



## Current Debate on New Media: Implications for Media Education

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*With the Civilmedia11 UnConference mid-April and the Conference of the Euromedia Research Group beginning of May, Salzburg has recently hosted two major events shaping the ongoing debate in media studies. This article sketches the landscape of debate at Civilmedia11 and points out the most interesting contributions of Leah Lievrouw and Natalie Fenton. Their remarks on collaboration platforms for journalists and amateurs (Lievrouw) and post-corporate, not-for-profit news media (Fenton) are put in the context of open data and open government. The article concludes with implications for media education.*

## Civilmedia11: Community Media for Social Change

The *UnConference Civilmedia11* took place in Salzburg from April 14 – 16 at the University's *Arts & Science* department. It focused on the effect of Community Media to social action and political climate, in specific DIY - Do It Yourself - media practices. The structure of the conference program was two-fold: The first and in this case traditional part was devoted to 6 pre-arranged thematic streams with 30 min. talks; the second part consisted in open streams inviting audience feedback and discussion. These two parts, as well as the 6 streams, were arranged in a simultaneous setting. The first day provided the audience with the streams of *Public Value and Community Media* dealing with social change, media literacy and the civil society concept; *Feminist Media Production in Europe* and the *Open Stream* giving country-specific examples of community media and its local/regional characteristics, importance and relevance. The second conference day set out to present the streams of *Democracy and Quality* focusing on policies and the reconciliation of participation and quality in community media, *Researching Community Media Audiences* with manifold perspectives from all over the world and again the *Open Stream*, which this time consisted of talks about community media in relation to representation, race, funding, media law and politics - with a specific excursion to online participatory budgeting. The third and last day was filled with talks about *Crowdfunding & Social Payment* and *Cross Media Publishing* in the pre-arranged thematic streams and a focus on the practices and future of community radio and television in the open stream.

## Changing democracy: Journalism, civic participation and ICTs

The public symposium *Changing democracy: Journalism, civic participation and ICTs* of the Euromedia Research Group was the second major venue of debate that took place in Salzburg. On May 6, conference chairs Josef Trappel and Ursula Maier-Rabler welcomed several key-note speakers of academic institutions. Among them were Leah Lievrouw from the University of California/USA and Natalie Fenton from the University of London/UK. After each key-note, a designated respondent from Salzburg University provided critical analyzes and questions. In the following paragraphs, the main argumentation of Fenton and Lievrouw will be illustrated, especially concerning controversial aspects. Leah Lievrouw, speaking first, was followed by her respondent Stefan Huber. Natalie Fenton was speaking next.

## Journalism in the age of participation (Leah Lievrouw)

Leah Lievrouw opened her talk about *Journalism in the age of participation* inquiring about the presumed crisis of journalism. She questioned whether journalism was in a crisis at all. Undoubtedly, the future of journalism is uncertain. In the ongoing debate about the presumed crisis of journalism, innovations like new technology, new methods, new platforms, new forms of news production and distribution get blamed frequently. Traditional news industries and professional journalists point at these factors because they see their prerogatives being eroded. This alliance between industry and journalism is not self-evident, as they are different entities. Though they are tightly associated with each other, they are not identical. While the news industry is in the business of making mass products, journalism is a practice; it is the effort to make a reasonable account of events and of what is going on in the society. In her talk, Lievrouw distinguished between the problems journalism and the news industry are facing.

Talking about the US-experience, Lievrouw illustrated that economic factors played a role in the generation of the crisis in the media industry long before new technologies emerged: Over the last four decades, a shift took place from family ownership of newspapers to publicly listed corporate ownership. Due to profitability between 5 and 7 % (perceived as too low), owner families lost interest in newspapers. New corporate ownership began to be geographically distant from the paper and the communities that the papers cover. Such remote corporate owners were

not as intimately involved in the life of the communities. Another change factor was corporate investors having higher expectations of profitability, going up to an unsustainable 20 %. In order to satisfy the corporate owners, massive asset-stripping took place in the 1980s and 90s. Reporters were being laid off, printing press plants were shut down, foreign bureaus closed, and investigative reporting was reduced. At the same time, the US Congress passed new legislation that suspended competition rules, allowing two newspapers to share one newsroom in the same city. When new technologies emerged and the news industry had the chance to become early adopters of innovations, the news industry tried to resist any new platforms. News organizations saw technology as a threat to their core business of printing press and creating broadcast programming. Attempting to preserve print, investigative reporting was further reduced and massive shifts to lifestyle and entertainment took place.

