

Network Journalism: Moving towards a Global Journalism Culture

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Abstract

Today's globalized network communication shapes new interactive formats, relevant not only for the dissemination, but – increasingly – for the production of news. The 'one-way' flow of news from a news outlet to the audience has been replaced by a network structure. Following Manuel Castells' concept of the 'Network' (1996) as the central model of information structures in our twenty-first century Information Age, I argue in this paper that *networks* transform the professional journalism sphere in many world regions in quite similar ways and create new forms of journalistic practice. A globalized journalistic network sphere is taking shape which involves mainstream journalistic outlets *and* bloggers, independently operating journalists in various corners of the world *and* so-called 'user-generated content'-providers alike. Within this sphere, an increasingly global flow of news is evolving which can be characterized by a new form of connectivity which establishes new (and continuous!) links between journalists, their sources *as well as* their audiences. I discuss the strategic and organizational implications of these transformation processes for the management of broadcast news outlets and analyze how public service broadcasters (PSB) are being challenged through these new journalistic 'network' practices, as the roles of journalists in this revised news sphere change. Based on key results of a comparative study of news organizations such as the world's leading public service broadcaster BBC in the UK and the peer-to-peer news and information network *Current* in the United States, this paper addresses parameters of new network models in news organizations and proposes ideas for a repositioning of public service media platforms in this new journalistic sphere. I argue that public service broadcast outlets can be repositioned as 'supernodes' within an evolving globalized network journalism culture that is characterized by 'interactive' practices of newsgathering, production and dissemination.

Keywords:

BBC, Citizen Journalism, Current, Digital Technologies, Network Journalism, Network Society, News Journalism, User-generated Content

Introduction

The relative stability and centralized ‘control’ of ‘linear’ news flows that characterized information exchange until the late twentieth century is inevitably over. Whereas national broadcast outlets or major print organizations only a decade ago held the power to control information flows, this power is increasingly shifting away from them. With the introduction of digital communication tools particularly to Western cultures new interactive formats appear, relevant not only for the dissemination, but – increasingly – for the production of news. This paper is concerned with demarcating the structures of this evolving global journalism culture that is taking shape as I write and with the implications of this structural change for the future of public service broadcasting.

Within this evolving global journalism culture, the dynamics of newsgathering, production and dissemination are transforming and public service broadcasters are being challenged through new journalistic ‘network’ practices. In fact, a multiple platform structure of journalism is taking shape in which boundaries between traditional media outlets of print, radio, and television and between national and ‘foreign’ journalism are blurring and merging online. Information spheres begin to merge and influence each other. Bloggers, so-called user-generated content providers, citizen journalists or media activists have entered the global sphere of information exchange and have become a vital part of the news exchange chain. A new level of connectivity is emerging that demarcates the end of a ‘closed’ journalism sphere in which a very small number of ‘gatekeepers’ secured journalism as “broadcasting to the masses” (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001: 369). The ‘traditional’ “one-way, hub-and-spoke structure, with unidirectional links to its ends, running from center to the periphery” (Benkler, 2006: 179) is being eroded.

On the basis of these introductory reflections, I argue that organizational structures in today’s print, broadcast and online platforms need to be reassessed according to the dynamics of an evolving global news sphere – not least through developing a ‘new’ sense of connectivity. Within this evolving global news sphere, information flows are in fact multidirectional. A ‘network’ character of communication is taking shape based on a ‘network’ structure of journalism in which decentralization and nonlinearity are the key parameters defining news flows at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The basis of this evolving journalism culture is the structural pattern of what I have come to call ‘network journalism.’

On the following pages I want to reconstruct the underlying dynamics that trigger this transformation of journalism. By drawing upon key results gathered throughout the study of news practice within these evolving interactive spheres of journalism production over the past three years, I will further discuss the future of public service broadcasting and the strategic and organizational implications of these transformation processes for the management of broadcast news outlets.¹ I aim to suggest a conceptual approach towards the reorganization of public service broadcast newsrooms at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which repositions them as central nodes within a highly dynamic network sphere of journalism.

¹ This paper is based on a PhD thesis submitted to the University of Otago in June 2008. The research project included a series of interviews with media practitioners at media organizations in the UK, US and Germany. Parts of the gathered material are included in this paper.

