

The Changing Context of News Work: Liquid Journalism and Monitorial Citizenship

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In this paper, the relationships between theories of (new) citizenship and (new) journalism are explored. The meaning of citizenship has changed in the last few decades. People still tend to be seen by most politicians, scholars, and journalists alike as citizens that need to inform themselves widely about issues of general interest so that they can make an informed decision at election time. However, this model of the informed citizenry is a thing of the past — a prescriptive and rather elitist notion of both how people should make up their minds and what (political) representation means to them. Today's citizen is not only critical, self-expressive, and distinctly anti-hierarchical (Beck, 2000), he is also what Schudson (1999) calls "monitorial": scanning all kinds of news and information sources for the topics that matter to him personally. People are not necessarily disengaged from the political process, they just commit their time and energy to it on their own terms. This individualized act of citizenship can be compared to the act of the consumer, browsing stores of a shopping mall for that perfect pair of jeans — it is the act of the citizen-consumer. In journalism, a similar trend is emerging, where traditional role perceptions of journalism influenced by its occupational ideology — providing a general audience with information of general interest in a balanced, objective, and ethical way — do not seem to fit all that well with the lived realities of reporters and editors, nor with the communities they are supposed to serve. In the context of a precarious and, according to the International Federation of Journalists, increasingly "atypical" professional work life, ongoing efforts by corporations to merge and possibly converge news operations, and an emerging digital media culture where the consumer is also a producer of public information, the identity of the journalist must be seen as "liquid" (Bauman, 2000). Such a liquid journalism truly works in the service of the network society, deeply respects the rights and privileges of each and every consumer-citizen to be a maker and user of his own news, and enthusiastically embraces its role as, to paraphrase James Carey, an amplifier of the conversation society has with itself.

During the Summer of 2007, temporary or "transient" nightclubs were built in Barcelona and Lisbon (after an earlier 2006 tryout in Berlin) under the brand name *Kubik*. "Designed by Berlin-based urban design agency ModulatorBeat and light artist Andreas Barthelmes, Kubik is built from stacked, reused

water tanks [. . .] Kubik's 275 illuminated cubes house a bar and lounge from Sunday through Wednesday, and a club from Friday through Saturday."¹ Earlier in 2007, marketing agency Herrmann International Asia together with the Australian arm of Brown-Forman Beverages Worldwide organized the *SoCo Cargo Experiment*, created for the Southern Comfort brand. This equally temporary club concept consisted of 12-metre long shipping containers stacked side-by-side and on top of each other, with adaptable interiors containing a bar, a stage, and lounge areas. The container club premiered on Sydney's Cockatoo Island in October 2006, and then popped up at festivals in Melbourne (February 2007) and Adelaide (March 2007).² A similar re-use of shipping containers comes from Singapore-based *Venue VBOX*, offering clients a portable store in a shipping container, which can be set up anywhere temporarily.³ In May 2007, the Russian vodka brand Stolichnaya launched a *Stoli Hotel* in Los Angeles, working with different agencies such as TTC PR, Legacy Marketing Partners, and Fly Communications.⁴ This 10,000 square-foot "pop-up" hotel was designed and built within an empty garage or hall space and was taken down after a month to be moved to other cities like New York, Chicago, and Miami.⁵ Marketing firm Trendwatching explains the growing popularity of "pop-up" retail, hotels, clubs, and other forms of consumerist leisure with the concept of "transumerism": designing and implementing novel and innovative shopping and entertainment opportunities aimed at consumers who are always on the move, "as consumers are slowly but certainly mirroring travel behavior in daily life. After all, in our Experience Economy, the temporary, the transient, is increasingly being valued if not worshipped on a daily basis."⁶

Of course, it would be easy to critique the choice of venues and materials for these marketing efforts. Shipping containers, empty or abandoned urban spaces — it all invokes disturbing images of refugees suffocating (as has happened in cargo containers at U.S. and European harbours), of homeless people seeking shelter, of tens of thousands hurricane Katrina evacuees forced to temporarily live in the Louisiana (New Orleans) Superdome. It is the reappropriation of the modes, tools, and trash of economic globalization at the hands of the very industries that enabled it to accelerate. What is a more salient issue here, though, is the shift in focus on living, eating, and socializing toward experiences that are intrinsically temporary, transitory, a moment in time that cannot be relived or revisited. As such, these examples underscore contemporary modern life — a life lived from moment to moment, always in the here and now, in a context of seemingly constant and disruptive change, and restlessness, as well as an overall anxious feeling of being part of a "runaway world," as Anthony Giddens (2002) states. In this feature essay, I would like to couple this crucial observation with a critical debate on the (future) role of professional

