

JOURNALISM AND THE WEB

An Analysis of Skills and Standards in an Online Environment

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Abstract / The Internet is changing the profession of journalism in a number of ways, which this article looks at in terms of so-called *digital*, or rather *online* journalism. This article focuses in particular on the question of if, to what extent and in what respects online journalism differs from traditional journalism. The developments on the Internet in terms of journalism and, more specifically, news on the World Wide Web are presented, leading to a discussion of the three characteristic keywords: interactivity, personalization and convergence. This in itself leads to an analysis of the standards and skills of journalism and journalists online. In conclusion, it is argued that these keywords and journalistic skills and standards closely reflect a contemporary global trend towards community journalism – also known as civic journalism or public journalism – which is an area deserving more study in any analysis of journalism and the Internet.

Keywords / journalism / journalistic skills / Internet / online journalism / World Wide Web

Introduction

The Internet is changing the profession of journalism in at least three ways: it has the potential to make the journalist's role as the essential intermediary force in democracy more or less superfluous; it offers the media professional a vast array of resources and sheer endless technological possibilities to work with; and it has created its own type of journalism on the Net: so-called *digital* or *online* journalism. This article focuses on the latter development, in particular on the question of if, to what extent and in which respects online journalism differs from traditional forms of journalism.

The main question to be answered here is: what *is* online journalism and what makes it different from other types and styles of the profession? In order to answer this question, first the developments on the Internet in terms of journalism and, more specifically, news on the World Wide Web are sketched. Then, the issue of defining journalism on the Net is addressed accordingly. Third, the question of what the discerning elements of news, journalism and therefore journalists are on the Internet in comparison with more traditional forms of journalism is answered.

An analysis of the specific standards and skills of journalism and journalists online concludes this article, based on those elements about which there seems to exist consensus in the available professional, scholarly and Internet-related

sources.¹ By determining a difference between online and 'other' journalism as the starting point for analysis, the article avoids normative statements on the quality of reporting in an online environment. Good reporting online is the same as good reporting in print; its characteristics are just sometimes completely different and require different skills and standards, as this article attempts to show.

The assumption here is that online news is generally free of charge, publicly accessible 24 hours per day and updated constantly. The combination of these three elements already makes online journalism more or less different from other media, but they do not force journalists to reconsider their skills and standards as such. Producing content for the online environment has certain consequences for the profession of journalism and its conventions – and those consequences will be dealt with hereafter.

News and Journalism on the Internet: A Look Back

According to the much-quoted yearly 'Media in Cyberspace' studies by Steven Ross and Don Middleberg (1999) 20 percent of American online newspapers claimed in 1997 that at least half of their daily content was original. In 1996 this percentage had been 7 percent. Original content is content which is produced exclusively for the online news site and is not 'shovelware': print media content recycled for the web. Offering original content instead of shovelware is generally considered to be an example of an online news site doing 'a good job'. The 1998 survey found that original content on web news sites grew enormously in 1998. Only 22 percent of newspaper respondents with web sites said their sites had less than 5 percent original content. This compares with 39 percent of the respondents in 1997. For magazines, the drop was from 27 percent to 11 percent (Ross and Middleberg, 1999).

Studies like these are mostly only available about (and on) American sites. A survey report of the Swiss company Interactive Publishing in 1998 among online news sites included 30 European newspapers, put together with 100 American and 11 Asian sites. The results showed that most online news sites employ a staff of about eight people and expected a growth rate of 40 percent for 1998–9, although the survey report did not specifically indicate differences between European and non-European developments (Interactive Publishing, 1998).

Such numbers tell a story of a new medium becoming more professional year by year: more resources are currently being transferred to online developments by media organizations worldwide. At the same time, one should not consider the World Wide Web or the phenomenon of online news a 'new' thing – publicly available online news has been around since the start of videotext in the early 1980s and the World Wide Web followed in the early 1990s.