Mapping the Dynamics of a Global News Culture

The introduction of digital technologies has had a significant impact on journalistic work, as a range of scholars has recently pointed out (see for example McNair, 2006; Pavlik, 2000; Straubhaar, 2007; van Dijk, 2004, Volkmer, 2007). Information travels with a new level of speed through a global 'digital space', proliferating a type of journalism in the 'information age' in which buzzwords such as 'instantaneousness' or '24/7 reporting' have begun to dominate the discourse on how to produce news. Furthermore, the easy-to-use technology developed in recent years has enabled everyone with a camera or a cell phone and an Internet connection at hand to produce and disseminate content of whatever kind. As a matter of fact, a whole range of 'alternative' news deliverers has entered the news sphere contributing to a (global) news exchange. They are being referred to as "non-standard news sources" (Gillmor, 2006: xx) or "nonmarket actors" (Benkler, 2006: 220) and have put the relative stability of 'traditional' information exchange patterns under siege.

To name some recent examples illustrating this transformation of news flows: when the bombs exploded in the London Underground in July 2005, first-hand information was provided by citizens 'on the spot' of the event, equipped with cameras or phones, who distributed their material to major news outlets from CNN to the BBC. The first images of the Virginia Tech Shooting in April 2007 aired via national as well as transnational news programs were produced as a cell phone video shot by a Graduate student. When in February 2008 the protests in Tibet reached a climax, Western journalists working for corporate and public service outlets were expelled from the site and cut off from direct access. Tibetan dissidents, tourists, and bloggers stood in, driving international news coverage.

Without the use of digital technologies, the production and dissemination process of news in each of these cases would have carried a completely different face. The examples indicate that a 'new' dynamic of newsgathering, production and dissemination is taking shape that affects journalistic practices. In each of these cases, gatekeeping as well as agenda-setting models as suggested with reference to the mass media system of the twentieth century (see McCombs, 2005 and Bennett, 2004) did not function the 'traditional' way. Instead it seems that the methods of a 'closed' operational sphere of journalism are overcome and being replaced by a highly dynamic process of information exchange. In each of these cases, 'alternative' news deliverers influenced the reporting of 'traditional' journalists. Concomitantly, Bruns identifies a paradigm shift away "from 'industrial-style content'" towards "the collaborative, iterative, and user-led production of content by participants in a hybrid user-producer, or *producer* role" (Bruns, 2006: 275 emphasis in original).

However, we do not have a conceptual approach, which helps unraveling and understanding the dynamics of a transforming journalism culture, in which not only 'traditional' journalists do the reporting and deliver through a 'mass' medium to a 'mass' audience. The only common denominator within scholarly research seems to be that we are dealing with "unfinished business" (Lovink, 2008: x). The 'object' of research – in this case the journalism sphere – is in fact "in a state of hyper-growth and permanent transformation" (Ibid.: xxiii). Within this sphere, collaborative global citizen journalism projects such as *GlobalVoicesOnline* flourish, alternative news and blog sites such as the *Huffington Post* gain national as well as international reputation and backpack journalists such as Kevin Sites report from armed conflict

zones around the globe, traveling as a solo multimedia reporter and equipped only with a laptop, two camcorders, a mobile and a satellite phone with modem.²

In addition, the way users access the news is being completely revised. News consumption is increasingly “demand-led, rather than supply-led” (Bell, 2007: 78) and news users do not want to be restrained by the timeline of a broadcaster but are rather consulting “media platforms and outlets that can tell them what they want to know when they want to know it” (report on “The State of the News Media 2008”: online).³ News consumption is being increasingly more personalized and Negroponte’s vision of the customized “Daily Me” (1995) seems to become reality in an atmosphere in which a “see for yourself” culture of news use is developing (Benkler, 2006: 218). Or as Bruns puts it: proliferated by digitization the “shape of media has shifted away from mostly passive, mass reception to more interactive, individualised modes of active engagement” (2006: 282). Information used to be solely ‘pushed’ towards audiences (confer Schoenbach et al, 2005: 248), yet today technologies such as the Internet support a selective ‘pulling’ of content (Ibid.). In fact, the Internet is a “push-pull medium” (see Volkmer, 2003: 12), allowing not only journalists, but every Internet user to ‘push’ information into the virtual sphere as well as to selectively ‘pull’ information from an almost uncountable variety of sources accessible online.

Thus, the increasing number of ‘alternative’ news deliverers as well as the changing interaction patterns with news on the side of the users pressure journalistic outlets to react to the transformation of a journalistic sphere in which their roles as sole news deliverers are collapsing. The fairly simple structure of a sender-receiver model or a ‘top-down’ organization of journalistic work (Bardoel and Deuze, 2001: 98, see also Beckett and Mansell, 2008: 93) seems to be overcome.

