Getting past the future: journalism ethics, innovation, and a call for 'flexible first'[1]

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Abstract

Journalists have long used ethical principles to define who they are as well as how they should behave. Ethics become a boundary marker to distinguish journalists from non-journalists, and familiar practices from unknown ones. As a result, journalists initially tend to frame a new approach as posing a terrible challenge to normative principles – that is, as something that must be resisted on moral grounds. Such resistance can easily become an impediment to thinking productively about how best to respond to innovation. This essay proposes that journalists should instead confront change by asking how they can adapt to – and adapt along with – the new thing, while at the same time preserving their core values.

For a long time now – more than a century, ever since journalists began to see themselves as members of a profession and not just an occupation – ethical principles have been used not only to suggest how journalists should behave but also to define who they are.

Ethics are used as a type of boundary marker to distinguish the familiar from the unknown, as well as to draw a figurative circle that encompasses and protects "us" while excluding "them," all those people who are Not Journalists (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). Bedrock normative principles are invoked to separate the comfortable set of practices we know (and fellow practitioners with whom we identify) from the unknown, which like all human beings we tend to fear. The same principles also give journalists a rationale for justifying that fear.

But therein lies a problem. It's all too easy to cross the line from using ethics as a legitimate cause for concern to using ethics as a crutch. When the reaction to every unfamiliar thing that comes along is to frame it as a terrible challenge to normative principles – that is, as something that must be resisted on moral grounds – the resistance can easily turn from professionally self-affirming to self-defeating.

The resistance generally comes in two often-overlapping forms. One is that the people doing the new thing are not journalists and need not (and, the argument goes,

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therefore do not) uphold the standards that "real" journalists uphold. The other is that we, the real journalists, will have to do that new thing – or indeed are already being asked, maybe even required, to do it – and will compromise our own ethical standards in the process.

I have long been a strong believer in the centrality of ethical standards as journalists move to a digital environment. Adherence to norms that bolster our claim to be purveyors of truthful, trustworthy information is arguably more important than ever at a time when we are immersed in information of doubtful provenance and variable quality. Journalists have long since lost their monopoly as society's information providers, making it absolutely fundamental that they never cede the ability to plausibly claim that what they contribute is credible and that their own actions are in service of the public good.

Yet the automatic response to novelty as moral threat is irritating and frustrating because it is an impediment to thinking more productively, right from the start, about how best to respond to innovation. Over and over, journalists have wasted valuable time agonizing about change, then have had to scramble to regain the ground they've inevitably lost to the nimble innovators surging past them.

A better approach, I propose, would be to begin on offence rather than defence: How might we, as journalists, adapt to – and adapt along with – this new thing, while at the same time preserving our core values? Instead of spending a great deal of time and mental energy explaining why those values clash with the latest change, let's begin by thinking creatively about how we might find a way to make them mesh instead.

This essay offers a series of examples, most though not all from scholarly work, of journalists' responses to digital innovation over the past two decades, since the advent of the Internet as a medium for increasingly widespread public use. Of course, the quotes that follow do not represent a universal reaction. A great many journalists have held far more nuanced views, and others have embraced the changes as they have come, seeing the emerging medium as a place of incredible opportunity to enhance their work and its impact. On the other hand, these quotes are not unique, either. In talking with journalists about change over the past 20 years, I've heard these sentiments repeatedly, and other researchers have, as well. A great many practitioners have reacted negatively to each successive wave of change – and in doing so, most have tended to cite ethical concerns as justification for their expressed desire to stand as far back as possible from the cutting edge.

The Internet: Mid- to late 1990s

> "In print, we've always had the luxury of, well, let's see if what we have immediately is actually true and the whole story and can be verified. The old adage was, 'Get it first, but first, get it right.' Well, now it's just 'get it first'"
> (*US newspaper journalist*; Singer, 1997a: 82).

