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Encountering disruption: Adaptation, resistance and change

Scott Eldridge and Marcel Broersma, University of Groningen

If you choose to look at news and journalism at any particular moment in time, these always appear to be in a state of transition. Traditional news media have been disrupted by new modes of communication, whether it is the radio, television or the Internet, while new actors have continuously entered the playing field. Ranging from the founding fathers of the Penny Press to the muckrakers and New Journalists, they found unique ways of communicating with audiences that disrupt traditional journalism's previous hold on this public conversation. However, while disruption is thus by no means a new phenomenon and every generation might experience its era as one of massive change, the term seems to have gained increasing prominence in journalism and journalism studies.

In the contemporary age, the many changes to technologies and digital approaches to journalism amplify a discourse of disruption and suggestions of a field in crisis (Conboy and Eldridge 2014). Moreover, while this can be overstated, when we adopt a longitudinal perspective there are clear signs of disruption in the present journalistic field. The nature of digital changes, and the disruption that accompanies them, is fast paced and extensive. They have emerged in ways that can be difficult to make sense of for scholars and practitioners alike who find themselves in the midst of the rapid. In this introduction, we will explore the notion of disruption and argue, alongside the articles in this special issue, that with a long view of the dynamics of change we now see in journalism, in moments of disruption there are also reflections of journalism's long history of encountering change.

This special issue features a collection of research articles and professional reflections prompted by the idea of disruption in journalism in the present day, first developed out of a symposium in Amsterdam in May 2015 as part of the AHRC-NWO-funded research network *Capturing Change in Journalism: Shifting Role Perceptions at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries*, led by the universities of Groningen and Sheffield. Each of the articles here addresses the challenges of making sense of the changing circumstances for journalism in different ways. They aim to pose new questions and provoke new discussions to advance our understanding of disruption, and adaptation, in journalism. Bringing together these critical voices, we explore the balance between seeing changing dynamics of the journalistic field as a form of disruption – upsetting the familiar ways of doing things – and seeing these as an opportunity for adaptation – an invitation to consider journalism differently. In this introduction, we will contextualize the uniquely digital aspects of change that now surround us as resonant with the way, historically, the fortunes of journalism have been closely linked to disruption.

Disruption and adaptation in journalism's history

We can begin with a question that stretches across the fluctuating nature of journalism as it has traversed from technology to technology: following moments of disruption in journalism, ‘did it maintain identity or did it perform a shape-shift, retaining its old name but taking on radically new features?’ (Conboy 2017: 31). We can ask this question of (ever) new technologies and journalism, and indeed this is a prominent point of reference for exploring the impact that technological shifts in the digital age have had. But it is important to consider this as a notion embedded in journalism's history as well. Martin Conboy poses the question quoted above to frame the uncertainties facing journalism in the late Victorian age, when improved printing technologies were increasingly used by British newspapers to print

newspapers in great quantities filled with content that appealed to larger audiences. This marked a shift from an elite-oriented press to a mass popular press, characterized not only by increased technological capacities but also by disruption of journalism's previous elite-focused content and the perception of journalism's societal role – the 'Era of the Mass Press' (Steel and Broersma 2017).

Then as now, the first challenge in this era for observers fretting about journalism's prospects was one of scale and scope –the volume of news that could be printed was significant, and with that the opportunity for treating news as a money-making venture also increased. Attention now turned to the social implications of newly unbridled newspaper owners who argued their aims through idealized visions of newspapers educating (and shaping) the public for the better, set against critiques that this mass press era would see a journalism driven by the opportunity for profits, attuning content to 'the worst desires and tastes' of the public (Conboy 2017: 36).

While this was not the first disruptive moment linked to journalism's reliance on technology (by any stretch), nor the last moment where concerns would be raised that technologies would lead to a 'dumbing down' of news, the 'Mass Press Era' and the turn of the twentieth century mark the start of a period of increasingly intense technological shifts surrounding journalism, and in the rapid succession of new modes of communication in the twentieth century, each was accompanied by concerns of what these technological changes would mean for the field of journalism itself. When it comes to understanding disruption in journalism, from newspapers employing improved printing technologies to widen their reach, to radio being harnessed to offer a 'national story' through news, to television and its ability to convey moving images from the world outside within the home, technological changes in

journalism's history from the twentieth century offer useful reference points to contextualize change in the present (Eldridge 2015).