The Internet has been around – first as an American military network – since the end of the Second World War. In 1965 the first electronic newsletters emerged followed by the widespread introduction of personal electronic mail (email) services in the early 1970s, and in 1979 the public news and discussion platform of Usenet was launched. Only in 1991 was the World Wide Web as such introduced. It served as a platform for the exchange and communication

of texts – so-called hypertext. Europe followed the American example in the 1980s; the first Internet connection in the Netherlands was, for example, established in 1989 – at the same time as in the UK and Germany. In 1993 it became possible to exchange graphic features as well as plain text. This is when the World Wide Web as such really took off, with a first-year growth of more than 300,000 percent worldwide. The first local online newspaper was the *Chicago Tribune*, which first delivered its content electronically (text based) in 1992 (Singer et al., 1998).

News on the Net had been a common feature during the 1980s, but on the World Wide Web it had a slow start. One of the first important examples of journalistic writing on the Web is the widely acclaimed *Wired Magazine*, which started its first online edition in January 1993 – not wholly surprising since it is a magazine with Internet users or ‘Netizens’ as its target audience (Katz, 1997). That year also saw the start of online talk radio, whereas other media were only beginning to take notice. By the end of 1994 a total of 78 newspapers were online, in 1995 the figure rose to 855 and at the time of writing a total of 4925 newspapers were available on the World Wide Web. Almost 40 percent of all online newspapers are based outside the USA. One has to note, that news ventures online consist of online newspapers, as well as online magazines, broadcasters and news services worldwide – pushing the total number of online journalistic sites to 11,398 (American Journalism Review, 1999; Editor & Publisher Interactive, 1999).

Although one could argue that the developments and growth of web usage and the Internet in the USA in general are years ahead of Europe, some recent studies have revealed that more and more people from outside the USA are getting actively online. This is measured for example by the percentage of web pages in other languages than English, which is getting close to 50 percent these days (NUA Internet Surveys, 1999).

Over the past four years online news ventures in Europe, such as the cooperation between the German ZDF and Microsoft (called ZDF.MSNBC), have become more or less established, with the BBC online news service, on the Net since June 1997, ranked as one of the world’s top online journalistic products – even though they suffer from American competition from the likes of CNN and search engines such as Excite and Yahoo (so-called ‘portal sites’) offering news services. The figures speak for themselves: over 60 editorial staff, creating more than 300 stories a day and a searchable archive of 61,000 stories. The key to the BBC site’s critical acclaim is their development of in-house software which transfers reporters’ material directly and automatically to the web site format. This system, called CPS (Content Production System), facilitates fast work by the journalists without forcing them to be technical wizards at the same time. Another advantage of the BBC is the fact that they have integrated the technological department right in the newsroom. This makes sure the different parts of the production chain are in constant contact with each other. The third successful element is the choice of content the site offers to the readers, exemplified by the vast archival resources they offer. Yet even Mike Smartt, editor of the BBC News Online, recently stated in an interview with the Online Journalism Review that: ‘We don’t have a set of rules because we are learning as we go

along. I don't think anybody in the business knows precisely how to do this' (Perrone, 1998). The 1998 'Media in Cyberspace' study revealed that more newspapers in the US are adopting this strategy: only 13 percent of the newsrooms still keep their print and new media operations separated. A German study has shown though that newsroom organization in Anglo-Saxon offices can be quite different from continental ones – whereas specifically British newsrooms favour a centralized approach and German newspapers tend to decentralize their work (Esser, 1998). This may partly explain the faster adoption and 'success' of new media activities in the USA and UK, although this development in itself is beyond the scope of this article.

One of the first online news sites in Europe, the electronic version of the British *Daily Telegraph* (with 20 percent original content nowadays), has been online since November 1994. The online newspaper has over 1 million registered readers. Another example is *The Scotsman Online*, which has 1.35 million page views per month, has been online since May 1996 and is said to be the most visited Scottish web site, with 65 percent of its readers coming from the USA and Canada. Most European national newspapers have their own web site now and independent online news ventures are growing, even causing political concern for their perceived competitive advantages over print media. CNN reported in June of 1998 that a survey showed more and more people were turning to the web for their daily news – making the web the foremost competitor for the television newscasts instead of the print media. Online news and online journalism are definitely here to stay. An important sidenote here is that most players in the online news industry seem to agree on the fact that news – or rather, content as such – alone does not and will not generate a profit online (Gardner, 1998).

Online Journalism and Journalists: A Definition

When one considers the issues and developments related to journalism and the Internet, the definition problem also rears its ugly head: what are we actually dealing with here? What is an online journalist?

