

Balčytienė, A. (2005). Journalism in the Age of Information: News Management as a Key Function. Annual Proceedings of Vidzeme University College ICTE in Regional Development, p. 22-26.

JOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF INFORMATION: NEWS MANAGEMENT AS A KEY FUNCTION

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KEYWORDS

Convergence, hybrid media, news management, professional skills, journalism training

ABSTRACT

The principal goal of this article to introduce a concept of journalistic “news management”, which indicates to multiplicity of tasks applied in complex conditions of news production in the newsrooms. It seeks to show the spectrum of skills that contemporary journalists need to acquire to successfully enter professional careers.

INTRODUCTION: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

Many things have changed since the concept of transformation was used as a keyword to describe changes in the media system (cf. Vihalemm 2002). The end of the 20th century is reasonably called the beginning of essential changes in public communications. The electronic revolution, which began and accelerated during the late 1980s, opened new communication channels and offered the unprecedented opportunities. Newly emerged cable and satellite television side by side with the public television significantly changed the field of society information. Due to this fact the number of the viewed TV channels increased ten times, journalists acquired more freedom to experiment with the television program formats. Eventually the publishing quality of the printed material changed and the spectrum of the specialized publications glittered with all colours of the rainbow. When the modern technologies began to be widely applied in the household, leisure time increased which consequently had a strong affect on mass communication: in attempts to

attract the audience media organizations started making more entertaining television programs, serials and games, publishing various magazines for leisure reading.

Today the situation has normalised and a new keyword has been invented. Scholarly debates nowadays stress the process of *media convergence* taking place on several fronts simultaneously, such as technological, organisational and social. The perspective of technological convergence tends to emphasise the digitalisation of all media's content. It imagines convergence as a process of melding several mediums into one, accessible through a computer screen. Organisational dimension of convergence results in the development of gigantic poly media enterprises. But convergence has social implications, too. It is certainly affecting how people – both media professionals and their audiences – select and use the information.

For journalists, media convergence gives rise to new forms of creativity and multi-tasking, to trans-media storytelling and the development of journalistic stories across different platforms and media channels. As a result, the professional communication world is facing new uncertainties and dilemmas. Previously clear boundaries of various media do not exist in nowadays media. Technological developments and cross-media ownership patterns encourage various types of hybrids. Nowadays reporters need to adapt to rapidly changing market situations and move between various types of media. Writers and reporters have to think visually and broadcast journalists need to work as producers and information managers as well. This adds a tremendous pressure and increases uncertainty among those who plan to enter communications careers.

NEWS MANAGEMENT

All aspects of media convergence affect how media companies organise their everyday work. Media organisations produce information in such way that matches their technical facilities, news production routines and corresponds to audience expectations.

News production is a complex process, which takes place in a particular cultural setting. It is affected by many factors such as technological and economic constraints, political factors or pressures from information sources (see Figure 1). It also takes place within organisational framework, which is determined by certain editorial policies and professional journalistic routines.

Because of the growing variety and complexity of news, more than half of the time journalists spent by selecting and managing of information. Journalists are facing new types of pressures. On one hand, they have to work hard to acquire professional competence and knowledge, and specialise within particular medium. On the other hand, they have to adapt adequately to changing demands of the media company they are working at. In addition, contemporary journalists are exposed to an oversupply of information, which reaches journalists via traditional and virtual sources from different actors such as government, political parties and PR consultants. As a result, editorial procedures and routines change, therefore, the need arises to assess the procedural aspects of news manufacturing.

Popularly speaking, news management aims at influencing, changing, piloting, and controlling the journalistic everyday business and is considered to be a PR function. So this is an outside strategy. Applying this top-down type of news management the political and other actors seek to determine the media agenda.