In effect, the amount of information in circulation creates a notion of a “chaotic” news journalism environment at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as McNair refers to it (see McNair: 2005, 2006). He identifies a ‘cultural chaos’, in which communication systems function “fundamentally non-linear, and thus [are] highly contingent. Like the strange attractors of chaos science, they exhibit structure, but of an irregular kind” (McNair, 2006: xiv). I suggest referring to this structure as ‘network journalism.’

Defining the Evolving Global Journalism Sphere

The idea of an evolving ‘network journalism’ is based upon Castells’ model of the ‘network society’ (1996) in which the ‘network’ appears as the overarching form of societal organization. According to him, “dominant functions and processes in the information age are increasingly organized around networks” (Castells, 2000: 500).

² Kevin Sites traveled for a year as *Yahoo!*’s first news correspondent. Previous to this assignment, he worked as blogger and backpack journalists for several years, covering conflicts for a variety of networks. An overview of his equipment can be found on the *Yahoo!* News site ‘Kevin in the Hotzone’:
http://hotzone.yahoo.com/gear;_ylt=AjWQ61YduyuDQzTQlgH.II.LFMsf

³ The report was conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ). Confer the analysis of declining audience numbers especially at newspapers in ‘The State of the News Media 2008’: online.

Proliferated by the introduction of digital technologies, far more complex and dynamic communication patterns take shape that lead to the creation of new global communication infrastructures (confer Volkmer and Heinrich forthcoming, October 2008). This network structure suits “the increasing complexity of interaction” (Castells, 2000: 70) within societies, as it is a flexible structure that allows for multidirectional and non-linear (information) flows. The digital shape of the Internet, which offers the option of multiple connection points, is the technology that mirrors these evolving structural patterns best and as Castells puts it, the Internet becomes “the technological basis for the organizational form of the Information Age” (2002: 1). This ‘network’ paradigm of a revised communication infrastructure is reflected in revised news exchange patterns. ‘Network journalism’ in this respect is a model which takes into account the new connectivity modes of today’s journalism culture, in which news exchange is “organized in a radically more decentralized pattern than was true of this sector in the twentieth century” to adapt the words of Benkler in this context (2006: 3). ‘Network journalism’ thus stands for a structural concept, in which a new organizational framework of journalistic operation is taking shape.

This approach towards coining ‘network journalism’ differs significantly from preliminary approaches of scholars who have used the term. ‘Network journalism’ as well as the variation ‘networked journalism’ have appeared in publications over the past years, however infrequently, within different contexts and carrying various connotations. The implications of the term reach from being a substitute for ‘citizen journalism’ (confer Cohn, 2007: online) to conceptualizing the evolution of ‘online journalism’ as a new form of journalism developing next to print, radio and television journalism (confer Bardoel and Deuze, 2001; Bardoel, 2002). Jarvis (2006: online), Cohn (2007: online) or Beckett and Mansell (2008) for example utilize the term in a fairly broad way and with regards to issues of civic participation and its impact on journalistic production. Along these lines, Karp (2008: online) refers to the ability to link information online as the primary new characteristic of today’s journalistic work and has applied the term ‘networked link journalism.’ Bardoel and Deuze understand ‘network journalism’ as a ‘journalism on the Net’ that threatens old media and existing business models (confer Bardoel, 2002: 504 et seq.). This view implicates that the whole journalistic sphere is affected by the introduction of a new medium and points towards the direction in which I want to lead the terminological discussion.

My understanding of ‘network journalism’ differs in so far from the mentioned approaches as I suggest applying the term as an overall paradigm for a dynamic structure of the global news sphere that has superseded the ‘traditional’ media system. It describes a completely revised organizational form of the entire media system as such, which impacts all news distribution platforms from print, via radio through to television as well as online journalism. ‘Network journalism’ in this respect becomes a basic principle, which explains the structure of journalistic systems in the digital age.

Within this sphere, the more or less ‘static’ flows of a highly controlled, ‘closed’ system of journalism are being replaced by a ‘dynamic’ information exchange mode. The ‘network journalism’ sphere has become a shared information sphere in which ‘traditional’ journalistic outlets such as corporate or public service news providers operate side by side with an innumerable number of other information providers from citizen journalists to alternative news organizations. Each of these information providers in fact constitute a node within an ever more complex system of information

exchange. These nodes can take countless forms, vary in size and are positioned in specific niches of the network. The question for journalistic outlets becomes, how they want to reposition themselves within this complex system of information exchange.

However, this repositioning can only succeed if the underlying dynamics of this new communicative structure are taken into account. As Castells points out:

“A network is based on nodes and their interconnections. The key issue is that these nodes may reconfigure themselves according to new tasks and goals, and that they may grow or diminish in importance depending on the knowledge and information that they win or lose.” (Castells and Ince, 2003: 24).