## Journalism

Looking at its history, Lievrouw pointed out that journalism was not always a profession taught in higher education – with university degrees turning into barriers to occupational entry. It rather was a craft, practiced by amateurs: journalism was learnt on the job. Only in the last decades a drive towards professionalization can be observed. Journalists started to shelter their professional market, like in other occupations where insiders attempt professionalization so they do not have to compete with outsiders anymore. The professionalization of journalism by accredited university courses occurred in the same period when the news industry was becoming a larger economic and political power. As news

organizations benefited from this, journalism and the industry served each other. Today though, journalism as a practice is being rethought. Among the activities that were previously considered professional, Lievrouw counts editoriability, reporting, knowing to figure out a story, how to write it up, how to structure the narrative, how to illustrate it, and to represent it. Little by little, those skills are being adopted by people in the community who would like to tell their story. Indymedia.org is an example of amateurs, activists and community advocates who want to have some of the benefits of journalists. They go and talk to people, take pictures, and investigate stories. For them, there is no need for printing plants anymore. What they need are online platforms to make themselves understood. Lievrouw suggested to debate on how communication science can investigate the methods and practices of such activist journalism.

## Participatory Journalism

Journalistic practices are to be understood as a form of participation when community members employ them in order to be active and engage themselves. Various labels have been used to describe the phenomenon such as citizen journalism, grassroots journalism, open source journalism and even garage band journalism. The bottom-up nature of the idea shows strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, participatory journalism draws attention to issues that would not be covered otherwise. By getting down to community level, even neighborhoods, it is hyper local, inclusive and emphasizes feedback. On the other hand, it is criticized of being unreliable, partisan and subjective. Such critique is heard mostly from the part of professional journalists

who miss authority, expertise and editing in participatory journalism, according to Lievrouw. But not all professional journalists think like that. Some actively turn to participatory journalism and develop new collaborative models. Lievrouw told the audience at the symposium about laid-off journalists in the US who wanted to continue practicing their craft at local level. Some of them found new smalltown papers, others bought local papers and run them offline and online in collaboration with amateurs. In these models the public is not just consuming, but invited in, and involved in events. The organization of work is based on improvisation in many cases. In addition to the classical values of journalism, new values are created. Emphasis is put on authenticity (i.e. reporting close to the community), fairness, interactivity, and news as a process, not as a product. Such new platforms make it possible to add new angles to an ongoing story.

Collaborative models of participatory journalism demand new kinds of skills to be taught to journalists and amateurs. Data visualization is very important, according to Lievrouw. Data Journalism, that is collaboration between designers and journalists in ongoing stories, is an emerging journalistic practice. It deals with the questions: How can we make immaterial data understandable? How can abstract data flows be represented to people in a meaningful way? Technologies allow us to capture more data than ever before. Data search needs to be taught, just like the design of visualization and its interpretation. As Lievrouw concluded, design is a skill and a powerful way of telling a story besides text.

## Data journalism (Stefan Huber)

In his response to Lievrouw's talk, Stefan Huber referred to and inquired about the development of data journalism. The importance of understanding, visualizing, explaining and interpreting data is evident in the information age. Data journalism on the local level can help people to understand their communities' budget, for instance. Online budgeting on municipal level is already practiced in some German towns and villages. Data visualization (i.e. the creative recombination and depiction of data sets) is a useful tool for citizen empowerment. It allows people to claim knowledge back, which has been gathered by local administrations in various contexts over years. Complex matters become easier to understand if its underlying data (e. g. revenues and expenditures in the case of municipal budgets) is coherently visualized. Both professional and amateur journalists can play an important role in embedding visualized data in written, oral or visual reports. Huber emphasized the great potential of open data for civic journalism and vice versa. He then asked Lievrouw if she could give any advice for prospective Austrian data journalists.

