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Journalism: An urban affair

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Introduction

“London is like a newspaper. Everything is there, and everything is disconnected.” These 12 words, which appear in Walter Bagehot’s much-discussed 1858 essay on Charles Dickens (Bagehot, 1965: 87), preface an evocative if short rumination on the relation between 19th century journalism and the urban. Urban life, Bagehot suggests, involves a mutual estrangement that is precisely the same as the unrelated names listed in newspapers under births, marriages and deaths. And the reader, moving “from the broad leader to the squalid police-report” (p. 87) – between stories juxtaposed with seeming abandon in Victorian newspapers – is like the walker turning a city corner, and finding one neighborhood abruptly replaced with another. In these observations, Bagehot seems to be inviting us to think about a *formal* relationship of the newspaper and the urban; one in which the urban not only appears through the newspaper, but the newspaper – as a form of journalism – is itself urban.

It is also important, however, to put Bagehot’s ruminations into context. Reading the essay from beginning to end reveals a critical and occasionally condescending assessment of Dickens’ writing. The genius of Dickens, according to Bagehot, is his sublime skills of observation, which bring to life the detail and minutiae of the city. But Dickens’ “picturesque imagination” is not complemented by a facility for abstraction (p. 84): “He describes the figs which are sold, but not the talent which sells figs well” (p. 85). For Bagehot, Dickens lacks learned taste; he possesses instead a raw, in-the-moment “creative taste” for describing urban life evocatively (p. 103). Implying that Dickens owes more to reportage than literature proper, Bagehot’s essay not only

invokes a relationship of journalism and the urban via its forms (i.e. the newspaper), but also its *norms*: as a model, pattern or practice for observing and knowing the city.

This formula of forms and norms provides the broad terms of reference for how this chapter will present the specifically urban affair, or situation, of journalism. I am interested not so much in specifying what counts as ‘urban’ journalism or not, but rather how the urban appears through journalism’s technical, industrial, architectural and organizational forms; and also through journalistic norms, that is, its various ways of observing, imagining and inhabiting the urban.

Provided we think of such forms and norms as always going hand-in-hand – as being inseparable – then we can reveal the urban affair of journalism as an environmental condition: as something that is never ‘outside’ of the city, but rather is *of* it. A consequence of this deep conception of journalistic urbanity is that our concern will extend beyond the subfield of local journalism.

Rather, we will grapple with how nearly all forms of journalism are bound up in different communicative ‘figurations’ in and through cities: that is, various urban constellations of shared relevance, human actors, and practice-technology ensembles (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 66-67).

My discussion will be organized around three conceptual lenses (drawing on Morgan Parment and Rodgers, 2018): journalism as a culture of public circulation; journalistic placemaking; and journalistic field spaces.

Journalism as a culture of public circulation

To begin clarifying how journalism might be seen as ‘of’ the urban, I would like to explore the ways that journalism is often considered to be a culture of public circulation. First, let me define

what I mean by ‘public circulation’. It is probably uncontroversial to claim that one principal way journalism is bound up with the city is that it makes possible an urban public sphere. The term public itself is a thorny one; once invoked, ‘public’ potentially invites us to take a deep dive into the work of writers such as Habermas, Arendt or Sennett. But for our present purposes let us focus on just one feature of journalistic publicness: that, as a practice, it involves recursive acts of urban public *address* (see Iveson, 2007: 20-49). Thinking about publicness in terms of address is most associated with literary critic Michael Warner (2002). Addressing a public, for Warner, always-already involves a taken-for-granted public sphere, which itself depends on those acts of public address. Publicness, therefore, entails a ‘chicken-and-egg circularity’ (Warner, 2002: 67). Addressing a public is never a one-way act, since that address always responds to or assumes an existing public. If we accept this, it follows that any model of journalism as a kind of linear urban communication – where journalists send outputs in one direction to urban residents, i.e. their receivers – is unsustainable. It is in this sense that we might describe journalism as a culture of public circulation. Here, ‘circulation’ is adapted from Lee and LiPuma’s (2002) influential critique of globalization research, which argues that cultural forms circulate not by moving in one direction, from point of origin to destination, but by being performed into being by dispersed communities of practice. A journalistic form such as news needs to be recursively enacted by various communities of practice in order to circulate; communities of practice which are simultaneously presupposed by the form (cf. Bødker, 2015). And, in circulating news form, journalistic practices are also important in circulating “the imaginary of the city into existence by presupposing its reality as a condition of their own” (Li Puma and Koelble, 2005: 175).