Accordingly, journalistic outlets need to define their ‘new tasks and goals’ and above all figure out what role they want to take in this network journalism sphere. This role has to pay its dues to the new dynamics of a transforming news culture and as Pavlik notes still needs to evolve (Pavlik, 2000: 236). Hassan and Thomas point out: “Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate with the network” (2006: xxiii).

The network structure thus demands a greater level of openness from journalistic organizations as it significantly transforms the ‘traditional’ approaches towards newsgathering, production and dissemination. Journalistic outlets in this sense are no longer ‘closed’ environments, but have rather become part of a highly dynamic, complex sphere of (global) networks, connected via multiple information strings. Within this evolving dense net of the information sphere, the opportunities to gather information have become immeasurable and so has the level of competition amongst an innumerable number of information providers ranging from the citizen journalism platform through to large corporations or public service broadcasters. News organizations need to re-invent and reposition themselves within this revised global news sphere, in which each news deliverer constitutes just one information node within a larger system of nodes.

First examples of newsrooms that have successfully implemented new network strategies to their ‘day-to-day’ routines have already begun to take shape. Among them are the news desks at the public service broadcaster BBC and at the so-called ‘peer-to-peer’ news and information network *Current*. In the following I want to sketch how both outlets have positioned themselves as information nodes and how their practices of newsgathering, production and dissemination correspond with the demands of a highly dynamic, open sphere of ‘network journalism.’⁴

⁴ The following analysis is based on interviews gathered by the author of this paper with an Editor at the Interactivity Desk of the BBC in London in April 2007 and with a leading staff member of the Vanguard Journalism Department at *Current* in San Francisco in May 2007. Both interviews are part of the PhD project on which this paper I based. Overall the study included interviews with thirteen producers, executives and media educators from across the spectrum of media platforms in the UK, the US and in Germany. The interviews were designed to reflect upon the first moves journalistic organizations have undertaken in order to reposition themselves within an evolving ‘network journalism’ sphere. Apart from staff at BBC and *Current*, media practitioners at the following organizations or journalistic outlets were interviewed: the *Guardian Media Group*, *ZEIT online*, *MediaChannel.org*, *AlterNet.org*, *Democracy Now!*, the *New York City Independent Media Center (IMC)*, *Ourmedia.org*, the *Project for Excellence in Journalism PEJ* and the *International Center for Journalists (ICFJ)*.

Re-structuring the Newsroom: BBC and 'Current'

The BBC and *Current* can be considered as forerunners with regards to the implementation of digital technology tools as well as with regards to inventing new strategies of interactive collaboration with 'alternative' news providers.

The public service broadcaster BBC for example established an Interactivity Desk in 2001 as part of BBC News, responsible for processing so-called user-generated content. Their interactive website feature 'Have Your Say' allows users to comment on current affairs, suggest news topics and to deliver material such as video or photo footage to the broadcaster. *Current* is a fairly new journalistic outlet, launched in August 2005 on the premises that users could contribute to the original reporting of professional journalists. The outlet is a fully integrated 24/7 web and television platform with offices in San Francisco, London and Milan. The TV arms of the channel are aired via cable and satellite across the United States, in the UK and Italy, and in addition *Current* programs are also accessible via their website. *Current* encourages users to participate in the content creation by submitting nonfiction video pieces of one to eight minutes length or producing so-called 'viewer-created advertisements.' These short videos – also known as 'pods' in the jargon of *Current* – are uploaded on the website and users are encouraged to vote for and comment on video clips. Depending on user votings and editorial decisions, such pods are eventually integrated into the television schedule, making up approximately one-third of *Current's* on air broadcasts.

The newsroom practices at both outlets signal a significant attitude change towards their users. BBC and *Current* have in fact understood that the dynamics of newsgathering, production and dissemination are being completely transformed and have systematically developed network-building strategies that allow for an increased inflow of information as well as for conversational formats such as comment and discussion sections on their websites. In interviews I conducted at the BBC and *Current*, my two interview partners agreed that developing a relationship with their users has become a key factor in journalistic work today and in the case of *Current* this perception of users as participators in the news production chain has inevitably become their business model. In the words of the interviewee at the BBC, journalists "have to have more awareness of how to tell their story. And this is another way they can tell their story! They have to realize that the audience can feed information to them. And they use that to tell their story in the best possible way." (BBC interviewee)

Users thus are viewed as useful pool of information providers who can serve as a gateway to news content as well as to background information. Some figures provided by the BBC interviewee illustrate the dimensions of material floating into their newsroom: twelve thousand emails reach the BBC Interactivity News Desk on a quiet day; bigger stories gather around fifteen thousand emails. During the Lebanon War in 2006, all in all the BBC counted about a hundred and fifty thousand emails on the subject sent in by users.

