

5(a). Journalism in a Network Society

*Meeting summary report by rapporteur Annelie Frank, Linneaus University, Sweden; syndicate expert/background report by Mindy McAdams, College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida, USA; chair Howard Finberg, The Poynter Institute, Poynter's News University, USA; and team members.**

This syndicate was assigned the task of determining what skills and knowledge future network journalists will need and how to teach such skills.

Mindy McAdams began the discussion by referring to her syndicate background report's (2013) explanation of basic related concepts, such as what is meant by the "network society," what networks are made of and the network society's connection to the field of journalism.

In this report, McAdams referenced Van Dijk's (2012) description of the network society as:

A modern type of society with an infrastructure of social and media networks that characterizes its mode of organization at every level: individual, group/organization and societal. Increasingly, these networks link every unit or part of this society (individuals, group and organizations). In western societies, the individuals linked by networks is becoming the basic unit of the network society. In eastern societies, this might still be the group (family, community, work team) linked by networks. (p. 22)

She also referenced Barney's (2004) explanation of what networks are made of – nodes, ties and flows:

A node is a distinct point connected to at least one other point, though it often simultaneously acts as a point of connection between two or more other points. A tie connects one node to another. Flows are what pass between and through nodes along ties.

To illustrate, we might consider a group of friends as a network: each friend is a node, connected to at least one other friend but typically to many others who are also connected, both independently and through one another; the regular contacts between these friends, either in speech or other activities, whether immediate or mediated by technology, are the ties that connect them; that which passes between them –gossip, camaraderie, support, love, aid – are flows. (p. 26)

McAdams explained that in a network society, where almost everything is connected both globally and electronically, the true measure of power is access to networks and control over flows.

As for the connection between the network society and journalism, she explained that while the network society concept can help us better understand journalism today – its products, media houses and how audiences are changing –, field theory is a better conceptual tool for understanding journalism itself. Field theory describes a system of influences that affects individuals and institutions. It also is an effective tool for examining “the micro-level practices of individual reporters (professional and amateur) and the macro-level institutional structures in which they invariably find themselves ... situated within a broader cultural, political and economic context” (Compton & Benedetti, 2010, p. 488).

Conclusions/recommendations

After discussing the above concepts, the group came to the following conclusions/recommendations:

1. Network society concepts, including theories about networks and fields, should be taught in all journalism courses, in much the same way ethics is taught across the curriculum. A theoretical base will help students understand the function of networks and the role everyone plays within them.
2. Teach student journalists that their goal should be to make complex issues understandable, not simplified, and that understanding how networks work can help them achieve such goals. The network should be used as a tool to discover, explore and explain a wide variety of issues.
3. The network empowers everyone to “commit acts of journalism,” become informed, active citizens and promote democratic change. Accordingly, educators should teach students how the network enables citizens’ collaborative efforts to hold institutions accountable and create positive change.
4. Teach students that since there are many ways to practice journalism, and that the technology and tools to do so are constantly changing, it’s important to keep up with innovations and to take risks. Teach journalism as a space for inquiry and experimentation and stress life-long learning.
5. Since many students are embedded in the digital network, they often are uncomfortable with personal encounters and do not understand the value of “off-network” experience. Accordingly, journalism educators should teach students the tools and skills they need to “verify the real.” For example, teach students the importance of directly observing people and events so they can bear witness to society’s most important occurrences.

References

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