Disruption in these moments is not merely technological – marked by the introduction of new media forms – they also include the ways in which each new media technology demanded of an existing coterie of journalists a consideration of their societal roles (disrupting the status quo of the journalistic field, and challenging the authority of previous approaches to news), alongside the prospect of innovation (both with new approaches to reaching audiences, and new ways of communicating news stories). Marcel Broersma and Chris Peters emphasize the quandary of reconciling change with existing understandings of journalism that rest on long traditions, and that have been established historically. In their introduction to *Rethinking Journalism*, Broersma and Peters challenge scholarship to avoid looking for a way to ensure 'journalism can move – more or less undamaged – into a new era' (2013: 2). They propose that 'unchanged' may be untenable, and go on to caution against understanding journalism today 'with the logic of yesterday' (Broersma and Peters 2013: 5). To push back from this myopia, they encourage looking not only at shifts in technology, but at the social role that journalism fills. In the introduction to *Rethinking Journalism Again* (Broersma and Peters 2017) they continue this argument by making a plea for a bottom-up approach to study journalism that does not depart from grand normative theories but starts from the functions that journalism fulfils (or *could* fulfil) in people's everyday life. These calls have gained traction, as shown in the articles here, which each reflect on the complexities of journalism not only as a product whose textures have changed in a digital age, but as playing a complex and interactive role in our social worlds.

Yet the advent of any new technologies rarely offers a clear idea of what is next to come, and then as now technological disruptions are often viewed first with trepidation, and only later enthusiasm. Take the emergence of the BBC as a prominent news source, something that was initially pushed back against by newspaper owners wary that the new technology of radio would supplant their role as news providers. Its biography includes the unique circumstances of a labour strike stopping most British newspaper presses in 1926. Only then, when there was a need by the government to communicate with the public, alongside the absence of rolling newspaper presses, did an opportunity arise for the BBC. This cracked open a door for an independent BBC to continue delivering news to the United Kingdom, and while it was not a straightforward transition, it was a moment of disruption to the newspaper's hold on news (Eldridge 2015: 533).

Now nearly 100 years on from the BBC's emergence, and nearly 150 years from the dawn of the Mass Press era, the dominance of the Internet may make the BBC's origin story as a news provider and the concerns of a Mass Press with a popular reach seem quaint. Yet on reflection, we can find points of comparison where disruptive approaches to news and journalism now hang on similar threads of seeming coincidence, and uncertain opportunity. Take WikiLeaks' explosive revelations in 2010 and 2011 revealing the secret communications of the US military and later its diplomats as one example of this. As Chelsea Manning testified at her court martial, WikiLeaks ended up the eventual recipient of the trove of documents that she had downloaded in part because the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* failed to take Manning's offer of newsworthy information more seriously (Pilkington 2013). Only then did Manning turn to the Internet and eventually WikiLeaks, and in the wake of this decision WikiLeaks grew in prominence and repute and its approach to sharing news with the public continues to disrupt notions of news and journalism to this day. Here the

disruption of a new type of journalistic organization seems linked, at least in part, to a confluence of the technological ability of WikiLeaks, and the missed opportunity by the *Times* and *Post*. There was a strikingly similar near-miss with the NSA leaks from Edward Snowden as Glenn Greenwald (then at the *Guardian*) was unfamiliar with the encryption techniques that Snowden used to communicate. It was only through mutual acquaintances helping Greenwald that he was able to also encrypt his e-mails, and the *Guardian* brought into the reporting on Snowden's leaks (Thorsen 2017: 576).

