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Churnalism: Revised and Revisited

Introduction

Jane Johnston & Susan Forde

Just under a decade ago the term ‘churnalism’ moved into mainstream journalism discourse, describing in less-than-complimentary terms the recycling process of news production which drew increasingly on wire service copy and public relations subsidies. Davies’ 2008 book *Flat Earth News* and Cardiff University researchers Lewis, Williams and Franklin, were to popularise the term that would become part of the vernacular of an industry on the brink of major change. To be fair, the concept of ‘churn’ and churnalists was earlier coined by Tony Harcup in his 2004 book *Journalism*, in which he cites BBC journalist Waseen Zakir’s description of how wire service copy had eroded original news production. However, the “assembly line in the news factory” and the “two primary conveyor belts” of wire services and public relations (Davies, 2008, 74) were to be seared into the journalistic psyche forever by Davies’ polemic, which laid the blame of churnalism on the “dark arts”, “pseudo-events” and out-of-control commercialism.

At that time, Davies saw the Internet as something ‘apart’ from churnalism, a way out of this passive process of (re)producing news. He says in his epilogue: “And, of course, there is the Internet ... The real promise of the Internet ... [is] that it could liberate the mass media from churnalism” (Davies 2008, 396). Fast forward almost a decade, and that prophecy is, arguably, no longer plausible. What the internet *has done* has been to provide *new models* of journalism – and its progeny churnalism; models that enable the recycling and repurposing of news like never before, through the aggregation of information driven by algorithms; and models that can capture previously out-of-reach data through technologies that can access and facilitate big data sets. The internet has also facilitated a type of ‘news cannibalism’ (Phillips 2011) through which journalism insidiously feeds off itself and swallows up rivals; consumes and regurgitates, or to put it more politely: recycles, recontextualizes and repurposes. These models have brought new mega-media players into the realm of churnalism – Google and Facebook, for instance as major news aggregators, have joined the growing and adapting news conglomerates such as News Corp and Comcast. And their impact on the traditional business models of news – that is, Google and Facebook’s increasing dominance of internet advertising which has decimated online advertising for news media – has amplified resource pressures on news organisations. This, in turn, further pushes commercial players to

economise their newsgathering models more and to enter in to commercial arrangements to help subsidise news costs. This is an ongoing theme in media financial analysts' assessments of the state and future of the industry (for example, Creighton 2017; Bornstein 2017; Beecher 2013).

These changes have seen the emergence of digital media platforms and software applications which have increased the range and character of churnalism in ways which were not envisaged, certainly not mainstream, in the early 2000s. News aggregators now liberally and blatantly select and re-direct the online news of other new producers; publications such as the *Huffington Post* have refashioned contemporary understandings of what constitutes news, including the use of unpaid journalism; content management practices have seen an increasing overlap between 'brand journalism' and corporate communication; blogging and microblogging is purposely used to spread news and capture readers across multiple platforms; and news-bots sort and create news alongside their human counterparts. These changes are typified by hyper-commercial media environments with fewer journalists, doing more—not only writing, but photographing, filming, recording and cutting audio, microblogging and repurposing—ultimately under greater pressure than ever to create and churn copy across a range of media channels and platforms. And so, today, the “filtration and curation of existing information” as Van Hout and Van Leven describe (2016, p. 118) is now as much a part of journalism—at least in mainstream and popular journalism—as observational journalism and bureaucratic sources were in earlier definitions.

Van Hout and Van Leven's literature review of the field found academic debate about churnalism spread between two poles: the first seeing churnalism as a threat to the public service ideal of journalism; the second seeing the transition from legacy to digital news media, understanding that journalism is no longer exclusively defined by eyewitness reporting (Van Hout & Van Leven 2016). They suggest: “This is not to say that reporting news is considered irrelevant or that journalists no longer self-identify as knowledge mediators. However, the balance is shifting” (2016, 118). Indeed, this shift is well illustrated in this special issue, as scholars present new understandings of the evolution, change and futures of churnalism in its relationship to the news worker, the news process and the news audience.