The debate on definition is an endless one. Any definition is valid, as long as its purpose and wording are supported by a clear-cut argumentation. A definition within a research project covering professional developments should be a functional one – one that works and preferably works over time. The problem with the definition issue in journalism is that no one seems to agree upon a single definition for this profession and media professionals in general. Even worse, some argue that journalism is not even a profession. The online journalist is first and foremost a journalist, which means that any definition of this communicator should follow the guidelines as chosen for the profession as a whole. Here a journalist is seen as a media professional, earning at least half of his or her monthly income as a journalist, working in the context of a newsroom or editorial board within a media organization and performing at least one of four selected journalistic 'core' activities: news gathering/research, selecting, writing/processing, editing. This definition is more or less taken from a journalism survey project in Germany and used as a starting point in a current

survey study among journalists in the Netherlands (see Scholl, 1997; Deuze, 1998a). The online journalist is therefore a professional performing journalistic tasks within and for an online publication. Following this definition, the same quality standards apply for online journalists as they do for 'regular' journalists. This does mean that the sheer impossibility of assessing 'objective' quality standards also goes for the online environment. It depends on the theoretical framework with which one chooses to address journalism, the individual journalist's role perspective – disseminator, advocate, adversary or mobilizer following Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) – and the function which one ascribes to journalists in (democratic) society; public/civic/communitarian or neutral/objective/professional (see, for example, the debates in Black, 1997).

One has to note in terms of the analysis here that independent online working units are still a rarity in today's newsroom. The general trend in European newsrooms is that there are few exclusively online news ventures. Put this together with the fact that those editors and reporters working on the online version of an existing media outlet are generally not performing these tasks full-time, the online journalist as a fully-fledged media professional is still virtually non-existent in Europe. But looking at the speed with which the online environment is evolving, one can safely assume we will see this trend across the globe soon.

Traditional vs Online News and Journalism

The developments on the Internet in terms of news and journalism lead one to wonder what the main advantages are. The three keywords in the debate about quality online content and the differences between traditional media and the Net will be briefly elaborated upon hereafter (for the literature review, see also Deuze, 1998b):

- Interactivity;
- Personalization, or rather individualization; and
- Convergence.

Although other media also have a claim to the fame of interactivity – one could think of talk radio – this aspect is generally referred to as the main discerning characteristic of the online environment. Especially when looking at online news, the interactive element seems to be of essential importance. The key to understanding this, is to see interactivity as a purely audience-related feature. It has not so much to do with the speed of news and journalistic activity – although it does facilitate fast work – but it has to do with the fact that online news has the potential to make the reader/user part of the news experience. This can be done through a number of ways: through direct or indirect email exchange between the journalist or staff and the user, through a bulletin board system available on the news site, through a 'send your comments' option box underneath each news story or, more recently, through web chat possibilities, even introducing the people who are featured in the story to the users together with the journalist responsible for the piece in an ultimate interactive

environment. Although essentially this potential is similar to 'letters to the editor' sections in print media, the combination of these various options and the speed with which they can be used makes for a new feature. Although journalists sometimes feel that publicly posting their personal email address is the same as inviting hundreds of emails every day, debates between journalists on professional emailing lists (such as the one of the American Society of Professional Journalists, SPJ-L) indicate that such direct contact actually results in more story ideas, faster correction of factual mistakes and sometimes access to story sources otherwise too time costly to find. A practical problem is the fact that personal email can remain unanswered due to absence of the journalist or the lack of an organizational culture of replying to readers' mail. Another problem is the general 'fear' of (new media) technology among news professionals in today's newsroom – regardless its omnipresence (see Singer, 1997a, 1997b; Katz, cited in Kees, 1999). The fact that the response of – and interaction with – the audience is the key element of the online news site could allow for a cultural change in journalism. The first step for any online journalist seems to be making sure that any story offers interactive possibilities.

