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On the Role of Emotion in the Future of Journalism

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Abstract

In this essay, we contextualize journalism in an emotionally charged networked environment. As journalism and society change, emotion is becoming a much more important dynamic in how news is produced and consumed. Highlighting how quality reporting and editing has always had emotion at its core, we move on to articulate ways to do “affective” news well and advocate promising avenues to study and theorize it. In this context, we suggest that more research and knowledge is needed regarding the ontology of data, the political economy of identity when privacy goes public, and on the sociology of influence when power is redistributed emotionally.

Keywords

journalism, emotion, media life

Journalism today is interactive, interconnected, participatory, more open, more global, multi-platform, multi-linear, producing a constant stream of data, analysis, and comment (Beckett, 2008, 2010). People’s everyday lives are correspondingly lived in, rather than with media. The challenge for the news industry is neither finding working business models nor figuring out what to do online—it is becoming a meaningful, insightful, and trustworthy part of an emerging affective media ecosystem. In this essay, we address this challenge by first establishing how emotion can be considered to be a crucial building block of good journalism. Highlighting how quality reporting and editing has always had emotion at its core, we move on to articulate ways to do “affective” news well and advocate promising avenues to study and theorize it.

The pervasive and ubiquitous nature of our contemporary media ecosystem and its attendant culture do not mean people’s lives are determined by technology, but certainly suggest that our understanding of society and the role of journalism in it must start with an appreciation of the profound mediatization of everyday life and the lifeworld (Deuze, 2014). This is all the more important as the ubiquitous and pervasive nature of media in everyday life is a direct function of their disappearance from our active awareness, as Joshua Meyrowitz (1998) remarked, “Ironically, then, the environment of a medium is most invisible when its influence is most pervasive” (p. 106). This influence is most profound regarding the increasingly intimate relation people have with technology in general, and media in particular. In

this article, we will examine this intimacy through the dynamic role of emotion as an animating principle in the emerging relationships between people, news, and the networked journalists involved.

Several changes in media have contributed to people’s increasingly personal and emotional engagement with the world around them. First of all, media are now predominantly mobile and profoundly personalized. Our devices are always with us. Smartphones especially are set to become effectively universal, and their usage is increasing all the time. They are rapidly becoming the primary platform, not just an option. News organizations are already skipping the switch from print and broadcast to digital in order to become mobile-first. Our physical relationship to news is changing because of mobile technology: Rodin’s Thinker has become Steve Jobs’ Swiper. The device is always on and always to hand. Furthermore, our media are social, in that social network platforms are increasingly integrating standalone websites—including those of professional news organizations—into their services, a process Anne Helmond (2015) aptly describes as the on-going platformisation of the Web. The news not only travels with us and is therefore in true

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Martini fashion anytime, anyplace, anywhere; it is simultaneously part of both personal and public networks. You can customize it—with apps, for example—to get what you want when you want it as well as to share and create content yourself through buttons, add-ons, and other functionalities integrating it with your social networks. As humans, we love to do this and as it becomes more personal and social, we become more attached. We might characterize this as digital co-dependency.

As our media become more intimate, we get more devoted to our devices and deeply attached to our mediated activities. In terms of news, what we are doing comes down to: “reading, watching, viewing, listening, checking, snacking, monitoring, scanning, searching, clicking, linking, sharing, liking, recommending, commenting and voting” (Meijer & Kormelink, 2015, p. 667). Even though plenty of people express concern regarding our digital co-dependency, overall, despite the cost and the dangers of addiction, people are generally positive about this new relationship with media, especially regarding networked mobile artifacts such as smartphones and tablet computers, considering them liberating and helping to connect better to people, places, and information.

Journalism as a profession and as a news industry has always been part and parcel of technological change, both in terms of responding to transformation and inspiring innovation. Technology is as much the source of journalism as it is a force acting upon it. Today’s technology gives the journalist extraordinary communication power and creative agency, while contemporary technologies are also augmenting and automating journalism through the use of computational algorithms, sophisticated software, and robotic agents that turn data into stories (Anderson, 2013).