For the shift from a core of journalism centred around dominant actors, disruption in these moments is underscored by the ability of interloping peripheral actors to perform journalistic roles, and by the need for more traditional organizations to adapt to new technological approaches (Eldridge 2018). Yet these are not outcomes that could have been predicted at their outset. In both cases, the scenarios could very easily have played out differently – Manning might have succeeded with the *Times* or *Post*; Snowden could have turned to WikiLeaks instead of Greenwald. These cases show how technological means to communicate information online have emerged that pose unique aspects of disruption and adaptation. But they also reflect how the actors involved in practices of journalism now extend beyond the distinct domain of a professionalized journalistic field (Waisbord 2013), and the field is no longer restricted to familiar media forms of storytelling. Distinctions between traditional and digital media have blurred, and the previous traditional 'siloes' of news are less clear, and at times less useful, for making sense of journalism around us.

The balance of understanding technological contributions to disruption and social aspects of the same are also stark beyond western contexts, where not only does the 'logic of yesterday' (Broersma and Peters 2013: 2) ill fit the journalism in such spaces, but the social forces

behind journalism and change also offer unique cases for exploration. It has become all but cliché to speak of the ‘Great Fire Wall’ as a technological means to ensure China’s online environment as a stable, politically sterilized, web. With emphasis on censorship of dissident voices, online filters limit the availability of certain news that might work against Beijing’s political ambitions and the ability of China’s people to speak up. China is often used as a case in point of the limited ability for the Internet and online news to provide a utopian information world. But even here, disruption comes through as innovative approaches to contending with censorship signal that, in a digital age a more complex set of dynamics are also at play and social actors embedded within the journalistic field contribute to the greater or the lesser extent of technological disruption.

Adaptation and resistance as responses to disruption

The articles here interrogate the ways in which each new media technology is assumed to be challenging previous media types. The goal is to make sense of just ‘how’ technologies have taken hold, considering disruption in terms of what changes, but also reactions to disruption and where there are aspects of journalism that persist. We can look within these articles to ask where, amid discussions of disruption and change, we continue to see the persistence of traditional norms and mechanisms of power in society. These reflect both a resistance to change, but also ways in which disruption is encountered through adaptation – bringing the disruptive technology ‘into the fold’, and making its aspects of change more normal (Broersma and Graham 2016). For those working in the field of journalism, the idea of disruption has often meant time and again being prodded to rectify change and adapt news practices, finding a way to make sense of journalism news as change amid continuity. Adaptation offers us a way to think about this more complexly – organizations can adapt by embracing new technologies, or they can adapt by resisting the same. They can embrace or

they can reject change, acting on the same inclination to look for ways their approaches to ‘journalism can move – more or less undamaged – into a new era’ (Broersma and Peters 2013: 2).

The authors here engage with both societal and technological aspects of disruption. Here we see where new actors and new approaches to ‘being’ a journalist have emerged that challenge the ways in which news organizations had traditionally conceived of their field, and in doing so have confronted traditional forms of societal power. In the articles here, we also see that the notion of ‘disruption’ is addressed through journalists finding ways to adapt, and innovate, and important for considering any prognostication about journalism undergoing change, pronounced moments of resistance to change.

In the article by Julian Petley, the muddled terrain between legal recourse and political risk is explored in the case of former UK Secretary of State for Culture, Media, and Sport, John Whittingdale, who took a dominatrix and escort to several events in his capacity as secretary. As Petley recreates in his article, Whittingdale’s story was well known, but barely touched upon by the newspapers who were still smarting from the phone hacking scandal and Leveson Inquiry’s exposing the closeness of those in power with those in the British press. Thus, it seems more than coincidence that their silence came as Whittingdale was considering how heavy a weight to place on newspapers facing possible libel fights.

But it also strikes Petley that Byliner – the digital news site that published the story – is less encumbered by these connections, working to bring news to the public *despite* more traditional actors’ reticence. What Petley unfolds for us is also a case where new actors succeed when traditional actors opt not to. In particular, his article shows how the

instruments of politics and power continue to factor into any discussion of change. While on the one hand this demonstrates the tenacity of London's 'press-power axis' (Wiener 2011), which on the surface seems to have restrained newspapers' willingness to act, this scenario also suggests a positive future for digital actors working outside the mainstream – and a sharp retort to those who bemoan online journalists as incapable of the same tasks as those in the field's traditional core.

