

Crossing Boundaries with New Media

**Introductory remarks for the panel on ‘the responsibility of the media’,
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The news media are changing quite radically today in ways that differ substantially from traditional media. Traditional media involve deadlines, top-down reporting, are expensive and so far, are profitable. New media involve new technology, are 24/7, interactive, inexpensive, and in the case of online news media, mostly unprofitable. ‘Networked Journalism’ is collaborative - professionals and amateurs working together. Boundaries are crossed to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, and perspectives.¹ New journalism raises many ethical issues. It also presents us with paradoxes. Different viewpoints, different languages, different cultures, values and goals are encountered whenever we cross boundaries. These differences have to be understood somehow because they affect our everyday lives and our perceptions of distant others – and indeed our actions. In this initial intervention I want to stress the urgency of giving a high priority to media literacy.

The Internet and its applications, such as blogs, mobile telephones, web sites, and cyber communities, represent a huge change for the media. A change that means we should give much greater attention to online spaces. Some say that the Internet makes possible a 'space of flows'.² The media operate today in a complex world in which this 'space of flows' contributes to a view that the risk of insecurity of mind or body is high and trust in authoritative viewpoints is low. But when we privilege new online spaces and technologies, it is easy to forget about the mundane, familiar practices that happen in the near and distant places that we encounter everyday through the media. The new media allow for, and encourage, boundary crossing on a scale not possible until recently. This can be disorienting in a huge variety of ways. Networked journalism contains the seeds for the possibility for understanding difference, but it also heightens the possibility of misunderstanding. It is also true that new media support diaspora communities in many ways, enabling people to maintain ties with towns, countries, cultural, religious and political groupings that never before were possible.

Networked journalism brings decentralised decision making, non-hierarchical structures, heterogeneity and diversity, face-to-face with the traditional practices of journalism. The impact of that confrontation is profound for the media, and it is even more profound for us as human beings. Border crossing is uncomfortable because it brings us into confrontation with others in ways that can be resolved and understood *only* through persistent dialogue. The responsibility of the media is to support and encourage that dialogue in an ethical way.

The traditional news media provide a good platform for public debate. But this platform has limited space for openness and innovation. Public service media are limited in many ways, and especially so in an international context. The status quo is not an option because of changing technology and changes in social and political circumstances. Networked journalism could give rise to declining investment in training for journalism, or it could instead foster new models for training and understanding that reduce risk and enhance trust.

It is, of course, impossible to generalise globally about this. However, globally, it is largely accepted that a free media is a political good. AFP, AP, Reuters, CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera have the means of delivering authoritative information and analysis. We live in a period of unsurpassed access to information and online debate, even though it is uneven. But even where it works, the liberal mainstream news media are severely limited. They are self-contained, self-referential, and often elitist, rarely crossing difficult boundaries.

New media are changing this. But the paradox is that the biggest threat to journalism is in fact new media. The possibility of infinite information is endangering the system that processes and distributes the type of information called 'news'. Audiences are fragmenting and the profit margins of traditional media are threatened. Many of the younger generation prefer informal social networking sites and wikis which are free. So there is a big need to find ways to make reporting commercially viable in the long term.

Networked journalism does not yet provide full opportunities for open dialogue and debate on the key issues of our time. Radio phone-ins are possible and web forums and blogs provide a way of creating active spaces for discussion. They also provide platforms for individuals to critique and correct mainstream media. Little Green Footballs – a blog - for example, revealed how a photographer working for Reuters faked photos of the Israel/Hezbollah conflict.³ Reuters appeared to be transparent and to accept criticism.

With networked journalism, the journalist becomes the facilitator instead of the gate-keeper. This means new boundaries can be crossed. Examples come from, for instance, the BBC World Service Trust which is enabling Pashto and Dari speaking audiences, inside and outside Afghanistan, to listen to their favourite radio programmes using the Internet.⁴ Zig Zag allows young people in Iran who use a secret language to communicate, offering the first chance they have had to hear each others' voices, and to engage with figures such as religious leaders.⁵ My Life offers a programme of workshops for young women in Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Saudi Arabia to tell their stories for the first time online.⁶

From a policy point of view, if these and other new forms of boundary crossing are to grow, funding will have to shift from support for traditional journalism to promoting media literacy. Only in this way can the public become the drivers of the news and their stories. Policy support for this might not be very strong because networked journalism goes against the grain of governments. When openness conflicts with traditional modes of

operation, governments become uneasy. Few political systems are predicated upon the need for an informed, let alone, networked, public.⁷

Networked journalism can give rise to heated and contested debates. Online debate does not itself guarantee greater understanding. But public debate is needed because there is a need to foster new moral spaces for collective deliberation and action.⁸ Networked journalism goes some way to providing an online space for new ways of engaging with the world and with its people, with those nearby and far away, geographically, culturally and morally.

When it comes to portraying distant others, the traditional media often fail us badly. They often do not grant those at a distance their own humanity – they either push them away so that we do not see their humanness, or they bring them so close that we cannot see their distinctiveness. But distant others have to be recognised as - others with humanity. Traditional media are often asymmetrical, dysfunctional and flawed in this respect. Networked journalism provides a basis for optimism that public dialogue may become more hospitable, caring and a just space for all.⁹

The media circulate the Abu Graib pictures, Iraq war footage, and the Danish cartoons controversy, in ways that heighten the global visibility of violence. We have to ask – what is the impact of spectacles of violence on our ideas about public life, identity, and the norms that guide our judgements about ourselves and others? Is it feasible to encourage new modes of caring for distant others?¹⁰ Networked journalism may encourage public action that grants equal value to human life, regardless of whether such life belongs to

‘my’ community or ‘another’ community. The traditional media encourage us to experience a feeling of global intimacy through their representation of distant others. But this needs to be countered by reflection on why suffering is occurring and what can be done about it.

