



# Gatewatching and News Curation

Journalism, Social Media, and the Public Sphere

**Axel Bruns**

*Gatewatching and News Curation: Journalism, Social Media, and the Public Sphere* documents an emerging news media environment that is characterised by an increasingly networked and social structure. In this environment, professional journalists and non-professional news users alike are increasingly cast in the role of gatewatcher and news curator, and sometimes accept these roles with considerable enthusiasm. A growing part of their everyday activities takes place within the spaces operated by the major social media providers, where platform features outside of their control affect how they can post, find, access, share, curate, and otherwise engage with news, rumours, analysis, comments, opinion, and related forms of information.

If in the current social media environment the majority of users are engaged in sharing news; if the networked structure of these platforms means that users observe and learn from each other's sharing practices; if these practices result in the potential for widespread serendipitous news discovery; and if such news discovery is now overtaking search engines as the major driver of traffic to news sites—then gatewatching and news curation are no longer practiced only by citizen journalists, and it becomes important to fully understand the typical motivations, practices, and consequences of habitual news sharing through social media platforms.

Professional journalism and news media have yet to fully come to terms with these changes. The first wave of citizen media was normalised into professional journalistic practices—but this book argues that what we are observing in the present context instead is the normalisation of professional journalism into social media.



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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

## **Gatewatching and News Curation**

"*Gatewatching and News Curation* is an intelligent, insightful, and indispensable intervention in the debate over social media's impact on journalism. Axel Bruns masterfully charts the rise of new social media infrastructures, the spread of novel audience practises, and the corollary actions and reactions of journalists. He adroitly navigates conflicting trends and tensions that both challenge journalism and point to fresh directions, addressing questions over what journalism is, how it operates and to what purpose. *Gatewatching and News Curation* is a deep dive into the media at a time when audiences and journalists swim in an ocean of information, with news swirling around at all times of the day, in all shapes and sizes, via all sorts of intermediaries and devices."

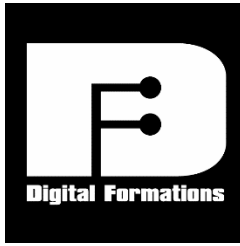
—Alfred Hermida, University of British Columbia

"Axel Bruns brilliantly captures an under-researched feature of the unfinished communications revolution of our time: the decline of gatekeeping media that once decided for millions of people what was newsworthy, and what was the truth, and the rise of networks of gatewatching platforms that make, discover, share, and dispute news about our world. This is an elegant and uplifting book by a distinguished media scholar whose wise observations and lively conjectures deserve to be widely known, and widely appreciated."

—John Keane, University of Sydney; Author of *The Life and Death of Democracy*



# Gatewatching and News Curation



**Steve Jones**

*General Editor*

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Axel Bruns

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and the Public Sphere



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## INTRODUCTION

In Internet terms, 10 years is a very long time. In 2006, *Facebook* was still trying to break out of the social circles of U.S. colleges, and into wider society. *Twitter* had barely been launched, and was yet to receive public endorsement from celebrities, politicians, and sports stars. News blogs still represented a considerable challenge to the journalistic *status quo*, and the *Huffington Post* could still be regarded as a citizen journalism start-up. Much has changed since then, and the present book charts these changes. I published *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* in 2005, and at the time could not have foreseen the substantial, transformative role that the then emerging next generation of social media platforms, in particular, would come to play for the practices of professional journalism, the dissemination of news and related information, and our day-to-day engagement with news and politics; previous generations of social media and social networking tools, from *Friendster* to *MySpace*, certainly never managed to affect news practices to anywhere near the same degree.

What was already evident at the time, however, was the significant impact of new, independent tools for publishing news and commentary—ranging from individual news blogs to collaborative citizen journalism sites—that could operate outside the news industry proper. These sites offered a funda-

mentally redesigned approach to tracking and covering news stories: rather than primary gatekeeping (selecting only a handful of newsworthy stories to appear in a centralised news imprint), they engaged in a secondary practice of *gatewatching* by observing the stories covered in other, mainstream as well as alternative outlets, and linked to, shared, and expanded on these stories in their own coverage. Through implicit or explicit collaboration across this network of sites, this community of self-appointed news bloggers and citizen journalists came to serve as an important and at times powerful corrective to conventional, mainstream journalism, resulting in a predictably mixed reaction from professional journalists. In particular, the emergence of this alternative approach to doing journalism “added extra stimulus to the critique of journalistic professionalism and all its attendant myths (of objectivity, the public interest and so on)” (Keeble 2009: 338).