In order to secure more or less 'stable' links with such user participators, the public service broadcaster has eventually developed a contact database that enables their editors to connect and reconnect with their 'informal' information sources. Their changed attitude towards their audience as not only silent receivers, but contributors

is mirrored in their perception of active users as “a global network of stringers” (BBC interviewee). Even though the BBC still differentiates between ‘users’ providing content and ‘professional’ journalists, these ‘amateur stringers’ have become a vital part of their news production chain:

“And the example I sometimes give is: there was a coup in Thailand last year [2006] and we had a few people who'd messaged us in the past from Bangkok about other stories. So as soon as we heard tanks are rolling down the streets in Bangkok we emailed these people. And they looked out of their window and said: 'Oh yes, tanks are rolling...' Straight on to world television, straight on to the website! And these were people who we can go back to. And that's instant access to stories, which is transformational!” (BBC interviewee)

Users thus become individual information nodes that complement traditional information sources. Similarly, the *Current* newsroom operates as a collaborative space in which ‘traditional’ journalists partner with their users. However, their approach also slightly differs from that of the BBC who in general does not ask for complete video pieces, but rather for comment or raw information footage to be implemented in edited reports. *Current* takes the collaboration with users a step further and can be identified as an integrative information node that not only develops relationships with their users, but relies on them as reporters who deliver fully fledged reporting pieces:

“Current is more about people who have personal access or insights into a particular situation as opposed to 'I just happen to have my camera...'. Now, we've had people send us those things and we certainly highlight it. But I think that's sort of the playing field that the traditional outlets are on. They want to call out for those breaking news images. And we're looking for really unique personal reports from people in our demographic, because we think that that's what is sort of missing from the news and journalism that younger people are really wanting.” (*Current* interviewee)

In addition, the outlet also tries to find story angles, which differ from the coverage provided by traditional media outlets. After the fatal shooting at Virginia Tech for example, *Current* did not send a correspondence team, but rather encouraged students to provide their own account of the event:

“When the campus was flooded with news media so much so that the students actually had to tell the media to leave, we never sat foot on that campus. But what we did do was we gave the students a platform to tell our viewers what was going through their heads through webcam stories. They sent vlogs, in a sense, via the webcams. We had a student who was sitting on the bunk bed in his dormitory saying that he just heard those shots and he just told us what was going through his head. It was very intimate; it was in his own words.” (*Current* interviewee)

Current thus aims to fill a niche within the information sphere in which they provide different approaches towards news reporting. Furthermore, their business model offers the chance to collaborate with users on a transnational level, as their website attracts news users as well as producers from across the globe. *Current* does send their own reporters to cover stories in various spots of the globe, however the outlet neither has the staff capacity nor foreign bureaus apart from their two offices in the UK and Italy to provide a steady stream of international reporting. In addition, the

outlet relies on citizen journalists across the world to cover stories and “will reach out to citizen journalists”, as the interviewee explains:

“We might not have money to travel to Venezuela. But we've been working on this report on Hugo Chávez and there happens to be a citizen journalist out there who is filming the protests because of the TV station being shut down and that person is capturing that as a collaborative process for this journalist, in some sense.” (*Current* interviewee)

Such collaboratively gathered material can eventually end up as a reporting piece consisting of information produced by citizen journalists and edited by *Current* staff. This interactive practice of newsgathering and production in fact assigns a new role to journalists. At the BBC, the staff at their Interactivity Desk for example is perceived as fact-checkers and ‘networkers’ responsible for the systematic generating and filtering of user-generated content. In addition, the Interactivity Desk functions as a “hub” (BBC interviewee) that networks with other BBC arms and distributes material across all platforms of the news organization. This is again a significant change in newsroom practice, as it suggests not only to open the ‘gates’ of the news organization for material provided by ‘alternative’ news sources, but furthermore triggers new collaborative approaches towards networking across various media platforms of a journalistic outlet. It is also a step that demanded an attitude change with regards to the use of user-generated content and with regards to the collaboration *amongst* journalists:

“It's taken a while to get them [journalists across platforms] up to speed. I mean a lot of people didn't want to... . You know: 'Oh, there's another thing to think about. I'm so busy I can't think about this. But I actually think it helps me ... If I do this, then I've got access to the story.' I think people have now bought into it internationally. But it certainly happened more quickly domestically. I think people who were in the domestic channels realized more quickly how important this stuff was.” (BBC interviewee)