¹ Source URL: http://www.springwise.com/entertainment/popup_nightclubs_update

² Source URL: http://www.springwise.com/food_beverage/popup_nightclubs

³ Source URL: <http://www.venue.com.sg>

⁴ Press release URL: <http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=104&STORY=/www/story/04-27-2007/0004575658&EDATE>

⁵ Source URL: <http://www.prweek.com/us/news/article/654624/Stoli-Hotel-inspire-buzz-reinforce-brand-message>

⁶ Source URL: <http://www.trendwatching.com/trends/transumers.htm>

journalism in developed democratic societies, for, as many keen observers of the profession note, it is impossible to conceive of journalism (and the work of journalists) without the larger political and social context within which it operates. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2001, p. 23) similarly argue, that “[w]hether one looks back three hundred years, and even three thousand, it is impossible to separate news from community, and over time, even more specifically from democratic community.” The pop-up phenomenon, thus, is a tool to express my concern with the role of public information and journalism in the experience of community at our particular phase of modernity.

If, as John Hartley (1996) puts it, journalism is the primary sense-making practice of modernity, what kind of modernity does it make? Scholars and practitioners alike often use a normative notion of journalism as providing the social cement of democracies as a point of departure in their work. In journalism, the consensually preferred way of achieving this classical role is through monitoring of bureaucracy, industries, and the state as modernity’s key institutions from a slightly elevated or professionally distant vantage point. It is what scholars and news workers alike tend to describe as “hard” news — the reporting of which is considered the apex of journalism’s informal hierarchy. Presumably, political and economic news forge and reinforce the foundations of social organization. However, contemporary society in capitalist democracies such as the Netherlands, the U.S., Australia, Brazil, India, Russia, and South Africa is anything but solid or socially cohesive. Under conditions of worldwide migration, capital flight, moveable businesses, global conflicts, and widespread environmental apprehension, most people sense a precariousness in everyday life, whether real or perceived. As a response, citizens increasingly retreat into “hyperlocal” enclaves (suburban ghettos or guard-gated communities) and “hyperindividual” personal information spaces (connecting with the world without actually physically engaging with it through online social networks such as MySpace and Second Life). A fundamental question is whether journalism adds fuel to these flames or effectively patrols the fragile fences of modernity.

As self-proclaimed gatekeepers, journalists have only their occupational ideology and news culture to rely on as a defence against either commercial intrusion or special interests (Deuze, 2005). In doing so, journalism’s representation of society tends to stay the same while it simultaneously reports on a rapidly changing world. In combination with a professional preferential treatment of hard news, journalists end up representing, and thereby reproducing, existing power formations and institutionalized relationships in society — relationships that inevitably prescribe an essential mediating role to professional journalism as society’s “glue” or “social cement” (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003; Costera Meijer, 2001).

Considering the tendency among news workers to reiterate and reproduce age-old news values, while at the same time surfing on the waves of permanent change amplified by the attitudes and behaviors of the global financial and political elite, journalism makes sense of a modernity that seems unsettling at best, and out of touch with the everyday lives of most of its inhabitants at worst. A key to reorienting journalism studies to the rapidly changing human condition may be found in the works of Polish social theorist Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman’s confrontations with modernity led him, in his most recent writings, to see contemporary society in terms of a “liquid” modernity (2000). Bauman defines a liquid modern society as

a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines. Liquidity of life, and that of society, feed and reinvigorate each other. Liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long (2005b, p. 1).

A liquid modern society is one where uncertainty, flux, change, conflict, and revolution are the permanent conditions of everyday life — indeed, as exemplified by the SoCo Cargo Experiment or the Kubik nightclubs. The experiences in these kinds of places — and as lived through the events mentioned earlier — are intentionally temporary, meaningful only because they are “once in a lifetime,” and are correspondingly presented as distinct breaks from the routine (of otherwise clubbing, shopping, or just being). The appeal of these experiences lies in their uncanny ability to tap into the real or perceived relationship between the individual and contemporary society — a relationship that has become liquid.

