

“Assembling Publics, Assembling Routines, Assembling Values: Journalistic Self-Conception and the Crisis in Journalism.”

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Introduction: Explanations for a “Crisis”

There can be little doubt that something traumatic has happened in American newsrooms in the past ten years. To recite only the usual statistics: newspaper print advertising revenue has plummeted by more than half since 2003. Total newsroom employment is down 30% since 2000 and has dropped to a level of staffing not seen since 1978 (State of the Media 2013). A few large newspapers have closed, while many others, including many of the newspapers owned by Advance Publications, have cut back printing and home delivery days. In the eyes of the public at large, journalists' and the news they produce are trusted less than ever (Ipsos MORI 2013). The work routines and production flows at hierarchically-oriented and bureaucratically functional news institutions have verged toward the chaotic; production processes are now far different than they were only a few years ago, and what is worse, they show no signs of stabilizing anytime soon. Technological change, finally and obviously, plays a role in all these developments-- from wrecking advertising cross-subsidy to disrupting newsroom routines. In short: the last ten years have witnessed a well-documented economic, political, and organizational crisis of American news production.

Has this past decade also seen the emergence of yet an additional crisis: a *cultural crisis* within journalism as a professional occupation? In discussing the possibility of the existence of an occupational cultural crisis I am referring to something quite specific. By occupational culture I mean the symbols and metaphors that guide journalists' understandings of what they do and why they do it, as well as the various intra-group conversations through which journalists make sense of those symbolic orientations. By crisis I mean, simply, that journalists' metaphorical guideposts and actual work practices are diverging in meaningful and potentially traumatic ways; that the what and the why of journalistic work have become, to twist that favorite catchphrase of future of news gurus everywhere, *unbundled*. Claiming that there is a cultural crisis in American newsrooms implies, further, that these symbolic disorientations are related to, but not ultimately reducible to, the economic, technological, political and organizational changes listed above.

In this chapter I want to obliquely make a case for a deeper understanding of this occupational cultural crisis by highlighting two specific moments when journalistic self-understanding was temporarily challenged, before it snapped back into settled routines and symbolic orientations. This “snapping back” This chapter draws on extensive research into the Philadelphia news media ecosystem last lasted from 2006 until 2012, with three years of archival and qualitative research preceding six months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2009, followed by a large number of qualitative interviews and several follow up immersive newsroom visits between 2010 and 2012. By necessity, this chapter is retrospective and reflective—retrospective because the research is by

now rather old and began at a point when many of the technological and economic developments now shaking newsrooms had not even emerged; reflective because the work has been presented extensively elsewhere (Anderson 2013) and I think it is now more of a useful exercise to ask how my findings from Philadelphia might need to be modified or extended based on the developments in journalism over the past several years.

Nevertheless: after a brief theoretical overview, we start with the empirical evidence. This chapter draws on two key moments in my primary fieldwork, one that took place in the now distant digital past of the 2007 Philadelphia mayor's race, and another that traced the diffusion of blogging practices in Philadelphia newsrooms between 2005 and 2009. I return to these now ancient (for the Internet) times because they mark some key decision points in the history of Philadelphia journalism—how to cover a local election in a digital world that suddenly contains a plethora of previously unheard journalistic and quasi-journalistic voices, as well as how to integrate new technological practices into already existing news routines. Drawing on fieldwork, interviews, and an overview of the various websites deployed by the two most important Philadelphia newspapers, this chapter demonstrates how cultural self-understandings about the nature of journalism intersected with actually existing material affordances and organizational processes to encourage a the emergence particular mode of news coverage at a particular moment. After these cases, I move to briefly consider how recent developments in journalism—the growth of professional journalistic aggregation, the increasing deployment of web metrics, and the rise of contextual journalism – challenge some of my original findings and imply that the speed of occupational transformation is accelerating even faster than I might have originally anticipated back in 2009. I conclude by offering some final reflections on the meaning of “original reporting” and “the unitary public” and the ways that these concepts might serve as grist for future research, even as the actually existing empirical importance of them appears to be fading away.