And what of the two 'conveyor belts' of churnalism – PR and wire copy? Researchers continue to confirm the dominance of these sources in churning news (see, for example,

Jackson and Moloney 2015; Forde and Johnston 2013; Johnston & Forde 2011). This edition, however, points to churnalism moving on from these. Our call for papers saw far more interest in social media's part in churnalism than PR's influence; far more interest in data news production than wire copy. The articles in this special issue have thus moved beyond Zakir and Davies' now well-trodden understanding of churnalism to more broadly envisage it across the converged, multi-media digital landscape where news sources, distributors, models and audiences are recalibrating the field. These eight articles present empirical and reflexive studies which address major issues and questions that relate to the role of the journalist in digital newsrooms, how news is produced and shared, how audiences understand digital news, and more.

We begin this Special Issue with one of the more traditionally-focused papers in the collection, which is Hannah Lorenz's consideration of the role of a Brussels-based news agency and the industry of news wholesaling. This moves on discussions about 'churnalism' in terms of public relations and wire copy, as discussed above, and considers the place of news agencies in the overall cycle of contemporary news production in the digital era. Dawn Wheatley and John O'Sullivan continue this consideration of our more established understandings of churnalism, but enlarge their study to consider the differences between repackaging and 'churning' of online news and news that is 'saved' for the later print version of selected Irish newspapers. Natalie Rulyova and Hannah Westley consider the changing nature of news driven by the online and social media environment, concluding that modern news consumers' perceptions of what constitutes news 'is determined by the changing ways in which we consume news'. In short, young news consumers are constantly undertaking selection processes to determine what 'news' they will read in the plethora of information driven by the processes of churnalism. Theodore Saridou and colleagues take the discussion to Greece, with a comprehensive study of a range of Greek online news sites to assess the trajectory of churnalism across time. This work includes a consideration of the sources of churned content, and an understanding of the nature of modern news sourcing and content is increasingly important for a nation experiencing ongoing economic and political turmoil.

Saso Brlek and colleagues take us straight to the data future of journalism, considering the nature of automated news and the potential for 'engineering technologies' to gather and present news based on database searches and collation of content. With great potential for enhancing processes of churning content – and this is a concern of the practice – the authors

note the new technologies ‘have the potential to significantly impact on news gathering and assembling routines, as well as editorial decisions regarding repurposing content’ (that is, churning). This is followed by an important study from Mario Haim and Andreas Graefe, who take us one step further in to the automated news minefield by examining this concept from the perspective of the news *consumer*. They find that while audiences expected news content to be more readable and of better quality, they did not expect human-generated news to be more ‘credible’ than that offered by a news bot. The study is centred around expectation-confirmation theory and interrogates the potential future of news and journalism in an automated content world. Our final two papers focus specifically on the world of social media and churnalism therein. Susanne Almgren examines sharing of news on Facebook, examining a case study of the Swedish news site *Arbetarbladet* and the ways in which Facebook users ‘share’ content from the site through their Facebook feeds. Almost 350 news articles were shared 7266 times, reflecting the role of the modern news consumer – as Rulyova and Westley discuss – as a selector and disseminator of news as much as a consumer. Our issue concludes strongly with a continuation of the discussion around sharing news online, with Australian researchers Tim Dwyer and Fiona Martin developing a ‘news sharing ecology’ to understand the interlinked business models, ownership patterns and industrial power of social media companies apps such as Facebook, Twitter, Gigya, Chartbeat and Newswhip. At its heart, the paper is a critical analysis of the political economy of news sharing, considering how social media news sharing is transforming reporting, news production and news distribution.

We trust your own research will be stimulated by this latest instalment in the scholarly understanding and positioning of news processes such as ‘churnalism’; and that the debates herein will not only lead to further new research but new thinking within media policy bodies and institutions to account for the significant shifts in the way our news is gathered, delivered and framed.

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