Bauman makes a compelling argument how liquid life is neither modern nor post-modern, but rather that the categories of existence established and enabled by early, first, or solid modernity are disintegrating, overlapping, and remixing. It is not as if we cannot draw meaningful distinctions between global and local anymore. The same goes for other modern categories of everyday life, such as between work and non-work, between public and private, between conservative and progressive, or between mediated and non-mediated experiences. It is just that these and other key organizing characteristics and categories of modern life have lost their (presumed or perceived) intrinsic, commonly held, or consensual meaning. As the trendwatchers excitedly proclaim about transumerism, everything (and everyone) is always on the move. The point is perhaps that, in liquid life, people perceive or feel always on the move, even if they are not. This feeling, for example, explains how labor statistics suggest that the vast majority of people do not get fired, and most jobs do not get outsourced or offshored, yet most (blue collar and white collar) workers express a distinct concern that this can or even will happen to them at any moment (Giddens, 2002). Using Bauman’s work as an anchoring framework, the challenges to our understanding of the role of journalism are discussed in terms of key political changes articulated with a liquid modern life. The purpose of this approach is to open up new or refreshing ways to ignite the discussion about, for, and especially with (young and aspiring) journalists about their role and position in contemporary democratic society.

Politics and Citizenship

The meaning of citizenship has changed in the last few decades. Michael Schudson (1999) argues that most people still tend to be seen by politicians, scholars, and journalists alike as citizens who need to inform themselves widely about all political parties in play, so that they can make informed decisions at election time. However, Schudson also shows how this model of citizenship is a thing of the past — an unrealistic and rather elitist notion of both how people should make up their minds and what political representation means to them. Another reason for the inappropriateness of the “informed” citizen as a benchmark for democratic theory is its reliance on a worldview that is premised on media access in the context of channel scarcity. Whereas the 1950s’ model of citizenship could be based on a notion of being informed as depending on a handful of sources that one was unable to question or interact with in any

meaningful way, in today's continuous remixed and remixable (to paraphrase Manovich, 2005) media ecology, such a premise seems rather problematic to uphold. Media have come to be integrated into every aspect of peoples' daily lives, particularly facilitated by the worldwide proliferation of the Internet and similar services that connect subscribers to a global, always-on, digital information and communication network. One can consider how the Internet crossed the 1 billion user threshold in 2006, with 2 billion users expected by 2011 (out of a projected world population of 7 billion around that time).⁷ Among the top 10 countries in Internet usage today are the United States, China, India, Germany, Brazil, and Russia, where Internet penetration reaches about two-thirds of the population.⁸ The whole of the world and our lived experience in it can indeed be seen as framed by, mitigated through, and made immediate by pervasive and ubiquitous media. This world is what Roger Silverstone (2007) considers a "mediapolis": a mediated public space where media underpin and overarch the experiences of everyday life.

The behavior of the citizen in our contemporary mediapolis can be understood in terms of what Schudson calls a "monitorial" attitude toward public information: scanning all kinds of news and other media sources — newspapers, magazines, TV shows, blogs, online and offline social networks, and so on — for the topics that matter to her personally. People are not necessarily disengaged from the political process; they just commit their time and energy to it on their own terms. This individualized enactment of citizenship can be linked to the act of the consumer, browsing the stores of the shopping mall for that perfect pair of jeans, comparing prices and sizes with online offerings. Monitoring is indeed the act of the citizen-consumer, participating in society (whether that "society" equals virtual, topical or geographical community, one's role within a democratic nation-state, or within a translocal network) conditionally, unpredictably, and voluntarily. The way people perceive and enact their role as citizens and consumers increasingly develops in the context of mediated and networked environments, which process loosens — but does not destroy — what John Thompson (1996, p. 207) describes as the connection between self-formation and shared locale. Indeed, Barry Wellman (et al., 2001) suggests that access to new media like the Internet enhances people's participatory capital and supplements their social contacts, even though in doing so, we are less likely to feel committed to traditional forms of community. Wellman and his colleagues stress how none of these trends are necessarily new or particular to media:

Even before the advent of the Internet, there has been a move from all-encompassing, socially-controlling communities to individualized, fragmented personal communities. The security and social control of all-encompassing communities have given way to the opportunity and vulnerability of networked individualism. People now go through the day, week, and month in a variety of narrowly-defined relationships with changing sets of network members (2001, p. 455).

⁷ Source URL: <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/img/worldpop.gif>

⁸ Source URL: <http://www.internetworldstats.com>

There is an implied normative reference to community as constraining rather than enabling self-formation here. It is useful to consider Bauman's (2004) juxtaposition of identity and community in this liquid modern context, where the contemporary life project of "having an identity" has become anathema to belonging to a community of places and ideas.

The worldwide shift toward networked, individualized societies has particular consequences for the way people relate to each other. According to Robert Putnam (2004), since the last few decades of the 20th century, people around the world have started to withdraw from participating in social institutions such as political parties, and religious institutions, as well as from subscription-based news media, large-scale voluntary associations, and organized group sports. This does not mean that people no longer vote, worship, read a newspaper, or engage in league bowling. It does suggest that if we do, we tend to do it whenever we feel like it (and whether we consider such activity to positively contribute to our postulated self) rather than because of our membership in a certain collective. This makes our behavior toward such institutions irregular, sporadic, unpredictable, and ultimately dependent on our personal wants and needs, but, I would add, not necessarily meaningless, purposeless, nor disengaged.