Occupational Expertise and Cultural Authority

The original goal of my Philadelphia research was to empirically investigate a normative question first posed by Michael Schudson and myself in 2008: in an era of widespread digital communication and distributed media production, how do journalists ground their occupational authority (Schudson and Anderson, 2008)? What do they do- and perhaps more importantly, what do they *claim* they do- that makes them different from other media makers? The theoretical starting point for this line of inquiry was the work of Andrew Abbott and his notion of *jurisdiction*: the idea that occupational authority is performatively grounded in both a set of work practices as well as a particular claim to abstract expertise (Abbott 1988). My concern with journalistic

authority arose both from the conditions of the moment in the mid-2000s, when new forms of communication like blogging and citizen media appeared to threaten the expert claims of journalists, as well as a nagging dissatisfaction with an existing literature that analyzed journalistic authority as a primarily discursive construct. I strongly felt that the more recent analyses of occupational authority had focused too much on journalists' own rhetoric; authority, I wanted to argue, was also grounded in work (Schudson and Anderson 2008, 97), as well as discourse and public invocations of expertise. As will also become clear over the course of this chapter, my research in Philadelphia convinced me that we should also add a third item to our list of where journalistic authority comes from: authority should be analyzed by looking at nexus of a specific form of work, a series of rhetorical claims, and a particular constellation of technological artifacts, artifacts that intersect with both rhetoric and work in both routine and highly surprising ways. In other words, the authority of journalism can be envisioned as part of an occupational culture, a social structure, and a particular *relationship to technological artifacts that can be grounded in both the affordances of technologies themselves, as well as what journalists believe those objects do.*

Four years and many hundreds of hours of fieldwork later, the answer to my original question -- how do journalists ground their authority in the digital age? -- might appear somewhat anti-climactic. Journalistic authority, I have argued extensively and will argue again in this chapter, arises from the valorization of a historically and sociologically odd form of work (the work of original reporting) and a particular vision of the public (the public as a unitary entity subject to both journalistic representation and journalistic informational guidance). While this is a simple answer, I think it opens up new ground for empirical exploration and also nuances the usual explanations offered for the current crisis in American news production. As I alluded to earlier, all too often news industry dilemmas are analyzed within the "future of journalism" conversation space in terms that are simplified and mono-causal. The collapse of the news industry is entirely due the collapse of journalism's advertising model, one argument goes. Alternately, a second argument maintains that transformation of journalism should be seen as the outcome of technological forces operating on a society-wide, even civilizational, level. Finally, a third perspective contends that the failure of journalism is primarily a managerial failure, the outcome of an "innovators dilemma" in which clueless dinosaurs remain trapped in the tar pits of tradition, outflanked by savvy entrepreneurs (Christensen 2013). Obviously, business models, technology, and conservative management all play their part in the story of journalism's decline, but I think this story misses both the intersection of news routines with technology, as well as the way that particular cultural self-conceptions of what journalism is and should be affect both work routines and technological adoption.

This perspective on technology, work, and culture I want to advance in this chapter echoes some of the most subtle academic thinking on this topic, thinking nicely captured in Pablo Boczkowski's 2004 diagram of the relationship between production, technology, and organizational effects (Boczkowski 2004). However, the diagram below is *modified* in order to capture the additional evidence I uncovered in Philadelphia about how the occupational culture of journalism, tightly coupled with journalistic understandings of particular socio-technical devices, plays a role in shaping the production and evolution of news:

Production Factors
Organizational Structures & Work Practices



Shape

Technology

Adoption

Vision of Technology
Vision of Occupation
Vision of Audience

Editorial
Effects



Affords

Filtered

Generate

My modification of the Boczkowski diagram indicates the direction I would like to go in for the rest of this chapter, namely, to provide evidence for and ponder the implications of the insertion of “visions of technology / visions of occupation / visions of audience” in the space between technological adoption and editorial effects. Journalism’s visions of itself as an occupation, of its’ technology, and of its’ audience—the “sticky symbols” through which affordances and routines are filtered—played a powerful role in shaping the trajectory of the journalism I observed during my Philadelphia research. In other words, along with materiality and workflow, we also have to consider a particular notion of journalistic culture. We can see these visions of work and visions of technology embodied in performative acts and material relationships that emerge from, but are not reducible to, material circumstances, economic pressures and work routines.