One evocative historical illustration of this circularity can be found in David Henkin's (1998) book *City reading*, an expansive exploration into the material relationships between various forms of written word and city living. Echoing our opening quote from Walter Bagehot, Henkin notices a correspondence between the experience of antebellum New York streets and public spaces and the layout of early printed newspapers. This correspondence, however, is not a binary one, between urban physical space and its imagination:

Newspapers were not simply simulacra of primary urban experience or abstract representations of the real spatial contours of the city. Hawked, posted, traded, and read in public view, they had a palpable material presence in the streets, and the symbolic relationship between rectilinear city blocks and rectilinear print columns was reciprocally clarifying. (p. 104)

Fritzsche (1996: 1) makes a similar observation in his study of early 20th Century print culture in Berlin. For Fritzsche, newspapers generated “a second-hand metropolis which gave a narrative to the concrete one and choreographed its encounters”; a kind of enculturation into big city living. Perceiving these dense, interwoven relationships of newspaper and city, Robert E. Park, a leading figure of the Chicago School of urban sociology – and a former journalist (Lindner, 1996) – lodged a notable argument against the prevailing, moralistic admonishments newspapers received in the early 20th century. In his provocatively-titled essay ‘The natural history of the newspaper’, Park (1923) argues that newspapers should not be judged as purely willful products of their proprietors or journalists. Rather, they were a ‘natural’ ecological emergence of mass urbanization, reproducing “as far as possible, in the city the conditions of life in the village”

(1923: 277). Park is not uninterested in politics or power, but he is sceptical of an image of newspapers as a contaminating imposition on urban publics. As an emergent form instilling amongst their readers an awareness of, interest in, and ability to consume an unprecedented common urban cultural world, newspapers made it possible to mobilize the city as a political body. Newspapers were, in other words, both an urbanized and urbanizing machine, with an unpredictable gravitational push and pull on city life.

A crucial backdrop to such late 19th and early 20th century city newspapers, described Park and others, is the transformation such media forms embodied both economically and in terms of what we call public address. Not only were they unprecedentedly cheap (typically one or two pennies) and therefore accessible to a very wide audience; they were also a secular breakaway from the partisan press (Lindner, 1996: 7), addressing their readers not from a particular ideological viewpoint, but as a diverse, differentiated mass urban public (Barth, 1980; Kaplan, 2002). By the latter half of the 20th century, the descendants of such newspapers grew into larger operations which, in the North American context at least, began to be described as ‘metropolitan newspapers’. For Phyllis Kaniss (1991), whose Philadelphia-focused study represented an early systematic examination of local news, such newspapers were in significant part a response to urban sprawl. While taking on the mantle of the historic city center name, such news outlets increasingly engaged in a more abstracted kind of urban public address:

They have had to come up with a set of institutions, problems, controversies and issues relevant to the entire market. But even more important, they have had to create a

regionwide sense of identity that draws their audience together in a psychological if not real form of interdependence (Kaniss, 1991: 64).

Arguably, however, television embodies the defining news media environment of postwar American suburbia. Built on the conditions created by radio before it, the rapid domestication of television into homes has led writers such as Silverstone (1994) to name it as the definitively suburban medium, “both historically and sociologically ... literally ‘of and for the suburb’” (p. 52). As a journalistic form, television has often been seen to articulate a particular relationship of suburb and inner city: the latter presented as a zone of disorder and criminality, the former a site of televisual spectatorship, with little experience of lived inner city realities (Cottle, 1993).

The technical conditions of contemporary journalistic circulation, markedly but not exclusively in the Global North, are of course increasingly defined by digital information and infrastructures, such as websites, mobile apps, desktop computers, feeds, aggregators, streaming and social media platforms. This is even the case for apparently analog media such as print publications, which are today substantially produced using various software applications and network infrastructures. One notable implication of such transformations is that the previously taken-for-granted dailiness of news has been disrupted by the rise of real-time, streamed and often interactive news information: “a kind of constantly updated flow of ‘news now’ ... simultaneously produced, consumed and re-distributed” (Sheller, 2015: 13). Another is that studying ‘local’ news now means contending with a complex, variegated and rapidly-mutating ecology of media practices and forms (Anderson, 2013; Coleman et al., 2016).

What appears to endure, however, is the urban as a complex object of intentionality for the practice of journalism, or what Edmund Husserl might call its ‘aboutness’. Sometimes, the urban shows up as classificatory scheme for news phenomena or events. Sometimes, the urban is a place identified by a proper name, one invoked to claim shared interests, values, concerns or simply turf; in other words, the urban becomes a collective totality in which ‘the city’ is synonymous with ‘the public’ (Iveson 2007: 40-47). As its forms undulate, between analog and digital, old and new, journalism clearly continues to embody a culture of urban public circulation.