"The Internet works with false information being presented as real. I guess what that boils down to is, who is to be held accountable?" (*US newspaper journalist*; Singer, 1997b: 80-81).

"Instead of gatekeepers, we will become doormen and doorwomen, bowing down to every whim of the reader and worrying not to offend them with negative, realistic news events" (*US newspaper journalist*; Singer, 1997b, p. 10).

"Online, you can choose what you want to read about, and if all you want to read about is guns and ammo, you can do that for the rest of your life, and never even see anything else" (*US newspaper journalist;* Singer, 1997a: 82).

Although scientists and researchers had been using it for many years, the Internet became a medium for ordinary people – some of them journalists – with the invention of an easy-to-use graphical "interface" in the mid-1990s. The first Web browsers became publicly available in 1994 and 1995; hundreds, then thousands, of news outlets around the world created websites over the next few years and began generating content to put on them. Journalists' initial reactions included concerns about privacy, accuracy, autonomy (Deuze & Yeshua, 2001), and a potential loss of a well-informed (by journalists, of course) citizenry.

Truth-telling has long been viewed as a primary virtue and a central mandate for journalists (Christians & Cooper, 2009; Laitila, 1995), and the new medium was quickly framed as having at least the potential for both inadvertent and deliberate dissemination of untruths. Even before some journalists had used the Internet themselves, they began articulating fears that its emphasis on rapid delivery of information, in particular, would undermine verification procedures that provided a safeguard against error. A related concern was the difficulty of differentiating fact from fiction in a medium where credibility markers could be easily appropriated and replicated by one and all, with no one necessarily responsible for any of it in the way that a newspaper was responsible for what it published or a TV station for what it broadcast.

Autonomy is another norm central to journalism, as to all occupations whose practitioners consider themselves to be professionals (Larson, 1977). Journalists have fiercely defended their role as independent gatekeepers, a role that rests on their ability to make their own judgments about what constitutes news and therefore best serves a vaguely defined public interest. Although much attention has gone to remaining free of government and commercial influences, journalists also have consistently resisted calls to be more interactive with and responsive to audiences; indeed, they invoke autonomy as a way to preclude calls for meaningful civic engagement, critics charge (McDevitt *et al.*, 2002). The overtly two-way nature of the Internet raised alarms about independent news judgment right from the start.

More broadly, journalists nurture a strong belief in their own overarching ethical role as providers of a public service, and the self-conception as "watchdogs" over the powerful is a central component of journalistic ideology (Deuze, 2005). The premise, of

course, is that exposure to a news package carefully constructed by professional gate-keepers will result in a populace credibly informed about a range of things that matter: politics, national and world affairs, economics, the working of social institutions, perhaps with a few carefully chosen diversions – the human interest story, the film review, the sports recap – sprinkled in the mix to leaven the heavy load of good citizenship. But again right from the start, the ability of online users to bypass all the stuff that journalists felt they needed and go right to the stuff they wanted was readily apparent. It that was all "guns and ammo" all the time, well, then, the world would quickly become an information-poorer place.

Convergence and Multimedia: Late 1990s and early 2000s

"I went to j-school to be a journalist, not to be a multimedia person, not to be a TV person, not to multitask. ... I have never liked TV journalism. I've always thought it's abhorrent, a sub-species" (*US newspaper journalist*; Singer, 2004: 14).

"If I have to rush to the newsroom to enter with the story in an hour's time, I just cannot stay around to get another interview or to do additional research, which I would had done if I were only writing for the newspaper" (*Spanish newspaper journalist*; Avilés & Carvajal, 2008: 231).

"If we become a slave to an entertainment medium, maybe we've lost something. It hasn't happened, but I can see the potential" (*US newspaper journalist*; Singer, 2006: 43).