I want to pause very briefly to outline the actual methods and scope of my research project, an outline that will, for the sake of space, be unavoidably compressed. The key methodological argument in my analysis of Philadelphia was we cannot attempt to understand how news is made in the digital era by *only* looking at how news is produced in traditional, professional media organizations. Instead, we need to study an entire “news ecosystem,” a system that includes bloggers, citizen journalists, activists, alternative weeklies, television stations, and so forth. Doing this allows us to see how news moves across an entire geographical or ideological space; it also allows us to see how different practices move from individuals to institutions and between different institutions. Using a combination of social network analysis and snowball sampling, key bloggers and independent journalists in a particular urban area (Philadelphia, Pa.) were chosen in an effort to map the entire local news ecosystem. This was supplemented with ethnographic research in Philadelphia newsrooms. I undertook a 60-month process of iterative, qualitative research, both on-and offline, with the most intense period of newsroom ethnography occurring between April and August 2008. In the months prior to and following that intensive summer period I did extensive research into the history of journalism and media in Philadelphia using both primary and secondary source documents. I also conducted more than 50 open and semi-structured interviews with journalists, editors, activists, bloggers, and media executives to gain insight into old and new forms of journalistic work. In the summer of 2010 I returned for a second month of fieldwork, and I conducted final follow-up interviews throughout 2011.

In sum, my findings were as follows:

Early 21st century American journalism grounded its authority claims on the fact that it (1) engaged in original reporting (2) for a unitary (local) public that (3) could engage in discussion and take public action based on those facts.

I want to now turn to the research that fleshed out these notions of reporting and public by discussing my reconstruction of two particular journalistic events in Philadelphia: first, the 2007 mayoral race, and second, the adoption of blogging technology at the *Philadelphia Daily News*. In the example of mayor's race, we can see how some of the underlying attitudes about the nature of the public played out in Philadelphia during a time of transition. In the discussion of the first blog launched at a mainstream media organization in Philadelphia, we can see how a socio-technical originally designed for aggregation, synthesis, and commentary was repurposed into a breaking news tool.

The Journalistic Public and the Next Mayor Project

How is it possible to empirically research the existence of a particular "vision of the public"? Like many stand-alone chapters summarizing qualitative, ethnographic research, I am going to choose one case study from a broader range of linked material, a case study that loses some of its' impact when it is divorced from the larger web of cases in which it is entangled. Nonetheless, I do want to talk about a particularly powerful case- my study of the "Next Mayor Project," initiated in 2005 by the *Philadelphia Daily News*, the public radio station WHYY, and The Committee of 70, a local good-government group . The Next Mayor described itself as "an innovative, two-year, multi-media partnership ... [focusing] on the issues — not just the personalities — leading to the 2007 mayor's race". I think this example is particularly important insofar as it represents one of the most innovative multi-media journalism projects in the mid 2000s, and one in which a particular "public purpose" was clearly articulated. And my argument is that you can understand the vision of the public embodied by the Next Mayor project- or rather, the shifting, undetermined vision of the public-- not by listening only to what journalists said about it, but also by studying the career histories of its' key participants and the material embodiment of the project in digital space.

Both of the key initiators of the Next Mayor Project- *Daily News* editor Zachary Stallberg and assistant editor Wendy Warren had a background in the public journalism movement of the 1990s

and early 2000s¹. In addition, a third supporter, Chris Satullo at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*- was one of that movement's key proponents. Public journalism was an intellectual reform and inter-newsroom movement that argued that journalism had become disconnected from the public that it was supposed to serve, that it often focused on the election "horse race" rather than underlying issues of importance to voters, that the media had a job to create informed, active citizens, and that journalism was obligated to contribute to the conversations amongst citizens as well as registering their baseline political preferences. In practical terms, public journalism projects often took the form of newspaper-sponsored citizen forums, newspaper printed voters guides about electoral issues, and special, "public issue oriented" news stories. Buried in within these varied conceptions of public journalism is an idea of a "public" that speaks and acts autonomously from journalism, but only achieves its true potential when it is organized

Both Warren and Satullo made multiple, lengthy references to the public journalism movement when I interviewed them about the citizen journalism projects they participated in early 2000s, and it was obvious that it acted as one of their guiding influences as they prepared new, web-first journalistic products. Just as important for understanding the shifting journalistic images of the public, however, were the ways that various conceptions of the public-journalism relationship were inscribed in the different architectures of the Next Mayor website; what Boczkowski and Akrich have called the "de-description of technical objects." (Akrich 1992; Boczkowski 2004, 92) The idea of the next Mayor Project as a public journalism project was evident in the initial version of the "Next Mayor" website, which resembled nothing more than one of the traditional "voters guides" produced by public journalism proponents a decade earlier. The information contained on the original site took the form of lengthy candidate profiles, the comparison of public issues in Philadelphia with those in other cities, questions about which "issues" mattered most to readers, and relevant news stories. Combining this architectural analysis with my conversations with Warren and Satullo, it is possible to argue that Next Mayor organizers saw their primary purpose in highly traditional terms- as providers of a centralized repository of civic information, information accessible to, but not produced by, a unitary public which would rely on journalists for the news. Although the public already existed, the Next Mayor project would call this scattered body into being and provide it with the information it needed to be self-governing. The "vision of technology" implied in this web architecture embodied a particular conception of the journalists relation to their audience.