Journalistic placemaking

Journalism is ‘of’ the urban not only via its public address, but in how it makes urban places. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the ways journalistic organizations make marks on the city through their buildings. As Wallace (2012) shows, for example, early newspaper skyscrapers such as those on Park Row, situated directly across from New York City Hall, not only surpassed in height the city’s church spires, but in so doing signaled their ascendance over organized religion as a new, secular communicative order of the city. More contemporary examples often represent an attempt to incorporate new media practices and technologies into a news organization, via architectural or space design. Broadcasting House in London crystallizes the BBC looking towards a digital future, but also back to its broadcasting heritage (see Ericson, 2010). Preserved on the original façade, for example, are Prospero and Ariel from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, the magician and spirit of air which, together, are meant to evoke the magical, enchanting, sublime nature of broadcasting. But inside the redeveloped and expanded facility is a

highly efficient input-output operation for a global, multi-platform news operation, with aesthetics taking a (modest) page from the design books of Google or Facebook. The new Axel Springer Campus, designed by Rem Koolhaas, is an immense cube bisected by a diagonal valley, across which digital and print employees observe one another, while their productive activities are simultaneously on view to passing Berliners (Gutzmer, 2018). Likewise, CCTV Center, also designed by Koolhaas, is a monumental cantilevered loop which at once routes digital infrastructures, provides spatial organization for CCTV's main departments, and affords a passage for visitors to peer into the production spaces while gaining spectacular views of Beijing (Wallenstein, 2010).

These and other buildings are important physical embodiments of journalism's urban places, but they do not exhaust them. As Rose (2012) argues, drawing on Heidegger, the act of building is inherently and reciprocally interwoven with dwelling: that is, with an enduring existential inhabitation of place. If we adapt Rose's terms, journalism might be seen as a form of urban dwelling that marks out and claims a wide range of material objects and environments, including but also going beyond its buildings narrowly defined. So, another way to approach this is to think carefully about what it means to speak of a relationship of journalism and urban place. Pointedly, *placemaking* has been used to title this section, to underscore that journalism neither encounters pre-existing places, nor affects or impacts place, as if from some external realm. Rather, through its performances, journalism inherently produces urban place.

Early forms of journalistic placemaking were often of the street. As O'Reilly (2017) argues, journalistic observation in mid-19th century Britain was akin to a more purposeful manifestation

of Walter Benjamin's wandering flâneur: a writer engaging urban life as embodied, first-hand knowledge. Late 19th and early 20th century British (and American) journalism, however, marked a shift towards increasingly detached reportage; a form of observation that deferred to the scientific conceptions of urban planners and engineers, through which the urban showed up as an abstract spatial imaginary rather than something experienced first-hand. In the process, journalistic observation was largely relocated, from street-treading flânerie to the dedicated, professionalized place of the newsroom.

It would be romanticizing the urbanity of the street, however, to conceive of this relocation as somehow leaving the city. Not only are newsrooms sited in urban contexts, but as a locus of media production, they are places through which the urban appears to journalism. While 'the newsroom' is associated with professional interiority – so much so that the term has become a synonym for journalistic culture in general – it is also a place fundamentally orientated to its exterior: both the immediate urban milieu of journalistic work and the various public geographies being addressed (Rodgers 2014). It is precisely on the basis of these historically close ties of newsroom and city that contemporary newspaper moves out of city centers, often to cash-in on valuable real-estate, prompt deep existential questions for journalism. Usher's (2015) ethnographic account of the *Miami Herald's* relocation from its prominent downtown waterfront building (later demolished) 12 miles west, to a smaller and far more anonymous office park building, previously the headquarters for the US Southern Command, describes a process that was not just disruptive but ambiguous. While it involved a disruptive departure and new distance from Miami's metropolitan center, journalists finally vacated a newsroom forebodingly strewn with empty desks and the

debris of laid-off colleagues; yet only to move to a newsroom that, while lighter and airier, also felt empty and disheartening.