The Global, The Translocal

The continuous instantaneity in the way people interact and communicate with the world seems to reduce it to their most intimate, direct, and real-time personal environment. Yet the same trend also works the other way around. The world, as people experience it, is not only getting smaller; it also seems to be getting bigger all the time. The experience of life in the "global village" feels like constantly trying to catch up with Giddens's runaway world, a world constantly on the edge of swerving out of control. In such a world, all the traditional institutions that provided the social cement of modern life — most notably the family, the church, the factory or company, mass media, and the state — at times seem nothing but bargaining chips in our individual negotiations with the forces of change that sweep contemporary life. People cannot simply rely on parents, priests, professionals or presidents for truth anymore; they have to go out and construct their own narrative, and come up with "biographical solutions of systemic contradictions" (Beck, 1992, p. 137). In his more recent work, Ulrich Beck envisions a new type of cosmopolitan democracy, where people as individuals all over the world will have a more or less equal say in world affairs (such as environmental problems, transnational corporate policies, and worldwide migration patterns), as these affect everyone (2006). Several other political and social theorists, such as Daniela Archibugi and David Held (1995), advocate cosmopolitan solidarity and world citizenship, if only to counter the catastrophic effects of an unbridled globalization in the name of markets and commerce, and legal and political acknowledgement of an "impotence" of national governments (Bauman, 2007a) and the "growing interdependencies of a world society" (Habermas, 2001, p. 70). Bauman articulates the cosmopolitan project more critically with individualization and globalization, arguing forcefully that "[t]he new individualism, the fading of human bonds and the wilting of solidarity, are all engraved on one side of a coin whose other side bears the stamp of globalization" (2006, p. 146).

As the contingencies of life, work, and play converge on the shoulders of the individual, and as traditional social institutions lose their automatic authority, people are, at the same time, swept up in a world of cosmopolitan politics and a global capitalist economy. As the power of the nation-state to control

or protects its individual citizens withers, a new translocal rather than international playground has emerged. Here, all kinds of forces and social movements compete for attention, recognition, and cultural acceptance: multinational corporations, cross-border coalitions of social interest groups, globally oriented media, and a growing number of international agencies. These forces increasingly influence interstate decisions and set the agenda of world politics (Archibugi et al., 1998). This does not necessarily mean that people as individuals are completely powerless in the face of global market forces, since the worldwide interconnectedness of markets, industries, economies, and social systems also open up numerous possibilities for the entrepreneurial individual. The point is, however, that the ability, skill, and resources necessary to navigate these global waters are beyond the means and capacities (or even wishes) of many, if not most people. We are supposed to increasingly rely on ourselves, a suggested self-reliance which has become an endemic property of late 20th century policy making, corporate practice, and public discourse. It seems to warn people to be reluctant to trust the institutions they used to turn to for comfort or protection.

Reporting on studies in 43 countries, Ronald Inglehart (1997) observed a global shift of people in their roles as citizens away from nation-based politics and institutional elites toward a distinctly skeptical, globally interconnected, yet deeply personal type of self-determined civic engagement. Instead of voting at regular intervals in national elections, we temporarily join any of the close to 30,000 international non-governmental organizations (INGO) active in the world today. Rather than subscribing to a national newspaper or tuning in to the daily evening newscast, we search for news and information online about topics that are only of personal interest to us. We do not form or join unions anymore, we simply move to a different area, city, or country when we become dissatisfied with our working conditions (or when we face permanent unemployment where we live). Although all of these activities may seem beholden to a relatively small group of resourceful financial and cultural entrepreneurs, one cannot forget that blue collar workers now have become a declining minority in most modern countries, whereas a creative class of professionals in knowledge and information industries increasingly dominate the cultural economies of the contemporary information age. As the rift between the individual and the nation-state widens, Pippa Norris (1998) observes the emergence of a new type of deeply critical global citizen who is excited about the ideals of democracy but is losing confidence in its national practice. "We are undoubtedly living in an anti-hierarchical age," concludes Beck (2000, p. 150).