¹ The intriguing overlaps between the relationship between the public journalism movement of the 1990s and the idea of the digital public is more fully elaborated in Anderson 2011.

Next Mayor Website, Version 1

By the time a more permanent version of The Next Mayor emerged, however, it became clear that design structures, and indeed the basic thinking about what a journalistic election website might actually be for, were slowly adapting themselves to the potentialities of digital space. By its second iteration, the Next Mayor site looked more like a collaborative, networked journalism website that like a traditional voters guide. It had a blogroll, and a list of citizen journalism websites that provided their own coverage of the election. The site began to aggregate all the news being produced about the mayoral race, regardless of whether the informational producers were journalists or not. It began aggressively linking out to other websites, “sending people away as much as we bring them here,” Warren remembered. It launched a blog. Finally, it partnered with the upstart website *Philebrity* to conduct actual voter registration drives. The evidence presented here—starting a blog for aggregation purposes, aggressively highlighting all the *other* journalism and activism occurring around the Mayors race, partnering with one of these news websites to increase voter turnout-- points to the mutation of the Next Mayor into a website more in tune with the emerging “ethos of the blogosphere,” a site that acted as a facilitator of already existing public information and self-generated knowledge, as much as it did a centralized repository where professionally produced news could be stored and accessed by a passive

public. And indeed, Warren and Satullo echo this in their interviews with me, describing how the middle version of the Next Mayor site had the most “bloggy” ethos of the three.

Next Mayor, Version 2



By the time the project concluded, however, the more traditional view of the relationship between journalism and public reasserted itself. In part, this is evident once again in design changes made to the site. The blogroll disappeared, and the external website links vanished. Most of the content on the final version of the site was produced by either the *Daily News* or WHYY, which signaled a shift, once again, to a professionally oriented view of news production. The reporters who were working on Next Mayor stories, Warren and Satullo told me, were becoming irritated that their reporting work wasn't featured on the site more prominently. They argued that they, not the bloggers and activists, were providing the most important acts of public information provision. What was more, as the mayor's race shifted into its final weeks, the *Philadelphia Daily News* began to cover it more aggressively, and the Next Mayor no longer needed outside content in order to fill up its pages. Perhaps most interestingly, the Next Mayor project decided to bifurcate its' work, confining most of the more “bloggy” journalistic activities (linking out, conversing with members of the public, aggregating, highlighting information produced elsewhere) to the Next Mayor blog.

The Next Mayor, Version 3

The screenshot displays the homepage of 'The Next Mayor' website. At the top, the main title 'THE NEXT MAYOR' is prominently featured in large, bold letters. To its right, the subtitle reads 'Issues, not egos, in the 2007 Philadelphia Mayor's race'. Logos for '70 Committee of Seventy', 'WHYY', and 'PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS' are visible. A navigation bar includes links for 'HOME', 'Next Mayor Blog', 'The Issues', 'The Candidates', and 'Contact Us'. A search bar with the text 'Search The Next Mayor' is also present. The main content area is divided into several sections: 'In the Spotlight' with a 'Voter's Guide' and three numbered steps; 'Campaign Issues' listing topics like Ethics, Crime, Taxes, Jobs, Good growth, Education, and Arts; 'Latest Headlines' with a link to a 'Philly primary' article; 'Next Mayor Blog' with a link to 'Covering the last days of the primary'; 'Meet the Candidates' featuring a photo of Michael Nutter and a list of candidates including Chaka Fattah, Tom Knox, Dwight Evans, Bob Brady, and Al Taubenberg; 'Campaign Countdown' showing '0 days to the primary election' on 'MAY 15'; 'Election Calendar' with details for 'May 15: PRIMARY ELECTION DAY!'; and 'Links' with a list of related content. On the right side, there is a 'SIGN UP FOR UPDATES!' section, a 'Video from WHY?' section titled 'A WHY Exclusive!', and 'Zack's Corner' featuring a video thumbnail of a man speaking.

