

Recovering Journalism

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Book Review: Martin Hirst (2019) *Navigating Social Journalism: A Handbook for Media Literacy and Citizen Journalism*. London: Routledge.

It is commonplace to declare that journalism is in trouble, under siege or in crisis. Many factors have been cited: the arrival of the internet, Facebook, Google, fake news, reduced prime time television audiences, press readership decline, failed advertising models, growing online news consumption and financial instability. But are these causes or symptoms of journalism's difficulties? Against what social totality can we make such evaluations? What theoretical frameworks should be employed? What is journalism anyway? What kinds are there? Which are worth defending and putting into practice? All of these questions are addressed in Martin Hirst's *Navigating Social Journalism*. This ambitious work is a diagnosis of journalism's perilous condition and a prescription for its reconstitution from a political economy of communication standpoint. My purpose here, for readers of this journal, is to provide a critical explication of the relevant arguments and recommendations.

Hirst begins by delineating a 'news establishment' comprised of news capitalists, systemic journalists, Fourth Estate idealists and normative media scholars. The first grouping includes media-entertainment corporations, mass circulation newspapers and magazines plus the news divisions of radio and television networks. For all of these organisations, news is a commodity which is consumed by readers, viewers and listeners. Their aggregated commercial value is a matter of negotiation between media managers and advertisers. Yet, news and its associated journalistic content is not *just* a component of commodity exchange. It is also a conduit for public communication and an informational resource for citizens in a democratic society. From this perspective, journalists act as a Fourth Estate check against the excesses of executive, legislative and judicial power. However, 'systemic' journalists pay only lip service to Fourth Estate principles while benefitting from the capitalist news industry (via high salaries and/or stock options). Such people, who may include newscasters, columnists and other talking heads, are typically neoliberal, conservative and openly partisan. These 'conscious believers', as Hirst terms them, effectively discipline a secondary layer of reporters and other news professionals who support the news establishment unthinkingly. Within some news media organisations, high profile journalists and editors declare their allegiance to the public interest and their opposition to unaccountable state power. For Hirst, such idealism displaces scrutiny of the capitalist system and the news establishment itself. One can certainly argue that the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and the BBC offer no substantive critique of the British political economy and provide little news space for those that do, namely, union activists, Momentum supporters and Jeremy Corbyn's economic advisors.

Similarly, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and CNN allow few opportunities to discuss the democratic socialist principles espoused, say, by Bernie Sanders or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Fourth Estate ideals receive academic support from journalism educators and media studies researchers. They complete the liberal wing of the news establishment.

This framework of capitalist power and ideology has characterised Western societies from the mid-20th century. Since about 1990, the World Wide Web, social media and the internet of things have radically modified the profession of journalism and the business of newsgathering and distribution. Here, Hirst warns against a determinist narrative whereby “technology is responsible for the newly emerged social media behemoths like Facebook and the search engine giants like Google” (Hirst, 2019: 29). Critical versions of this narrative point to the digital disruption of established news organisations and professional journalism. Conversely, optimistic versions claim that digital technologies and infrastructures will democratise journalistic practice. Illustrative formulations include: citizen journalism, participatory journalism, reciprocal journalism and hyper-local journalism. Meanwhile, standard news reportage depicts technological innovations independently of the corporate business models and value chains that drive them.

Eschewing all constructions of technological determinism, Hirst argues that traditional news business models have been disintegrating for some time. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, family-owned news and news media companies were floated on the stock exchange. Future revenue and profit growth could no longer rely on advertising returns alone. Mergers, acquisitions and the conglomeration of commercial media assets started to reshape the news business. Subsequently, the spread of online media use has fractured the mass audience and reduced the financial value of ratings figures and print-ad classifieds. The largest platforms – Facebook and Google – are siphoning advertising revenue away from mass media organisations. Hirst ascertains, succinctly, the historic significance of this development:

The broken bond between advertisers and content publishers through which the advertising previously subsidised the cost of producing news is a big lesson of how the internet has disrupted the 20th century business model that once funded public interest journalism. There can be no return to the past; that road is permanently closed and the consensus is that advertising revenue will continue to fall. The internet and mobile apps have created a new form of advertising that is not tied to content creation; classifieds and display advertising, publishers are no longer in the driver’s seat (Hirst, 2019: 110).

The situation described here constitutes a two-fold threat to journalism as a professional practice. Firstly, establishment media organisations have, and will, cut news budgets, reduce news space, hollow out news rooms, introduce pay walls and lay off staff. Those that remain must gather, produce, present and promote multiple news items over multiple platforms within ever-diminishing periods of time. The time and resources necessary for public interest journalism are less available. Secondly, beyond establishment news media, digital start-ups are not commercially sustainable. *Huffington Post* and *BuzzFeed* have laid off journalists while smaller enterprises such as *Digg* and *Reported.ly* have closed (Hirst, 2019). One difficulty here is that digital screen-worlds are evanescent and kinetic while user attention is short and cursory. This impairs the effectiveness of brand advertising and compels major agencies to engage directly with social media corporations by purchasing access to their proprietary software. Comprehensive data in regard to the online and offline activities of consumers is extremely lucrative for advertisers and corporates alike. Digital start-ups not only struggle to attract advertising, their subscriber base is fragile and hard to predict

in advance. Thus, financial security for online journalists, writers and commentators cannot be guaranteed.