Around 2000, the initial "dot com bubble" in the United States burst, with global repercussions. After several years of meteoric growth by a wave of newly formed online companies, many of them propped up primarily by short-term funding from venture capitalists rather than by sustainable business models, there was a sudden and dramatic retrenchment. Although media companies that had launched a website in the late 1990s were by that time locked into sustaining their online presence, few had yet seen a profit from it. So they looked for ways to gain more users (which, because they were still thinking in terms of traditional advertising models, were thought to automatically equate to more revenue) without spending a whole lot more money in the process.

Two common, and related, approaches were to add "multimedia" – audio and video content, which new, small-yet-sophisticated technologies facilitated creating and editing without much expertise – and to experiment with newsroom "convergence," the combination of news staffs, products, technologies, and geography among the previously separate provinces of print, television, and online media (Singer, 2004). Suddenly, editors were asking print reporters to shoot on-location video or to do "stand-up" recaps from the newsroom; TV journalists were asked to write weekend columns for the newspaper and to promote the next day's print stories in their newscasts.

Many in the newsroom were, predictably, appalled. Newspaper journalists, in particular, already had a long history of belittling their broadcast colleagues as, in the words of one print reporter, "hair spray, bow ties, vapid airheads" (Singer, 2004: 10) – that is, as people who were not "real" journalists at all but instead an "abhorrent sub-species" (ibid.: 14). Others put a more explicit normative spin on their concerns. For instance, some newspaper journalists felt broadcast colleagues were less "meticulous" about verifying information or correcting errors, while others worried that convergence would increase the prominence of "splashy, TV-oriented stories" to the detriment of the "more issue-oriented" pieces that work well in print (Singer, 2006: 41-42).

Many of these and other concerns, as the journalists themselves acknowledged, were about something that might happen rather than something that had actually occurred. For instance, a print reporter declared he got an uncomfortable "journalistic hair-on-the-back-of-the-neck feeling" when he thought about how the advertiser sponsoring his weekly television piece might jeopardize his independence – even though, he admitted, the sponsor had never actually sought to influence his story at all (Singer, 2006: 45). Similarly worrisome, in a what-if sort of way, was a potential shift in emphasis from covering the community to merely generating traffic, particularly given increased collaboration with colleagues who "live and die" by "ratings that come in every freaking week." The threat to public service norms, the risk of becoming "a slave to an entertainment medium," was hypothetical, but still journalists could, and did, vividly envision the danger (ibid.: 43).

As for creating multimedia content, which international surveys suggest journalists increasingly see as a vital skill (Willnat *et al.*, 2013), some admitted that they were simply afraid of the unknown and unfamiliar. But others, predictably, framed their fear in ethical terms, emphasizing detrimental effects on the quality of news, the time available to do additional reporting, or both. Rushing back to the newsroom to create and edit a multimedia story erases time available "to get another interview or to do additional research" (Avilés & Carvajal, 2008: 231). "I'm like a duck," said an American newspaper reporter. "I'm already paddling as fast as I can" (Singer, 2004: 12).

Bloggers: Early 2000s

"It's vanity journalism. 'Oh look at me, I can express an opinion on something'. And I'm too much of an old style journalist, you know I still put value on fairness and balance and everything else. And I don't particularly care generally what most ill-informed people out there who appoint themselves pundits think. Because basically it's drinking bath water" (*Canadian TV journalist*; Bivens, 2008: 119).

Bloggers "publish because they hear 'something' from 'someone' who is 'reliable.' Sorry, not good enough" (*US newspaper journalist*; Carlson, 2007: 274).

"Blogging is not journalism. Often it is as far from journalism as it is possible to get, with unsubstantiated rumour, prejudice and gossip masquerading as informed opinion" (*British technology columnist and critic;* Hermida, 2008: 275-276).

Blogging is "little more than hype dished out largely by the unemployable to the aimless" (*US magazine journalist and industry consultant*; Rothenberg, 2004).

