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Considering a Possible Future for Digital Journalism

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Considerando el futuro del periodismo digital

Abstract

Developments shaping digital journalism seem to speeding up at the start of the 21st century. Social media enable radical new ways to gather and verify sources and information. Hardware and software power innovative storytelling formats, combining platforms and channels, adding interactivity to the news experience. And the global news industry is quickly becoming a networked industry, with startups and other forms of entrepreneurial journalism springing up all over the world. In this essay, I consider a possible future for digital journalism by briefly reviewing first findings from a series of case studies of 21 new small-sized journalism enterprises operating in 11 countries (spread across 5 continents). The overarching research question: seen through their eyes, what does the future of (digital) journalism look like? The answers are hopeful.

Resumen

Parece que los desarrollos que inciden en el periodismo digital se están acelerando al comienzo del siglo XXI. Las redes sociales permiten nuevos modos radicales de captar y verificar fuentes e información. El hardware y el software permiten formatos narrativos innovadores, que combinan plataformas y canales, añadiendo interactividad a la experiencia informativa. Y la industria global de la información se está rápidamente convirtiendo en una industria en red, con el surgimiento de starups y otras formas de periodismo emprendedor en todo el mundo. En este ensayo, exploro un futuro posible para el periodismo digital examinando brevemente los primeros resultados de un trabajo que analiza los casos de estudio de 21 nuevas empresas periodísticas de tamaño reducido que operan en 11 países, en los cinco continentes. La pregunta de investigación que se plantea es: visto a través de sus ojos, ¿cuál es el aspecto del futuro del periodismo (digital)? Las respuestas son esperanzadoras.

1. Legacy news media

Just the other day I sat down to chat with a young journalist who was recently put in charge of multimedia operations at a reputable news company. He expressed sincere enthusiasm for his new role, and elaborated excitedly about all his plans and the fun he is having with his team of dedicated digital colleagues. Soon, however, the discussion turned to the more problematic aspects of his job. Such as the fact that the company's proprietary content management system – purchased at great expense and to facilitate a 'digital first' turn – turned out to be just another system ill-equipped to handle tru multimedia storytelling. Or that the digital desk in the newsroom is generally used as an afterthought – if at all – by colleagues elsewhere. He shook his head as he was expressing his frustration with being seen as someone simply providing a service, rather than being considered a professional partner in telling good – if not better – stories. The most profound problem with the future of digital journalism at his beloved employer, he explained, are the numerous debates and brainstorm sessions organized regularly in the newsroom, as no one at these sessions dares to question neither the existing ways journalism gets practiced nor the traditional ways news stories get told. "Our journalism is great," he summarized his colleagues' mindset, "so how are we going to package it in a way that will entice audiences to pay for it?" The future of journalism thus gets reduced to a discussion of platforms. And this, he conceded, leads nowhere.

This conversation, in a nutshell, summarizes the profoundly precarious position the profession of journalism finds itself in, particularly when it comes to its digital future. It faces challenges on all fronts:

- *Technology*: as the opportunity cost for the production of digital journalism diminishes, legacy media face significant problems as they tend to be stuck in their 'heavy' material contexts (of large studio complexes and associated equipment, dedicated newsrooms, content management systems, and other proprietary software packages and hardware configurations designed for particular uses). Considering the rise of freelance and entrepreneurial journalism, a global startup culture, and a range of innovative ways in which journalists (both individually and in networks or teams) are leveraging their professional skills and networks to produce news outside of established news organisations, technology runs the risk of becoming something that simply serves to maintain existing structures and production cycles rather than enabling a more nimble, creative, and multimedia portfolio.

- *Organisation and management*: legacy news organizations are historically oriented toward specific schedules associated with platform-specific production processes benchmarked by deadlines, around which schedules other societal systems – such as companies, government institutions, and political parties – traditionally organize their operations (as expressed through press conferences, the publication of financial reports, and the release of public statements). However, the digital realm introduces a new media logic, one that seems oblivious to industrial-age schedules or more or less predictable news cycles, forcing news organizations to aggressively replace 'analogue' production practices with 'digital' ones which tends to be a managerial hurdle many, if not most companies cannot take.

