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Factors Transgressing Journalism's Contemporary Mission and Role


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Abstract. This discussion article envisages five different contemporary challenges and pays special attention to the arguments as to why contemporary journalism loses its professional priorities and gets mixed in with other types of mass communication, particularly with public relations (PR) and propaganda. This clarification is of great importance not only for purely professional purposes, but also for broad social priorities. Arguments concerning the role and mission of journalism place it anywhere between watchdog and lapdog which makes the process of studying journalism uncertain and even contradictory as it is caught between the binds of historical values and the traps of contemporary practice.

Keywords: journalism, fourth estate, interpretive journalism, transgression



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Миссия и роль современной журналистики: факторы трансгрессии

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Аннотация. В данной статье рассматриваются пять актуальных вызовов, которые определяют ситуацию трансформации традиционных профессиональных ориентиров журналистики в контексте трансгрессии, смешения с другими видами информационной деятельности, в частности со связями с общественностью и пропагандой. Прояснение этого вопроса имеет существенное значение не только для решения профессиональных задач в сфере СМИ, но и для определения социальных приоритетов массмедиа. В настоящее время роль и миссия журналистики определяются границами классических постулатов прошлого и парадоксами современных практик, что провоцирует неопределенность и даже противоречия в изучении данной сферы деятельности.

Ключевые слова: журналистика, медиатизация, глобализация, политизация, коммерциализация

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

This review paper intends to track and discuss the often-contradictory discourses on the role and mission of contemporary journalism as a profession and journalists as the professionals of the industry, which lies anywhere between watchdog and lapdog which makes our investigation actual for modern media practice accompanied by a large number of information challenges. Even in the more democratic societies political and economic pressures on the media become dominant which significantly decreases opportunities for non-biased information. Journalism is pressured by the other three forms of mass communication, such as advertising, public relations (PR) and propaganda. The authors believe that propaganda dictates certain requirements for the content of information and suggests persuasive and/or manipulative methods of portraying reality that is distorted in consciousness of the audience.

In this article, the primary focus is on academic discussions concerning the role and direction of journalism in the 21st century, although this does require delving deeper into history as the basis for the contemporary evolutions and revolutions in journalism are derived further back. There are also reflections from media sources concerning the change, whether this is positive or negative and why. The number of modern challenges towards journalism is not limited only by those being mentioned. The profession is without doubts is being affected by many more, such as social media, mobile technology, etc. which can create additional threats and opportunities for journalism's development. Nonetheless, those five include all the other informative trends that have become more noticeable and acute, even though they are not strictly being recent developments and trends. This enables us to narrow down the research focus to basic connotations being most pivotal for understanding the changes in modern journalism.

Method

A general internet search using Google Scholar was made with the following search terms: *journalism + change*; *journalism + evolution*; *journalism + revolution*; *journalism + transgression*. An extremely large potential pool of possible hits was received and after manually checking the first ten pages of each search term a set of over 200 items was deemed relevant (based on the above-mentioned traits) for the study. Given the large set of articles, the content and the narratives of the selected materials revealed a certain set of recurring patterns and narratives of the changes that journalism is undergoing, which assisted the coding of the materials.

Coding is an essential element in the qualitative research process as it takes a part the data to see what it yields, before reconstructing the data in a meaningful way (Elliot, 2018). There are two broad approaches to coding data,

inductive and deductive coding. The inductive approach uses the data to generate ideas, whereas the deductive method starts with an idea or theoretical framework and uses the data to verify or disprove the idea (Taylor, 2003). Schadewitz and Jachna note that, “often a combination of both approaches is used. A researcher might start with an inductive coding, trying to identify patterns in the data and establish categories by which the remaining data is coded. In further steps, some theoretical constructs can be consulted to explain and evaluate the categories” (Schadewitz, Jachna, 2007, p. 6). To reach Schutz’s (Schutz, 1967) two orders of interpretive understanding, the method of analysis shall employ an inductive data-driven interpretation as outlined by Boyatzis (Boyatzis, 1998) to reach the first order. Then a deductive template of codes approach outlined by Crabtree and Miller (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) will be used to reach the second tier of understanding.

Given the size of the task to identify the main categories of discussion there is a need to locate codes that are logical and adequate to the task of interpretation. Therefore, the thematic analysis involves a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon. As such, it involves a process of identifying the themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). This was the approach to identifying the code categories used in this article: 1) globalisation; 2) politicisation and commercialisation; 3) new technologies; 4) influence of PR; and 5) advertising. This review article focuses, albeit briefly, on highlighting the main problems as being simultaneously key challenges for contemporary journalism through a review of some of the current academic literature and opinions on the issue.