Today’s professional news offerings across all media can expand the citizen’s choice, information, engagement, and understanding, but it can also be confusing, disorientating, and even upsetting. A disconnect between journalism and its publics grows as the industry suffers “from a loss in public trust and confidence” (Witschge & Nygren, 2009, p. 41), and the profession is undermined by an on-going casualization of labor and a corresponding rapid rise of atypical media work (Deuze, 2007). As journalists are increasingly on their own as well as disintermediated by tweeting politicians and companies with their own in-house newsrooms, while also responding to the disloyalty of audiences and employers alike, their work moves outside the newsroom and flows into as much as it comes from the digital channels and social media that people use throughout the day. The key issue at the heart of this at once individualized and networked media and news environment is that of connection: how to establish and maintain connections with attentive publics, with reliable sources, as well as with potential collaborators. We see connection here not just in terms of the instrumental exchange of information, but more intensely in the connections that sustain communities and relationships

in and around information and, insofar our concern in this essay is concerned, quality in-depth reporting and breaking news.

In the context of a changing media culture, the omnipresence of technology and media in everyday life as people’s lives are increasingly lived in media, and the emergence of journalism as a profoundly precarious profession, we see both a challenge and an opportunity for journalists. Today’s news professionals have to work in this world where their craft is blended into people’s digital mobile lives alongside kittens, shopping, sport, music, online dating and mating rituals, pornography, and games. Journalism is now part of people’s media lives, while it is also a principal component in the connections between people’s personal information spheres and those of others nearby and far away. Professional journalism, in this networked context, simultaneously addresses us individually based on the personal preferences and algorithmic settings governed by our digital shadow, as it reminds us of how we belong and fit to the wider world around us.

At the heart of all of this, we argue, is emotion. Emotion drives people’s increasingly intimate relationships with technology, fuels engagement with news and information, and inspires professionals to pursue careers in an industry that offers anything but reliable rewards for work well done. It inspires connection.

As journalism and society change, emotion is becoming a much more important dynamic in how news is produced and consumed. Emphasizing emotion as the key redefines the classic idea of journalistic objectivity—indeed, it is reshaping the idea of news itself. That matters because journalism has an increasingly significant role in our lives as information, data, and social media become more ubiquitous and more influential. We are drowning in a sea of stories about our world. There is a daily flood of news online combined with the traditional media that is bigger than ever before, despite the business model crisis for some parts of the industry. News consumers have more access, more easily to more journalism than ever before. That means that the news is everywhere, all the time. And it’s a different kind of journalism producing a new kind of news—it is networked (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001; Heinrich, 2011; Russell, 2011).

The experience of this can be quite magical, visceral, and even wonderful—as we, following Richard Rorty (1998, p. 126), willfully embrace a sense of romantic enthusiasm about today’s news ecosystem. It is difficult to imagine any major event or issue being covered without the input of social media and mobile devices. This brings traditional news values into stark relief: the old idea of “hard” news’ that shocks, frightens, disturbs, and alarms can leave the audience feeling alienated, disempowered, helpless and, worst of all, apathetic, insensitive, and even hostile to learning about our world. Taking “vacations” from the news or otherwise instituting newsbreaks are understandable tactics to deal with the onslaught of news.

Journalism must not lose its competitive, critical, independent edge. It must tell people things they do not always want to hear. But it should also find better ways to give context and promote understanding so that we pay attention to and engage with the news. In the digital context, it should come as no surprise that more or less new conceptualizations of news are emerging—including, but not limited to constructive, activist, and participatory journalism. These journalisms are propagated not just by academics but by news practitioners alike, who advocate more engaged, involved, and altogether emotional approaches. If news is going to work for citizens, then we have to find better ways to create, deliver, and consume journalism that is more relevant, reliable, and responsive to the audience. There are many clever technological fixes that can help with this, but there is much more that journalists must do to change their craft to help people cope with the increased volume and variety of sources now just a click away and often thrust in front of them without their permission. Again, we think understanding the role of emotion in journalism is critical to this.