- *Culture*: journalism worldwide is in a process of becoming a different kind of profession. Once organized in formal institutions, where contracted laborers would produce content under informal yet highly structured working conditions, today the lived experience of professional journalists is much more precarious, fragmented, and networked. Still, the profession's primary way of making sense of itself is through recursive self-reference, particularly when it comes to those professionals working inside legacy news media. Challenges and opportunities are perceived as coming from the outside, and the digital future of journalism is therefore seen as something happening to journalism (rather than, for example, also occurring because of it).

The question is, whether the profession can manage itself through and beyond these challenges. One particular expectation is, that new(er) news organisations – such as startups, editorial collectives, and journalism outfits on the boundaries of the profession – are better able to embrace and pioneer innovation, unhindered as they are by the need to also protect and maintain a historical structure of making news. The journalistic field in recent years has exploded and fragmented in all kind of ways, similar to perhaps the music industry in the late 1990s, where both established brands and companies seek to reinvent themselves as many more or less independent (in music parlance: 'indie') firms and networks of individual journalists stake out significant territory.

2. Post-Industrial Organisation of Newswork

According to Anderson, Bell and Shirky (2012), journalism is evolving towards a 'post-industrial' model of news. They argue that in order for journalism to adapt to the new media environment (with its attendant social, economic and cultural implications), the profession needs new tactics, a new self-conception, and

new organizational structures. In a post-industrial context, newswork increasingly takes place with the formal or informal collaboration of the public, who participate on a co-creative continuum ranging from sharing real-time information and providing eyewitness accounts, all the way to autonomously authoring news stories, shaping an emerging type of *networked* journalism (Beckett, 2010; Russell, 2015).

Considering the role of digital journalism in this environment, Van Der Haak, Parks and Castells (2012) see the emergence of a new professional figure: the 'networked journalist', whose work is "driven by a networked practice dependent on sources, commentaries, and feedback, some of which are constantly accessible online" (2927). They see in this new role for journalists "not a threat to the independence and quality of professional journalism, but a liberation from strict corporate control" (ibid. 2935). Part of this perceived journalistic independence online stems from the realisation, that journalism, as a set of practices dedicated to the verification and dissemination of information of public relevance, today increasingly takes place beyond the walls of legacy news institutions. As Anderson, Shirky and Bell concede, 'the journalism industry is dead but […] journalism exists in many places' (2012: 76). Although many journalists still work for such news media organisations, today's newsroom looks quite different than those of the mid- to late 20th century – as they are largely empty (because of mass lay-offs and outsourcing practices), as well as gradually transforming into integrated operations where content, sales, marketing and a host of other functions (including circulation management, design, multimedia operations, and IT services) are supposed to converge.

3. Global startup culture

In the digital context, the news organization is not so much a *place* but a *process* that involves networks of people, technologies and spaces. There is a high degree of flux, blurring the in/out boundary of the newsroom and its environment. In fact, the new ways in which newswork is organized ask us to move beyond the binary opposition of inside and outside the newsroom as this notion becomes ever more obsolete, and as a concept may obfuscate rather than illuminate. It is important to emphasize that most of the actual reportorial work gets done elsewhere. With the rise of 'post-industrial' journalism, the journalistic workforce becomes distributed, consisting of individual entrepreneurial journalists, freelance editorial collectives, and a worldwide emergence of news startups.