Lievrouw proposed an illustrative video produced by Stanford University in 2010 called *Journalism in the age of data*. Besides covering data journalism, the video features a young woman who practices data visualization. Lievrouw further explained that newspapers are beginning to hire data design staff in order to collaborate with reporters. In an online environment, viewers need to have the opportunity to manipulate the visualized data, to change the templates. For this purpose, training in

journalism needs to focus on design, illustration, representation and on telling a story in multiple modes.

## The relationship between news and democracy (Natalie Fenton)

Natalie Fenton addressed the audience at the symposium *Changing democracy: Journalism, civic participation and ICTs* with a talk about the relationship between news and democracy. Despite a tremendous growth in free news papers and online and mobile platforms in the UK, newspaper circulation has reached an all time low, she explained. Regardless of the Internet, British citizens are generally consuming less news today. The same falling numbers account for the consumption of television news. In regard of this development, Fenton raised the critical question of what we want news for and how it can be delivered in the future.

Journalism can be democratizing as well as being de-democratizing. The changes to journalism that came with the Internet (i.e. new ways of collecting and reporting information into newsrooms, new writing and search techniques, iterative processes, delivery at great speed, etc) do not necessarily reinvigorate democracy. Fenton characterized the Internet as a tool used in the context of socio-political-economic structures. Those structures play an important role in turning the Internet into a democratizing or de-democratizing tool. At the present time, the news industry and the practice of journalism are in dire trouble in the UK. The decline in advertising revenues and huge cuts in personal have had negative impact on journalism. Branches of journalism that cannot count

on economics of scale (like investigative, foreign and local journalism) have been hit hard. The results are paradoxical for the digital age: Although the space for news has expanded exponentially and the speed at which it has to be delivered is virtually instantaneous, far fewer journalists are doing the job. This equals a devaluation of the very kind of news journalism that is in the public interest.

## The changing face of news journalism

With news losing its market value to advertisers, the market rationale for the provision of news for the public good and in the public interest comes under scrutiny. Fenton emphasized that news for the public interest stands for the very kind of news that maintains the relationship with democracy. Instead of reinvesting in news journalism, market ambitions and the desire to deliver extensive profits to shareholders, drives news organizations to cut back on journalists, commodify news and homogenize the content. Findings of a study among 200 journalists compare the vocational reality to *creative cannibalism* rather than the craft of journalism. Following the principles of commercialism and at the expense of democratic values, journalism becomes faster and shallower. In this context, protecting and enhancing a diversity of media content is even more vital. Even with the recent explosion in media outlets and citizens being enabled to publish media content more easily than ever, there is still a significant threat to pluralism. A limited number of organizations is still controlling the flow of news and the contour of public debate, as Fenton uttered to raise concern.

Traditional offline news organizations with established news production infrastructure and a strong market position have invested heavily in

online platforms. Fenton adverted that these organizations are dominating the consumption of online news. Frequently, offline mainstream news find their way onto the online platforms of news organizations. As UK citizens mainly use online news sites run by existing news providers, their dominance is further established. Accordingly, the content of the online news looked at by the citizens does not necessarily change in comparison to offline news. The design of search engines also does its part in directing more users to the most popular sites.

## The effect of new technology and marketization on news journalism

Fenton continued pointing out the ambiguous role of new technology in the current collapse of the news economy. New technology has both been blamed for the crisis of the news economy and also called its savior. While some emphasize new technology's potential to save news by delivering a new form of collaborative journalism, Fenton holds serious reservations about the likelihood of this to occur. Although she admits that online newspapers are growing, while print versions are declining, Fenton argues that there is evidence of people still using the internet mostly for entertainment purposes. Easy access to online news does not necessarily result in plurality, as long as news itself is driven by the interest of the news industry over and above the public information needs. It is unlikely, she said, that the rebirth of news will be a cause of new technology if the economic context does not change. Fenton sees the nature of news journalism currently linked to the practices of neoliberalism that cause the increasing marketization of news. The

dominant market logic demands ever growing profit margins at the cost of quality journalism.