There are three factors currently driving journalists toward using emotion as a tool. The first is *economic*. Competition has never been more intense. The Internet means that your rivals are everywhere and endless. Distraction away from news is more immediate and accessible to your audience than ever before. As advertising revenues plunge, journalists have to fight harder than ever for every eyeball or ear. Tugging at the heartstrings is a tried and tested way to get attention. As the marketing world loves to talk about “points of engagement” between a brand and a (potential) consumer, journalism should consider emotion to create the experience of involvement with the news. As Chris Peters (2011) shows, news has always been emotional—the difference today is a growing diversity of emotional styles, the increased acceptability of journalistic involvement, and how attempts to involve the audience have become more explicit.

Second, it is about the *technology*. We have clear evidence that using emotional cues helps to get consumers’ attention and to prolong their engagement. A story with emotionally engaging images gets more traffic (Pantti, 2010). Text written in conversational language tends to increase responsiveness. And there are legions of other tricks that sites like Upworthy, BuzzFeed, and others have perfected: the so-called curiosity gap, for example, in a headline—“What Happened When Jeremy Corbyn and Harry Styles Met?” Increasingly, journalism is now distributed not by transmitters or newsagents but through social media. Journalists are charged with the responsibility not just to pitch and submit their stories, but also to publish and publicize their work across their networks (as well as to enrich their stories with features such as maps, infographics, timelines, etc.). Getting people to spread your content is vital, and emotional impact is critical to making that happen

(Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Newsrooms from Upworthy to ITN’s Channel 4 News mine audience data to create content creation formulae that strategically identify specific categories of narrative to match their readers’ sense of personal identity, ideologies, and behaviors. Emotion in its broadest sense is the animating factor in that calculated relationship or exchange.

Third, it’s about a better understanding of people’s *behavior* and both the cultural science and the neuroscience behind it. We know from politics that people respond to emotion not ideas or facts—inspiring the rise of the so-called “fact-free” politics (skillfully exploited by politicians such as Donald Trump in the United States). Marketing journalism is no different. We need to understand “what makes people tick” before we try to sell them news. Understanding how people relate to the news on a personal as well as communal level is vital to anyone trying to get them to connect to their journalism. Sometimes people will have practical or professional reasons for finding news relevant, but it is an emotional response, too—it always has been. Luckily for journalists, there is now the technology and the data to measure that process. This is not a plea to make news selection subject to algorithms. One problem with that is that social media algorithms combined with the emotional dynamic in sharing and interaction tend to reinforce filter bubbles and echo chambers. These networks are programmed—just as humans seem to be programmed—to follow the flow of our prejudices. Like tends to connect with like because we often prefer that to communication that challenges. As data scientist Gilad Lotan writes with specific reference to how engaging with high-impact news on social media tends to reinforce a very particular point of view:

The better we get at modeling user preferences, the more accurately we construct recommendation engines that fully capture user attention. In a way, we are building personalized propaganda engines that feed users content which makes them feel good and throws away the uncomfortable bits.¹

Here is an agenda for journalists who seek not to rage against this algorithmic machine and its emotional power source but to harness its communicative potential. There are functional reasons for sharing material—but it is a useful myth for journalists that people consume news mainly because it is useful, informative, or entertaining. One key motive for consuming and certainly for sharing news in the social media space is personal. The consumer is acting in an emotionally charged way in connection with their community or wider networks. As Alfred Hermida (2014) explains in *Tell Everyone*, humans like to talk about themselves to others—it is good for us, and it helps build communities. As news becomes part of social media so it becomes part of that process. Although social media certainly is not a synonym for society, journalists’ engagement with publics through social networks speaks to one of the core functions of the

profession—considering journalism as an amplifier of the conversation society has with itself.