The emergence of a startup culture in the field of journalism is global: since the early years of the 21st century, new independent (and generally small-scale and online-only) journalism companies have formed around the world (Bruno and Kleis Nielsen 2012; Simons 2013; Coates Nee 2014; Küng 2015; Powers and Zambrano, 2016). In the context of self-deleterious print and broadcast business models, audiences migrating to the digital space where their time is spent less with visiting news websites but more with finding and sharing news via social media (thereby enabling companies like Facebook and Google to further siphon off advertising revenue), and an organizational context rife with atypical working conditions, on-going managerial overhauls, and declining budgets, journalistic newcomers and senior reporters alike strike out on their own.

In 2013 I embarked on a five-year project titled "Beyond Journalism" (also the title of a forthcoming book on the project, contracted with Polity Press) charting the development of news startups around the world, seeking to understand the ways digital journalism takes shape in the context of new organisational forms and new operational practices. Tamara Witschge (University of Groningen) joined the project in 2015. In our project we critically investigate the work of those who are called 'entrepreneurial journalists' in a variety of settings and countries. The project, while still on-going, currently covers 21 cases in 11 countries (see Table 1). Our identification of startups in the field follows that of Bruno and Nielsen (2012) and Powers and Zambrano (2016): organizations built primarily around a web presence, that have no formal affiliation with legacy news media, and that seek to be recognized by their peers as journalistic. That said, over the years some companies have ended up participating in our project because of opportunity sampling, not fitting neatly our original operationalization. For the purposes of this essay, I have left these companies out of consideration.

Table 1: Startups in the Beyond Journalism project (phase: 2014-2016)[i]

Name Startup	Country	Remarks	Start
Discourse Media	Canada	In-depth journalism projects in collaboration with news outlets; largely female-led.	2013
La Silla Vacia	Colombia	Independent news blog; crowdfunding and (US) foundation support.	2009
14ymedio	Cuba	Independent news blog; (US) foundation support & private investors.	2014
Periodismo de Barrio	Cuba	University-based news service focused on natural disasters; distribution via USB sticks.	2015
Zetland	Denmark	Online magazine co-created with members; also: live journalism shows in theatres.	2012
Mediapart	France	Subscription-based online in-depth news platform; also user-generated content.	2007
IRPI	Italy	Investigative journalism platform; non-profit with (international) foundation support, crowdfunding.	2012
Jaaar	Iran	Jaaar is an online kiosk for newspaper articles (similar to Blendle in The Netherlands).	2011
Naya Pusta	Nepal	Weekly children's TV news show; international foundation support; produced through NEFEJ (Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists).	2012
De Correspondent	Netherlands	Online magazine; Long-form articles; access is membership-based, also foundation support.	2013
Follow The Money	Netherlands	Membership-based startup for financial-economic investigative journalism.	2010
The Post Online	Netherlands	Free online news blog; some investment backing. Partnership with TPO Magazine	2009
TPO Magazine	Netherlands	Online news magazine; people subscribe to individual journalists, also crowdfunding; partnership with The Post Online.	2013
Bureau Boven	Netherlands	Freelance female-only editorial collective; numerous jointly funded projects (also non-journalistic).	2013
360 Magazine	Netherlands	Largely subscription-based print magazine with Dutch translations of international journalism; partnership with Courrier International (France).	2011
Code4SA	South Africa	Non-profit data journalism outfit (part of international network Code4); sponsoring and civil society contracts.	2013
MMU Radio	Uganda	University-based community radio station; international funding.	2016
Corner Media Group	United States	Network of hyperlocal online news sites in New York City; advertising-based.	2011
Inkabinka	United States	Software developer for automated news summaries; subscription-model and venture capital.	2013
The Brooklyn Ink	United States	University-based (and sponsored) local investigative student news website; offered as a course.	2007
Mediastorm	United States	Film production and interactive design studio, with clients in journalism, business, and education.	2005

Source: Author.

In all these cases, we explore and interrogate the factors involved in creating and running a journalism startup, and how the professionals involved give meaning to what they do in the fast-changing field of digital journalism. With this, we aim to shed light on the ways in which these new start-ups impact on the field and wider understanding of journalism, providing rich, in-depth descriptions of these new forms of journalism, the new types of business models, and news ways of practicing and perceiving journalism.