Newspapers are moving out of local contexts, merge into larger organizations and begin to feed bigger regions with fewer journalists. Local communities then recognize the growing disalignment of the newspaper with their lifeworld and the desire to buy newspapers drops. With readership falling, advertising slips away too. The obvious response would be to ingrain the newspaper in the local community by journalists on the local level, i.e. to produce the newspaper that all of the consumers actually want and value. Fenton brought the example of a specific area in the UK which had lost all paid-for local newspapers. The residents of this area wanted their local newspaper back as they did not trust the internet. For them, the internet appeared to be fragmented and inapt to hold power to account. Fenton warned that citizen journalism cannot be a replacement for professional journalism.

## Regulation for post-corporate, not-for-profit news media

Summing up her talk, Fenton drew attention to a two-fold contradiction in the relationship between contemporary news and democracy: the first side of the coin is situated between the transforming potential of new technologies and the stifling constraints of the free market. The second side concerns the democratic potential of news media and the structural practice of journalism. Fenton agreed that news help to make democracy work, but only if journalists are given the freedom and resources necessary to do their job. She stressed that the notion of the freedom of

press does not only stand for freedom from censorship and interference from government, but also for freedom from the constraints and limitations of the market. From her experience in the UK, there is a rush for deregulation for the benefit of the market, but deadlock in the regulation for a healthy relationship between news media and democracy. Fenton emphasized the need for such regulation, because market forces would otherwise sweep aside ethical journalism in pursuit of financial interests. She concluded:

*“Only when we are able to reimagine a post-corporate, not-for-profit, independent news media freed from the shackles of commercialism that prioritizes the relationship with democracy and exists primarily to aim for that ethical horizon, will the true value of news in the digital age be realized.”*

## Implications for media education in the context of open data and open government

Concerning the debates at the Civilmedia11 UnConference and the symposium on Changing democracy – especially the input from Lievrouw and Fenton – common ground can be identified in the aspiration for a reconciliation between participation and quality in democracy and media. Still, different approaches are taken in what accounts for the establishment of a sustainable balance. While the focus was on Do It Yourself Community Media at Civilmedia11, Fenton’s argumentation started from a professional news media perspective. Lievrouw’s approach, in our interpretation, is situated in between. Fenton’s concern is with the contradiction between the transforming potential of new

technologies and the stifling constraints of the free market; which makes her call for tighter regulation. Lievrouw's argumentation – exemplified in collaborative platforms for professionals and amateurs – seems more concerned with the capabilities people need if they want to commit themselves to news journalism and democratic participation. Two issues that Lievrouw would arguably agree with were brought forth by Fenton. The first concerns the domination of online news by traditional offline news providers. The second is the characterization of the Internet as a tool used in socio-political-economic structures. In this context, Lievrouw referred to Indymedia - an example of amateurs and community activists. Indymedia operates successfully in the very socio-political-economic structures rightly criticized by Fenton. Democratic plurality still provides potential for many more platforms like Indymedia, specialized on different kinds of journalism as well as on local and regional level. Data journalism is such a kind of journalism and will see tremendous growth in the near future, providing open data and open government a chance to become part of generally accepted democratic values.

With municipalities providing their digital data stock online, both professional journalists and amateurs will have access to a myriad of stories they can craft out of raw data. Media education needs to equip people with the skills needed for data search, design, visualization and interpretation, as Lievrouw pointed out. New media capabilities involve the competency to combine text, visual and oral content with data re-configuration, interpretation and visualization to one integrated story. Imagine citizens and data journalists of a given municipality collaborating on an online platform on the reconfiguration of open raw data concerning their very living environment, combining it with pictures they have taken themselves and consulting a professional journalist for editing the story. Such an integrated news story can be appealing to readers online and offline, free and paid-for. In combination with participatory online budgeting on municipal level, such local integrated news stories can powerfully influence budget allocations and thereby play an important role in local participatory democracy.