The second key element is not surprisingly also an audience-related feature: personalization. It is better though to use the term 'individualization' here, since personalization also implies a trend associated with the debate on the modern-day blurring of the lines between the public and the private sphere – especially in the media. The technology of the Internet not only allows for fast interaction between journalist, organization and user, but also between the individual preferences of the user and the journalist. This would not mean adapting the paper or the programme to the perceived needs and wants of a faceless audience probed by marketing research firms. This means putting a journalistic product together to cater for the individual. This can be done in two ways, offering a choice for the user which is unique for the media world. One option would see the online news site providing so-called hyperlinks to a vast source of archives, grouped topical content and all kinds of consumer-related services on their web site. This way makes use of the fact that it is easy to archive all existing material online and allowing each user to search and browse through for free and at any time – in other words, 'pull' content. The second way is called 'push' content delivery, which means asking the individual user to draw up a list of what he or she wants to read and hear about and then delivering this individualized content automatically at any given or even prearranged time right on a computer screen where the user wants it. This was the main hype and success story last year, with free push services like the American PointCast gaining worldwide presence. PointCast asks the user to 'customize' the news the company has to offer, after which the selected services are delivered as a screen-saver on the user's computer. Later on the hype dwindled down somewhat with companies realizing that users often enjoy just looking around on their own, the automatic delivery of news losing its charm quickly and with the necessary software becoming typified as 'the most uninstalled software in the world'. The fact remains that an online news product can offer each and every individual anything he or she wants, as long as one knows the preferences of the audience and one keeps adding features and services to the site which can attract users. There

is virtually no limit in programme time or number of pages – and the technology allows for personalization both by the individual user (push) and the journalist (pull).

A third way and currently very popular hybrid between push and pull, used by news sites like CNN as well as search engines such as Excite, is the option for the user to create his or her own homepage at the search or news site, consisting of preselected news topics and services such as horoscopes, stock quotes and so on. Such services – called ‘custom news’ or for example ‘my.excite’ – allow the reader to log in at any time to a certain web page and watch their personal picks of the moment’s news. The central point remains the same: individualization is one of the key discerning elements of online journalism.

The third point mentioned here, convergence, is not so much an audience feature but much more a journalist feature. Convergence in the context of online journalism vs traditional journalism is the melting of these traditional media forms – (moving) image, text, sound – in one story told online. Imagine a story with pictures offering links to a video shoot of the event described, excerpts of the interviews that were held and links to other stories and background material of related topics. This is a point where one could argue that the online journalist is directly competing and compatible with the television journalist. There is a difference though: the context of the web offers the user the option to choose between the respective elements of the story and offers the journalist the option to ‘play around’ with these elements: every single story can have a different angle, a different way of telling the story. Whereas a bombing could start with a video shoot, a court ruling could begin with the voice of the judge and the response of the lawyers, to give an example. The technology for full convergence is not generally available at the present time, but will be in a matter of years. The fact that there is a choice – both for user as well as journalist – is the discerning element here.

Journalism and the Net: New Skills and Standards to be Considered

A key point in a discussion about new journalism standards and skills on the Internet is the audience, as shown by the key online features such as interactivity and individualization. Any relatively new medium – as the Net in terms of attracting a global audience is – has to fight its first battles in getting the potential audience to pay attention, and to keep coming back. It is remarkable that practically all reports, studies, columns and essays online dealing with this ‘new journalism’ formulate standards, tips, guidelines or any other advice towards online content producers in terms of how they can serve their audience better.

Such an explicit audience focus is something of a novelty in terms of journalism publications dealing with skills and standards in radio, television or print media – apart from the often highly theoretical nature of public journalism advocates such as Jay Rosen, Jeremy Iggers or James Fallows. The literature on what makes for quality content, for a ‘good’ online news site or for basic web-based journalism is scarce to say the least – and most of the time lacks any

research background or methodological foundation, save Jane Singer's work at the University of Colorado (see especially Singer, 1998; Deuze, 1998c). I have scanned and analysed trade journals, online columns and essays, textbooks and some scholarly literature for notes on or about journalism skills and standards which are generally considered as signs of online reporters and news ventures 'doing a good job'. The list of sources used (see the Appendix and Bibliography sections) is by no means exhaustive, but it is an indication of what material is 'out there' – with a focus on what is easily available and accessible for free online, for everyone – with the restriction of availability in the English language. As noted earlier, English will probably not remain the dominant language on the Net. According to Internet research group Emarketer, non-English speakers are the fastest growing group of new Internet users, with a rapidly growing interest in non-English sites. Industry sources are noting particularly marked increases in the online use of Spanish, Portuguese, German, Japanese, Chinese and Scandinavian languages – indicating Europe is gaining a stronger presence online (NUA Internet Surveys, 1999).

