Commentary

The Midlife Crisis of the Network Society

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Submitted: 21 September 2018 | Accepted: 24 September 2018 | Published: 8 November 2018

Abstract

The network society is moving into some sort of middle age, or has at least normalized into the daily set of expectations people have for how they live their lives, not to mention consume news and information. In their adolescence, the technological and temporal affordances that have come with these new digital technologies were supposed to make the world better, or least they could have. There was much we did not foresee, such as the way that this brave new world would turn journalism into distributed content, not only taking away news organizations’ gatekeeping power but also their business model. This is indeed a midlife crisis. The present moment provides a vantage point for stocktaking and the mix of awe, nostalgia, and ruefulness that comes with maturity.

Keywords
digital journalism; fake news; hybridity; Networks; Media; participation; reflexivity

Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “News and Participation through and beyond Proprietary Platforms in an Age of Social Media”, edited by Oscar Westlund (Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway) and Mats Ekström (University of Gothenburg, Sweden).

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1. Introduction: The Network Society Reaches Midlife

The network society is moving into some sort of middle age, or has at least normalized into the daily set of expectations people have for how they live their lives, not to mention consume news and information. In their adolescence, the technological and temporal affordances that have come with these new digital technologies were supposed to make the world better, or least they could have. The ability to capture, to record, to share, to broadcast from our phones, made all much easier by social media platforms, and then, watch it scale; the ability to transfer near-instant information across wide, post-geographic nodes of exchange; the enabling of openness, transparency, and data-sharing; the ability for people, not just traditional gatekeepers, to hold power to account, and beyond—well, we knew, as journalism studies scholars, that this would fundamentally reshape professional journalism as a practice, its normative epistemology, and perhaps, even its authority. This excitement may seem puerile, but it was born of the optimism of youth. As a result, there was much we did not foresee, such as the way that this brave new world would turn journalism into distributed content, not only taking away news organizations’ gatekeeping power but also their business model. This is indeed a midlife crisis. The present moment provides a vantage point for stocktaking and the mix of awe, nostalgia, and ruefulness that comes with maturity.

2. Darkness and Temporal Reflexivity

This thematic issue comes at a critical time, both geographically but also in terms of much needed academic reflection—asking what has happened and what we don’t know about the nature of news and participation in a platform era. As scholars, we have seen just how nasty, or “wicked”, even actors can be on these platforms, as Quandt (2018) writes in this issue, and as schol-
What do we make of the past, present, and future for world of participatory journalism; we do have, indeed, as “anti-systemness” and when even the most or-
tward, as “anti-systemness” and when even the most or-
table media. We need to ask, “What has such research wrought?” (p. 42). Participation and participatory journalism are words that scratch the surface of the myriad conceptions of what it means to shift the modes and terms of engage-
ment, as Anderson and Revers (2018) discuss here, as they try to unravel a “participatory epistemology” to de-
scribe “journalistic knowledge in which professional ex-
pertise is modified through public interaction” (p. 26). The hybridity of journalism today recalls some sort of
mutant mix of journalist plus something else, or what we think of as a standard news outlet plus some other,
not always desirable enhancement, as Ruotsalainen and Villi (2018) discuss. When new modes of online partici-
patory media can be thought of as Holt (2018) puts for-
ward, as “anti-systemness” and when even the most or-
dinary commenters on news outlets swear, a lot, creat-
ing all sorts of new swear words that AI content analy-
sis must be taught capture, as Boberg, Schatto-Eckrodt, Frischlich and Quandt (2018) do, what are scholars, not
mention the public, supposed to do? Boberg and col-
leagues present the quandary of comment section mod-
erators grasping for standards as they bat away com-
ments deemed unworthy of being admitted to the pub-
lc space.

One cannot help but think of a Hollywood X-man bat-
tle between the “good” half-journalists, half- Frog. To
carry this superhero metaphor further, Pepe-the-Frog
might have once been a good mutant participatory jour-
nalism leader but became, due to the toxic sludge of pop-
ulism, a frog-headed, swastika wearing anti-hero, a ge-
nealogy discussed here by Anderson and Revers (2018).
Surely, as Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018) suggest, tak-
ing cues from George Simmel, there is some value to the
benefit of the doubt for these new entrants into journal-
ism; thinking of them as strangers already puts their poten-
tial contributions in a negative framework rather than a
more productive one. But to wit, we are in comic-book
world of participatory journalism; we do have, indeed,
hybrid journalism strangers entering today’s world of par-
ticipatory journalism; and perhaps we have engendered
a form of hyper-reality that demands thinking about who
is good, who is bad, from an individual, group, and struc-
tural level, why this has happened and some of these
strangers, as Quandt (2018) suggests, will indeed prac-
tice the “dark participation” wielding a pernicious, evil
cloud over what could be a productive vision of mutual
reciprocity that Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014)
hope might be possible.

