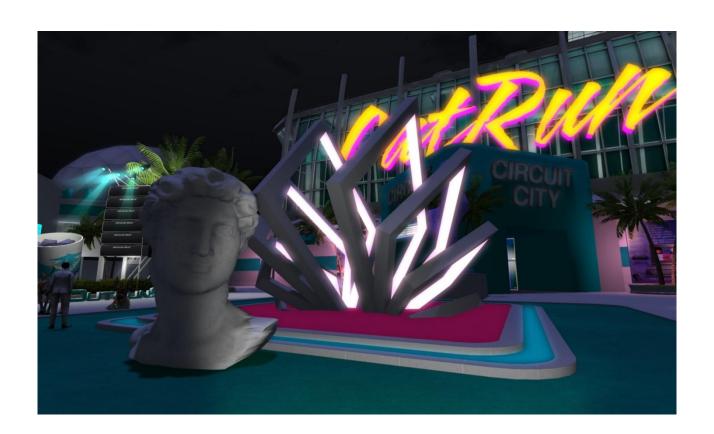Juho Ruotsalainen and Sirkka Heinonen

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Final Report for Helsingin Sanomat Foundation

Intimate journalism

DIGITAL NATIVE MEDIA

AS THE FORERUNNERS OF THE FUTURE JOURNALISM

Contents

The research object, data and theoretical background

The research project "*Digital Native Journalism as the Forerunner of New Media*" (2015 - 2016) of The Finland Futures Research Centre, University of Turku, examined the new ways in which the so called digital native media – media which publish and "live" first and foremost on the internet – understand and signify themselves and their journalism. Through the examination, possible development paths of journalism were anticipated.

Digital native media was understood as forerunners of the futures of journalism. In other words, the project anticipated what journalism could be like in the future in which all media increasingly operate on the internet and on the platforms of social media. It was assumed that the internet and social media are not neutral publishing technologies and platforms, but that they incorporate certain values, routines and operation modes which affect what kind of journalism is created and published on them.

The research data consists of 36 mainly U.S. digital native media's "About Us" pages. On these pages the media describe their values, procedures, and how they conceive journalism. The data was analysed through the method of discourse analysis. The project examined four discourses identified in the data: identity discourse, niche discourse, network discourse and change discourse. A discourse of traditional journalism was also identified in the data. The discourse consists of traditional values of journalism, such as objectivity and impartiality. Because the focus of the study was on the new ways of conceiving journalism, this discourse was left out of the analysis.

The discourses were analysed in the context of the media ecology of social media (Langlois 2014) and the conception of journalism as *journalism-as-conversation* (Marchionni 2013; 2015). Media ecology refers to the tradition of media studies in which different media and media technologies are not seen as neutral conduits of information transfer, but as "habitats" or environments that shape the whole of society and its core values and modes of organization (see e.g. McLuhan 1994; Innis 2007). Journalism-as-conversation, in turn, sees journalism not as creating and distributing objective knowledge but as communication: sharing, participating, and creating a shared culture and social reality.

In the media ecology of social media, different spheres of life tend to merge together. On social media, media organisations and their audiences "live" in the same habitat. This is manifested for instance in the merging of private and public communication: on social media publishing is often more or less informal, and the distinction between producers and consumers is often blurry. It can thus be assumed that if social media become more common as platforms of publishing and distribution of journalism, they steer journalism towards the conception of journalism-as-conversation.

The study assumes that because of the proliferation of social media, the relationship between media organisations and their audiences becomes more interactional and intimate than today – thus

the title of this report "Intimate Journalism". This, in turn, presumably affects the discourses through which media understand themselves and their journalism in the future.

Results

The research analysed four discourses identified in the research data. In the following a summary of each discourse is presented.

Identity discourse signifies media as human-like actors, who have their own identity and individuality. In the discourse, media construct their identities by assigning themselves different features and "personality traits". The media do this by describing their "emotions", highlighting their value-drivenness, and identifying with their audience. In the discourse, journalism is defined by subjective, personal styles, commentaries, and opinions. The discourse can be interpreted so that by presenting themselves as individuals media seek to build a personal relationship with their audience.

In the **niche discourse** media highlight the importance of focus and specialisation – niche journalism refers to journalism that concentrates on certain topic areas. Despite the emphasis on focus, the media's stated objects of specialization are quite general, such as business or technology, or combinations of different topic areas. Hereby, focus and concentration have more to do with the distinct style and culture of each media rather than a certain, narrow niche. The discourse thus signifies journalism as deep and acquainted approach to different topics instead of narrow specialisation.

Network discourse signifies the media as nodes of networks, not as independent and distinct actors. The border between media, their audiences, and other organisations is thus blurred, and the discourse emphasises interactivity between different actors. Through interaction the media seek to establish a close relationship with their audience and to produce news and other contents in a networked manner. In the discourse, journalism is defined through a networked or systems oriented view that highlights the interconnectedness of issues and phenomena.

In the **change discourse** the media seek to renew both journalism and society. Media identify as active agents, facilitators and advocates of change. The goal of journalism is to activate audience to change and improve society. In the discourse media also construct identities that are future-oriented and "in the now". Their journalistic promise is to offer newness and novelty, and to renew journalistic conventions.