In the wake of this disruption professional and citizen journalism gradually settled into an uneasy truce that involved both the cautious normalisation of some aspects of citizen journalism into mainstream journalism practices and formats, and the grudging acceptance of leading new citizen journalism outlets as part of the mainstream industry, by the end of the 2000s. But time has not stood still since then, and neither can our understanding of journalism and its role in facilitating the circulation of news and information across society. As Vos has put it, “the real world of news production and distribution is changing so quickly that scholars are confronted with the changing dynamics of gatekeeping. If news making is in a period of transition, then gatekeeping is in transition. Our theorizing must transition as well” (2015: 5), well beyond the changes we could anticipate in 2005.

Those transitions have perhaps never been more evident than today; in fact, it is hardly an exaggeration to state that I began researching and writing this book in one world, and finished it in another. I started this work at a time before the successful Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president, and concluded it in late 2016 after these fundamental disruptions of the existing world order. Alongside other, less momentous public debates elsewhere, both campaigns were dominated by ‘post-factual’ propaganda and the blatant lies of ‘fake news’, and by the arrival of ‘alt-right’, neo-fascist demagoguery into mainstream politics, and both have therefore already resulted in considerable and genuine soul-searching amongst professional journalists and their news organisations, as well as in a less edifying and largely self-serving backlash against social media for their apparent role in enabling so much mis- and disinformation to circulate unchallenged throughout



society. These are important issues to be addressed as we confront the present existential challenges facing liberal democracy—but we would do well to do so from a much more long-term perspective than may have been possible in the immediate trauma felt after Brexit and Trump.

This book, therefore, addresses these very current debates about news and journalism, about mainstream, alternative, and social media, and examines issues including the decline in journalistic authority, the circulation of ‘fake news’ and other misinformation, the move away from rational deliberation and towards a more affective engagement with the news, and the purported development of ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’ that are impervious to dissenting views—but it does so, I hope, without being dominated by them. Rather, it charts the broader trajectory of the transformations and changes that have played out as news producers and news users have sought to redefine their roles in an increasingly hybrid, networked, and social news media environment, and develops a more diachronic view of these developments that advances our understanding beyond the at times very pointillistic, case study-driven perspectives that have tended to dominate the literature. In doing so, it must at times necessarily simplify more complex developments occurring, for a variety of contextual reasons, at different speeds in different national mediaspheres—but even in spite of these variations at the local level, the overall, global trajectory of transformation in professional news production, popular news engagement, and societal debate remains a phenomenon that affects us all.

## Coming Up in the News

The present volume is not a revision or update of *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* (Bruns 2005), therefore, but is instead designed as a sequel to the earlier book. It picks up the story from where we left it in 2005, traces developments in both professional and non-professional news practices since then, and explores their implications for industry and society.

Chapter 2 sets the scene, however, by revisiting the emergence of citizen journalism in the late 1990s and the popularisation of news blogging around the turn of the millennium; it introduces gatewatching as a foundational practice for this second tier of news sites as they observe and critique the mainstream media, and in doing so summarises some of the key ideas presented in *Gatewatching*. But in re-examining these developments from a distance of

more than 10 years, we are now also able to document the gradual normalisation (and to some extent, neutralisation) of the citizen-journalistic practices challenging mainstream journalism; beyond the occasional ‘blog wars’ between professional journalists and their self-appointed critics, this is also a story about the slow and at times reluctant embedding of columnist blogs and interactive features, of user-generated content, and even of some of the leading voices of citizen journalism into the products of the established news industry, therefore. As this normalisation proceeded, it managed for the most part to contain the most disruptive impacts of what I have called here the first wave of citizen media.

But it did so only just in time for the arrival of contemporary social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* as mass participation platforms, which initiated a second wave of disruption and transformation. The following four chapters examine these developments, from two different perspectives. First, as Broersma has pointed out, today’s “news consumers are more media literate and have more possibilities to challenge professional news production. They openly comment on coverage, check news ‘facts’ themselves and publish alternative representations” (2013: 29)—and social media platforms have become the primary channels for doing so.

Chapter 3 examines how these processes unfold in the context of the most recognised news-related uses of social media: in covering acute, breaking news events. From the 2007 San Diego wildfires that first led *Twitter* user Chris Messina to propose the idea of a hashtag (Halavais 2014) through subsequent natural disasters, industrial accidents, terrorist attacks, and popular uprisings, and all the way to the Brexit and Trump victories themselves, social media (and here especially *Twitter*) are now without doubt *the* space where acute events break first and are tracked in the greatest detail, and where *ad hoc* publics (Bruns and Burgess 2015) rapidly assemble to gather and evaluate the available information as it emerges. Due to the widespread availability of mobile devices and connectivity, this process usually commences within minutes of an incident, drawing on first-hand eyewitness reports, but is also enhanced by a kind of secondary eyewitnessing that utilises gatewatching practices to identify and share emerging information from official bodies, news media, and other relevant institutions. What results from this is the use of social media to collectively compose “a first draft of the present” (Bruns and Weller 2016), ahead even of journalism’s “first rough draft of history”.