With each case, we have followed a baseline method. First, we establish contact with the key people involved. Our experience has been that getting access is relatively easy if one is prepared to go beyond typical high-profile news startups (such as Vox, Politico, and Quartz in the United States). The next step was to set up the parameters of access, as we tried to get the organisation involved to allow for site visits and observation of office practices (such as editorial meetings, tagging along with reportorial projects, hanging out in dedicated workspaces wherever these may be) over the course of one to three weeks. During this time – and in some cases, before or afterwards via phone or Skype – the visiting researcher would conduct as many interviews as possible with the startup founders, employees (if any), professionals involved, as well as some context interviews with other journalists working in the same area. For comparative purposes an interview guide was developed (after a few pilot studies in our home country, The Netherlands), consisting of semi-structured questions on:

- people's professional backgrounds;

- on practices, competencies and skills involved in running the startup and doing the work;

- on the organisation and management of labor as well as the production process;

- on the material context of the startup (i.e. workspaces, hardware and software, technologies);

- on professional identity – focusing on ethics, role perceptions, status and reputation, news values, motivations and goals, audience, community and society;

- and, to wrap up, a final question on what the journalists involved considered as the most fundamental challenge for the field of (digital) journalism.

A third empirical step consisted of securing access to internal and external documentation on the startup. Internal documents include meeting notes, e-mail exchanges, and (draft) papers related to the journalistic, managerial and business practices of the organisation. External documents include press statements and public mission statements (including online "About" and "FAQ" sections), social media posts (blogposts, tweets, Facebook status updates, contributions to Instagram/ Pinterest/ LinkedIn, and so on), interviews given to other media, press clippings on the startup involved. A fourth step involved doing a comprehensive analysis of the products and services the startup produced during the time of our investigation. In some cases, this involved doing a content analysis of stories, in other cases this phase of the research covered a detailed description of all the features of the output the startup had been able to generate.

Although we are still in the middle of analysing all the data, I would like to use this essay as an opportunity to reflect on three particular issues affecting all these startups:

- the structure of their *motivations and goals* in pursuing their dream of journalism by going at it alone (that is: deliberately outside the legacy media system);

- key issues the professionals involved struggle with '*making it work*' (including earning enough money to make a living);

- a reflection on the potentially *precarious features* of the global startup trend for the future of digital journalism in a network society.

4. Digital Journalism Startups: Motivations and Goals

The post-industrialisation of journalism is part of a trend signposted as early as 2006 in a survey among journalism unions and associations in 38 countries from all continents by the International Federation of Journalists and the International Labour Organization. The report signalled the rapid rise of so-called 'atypical' work in the media, documenting that close to one-third of journalists worldwide work in anything but secure, permanent or otherwise contracted conditions. Since then, freelance journalism, independent entrepreneurship, and further flexibilisation of working conditions have become paramount, particularly among younger reporters and newcomers in the field (as well as for more senior journalists affected by lay-offs and downsizing so common across the news industry; Deuze, 2014). One would expect that the dominant reason for setting up shop on one's own we found was as a response to the crisis in journalism in terms of employment. However, whenever a crisis in journalism was mentioned, our study participants would refer to it in terms of a business opportunity: to fill a news gap. Examples of mentioned markets are taking children as a serious news audience seriously (Nepal), identifying information and communication technologies as a valuable niche news segment (Iran), or through offering in-depth stories with a more engaged or 'subjective' voice than would be common among legacy news titles (France, Italy, The Netherlands, the United States).

In fact, the most commonly mentioned motivations for starting a business among the cases we investigated – bearing in mind the challenge to generalise from case studies – fall into four thematic categories, none of which related to the purported crisis in journalism: technology, economy, culture, and social.

