Commentary

Commentary on News and Participation through and beyond Proprietary Platforms in an Age of Social Media

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Abstract
The far-seeing collection in this issue is arrayed across the terrain of journalism infused with social media. The authors take deep dives into the material and in the process contribute significantly to the research community's corpus on social media and proprietary platforms in journalism. In their wake, they leave an ambitious albeit hazy roster of research topics. My aim is to offer a brief critique of the articles and conclude with a few hortatory words.

Keywords
comparative methodology; critical studies; journalism; research agenda; social media

1. Introduction

This far-seeing collection of articles in this issue is arrayed across the terrain of journalism infused with social media. The authors take numerous deep dives into the material and in the process contribute significantly to the research community's corpus on the topic of social media and proprietary platforms in journalism. They leave in their wake an ambitious albeit hazy roster of research topics. My aim is to offer a brief critique of the articles and conclude with a few hortatory words.

2. News and Participation through and beyond Proprietary Platforms in an Age of Social Media

2.1. A Decade of Research on Social Media and Journalism: Assumptions, Blind Spots, and a Way Forward

Drawing on a decade-long retrospective of experience and analysis, Lewis and Molyneux (2018) attack three contentions about how social media should change journalism. These are that social media would be (1) a net

positive, (2) reflect reality, and (3) would matter more than other factors. From today's perspective, these assertions would seem implausible, practically self-answering themselves in the negative. But in the halcyon days of social media's explosive growth, many researchers endorsed them. Lewis and Molyneux (2018) also identify two overarching narratives governing the arrival of social media: normalization and control. The first has to do with importing journalistic norms into new platforms of production and distribution. The second has to do with who determines what will be covered, that is, what constitutes news. Here they conclude that the audiences have been empowered significantly.

Arguing that these original contentions and narratives have led researchers in a certain direction, the authors can, with the advantage of hindsight, critique what has been overlooked. They now call for a revised research agenda that will take the field in a new direction and offer guidance as to what that might entail. Yet their brave new research agenda remains less of a roadmap and more of an incantation to today's version of what 400 years ago Sir Francis Bacon called in *Novum Organum* idols of the marketplace.

2.2. From Counter-Power to Counter-Pepe: The Vagaries of Participatory Epistemology in a Digital Age

Anderson and Revers (2018) provide an illuminating perspective on non-specialists' involvement in news creation. They highlight the value framework celebrating (at least in its potential) the authenticity of community participation in politics generally and journalism particularly. They do so by invoking the concept of "participatory epistemology", where public interaction modifies professional expertise of journalists. They draw on Fred Turner's work claiming that California's rising computer culture was predicated on the 1970s counterculture. As beguiling as the Turner thesis is, it must be acknowledged that Turner was selective in his choice of examples and that an argument could be built from what he omitted to prove exactly the opposite. Still, Anderson and Revers (2018) provide a valuable overview of the rise and fall of the hopes of citizen participation in the news production process. As such, they have added to our repository of examples of dashed populists hopes that opening processes to citizen participation would provide an antidote to technocratic elitism and political insiders' self-serving.

2.3. Dark Participation

Quandt (2018) notes that the utopian dreams of participatory online news, once celebrated as the savior of both newspapers and the public forum, are largely absent components of professional journalistic websites. Rather than "groves of academe", Quandt (2018) finds these outlets over-flowing with hateful comments, false information, and various forms of duplicitous manipulation. Quandt (2018) concludes his analysis with a surprise for the reader, which I will not give away. Regrettably, though, there is a missed opportunity of juxtaposing what happened with public digital engagement in journalism to what happened when the telephone was introduced because there are many illuminating parallels that could have been drawn. Initially telephone technology was designed to be a great way to spread useful information and news. Indeed, an early use was to read newspaper stories in a broadcast mode to telephone subscribers, a primitive form of multicasting. Yet accompanying such "light" forms of telephone usage were "dark" ones, ranging from obscene and distressing phone calls, spreading misinformation to harassing subscribers. As was the case with other articles in this collection, absent is an historical context that could have provided additional insight on the contemporary situation and a guide for likely future developments.