Journalism’s contemporary global challenges

To achieve the above, the authors identify and analyse five different and broad categories of challenges faced by contemporary journalism and how they affect the mission and role of journalism through evolutionary and/or revolutionary change and transformation of the profession.

Challenge 1: Globalization. Globalization means not only the process of diverse internationalization, which determines the movement towards increasing interdependence of different countries that facilitates the creation of common values and criteria. For example, Chinese journalism has adopted some of the key concepts in Western journalism (such as the typologies of professional journalism), but these have been adapted to the specifics of the national media system (Hassid, 2011). One can also observe the increasing number of international editions of national media, such as the British Guardian UK and now Guardian US edition or the US Huffington Post’s original US and later the UK edition, which export not only ideas, but formats and practice that is associated with the media outlets’ brand. Most important in this movement is spreading of different achievements that determine a unified background for the future technical and technological progresses. It applies to the humanitarian spheres and gives rise to

the development of various strategies, both informational and legislative, which actively promote international integration (Webber, 2006, p. 69).

News Corporation, owned by magnate Rupert Murdoch who is known for a large number of media enterprises being controlled (including the film company *20th century Fox* and hundreds of different radio and print media on five continents). In addition to *News Corporation*, there are gigantic financial investment corporations, also pursuing media businesses, like American *Time Warner*, *Disney*, German *Bertelsmann*, the Japanese *Sony* being included in the list of 500 world leading companies, each with income of US \$10 to 25 billion per year in the early 2000s (Bykov, 2003, p. 78). Those media which are a part of this company support its interests wherever they spread.

It is natural therefore that globalization stimulates a problematic development of the international situation and inevitably increases conflicts in various spheres: military, economic, diplomatic and economic. This situation is particularly noticeable in the current confrontation between Russia and the USA and Western European countries within media reporting. As opinion polls demonstrate, the attitude to economic sanctions against Russia on the part of the population of Western Europe varies. However, the media in these countries are seriously influenced by American political interests are hostile towards Russia (Simons, 2019). At the same time the audience in these countries is unable to see viewpoints of those who oppose an official position of most governments. A similar situation today exists in Russia. Most media there are also hostile towards the US and its partners, due to political interests of the Kremlin. Yet the whole picture significantly reduces plurality of information and the level of discussion on one of the most significant political agenda settings, which negates a potential positive impact from journalism.

Challenge 2: Politicization and commercialization. Journalism as a business has been suffering from a significant recession that affects its profit-making ability, added to this problem are the further business effects of new digital technology. As a result, there has been a focus on the streamlining of operations and trying new business models. However, as McDowell (McDowell, 2011) argues, this is only a part of the solution. Journalism content is increasingly becoming treated as a commodity by audiences and advertisers; therefore, the problem is not only concerning operational aspects, but also touches upon brand management and therefore the expectations of advertisers and the public. Research indicates that journalists are coming under increasing pressure from supervisors, their colleagues and the public to develop a professional identity. This process limits their professional freedom as they become caught in a cycle that stifles their individual freedom to maintain a consistent professional brand identity.

This can create a significant problem in the media sphere, which is being affected by commercial and political organisations that seek to pursue their interests and aims, and to garner public legitimacy via mass media content and therefore destroy journalism with its rhetorical adherence to non-biased reflections

(Papathanassopoulos, 2020). The situation has stimulated an interest and a discussion that reflects on the relative power of journalism in relation to powerful commercial and political interests that are currently being communicated. It should be understood, different political and commercial actors have priorities that are other than the idealised vision and mission of journalism within the moralistic framework and understanding of the “fourth estate”. This creates different and divergent sets of moral and ethical considerations that are directed at realising ‘other’ as opposed to public interest and claims of social responsibility.

Politicization is understood as having direct or indirect influence on journalism, which increases biased coverage of different socio-centric processes. Media politicization is seriously affected by media globalization giving birth, as has been said, to political imbalance. The situation runs contrary to Anglo-American journalism’s ideal of “objectivity” that still prevails, at least rhetorically. However, the ideal was not universally shared among all journalists. Some British print journalists adhered more to the ideals of independence, fair play and non-intervention by the state rather than objectivity (Hanusch, Banjac & Maeres, 2020). This is seen in the increasing level of criticism in and among journalists concerning the evolution of key challenges journalism’s identity and role in society, especially with regards to political partisanship and fake news. For example, the above has been clearly seen in the run-up to the US presidential elections in 2020 in terms of how different media outlets (including social media) cover Biden as the Democrat Party candidate and Trump as the Republican Party candidate. Not only in terms of what they do cover, but also what they refuse to cover. The story concerning the contents of Hunter Biden’s laptop, which saw those media outlets favouring Trump or independent covering the story, and some mainstream liberal media outlets that favour Biden not covering the story.