Networked journalism also may offer the possibility to move away from Eurocentric dialogue. To think in terms of ‘transmodernity’¹¹ or about ‘border thinking’ instead of in terms of a uniform globalised world.¹²

Networked journalism may bring the possibility of seeing local histories and to remap stories of colonial difference and exclusion into a more worldly culture.¹³ It may help us to move beyond old dichotomies such as ‘north’-‘south’, ‘information rich’-‘information poor’, or ‘hegemonic’-‘indigenous’ knowledge, and towards new, not yet completely understood, alternatives. Networked journalism can offer the chance to think in new ways.

How might this be possible? It may be possible because networked journalism has a chance to support ‘translation’, a possibility that de Sousa Santos¹⁴ believes will underpin mutual understanding and intelligibility among those who have worldviews that are different and at odds with each other.¹⁵ If networked journalism creates the possibility for new border crossings and translations, then it could underpin new understandings and actions.

This potential depends hugely on widespread media literacy. Media literacy is often seen as providing people with a means to protect themselves from harmful aspects of media. But our engagements with close and distant others are mediated increasingly by our new media environment and this

means that media literacy is essential for participation, active citizenship, learning, and cultural expression.¹⁶ Much effort is devoted to gaining access to networks and to acquiring literacy for basic understanding – reading and writing. But little attention as yet is being given to a more sophisticated understanding of the media. Much more is needed to increase critical evaluation capabilities and capabilities for creating communications. Media literacy principles are being developed under various charters and conventions, but they are not being widely translated into teaching resources. Other routes to media literacy such as media campaigns or online resources reach the already-informed. Increasing resources and equalising competencies so that all may benefit is **the** enormous challenge for the future. They are crucial to any success of a challenge for peace.

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Summary:

- The news media are changing radically; networked journalism is emerging raising many ethical issues and encouraging boundary crossing on a scale not possible until recently and which both contains the seeds for the possibility to understand difference, but also heightens the possibility for misunderstanding.
- Networked journalism does not yet provide full opportunities for open dialogue and debate but with networked journalist, the journalist becomes the facilitator instead of the gate-keeper, enabling new boundaries to be crossed.
- From a policy standpoint, if network journalism is to flourish, funding will have to shift from support for traditional journalism to promoting media literacy, although this will be

resisted as political systems are not predicated upon the need for an informed, networked public.

- Networked journalism provides a basis for optimism that public dialogue may become more hospitable, caring and a just space for all. It also may offer the possibility to move away from Eurocentric dialogue, to remap stories about distant others through new forms of translation, leading to greater intelligibility among those who have worldviews that are different and at odds with each other.
- This potential depends on widespread media literacy. Little attention is being given to a more sophisticated understanding of the media through increased critical evaluation capabilities and capabilities for creating communications. Increasing resources and equalising competencies for media literacy is the challenge for the future and they are crucial to any success of a challenge for peace.

Notes

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- 1 See <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2006/07/05/networked-journalism/> accessed 5 May 2007.
- 2 Castells, M. (2001) *The Internet Galaxy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 3 See <http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/weblog.php> accessed 5 May 2007. And see
- 4 Becket, C. 'How can new technologies be harnessed to create an enhanced public service media environment?' unpublished paper, POLIS, London School of Economics, May 2007.
- 5 See http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/asiapacific/story/2007/04/070416_aep_website_nazer.shtml accessed 5 May 2007.
- 6 See http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/mediadevelopment/story/2006/10/061020_iranyouth_radio.shtml accessed 5 May 2007.
- 7 See <http://www.adrianmonck.blogspot.com/2007/02/why-public-doesnt-deserve-news.html> accessed 5 May 2007.
- 8 Silverstone, R. (2006) *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*, Cambridge: Polity.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Chouliaraki, L. (2006) *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. London: Sage.
- 11 Dussel, E. (1996) *The Underside of Modernity*. Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press.
- 12 Mignolo, W. (2000) *Local Histories: Global Designs*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 13 Escobar, A. (2004) 'Beyond the Third World: Imperial Globality, Global Coloniality and Anti-Globalisation Social Movements', *Third World Quarterly*, 25(1): 207-230, p. 219.
- 14 Santos, B de S. (2002) *Towards a New Legal Common Sense*. London: Butterworth.
- 15 Escobar, A. (2004) 'Beyond the Third World: Imperial Globality, Global Coloniality and Anti-Globalisation Social Movements', *Third World Quarterly*, 25(1): 207-230.
- 16 Livingstone, L. (2004) 'Media Literacy and the Challenge of New Information and Communication Technologies', *Communication Review*, 7: 3-14.
- 17 This note benefits from and draws upon work by Charlie Beckett, Director, POLIS, London School of Economics, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/polis/>, Lilie Chouliaraki, Copenhagen Business School, London School of Economics from Aug. 07, Sonia Livingstone, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics, and Gerry Power, Research Director, BBC World Service Trust. It also benefits from comments by Bruce Girard, www.comunica.org.