Eventually, such collaborative approaches can lead to the creation of ‘converged’ or ‘multimedia’ newsrooms, in which journalists from across various platforms work not as separate entities, but rather as partners. In the case of BBC News, this ‘convergence’ of supposedly ‘different’ media platforms has already taken place and can be interpreted as a consequence of the increasing cross-platform interactivities indicated in the establishment of arms such as the Interactivity Desk.⁵ The journalistic staff of the desk in the first half of 2007 in fact already was ‘multimedia’ so to speak, with journalists originally trained on radio, as well as on the various television channels ranging from BBC World Service to BBC’s News 24 working in the same team. This mixture of journalists with different media backgrounds enabled the Interactivity Desk to develop an understanding of what kind of content might be useful for each journalistic platform within the overall organization of the BBC.

Over and above, the examples of re-structuring the newsroom at the BBC or inventing a completely new approach towards news gathering, production and

⁵ The multimedia newsroom of the BBC maintains the BBC News website, the radio summaries and bulletins (except for Radio 1), BBC World Service News, BBC News 24, BBC World, BBC Breakfast and the bulletins on BBC One at one, six and ten, melting television, radio and online into one entity. For more information see the online announcement made by the BBC’s head of the newsroom, Peter Horrocks, in November 2007: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2007/11/multimedia_news.html

dissemination practices as in the case of *Current* appear as first models of how journalistic organizations can reposition themselves in today's news sphere. The structural organization of both outlets allows the integration of new (and continuous) connections with 'alternative' news providers and thus establishes new interactive spheres within journalistic outlets. The advantages of these new organizational models are manifold for both, the BBC and *Current*: they have greater access to more spots around the globe, receive story ideas as well as material, they can enhance their network of news deliverers and can in fact develop a conversation with their users.

Current and the BBC thus have not only understood the dynamics of a transformed journalistic sphere, but they have reacted. Both are establishing themselves as specific information nodes within a complex, open, and interactive journalism sphere, with *Current* trying to position itself in a specific niche as a transnational provider of information for a younger audience as well as a facilitator of a conversation. *Current* wants to add different perspectives to stories and gives citizen journalists or independent producers a voice. The BBC on the other hand is trying to position itself as a 'central' information node. They aim to re-establish themselves as a (global) information provider who not only distributes news, but rather reinvents the practice of news gathering as a more collaborative activity. The BBC in fact leads the way for public service broadcasters by reconfiguring itself as an accelerator for news or as the BBC interviewee put it:

"Apart from the technologies there and the millions of ways you can contact people or listen whether you podcast, vodcast, listen on your PC, watch TV on your little PDA or whatever: We could be a prism through which all this is channeled. And so the best comes out. We can maybe say: 'This is what's out there and the blogs and maybe we can lead you to the best.' And I think that's a positive thing for broadcasters! [...] Because one thing is: people don't have lots of time. And there's so much out there. So what broadcasters and newspapers can do is point you to the best!" (BBC interviewee)

The successful approaches of the BBC as well as of *Current* are in my view an indicator that methods of integrating elements of participation and the development of formats that engage users in the news production processes are becoming valuable tools in news practice. Yet, it seems that public service broadcasters at least until recently have still been "reluctant to embrace the participatory formats, considering them to be populist, blatantly commercial and of low quality", as Syvertsen (2004: 372) has observed. This reluctance can be interpreted as a lack of understanding of the evolving dynamics in a transformed news sphere. I argue strongly that within an evolving sphere of 'network journalism', public service broadcasters need to reassess their strategies of newsgathering, production and dissemination and pay tribute to the fact that the environment is undergoing a profound transformation. They have to understand that they are in fact part of the 'bigger picture' and find their place within this journalism sphere.

Such a reassessment neither means that public service broadcasters have to compromise core values such as 'credibility', nor does it mean that they have to give up on the idea of 'serving their publics.' However, it does compass a redefinition of the role of public service broadcast outlets within the journalistic system, what 'publics' they want to 'serve' and through which channels they receive as well as distribute their information in the future.

The Place of Public Service Broadcasters in a Network Journalism Sphere

Public service broadcasters (PSB) especially in Europe are currently still in a prestigious position. As established journalistic organizations they provide portals that attract user traffic online as well as over their 'traditional' broadcast portals and – at least up until now – users will most likely turn to information sources that are common knowledge (confer Schudson, 1995; also see Singer, 1998). This is a strong fundament on which they can strategically rebuild and reorganize their newsroom activities in order to stop the steady decline in audience numbers that has been observed for more than a decade now.⁶

As large professional journalistic organizations supported by public funding, PSBs are being particularly challenged by these new network forms. Yet, over the past decades, they already have established a broad network of own journalists and can rely on various links to other news organizations (nationally as well as transnationally). Their task now will be to create new network formats by strengthening these already existing networks as well as to develop strategies to even enhance them and 'open up' to news deliverers, which have so far not been part of their journalistic network. This includes that there has to be a growing awareness of 'alternative' news providers who can add content as well as 'fresh' perspectives to the news sphere.