The distinctly anti-hierarchical character of our time also comes into play in the consumptive world, where advertisers cleverly market to people's desire to be different, to be critical — to be cool. Bauman (2007b) reminds us that, under conditions of a consumerist culture, people can never really achieve difference, nor should they; for, at that moment, the act of consuming would stop. On the other hand, once settled in carefully target-marketed brand communities, whether the brand is Shell or Greenpeace, CNN or Indymedia, citizens achieve some kind of collective identity similar to the one achieved by voting (as an act of political allegiance). Mark Poster (2004) stipulates that consumer activity is central to society, as it is the domain where the individual is realized. Considering the act of consumption as productive and creative, Mitzuko Ito (2005) takes this argument even further. In the various ways people engage with each other via the products they consume, whether that product is a political candidate, TV show, or a T-shirt, their consumption becomes a creative and meaningful act. Stated another way, under conditions of liquid life, consumer culture and civic engagement seem to be

interconnected and co-creative rather than opposing value systems; and as such, they function to make the daily remix of work, life, and play just a little bit easier.

Roles of Journalism

News has always been a product that commercial companies sold to target audiences as defined by marketing departments (Lampel et al., 2005). As a marketable commodity, it has traditionally competed with the tendency of people to make their own news: pirate radio, alternative media, using the office photocopier as “the people’s printing press,” activist newsletters pasted on city walls, or gossiping in the local pub or market tavern. This was never a real problem for journalists working in the 20th century heyday of mass media where the particulars of audience behaviors remained largely invisible to them, a period Hallin (1992) called the “high modernism” of (American) journalism. It is during this time that journalism, as noted earlier, emerged as the primary sense-making practice of modernity (Hartley, 1996, p. 12). In terms of journalism’s “modernist bias of its official self-presentation” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 112), its practitioners came to see their work and their product as the cornerstone of modern society, and more particularly, the nation-state. As Carey (1996) has explicitly noted:

Journalism is another name for democracy or, better, you cannot have journalism without democracy. The practices of journalism are not self-justifying; rather, they are justified in terms of the social consequences they engender, namely the constitution of a democratic social order (online).

Much has changed since those days. Consider the following conclusion from a series of research projects by the American Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in 2005:

Sitting down with the news on a set schedule has become a thing of the past for many time-pressured Americans [. . .] More people are turning away from traditional news outlets [. . .] At the same time, public discontent with the news media has increased dramatically. Americans find the mainstream media much less credible than they did in the mid-1980s. They are even more critical of the way the press collects and reports the news. More ominously, the public also questions the news media’s core values and morality.⁹

Reports in most well established democracies around the world signal similar trends. Corporate journalism has lost its “sense of wholeness and seamlessness” observed by Hallin (1992, p. 14), but not necessarily because of the collapse of political consensus or increasing market forces, as he suggests. I’d like to suggest that journalism, as it is produced within the confines of mainstream news media corporations, has lost touch with Bauman’s acute observations of the lived realities of today’s citizen-consumers. This is a reality where “liquid modern society and liquid life are locked in a veritable *perpetuum mobile*” (Bauman 2005, p. 12). The key to these assumptions about our postmodern condition

⁹ Source URL: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/206/trends-2005>

is the common perception among people of all walks of life that we live in times of fast-paced radical change. In today's global society, such a widely shared sense of accelerated change is no longer a break in the otherwise fairly stable routine of everyday existence; instead, it has become the structural condition of contemporary liquid life. It is perhaps no small matter that the topics dominating the front pages or lead items in the news all share two principal components: They involve issues that one way or another affect everyone's daily lives on a profound level, while at the same time referring to problems that are beyond the control or power of any individual life's politics (or national politics for that matter), such as global warming, terrorism, worldwide migration, and the practices of transnational corporations (including INGOs).¹⁰ 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. Although people and social systems around the world respond to real or perceived disruptive changes differently, the impact of permanent revolution on society manifests itself most clearly in our increasing uncertainty, anxiety, and disagreement about the exact meaning, role, and function of such well-established features of modern life as the role of the state, the church, the family, and of professional journalism (Bauman, 2000). The added value of a social perspective offers media theory an important marker for understanding this status quo.

Media as social institutions do not escape the sense of accelerated, unsettling change permeating liquid modern life, and it is exactly this notion of volatile, uncertain (global and local) flux that professional journalism fails to come to terms with. If we look at the various ways in which the news industry has tried to integrate, or at the very least, give some kind of coherent meaning to disruptive technologies like the Internet and social trends like individualization or globalization, one can see how journalism still depends on its established mode of production, through which it largely (and unreflexively) reproduces the institutional contours of high (or "solid") modernity. Thus journalism, since it moved online in the late 1990s, has consistently offered shoveled, repurposed, and windowed content for free, cannibalizing its core product while treating its Web presence as an advertisement for the offline product (Deuze, 2003). In doing so, it remediated not only its product, but also its production process online, including, but not limited to, its established ways of doing things, its news culture, and its occupational ideology. The primary function of the multitude online thus became the same as people were expected to behave offline, as *audiences*.