If convergence and multimedia threatened to steal time that journalists felt could be more profitably spent producing "quality" journalism, bloggers threatened to steal their very identity. As easy-to-use self-publishing platforms became widely available, the implications of a truly open, interactive, and unfettered medium became apparent for perhaps the first time. One very big and very unavoidable implication was that bloggers were staking a claim to journalists' occupational turf: selecting events and issues for audience attention, commenting on those issues, even (though more through aggregation than personal investigation) gathering the information in the first place (Lowrey, 2006). Journalists quickly got busy drawing lines in the cyber-sand: real journalists, who valued "fairness and balance and everything else" (Bivens, 2008: 119), on one side, and poseurs with their "ill-informed," opinionated little bath-water blogs on the other.

One of the primary norms that journalists used in differentiating themselves from bloggers was a form of independence, framed variously as neutrality, impartiality, or objectivity, a contested but commonplace exemplar of journalists' claim to professionalism and power (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). Bloggers quickly established themselves as people who provided their own personal views about the news, and journalists were equally quick to frame the blending of opinion with information as an ethical problem. "Bloggers aren't preaching to the choir. They are the choir," a newspaper columnist wrote in 2004. "This isn't fair, unbiased and objective journalism. Nor is it trying to be" (Carlson, 2007: 268). A columnist at another newspaper agreed: "Online, free of mainstream journalistic norms, bloggers don't have to be objective or politically correct" (ibid.: 272). In an article for the influential trade magazine *Advertising Age*, one writer pronounced blogging to be "little more than hype dished out largely by the unemployable to the aimless" (Rothenberg, 2004), and for at least a while, journalists and their employers seemed to take him at his word.

Of course, just as journalists producing online content, including multimedia content, soon became commonplace, so too did journalists producing blogs for their news organizations. Yet concerns about how, or whether, to maintain neutrality lingered for some time and indeed linger still. A series of quotes from journalists at the BBC, which published its first newsroom blog in December 2005 and within three years was offering more than 80 (Hermida, 2008), illustrates the perceived tension. The quote above suggesting blogging is "as far from journalism as it is possible to get" (Thompson, 2003) is from a piece written for the BBC website, and BBC journalists themselves were even

more explicit. Blogging can, "on the face of things, sit awkwardly alongside some of the BBC's editorial values: truth and accuracy, impartiality and diversity of opinion, editorial integrity and independence, serving the public interest, fairness, and privacy" (Hermida, 2008: 276) – this from the man who at the time was the BBC editor in charge of blogging. The BBC's online features editor put it this way: "The thing we explain to all our bloggers, and thankfully they've all got it, is that they shouldn't misunderstand the apparent informal atmosphere of a blog to let their commitment to impartiality drop" (ibid.: 277). "Same rules apply as on air – impartiality is the watchword. Which means bloggers have to tread a careful line – they can be engaging and judgmental but must not take sides," said one of those BBC journalists-turned-blogger. "We cannot write, we would not want to write, partisan copy in any way, shape or form" (ibid.: 276-277). Even as journalists became proficient at blogging, then, the traditional norm of impartiality – a norm built into the BBC's charter – remained, at least in their view, a key boundary marker between themselves and bloggers unaffiliated with news organizations.

A related ethical concern that journalists expressed early and often was that material published on blogs had not been verified and thus was not to be trusted. On the contrary, journalists portrayed bloggers' verification methods as lazy and slipshod – practices that were simply "not good enough" (Carlson, 2007: 274). An academic summed up the concern in a 2004 column for his local newspaper: "You don't have any credibility test" for a blogger's sources, he wrote. "If it shows up in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* or the *Omaha World-Herald*, I know it's been reviewed by somebody whose profession requires them to have checked. With a blog, you have no clue" (Carlson, 2007: 274). A survey in the mid-2000s found sizable numbers of journalists characterized blogs as untrustworthy, neither credible nor factual (Chung *et al.*, 2007). In fact, verification was invoked as a definitional practice, illustrative of what a technology columnist for various print publications identified as the "disconnect" between bloggers and journalists. "Bloggers, in general, know little about independent verification of information and data. They lack the tools and experience for in-depth research. They don't know how to fact-check," he wrote (Andrews, 2003). "Calling a typical blogger a journalist is like calling anyone who takes a snapshot a photographer."