Through a tentative analysis of these sources and selecting those issues and topics that are directly related to the online journalists' experience and profession, two categories of consensus can be drawn up: one of specific new skills for journalists when working for an online publication and one of more general standards relating to the successful presentation of an online journalist product. The order of the respective skills and standards is wholly random. In the literature only those skills and standards were chosen which are a *direct* result of the online environment. There is an element of translation involved because of the fact that I sometimes had to rephrase a certain line of argument by an author in order for it to fit into the (sub) categories used in this article.

Journalism Skills

The Application of Storyboarding When Planning an Online Story

Writing online journalism is not so much writing a text, it is thinking ahead about all possible formats to be used in a story to allow for the medium's key characteristic – convergence – to be functionally and successfully used for the benefit of the user. Every story can have a different setup online, but then again, not every story comes in different formats. But the availability of archive resources, the option of exploring (all) possible angles of the story topic into different directions and the interactive possibilities of the medium all require a planned ahead and structured approach, for which storyboarding – in itself an 'old' journalistic tool – is a compulsory instrument when building a story on the web. It is especially useful when considering the hierarchy of information online which exists if the journalists practice non-linear writing.

Non-Linear Writing

Traditional journalism writing comes down to the narrative flow of the inverted pyramid – with some alternative approaches possible. This is not only a style

prerequisite, but also a practical news management credo: the subeditor should be able to cut the copy (script or text) from the bottom up in order to make spur-of-the-moment news decisions. On a web site the inverted pyramid rule is sometimes upheld with the argument that readers only scan, and do not really read a story. This means that any journalistic piece should be brief, concise and enticing the reader (or surfer, user) to follow the storyline through. Although this is a golden journalistic rule, it pales next to the option the online environment offers to the online journalist: non-linear writing. This is writing in pieces or, in Net jargon, 'chunks of content'. Traditional writing is linear in nature, online writing can be non-linear. This means that any story can be cut up into smaller pieces and spread out across a number of web pages. Each of these pages can be accessed separately by the user – in any order he or she wishes. This means that a reader can first go to page 4 of a 10-page story because that is where the video footage is, then browse through the picture gallery on page 9 to finish off with the headlines on page 1 – and each time still getting the news. This puts a huge demand on the skills of the journalist, who has to make sure each content section offers the news as well as something new and making sure it is still part of the whole.

Considering Journalistic Taboos Such as Writing Questions, Quoting Dialect and So On

Talking about journalism 'laws', one of those is that one should not write question marks, or exclamation marks for that matter. This brings forth an interesting point: language on the Internet. Although there are of course cultural and national differences, generally the consensus is that the Net has produced an informal and grammatically very 'relaxed' kind of language. It is even argued by authors such as Roger Fidler that the language used in emails and news groups is a new, third form of language next to the spoken and written word – a sort of in-between language or 'digital' language (Fidler, 1997). Online journalists can seriously consider this, since it is an intricate part of their medium. The question mark can be used to entice a reader to move on to the answer (on another page, for example), while instead of exclamation marks text in capitals is often used for the expression of strong emotions. There is a discussion going on about the use of so-called emoticons: little ASCII-symbols that symbolize non-verbal signs such as a wink ;-) and surprise 8-) for example. There are hundreds of these symbols and they have become an integrated part of news group and email talk. Whether journalists should use them is debatable, but the fact is that these symbols have become a daily reality for a growing number of Net users – and those people are the audience the online journalist is trying to reach. Another example of a rule that should be broken online is use of the last name only on second reference. When one writes online – which generally means having a piece cut up in different segments or having to scroll down the screen to read on – one should be aware that a name can be seen first in different parts of the online story, so it should be printed, told or shown in full every single time. Length seems to be less of an issue here.