¹⁰ Of course, I am not arguing that journalism should not report on these matters. The point here is that even if one may argue that, for most people, lives and values are in fact still pretty stable, their experience of the world around them is very much typified by a world in flux and beyond their control, a world with few or no certainties.

Journalism has engaged the individualized and networked society in terms of its presupposed "audience fragmentation," which, in turn, has reified professional journalism's position as the primary gatekeeper and information provider in society. Instead of acknowledging the contingent and co-creative context of the society and forms of community it intends to serve, the social system of journalism has consistently translated external realities into editorial processes and professional values that have served to reinforce its boundaries toward the outside world (Weber, 2000). Thus, we see how journalists around the world embrace "autonomy" as the sole value they all share, regardless of political context (Scholl & Weischenberg, 1999), while, at the same time, increasingly privileging explaining and interpreting the news as a more important role in their jobs than reporting or "breaking" the news (Weaver, 1998; Deuze, 2002). This, in turn, has led to an increased reliance for reporting on the work of transnational news agencies such as the *Associated Press* and *Reuters* (see Paterson, 2003), while spending more and more screen time and page length on long form pieces — a process Kevin Barnhurst describes as the "new long journalism."¹¹ Although this does not necessarily mean this has been a good or not so good choice for journalists to make, it must be understood in the context of an ambitious yet also arrogant occupational ideology and a deeply self-referential professional culture. When seen from this perspective, it is perhaps easier to understand how journalism has somehow succeeded in taking its traditional public service role perception extremely seriously, while at the same time, and largely because of this, it has established a position for itself in contemporary society that seems almost completely out of touch with the lived reality of its constituencies.¹²

New Media Ecology

The 21st century can tentatively be seen as a period when the developed world enters the second, "liquid" phase of modernity, where all existing modern social, economical, and political institutions — the church (or mosque, temple), the family, journalism, the nation-state, party-based democracy — have become what Beck calls *zombie* institutions: "living dead categories, which blind the social sciences to the rapidly changing realities inside the nation-state containers, and outside as well" (2002, p. 24). For journalism, this means that deploying such institutions as the dominant framework for making sense of the news, in fact, effectively increases the impotence of people to get a meaningful handle on the problems they face, thereby further alienating the product of news from its consumers.

Instead of being able to rely on such institutions for providing some automatic or consensual function in our lives, it is up to each and every one of us to enter into a complex and ongoing negotiation with them, of which the outcome will always be uncertain. This process coincides with the emergence of a post-industrial information culture (Manovich, 2001), shifting the emphasis toward immaterial resources like those traded on the international stock exchange and over the World Wide Web. This globally interconnected and interdependent culture of information and communication, in turn, has lead scholars to

¹¹ Kevin Barnhurst (2002) *The new long journalism*, URL: <http://tigger.uic.edu/~kgbcomm/longnews/html/barnljch1.htm>

¹² The same argument can be made for the relationship between voter apathy and the relative success of the traditional political party-driven democratic system in taking care of (or rather, *for*) its citizens.

proclaim the establishment of a global network society (Castells, 2000). What is expected of people in such a society is to acquire the skills and resources necessary to navigate complex and permanently unstable social and technological networks. Put in the context of Beck's increasingly anti-hierarchical age, in which traditional institutions are seen as living dead containers without meaning, people turn to each other rather than to established experts — parents, priests, professors, or presidents — for guidance.¹³ Levy (1997) sees this shift as an emerging form of collective intelligence particular to cyberculture, where knowledge about any given topic or subject is based on the ongoing exchange of views, opinions, and information between many, rather than pulling the wisdom of a few. Hartley (2000) predicts, in this context, the emergence of a global "redactional" society, that is, the core competences once exclusively associated with professional journalism are increasingly necessary for every citizen to guarantee survival in a networked information age. Journalism has become not so much the property of what journalists do in order to sell news, but what people all over the world engage in on a daily basis in order to survive, coping with "modernity's extreme dynamism" (Giddens, 1991, p. 16) and the permanent revolution of liquid life.

