What differentiates Journalism from other parts of the media and communications industry?

Introduction

This paper will begin with an examination of what constitutes ‘journalism’ and will discuss a variety of different interpretations of the term. It will then be followed by an examination of social media and a discussion which contrasts this with other traditional definitions of journalism such as talk back media and public relations. The paper concludes by critiquing the varying forms of communication media and offers a defining attribute – the search for truth, which may be useful to assist in delineating between the various forms of media in the communications industry.

Towards a definition of journalism

Significant challenges surround the task of defining journalism and contrasting this to the other forms of popular media, as there is clearly no agreed typology. A simple dictionary definition offered by Merriam-Webster (2012) defines journalism as writing that is characterised by a direct presentation of facts or a description of events without any attempt at interpretation. However there are other ‘forms’ of journalism. These include investigative journalism, photojournalism and feature writing (Lamble, 2011). Lamble defined the key skills and personality traits required to be a journalist as effective communication, non-bias, coherent and fluent writing and adhering to ethical standards (Lamble, 2011 p. 25). He also described two types of journalism; reactive and proactive (Lamble, 2011 p. 21). Reactive journalism is journalism that is a direct response to an event
i.e. reports about accidents (Lamble, 2011 p. 21). Conversely, proactive journalism refers to a deeper intellectual involvement required by the journalist i.e. document analysis (Lamble, 2011 p. 21).

Ryan claimed that ethics is the all-encompassing value that bridges and encapsulates all forms of journalism (cited in Deuze, 2005, pg. 450). Furthermore Knight (cited in Lamble, 2011, p. 23) in his definition of journalism contended that writing should be non-fiction and rely on identifiable sources and that journalists have professional and ethical responsibilities to look beyond what they have been told by those in authority. Windschuttle (cited in Lamble, 2011, p. 24) argued that a journalist had a commitment to the truth, an ethical obligation to their readers, viewers or listeners (not their employers) and should show a commitment to good writing.

**Social Media versus Journalism**

Social Media can be commonly defined as ‘...the forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content’ (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Poell & Borra (2011) have referred to social media as encompassing commonly used digital platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and Facebook. Personal blogs, or ‘weblogs’ are another example of social media and, according to Andrews (2003:63), ‘...if journalism is the imparting of verifiable facts to a general audience through a mass medium, then most blogs fall short of meeting that standard’. Blogging is available to any person that has a computer and internet access and anything can be shared on the internet whether it is true or false. Blood (2003) argued that
publishing unsubstantiated e-mails from readers is not journalism, even when it is done by someone with journalistic credentials.

Goode (2009, p. 1288) has provided a useful critique of the topical issue of ‘citizen journalism’. He found that a citizen journalist was a person who participated in a range of web-based practices where users engaged in journalistic practices. He continued to suggest that a citizen journalist was one that contributed to the news process but was not necessarily a ‘content creator’ (Goode, 2009, p. 1288). It could then be argued that professional journalism differs from that of social media in that it is ‘...non-fiction writing (news) which relies on identifiable sources’ (Knight cited in Lamble, 2011, p. 23). However, social media can be useful to the journalist in either the gathering of information or in the promotion of their own work. Levy (2010) argued that social media has allowed the journalist an increased opportunity to gather information, conduct research and examine work and has allowed journalism to remain relevant in a ‘tech savvy’ society.

**Talk-back Radio versus Journalism**

According to Turner (2009, p. 415) talk-back radio is a format in which most of the content is generated by the listeners’ responses to the invitation to phone in and talk ‘live’ with the host. Turner (2009, p. 415) found that the majority of the programs on the ABC were ‘...locally and community-based talk programs which operate very much as a virtual backyard fence for the sharing of gossip, opinion, and local concerns’. Turner (2009, p. 418) explored an example in which a talk-back host (John Laws) presented ‘...views that met his contractual obligations to his sponsors in a way that was clearly aimed at influencing
political decisions’. Turner (2009, p. 418) then quoted Laws as saying that ‘...he was an entertainer, not a journalist, and that therefore he was not governed by the ethics that constrain journalistic practice’. Laws has suggested that talk-back radio hosts are entertainers, not journalists, however when commentators such as Neil Mitchel win awards such as the Graham Perkin Australian Journalist of the Year and has been a talk-back radio host for 25 years (Melbourne Press Club, 2011), this argument appears to be unsubstantiated. When differentiating between journalism and talk-back radio, it could be argued that talk-back radio is journalism, but is dependent on the context. Talk-back radio hosts are in fact facilitating discussions surrounding news and information that has been generated in other journalistic mediums (i.e. news or print). Reich (2011, p. 295) concurred, stating that print journalists and radio journalists were not unique institutions providing news but were rather unique in their packing and distribution of similar raw materials.

Public Relations versus Journalism

Franklin et al (2009, p. 175) have defined public relations as ‘...the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.’ Salter (2005, p. 90) stated that is has become common in universities for journalism and public relations to be considered as partner subjects. Somerfield (2012) has supported this argument by stating that many public relations practitioners come from a journalism background. What differentiates journalism from public relations is that public relations practitioners are employed by a company that, according to Edwards (Chia and Synott, 2009, p. 10) looks after reputation with the aim of ‘...earning understanding and support and influencing public opinion and behaviour’. The
key differentiator in this definition is that of ‘influencing’, one of the main goals of a public relations practitioner. This is supported by Windschuttle (cited in Lamble, 2011, p. 24) who has argued that a journalist should be ‘...committed to reporting the truth about what occurs in the world’. Salter (2005, pg. 102) has supported this view by contending that public relations contrasts to journalism and is primarily concerned with the world of appearances rather than reality. Salter (2005 p. 105) found that public relations practitioners may benefit from journalists to meet their goals but that journalism does not ultimately benefit from public relations. Frith and Meech (2007, p. 154) appear to support this assertion, describing public relations and journalism as being part of the same vehicle whereby public relations is in the passenger seat and is unable to always influence the turn of the steering wheel in journalism's hand.

**Conclusion**

An exploration of the literature has clearly shown that there are no commonly agreed definitions for the term ‘journalism’ and its allied derivatives. Notwithstanding this, the literature has clearly demonstrated that journalism stands on one clear pillar – that of truth. Varying forms of media, including social media, appear to be mere vehicles to transmit information which may be flawed in its original source (or altered to suit the target audience). Further to this, public relations (whilst beneficial for the entity being publicly promoted) falls foul of perhaps ‘bending’ the truth for the benefit of a few. Journalism, however, in its pure form, remains committed to the pursuit of truth and the betterment of society as a whole.
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