But social media are used for news-related purposes well beyond the extraordinary contexts of acute events, even if much of the available literature

continues to focus on such moments of heightened news engagement. Chapter 4 therefore addresses the less immediately visible, but much more widespread practices of everyday news engagement by social media users, focussing especially on the everyday sharing of news reports and related information that a majority of social media users now participate in. Such newssharing follows on naturally from the gatewatching processes through which users come across new news stories; in the process, they decide on whether these items warrant further dissemination to their own “personal publics” (Schmidt 2014)—that is, on whether they are “shareworthy” as well as newsworthy (Trilling *et al.* 2016). Available surveys on user practices indicate that—contrary to the limited number and range of users from which participants in the first wave of citizen media were recruited—this newssharing has now become habitual for a majority of Internet users, and can therefore be regarded as a truly demotic practice. Finally, then, those users who engage most consistently in such newssharing activities might also emerge as “niche authorities” who are known and respected for their news curation efforts on their topics of interest and expertise (Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013: 305).

While these chapters largely examine the recent developments in gatewatching and newssharing from a user-centric perspective, such changing news engagement practices also affect the news industry, of course. As Broersma outlines it, “first, digitization and the economic downfall have stimulated competition between mass media. In addition, new niche media have been founded that tend to subvert the ‘rules of the game’ journalism has developed in its long-term project of professionalization” (Broersma 2013: 29), and the following two chapters therefore turn our attention towards the attempts to come to terms with an increasingly social media-driven news environment that have been made both by individual journalists and at the institutional level.

Chapter 5 begins by examining individual journalists’ approaches to adopting and adapting social media as part of their professional practices. Here, much as in the first wave of citizen media we again find a mixture between outright hostility, grudging acceptance, and enthusiastic embrace of social media platforms and the communicative environments they provide; as the utility of social media especially in covering breaking news stories has become more obvious, journalists have gradually developed a number of strategies for embedding social media into their day-to-day work. In addition to promoting their own news stories and connecting—publicly or privately—with key sources via social media, this has also included some degree both of

public interaction with fellow journalists and of news discussion with ordinary audience members; some leading adopters of social media for journalistic purposes have well advanced beyond this, however, and established themselves as prominent social media news curators who pull together news and information from a variety of sources, well beyond their own imprint, into a consistent feed of updates on their core topics. It is especially these most active and most visible journalists who have also managed to develop a strong ‘personal brand’ on social media, independent of the news organisation that employs them—and such social media stars amongst journalists may derive considerable career benefits from this new-found independence.

This, then, necessarily also creates new challenges for news organisations, and we explore these in Chapter 6. The response by the journalism industry to the rise of social media has been as contradictory and conflicted as that by individual journalists: on the one hand, many news outlets have actively encouraged their newsroom staff to develop a professional presence on the leading social media platforms in order to promote and disseminate their content to the immense potential audience now gathered there; on the other, they have also sought to curtail their employees’ activities on these platforms in order to avoid any negative repercussions for the news brand that may arise from journalists providing too much detail about their personal lives, activities, and views. Similarly, many news outlets have invested considerable resources into generating and optimising the social media engagement metrics for the stories they publish—yet their understanding of what these metrics mean often remains rudimentary at best. Perhaps the most fundamental problem for news organisations, however, is that so much more of the news process—from publication through dissemination to engagement—now takes place immediately within the third-party spaces provided by the social media platforms themselves: the outlet’s own Website now merely serves as the place where a story is published (and with initiatives such as *Facebook’s* Instant Articles, which allows for native in-platform publishing, even that role is under threat), while everything else now unfolds in spaces that are beyond the direct control of the news publisher. This transfers considerable power over the news process to non-news organisations like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and to their users.

Partly as an attempt by news outlets to wrest back some control over the news process, and partly as an experiment in embedding more social media logic into conventional online news publication formats, recent years have therefore also seen the emergence of new models for professional journalistic news coverage. Chapter 7 examines the most important of these new formats

in some detail: the liveblog. Liveblogs are presented, on the Websites of mainstream news outlets, in a form and format that closely mimics many of the fundamental affordances of social media: they present a reverse-chronological feed of brief news updates (in text, image, audio, or video) on a developing story that resembles the timelines of *Facebook* or *Twitter*; they frequently embed a variety of reposted snippets sourced from other news sites, official statements, social media discussion, and elsewhere; and they incorporate the journalistic liveblogger's own comments and evaluation. As a format, they therefore incorporate many of the core practices of everyday news engagement in social media—including gatewatching and newssharing—but do so under the auspices of mainstream news organisations; it is therefore unsurprising, perhaps, that they have proven to be particularly popular amongst online news audiences and journalists alike. The journalists operating such liveblogs, then, do more than merely cover the news: they have become news curators, transparently tracking news developments and developing news frames, in constant interaction with their audiences, as events unfold.