In an increasingly globalized world in which "borders become markedly less relevant to everyday behaviour in the various dimensions of economics, information, ecology, technology, cross-cultural conflict and civil society" (Beck, 2000: 20) and in which "distances, and boundaries, are not what they used to be" (Hannerz, 1996: 3), the content of news provided by PSBs needs to reflect this diversity. Developing new (and continuous!) links with more optional news deliverers can be perceived as one necessary reaction to pay tribute to these changes. PSBs can still play a vital and important role within a new network sphere of journalism, but they will have to provide a competitive, high-quality information package, which ultimately has to consist of a larger spectrum of voices and angles to stories.

In designing this package, PSB outlets also have to take into consideration that not only societies are structurally transforming into an increasingly diverse sphere of a "world society" as described by Beck (2000: 10) in which difference and multiplicity are the overarching principles as opposed to unity, but that this development corresponds with an attitude change of users towards news within national borders as well. The 'public' a PSB outlet aims to cater for is being transformed into a more diverse group that should rather be referred to in the plural as 'publics.' As McNair argues with reference to the UK media system, a "rethinking [of] the meaning of key terms such as 'public' and 'service'" is required which includes

"breaking with the paternalistic past, letting go of the idea that the role of culture is to enlighten and instruct the uneducated masses, filling them, through such institutions as the BBC, with what cultural elites have regarded as worthy knowledge. It requires embracing the notion that there is in the UK not one public, but many, distinguished by socioeconomic background, age, sexual lifestyle, ethnicity and other demographic characteristics. It requires

⁶ The PEJ survey for example indicates that news users increasingly turn to the web for information and away from 'traditional' news providers. For an overview on changing audience behavior see the "State of the News Media 2008" report (2008: online).

understanding that these publics no longer appreciate well-intentioned but ultimately patronizing guidance on cultural matters from self-appointed wise men and women, but expect genuine respect for their views and aspirations, their tastes and their preferences; for the choices which communication technologies like cable, satellite and the world wide web now allow them to make.” (McNair, 2004: online)

I argue that a structural reorganization of newsrooms and the integration of a wider variety of (alternative) news sources can be the answer on the level of news practice. To refer to the BBC once more: in 2008 the public service broadcaster announced the launch of a new blogging community on *LiveJournal.com*, providing a platform for Russian bloggers. This platform is also connected to the outlet’s Russian service *BBCRussian.com*.⁷ Other collaborative approaches are the collaboration and exchange of material between professional news organizations such as *Guardian* and *Current* or the move of the German online arm of the weekly newspaper *ZEIT*. *ZEIT online* has created an online community for the users where they can comment or discuss *ZEIT online* articles or offer own contributions.⁸

I furthermore suggest that the role of PSBs within this evolving network journalism sphere can be to aggregate information for their users. Information seekers (i.e. users) will increasingly search for orientation within this sphere or as a staff member at the International Center for Journalists in Washington D.C. puts it: “I think public media will regain momentum” as “people are going to be looking for middle grounds. And there are few institutions around the world that provide that middle ground.”⁹ PSBs can eventually become the central contact points, drawing together information strings from the ever-increasing vastness of information floating through an interactive ‘chaotic’ (McNair, 2006) journalism sphere. They can in fact act as news accelerators, generators and commentators guiding and navigating their consumers – and this aggregation should include the integration of ‘alternative’ news sources. Bennett argues along these lines when he suggests to view news organizations such as the BBC as a portal that

“should be used not just to direct user/viewer-flows [sic] to its own proprietary content or that of content affiliates, but be more open than this – lending its trusted brand to connect users to independent and other media in a way that will help structure the choices made by ‘DIY citizens’ beyond fulfilling mere consumerism: to interface the nation with one another.” (Bennett, 2008: 290)

PSB outlets thus need to ‘decentralize’ themselves within a dense web of information and understand that the tasks of journalists today lies in “filtering relevant issues from an increasing supply of information in a crowded domain and its fragmented segments. Journalism evolves from the provision of facts to the provision of meaning” (Bardoel, 1996: 297).

