

Beyond Journalism



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Mark Deuze
and Tamara Witschge

polity

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Prologue: The Beyond Journalism Project

In the summer of 2013, Mark moved to The Netherlands after spending ten years working and living in the United States. Tamara had then just come back from maternity leave, after returning to her home country the year previous to Mark, having lived and worked in the United Kingdom for five years. Both of us assumed positions at our universities (Mark at the University of Amsterdam, Tamara at the University of Groningen) with responsibilities regarding administration, teaching, and research in journalism and media studies – at a time when both fields shifted under the influence of technological and social transformations.

Whereas changes in journalism manifest primarily in the decline (or disappearance) of local news media, with subsequent large numbers of layoffs in news organizations all over the world (and especially in overdeveloped nations), in The Netherlands we were also confronted with a new kind of energy: independent journalistic ventures such as Follow The Money (a financial-economic investigative journalism collective founded by Eric Smit, Mark Koster, and Arne van der Wal in 2009), Blendle (offering an online kiosk that sells articles from a variety of newspapers and magazines on a pay-per-article basis, started in 2012 by Marten Blankesteyn and Alexander Klöpping, and expanding to Germany and the United States in 2016), and De Correspondent (an online in-depth journalism magazine launched as a crowdfunded

initiative in 2013 by Rob Wijnberg, Harald Dunnink, Sebastian Kersten, and Ernst-Jan Pfauth, opening an international division in the United States in 2018) were making headlines, both nationally and internationally. Something was brewing in our home country – a development partly inspired by the economic downturn, and greatly enabled by funding agencies such as the Dutch Journalism Fund, a government-sponsored institution offering subsidies for innovation.

Traditionally, the Dutch Journalism Fund supported legacy news media in their efforts to develop new ways of publishing news. However, in 2010 a new subsidy program was adopted (titled *Persinnovatie* [Innovation of the press]), redirecting its efforts to support both individual journalists and teams of journalists as well as news media organizations to take advantage of – and experiment with – new, digital opportunities. In the first five years of this program it received over 550 applications, of which 93 applications were granted with well over 10 million euro in subsidies. Approximately half of the projects were continued by the applicant after the subsidy was spent.¹

The availability of a lot of (unemployed) journalistic talent, new sources of financial support, a growing frustration with the lack of innovation in the Dutch news media landscape (among journalists and certain segments of the public alike), as well as the emergence of charismatic and media-savvy reporters and editors such as Smit, Klöpping, and Wijnberg, cemented a path for journalism startups – admittedly, a path partially paved for them by belonging to the dominant class of journalists in The Netherlands (white, middle-class, male, well-educated, living in or near the capital). As these startups expressed a profound engagement with society, a critical attitude toward traditional newswork, as well as a commitment to the ideals of journalism, we were tremendously inspired by all this activity. We also saw the young graduates of our respective master programs in journalism (in Groningen and Amsterdam) flock to these (and other) startups, eager to have a go. All of this momentum in the startup space correlated with a growing need felt by both of us to challenge, provoke, uproot, and dislocate established theoretical frameworks and practices in journalism studies

and education (and in studies on journalism and journalists within other disciplines). The developments in the pioneering startup space provided the perfect operationalization of our disciplinary concerns.

Without a clear plan other than a genuine desire to listen and find out what working in such a way was all about, we went to the Nieuwsatelier in downtown Amsterdam: the ground floor of a vacant old building in the city center housing five different media startups (and a network of associated independent journalists), managed by Follow The Money. We invited all the professionals who rented desk space in the Nieuwsatelier to dinner, as in: we brought in a caterer to cook a delicious meal for everyone involved, while Mark's students Nikki van der Westen and Fleur Launspach rigged the informal office environment with cameras and microphones. During dinner, a more than lively conversation ensued about the promises and pitfalls of startup and entrepreneurial journalism, about frustrations and excitement, about love and hate for the profession and the news industry as a whole. It was an inspiring and insightful evening that paved the way for the Beyond Journalism research project of which this book is a document.²

Every year since that dinner conversation (on April 11 of 2014), the empirical work continued thanks to the help of different teams of graduate students who (from 2014 onward) conducted a series of case studies of journalism startups that they found inspiring, anywhere in the world. We gradually developed a comprehensive interview protocol – loosely based on the conversations during the dinner in the Nieuwsatelier, informed by emerging research among news startups around the world. Getting access turned out to be relatively straightforward – most startups are enthusiastic to show their work and share their positive and negative experiences for others to learn from. As our students found startups all over the world – from Uganda to Colombia, from Cuba to Nepal, from Canada to Italy, from Australia to the United States – we were in need of more funding. Some initial support came from the University of Groningen as part of its Rosalind Franklin Fellowship program for Tamara and the NWO internationalization grant for the humanities, which resulted in the international research network “Journalism

Elsewhere.”³ This network support also allowed us to discuss the methodological approach and theoretical questions with the inspiring group of international researchers in meetings taking place from 2013–15.