In other words: an alternate view of the public as a fragmented, active, productive informational entity did not disappear; rather it was relegated to a secondary status via the material transformation of piece of digital technology. The public had its' blog. Journalism, on the other hand, had its; news website. To me, this bifurcation (far more than the total disappearance of these more bloggy functions) provides intriguing evidence as to the complex nature of journalism's understanding of the public under conditions of digitization. Journalists acknowledged another world of outside content producers, as well as the fact that the line between creating a public and the existence of a public that could write and speak for itself, was blurring. But they ratified their own role by providing original reporting that served as the main focus for the journalism website while allowing alternate forms and functions—different visions of the public—to exist in a secondary “bloggy ghetto.”

The argument so far is that The Next Mayor Project serves as a useful window through which journalism scholars can come to terms with the complex assemblage of technologies, workflow routines, personal histories, and occupational self-conceptions that make up journalism's “vision of the public.” By this argument, scholarly work focusing on the role of technologies and routines in journalism should also focus on the symbolic detritus that “accumulates” and “crystallizes” around these routines. I now want to turn to a second window that can illuminate other elements of journalistic cultural practice, namely, the valorization of original reporting in contrast to other possible media practices like summarizing already existing information, facilitating conversation,

or synthesizing divergent points of view. I want to look at how a particular fringe media practice, the practice of blogging, was both adopted and transformed as it was absorbed into the mainstream media bloodstream. I begin by looking at how early bloggers defined what they did every day before turning to the ways these practices were reevaluated as they got picked up by more traditional media outlets.

From Fringe to Mainstream: The Transformation of the Work of Blogging

As noted above, my research in Philadelphia attempted to go beyond the usual focus on traditional news organizations (like the Philadelphia Inquirer or the Philadelphia Daily News) and look at journalists and quasi-journalists operating in the news ecosystem as a whole. This entailed interviewing and shadowing a number of bloggers operating outside the walls of the mainstream news organizations, many of them pioneers in developing blogging as a journalistic form. Some of the bloggers I observed (and the majority of those I spoke to outside traditional media institutions) insisted they were *not* reporters. In fact, when asked to describe their daily work routine, many of them laughed and found the question difficult to answer. When pressed, most of these “non-reporting” bloggers settled on a fairly simple job description. “We read a lot and we write a little less than we read,” one told me.

What does this mean? How did some of these early blogging pioneers describe what, exactly, they did? In essence, bloggers working outside the traditional Philadelphia news institutions described their work as one of extreme information absorption, followed by information synthesis and analysis or opinion-giving. “I have a set reading process now that I take myself more seriously as a writer—as a blogger” one-time Philadelphia blogger (and now WHYY reporter) Amy Z. Quinn told me, describing her work practices circa 2007-2008. Occasionally, when Quinn would take on a freelance music reviewing or reporting assignment, she would attend music events in person. “But, most of the job [of a blogger in 2007] is reading things [online], with a few hours of writing every single day.” Quinn had a set list of mostly online reading material, which included key blogs and websites of the late George W. Bush era: Philebrity, Phawker, the Atlantic, Jezebel, Perez Hilton, Politico, McClatchy DC, and bloggers from the daily newspapers. Well known blogger Will Bunch noted that the blogs he linked to also doubled as his reading list.” To keep up with my reading “basically what I try to do more or less is use my blogroll – it’s killing two birds with one stone, it’s there for my readers but I’ve also constructed it for me. So I just go to [my blog] Attytood ... and work my way down the list. Now that said, I’m probably just like everyone else in the world in that I have a dozen, maybe, a-list blogs that I’m reading on a pretty constant basis.” “The only local blog I try to read regularly,” Bunch added, is Philadelphia Will Do.

“That blogger basically has a newspaper sensibility and he tries to kind of comprehensively cover the great blogging subjects of the day, which makes it a good one stop shop. The other blog I used to read everyday, and I have to confess I’ve kind of gotten out of the habit of reading ,it because I think it’s gotten too hipster and less news .. is Philebrity.”

The manner by which this new breed of quasi-journalists gathered information was thus (1) digital and (2) through a screen (Boyer 2013). But the ethics and practices of writing stories based on the information gathered through these screens were different as well. The sports blogger with the Philadelphia baseball blog Beerleaguer puts his work routine into relief by comparing himself with more traditional sports reporters. There are big differences between what reporters do and what we do, the Beerleaguer blogger told me in 2008. “They’re talking to the guys in the locker room, writing on deadline. We, on the other hand, are always working with secondary sources and we rarely interview players.” Reporters are on deadline for the whole game, but “I, on the other hand, make my own deadlines. They also have to follow the team on the road, they’re away from their families.” Despite the backhanded deprecation of his work effort, however, the daily blog routine at Beerleaguer is fairly rigorous. I arrive at my job and browse my daily headlines through Google Reader and Philly.com, this blogger told me. Then, by late morning, I put up a post analyzing and recapping the Phillies game from the day before. Later in the afternoon, “I post something smaller, maybe a post discussing latest trade rumor.” Finally, around game time, “the blog becomes more like a chat amongst my readers,” who discuss the game in the comments section of the latest post. “ People come to my blog “not only to read my thoughts, they come looking for what my readers have to say” in the comments.