Not incidentally, the criticisms related to both impartiality and verification pointed toward the emergence of a norm that, while not new, proved especially well-suited to the zeitgeist of an interactive medium: transparency. Disclosure about the blogger's background, motives, and financial considerations was declared to be of paramount importance, with prominent bloggers identified as especially likely to offer substantial information about themselves (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005).

Before long, growing numbers of journalists were becoming "j-bloggers" – typically despite considerable trepidation among managers that staffers would say something embarrassing (Outing, 2004). Although traditional journalistic norms of objectivity and detachment made it harder for journalists to embrace full disclosure (Hayes *et al.*, 2006), most did eventually become more at ease with admitting they were actual human beings. Of course, they promptly positioned this shift as justified, even mandated, by – what

else? –professional ethics, particularly accountability to the public through an expanded form of truth-telling. The "fundamental mission" of a CBS News blog, for example, was to bring transparency to the news operation, enabling the broadcaster "to be more open about how and why it makes editorial decisions" (Meyer, 2005: 1, 4). "We must embrace transparency," agreed the former *Washington Post* ombudsman. "It's part of holding ourselves accountable to a public that has long wondered who's watching the watchdogs" (Smolkin, 2006). In short, journalists had come full circle: appropriating a blogging norm to explain why journalistic content was in fact morally superior (Karlsson, 2011).

User-generated content: Mid- to late 2000s

> When you have people involved who are not professional journalists, they don't have a grasp of the ethics involved ... You risk diluting the news to hearsay and gossip" *(US newspaper journalist*; Lewis et al., 2010: 170).

> "Things can be construed as fact when there's nothing to back them up as facts" *(US newspaper journalist*; ibid.).

> The value of UGC is "disproportionate to the excessive amount of management time which is taken up with trying to ensure it is accurate, balanced, honest, fair and – most importantly – legally safe to publish" *(British newspaper journalist*; Singer, 2010: 134).

On to the second half of the 2000s, when journalists (including j-bloggers) were wrestling with user-generated content, mostly in the form of comments attached to their articles. If bloggers were a challenge to journalists' occupational claims as the creators of timely and newsworthy online content, user-generated content meant they also were losing control over what was published even under their own byline and their employer's brand. They wasted little time articulating why such content was not and never could be journalistic – why, in fact, it posed a real threat to editorial values and news standards (Harrison, 2010) – and as before, their definition of real journalism rested solidly on ethical principles.

Ethical concerns about user-generated content, especially comments, were wide-ranging, but accuracy, credibility, and civility tended to be prominent and intertwined. The first of these was again closely connected to the difficulty of verifying information – maybe factual, maybe merely "hearsay and gossip" (Lewis et al., 2010: 170) – provided by people for whose contributions journalists believed they were responsible, yet over whom they had no formal control. Journalists felt their credibility was in the crosshairs. When journalists report a story, "we talk to at least three sources. When we print something, we know it's as close to the truth as possible," a U.S. community journalist said. "When you have a citizen who has a gripe about the police department, that's going to be as much opinion as fact. It affects the credibility of your organization" (Lewis *et al*.,

2010: 170). A British editor said she had no expectation that users would be credible, citing a lack of information about "what they know, what they don't know, what motivation they have, and what views they bring with them" (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 13). Another was even more blunt: "The platform gives credibility to people whose comments may be completely inaccurate, offensive or without foundation in fact. It arguably undermines the work of professional journalists by placing the words of people who have no training or professional responsibility alongside, or even on a par with, those who do" (ibid.: 12-13). Heaven forfend.

