear to be written by ‘newser staff’ members, the links in the stories and the content of the presented links makes it clear that other content is used as a source.

Material from social media like Twitter can be embedded on news websites using special ‘widgets’ whereby only tweets that contain specific words or phrases are used. iPad app Flipboard – one of the most popular news apps - uses feeds from Twitter for content on their news app.

RSS (Real Simple Syndication) is used by websites to promote and distribute their content, but these RSS-feeds themselves can be used by other services as a source for news. The Pulse iPad-app is a news app without any journalists, using RSS-feeds from various news sources. The company employed 12 people in the beginning of 2011: one CEO, one staff member for marketing and ten programmers. Pulse started as a paid service but moved to free distributions as it sought for other revenue streams like sponsored promoted content. The Zite iPad app also only uses 9 news from other sources (TechCrunch, Businessinsider, blogs, newspaper websites) through Twitter-posts, RSS-feeds and social bookmarks. The News.me app is based on what other people – authorities on subjects – read. Mobile news service Ongo offers a paid service – using news from other sources – beginning at \$6.99 a month.

Promotion through social media means that new items are automatically posted on Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn. People can tweet the heading and the URL of the news item to their followers, mail it to their friends or like it on Facebook and Google+. Items can be shared on Digg, Delicious or other social bookmark sites. The AddThis service “Boost your site’s traffic” offers dozens of options in this respect. All strategies (including aggregation, social media, curation and using RSS-feeds) use material from other media and usually provide links to the original source; driving traffic to the original website is used as a justification of the use of third party content.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process whereby articles are written in ways that makes it likely that the article will end up high – preferably on the first page - of a Google or Yahoo! search. Content farms like Demand Media use this strategy to brief their authors. It means the use of simple often-used words in headings and body text. When it comes to finding a website, SEO suggest that using many often-searched words on the website will result in a better position in searches. This explains why news websites often contain many articles. Google Analytics and Google Adwords are helpful tools when it comes to implementing a SEO-strategy. SEO has developed the last years as a rapid growing industry.

Introducing automatic features like “best-read” or “most-commented” can increase the number of pages people read on a website, while polls are also ways of engaging audiences. The first two options are fully automatic; polls include some human interference, but comments and results can be used for news items as well.

An option in using technology for journalism bordering on science fiction is using software to write articles. StatSheet, a US company that offers sports statistics experimented with software that turns game statistics into ‘automated content’.

A model for the online news business

When skilled professionals produce unique content that is highly valued by an affluent audience, an online news business model probably will include paid access and high advertising rates. With a general audience and news that can be obtained elsewhere as well, options are limited; free access

and maximizing the audience is a 10 likely course as advertising rates will be low. But also strategies of extreme cost reductions (staff, content, technology) can be followed. Not all strategies mentioned above, however, have to result in lower quality journalism. Freelancers don't produce inferior quality compared to staff members, an Australian sub-editor can work just as good as someone from the UK, pictures from eye witnesses can be newsworthy while good SEO may result in more revenues. Nevertheless, most strategies will result in having fewer professionals produce more (but less original) content, while "outsourced content tends to create lower value" (Picard, 2010, p. 84). The choices publishers have to make are summarized in the model below. Instead of the linear value chain model, a more circular model is proposed. The nature of the content produced (unique, specialized, general, local) has a direct influence on the audience and the willingness of the audience to pay for this content, mainly based on the availability of substitutes. The nature of the audience has consequences for the revenues (subscription, advertising, public funding) and thus for the business model of the operation. Policy on for instance VAT-rates, tax-exemption for noncommercial operations and copyright-protection also influence the business. Based on revenues it can be assessed how content will be produced, the number and nature of the staff members and the technologies used to produce and format content.