There were thus several cultural practices of blogging that had emerged quite clearly by the time I did my fieldwork in 2007-08. The first was the *highly routinized* consumption of online media sources, discussed above. The second and third practices related to the relationship between bloggers and their audience, and, perhaps more importantly, between bloggers and other bloggers. The relationship between a blogger and his audience is summarized by the Beerleaguer’s comments about his audience: they come “not only to read my thoughts, they come looking for what my commenters have to say.” The third factor can be tied to the manner in which the perusal of *other* blogs is *inscribed through the linking process*. A dialog of ideas has always been a part of the writing process; in the case of blogging, however, this community conversation is rendered *visible* through links and reader comments, and is valorized as an essential cultural component of the blogging activity. Blogging, as workers outside traditional Philadelphia media organizations practiced it, was a cultural practice that valued community dialog and information synthesis. It was thus distinctly different from so-called “original reporting.”

This dialectic between reading, writing, and linking dominated the daily work life of the “classic” bloggers I observed during my time in Philadelphia. But as the socio-technical *form* of the blog began to penetrate news organizations, a divide opened up between newspaper-staff bloggers who saw themselves as *reporters* and the increasing number of bloggers employed by large media organizations who saw themselves and engaging in what they called aggregation or curation. *Blogging, as a technical practice that used certain types of online software, was repurposed as it was adopted at the Inquirer and Daily News in 2008 in order to serve “traditional” reporting needs.* This repurposing is best summed up in the comments of a *Philadelphia Daily News* sports blogger, who told me that he didn’t bother to read other blogs: “I read the wire, I don’t have time to read the blogs of the sports fans,” he said. At the same time, while most of the traditional journalists I interviewed in 2008 were repurposing the blog format to serve their own reporting routines, a few of them (like Will Bunch of the Attytood blog) assumed a professional identity and a set of work practices more similar to the majority of unpaid bloggers,. The newspaper-bloggers were highly conscious of the fact that they were **different** from their colleagues, however, even as what they did was more in line with what most bloggers had always done.

At the newspapers I researched, many bloggers worked primarily as reporters, and used their blogs to supplement their reporting. “I use my blog mostly as a portal for breaking news,” many bloggers at the *Inquirer* and *Daily News* told me. When pressed about the difference between their blog and their reporting work, many of them agreed with Dan Gross, the *Daily News* gossip columnist: “[there is] very little difference between my blog and my column, to be honest. If I posted to my blog more often, if I linked more to other people, if I weighed in more on what *other* people were saying, my blog would be more like a typical blog. But I don’t do those things. Instead, I’m mostly writing. When I first heard this, stated over and over again by the so-called “bloggers” I interviewed at the newspapers I studied, I was confused. This didn’t sound like any blogging I knew about, either from my earlier interviews or indeed as I had practiced it myself for many years. But then I realized: these workers were bragging. They still saw “original reporting” as the key to what they, as professional journalists, did. They might have used blogs, as a tool and a technology, but they were not bloggers.

Many reporters thus mostly their blogs to supplement their reporting: to break news quickly and to cultivate sources, among other uses. “I don’t see myself as wearing multiple hats,” the gossip blogger Dan Gross told me--,”being blogger first, taking it off, then a columnist, then print journalist. I absolutely see everything I do as one assignment.” This “one assignment” was, for Gross, to break news and publicize it as quickly as possible. “We’re at the presser, reading the

wire, at the [team] practices, working sources and so on,” a Philadelphia Daily News editor added. “So why shouldn’t we use the blogs to supplement what it is we’re already doing?”