2.4. Alternative Media and the Notion of Anti-Systemness: Towards an Analytical Framework

Holt (2018) tackles a favorite trope among independent thinkers: the mainstream media, in alliance with those controlling the other levers of power in society, hide important information from the public. (This may or may not be an accurate contention depending on the specifics.) Although Holt (2018) chooses to go after those on the Right for believing in the existence of this informal conspiracy, it is safe to say that this trope has also been well-plowed by the Left and in quantitative terms, probably more so. Certainly, that has been the critique of Marxists and critical scholars, including those dedicated to anarchy, anti-capitalism, and environmental extremism. Holt (2018) correctly argues that similar standards should be applied to both Left and Right critiques. It seems that Holt may have noticed that when journalism scholars refer to extremist viewpoints, they are really speaking of those viewpoints with which they strongly disagree.

With reference to analysis of media groupings, Holt (2018) disambiguates relational from ideological anti-systemness. His analysis cleaves off what might be considered irrelevant (from a political/ideological viewpoint) alternative media from other types. It further allows the distinction between polarizing alternative media versus those that are opposed to the dominant system. The merit of this approach is that it downplays the value judgments that are often applied to groups that one either supports or opposes, and concomitantly minimizes the teleological fog that subsequently beclouds analysts' minds as they seek to celebrate or denigrate media outlets according to their ideological stripe. Echoing elements of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, Holt (2018) provides a valuable heuristic for examining relationships among contested media perspectives.

2.5. The Moral Gatekeeper? Moderation and Deletion of User-Generated Content in a Leading News Forum

Boberg, Schatto-Eckrodt, Frischlich and Quandt (2018) explore not only what is *in* the comment sections of a newspaper but also (quite laudably in terms of analysis) what is *excluded*. Comments can provide insights on topics at hand and well beyond and can offer vital correctives and countervailing viewpoints. Yet many news outlets don't allow them, often for good reasons. Given the benefits of a well-run comment section, improvements to commenting procedures could enhance the quality of users' experiences and add to the outlet's value.

Drawing on a German newspaper's database, the authors derive several findings. More than a third of comments were rejected. The authors also discovered "no general pattern of moral redlines". Moreover, the absence of clear rules may lead to systematic bias concerning certain ideological representations, or at least the perception thereof. Not without cause, this is what the conservative and Right-leaning partisans have argued in the related context of social media giants such as Google, Facebook and Twitter. These findings suggest yet another ambitious research agenda.

2.6. Strangers to the Game? Interlopers, Intralopers, and Shifting News Production

Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018) seek to update the way journalistic participation is categorized to better understand the realities of news production. The authors wish to reconceptualize the role of "outsiders", those who have not been traditionally considered journalists but who are now central to contemporary journalism. These include bloggers, web analysts and app designers, among many others whom they dub strangers. To improve the accuracy of our perceptions, the authors suggest a new categorization schema as well to gain greater analytical depth.

Drawing on the fecund Georg Simmel, they find much grist for their analytical mill. Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018) conclude that these new strangers will not have the same traditional commitment to the ethical standards and personal aspirations of professional journalists. They end their work with a clarion cry for tracing out the implications of this situation for larger political and social spheres that journalism serves, a cry that should be heeded.

Going forward, they suggest that researchers have greater reflexivity. It may be that many researchers long for a restoration of the journalistic equivalent of the *ancien régime*, that is, an era with ample resources and expense accounts along with talented fact-checkers, editors and sub-editors to do quality control; deeply staffed newsrooms would go after the important stories of the day. Nevertheless, greater reflexivity would call into sharper question who benefited from the old system, as well as provide a more critical analysis of today's pursuit of citizen participation in journalism.