Following this, many of our students were able to secure travel grants, for example through the Horizon Fund of the University of Amsterdam, supporting students from the humanities wishing to do research abroad. As our students were also trained journalists, they often managed to further support themselves by selling stories to news organizations about issues in the countries they visited. In 2015 we were honored to receive a joint nonresidential fellowship from the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the University of Missouri in the United States. The financial support of this fellowship funded several case studies in the United States (and elsewhere), and enabled us to visit and spend some time at the Missouri School of Journalism to meet with students and faculty to discuss and further develop our work and ideas. In 2015, Tamara was awarded a five-year personal grant from the Dutch national research organization NWO for her research program “Entrepreneurship at Work,” and in 2017 she gained additional funding from the NWO for the action research project “Exploring Journalism’s Limits.”⁴ Both these projects contained elements that allowed us to support the research and output for the Beyond Journalism project.

By the academic year 2015–16 the first case studies were completed. Charlotte Waaijers included our dinner session in her study on Follow The Money, Shermin Chavoushi spent significant time at the fledgling De Correspondent, Lotte van Rosmalen went to California to observe the operation of InkaBinka, while Jorik Nijhuis visited Nepal to observe how Naya Pusta managed to distribute its children’s television news program via discs across a country ravaged by natural disaster. Andrea Wagemans did a stellar project with Mediapart in Paris – one of the few startups we found making a profit – which led to her first scholarly journal publication (Wagemans, Witschge, and Deuze 2016), and she has continued to work on the project, transcribing and coding interviews, and is currently pursuing her PhD on innovation in journalism. Other projects that year included

Boris Lemereis's study of *360 Magazine*, Joris Zwetsloots's inspiring observation of the all-female editorial collective Bureau Boven in Amsterdam, Susan Blanken and Fleur Willemsen's coverage of The Post Online and its TPO Magazine, Heleen d'Haens's research on MMU Radio in Uganda, and Guus Ritzen and Liz Dautzenberg collaborated for their intensive fieldwork in New York while studying the six hyperlocal news startups that are part of the Brooklyn-based Corner Media Group. Luuk Ex traveled to Tehran, Iran – an area teeming with startup activity in anticipation of the market opening up after the end of economic sanctions. Under difficult circumstances, Luuk visited and profiled Jaaar (an online kiosk for all Iranian newspapers), *Peivast* (a monthly print magazine about information and communication technology), and Aparat (a video-sharing website). Amanda Brouwers and Sofie Willemsen, prior to starting their PhD research at the University of Groningen, went to the United States to research, respectively, the now-defunct *Alaska Dispatch* and the *Common Reader* (at Washington University).

In 2016–17, Alexandra van Ditmars visited Zetland in Denmark – a startup that among other activities organizes a successful annual theater performance (Zetland Live) based on their journalistic investigations throughout the year, Ronja Hijmans looked at the university-based hyperlocal The Brooklyn Ink, Hadewieg Beekman visited the documentary film venture Mediastorm (also in New York), while Renate Guitink had an inspiring time in Vancouver at the offices of the all-female investigative journalism company Discourse Media. Other cases completed were IRPI in Italy by Milou van der Zwan, Sophie Frankenmolen and Evelien Veldboom's study of Code4SA in Johannesburg (South Africa), and a detailed profile of La Silla Vacía in Colombia by Tessa Colen.

During the next academic year, 2017–18, we used all the data from these thesis projects coupled with our own projects (such as Mark's involvement with the international New Beats study, investigating what happens to journalists after they have been laid off) to conduct a comparative case study, and started the writing process for this book. At the same time, a new student cohort continued the work, shifting focus to an emerging trend of legacy news organizations who, noticing

the energy and innovative potential of startup culture, create spaces within their companies for “intrapreneurial” teams of motivated reporters and editors – often supplemented with other professionals, including data analysts, social media experts, and representatives from marketing departments. Although the data from these studies could not be included in the formal analysis in our book, we want to acknowledge the work of the students involved, as their experiences and insights certainly contributed to our work. Livia Benders studied the Digital Storytelling Initiative (DSI) at the ABC in Australia, Wisanne van ‘t Zelfde looked at Dag6 (an online joint venture between a Dutch national newspaper and a public broadcaster), and Marit Willemsen observed the operations of the MediaLab, part of Dutch public broadcasting organization VPRO. The reporters and editors at both the MediaLab and the DSI found out they were being shut down during the time of our investigation, providing more testament to the precariousness of beyond journalism – within as much as outside of legacy institutions. At the time of writing, the work still continues, with independent journalism cases under investigation in Argentina (Revista Anfibia), Spain (El Diario), Cuba (PostData), and Belgium (Apache).

The project and this book can be considered to be a personal passion project for us. It is a way to operationalize our excitement about everything that is possible under the umbrella concept of “journalism” as much as it is a way to bypass or at least alleviate the frustration all too often found in journalism studies about the various problems legacy news organizations face. We wanted to focus on the people driving journalism forward, the professionals who are opening up the field while being committed to both personal motivation and professional and public ideals: making journalism content that matters, whether on a small scale informing individuals, or at societal level, responding to and affecting public issues.