Describing the daily work routine of one blogger who had largely reoriented his blog to serve reporting ends, the “Clout” blogger for the *Daily News*, can help flesh out the journalistic practices of this subset of professional bloggers. On one average day, after arriving at the City Hall pressroom, Chris Brennan read *Philadelphia Daily News* website and logged onto the newspaper content management system Clickability. He then read the comments left on the post from the previous day “I’m interested in who is leaving comments,” he told me. Brennan then assembled his first post of the day, a “morning post” that discussed interesting items in the day’s paper and what might happen in City Hall. The morning post is “basically a set of single sentences with links.” Several internet browser windows were open at one time on Brennan’s desktop while he read through the *Daily News* website, scanning stories and copying links. For the morning post, “I almost entirely link to the *Philadelphia Daily News*,” Brennan told me. For Brennan, this morning activity resembled most closely the traditional work of blogging. But he would quickly leave these curative routines behind as his so-called “Real workday” began.

The rest of Brennan morning was consumed with traditional varieties of City Hall reportage: he attended the meeting of the Democratic caucus, sitting in chambers during council hearings, attended a special events, and tracked down documents and sources in order to flesh out the day’s developments. The existence of Clout has, for Brennan, created an additional mental calculation, however. “It’s a balancing act,” he told me, “you have to decide when you’ve got something that should go up on the blog, when you should hold it until the paper the next day, cause maybe it’s a scoop, and whether something is “bloggy” or “newspapery.” What did Brewer mean by bloggy or newspaperly? One example of a “bloggy” item included a report that every member of the City Council was getting a car in order to carry out Council business. “That’s a classic blog item,” Brennan told me. “It’s just a little nugget that people might find interesting that might not make it into a story ... if it works out, since it is the last day of Council session, I can compare it to getting a new car on graduation day.” “Blogging has been a burden and a boon,” Brennan concluded. “It gives space to news that might not otherwise find a home, but it’s more work.” Blogging created a new news hole—another place to put stories that might not find a place in the print paper, and it assisted with the “care and feeding of sources. People in the building [City Hall] read the blog and talk about it, and them talking about it is the first step in them picking up the phone and calling you.” But it was ultimately not about reading a lot and writing about what one read, as it was for the non-professional bloggers working outside the major newsrooms. It was about finding different ways to publicize original reporting as quickly as possible. In other

words, for what journalists had always done, or at least for what they saw themselves as always doing.

Journalists I studied in Philadelphia thus grounded their authority—their claims about what made them different from other news workers—in the act and idea of **original reporting** and the idea and materiality of the **journalistic public**. In some ways, this ethnographic conclusion can be seen as a reworking of the central historical conclusion of Hoyer and Pottker (2005) where they argue that a particular news paradigm of both journalistic process and journalistic form, comprised up of at least six factors, originated in the United States in the mid-19th century and spread across the Western world. This news paradigm was defined as a journalistic activity concerned with

- (1) recent
- (2) single events, grounded in
- (3) individual facts that were
- (4) gathered via interview. The presentation of these facts usually occurred in the
- (5) form of an “inverted pyramid” and were presented
- (6) in a neutral manner.

The importance of original reporting to journalists in Philadelphia can be seen as a gloss on items 1-4, with the added complication that the presence of “the public” also loomed large for these journalists, and that the question of what *originality* meant in the context of reporting had become deeply problematic under conditions of digitization.

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It has been six years since I did the bulk of my Philadelphia research, and much has happened in the news industry since then. While I remain satisfied with my conclusions, I do think it is worth revisiting some of the ways that journalistic understandings of the unitary public and the idea of original reporting have changed in over the past five years – or if not *changed*, the ways these ideas have continued to come under stress in the digital era. We need to not look at the concept of original reporting and the unitary public as permanent bulwarks of cultural authority; rather, they are most productively analyzed as obdurate structures that influence but do not entirely determine the course of journalistic development in the United States—along with economic, technological, and organizational structures, of course. In the final section of this paper I want to briefly discuss how the increasing prevalence of web analytics, audience measurement techniques, and impact assessments in the news industry are complicating the idea of the unitary

public, before turning to a discussion of the way that a number of new, “data driven” reporting projects prioritize synthesis and explanation instead of act of breaking original information in the form of scoops.

New Challenges to Information Originality and the Unitary Public

One of the reasons why journalists could see the public as a unitary object that they themselves created through their reporting was that they actually knew very little about it. As Herbert Gans and others have noted, throughout the mid-20th century, journalists often supplemented their (almost entirely inadequate) understandings of their audience with professional conversations and feedback from their co-workers (Gans 1979). Other reporters “stood in” for the invisible if unitary public, and most journalists were shielded from the demographic and statistical insights about the audience possessed by newsroom marketing departments.

