

Selling Digital Dreams: “Entrepreneurial journalism,” the Decline of Public Service Reporting, and the Role of Journalism Education

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New, disruptive technology has had enormous economic repercussions for the media industry and, consequently, on the practice of journalism. Fragmented audiences and declining advertising revenues have resulted in widespread closures and layoffs in struggling legacy media organizations. Simultaneously, the rise of new media outlets that blend news, gossip, entertainment, rumour, and humour, and that use Web metrics and audience tracking to maximize page views, have challenged the hegemony once enjoyed by traditional media. The responses to this rapid transformation and destabilization have been varied, but two ideas with far-reaching implications have emerged in journalism circles.

The first is that technological innovations have rendered the prevailing model of journalism economically unsustainable and conceptually anachronistic, especially with regard to the supposed “wall” between its business and editorial functions. The second idea, which is related to the first, is that individuals cannot and should not rely on institutional journalism for employment; rather, they should take personal responsibility for innovating, for building their own businesses and their own “brands,” and for developing new “entrepreneurial” endeavours that fuse “doing journalism” with business and profit. These ideas have become the mantra of online and digital enthusiasts such as Jeff Jarvis of BuzzMachine, who goes even further by blaming individual reporters for the economic trough in which journalism now finds itself: “I believe that by teaching journalists that business itself is corrupting, we became terrible stewards of journalism and that is one of the key reasons journalism is in the fix it’s in” (Jarvis 2010).

Framed as the only viable survival strategy, these ideas have been enthusiastically embraced by journalism schools in North America and abroad (Coddington 2015). Responding to a growing number of new entrepreneurial journalism programs in the United States – most

notably the MA program in Entrepreneurial Journalism at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, and the Scripps Howard Journalism Entrepreneurship Institute at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University – Canadian journalism educators have joined the chorus calling for similar programs in j-schools here. Julie Ireton, a CBC reporter and contract instructor at Carleton University’s School of Journalism and Communication, agrees that it is necessary to inculcate business skills and entrepreneurship into journalism education: “Journalism programs need to encourage a new kind of journalism ... and a better understanding of the ever-changing business of journalism ... That means students need to learn about business models and development, how big ideas are pitched and branded” (2014). In Britain, Baines and Kennedy call for a similar re-evaluation of journalism education, citing the eroding boundaries between journalism and public relations and “information brokerage.” They call for educators to “strive to give students the opportunity to become entrepreneurial self-employed agents” (2010).

Yet there has been little critical evaluation of either the concept of entrepreneurial journalism or the wisdom of adopting it. Coddington notes that “entrepreneurial skills and the business of journalism have become increasingly emphasized in American journalism education” – with, it appears, little critical evaluation. He writes: “There is notably little public discourse defending against the advance of entrepreneurial journalism in the name of the news–business boundary. Instead, virtually all of the discourse advocates journalists’ increased understanding of the news business, and most of it foregrounds the rhetoric of survival” (2015). This position is echoed by Baines and Kennedy, whose response to underemployment and precarious employment in the media is to “prepare students to consider independent career paths with the skills, ability and confidence not only to work as journalists (employed or freelance), but to establish independent enterprises in the wider communications sector” (2010).

We challenge this new common sense. We hope to add to the public discourse by providing a critique of the definition, theory, assumptions, and practices of “entrepreneurial journalism.” Our examination reveals serious problems, both theoretical and practical, regarding the definition, rationale, conception, historical context, and implementation of entrepreneurial journalism and the weakening of established boundaries between journalism-as-public-service and journalism-as-business.

Meredith Levine begins this suite of papers by interrogating the term “entrepreneur.” She argues that Joseph Schumpeter, the godfather of entrepreneur scholarship, was sometimes guilty of conflating the terms innovator and entrepreneur in his work, setting off a semantic confusion that remains today (Sledzik 2013). Contemporary Schumpeter scholars argue that innovators and

entrepreneurs are different kinds of people with different skill sets: innovators generate ideas; entrepreneurs implement and monetize those ideas, often by copying or imitating them (Sledzik 2013; Allen 1994). It is important for journalism educators to thoroughly understand the concepts and the realities of entrepreneurship before jumping on the entrepreneurial journalism bandwagon.

Paul Benedetti, in his paper, provides a snapshot of the forces and developments that have brought us to this juncture. In the process he illuminates, empirically and theoretically, the inherent contradictions in this strongly promoted view of the future of journalism. Benedetti proposes that journalists and journalism educators, instead of seeking new ways to serve advertisers and to maximize page views, should reject this approach and stand firm against new attempts to appropriate journalism as a commercial enterprise enlisted to serve the market instead of the public.

Finally, Mike Gasher asks: What is journalism education for? Instead of answering the question directly, he seeks to clarify the object of analysis by drawing a number of distinctions between terms that are too often conflated, emphasizing that journalism education should serve journalism rather than the news industry.

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