Moreover, journalists said, users – unlike journalists – do not necessarily feel accountable for what they publish. In particular, the ability of users – again unlike journalists – to post their news and views anonymously was highlighted as indicative of a lack of accountability and as a contributing factor to abusive online behavior. The use of pseudonyms was taken to offer users free rein to be outrageous (Singer, 2010): Because they are anonymous, a British journalist said, "people feel licensed to say things in content and style that they wouldn't own if publishing as themselves" (Singer & Ashman, 2009: 16). And journalists saw online incivility as rampant. A British editor, for instance, described message boards as "a bunch of bigots ... shouting from one side of the room to the other and back again without even bothering to listen to what the other side of the room were saying. If someone did try to put a reasonable, balanced view, it was an exception (Thurman, 2008: 144-145). Another, at a smaller paper, described "most" online comments as "vulgar, abusive and generally worthless. It cheapens our product and, in some cases, offends our sources," who feared becoming "the subject of human bear baiting" if a story quoted them (Singer, 2010: 134).

With user-generated content, legal concerns were mixed with ethical ones. Ensuring that material from outside the newsroom was "legally safe to publish" took considerable journalistic time and energy. Comments are "subject to libel claims, slander, censorship rules, the ban on publicizing the name of the rape victim – this is tons and tons of work, to read these things, to approve them," as an Israeli editor explained (Singer et al., 2010: 135). Libel was the most prominent legal concern: "A newspaper publisher is responsible for everything that it publishes, including the posting that come from the various whack-jobs in society," said a Canadian editor (ibid., 2010: 131). Other legal worries involved hate speech, particularly in countries such as Germany with strict laws in this area, and intellectual property, which journalists maintained "ordinary citizens" don't understand.

There's more, of course, but you get the idea. In fairness, it is worth reiterating that these criticisms and concerns were not universal; many journalists expressed support for user contributions, though not atypically couched in caveats about the real costs versus the ideal benefits. Yet many journalists, from diverse media outlets in diverse countries, did offer an ethical framing of the problems raised by the new thing and an ethics-based delineation of why it was not journalism. Once again, they drew a line and promptly declared themselves on the side of the angels.

Social Media: Late 2000s and early 2010s

"Twitter floods the market with private thoughts of public figures, most of which aren't really worth articulating" (*US alternative journalist*; Arceneaux & Weiss, 2010: 1271).

''One function of mainstream media journalism is to disseminate information we've determined to be reliable. ... The reliance on Twitter and Facebook is essentially throwing the doors open to everything and anything'' *(US radio journalist*; Small, 2011: 873).

"It's like searching for medical advice in an online world of quacks and cures" (*US syndicated columnist*; Hermida, 2010: 300).

"You have this view that there are lots of other people out there who are your eyes and ears. They can be really useful ... but your vantage point is a computer screen in an office block in London, and as a journalist you always find out more when you're there. Always" (*British newspaper journalist*; Thurman & Walters, 2013: 93).

Since the late 2000s, a time of economic and well as technological upheaval in the media and beyond, user-generated content has been joined by social media, the last of the innovations on my list but, like all the others, generally met with what by now will be familiar ethically framed misgivings. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and a thousand more are indeed opening the doors to "everything and anything," and how are we – and the public we are here to serve – to know who or what to trust?

Many social media formats, such as Twitter, are essentially micro-blogs, and the concerns are in some ways quite similar to those raised a few years earlier about blogs and then about user-generated content. But unlike comments and other user contributions to news websites that are generated after the journalist has already produced the story, social media material is potential source material. The questions about trustworthiness, therefore, are of more direct concern: Is the information important and reliable enough for me to incorporate in a story that has my byline attached?