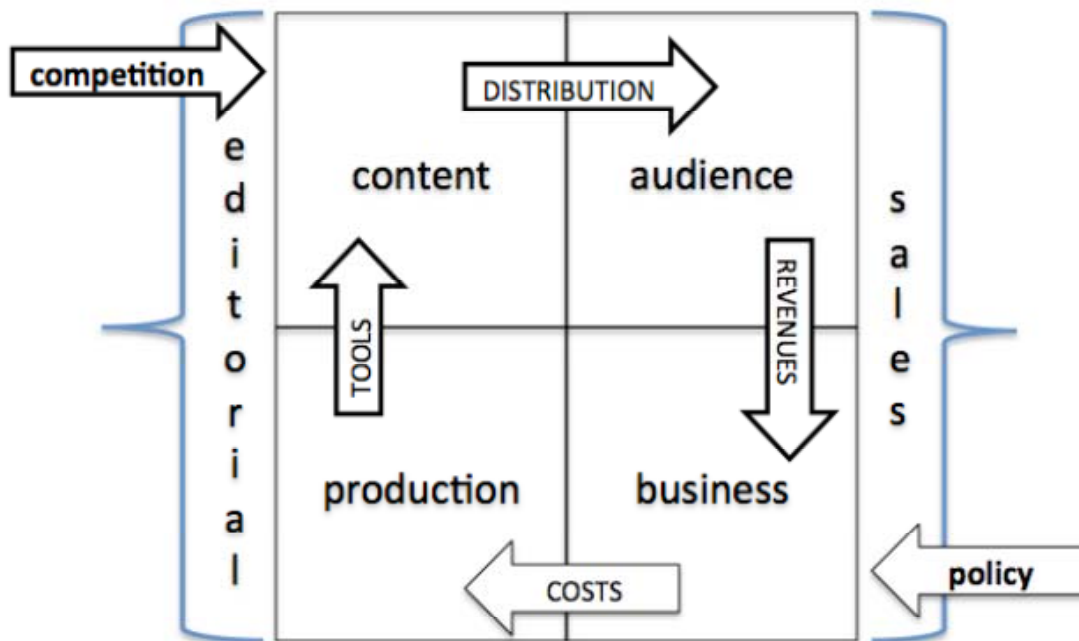


Figure 1: model for online news business

Cases: low-pay, no-pay & aggregations

Below three cases will be presented, each making different choices when it comes to develop a business model for online news: producing non-competitive content at low prices, producing competitive content and opinionated news by non-paid contributors and a model whereby technology plays a leading role.

Content farms

The 'content farm', mostly found in Northern America employs freelancers, nonjournalists, bloggers, part-time writers and amateurs who produce articles on subjects that are expected to end up high in searches and in that way generate traffic to the websites catered by these services. Its main strategies in other words are a combination of low-pay for writers, a focus on free content and the employment of SEO technology. Advertising is the most obvious source of revenue. Demand Media publishes between 4,000 and 6,000 articles per day at a current rate of \$15 for a 500-word story. More than 12,000 authors work for the service. Many stories end up on Demand's eHow.com website and concern non-news items. Demand also provides websites of USA Today, the San Francisco Chronicle and the Houston Chronicle with news (Shaver, 2010). Registered writers are presented with ready-made headlines based on key words that are likely to turn up in web searches; a claimed subject has to be finished within a week. Stories are checked for plagiarism by software but also by editors (Blanda, 2010). In 2011 Demand announced that it would introduce quality content and paying writers up to \$350 for longer (850 words) articles. This was a reaction to a change in the Google search algorithms that resulted in lower positions for Demands content.

Different content farms do exist, although none of them is particularly fond of be called that name. Any service that offers low-cost free content from undisclosed authors, however, could fall under that heading. Demand Media is perhaps the bestknown example but websites like Helium ("where knowledge rules"), iNeedaGreatStory, Suite101 (Canada), StudioNow and Seed (both AOL), Associated Content (Yahoo!), Ask.com and About.com employ similar models. Instead of a fixed price, some websites offer writers a share of the advertising revenues depending on the number of clicks a page gets; the US-network of local websites Examiner.com employs this strategy. In April 2011 240 local Examiner sites have been launched, 12 around 3,000 articles a day are published, usually by amateurs and local bloggers.