⁷ See the online announcement of the BBC Press Office in 2008:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/04_april/21/russian.shtml

⁸ See Oliver’s article on Guardian vloggers featured on Current TV on journalism.co.uk (Oliver, 2008: online). The *ZEIT online* community can be accessed here:

<http://kommentare.zeit.de/>

⁹ This quote is again part of the PhD project on which this paper is based. Confer footnotes one and four.

This task can best be fulfilled when 'traditional' news organizations understand that the platform itself on which the news is disseminated is becoming irrelevant to a certain degree. Users are developing new consumption patterns and are increasingly "blending" online and 'traditional' sources as a recent survey conducted by the Pew research center suggests.¹⁰ With an increased convergence of 'traditional' as well as 'new' media (confer Bell, 2007: 13), media platforms such as television and online do not function in opposition to each other or separate from each other anymore. PSBs have already reacted to this shift in news consumption attitudes and created their online counterparts. As Trappel points out:

"The main rationale behind online media provided by PSB is the basic consideration that the public service remit is not confined to a specific technology (like radio or broadcasting) but to a specific service. PSB therefore has to follow the audience to where they would access such services." (Trappel, 2008: 320)

However, websites of 'traditional' media outlets – be it print or broadcast media – often mainly consist of shovelware, i.e. content produced for the 'traditional' media platforms and then transferred onto the websites (confer Deuze, 2004: 141 as well as 2006: 70). Yet, such practices neglect the interactive opportunities and networking abilities provided by the online medium. I view these practices as an indication that websites are still often treated as a supplement rather than a 'team-partner' by 'traditional' media outlets. In an evolving network journalism sphere though, journalistic work is shifting "from individualistic to collective and cross-departmental team-based newswork" (Deuze, 2004: 148) and journalists in fact are urged to learn "to 'see the news' through more than one medium" (Volkmer and Heinrich forthcoming, October 2008). In addition, crossmedia work skills are becoming inevitable (confer Barnhurst and Nerone, 2003; Kawamoto, 2003; Pavlik, 2000) and along with it the development of team-based partnerships amongst journalists working for the same outlet, but on a different platform. The creation of a 'converged' news outlet with "formerly distinct media operations" (Deuze, 2004: 141) drawn together into one newsroom as BBC News is pioneering with the creation of a multimedia newsroom is in my view a necessary step. Such a multimedia newsroom also supports collaborative working methods of journalists and enhances the ability to think the 'making of news' across platforms.

Conclusion

Within an evolving network journalism sphere, public service broadcasters still have an important role to play. Yet, with the end of a 'closed' system of journalistic operations and news exchange and in the wake of an evolving network journalism sphere, journalistic work functions upon different grounds and within different parameters.

Networks are open structures in which nodes are the vital connection points. Networks are expandable and their structure suggests understanding nodes not as separate entities, but rather as interconnected particles within a larger framework. Each public service broadcast outlet constitutes just one node within this network and

¹⁰ See the Pew survey on "Key News Audiences now Blend Online and Traditional Sources" accessible online: <http://people-press.org/report/444/news-media>

I am confident that the ability to connect, interact, integrate and thus collaborate with other nodes will decide about their future fate within the evolving global news sphere.

Public service broadcasters will need to reposition themselves within this dynamic and complex sphere consistent of an innumerable number of information nodes and develop strategies to implement networking practices in order to enhance their connections with other information nodes. They will need to 'open up' to diverse input channels and reinvent themselves as central information nodes aggregating and filtering information as well as facilitating conversations for their 'publics.' Building upon their notoriety, they can in fact be reestablished as 'supernodes' operating on various platforms, with each of these platforms being an integral and therefore essential part of the outlet.

Ignoring the transformation of the journalistic environment will eventually lead into isolation in a network society, in which users increasingly blend information sources and search for news 'on demand.' For public service broadcasters it will be relevant to understand the transformation of the parameters of 'public service' within a network sphere. Interactive features and collaborative media practice are not an additional extra, but a necessity to be included in the newsgathering, production and dissemination practices today. Other nodes in the network – be it a blogger, a citizen journalist an independent journalist or whatever information deliverer one can think of – can provide content viewed through a different perspective, add another story angle or a topic. Public service broadcasters could provide a wide variety of perspectives of news gathered via an increased network of sources and distributed on any platform best suitable for the content. Ideally, they could become facilitators of larger conversations and this approach might very well become the 'added value' provided by public service broadcasting within the network journalism sphere. The values and key functions of journalists as the providers of reliable, credible and accurate information will remain untouched – yet the way of practicing journalism is being transformed. Understanding the dynamics of an evolving network journalism culture and restructuring newsrooms accordingly is essential to the survival of any news organization – be it a corporate outlet or a public service broadcaster.

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