At the outset, this thematic issue tries to be gener-
tive and reflective, no easy task, and the mixing of the-
etorical articles with empirical ones sets forward a pro-
ductive path for what must come next. Quandt tricks
the reader in his essay (spoiler alert), after ⅔ of an ar-
ticle on the deep dark platform world, writing “If you
now believe that the future is all doom and gloom, then
you have stepped into a trap I have set” (2018, p. 44).
What do we make of the past, present, and future for
news, news and participation, and participatory journal-
ism in a proprietary platform world? We need to ask
these questions and provide some sort of “temporal re-
flexivity” (Carlson & Lewis, 2018), and in particular, chart
the waves in our own academic discourse about partic-
ipation as emancipatory and generative and participa-
tion as dark, evil counterpower. These essays suggest
a need for balance—that the past was not as rosy as we
scholars might like to remember, but more important
to keep at the forefront of our present considera-
tion. The present, in fact, might not be so bad either—
there are ways in which marginalized groups can con-
nect, new accountability is fostered, new ideas and prac-
tices can be introduced into newsrooms and professional
journalism that might well enable future sustainability
or at least more targeted and successful strategies. This
means good strangers bearing presents and new pow-
ers, not bad ones with dark arts—as we have seen re-
cently, when programmers bring their skills to journal-
ism (Usher, 2016), and historically, when photographers
came to journalism (Zelizer, 1995).

But the benefit of age is often the shift from a fasc-
nation with immediacy to a longer, deeper vision of
the world. Lewis and Molyneux (2018) make this clear
in the look back at guiding assumptions of social media
within the journalism studies research. Could we begin
again with what we have learned, how might have these
studies been carried out? Robinson and Wang (2018) pro-
vide some help here by starting from a point of inequal-
ity rather than an assumption of social media equality;
social media gives rise to elites who marshal offline re-
sources and capital into online status. But, as they argue,
this should not be entirely deterministic; we can’t derive
from social structure all we need to know about social
media. We just need to be aware that what we study is
deeply rooted in and reacting to the larger whole.

3. Into the Light: Moderating Dystopia and Utopia

How do we move forward then? Entrepreneurial jour-
nalism can both ground us in pre-existing normative
boundaries, but it can also provide a way out (Carlson &
Usher, 2016; Usher, 2017a). The thirty-years out vision
that Ruotsalainen and Villi (2018) suggest has multiple
modes for seeing the journalism of the future—but the
idea of niche, elite, quality journalism for a small few is
deeply concerning even as we can already see signs of
this happening with membership models. On the other
hand, perhaps the very understanding of participation
as a possibility in journalism unsettles the knowledge
claim of journalists to begin with and invites new people
to retake this claim to knowledge in alternative form of
participatory expression. We see this discussed here in
a number of essays—in comments, ordinary people are
now free to push back in very visible ways on news out-
lets, and even after over a decade of news comments
on websites, there’s no real method through which to
distinguish the good from the bad—but we can at least
say people are passionately talking back and questioning
their received wisdom. But of course, that received wisdom is sometimes important, too—at some point, there has to be a commons for public deliberation as Bobberg et al. (2018) note, but what happens when this commons goes away—when we are only sharing on our private, siloed platforms?

To be in a midlife mindset is ideally to find comfort in stability while not entirely surrendering oneself from novelty. When applied to the participatory potentials of digital journalism, we find evidence of stasis that does not suggest we are stuck, but a recognition that the same tired, structural, political economy patterns repeat themselves, perhaps more so in a post-capitalist, globalist society. As one of the authors of this essay argues, user-generated content and citizen journalism have been full-on appropriated by professional newsrooms, who haven’t shifted their normative frameworks much (Usher, 2017b). Appropriation is an endless swirl, starting with the least powerful being appropriated and normalized into the slightly less powerful (turtles all the way to the top, as it were), as the drivers of capitalism and power struggle to dig in their tentacles of power.

Does this all get better somehow? Can we move toward a moderatism where dystopian and utopian visions co-exist, where the anti-heroes and heroes of the platform news and information ecology surrender their arms and instead of unconditional surrender, work out terms where free expression can coexist with respect? Or, perhaps even better, where public knowledge production can coexist with respect for expertise, with working in a symbiotic relationship rather than a lopsided parasitic one? Certainly, the powerful platforms have this in their best interest, and have begun funding academics to research how healthy discourse may survive. The bigger question is whether moderatism is, in fact, dead—or whether it can, in fact be rehabilitated—given how many find this call for balance undesirable. In our small pocket of the world, where we think big ideas and study those who produce them, what they look like, and how others consume them, we need a call to remember balance in our research questions such that we are able to capture a broad perspective of what the world is—and then ask, what it shall be.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the thematic issue journal editors and contributors for their robust contributions to this discussion.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References


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