AOL's local network Patch – targeting 800 smaller communities - employs full-time editors but also freelancers who can be paid up to \$50 for stories.

Media-economist Robert Picard writes about content farms on his blog *The Media Business* (December 12, 2010):

These enterprises are providing high quantity, low quality material on topics designed to produce many search hits and driven by the desire to make money from advertising received as high traffic sites. (...) These producers and a whole range of similar organizations are producing material in content farms that rely on freelancers who are paid as little as \$1 an article or get no payment except for number of page views for their specific work. It is a throwback to the penny-a-word days of journalism in the 19th century.

Huffington Post

Apart from robots and low-pay writers, some services have professional journalists and bloggers write for them for no compensation at all. Focus has shifted from lowpay to no-pay. In terms of content, however, more emphasis is on original opinionated content while SEO is less important. Promotion through social media on the other hand is used extensively.

The best-know example of such an operation is the Huffington Post, a popular website that employs around 9,000 unpaid bloggers, working for the website is seen as a compensation in itself. Well-known authors, celebrities and politicians are invited to blog and use the website as a podium for their opinions. Also bloggers cross-post content to promote their own blogs. The Huffington Post was launched in 2005 and is in 2011 one of the most-visited news website in the US. In July 2011 it launched an UK-edition. Criticism not only concerned content – particularly when medical or scientific information was published – but also the fact that bloggers were not compensated for their efforts.

This criticism increased after the \$315 million sale to AOL. Original content might be the focus of the website, but in 2011 a HuffPo-writer was suspended because of ‘over-aggregation’ an item from Ad Age. Websites like 13 The Daily Beast and The Guardian’s Comment is Free use more or less the same model.

Aggregators

Websites that do little more than find news and publish it, either full, a digest or as a heading with a link to the original are usually called aggregators. The best-known international example is Google News, but apart from that national and local models exist. A research in 20 Dutch local communities (Bakker, de Ridder & Schönbach, 2010) found an average number of 26 news channels in these communities (511 in total), two thirds of these channels (345) were digital media, and of these channels 136 (40%) were local news aggregators (75 were Twitter feeds that only contained links to articles published elsewhere). A dozen services were identified that covered sometimes over a hundred communities: nieuws.nl, www.112-nieuws.nl (accidents, fires), nieuws.plaatsnaam.startmenu.nl (“information from Google News”), plaats.nl, www.citytweet.nl, citysite.nl, digicity.nl, nederland-web.nl, straatinfo.nl, hetnieuws.in and Webregio.nl. Some websites used editors as well while there also were opportunities for users to comment on articles. In 2011 the hyper local network Dichtbij.nl (owned by De Telegraaf Media Group) launched in all 400 Dutch communities, journalists are employed as ‘community managers’ who select, analyze and ‘enrich’ items from other sources and users, and write articles for the target group, often from a human interest or commercial point of view according to the text of the add (www.werkenbijtmg.nl).

Discussion

News organizations probably would rather employ specialized professionals who write highly valued content for a paying audience or distribute general current affair news to a mass audience so advertisers can pick up the bill, than producing lowquality, poorly produced content from digital sweat shops or news gathered by machines crawling the world wide web. But these options are not open to everybody, and the models presented in this article are those that cover the ground in between specialized high-quality news production and distributing news to mass audiences. When subscription is not an option and advertising offers only limited revenues, solutions have to be found elsewhere. These strategies show viable business model based of low-pay, no-pay and automatic ‘journalism. Instead of only denouncing these models and the content that is produced, it should be emphasized that these emerging models also offer an opportunity to develop models that do exactly the opposite: offering high quality journalism, perhaps even for subscription. Particularly in local markets the battle between free competitive news and paid non-competitive news is not yet over. At the same time, it leaves an uncomfortable feeling that one of the most valued news enterprise – the Huffington Post – has acquired its value by having people – journalist for an important part - working for free

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