Regarding *technology*, startup founders would mention the advantages online publishing offers them in terms of cost-efficiency. More specifically, though, their technological motivation tends to be exemplified by a sincere belief in the digital as a superior platform to gather, produce, co-create and disseminate news on. All phases of the journalistic production process run through an almost exclusively digital design, where information, leads and sources are collected online (often via social media), stories and reports are written, edited and produced in multimedia formats (combining various media, such as text, pictures, infographics, and video), the audience can be involved in various ways (from leaving comments on the site and encouraging further sharing online to user-generated content such as blogposts), and distributing news and information online (in real-time, through day-parting, or other creative temporal strategies) offers freedom from print and broadcast schedules. Whereas in the old days technological complexity tended to force news organizations toward assembly line type production schedules limiting the range of possibilities for storytelling, the current digital context offers plenty of opportunities for free (contemporary examples include online services such as Medium, Wordpress, Storify, or open source writing and audio/video editing software like LibreOffice, Blender, Audacity).

An *economic* motivation for investing time and resources into a startup relates to the pragmatic notion that working together provides the journalists involved with a better chance at surviving, than going at it alone. Also, their capital – as in the ability to convert their resources, networks, contacts, reputation, skills and competences into opportunities for business, funding, or access to sources of support, tends to be enhanced when banding together (see also Powers and Zambrano, 2016). In numerous cases younger journalists or newcomers to the profession would work under the guidance or leadership of one or more senior reporters and editors. A note of concern here refers to the efforts journalists involved are making to make ends meet, even when grouping together. More often that not, the key source of income for a startup – or for individual reporters associated with the startup – is non-journalistic in nature: working for commercial clients, or within the parameters set by funding institutions. Additionally, much of the work that goes into designing, setting up, and maintaining a startup is in fact free labour – a form of work Fast, Ordering and Carlson call 'prospective' labour, involving a kind of professional who "takes high risks, puts in long hours without any guaranteed reward, is likely to be exploited, but can also find nuggets so big they will never have to perform labour again" (2016: 969). The latter motivation was absent from the sample – with one exception: Inkabinka's founders clearly are aiming for a multimillion-dollar paycheck for their software development.

Another economic argument voiced referred to the freedom the independent environment offered to pursue whatever our participants considered to be quality work, rather than being evaluated on the basis of criteria related to productivity. Legacy media counterparts were often dismissed for focusing too much on quantity over quality and caring more about producing to quota. We cannot test the veracity of such statements other than acknowledging that these claims serve a particular purpose: to validate the choice for going at it alone, for choosing the precarious path of a new small-sized business.

As is shown in study after study, journalists around the world rate autonomy as most important when it comes to job satisfaction and happiness. In a comparison of surveys among journalists from 31 countries, the authors note: "patterns indicate that most journalists around the world recognize the importance of job autonomy, but also perceive large gaps between the ideal of autonomy and the actual freedoms they have. However, these gaps in perception are not restricted to nations with limited press freedom" (Willnat, Weaver and Choi, 2013: 172). Regardless whether the cases in our sample were from supposedly 'free' countries such as the United States and The Netherlands, or from nations with more restricted press policies like Iran and Cuba, a key *cultural* motivation for the journalists involved was to do what they felt like doing – to be free from what many perceived as the shackles and constraints of legacy media organisations. At the same time, such real or perceived autonomy comes at a cost, because it "is sufficiently powerful to override any misgivings, constraints or disadvantages that might emerge in the everyday reproduction of this highly competitive and uncertain domain" (Banks, 2007: 55). Objectively speaking, the working conditions at many of the startups in our sample were anything but good: people work all hours of the day and night, the boundary between working life and private life disappears, the work tends to be unpaid or underpaid, and there is little or no predictability about what may happen next to the work or company involved. Yet the relative freedom one has gets touted and celebrated throughout.