John Steel offers a different narrative of resilience of traditional approaches in the face of change as his article focuses on contending with change in journalism training and resistance to alternative approaches to educating journalism students. Taking as his approach a comparison of perspectives among journalism educators and professionals from 2006 and again in 2016, Steel finds that the persistence of traditional narratives of journalism's societal role continues to dominate in university classrooms and in the perspectives of professional journalists. Facing the complexities of a more fragmented journalistic field, Steel finds that rather than seize on innovation the reaction of some educators in the UK Higher-Ed sector has been to double down on tradition – treating as untouchable certain 'sacred cows' of training that they themselves experienced, and placing a high priority on their professional experience over research-driven academic analysis.

Steel describes how 'the normative parameters of journalism education remain remarkably resilient', particularly in settings where educators see their role as building up students to enter the professional news workforce. But, there is a catch: while changes such as those outlined here are only a part of the conversation about disruption in journalism, they are regularly elided by those Steel interviewed as something outside their main concerns, and another example of 'unnecessary' academic analysis of journalism. This is particularly clear

to those journalism educators Steel interviews who prioritize an unchanged, traditional, core set of skills. The prognosis for ‘adaptation’, then, is not entirely favourable.

Returning to the case of China, and its censorship regime, Tianbo Xu offers us a more nuanced discussion of the ‘great firewall’ that bridges the technological impediments, and the social realities. From a series of interviews with online and more traditional journalists in China, Xu proposes a discussion of China’s censorship of news not as operating with a black-and-white set of practices for journalists to abide by, but rather a ‘grey area’, where what is technically allowed and what is achieved are in a more complicated balance. Xu shows where the opportunities of publishing news online fall outside traditional state control mechanisms, and where in China rather than disrupting the traditional domain of news media, online journalists disrupt notions of state censorship as a menacing force. Innovation, in this case, comes through navigating spaces between what is expressly allowed and what journalists can get away from.

Where should we take such discussions of grey areas? They offer, on the one hand, a way of thinking about digital journalism spaces as complex, and sometimes blurry, arenas of journalistic practice that are disruptive inasmuch as they are able to reach audiences differently, and subjected to different levers of power. Take Petley’s retracing of a scenario where the state and those working for it still hold sway over news media, and Xu suggests even in contexts where the state is more able to control news media, innovative disruption still emerges. Yet Xu also points to another aspect of this disruption as within the shift from centrally ordained journalism approaches, Chinese journalists practice news work that more closely resembles twentieth-century western journalism than what has become common in the twenty-first century.

One regular focus of disruption is found in discussions of ‘innovative disruption’, posed here across the cases studied – including in the piece by Scott Eldridge, which explores reactions to the emergence of highly disruptive actors. In his article, WikiLeaks and Julian Assange are compared alongside the emergence of non-profit newsrooms. As innovators, both WikiLeaks and ProPublica, a non-profit digital news organization, signal new approaches to journalism practice that confront the boundaries of the traditional field. Yet in reactions to ProPublica and to WikiLeaks two distinct types of disruption are perceived, and there are two disparate responses in return. Eldridge looks at the *New York Times* and its interactions with both organizations in cooperative reporting projects. This article poses new ways of considering the disruptions that new actors pose, and while ProPublica’s journalists benefited from their experience working for newspapers, thereby validating their new endeavour, the benefit only extended so far and discourses in *Times* coverage still reflect traditional exertion of the article’s journalistic authority, and information primacy.

Proposing an ‘appropriation thesis’ to describe these narratives, Eldridge’s argument resonates with the tensions inevitably found in dynamics of disruption and innovation explored by Petley, Xu and Steel in that each have examined where and how digital approaches are addressed by traditional actors in ways that more or less successfully re-exert control. Within these articles, we can see overlaps with the priorities that some educators place on traditional experience that Steel identifies, as Eldridge finds emphasis placed on the traditional backgrounds of ProPublica’s journalists. This brings to bear questions of power, and how in reactions to disruption and the emergence of new forces of news and journalism, traditional actors continue to exert their authority over the journalistic field. In fields of education, politics and journalism, the boundaries between traditional and innovative

approaches to news and journalism are as vulnerable to change, and the actors within them as reticent to 'let go' of familiarity.