Using Interactive Tools to Expand Content Such as Discussion Groups, Web Chat and So On

The characteristics of online journalism – interactivity, personalization and convergence – are considered to be the main starting points for any online news site and story. The problem for the online journalist is how to keep his or her audience – especially now that there is so much information and news available online and most of it is free. The Internet offers a number of interactive tools to help the journalist to communicate with the user: direct email links (when clicking on the printed email address a message window immediately pops up), bulletin board systems (BBS), web chat ('live' text-based discussions online using the Internet application Telnet), ongoing online survey questionnaires or opinion poll forms (with the results published on the site as well) which could ask for opinions, sociodemographics and so on, discussion groups (using Telnet, the World Wide Web or an email forum setup where each response is published at the site as well) and so on. Email is known as the most popular aspect of the Internet, so it is almost evident journalists should use it to their and their readers' full advantage. The use of email and other online communication applications is not without its specific online problems; the headline 'E-Mail Interviews: Can You Trust Them?' of an Editor & Publisher Interactive report speaks for itself in this respect (Bermant, 1999). This does not only require the traditional skill of verifying sources – it also requires an up-to-date understanding of domain names, email traffic (especially forwarding and redirecting services) and plenty of time.

Layering of Content

This is related to the convergent nature of online media as well as the concept of non-linear writing as mentioned before. By cutting up a story into separate sections the user can scan through any story or topic easier, getting the information he or she wants faster and allowing the journalist to come up with different formats and angles for one and the same story or topic. The fact that not everyone has the necessary hardware and software to view all kinds of (new) media applications such as video or audio makes it even more practical to layer content: the user can skip (or will automatically skip) those parts of the site and story that cannot be viewed or listened to. To imagine the story as layered and to work, edit and gather the news in a layered format is a step away from the 'usual' for a journalist.

Journalism Standards

Offer Hyperlinks to Sources, Background Material, Related Content and Archives

The Internet can be used as a seemingly bottomless pit of resources for the reader. It all starts with a headline and teaser, but it can end in browsing through reports, archives dating back years and years, official documents and

full transcripts of interviews and statements. The BBC archive mentioned earlier is but one example.

Allowing the Reader to Trace Back the Reporting and News Gathering Process

This is also a new concept – and at the same time a tricky one. For one thing, the concept of hyperlinks makes it possible for the journalist to offer the reader direct links in the main story to the material where he or she got it all from – the source documents. One could think of a story about the activities of Shell in Nigeria with links to Shell press releases, sites of activists and human rights organizations, Nigerian government statements, wire services which have carried the related news items and so on. A problem here is the vague distinction between commercial and editorial content: when is a link to a company which features in the news purely meant as a service to reader – and when does it have commercial (or even sponsored) intent? The bottom line is that some online sources can be checked by the readers themselves.

Always Offer Extensive ‘About Us’ Sections

An extensive ‘about us’ section and related sections covering editorial, advertorial and advertisement policies, organizational aims and directives and feedback opportunities are considered to be a valuable addition to any online venture – a consideration which has to do with a main problem related to any content – journalistic or not – on the Net, credibility. When a news organization gives the user plenty of clear information on who it is, where it comes from (organization, owner and company, country and so on) and what its rationale is, it allows the user to have an ‘educated’ choice when selecting content to read. This, together with a real option to respond (extensive contact addresses and email links), is crucial for attaining some form of credibility, authority and therefore brand image on the Net. This argument follows the previous one about allowing the reader to follow the journalist’s footsteps online.

Always Answer Readers’ Email

This point also follows the previous ones and again shows the importance of listening to the users. Considering the fast-paced and fleeting nature of online readership it is important to note the ‘always’ here: any email should be answered as fast as possible. The idea behind this seems to be that taking readers’ comments seriously is a way of keeping them. This could be supported by consistently putting (personal or staff) bylines on every web page. Objections to this reasoning centre around the fear of spam: loads of emails every day full of commercial, inflammatory or otherwise debatable content. Comments of journalists on emailing lists reveal that this is hardly a result of printing their email address next to every story. Of course, there are some cases of unsolicited mail, but the overall picture seems to be one of real help to the journalist, as well as one that facilitates an open and steady journalist–reader relationship.