In Hirst's view, both mass and digital media face a crisis of profitability. Neither can bridge the gap between advertiser/consumer spend and the costs of production. This is undoubtedly true, yet there is more to capitalism than production, worker exploitation and commodity exchange. Financial circuits of speculative profit expropriate capital from other businesses *precisely because* they are profitable. These practices, I would argue, worsen the plight of journalists even when media bottom lines are sound. This occurred from April 2018 when the Alden Global Capital hedge fund took over the *Denver Post* in Colorado. Although the newspaper had been profitable, budget cuts and staff layoffs ensued. Journalists and local business leaders openly vilified the new owners. Former editor Greg Moore wrote that he had left the news business because "hedge funds and investment banks that dominated ownership of local papers were not committed to the mission of serving the public interest" (Hutchings 2019). The debate here is not between Fourth Estate ideals and the bottom line. Predatory financial businesses have no interest in reconciling media profitability with the public interest (even if this is achievable). Their imperative is to maximise the *rate* of profit before moving on to another target enterprise.

As economic pressures contract newsrooms and threaten professional journalism, rapid technological change undermines the factual integrity of news stories. Factuality has always been problematic of course. Actual occurrences attract differing eyewitness reports, and memories are fallible. Plausible accounts of reality may be framed in advance for propaganda purposes. What news stories contain, or exclude, depends on the sources used and the authority they are given. Some publications and media outlets will even deliberately fabricate stories. In digital environments, however, the veracity of news stories is even more problematic. In the absence of photo negatives, images can be photoshopped without detection. Artificial intelligence can digitally manipulate audio in order to mimic a person's speech patterns. Skilled hackers can fill websites with false content and create fake twitter accounts. Furthermore, many news consumers rely on Facebook for headline and story feeds which are often inaccurate and difficult to verify (Pickard, 2017).

Together, these contemporary developments accelerate the spread of 'fake news'. As Hirst observes, "operating at a level of near physical instantaneity, social media allows for the rapid dissemination and peer-to-peer sharing of information." Consequently, "speed has replaced accuracy as a necessary intrinsic value of news-like information." This can be "shared multiple times in second and third hand posts, reposts and interpretations." The mainstreaming of social media connections "creates large audiences that are available to sell to advertisers and to create further free content that can be monetised" (Hirst, 2019: 87). The factual reliability of such content may be compromised by product placement, infomercials and 'native' advertising. In these circumstances, factuality is difficult or impossible to determine and subjective viewpoints prevail. As Humpty-Dumpty declares to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* – "When I use a word it means exactly what I want it to mean, neither more nor less." When Alice asks "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things" Humpty-Dumpty's judgement is final – "The question is ... which is to be master, that's all." In today's parlance, the locution 'fake news' is used to define, discredit and indict all opposing views without resort to evidence. Here, Hirst analyses, perspicaciously, recent political cases. Thus, President Donald Trump routinely describes the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN and other non-Fox media outlets as the 'fake news' media. The efficacy or otherwise of this attribution depends entirely on Trump's power to control news

agendas. That power will diminish if he loses the 2020 Presidential election. In the meantime, certain voters in Electoral College ‘swing’ states will be targeted with anti-Democrat attack advertising – a strategy pioneered by Cambridge Analytica. These are not isolated examples. Beyond Anglo-American political culture, the template for ‘fake news’ and duplicitous rule has been established.

The general diagnosis for journalism appears bleak; a crumbling news establishment, irreversible declines in advertising revenue, de-populated newsrooms, dwindling attention spans among social media users, endless blurring of fact and fakery and a widening democratic deficit. Hirst’s prescription draws upon and develops Antonio Gramsci’s conception of integral journalism. Its purpose is to challenge ruling class hegemony over public life, critique the distortions of bourgeois news coverage and develop socialist media organisations on behalf of working class people. In contemporary terms, one could argue that integral journalism seeks to expose the vested interests and social polarities of neoliberalism on behalf of afflicted communities and localities. The success of such endeavours would help to build oppositional public spheres of communication around anti-austerity political movements. What then does an integral journalist look like? What armoury do they need? How should they operate? Hirst perceives such a journalist as an activist and a teacher. They collaborate with others beyond the newsroom on matters of public import and perform a pedagogical role; citizens are taught to monitor ruling systems of power. Just as importantly, integral journalists must have research abilities and the social media skills of web searching, file sharing, app selection, news gathering, story compilation and distribution via Facebook, Tumblr, Snapchat, Instagram, Pinterest and (eventually) drones. In this regard, today’s integral journalist must also be a social journalist. But, these attributes, in themselves, are not sufficient. Advocates of Breitbart News and the ‘alt-right’ generally also undertake research, engage with public issues, use social media, form coalitions and work to educate citizens. What puts integral journalism above the Breitbart variety is commitment to the ethical principles of fairness, transparency and independence, and the analytical principles of accuracy and thoroughness. In the latter context, Hirst details the practical imperatives of source, story and document verification within social media settings in a way which transcends the alt-right’s predilection for ‘fake news’.

Navigating Social Journalism assesses the economic, political and technological plight of journalism and maps a way forward for aspiring journalists. The entire project represents a major contribution to the political economy of journalism and raises questions for further research. Is the News Establishment’s decline a global phenomenon or a Western malaise? Is mass media news and journalism more resilient in certain countries or regions? How far do the practices of integral journalism depend on the geo-social particularities of capitalist hegemony and resistance? Are neo-Gramscian principles of journalistic praxis internationally transportable? Do they have a global resonance? Answers to these questions could, perhaps, form the basis of a sequel to *Navigating Social Journalism*.

References

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