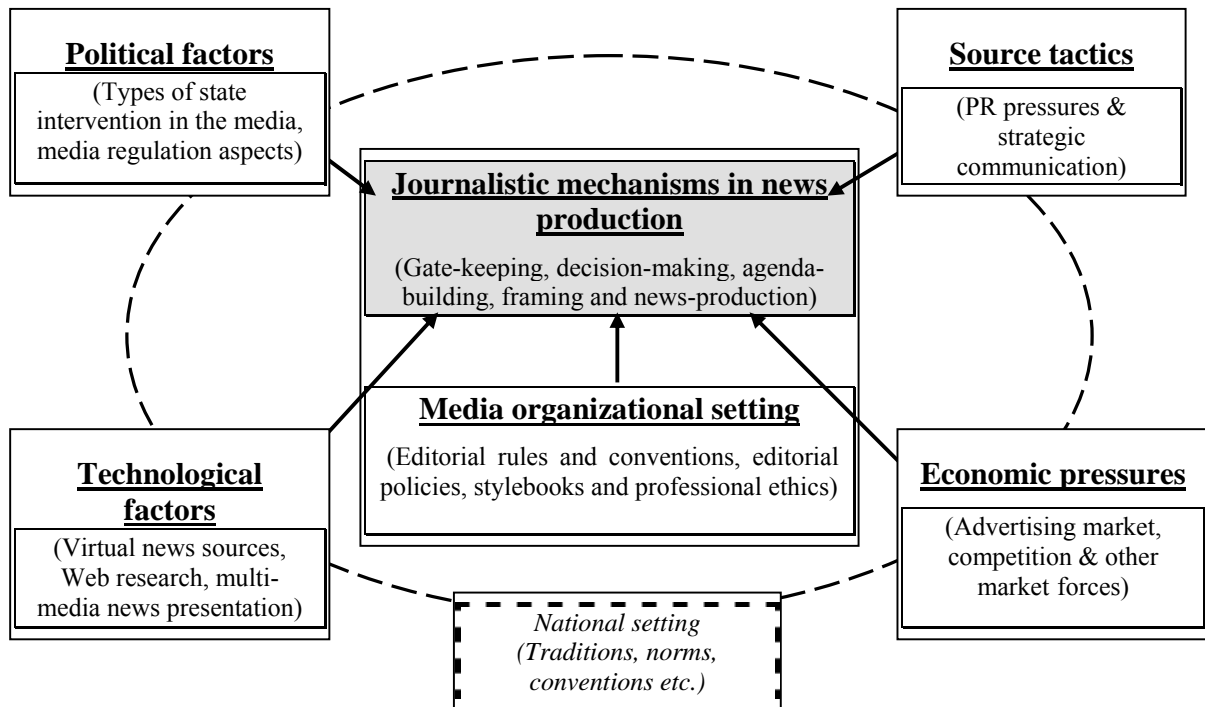


Figure 1. Main factors affecting and determining the flow of news. Adapted from McNair, B. (1998), Balčytienė et al. (2005a), Rosenwerth et al. (2005).

But, at the same time, news management is a process, which covers different phases of news production such as choice of information sources, value judgement, assessment of news relevancy, and news presentation (Shoemaker 1999). The result of this multilevel process is the news agenda set by the media company.

Journalists select, construct and package the news, in order to present to their audiences information that is most relevant. Sometimes news is rejected because it does not fit relevancy criteria established by media organisation or of other more practical reasons such as lack of time or space in the publication. For media operating under fierce competition, the news value is determined by the audience requirements and commercial imperatives (cf. Shoemaker et al. 2001). The widely discussed commercialism of the media is, in fact, strongly related to social changes. One important argument for media commercialisation is the idea that the centrality of organized social groups and importance of loyalty and solidarity to group interests is giving way to greater

individualism (Hallin & Mancini 2004). As scholars claim, a mass audience changes into a new audience with personalized interests and the media re-orient itself towards producing news and information as a “saleable product” (cf. Balčytienė 2005b). The arrival of interactive technologies, too, contributes to the process of personification: it provides means to personalised experience for information consumers. In other words, new technologies challenge traditional journalistic processes in that sense that they allow reader independence from gate-keeping by the media. The audience may become information suppliers, sources as well as contributors. As a result, online journalism can become an open-source journalism that at some point may turn into open-content journalism where readers can actively supply media with additional information and comments (cf. Moon 1999).