If this was the case in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, it is almost certainly no longer the case today. As an increasing body of empirical evidence has shown, in fact, journalists are routinely exposed to audience engagement numbers, web analytics, and story impact data, all obtained through an increasingly granular set of online metrics tools. While the degree of exposure varies, with some newsrooms going so far as to pay their staffers based on their web traffic and others largely shielding their reporters from exposure to audience data, it should be clear that these are differences in degree, not in kind. The era when journalists could create their own visions of the public unimpeded by any exposure to quantitative audience data is almost certainly coming to an end.

A further consequence of this change in measurement is that the once unified notion of the public has begun to buckle under the increasingly detailed information that journalists now possess about the various “audience niches” that consume their work. In part, this can be seen in the prominence of so-called “verticals” at nearly every new journalism website. Of course, newspapers have embraced the notion of sectioning (adding stand alone parts of the newspaper such as lifestyle, automobiles, technology, and sports in the 1970s and 80s), but the bundled aspect of the paper was often enough to convince reporters that members of the public who primarily consumed news for the sports scores or the weather report were holistically unified readers who cared equally about national politics and foreign news. This illusion has definitively ended. The digital era is the era of micro-content, niche marketing, and targeted ads, all of which are designed to extract dollars from the fragmentary micro-publics journalists are increasingly called upon to serve.

Debates about the fragmentation of the public have been around as least since John Dewey; what is different now is that this fragmentation is less a philosophical debate or a normative argument than it is a real empirical development that journalists must confront every day of their working lives. If the cultural authority of journalism rested, in part, on journalists' self-confidence that they spoke to the public, it would seem to imply that the elimination of this bulwark would come with dramatic potential consequences and would imply a drastic rethinking of the role and public purpose of journalism. Framing the various debates about the future of the news around this question—the question of the unitary public, the role of web metrics and impact analytics, and the material collapse of that holistic public—would be a good way to talk about the future of journalism and a culturally specific way.

The role of original reporting in journalism is also changing as the work routines and belief systems of 21st century journalism are coming more sharply into view. Mark Coddington pointed out that traditional journalists framed the debate over Wikileaks not as a conflict over the value of reporting but as a referendum on journalists' ability to add context and explanatory value to a series of disconnected "original reports." Indeed, late 2013 and early 2014 saw an explosion in the number of news websites prioritizing context and explanatory capability, from Nate Silver's FiveThirtyEight to Ezra Klein's Vox. In his inaugural post on the new 538, Silver wrote that:

Our methods are not meant to replace "traditional" or conventional journalism. We have the utmost admiration for journalists who gather original information and report original stories. Our staff includes alumni from traditional news organizations like The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian and The Washington Post (along with others from digital news organizations, blogs and from outside journalism entirely).

Still, I would never have launched FiveThirtyEight in 2008, and I would not have chosen to broaden its coverage so extensively now, unless I thought there was some need for it in the marketplace. (Silver 2014)

On the level of routines, it is also obvious that much of the traditional media has lost the allergy to blogging or curation that was revealed in my 2008 interviews with Philadelphia journalists. The Ledge blog at the New York Times is a prominent part of the Times coverage of breaking news, and The Guardian regularly live-blogs about incidents of civil unrest or important developing news. The same is true at a number of less prominent news organizations. Even here, however, the synthesis and curation of information is quite often tied to breaking news and the ability to make sense of rapidly unfolding developments. The types of news writers who primarily "read, and write a little less than they read," in the words of one of my Philadelphia informants, appear to remain a minority within most traditional news organizations, even as blogging has become more important in newsroom workflow.

Much like the fragmentation of the public engendered by the rise of web metrics and niche analysis, so too we should see the tension between original reporting and information synthesis, not as a perpetual state of affairs, but as a series of cultural dynamics which are subject to perpetual evolution, rethinking, and development. What is important, however, is that this tension *exists* and that it *matters*. The true revolutionary potential of the penny press developed, in large part, out of the basic idea that emerging working-class urban environment contained within it a number of hidden deviances and shocking events, ranging from the society ball to the treatment of the poor to the details of a gruesome murder which only could be ferreted out at the courthouse or within the police precinct. News was hidden, in other words, and it needed to be discovered. If one of the emerging cultural notions of our new information environment is that information is not hidden but abundant, and that it must be synthesized and explained rather than discovered reported, we may stand on the threshold of a new era in the universe of public communication. These changes in the idea of the unitary public and original reporting go beyond the current crisis of journalism. They get to the heart of how we, as a democratic society, come to possess the knowledge we have about the operations of the world, and the manner in which we enact a vision of the common good that has lain at the heart of the press-public relationship for the last two centuries.

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