While the prognosis outlined in these articles may seem to offer an inauspicious future, amid disruptive changes to the field and the unsettled nature of journalism that has resulted, we still find brilliant flashes of innovation that see disruption as opportunity and have found new ways to shepherd journalism into these spaces. Take the work of Lea Korsgaard and Zetland, a Danish news site that also takes news to the stage in its non-fiction live performances. Korsgaard discusses here with Chrysi Dagoula the way in which she thinks of her and her colleagues' work as journalism that is 'a force for good', and how Zetland looks to recreate the relationship between media and their audiences, both online and offline – 'disruption to the classic journalism', yes, but in a way that ultimately looks to build up engaged and interested audiences in these spaces.

Such a view of traditional approaches to journalism as ripe for change can also be found in the work of Danielle Batist, a journalist based in London who has embraced 'constructive journalism' in her work, orienting her journalism towards solutions rather than conflict in covering news stories. In conversation with Dagoula, Batist describes her projects including at *Positive News* – a site and magazine dedicated to 'good journalism about good things' – and in her freelance work as trying to use journalism to construct solutions, rather than just diagnose problems. We can see in both discussions with Batist and Korsgaard how they have seized on digital platforms and a more dynamic media environment to build audiences through engagement and interaction. As Korsgaard describes, the best version of 'disruption' is not achieved by coming in 'with a sword in your hand and you scream at others', but through building up new approaches to news and journalism that challenge the mainstream.

This is as apparent to those working in the field, and working to introduce new approaches to the practices of journalism, as it is to scholars. Bart Brouwers himself bridges this terrain both as a working journalist and as a professor of journalism practice. Brouwers offers here a thoughtful reflection on the challenges of going from small moments of innovation to successful and sustainable news projects, particularly while on uncertain digital terrain. Successful models, he cautions, are not definitive predictors of future success and the four phases of innovation – Stand up, Start up, Scale up and Stay up – are as vulnerable to disruption as the traditional approaches that they seem to be challenging. In Brouwers' account, we see that innovation and the opportunity to disrupt traditional approaches to journalism carry risk – but also opportunity.

Conclusion

The concerns around disruptive technological shifts at the turn of the twentieth century have counterparts in the present day. In a digital age, technologies see the scale and breadth of news amplified even further, and with this amplification the worries that the new technologies of journalism will change the nature of journalism itself. While these comparisons are helpful, they are not one to one; the technologies of the Mass Press Era saw proprietors consolidate their hold on journalism as a marketable product, whereas the technological shifts of the Digital Age have seen that centrality challenged (Eldridge 2015: 533–34). Nevertheless, we can gain perspective by understanding disruption as a dynamic that has emerged repeatedly in journalism's experiences.

If the promise of innovation and the outcome of disruption are difficult to predict, this may lead some to conclude with an unsatisfactory 'it's complicated' when asked what these

discussions offer for understanding journalism in a digital era. One could be forgiven for being disheartened when seeing the mechanisms of power play out as they long have done in Petley's account or the challenges facing even the most ambitious innovators as Brouwers unpacks. Yet we see in these articles a different prognosis – one that embraces the 'messiness' of an increasingly dynamic, and digital, news media space. Within the research network that brought about this special issue, we have explored the changing roles and perceptions of journalism at two consequential turning points: the turn of the twentieth and later the twentieth centuries. Where in the former, we see a professionalizing field, in the latter we see a field that may be opening up to new approaches of news and journalism. Rarely far removed from discussions of power and politics, a stage performance and an online website can also be successful at embracing journalistic roles, and can challenge our perspectives on what is news and where it can come from.

Foolhardy as it would be to suggest that the arguments and accounts within these pages offer a roadmap for the future direction of journalism, they do offer critical reflections on journalism amid change that compel us to think differently about both journalism and change. If disruption is discussed as a change, but not as a sword, we might also find innovation as an opportunity, rather than a threat against the normal order. This is not a straightforward change in tack for journalists or for scholars, and is pushing against a very established set of ideas about news and journalism. Yet we argue here, and in the articles ahead, that considering disruption in the spaces of media change that we now find ourselves in can help navigate these processes of change.

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