2.7. Hybrid Engagement: Discourses and Scenarios of Entrepreneurial Journalism

Ruotsalainen and Villi (2018) consider how journalists can produce stories that are both relevant and true. Yet even the term "true" is fraught because in the world of journalism it usually refers to two levels of meaning. First, that no statements in a story that are false. The other is that the journalistic report is a reasonably faithful transmission of reality as perceived by an objective outsider. However, neither definition is a full and complete definition of "true" because there can be no one-to-one correspondence between objective reality and a journalistic report; the report must always be an incomplete perspective and therefore not, in a narrow technical sense, true. But most stories are true enough to satisfy editors and audiences, although that is decreasingly the case in controversial areas.

Although given the topical framework of the collection and the fact that the authors bring up the topic, it is unsurprising that the authors do not delve into this complicated area. Still, when Ruotsalainen and Villi (2018) explore discourses surrounding what they term entrepreneurial and hybrid journalism, they sidestep the issue of truthfulness and how the potential diminution of objectivity may increase audience engagement but at the cost of legitimacy. Nonetheless, they are to be complemented for considering ways to generate both trustworthy quality on the production side and audience engagement on the consumption side. Additional research and analysis is their recipe for finding innovative solutions to the dilemma.

2.8. Networked News Participation: Future Pathways

Robinson and Wang (2018) explore networks of participation in the production of news. Focusing on the once and future vision of having major civic participation in news production, they arrive at an inescapable conclusion: contrary to vision of a glorious new era of democratic participation (which the intelligentsia has aspired for since the Internet era's inception), they find that today's elites continue to control the levers of power concerning information creation, interpretation, and distribution.

Commendable is the authors' focus on networks of information flows and personal contacts. Marching through several different bodies data, the authors examine the situation from multiple cultural perspectives (albeit primarily that of the United States) and, as they do so, develop a coherent and logical argument. They see several forces converging to create today's journalistic world, one that seems to them as both dim and diminished compared to its unrealized democratic potential.

What are the reasons for this sad state? Prime among them say the authors is the way journalists draw upon viewpoints of coincidently involved members of the public to make their stories colorful and meaningful to audiences. This increases the audience's feelings of belonging. Yet familiarity seemingly breeds contempt. When anybody can comment on anything, the role of the expert—already under assault throughout society nowadays—is further downgraded.

Robinson and Wang's (2018) narrative does not engage with the historical record of what happened when earlier technologies were introduced to journalism. The radio and then television were in their day seen as revolutionary technologies that would lead to an empowered citizenry, rapid dissemination of information, and better governance, not to mention promote health, welfare, and education. Readers can judge for themselves the cumulative impact of radio and TV. But my point is that an historical perspective would have contextualized and enriched the analysis of a situation that may otherwise seem unprecedented and specific to the technology. Such a perspective would also provide some comparative points when the time comes to evaluate remedies.

3. Conclusion

This issue's authors are to be applauded for their thorough engagement with an important topic, one that becomes increasingly pivotal as social media and digi-

tal communication allow people to find ever more contestable issues. Yet from my critical reading of the articles, two observations may be suggested to help the collective research enterprise. First, the focus on journalism without reference to historical analogs and contemporary systems of information distribution forfeits an opportunity to add analytical force and validity to arguments. Second, calls for action and new research directions remain vague: aspiring researchers need specific recommendations, especially for work that is "outside the box" of contemporary fixation. Despite these criticisms, overall the authors deserve congratulations on their thought-provoking studies.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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James E. Katz (PhD, Dr. H.C.) is the Feld Family Professor of Emerging Media at Boston University's College of Communication. His latest book concerning journalism and the search for truth is scheduled to be published by Oxford University Press in 2019. His other recent books include *Philosophy of Emerging Media*, co-edited with Juliet Floyd, also from Oxford University Press and *The Social Media President: Barack Obama and the Politics of Citizen Engagement*, published in 2013 by Macmillan. In a 1998 article, he predicted many of the problems we are now confronting concerning journalism and the Internet ("Struggle in cyberspace: Fact and friction on the World Wide Web", in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 556, pp. 194–200).