Applying Personalized Email (or, for example, Acrobat) Services

It has already been noted that email is not only popular, but also – as Editor & Publisher Interactive column writer Steve Outing claims – addictive. Email traffic is on the increase all across the globe, supporting the argument for better use of electronic mail by journalists in general and online newspapers in particular. A way of using email is, for example, sending out teasers and reminders of new editions or breaking news to registered readers or making personalized email services (such as a headline-only edition) for those users who so request. Again, this sets a pure audience-related standard for contemporary journalism.

Online News Sites Should Serve as Community Resources When Operating on a Local Level

This is perhaps one of the more general but at the same time key arguments coming out of the available literature (see, for example, Riley et al., 1998). It is considered to be such a crucial element, that one could argue that this is not only a standard but also a commonly perceived *goal* in online journalism. It seems to be the consensus that one should focus on providing a community-based service in order to speak of an accomplished online journalistic venture. An example is the Interactive Publishing TOP Award of November 1998 for the Dutch service CityOnline as the best online community – the fact that this is a category on its own for the first time is an example of this consensus.

Any successful online news site should not just stick to delivering the news – it should make use of all the standards and skills mentioned here and offer a range of service-oriented content to a specific audience. This perceived audience could be seen as a community, be it a virtual one (solely existing online) or a geographical one (for example, a specific borough, village, city or province). The concept of operating as a community resource can be linked to one of the more recent buzzwords on the Internet: the ‘portal’ site. A portal site is a web page which offers all kinds of related services to the user in such a way that it becomes the standard starting point for the user when going online, namely surfing the web. A journalistic online product could deliver all kinds of services to the reader.

Success stories of online newspapers serving a local community are characterized by a strong focus on incorporating all elements of a geographical community online, varying from school lunch menus and library opening times to all kinds of discussion platforms, online classifieds, (personalized) search engines, shopping options and offering readers their own homepages on the site itself (Lapham, 1995). It has even been argued recently that online newspapers could offer their readers email addresses – which would help building the brand. One could think about having the domain name of one’s favourite paper – for example *nytimes.com*, *gazetapolska.pl* or *sueddeutsche.de* – in one’s personal email address. This forces the journalist to constantly reconsider the value of information for their specific community and therefore forces the media

organization – in the words of one author – to continuously keep on researching itself (Zollman, 1997).

When one speaks of these community-focused standards as a goal in online journalism, one could also generalize certain arguments in the sources used into a category of ‘goals in online journalism’. One could think of the basic goals of offering authority and credibility to the reader – issues that are topics of debate online because of the facts that just about everyone can go online and start a news service and that the division between commercial and editorial content on the World Wide Web is not as clear as it is in, for example, mainstream print media. But these are also issues that are of importance in traditional journalism and are therefore not considered in detail here.

Discussion and Conclusion

A remarkable result from this brief study is that journalists and researchers alike seem to have developed some kind of (un)conscious consensus on the topics analysed here. This is remarkable because almost all of the authors start their publications with the announcement that nobody agrees on any of the mentioned skills and standards.

Another generalization can be made on the basis of the analysis in terms of what the Internet does for journalism: it breaks the traditional concept of ‘journalists know and can decide what people need’ in terms of news and information. In the words of a classic story by Katherine Fulton in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, online edition of 1996: ‘Journalism companies used to control the megaphone – and therefore had a monopoly on who got heard. New technologies . . . have destroyed that world forever’ (Fulton, 1996). The Net offers the audience the possibility to surpass the journalist in their search for information and their choices for the way in which information is presented and eventually gets to them. Regardless of whether members of the audience actually do so or want to do so – this is a reality when dealing with journalism and news on the Internet.

Reflecting on the differences between traditional journalism and online journalism with the specific argument of offering all kinds of related services and a strong audience or even community orientation, the developments online seem to coincide with a contemporary global trend towards community journalism (Lambeth, 1995). Community journalism – also known as civic journalism or local watchdog journalism – can be characterized by similar elements such as a strong emphasis on interaction with a specific audience and a service-oriented approach to journalism as such. The trend towards a ‘civic’ journalism reportedly started around 1988 with a growing concern about the lowering standards in journalism, mainly in the USA (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). It can also be found in countries where journalism functions in a politically sensitive and charged environment, of which South Africa is a prime example (Deuze, forthcoming). Civic journalism as such is sometimes characterized by three steps: it reformulates the relationship between the press and the people, it emphasizes establishing connections and contacts between journalists and the communities they cover trying to address the audience as equal partners instead

of ‘just’ consumers, and finally it emphasizes a focus on issues instead of institutions (summary taken from Dahlgren, 1998). Although this last item may not be typical of online journalism, the first two points could come straight out of a handbook of ‘how to do online journalism’.