Finally, a *social* motivation emerges from these case studies of journalism startups. Banding together, setting up shop with a group, working on projects as a team – it all offers solutions to social isolation as a brutal side-effect of working as an independent journalist in the field. The camaraderie and warm collegiality often found among the colleagues of these startups was palpable, often seducing us as researchers in the

process. It becomes hard to remain neutral and observant when the people you are witnessing, interviewing and studying are clearly passionate and mutually validate each other's passions for the work, the company, the product, and the profession of journalism. At the same time I have to note the distinct character of this collegiality as a rather loose network. Startups are fluid spaces in that they are inhabited by a temporary constellation of people, many of whom are either by necessity or accident also working on other things, scouting for other opportunities, and considering alternatives. It is a precarious collegiality, then, but a highly appealing one.

The personal investment of journalists in their work is nothing new, of course. In fact, upon re-reading the classic newsroom study "The News Factory" from 1980 by Charles Bantz, Suzanne McCorkle and Roberta Baade – documenting the routinized workflow at a local television newsroom in the United States – I am stunned how they predicted the motivations for journalists to leave established news organizations in favor of trying things out on their own terms. In their study, Bantz, McCorkle and Baade consider the consequences of news organizations opting for a routinization of the production process, no matter how necessary or understandable such a managerial decision may be:

> "The development of a factory news model, with its assembly line approach, in conjunction with the trends toward routinization appear to have at least four organizational consequences: (1) the news factory lacks flexibility, (2) there is a lack of personal investment in the news product, (3) newswork becomes evaluated in productivity terms, and (4) goal incongruence emerges between newsworkers' job expectations and job reality" (59).

Seen in this light, the emergence of a startup culture at least in part stems from a significant frustration among (certain) journalists about (specific) legacy media business and managerial practices.

5. Digital Journalism Startups: Making It Work

A significant critical observation about the digital journalism under investigation in this project must be, that with few exceptions these startups are not earning enough money with their digital offerings to offset the cost of doing (quality) journalism. There is not a single working business model, as almost all of these small enterprises struggle to make ends meet. The competition online is high and sources of income and funding tend to be fickle, often temporary and generally unpredictable. On the other hand: this does not mean these startups are necessarily not making it work as businesses. In fact, it has been a revelation to see the various creative and more or less innovative ways these journalists found sources of income. Zetland, for example, sells out theatres with live news performances. IRPI, on the other hand, employs fulltime staffers who seek out and apply for (international) funding and subsidies. Several startups have membership programs (De Correspondent, Mediapart, Follow The Money), have their finances arranged through public institutions such as universities (MMU Radio, Brooklyn Ink, Common Reader, Periodismo de Barrio), and indeed some rely on advertising, paywalls and subscriptions. As stated enthusiastically by David Plotz in a post on the American website Slate in 2014: there are (at least) "76 ways to make money in digital media." This may be so, but handling, organizing and applying a flexible variety of business models is not easy, nor is it guaranteed to work out.

What this discussion of business models – or lack thereof – signposts, is the overriding element of 'business' running through all accounts of what it is like to work for a startup and making the startup work. Generating funding, income, revenue, and return on investment are a constant factor, permeating all considerations of the work, of living the life of an entrepreneurial journalist. More often than not, the professionals in these cases talk about their work in terms of doing what they *have to do* in order to do what they *want to do*. Such cross-subsidy is something quite common for both freelance journalists as some news organisations. Where a freelance reporter might supplement their income as a journalist with work done for businesses or public institutions, a news company may engage in the production of branded content – producing editorial work that (also) serves as an advertisement for a commercial client. The same is the case in many startups, although quite a few try to either prevent cross-subsidy from happening, or put strict policies in place that would separate marketing and business from editorial decisions. In one case – of the hyperlocal news network Corner Media Group in New York City - such a policy materialised as a row of potted plants between the advertising section and the newsroom proper.