Our aim throughout is to tell new stories that open our concept of what journalism is (or should be), and what journalism is for. To further our aim to tell the stories from the heart of the startup journalists, we have added in-depth contextual narratives, inserted as boxes in the empirical chapters. For this, we are deeply indebted to Andrea

Wagemans, who has – as she has done for all the quotes used in this book – mined the data. We hope these boxes engage the reader, and add yet another way of letting the startups speak for themselves. We also acknowledge the invaluable work of Sofie Willemsen (as well as the anonymous reviewers of our initial manuscript), who provided expert comments and feedback on the manuscript. Through telling stories of startups we hope to do justice to the variety of actors; the multitude of forms, content, and audiences of those startups; and the scope of their excitement, drive, struggle, and ambition to make for what they feel is a better journalism.

Introduction: What Is Journalism (Studies)?

What is journalism for? The starting point of this book is that journalism holds great potential to further the imagination, and performs a variety of functions (beyond informing citizens) that are necessary for society to thrive. We see, however, that in realigning itself to fit the changing social, technological, and political landscape, journalism as a profession, as well as news as an industry, struggles to transform itself. This is where journalism *studies* should come in, as a scholarly endeavor that assists and inspires the field to self-assess, move forward, and innovate. It is our contention that journalism studies – even before it became an established field at the dawn of the twenty-first century – furthered a rather narrow picture of the profession and its performance and role in society, thereby reifying its internal (industrial) operations, and limiting its creative potential.

Beyond journalism (studies)

In its eagerness both to prepare students for jobs in the news industry and to understand and explain journalism's functioning in (the service of) democratic societies (while consistently framing this function as being under threat, thereby collapsing concerns about news as an industry with journalism as a profession), journalism studies and education have constructed a theoretical framework that considers the profession in terms of its more or less consensual news values, dominant frames, routinized operations, gatekeeping functions, and industrial arrangements. This is not to say scholars of journalism have not studied nonmainstream, oppositional, grassroots, or any other kind of nontraditional form of journalism in the past. Such "journalisms," however, were generally reined in and tamed in theoretical frameworks emphasizing inside/outside binaries – for example, between mainstream and alternative journalism, between hard versus soft news, or between information and entertainment functions of the press. In doing so, a certain way of doing (and thinking about) journalism has prevailed – providing a benchmark of sorts.

At the same time, when journalism educators, students, and researchers talk about journalism, they cannot help but recognize the enormous diversity of the field. Professionals, amateurs, and hybrid variations of such identities, many institutions, many technologies, are all involved in the production of journalism across diverse channels and platforms. With so many actors involved of so many types, our conceptualizations of journalism as a single (more or less consensual) entity are challenged. When we revert to the same old dualisms, we risk explaining this complexity away, reflexively suggesting there is a *core* to the profession that continually reflects on itself vis-à-vis the developments in and challenges of the *periphery*, in a continuous circling of the wagons to keep truly original, edgy, pioneering, creative, nonformulaic, nontraditional ways of newsgathering, storytelling, and audience engagement at the perimeter. In keeping with this center/periphery distinction, anything

not fitting preconceived notions of coherence is labeled as diverse, complex, or hybridized. Such approach does not acknowledge the messiness intrinsic to the object of study, a messiness amplified and accelerated by changes in working conditions, in information and communication technologies, and challenges to established business models: “we need to be ready to see the conceptual mess that we made through neatly fitting everything in categories that never quite fit” (Witschge et al. 2019: 657).

The conceptual and theoretical building blocks of journalism studies, news values, framing and agenda setting, and occupational ideology can all be considered examples of routines, conventions, and formulas that developed (and continue to develop) – arising out of conversations in workplaces, debates in newsrooms, choices by individuals in a variety of circumstances. That is, these concepts and theories are continually contingent on practices. The ongoing and dynamic discursive construction of journalism as an idea as well as a praxis tends to be dictated by casuistry (rather than a strict principle-based approach) and *everydayness*. In Heideggerian (1927) terms, everydayness in journalism manifests in journalists’ generally pragmatic way of engaging the daily challenges of newswork. Lefebvre’s (1987) use of the concept of everydayness is relevant as well: how those engagements over time have a tendency to become repetitive, routinized, even monotonous – quite possibly soon to be replaced by automation and robot (or algorithmic) journalism (Carlson 2015).

Although this would suggest that one could equate “journalism” with the sum of routines, conventions, and formulas emerging from the newsroom-centric construction of the profession, we want to pinpoint and highlight all the other ways of understanding and doing journalism, being a journalist, that aren’t necessarily “peripheral” or even exceptional but simply also make up the essence of the profession. It can be argued that well-established patterned behaviors are what students and scholars may have focused on, and they may be what journalism education is structured around. Such behaviors may be what the major news institutions use to standardize work. In everyday practices, though, there is always what Robert Chia and Robin Holt