We want to stress that there is nothing entirely new about the idea of emotion in news nor is the familiar debate about the role of emotion in journalism particular to the 21st century. Making a drama of a crisis has always been part of mass media. Traditional news values have always singled out the unique, the unusual, and the spectacular—in print, as well as electronic media. The theater of news is as old a setting as any form of journalism. News as a spectacle has always been one of its dramatic forms. If news or an investigative report does not get your attention, if you do not find it interesting, amusing, frightening, or uplifting than you are less likely to take notice. But like so much in modern media that has all become much faster, more complex, and more unstable. As Clay Shirky has argued, “As a medium gets faster, it gets more emotional. We feel faster than we think.”²

In these circumstances, for journalism to sustain its social, political, and economic added value distinct from the general flow of information and comment, it must reassert the value of critical, independent, constructive journalism with a reconceptualized idea of human interest at its center. It must be built upon the core ideas of journalism as accurate, truthful, and expert. The key here is the connection between journalism’s core functions of reporting, contextualizing, and facilitating deliberation with what Zizi Papacharissi (2014) aptly calls today’s affective publics. Ideas of “positive” or “solutions-based” storytelling are relevant here. This affective media ecosystem must also allow for challenging, contrarian, and disruptive narratives. In fact, countering the filter-bubble, the group thinks of cozy consensus, and the amorphous relativism of so much online discourse is a vital part of the new networked journalism.

As journalism reinvents itself, it must ask how best an aspiration to objectivity might be fostered in this environment. It isn’t by insisting that the authorities know best—let alone the journalistic authorities. It will be about linking news to emotion: connecting with communities, creating constructive journalism that deploys positive psychology, and linking up with the culture of sharing on social networks. It must abandon the problematic and gendered false dichotomy between “quality” and “popular” journalism in favor of integrating emotions and everyday life with the news using notions of public quality (Meijer, 2001). Coverage of the refugee crisis has exemplified many of these factors. For example, media representations have induced reactions from the public of compassion but also fear, of apathy but also engagement, of repurposing as well as remixing (even including parody). We are witnessing the normalization of affect as a potent force for more effective journalism.

Indeed, there is evidence that such a reformulated affective (and at times affectionate) objectivity is rapidly emerging. For example, there is a boom in production by legacy and Net native news organizations of data journalism based on facts, crunched by professionals at times in collaboration

with the crowd which not only finds a significant audience but is consumed attentively according to reader data. Considering the growing influence of big data and the algorithms that govern our pathways through datasets, it is significant to note that the storytelling power of data journalism ultimately is determined by relating the insightful image of the data to meaningful experience of the individual. In the words of technology ethnographer Tricia Wang, in order to truly understand and appreciate what is happening, we need to integrate big data with thick data:

Thick Data is data brought to light using qualitative, ethnographic research methods that uncover people’s emotions, stories, and models of their world.³

As mentioned, we consider reporting on the refugee situation in Europe and across the Middle East as an example such an integrated approach, combining first-hand accounts of the terrible plight of refugees on the Aegean seas with data visualizations, infographics, and analyses of the numbers of people exiting war-torn areas. So the story achieves both a level of abstraction important to be able to reflect on global ramifications while reminding us of the distinctly human scale of the disaster that is unfolding.

As emotion pervades networked news, we witness the emergence of new storytelling styles and formats that integrate substance and affect—from benchmark legacy media interventions such as *Snow Fall* at the *New York Times* (in 2012) and *Firestorm* at *The Guardian* (in 2013) to the rise of hyperlocal journalism where professionals and amateurs collaboratively cover the smallest communities in urban areas around the world. In the global startup scene, new players emerge who provide crossover work of note.⁴ Visual narrative makers like Vice may have an informal, personal reported style. But by avoiding the usual broadcast news formulae, they are getting out of the way and allowing the public to see stories more directly. BuzzFeed is famous for cats and lists, it deploys humor and imagery but its news reporting is remarkably fact-based and balanced, and its investigative unit has a clear mandate to produce quality journalism. People want the full range of emotions (e.g., love and desire, wonder and surprise, fun, anger and fear, disgust) as well as reliable and timely narratives. Trustworthiness in the networked journalism age is, we argue, increasingly determined by its emotional authenticity. This journalism has the human factor at its center, not in the least because the audience is now part of the process.