An interesting result from a study on the notions of transparency and objectivity among US-based journalists demonstrated that “the longer journalists have been in the profession the less they embrace neutrality as an occupational norm” (Hellmueller, Vos & Poepsel, 2013, p. 300). In the contemporary era of politics where liberal democracy is under a great deal of pressure from ‘populist’ or anti-establishment politics, mainstream media and journalism has been seen coming to the defence of liberalism. The result is a decline in trust of the messenger among the audience, there is also a decline in the reliability of the message too.

A relatively recent development in journalism is to move away from the impossible utopian concept of “objectivity” towards the concept of “truth”, which creates a confusing and fallacious information environment (Munoz-Torres, 2012, p. 566). This is perhaps creating the foundations for those current buzzwords such as post-truth world and fake news that have created a great deal of noise in academia, politics and journalism.

Fake news is a current aspect of the contemporary information environment that has attracted a lot of interest and conjecture as to its level of threat and its origins. Although fake news has been practiced for some time, and even recently

the definition has evolved – from something made up or conjured (such as satire or talk shows), to something more sinister, deceptive and manipulative (such as disinformation and propaganda by state actors), and finally to mean something does not agree with one's world view (such as Trump's regular invocation of fake news allegations against *CNN* and other media outlets) (Simons, 2017). The issue of fake news is being used politically to put pressure on journalism.

Commercial news are not only shaped for the consumer, but also for the benefit of advertisers, investors and sources, with economic rationalism increasingly playing a role in print and broadcast journalism in determining news selection. Commercialization of the media also reduces quality of information and leads to a specific spreading of mass culture. On the one hand, the media information in this case becomes more entertaining, and on the other one, it turns out to be overly simplified, and often quite primitive. Accordingly, understanding of the modern world seems to be biased (Mancini, 2013, p. 44). These contradictory demands and patterns create an environment of contradictions, where binary opposing goals and objectives exist side by side with the influences and expectations of different stakeholders.

Ideas have emerged and are developed from an era of “post-journalism” where politicians and others have adopted an ‘entertaining’ format or logic of influence over informing the public, the result has been the death knell to independent and investigative journalism (Capilla, 2021). If journalism is predetermined by thoughtful coverage of reality, given pros and cons of the latter, then propaganda distorts this reality in favour of certain subjective political and economic values. This occurs due to a manipulation by a person or a group of individuals, often in a veiled form, of mass consciousness. Taylor admitted that propaganda can be spread accidentally or unconsciously, in most cases it is based on deliberate decisions, and uses techniques of persuasion designed to achieve specific objectives, for the sake of those who organize the process (Taylor, 2003). These goals are often defined by rigidly specified political idea which undermines all other arguments.

Propaganda is often ‘embedded’ in journalism so much that it is impossible to immediately determine the boundaries between them. This applies, for example, to such a media genre as inquiry, which may resemble journalism, but in fact, is politically or economically biased (Zollmann, 2017). ‘Erosion’ of journalism happens not necessarily because someone deliberately sets this goal. As Lippmann noted the stable existence of any society is possible only through the certain political agenda which can never be fulfilled without propaganda activity. Their presence Lippmann attributed not only to authoritarian, but also to civically oriented regimes under which interests of the so-called ‘average’ people are considered when making state decisions. The development of countries in these conditions does not deny propaganda used by the authorities to achieve their goals (Lippmann, 1997, p. 3–23).

This does not improve the state of journalism being often a ‘hostage’ in contemporary politics. The evolution of political and economic factors provokes

fundamental re-evaluations and changes in the profession of contemporary journalism's definition and practice.

Challenge 3: Entry of new technologies in the media market. This factor could potentially help the realization of the journalistic profession, however daily practice in the media sphere proves that technological changes provoke controversy. It is true that new information technologies assist to immediate reception of information and make the journalism process quicker. These circumstances enable media to engage in discussions with more people and to quickly compare all the 'pros' and 'cons' about socially important issues (Schapals, Porlezza, 2020). Thereby, the penetration of rapid information into these issues becomes deeper. Yet, to what extent the media in these conditions are capable to enforce a profound understanding of reality?