Especially in the European context, with its diversity in language and culture and its increasingly fragmented nature, a strong community-oriented online journalistic product could prove to be beneficial and successful. Although one can expect more and more people from all walks of life to go online in Europe – enough to start speaking about communities – the American situation does send out a warning. According to a survey report by the US Department of Commerce (1998), the so-called ‘digital divide’ had widened over the past three years, as more wealthy than poor Americans acquired computers and connected to the Internet.

Thinking about journalism as a profession and the changes therein can go in lots of different directions, of which the online environment is but one. A coherent vision of the new journalism should therefore consider all aspects of change and evaluate them both on what they mean right now, and what they could mean in the near future. The near future of journalism in a democratic, capitalist and technologically advancing society could well be found online. Taking into account the different skills and standards as briefly discussed here one can see a notable change in the way the media professional could consider his or her role online: much more focused on community and audience, on a continuous reconsideration of traditional and alternative ways of storytelling and of being constantly aware of the pros (and cons) of the medium. It is both a challenge and a threat to journalism, since the inherent problems and difficulties that profound changes bring at the same time can cause a retreat into established patterns and professional rituals resulting in concepts such as shovelware. The battle for audience attention and, even more so, participation is part of the new journalism and is omnipresent on the Internet and more specifically the World Wide Web. To ignore this, is to lose the battle online before it has been fought.

Appendix

Online Journalism-Related Mailing Lists (Examples of; English Language)

CARR-L	Moderator: Elliott Parker, Central Michigan University (USA).
JOURNET-L	Moderator: none. Organization: American University (USA).
Media	Moderators: Fredrik Laurin, SVT Swedish Television and Mark Comerford, Grävande Journalister Stockholm (SE).
NewsViews	Moderator: Mark Deuze, University of Amsterdam (NL).
Online Europe	Moderator: Steven Carlson, iSYS Hungary (HU).
Online News	Moderator: Steve Outing, Editor & Publisher Interactive (USA).
Online Newspapers	Moderator: Steve Outing, Editor & Publisher Interactive (USA).
Online Writing	Moderators: Steve Outing, Editor & Publisher Interactive (USA), Amy Gahrn, editor Contentious Magazine (USA).
SPJ-L	Moderator: none. Organization: Society of Professional Journalists (USA).

Online Journalism-Related Newsletters (Examples of; English Language)

<i>Europemedia</i>	Organization: Interactive Publishing (CH), Arehaus in London (UK), Van Dusseldorp & Partners (NL).
<i>MediaNews</i>	Organization: European Journalism Centre (NL).
<i>OJR Newsletter</i>	Organization: The Online Journalism Review, Annenberg School for Communication (USA).

Journalism-Related News Groups on Usenet (Examples of)

alt.journalism
 alt.journalism.criticism
 alt.journalism.freelance
 alt.journalism.moderated
 alt.journalism.newspapers
 alt.journalism.print

Notes

This article serves as a follow-up to a paper presented to the Napier University Journalism Conference of 4–5 September 1998 (Edinburgh, Scotland). The issues regarding journalism and the Internet form part of a larger research project into contemporary journalism in the Netherlands, a project which will run from 1997 to 2001. This project has four main themes: journalism in the Netherlands in terms of (1) an international comparative perspective, (2) the multicultural society, (3) infotainment and (4) the Internet.

1. References in this article are too specific or interconnected to mention or quote separately here. Classics on the topic are Fulton (1996) and Lapham (1995). Good overviews or introductions are Bardool (1996), Deuze (1998b), Rich (1998) and Zollman (1997). Scholarly research is reported in Jane Singer's publications (Singer, 1997a, 1997b, 1998; Singer et al., 1998), and in McGregor (1998) and Harper (1996). Prime academic sources are the *Online Journalism Review*, the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* and *Convergence*. A new journal specially devoted to the topic, *New Media & Society*, was launched in April 1999.

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