A way to put emotion front and center in today’s networked journalism in a principled and professional manner is through transparency. Transparency is the trading and validating currency for an affective news ecosystem, and we argue it has the potential to prevent the pitfall of a journalism of emotion to be accused of simple subjectivity and bias. Openness, including openness to the central role of emotion in connecting content to producers and the public will be the

animating force in the connected age of social media. With transparency as the first and foremost reference to a distinct ethical framework for doing newswork, both for established news organizations and enterprising individual journalists, news professionals have a chance to reclaim the privileged position of trust they used to have in society.

As scholars of journalism and educators of its future professionals, we are left with a number of questions and concerns as we move forward into the field of emotion as a principal component of the profession's success in today's affective media ecosystem. Simply put, we need to know much more about the role of emotion and the consequences of recognizing and putting emotion front and center in our considerations of newswork. We need more research on

- The ontology of data;
- The political economy of identity when privacy goes public;
- The sociology of influence when power is redistributed emotionally.

Journalists and news organizations still struggle to understand how the technology works in this context. They do not always know the detail of algorithms created by the digital intermediaries that drive search and sharing. They are not transparent. A more scientific approach can help journalism to build algorithms that encourage serendipity, that foster media literacy, and even protect us from emotional harm. We need more evidence-based analysis of affective publics. What motivates attention and agency related to media? Ultimately, it will be about editorial, ethical decisions by individual journalists as well as news organizations large and small, including (and preferably in close collaboration with) code-writers, programmers, (information) designers, and other creatives committed to the public service and public quality that reporting networked news entails. The challenge for journalism is to foster the art of listening and of collaborating.⁵ Not just to promote consumption but to empower the public to pay attention to news in an active, critical, and self-reflective way, grounded in a multimedia literacy (Hartley, 2007).

Before we conclude, we want to highlight a crucial aspect of the role emotion plays in any consideration of the future of journalism: the often passionate and always affective commitment of journalists to their work and craft. To be a professional, working journalist in the 21st century means, to most, having to go above and beyond the call of duty. Many (if not most) journalists today are engaged well beyond what any profession could ask for. In the networked news environment, journalists have to be committed beyond any of this, as their work is insecure, their pay limited, the people's trust precarious, and their working time stretches beyond the boundaries of a print deadline or broadcast schedule—and more often than not today necessarily includes a fair amount of personal branding along with constant re-skilling and

multi-skilling demanded by the ever-changing technological context of media work (Deuze, 2007). With the institutional protections and privileges of the profession limited, this means that the journalists' drive becomes increasingly personal. This personal, affective, and emotional engagement with newswork needs to be considered carefully—not only by the managers, directors, and editors of news operations but also by students and scholars of journalism.

At the moment, we have what Andrew Chadwick (2013) labels a hybrid media system, blended between linear legacy journalism and a new networked news media. There is much more change to come. The trend is clear: toward a more mobile, personalized, and emotionally driven news media. The challenge for the networked journalist is clear: how best to sustain the ethical, social, and economic value of journalism in this new emotionally networked environment.

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Notes

1. Source: <https://medium.com/i-data/israel-gaza-war-data-a54969aeb23e>
2. Source: http://blog.ted.com/2009/qa_with_clay_sh.php
3. Source: <https://medium.com/ethnography-matters/why-big-data-needs-thick-data-b4b3e75e3d7>
4. For many inspiring examples, see: <http://multiplejournalism.org>
5. Source: <https://medium.com/@CharlieBeckett/are-we-losing-the-art-of-listening-758e7e869cd3#.s2xhiuxsg>

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