Firstly, the Internet, social media and mobile technologies provides opportunities for manipulation of the mass consciousness. The simultaneous use of verbal and visual effects, moving images, colours and different technical effects radically change perception of the world, and the audience in these terms often stops to distinguish reality from fiction. Technologies already seriously raise the issue about a new phase of the Internet development to be filled up with computer information, without human intervention. This puts on the agenda an idea of creating even a more illusory world compared to what exists now, that has very little in common with reality. Fictional reality is being actualized today through active involvement of illusions or misinformation into public sphere, which becomes especially noticeable during election campaigns, such as the Trump phenomenon (Swire et al., 2017). In this regard, the main problem is generated by unverified information provided as 'truthful' and given in a form of journalism.

Secondly, with the advent of modern technologies, and in particular with the development of the Internet and social media, the level of critical appraisal of information sourced from there began to decline. This is due to the increased competition among editorial offices, a journalist has to work as quickly as possible and often turns out to be unable to evaluate discussible sources of information analytically. He is often not even required to do so. This occurs in Western (Brandzaeg, Følstad & Chapparo Dominguez, 2018) and other journalism environments, for example in the Arab world (Fairfield & Shtein, 2014). A lack of an ideal journalistic professional standard is going to be exacerbated. Meanwhile, this position has always been part and parcel of journalistic activity, which separates it from public relations and advertising.

Thirdly, the development of the Internet has lowered the ethics of relationships between actors disseminating information and the audience (Fairfield, Shtein, 2014). If social networking makes possible the distribution of any uncontrolled information, this inevitably leads to massive consumption of this communicative algorithm in other media. One observer noted the changing nature of the style of communication and the relationship between journalism and its audiences. There has been a gradual transition away from monologist one-to-many communication to what has been described as a "mutualised" relationship,

which represents a more complex many-to-many and interactive form of communication. These approaches to creating information are unable to instil in people an understanding of journalistic creativity with steady rules regarding structure, composition and semantics of the texts. The trends and tendencies in this challenge indicate a rather radical revolution in the professional work of journalists owing to the rapid development and diffusion of modern information communication technologies throughout society.

Challenge 4: Influence of public relations. Public relations (PR), as one of mass communication trends like journalism, seem to be a sphere of creative mass information activity. Journalism and PR have developed alongside each other over the last two centuries (Moloney & McGarth, 2020, p. 81). However, its content is fundamentally different to journalism. PR seeks to encourage a target audience to engage emotionally and sympathetically with a person or organisation in order for that said person or organisation to fulfil its aims and goals. One of the sources of conflict between journalists and PR practitioners is that the latter are viewed as being somehow subjective and biased whereas journalism is intended to be initially prone to objectivity and non-bias (Franklin, 2005, p. 216–217). PR looks as the field of social-oriented activity based on the relationship between the actor and the audience and aimed at promoting a positive image of the actor or organisation.

If journalism seeks a deep and unbiased study of life given diversity of positions existing in society, then PR is focused primarily on the formation of a positive reputation of the actors of influence. It does not mean that a PR-text cannot provide the audience with pros and cons concerning one or another situation but obviously it is very unlikely to meet media standards where content priorities would contradict a position of an information provider whereas a journalism approach predetermines seeking truth.

Practice however seems to be different from theory and get complicated with particular circumstances. Tumber (Tumber, 2001) observes that journalism is under pressure from two different directions. Firstly, it is worth mentioning editorial pressure from media owners and conglomerates. Secondly, there are new forms of political and government communication with the public. To fill up media with diverse information, journalists actively use press releases. Press releases serve as a background for creative media material which creates an illusion of journalistic work. Yet, this approach affects the entire information policy of the media because journalists often begin to treat the received information uncritically, without detailed investigation as though it is wholly trustworthy (Lewis, Williams & Franklin, 2008, p. 43). One more problem for journalistic realization is defined by certain media conditions. For instance, in Russia and in the CIS countries journalists have to earn money for newsrooms where they work. They perform the so-called paid tasks, preparing materials for payment from clients (Azhgikhina, 2007). In this case journalists stop being journalists and become involved in the PR-work which fundamentally changes their social role based on the daily results of their work.