A fundamental factor determining people's involvement with these news organisations is their level of emotional engagement, despite the overall dearth of working business models. Sure, journalism is an affective profession, in that most journalists tend to choose this line of work for emotional rather than economical reasons – few expect to get rich with journalism (Beckett and Deuze, 2016). In the fieldwork we found countless examples of people profoundly passionate about their work and feeling strongly about the need for the startup to exist (and succeed). Such passion enables people to handle or at least accept poor

working conditions and an often-precarious outlook. At the same time, this kind of emotional engagement with the work also makes people easily exploitable, if anything because they are more likely to explain exploitation away.

Passion is pertinent in the ways in which our study participants give meaning to the work they do. In many instances, the journalists involved would emphasize how what they do can be considered to be 'true' or 'real' journalism – as opposed to the products churned out by colleagues in mainstream, legacy media. Such sentiment was not just voiced by reporters working in societies where the state has a problematically close relationship with the national news media – such as Colombia, Cuba, Iran, Nepal. The same criticism about colleagues in legacy media organisations can be heard from startups in The Netherlands, Italy, and the United States. A significant part of the professional identity of the journalists involved with the startups in this study was tied up with perceptions of being 'true' to journalism, an ideal-typical and even romantic vision of the profession that in turn legitimised and validated the choices they (or their startup) made. Such dreams of what journalism may be suggest that the ultimate role for journalism in society is to have impact and (thus) make a difference in people's lives. What is interesting about this construction of journalism, is that it is not particularly new, nor innovative. In fact, these reporters and editors would generally refer to a 'real' journalism as dedicated to the truth, as functioning as a watchdog, scrutinising those in power critically and sceptically in the name of the public, and doing so in a way that is professional, transparent, and ethically sound. All of these values can be considered to be the basic building blocks of the consensual occupational ideology of journalism as a profession as it emerged in the 20th century (Deuze, 2005). Still, for the startup workers we spoke with this ideological vision of professional journalism felt distinct to what they were doing – more often than not suggesting that their counterparts in mainstream media companies somehow had 'lost their way' or simply failed society by not living up to their own journalistic standards.

6. Digital Journalism Startups: Precarious Features

Beyond motivations, goals, and ways to make it work as a journalism startup, some problematic issues remain. Such issues largely relate to the possible futures of digital journalism in the context of new news organisations. First, one has to consider what exactly can amount to something resembling a career in journalism. For some time now careers in media industries in general and journalism in particular have changed structure, from a more or less predictable linear progression (for example from being an intern to a junior staffer, securing a contract to be reporter or correspondent, then moving up the ladder in the newsroom, at some point being eligible for an editorial position) to a portfolio or patchwork career. Such a career resembles a patchwork of assignments, contracts, projects, stories, media, positions, and duties – often in a rather random order. Still, such 'portfolio worklives' (Handy, 1989) tend to be seen and experienced as a series of stepping stones, leading to what – in hindsight – looks like a more or less consistent career trajectory. Despite the enthusiasm we found among many study participants (about their company and their work), I sometimes wonder to what extent life (partly) inside a startup may lead to, given the fact how it is more often than not cross-subsidised by other (non-journalistic) work, how it offers little control over what may happen next, and does not necessarily contribute to a specific reputation or status (which then can be marketed to secure future employment). This is the ultimate embodiment of precarity in work, as it is quite difficult for the professionals involved to have control over what happens next in their work-lives. Pierre Bourdieu (1998) fiercely critiques such precariousness of work in the digital age, suggesting that living under precarious conditions prevents rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to (individually or collectively) rebel against intolerable working or living conditions.

A second, related concern with precariousness is work as an opportunity for (personal) growth. In the context of ever-increasing flexibilisation of work throughout the contemporary labor market, one wonders where workers learn new skills, how they reflect in a structural way on their own process, and to what extent there are any moments for mentoring, intervision, and learning. I am pointing this out because professionalization tends to be tied up with a certain dedication to the craft – in this case, the craft of journalism. And indeed, the people in this study generally speak lovingly of journalism – what it can be, what it should be, what kind of impact it may have on society. There seems to be a clear commitment to quality and talking responsibility for the consequences of doing journalism, but how does one develop structures of learning and growth in such a precarious context? There seems to be a new role for unions and professional associations here – one that is less about protecting people's careers, and more about assisting in people's decisions (for example through education and training, legal assistance, and administrative support) regardless of what their chosen form of employment looks like.