Indeed, the production of news is a very complex process. News is determined by some specific professional routines. As a tradition, some events generate more attention than the others. There exists a clear tendency that nowadays the news organisations receive the kind of information that they require. For instance, even news agencies pre-determine types of information which is being sent to their subscribers. Local newspaper most obviously will subscribe country-focused information rather than news in foreign languages. News production also depends on the spectrum of sources available. Most popular sources of information are news agencies, special correspondents, foreign correspondents and press releases. For media organisations, which own several media outlets, an important source of information is news from other newsrooms of the same company. For large media organisations more actors cooperate in news production, therefore, it is needed to form new partnerships such as reporters working with designers and photographers working with writers. To conclude, on one hand, news is determined by the work of journalists and editors. But, on the other hand, news organisations are dependent on information that has been “packaged” by their sources. Very often, instead of critical analysis, the media simply reproduce information received from its various sources.

To sum up, the news production is an active process which is both top-down and bottom-up strategy of information management that is manifested through such journalistic processes as gate-keeping, decision-making, agenda-setting and news-production (see, for e.g., Rosenwerth et al 2005). The concept of “news management” seems to be a relevant definition of the procedures applied within contexts of news manufacturing. From journalistic point of view, news management has an emphasis on activities performed by media professionals in determining the news agenda in the media. In this context it is necessary to speak about new combinations of skills required for professional journalism.

SYNTHESIS: NEW REQUIREMENTS

The public communications sector in Lithuania has undergone rapid restructuring, development and change. Within free market conditions the media rapidly changed their orientation to capitalism and democracy. By 2000, after a decade of experiments, the overall media system has reached stability. Yet, at the same time, the media market remains vulnerable as competitors with different editorial lines, virtual projects and

business concepts fight for audience and advertising money. Thus, educational and journalism training institutions have encountered new challenges. How has journalism training changed (if anyhow) since the phase of consolidation in the national media was reached?

There is a need for educational institutions to take into consideration changes in the media industry and to re-shape journalism education programs accordingly. Answers to above mentioned concerns and dilemmas could be found through debates and discussions among the interested actors, such as media scholars and practitioners, as well as graduate students in journalism. It seems that the specific skills that journalism graduates need to successfully enter careers in the media industry are as follows: fundamental skills of gathering and reporting the information, critical assessment of sources, innovative thinking to make new combinations of information, ability to judge which medium fits the information presentation best, capability to solve complex problems of modern communications, and skills to reflect upon their work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Assumptions about news management were investigated through a series of studies conducted in 2004-2005 within the 6th FP project AIM “Adequate Information Management in Europe” (Contract No CIT2-CT-2004-506301, <http://www.aim-project.net>). The impact of media convergence on journalism training is assessed within NordPlus Neighbour project “Developing Nordic-Baltic-Russian Cooperation in New Media Journalism Training” (2004-2005).

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BIOGRAPHY

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Auksė Balčytienė is the chair of the Graduate School of Journalism at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. Currently she is in charge of a graduate programme in Public Communications. She has designed and taught courses in International Journalism, Media and Democracy in the Nordic-Baltic Area of Europe, Internet Media, EU Information Policy, Information Society Topics and Rhetoric of the Internet. She has written extensively about the culture of journalism, the impact of Internet on mass media and journalistic innovations. She is involved in a number of internationally funded projects focusing on the Europeanisation of the media and development of the European Public Sphere (6th Framework Programme), new media journalism training (NordPlus Neighbour) and the impact of the Internet on mass media in Europe (COST A20).