Already in the mid-1980s Baistow raised the issue that the “fourth estate” gradually gives way to the “fifth power” (implied as information technologies in sense of structured information trends) and resorts to streamlined coverage of life (Baistow, 1985, p. 67-77). This trend has become noticeable in the contemporary world being distinguished by media unification because of the development of global information flows. It goes without saying that this situation poses a serious threat to idealised notions of journalism with its individual perceptions. Modern media-practice universally becomes very similar to *PR-nalism* based on a combination of journalism and PR.

This activity promotes media information by imitating journalistic output, or at least almost undistinguishable from it, but the information itself favours the interests of its actor or contributor. Moreover, such information may be well ‘tailored’, given the requirements for its composition, argumentation and other parameters which make it consumable. However, PR-nalism seriously distorts journalism as a profession and inevitably stimulates a shortage of creativity in modern media texts.

The information presented on news stories often offers a similar interpretation of news due to the same press releases consumed by journalists. In terms of today’s political reality journalists apparently do not consider these situations as abnormal and violating the ideal principles of journalistic activity. This is confirmed by Moloney and McGarth, who characterise journalism as having capitulated to PR in the contemporary era (Moloney & McGarth, 2020). Historically, PR has always provided material for journalism, which is nothing new. What is new is the volume and extent to which this has taken place in recent years.

Challenge 5: Mass media advertising. In both a theoretical and practical understanding, advertising plays an important role in mass media products offered to the consumer. There are those that are less optimistic about the public’s ability to gather enough reliable information anymore in order to be able to make those informed decisions on critical aspects that affect their lives, where mass media and journalism are theoretically intended to nurture an environment of free-willed participative democracy.

There are some similarities in the relationship between advertising and journalism as there is between PR and journalism. Erjavec noted a relationship between advertising and journalism in the co-production of “hybrid promotional news” (Erjavec, 2004). This is owing to the large financial stakes in the global advertising market and journalism’s reliance on this source of finance. Advertising revenues are crucial because they provide a large part of the income of media outlets and also help to offset the purchase price for the media product consumer. Advertising can also be used to directly or indirectly influence the quality and nature of the media content, especially something that may harm the interests of the advertiser (Hanusch, Banjac & Maares, 2020). The impact of advertising on media sources increases every year. Along with this, advertisement at this time continued to be a source for its existence and thereby actively influenced the content of the media.

Conclusion

The academic idea and professional practice of journalism has been steadily transgressing away from an utopian ideological concept of ‘pure’ public good towards a less than ideal form of influential and persuasive (in a manipulative sense) pragmatic practice that acts in the interests for powerful for political or social or economic goals. This article has been framed around five contemporary challenges that are faced by journalism around the globe currently. To reiterate these challenges, they are 1) globalisation; 2) politicisation and commercialisation; 3) new technologies; 4) influence of PR; and 5) advertising. These are all central concerns to all countries regardless of their political and economic development, which makes our analysis actual. These five categories should not be viewed as being in isolation from one another as they are mutually influencing and reinforcing certain evolutionary and revolutionary trends and processes in contemporary journalism. Meanwhile, the problems for journalism’s existence are not followed only by the above reasons, but by a very broad view of the essence of the profession itself. One of the problems found in journalism is a lack of definitional and conceptual clarity in the central ideas that form its identity and purpose, for example the use of the standards of ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’ in their work.

Political, cultural, social, economic and technological factors have all influenced how journalism’s role and mission in society is defined and conceived. These factors should also not be considered as being insulated from the effects of each other but interconnected and influencing each other in transforming the concept and practice of contemporary journalism. As has been noted, journalism is often co-opted or made use of by other actors in the stated challenge categories, such as by PR and advertising practitioners, by political or business interests, to further their or their clients’ interests and not the ‘public’ interest. The resulting relationship tends to be asymmetrical in terms of power and influence as the journalism profession seeks to find its footing in the midst of a crisis in the functioning of its economic model and to try and apt to the rapidly evolving technological environment that has seen journalism lose its monopoly on the mass distribution of information. Therefore, the “crisis of journalism” is in fact consisting of a number of simultaneously occurring crises: corporate interference, political interference, influence of PR, influence of advertising, decreasing sense of public legitimacy, financial business model, internal value and normative conflicts in the journalist and academic communities, etc.

The rapid development of new technologies has created a revolutionary change in journalism, which has seen the rise of an environment where almost anyone can simultaneously be a producer as well as a consumer of information. The other environmental factors have had a more gradual, yet profound evolutionary effect upon journalism that has significantly altered journalism’s identity culture that defines its mission and role in society. Furthermore, the combined effect of the five challenge areas has created a revolution in the way that contemporary journalism is being defined and practiced.

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