Many journalists were initially dubious. "A toy for bored celebrities and high-school girls" is how a veteran columnist described Twitter in 2009 (Hermida, 2010: 299) – in other words, for people whose thoughts aren't worth being articulated, let alone shared. Other journalists also mocked the triviality of tweets, their lack not just of seriousness but also of newsworthiness. "What could be more annoying and less useful than a site where thousands of people are given 140 characters to shout out about what they're doing at every moment of the day? The amazing thing is that enough people out there think this mindless stream of ephemera ('I'm eating a tangerine', 'I'm waiting for a plane', I want a Big Mac') is interesting enough to serve as the basis for a viable advertising platform," wrote a columnist in *Advertising Age* (Arceneaux & Weiss, 2010: 1271) ... the same publication, you may recall, that mocked the potential of blogs a few years earlier

The pitfalls of instantaneous information, flagged by journalists from virtually the moment they became aware of the Internet, are an even bigger threat with social media, which combine ubiquitous availability with an exceptionally easy publishing process – and a notable absence of editors. "Is this photo, or this video or piece of information really so essential or urgent that we can't wait and investigate other avenues with it?" Regret the Error editor Craig Silverman asked. "You don't just start throwing things out there and saying 'is this true?' That's not the responsible way to do it" (Bartlett, 2012). So great is the perceived potential risk that earlier this year, the European Journalism Centre published a "Verification Handbook" to help journalists and other information gatherers and disseminators "gather, triangulate and verify the often conflicting information" emerging on social media, particularly when a disaster occurs (Silverman & Tsubaki, 2014).

Social media, like earlier blog formats a decade ago, also challenge journalists' traditional writing style, which again is based on the premise that detachment is an aid to, and a signal of, normatively desirable impartiality. Despite all the challenges posed by a digital media environment, the pursuit of objectivity remains a central part of journalists' self-perception as ethical professionals (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). Yet a recent study showed that large proportions of journalists' own tweets contained at least some expression of opinion, with journalists using the format to share information about everything from their jobs to their personal lives (Lasorsa *et al.*, 2012), as well as humor, making the journalist overtly and transparently "present" in his or her writing (Holton & Lewis, 2011).

It has not all gone smoothly, needless to say. News organizations have wrestled with how much leeway to allow their journalists, and many have created guidelines similar to this one, from the *Mail and Guardian* in South Africa: "The bedrock of our authority as a publication is our impartiality. Your profiles, retweets, likes and postings can reveal your political and ideological affiliations. Be very sure that your audience either understands that you are professional enough to put those aside in the workplace, or that those affiliations will not be construed as having an effect on your ability to do objective journalism." And some news organizations have taken steps to rein in journalists whose social media use crashes into such traditional norms; *The New York Times*, for instance, assigned an editor to "work closely" with its Jerusalem bureau chief on her social media presence after she posted an insensitive Facebook comment about Palestinians (Sullivan, 2012).

That said, despite the predictable objections, social media have been adopted by journalists more quickly and with fewer ethics-cloaked protestations than any of the previous innovations described here, and early indications are that the even more recent rise of entrepreneurial journalism also is meeting with only scattered misgivings (Vos & Singer, 2014). This article ends with a look at the past, the present, and, perhaps, the future.

Flexible First

I firmly believe there's a benefit for journalists, and the public they serve, in periodically revisiting the occupation's foundational norms. When we think deeply and critically about our values and our reasons for holding them, we take a breather from the frantic

pace of our daily routine and reconnect with the broader role we hold in society and why that role matters. Periods of transition in general, and the ongoing digital transformation in particular, do not make ethics less important for journalists. On the contrary, as I said at the outset, a commitment to ethically grounded practice is arguably more important than ever at a time when we are immersed in information of all kinds and all levels of quality. The fact that journalists have lost their near-monopoly as society's information providers makes it more vital than ever that they never cede their ability to plausibly claim that the information they do provide is credible and trustworthy and places the public good foremost.

And yet...

And yet the innovations briefly outlined above have not spelled the end of good journalism. Quite the opposite: Every one of those innovations ultimately has enabled, even facilitated, the production of journalism that is stronger in a multitude of ways. The Internet, stories incorporating sounds and moving images, new formats such as blogs, user-generated content, social media – all have contributed to a journalism that is more engaging, more multi-faceted, and more accessible to more people in more ways and more places.