Core conclusions

The core conclusions of the research are that the media ecology of social media explain the discourses, and that the discourses adhere to the features of journalism-as-conversation. Because on social media media organisations increasingly operate in the same environment as their audience, they seek to construct individual-like identities in order to be more engaging and relatable, and this aspiration is

reflected in their journalism (*identity discourse*). The personalisation algorithms of social media platforms tailor news and other contents to each user, and thus it is favourable for media to produce specialised contents with distinctive styles (*niche discourse*). The internet and social media are networked environments, and this can be claimed to steer media organisations towards networked models and to broaden news criteria and the sources used (*network discourse*). Social media are built on constant streams of novelty, and they promise their users continuous identity development (Langlois 2014) – digital native media answer this kind of demand by offering unique "newness", presenting themselves as "in the now", and aspiring to renew both society and journalism (*change discourse*).

In regards to journalism-as-conversation, essential in the results is that they imply an "intimate" relationship between media organisations and their audience. The results indicate that media organisations and their audience should have a "common language". According to the discourse analysis, in the journalism of digital native media mere facts and a detached style are not sufficient enough in reporting events. Instead, journalists should increasingly assess and interpret events and phenomena, and to present them in a way that is engaging for audiences. All these features point to subjective and informal journalistic styles. The journalism of digital native media is thus partly situated outside the neutral public sphere. Because the analysed media see themselves also as servants of democracy and public life, their role can be seen as a hybrid of private and public agents.

It should be noticed that subjectivity and objectivity are not mutually exclusive: originally objectivity referred to the methods of inquiry, not to an objective, neutral reporting style (Marchionni 2013). In other words, journalists can both strive for truth and use rich, subjective, and "informal" styles. At the same time, the news agenda and the range of different views and information can broaden, if "objectivity" is not seen primarily as a balanced presentation of different elites, political parties, and lobbies (see Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2016). From these perspectives digital native media can be seen both as renewing journalism and respecting its core values. In a similar way as their role between the public and the private sphere, also the journalism of digital native media can be seen as a hybrid, mixing for instance fact reporting and interpretations.

The blurring of different boundaries does not concern only the relationship between media organisations and their audiences, or different journalistic genres and styles. The "intimate journalism" of digital native media, consumed through ubiquitous mobile devices, can also narrow the gap between world events and the audience, and thus make the world "more real" for citizens. Thus also the relationship between citizens and "the world" could become more intimate than today.

What may follow from the "intimacy" in journalism is that journalism could have a more prominent role in the everyday life of citizens. Culture could become more diverse as different media produced journalism that is intertwined with the life worlds of individuals. Journalism would thus increasingly serve "existential" needs of individuals. Media and journalism would aid people to understand and

make sense about both themselves and the world. At the same time, however, the social reality shared by more or less all the citizens of society could be in danger to deteriorate. Society could divide into numerous different communities of interest, which might not be able to communicate properly because of the lack of common language, ideas, views and public arenas. Like journalism, culture could become personalised as well.

10 theses for the journalism of the future

Based on the results of the research, the following theses were formulated to depict the futures of journalism. The theses describe *possibly strengthening* phenomena of journalism, of which the discourses presented in this research are *weak signals*.

1. Media organisations construct distinct identities, akin to identities of individual human beings. They present themselves as if they were social media users among other users. Media organisations pursue for an intimate relationship and seek to share a common life world with their audience.

2. Journalistic styles that reflect the identity, values, and tastes of journalists and media organisations are strengthened. In this regard journalism becomes more subjective than today. Instead of a relatively uniform mass product there are several journalisms.

3. However, the ideal of objectivity is not abandoned. Journalism remains an institution that is defined by certain criteria – journalism gathers, qualifies, interprets and distributes facts. The conception of objectivity is however changed as journalists assess presented facts actively.

4. Analysis, interpretation, and opinions proliferate. Journalism does not only describe the world, but aids audiences to deeply understand and make sense of it. Journalism becomes increasingly an instrument for identity construction. As the relationship between media and audiences, also the relationship between audience and the world events becomes "intimate".

5. Journalism pursues social and societal changes. In addition to being active agents, media organisations highlight the role of the audience in achieving reforms. A core aim of journalism is to increase the activism of citizens and their engagement with public issues.

6. Attractiveness becomes a core quality criterion in journalism. Instead of routine reporting, journalists treat all subjects in a deep, interested, and engaging way. Oftentimes attractiveness and engagement stems from novelty, freshness and originality.

7. Journalism becomes networked and it is built on the cooperation between different actors. The goal of journalism is to capture the world more comprehensively than before. News criteria are broadened and they are defined by media organisations' networks, along with the media themselves. As a consequence, media lose their independence and autonomy in relation to other actors in society.

8. Media do not aim their journalism for the "mass audience", but for different groups of shared tastes and interests. They gather information on their core audiences through web analytics and by participating actively in conversations on social media, and feed the information into the journalistic process.

9. Because most media still pursue as big audience as possible, only a few media specialise in a narrow niche or serving certain audience segment. Instead their strategy is mass-tailorisation. Media organisations have different niche departments and niche reporters.

10. However, some media will specialise in narrow niches. They produce high-quality and deep journalism in their area of specialisation. Often these kinds of media base their business on subscription, membership, and other fees. Consumers are ready to pay only for journalism that is highly specialised and unique.

Publications and presentations

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