It is in this context that a new media eco system, or new mixed media ecology, is taking shape.¹⁴ I have previously drawn distinctions between different and recombinant functions of journalism in such a new media system, in which its news professionals will have to find ways to strike a balance between their identities as providers of editorial content and the realities of public connectivity (as in providing a platform for the discussion society ideal-typically has with itself), as well as between its historical operationally closed working culture, strictly relying on 'experts' and a more collaborative, responsive and interactive open journalistic culture (Deuze, 2003, p. 219). In a complex new media ecology, one can see the Internet (and all that we do online) as its primary manifestation, where people empowered by increasingly cheaper and easier-to-use technologies participate actively in their own news making, from responding via e-mail to a breaking news story to collectively producing citizen journalism Web sites powerful enough to influence presidential elections — as in the case of *Ohmynews* in South Korea.

What is particularly salient about these trends is a further blurring of the carefully cultivated dividing lines between the professional and the amateur, and between producers and consumers of media.

¹³ The global PR firm Edelman conducts annual surveys on trust and credibility among college-educated, middle class, and media-savvy adults in 18 countries (see URL: <http://www.edelman.co.uk/trustbarometer>). What the firm finds is a gradual erosion of trust in governments, traditional institutions, and elites in favor of (especially in Brazil, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United States) "a person like me" as someone considered to be the most credible source of information.

¹⁴ Henry Jenkins (2007), for example, discusses how *Second Life* is an excellent example of such a new ecology: "[Second Life] embodies a new mixed media ecology in which institutions with very different levels of power, wealth, and influence co-exist in a shared virtual space creating more equivalence in terms of their relationship to the media landscape." Source URL: http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/01/a_second_look_at_second_life.html

Jenkins (2006) describes this development as the emergence of a convergence culture, indicating a shift within media companies toward a more inclusive production process fostering a new participatory folk culture by giving average people the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate content. There is no doubt that a future news system will be based, at least in part, on an interactive and connective mode of production where media makers and users will co-exist, collaborate, and thus effectively compete to play a part in the mutual (yet never consensual, as Niklas Luhmann has noted) construction of reality. On a concluding hopeful note, Balnaves, Mayrhofer, and Shoemith (2004) consider such a shift toward a more engaged, emancipatory, and participatory relationship between media professionals and their publics an example of a new humanism in the domains of public relations, journalism, and advertising, constituting "an antidote to narrow, corporate-centric ways of representing interests in modern society" (p. 192).

Liquid Journalism

If the old model of journalism was to push news to the masses so they could vote informed in representative democracy, the argument as outlined in this essay begs the question of how the new media ecology contributes to a new or renewed form of citizenship, and what the role of journalism in such a context would be. Whether or not one is optimistic or hopeful about the collective intelligence found online and the networked individualism offline, it seems doubtful that it is possible to call upon citizens to embrace some sense of socially cohesive purpose that is based on their social identity as centrally informed members of a mass audience: an audience of voters for politics, and an audience of consumers for journalism.

Instead of focusing on voter apathy, one could argue that democracy has arrived at its most successful stage yet: a phase where people trust or believe the political system will function regardless whether they engage with it or not. If democracy effectively means outsourcing governance to a political elite, it has succeeded. However, this is not exactly what is happening. Rather than voter disinterest or civic disengagement, we see another, more anti-hierarchical and deeply individualized type of citizenship emerging. This is the attitude of the citizen-consumer as Margaret Scammell argues:

The act of consumption is becoming increasingly suffused with citizenship characteristics and considerations. Citizenship is not dead, nor dying, but found in new places [. . .] The site of citizens' political involvement is moving from the production side of the economy to the consumption side (2000, p. 351).

Schudson's monitorial citizen is the image of a discerning shopper who has compared customer reviews on *Epinions.com* and clipped her coupons before entering the mall.¹⁵ Furthermore, as we have seen, the new media ecology amplifies the act of consumption to a creative level. Consumerism may have all kinds of destructive effects, yet for all its problems, it also turns citizens into more demanding and critical human beings.

¹⁵ *Epinions* is a site with carries the slogan: "unbiased reviews by real people," suggesting that professional expert reviewers are not real.

Journalism, until now, has not seemed to be able to find an answer to these developments. It blames the commercial system within which it has always operated. It laments the dominant role of technologies that it has contributed to (desktop editing and publishing software, portable audio/video recording equipment, digitalization). It accuses ubiquitous PR spokespeople and spin doctors whose jobs it demands in order to bring the flow of institutional news under control. Despite efforts to “hyperlocalize” or otherwise ground the news in people’s everyday lives, as a profession, it does not seem to be able to engage the consumer-citizen in a meaningful way.