The displacement of major metropolitan newspapers from city centers is in many ways remarkable. But it is also unsurprising, since the journalism taking place through such organizations is not necessarily always at the center of a contemporary, expanding urban news ecology (Anderson, 2013; Coleman et al., 2016). Consequentially, the importance of dedicated newsrooms has to some degree eroded. Meanwhile, emergent forms of journalism entail new kinds of journalistic placemaking. Markham (2011), for example, argues that so-called citizen journalism depends on a phenomenological normalization of ‘third places’ such as coffee shops, bedrooms or converted warehouses as workplaces. This is not to mention that, beyond such amateur and semi-professional activities, news now also emerges from all manner of locales via often ephemeral acts of ‘witnessing’ using mobile media (Sheller, 2015).

It is important however to be cautious of implicitly centering the journalistic experiences of the West or Global North, in which journalism appears to travel from street to newsroom and back again. Cante’s (2018) ethnographic study of contemporary community radio practitioners in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, for example, describes a very different trajectory of journalistic placemaking in and through the city. In Abidjan, the work of community or ‘proximity’ radio practitioners is realized as much in the generalized urban milieu as in the radio studio. Whether on the air or off, indeed on or off their jobs, these practitioners – appropriately named *animateurs* – are oriented above all to the enlivening of social situations and events in the city, everything from concerts to weddings (see also Chapter 40, this volume). The work of proximity radio

animateurs, then entails forms of urban placemaking different from the usual terms of reference seen in the literature on journalism and the city.

Journalistic field spaces

Whether the animateurs described by Cante (2018) and their myriad urban placemaking practices – or ‘citizen journalists’ more generally – might be counted as ‘truly’ journalistic is up for debate. And this ambiguity opens up our third and final lens, which is to consider how we might think about the interface of the urban with ‘journalism’ as a dispersed professional field. Recall that Bagehot’s essay, discussed in the introduction, is as much a patronizing attack on Dickens’ observational style as an appreciation of its formal merits. As Tulloch (2007: 59) argues, in emphasizing Dickens’ debt to reportage, Bagehot is signaling “his low status.” This is seemingly paradoxical, since Bagehot himself was a journalist. However, Bagehot counted himself part of its higher, more literary order, which essentially disavowed the trade (Campbell, 2000). This disavowal is also noticeable in how Robert E. Park, mentioned earlier, accounted for his own journalist provenance. As Lindner (1996) points out in his superb archival study, despite working for more than ten years as a journalist (between 1887-98), in Detroit, Denver, New York, Chicago, and Minneapolis, Park indebted his urban ecological approach to anthropology, not journalism.

For Lindner, however, the empiricism of Chicago School urban sociology clearly draws from the ‘new journalism’ of the 19th Century. New journalism set itself against the moralizing and ‘civilizing’ pretensions of social reformers; it was concerned instead with seeing, knowing and

showing life, rather than stipulating how it should be lived. This shift to a naturalistic ‘disinterested interest’ and later the professional value of objectivity was closely connected to shifts in the economic as well as public model of newspapers. The professionalization of journalism emerged as news organizations shifted towards larger urban regions throughout much of the 20th century, necessitating increasingly complex divisions of labor and specialization. Here we can again underscore that the relationships of journalism and the urban run deeper than simply local news. As Kramp (2016) argues, in large urban agglomerations there has been historically, and continues to be, a distinctive ‘metropolitan journalism’ which under certain conditions has a nucleating potential in relation to journalism’s general transformation.

These curious disavowals of journalism – by Bagehot, Park and others – also remind us, however, that journalism involves various genres and positions of relative status, often ordered hierarchically. In this way, we might note that journalism not only encounters the urban through countless, situated acts of seeing, knowing or showing; but also as a translocal social space. Following others in journalism studies (e.g. Benson and Neveu, 1995), in my own work (e.g. Rodgers, 2013; 2017) I have adapted Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social field to conceptualize this translocal space. Thinking in terms of field alerts us to the ways in which journalism is a practical game with rules, resources and relative positions that can transcend specific local instances. The journalistic field is not so much an objective domain abutting subjective urban places, but rather a social space helping constitute the conditions of possibility for concrete or materialized expressions of journalism as situated urban media practice.

If we accept that a significant range of journalistic activities transpire through urban environments, then it soon becomes clear that there is considerable overlap of the journalistic field and urban material spaces. In many ways, the latter are a condition of possibility for journalism in general, not just those forms directed explicitly at phenomena classified, or named in relation to the city. The taken-for-granted notion of a UK national media, for instance, is arguably a myth, considering its notable concentration in London (Tumbler, 2011). And, as Archetti (2014) found in her study of foreign reporting networks in London and Oslo, valuations of ‘good’ correspondence are closely tied to how the identities and routines of reporters emerge through the spatial arrangements of the urban contexts to which they are assigned. The urban is both a site for the intensification of practicing journalists, and at the same time a site for the intensification of events, institutions, places and other storytelling possibilities for documenting, mapping and narrating social, political, cultural and economic affairs, in general.