A third element of concern is the current structure of the market for journalistic storytelling. The on-going flexibilisation of work and the emergence of a global culture of entrepreneurialism in journalism ideally bring

about a situation where audiences can pick and choose from a tremendous amount of quality offerings available on a wide variety of platforms and channels. On the other hand, quite a few startups we studied to some extent rely on traditional (print and online) publishers or broadcasters to pay for and distribute their work. At the same time, these legacy media in recent years have laid off large numbers of journalists, effectively relying increasingly on freelancers and people working in otherwise contingent contractual contexts. This produces a market where journalistic talent competes with each other for a chance to tell (and sell) stories, rather than the other way around: where publishers (online, print, radio, television, mobile) would contend for the best reporting and reporters around. Interestingly, in several places around the world new collective enterprises have sprung up in recent years aiming to organise freelance and independent journalists outside of traditional trade unions in an attempt to improve working conditions (including client negotiation support, healthcare provision, and workspace facilitation) for freelancers as a group. These kinds of 'organised networks' (Rossiter, 2006) provide one possible solution to the dilemma of a distributed workforce that has little negotiating power vis-à-vis large companies or corporations. On the other hand, many of the startups we studied opted out of this competition for recognition and access to legacy publication channels, instead building their own platform – varying from a radio station to theatre performances, from websites and weblogs to printed magazines.

Finally, a word regarding the audience for (digital) journalism. In most of these startups significant efforts are made to engage the audience directly, either by taking them seriously as a market or a constituency, at times by asking them for input (both financially through crowdfunding and content-wise via crowdsourcing) and expertise, and including them in the production process with user-generated and user-submitted content. This begs the question: how does one cultivate a genuine relationship with a public as an entrepreneur? One would expect that legacy media had an enormous head start toward this end, but we know from journalism studies that in fact most news media struggle significantly with their audience relationships, generally outsourcing the responsibility thereof to marketing departments, ombudsmen or audience representatives. The dedication to the public that characterises many of the startups in this study has been a remarkable (and laudable) feature. Yet many of these startups probably will not last, given the rate of failure for startups generally (Naldi and Picard, 2012). A generally high turnover rate of journalists and editors in such small to medium-sized enterprises amplifies the volatility of the startup scene, and carefully cultivated relationships with a specific community may vanish overnight. Given the already rocky relationship between professional journalism and the general public, this could be a source of concern.

7. Discussion

In this essay, I have looked at possible futures for digital journalism seen through the lens of a research project among digital news startups on five continents. In doing so, I have aimed to broaden the conversation about digital journalism, taking it beyond expectations of new forms of multimedia, crossmedia and transmedia storytelling, beyond a strict evaluation in terms of business models and return on investments, as well as beyond discussions of quality reporting and editing. My focus is rather on what doing digital journalism actually means for a growing number of journalists now contingently at work in the news industry, often operating in a precarious context both within and outside legacy media organisations. What this broadening of the scope for discussion brings, is a sincere appreciation and respect for professionals trying to make it work in the digital arena. It also offers as an observation the pervasive nature and longevity of traditional values that have come to define professional journalism, despite intense business pressures, technological challenges, and cross-subsidising practices (see also Wagemans, Witschge and Deuze, 2016). It certainly seems that the ideal-typical core values of journalism do not necessarily stand in the way of new forms of journalism developing and flourishing in vastly different parts of the world, operating under a variety of material, economical, cultural and political contexts. If anything, this gives me hope. The possible future for digital journalism is precarious, and hopeful.

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