For journalists, all of this not only means that value attributed to media content will be increasingly determined by the interactions between users and producers rather than the product (*news*) itself. The real significance of the argument outlined here is that we have to acknowledge that the key characteristics of current social trends — uncertainty, flux, change, unpredictability, or perhaps, “kludginess” (to paraphrase Jenkins, 2004, p. 34) has come to structurally define or even determine the way people, media, and society interact. This defines the current and future state of affairs in how people make and use journalism all around the world. In terms of business praxis, this means we see a bewildering variety of top-down, hierarchical, and extremely closed-off types of corporate enclosures of the commons existing next to peer-driven forms of collaborative ownership regarding the manufacture of news. In terms of media production processes, we continue to witness a mix of “one-size-fits-all” content made for largely invisible mass audiences next to (and infused by) rich forms of transmedia storytelling which can include elements of user control and “prosumer”-type agency. In a way, it will be a mess, which makes the careful and socially realistic study of what people in their shape-shifting identities as consumers as well as producers of (news) media actually do all the more important.

Instead of lamenting or celebrating this process, or trying to find a fixed point somewhere in the future in our failed predictions of where we are going, we should embrace the uncertainty and complexity of the emerging new media ecology, and enjoy it for what it is: an endless resource for the generation of content and experiences by a growing number of people all around the world. Part of what will happen will reproduce existing power relationships and inequalities, for sure. Yet we are also witnessing an unparalleled degree of human agency and user control in our lived experience of mediated reality. A journalism that will successfully embrace and engage this ecology, will have to become fluid itself — a liquid journalism.

This feature essay does not re-theorize journalism. It also does not neatly describe what is going on inside the profession. What it does, I hope, is give an appropriate frame for locating the contemporary struggles of journalism as a social institution. The implications of such a frame are manifold. For audience reception studies, this, for example, means that assumptions about media effects and agenda-setting theories must be set against debates about what constitutes an “effect” if the receiver of media is the same person as the one sending media. Furthermore, theories of agenda-setting are well-positioned to look for dominant themes and topics, yet even a cursory glance at the contemporary mediascape suggest that multiple, fragmented, and to some extent, overlapping topics are constantly setting the agenda, and that the agenda of institutions is increasingly different from the one of individuals. Regarding content analyses, it is understandable that in the given social context, scholarly attention has shifted from

descriptive projects to more complex research looking for patterns and meaning. However, the study of content has always rested on the premise that content actually exists, that it genuinely can be considered as a finished, static object of study. In a current media ecology of endless remixes, mashups, and continuous edits, that is a problematic assumption. Finally, in my own field of media production studies, the implications are well-voiced by Michael Schudson and Tony Dokoupil in a March 2007 piece for the *Columbia Journalism Review* on the large numbers of lay-offs in the newspaper industry, where they argue that determining who is a journalist "has become as much a matter of philosophical argument as of careful methodology."¹⁶ When studying the making of media, scholars of communication tend to distinguish between professionals (journalists, reporters, and editors) and amateurs (what Axel Bruns calls "producers," the "Pro-Ams," or professional amateurs signaled by Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller, and the free labor engendered by the productive activities of fan labor).¹⁷ Yet in a digital culture, the roles, identities and activities of the people implicated in these categories are constantly shifting and, if anything, are less than clear-cut as such studies would suggest.

Of course, none of this means traditional studies of production, content, and reception are now invalid. What I do want to emphasize, however, is the liquidity underlying the contexts and assumptions on which we tend to ground such studies. With this essay, I also hope to show how this liquidity is not just an academic charge, as it also affects the work and lives of people directly. To Zygmunt Bauman, any study of the social that is not explicitly grounded in human praxis ceases to be relevant (2006, p. 160ff). With news workers across the globe under tremendous pressure, with mass lay-offs of journalists and buy-outs of news companies dominating the corporate agenda (especially in the U.S., across Europe, Australia, and South America¹⁸), and audiences retreating from commercial news products, it is safe to say that any study of journalism has to take into account the precarious context of its object of study. And that context must be seen in terms of a liquid journalism for a monitorial citizenry.

¹⁶ Source URL: http://www.cjr.org/the_research_report/a_long_view_of_layoffs.php

¹⁷ See Axel Bruns's blog on produsage: <http://produsage.org>; Wikipedia entry on professional amateurs: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professional_amateurs; the "The Pro-Am Revolution" blog at: <http://www.proamrevolution.com>; and the Wikipedia entry on fan labor: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fan_labor

¹⁸ See for current information on the dire context of working in the news industry: <http://www.iwantmedia.com/layoffs.html> (U.S.); <http://www.journalism.co.uk> (UK); <http://www.villamedia.nl> (NL); (U.S.); <http://www.journalism.co.uk> (UK); <http://www.villamedia.nl> (NL); <http://www.abcdigitalfutures.net> (Australia).

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