Yet journalism is also often oriented to the city; it has long been associated with specific ways of narrating urban phenomena and named places (e.g. Parisi and Holcomb, 1994). Within the journalistic field, however, this kind of orientation is often classified as ‘local’ journalism, a subfield of considerably lower status. This low status is unsurprising: many local newspapers today have undergone a ‘McDonaldization’ process, becoming standardized and packaged titles, produced by overworked and often precariously employed journalists, and owned by multinational media conglomerates (Franklin, 2005). Yet at the same time, as Schmitz Weiss (2015) points out, ‘location’ – an historically longstanding focal unit of journalism – has taken on renewed journalistic significance in an era of geographically-defined digital information. Locational data, and its close relationships with mobile computational technologies such as

smartphones, is beginning to reshape how news is made, distributed and consumed both spatially (Goggin et al, 2015) and temporally (Sheller, 2015). So, in important respects, locality has re-emerged as a central issue for contemporary journalism, notably in what has been described as the nascent news subculture of hyperlocal media (Hess and Waller, 2016), as well as new forms of community journalism (Dickens et al., 2015). Not only do such new media production practices appear to offer an antidote to oligopolistic mainstream local media; they may afford new kinds of voice for disadvantaged urban locales. It remains important to question, however, just what kinds of localism, urban or otherwise, are being pursued through such emergent journalistic practices, and why particular technologies are taken-for-granted as solutions (Rodgers, 2018).

Whether an increasingly fragmented urban news environment, mediated by new locative technologies, marks the decline of the city-wide journalistic public address that have often characterized print and broadcast media is unclear. It is unlikely that this question can be answered from a purely journalism- or media-centric point of view. Drawing on the Chicago School tradition of urban ecology, as well as humanistic geography, Boyles' (2017) evocative account of post-Katrina New Orleans suggests that journalism is entangled in the urban as a field of care. The urban is more than an object or subject *for* journalism, affording it status, purpose or intelligibility as a professional field; it is also a complex locus of shared emotional or affective attachment. Here we can return to the irreducible circularity of urban public address, mentioned earlier: while we might conceptualize journalism as a relatively coherent field space, we should avoid falling back on an image of journalism as an originary site which transduces the urban into certain media forms, which are then outwardly transmitted to its audiences. The journalistic field

certainly represents a form of media power, but not necessarily one of public imposition. Rather, it embodies a site of particular norms and forms for attuning with, inheriting and being affected by urban publics (cf. Rodgers, 2014: 80-81).

Conclusion

It seems that in virtually any contemporary discussion of journalism, one must speak in the same breath about its apparent crisis. This crisis, if there is one, is about much more than the evidently unsustainable economic model of newspapers. At a moment where (in principle at least) anyone can be a media creator, and deference to traditional political institutions is waning, the once near-inimitable cultural position of journalism at the centre of public life is clearly in question. Yet in evaluating whether these supposed downward trends also might imply a crisis in mediated urban communication or public life, we might first be mindful of the possibility that the so-called crisis of journalism largely depends on validating an historically-specific configuration of journalism. The urban political institution that is or was the city newspaper, for example, might in fact embody an unusually stable configuration of urban public life, one that experienced a kind of peak, or plateau, for perhaps just two or three decades in the post-war period. As Ryfe (2013: 195) concludes in his wide-ranging ethnography of American newsrooms, journalism per se is not dying; but a particular model of journalism is clearly unravelling.

We might also be mindful of the geographical specificities of the apparent crisis of journalism, and its urban situation. Scholarly writing that connects journalism and cities (not to mention media and cities more generally) often tends to fall back on Western urban theories. While there

may be valid reasons for this, as Robinson (2006) argues, reading all urban situations through the experience of such a small range of cities also seriously hinders our imagination of possible urban futures. Relatively little is known, at least in the English language literature, about journalistic practice in and through cities in the Global South. Rao's (2010: 45-90) ethnographic work on burgeoning Hindi newspapers in urban India reveals local newsmaking practices quite different from, for example, the well-worn image of professional journalists interacting with city officials. In cities such as Lucknow, journalistic practices often entail brokering amongst a very wide range of grassroots urban actors, seeking different kinds of voice within a rapidly emerging urban public sphere. So, in studying the futures of journalism and the urban, it is crucial to question what sorts of urban contexts we seek and find journalism in, as well as how cities and their publics are constituted through journalism.

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