Contemporary media struggles are rooted in a financial crisis, brought about by the dissolution (largely caused by, yes, digital technologies) of economic models that emerged in an environment of information scarcity that no longer exists (Ryfe, 2012). The crisis, in other words, is an economic one, not a journalistic one: The ethical compromises that journalists fear – not entirely without justification – stem primarily from pressures that originate in a shortage of money, not an excess of innovation. The organizations that still employ the majority of journalists have shed staff, cut corners, and asked fewer people to produce more with less. Not surprisingly, that is a recipe for mistakes to occur, for verification practices to be curtailed, and for users to be relied on to produce the news that journalists no longer have the wherewithal or the time to gather themselves.

But we are, perhaps, mistaking effect for cause here. The cause of the ethical breaches that journalists can so easily point to in making their case is not new technology per se – not the Internet, not multimedia, not blogs nor social media. One cause is a lack of resources enabling journalists to deal with those things and the challenges they raise as fully – as ethically – as they might like to do. And another cause is a lack of the sort of open and innovative mind set that newsrooms need.

We're still stuck on digital first (or perhaps mobile first), when our more crucial need is *flexible first*. A willingness to adapt enables us to tackle the question of how our norms might guide that adaptation from the start. The goal, in other words, should be for crucial normative standards to be built into journalistic innovation at the outset, as a proactive response to inevitable and ongoing change rather than a reactive one that leaves journalists perpetually playing catch-up. Without the flexibility needed in a constantly changing media world, journalists and news organizations will continue to lose a lot of time on futile angst that could be more productively spent on actively steering change in an ethical direction.

I'll end with an example of how technological innovation not only can but quite demonstrably does lead to better journalism once practitioners stop agonizing and get down to the rewarding work of applying their ethical sensibilities to shaping an innovation in ways they can point to with pride. My example is social media, particularly the microblog Twitter, which is turning out to offer ways for journalists not just to apply but to extend important normative practices. For instance:

* Because it can indeed be hard to tell credible tweets from a news event from ones that are not trustworthy, news organizations actually have strengthened – paid greater, not less, attention to – their verification procedures. The Associated Press wire service, for instance, goes through a lengthy set of steps in checking out the credibility of information it obtains through Twitter, and those steps come on top of its normal verification processes, not instead of them. They include, among a range of others, checking the source's history on social media, comparing the tweeted information with other AP reporting, and running the material past regional experts (Silverman, 2012).

* It has long been accepted wisdom in journalism that the more perspectives we get on the world – and Twitter hashtags are, to date, unbeatable at getting a lot of perspectives – the more multi-faceted the truth that is available to the world's citizens. We no longer have to rely on official sources to know what's happening in Beijing or Washington or London or Lisbon. Updates, tips and insights are available not only far faster than ever before but also from a far vaster array of information providers.

* Perhaps most significantly, Twitter has pushed journalists to truly incorporate and internalize the understanding that they are in a relationship with their audiences. They are not somehow separate from real people, delivering information from behind the newsroom wall. They are part of a media ecosystem that includes other real, live humans, and their relationship with those humans must be open and honest in order to function. Journalists who in the past may have paid little more than lip service to the ethical norm of accountability have found that they must walk the walk, not just talk the talk. They must be directly and immediately accountable for what they say, write, upload – or tweet. They must fix what's wrong. They must say what they do not know as well as what they do know. In short, they must jointly gather and collaboratively share information, not merely deliver it.

In summary, fundamental journalistic norms are now being enacted through journalists' use not of a traditional format but of a new one. These and other ethical applications of Twitter and its social media cousins show flexible, innovative journalists drawing on long-standing principles to proactively shape digital formats in socially beneficial ways. These journalists have not abandoned their ethics in adapting to social media. Instead, they have applied their ethics in ways that make both the social media messages and the journalists themselves more credible.

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