As a result of these continuing transformations, the contemporary media ecology now consists of the primary spaces of news coverage in the mainstream industry, the secondary spaces of commentary and critique that are provided by citizen journalism sites, and the vast tertiary spaces of social media that tie together these stand-alone sites and facilitate the flow of news and information between them and between their users. Each of these spaces is further subdivided into dynamic communicative formations of widely variable size and duration, involving different collectives or more or less actively engaged participants. This complex picture of interweaving networks of interaction makes it difficult if not impossible to still imagine a singular *public sphere* in which public debate and deliberation is conducted, in individual nation states or at a more regional or global level by elite media on behalf of the citizenry; instead, what we encounter here is a complex multi-tiered assemblage of smaller or larger, shorter- or longer-lived *publics* that form around events, issues, topics, and themes of shared concern, and around a set of core texts and actors. These publics range from the centralised publics that continue to exist around mainstream news coverage to the much less prominent but no less important personal publics surrounding and connecting between ordinary social media users' accounts, and they form a structured but densely interwoven network of communicative spaces through which news and information can and does travel. Chapter 8 identifies these different types of publics and explores how their interplay might be studied further; in doing so, it also challenges

popular but simplistic conceptions of ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers’ that are supposed to enable their inhabitants to insulate themselves from any news and information that challenges their own worldviews.

Finally, Chapter 9 concludes the book by presenting an overall picture of a contemporary global news media environment that is characterised by substantially increased social and societal involvement and a more and more networked structure—that is, of a *social news media network*. In this environment, professional journalists and non-professional news users alike are increasingly cast in the role of gatewatcher, newssharer, and news curator, and sometimes accept these roles with considerable enthusiasm; additionally, a growing part of their everyday news engagement activities takes place within the tertiary spaces operated by the major social media providers, where platform politics, affordances, algorithms, design, and other technosocial factors outside of their control affect how they can post, find, access, share, curate and otherwise engage with news, rumours, analysis, comments, opinion, and related forms of information. The complex and multilayered social news media network that is central to the contemporary mediasphere is characterised by a multitude of “curated flows” (Thorson and Wells 2015), therefore, that result from the interactions and interdependencies of professional journalists, citizen journalists, politicians, celebrities, experts, niche authorities, ordinary users, platform operators, designers, algorithms, and many more stakeholders besides, but are exclusively controlled by none of them. Well beyond this book, this emerging and dynamic social news media network, whose constitutive parts continue to rearrange themselves constantly as we observe them, will require considerably more study in the coming years.

## **Platforms of the Social News Media Network**

Although the following chapters make every effort to discuss current practices at the intersection of journalism and social media independent of the specific social media platforms being used, there is nonetheless a considerable focus on *Twitter* over *Facebook* and other social media spaces. This is unavoidable given that so much more of the body of literature upon which this volume builds is centrally concerned with *Twitter* (Kümpel *et al.* 2015: 3), even though it has a considerably smaller userbase than *Facebook*. There are number of reasons for this imbalance. First, compared to *Facebook* it remains significantly easier—though by no means trivial—to generate large datasets on user en-

agement with the news from the *Twitter* Application Programming Interface (API), and the growing use of ‘big social data’ following the “computational turn” in the humanities and social sciences (Berry 2011) has therefore also led to a sustained growth in the field of *Twitter* research, well beyond the study of news and journalism.

Second, however, the comparative platform affordances of *Facebook* and *Twitter* have also meant that *Twitter* is genuinely used more widely for some important forms of news engagement. More than 95% of user accounts on *Twitter* are public, and can be followed by any other user without a need to seek permission; by comparison, “about 72% Facebook users set their posts to *private*” (Dewan and Kumaraguru 2014: 1). This enables the rapid and more widespread transmission especially of breaking news across the *Twitter* network, while similar processes on *Facebook* are relatively slower and take more circuitous routes. Additionally, the very sparse infrastructure of interaction on *Twitter*—with its short 140-character messages and limited threading of messages, compared to the longer posts and more involved interactions via liking, reacting, and commenting on *Facebook*—also means that the forms of news engagement that these platforms are used for can vary significantly. Larsson and Christensen suggest that “we can perhaps consider Facebook as the news ‘showroom’—used mostly for broadcasting messages—whilst Twitter is the news ‘chat room’—used more for interaction” (Larsson and Christensen 2016: 13), therefore, but this observation may be true only for interactions that are fully public: in the private or semi-private realm of users’ personal profiles, away from the public pages of news organisations, *Facebook* may well sustain some intense discussion of the news amongst smaller groups of participants, too.

It is important to keep in mind the specific features and limitations of each social media platform as we continue our discussion, therefore; “talking about ‘social media’ in general always risks missing important distinctions”, as Dahlgren warns (2014: 196). And yet, the fact that these platforms do not exist in isolation from each other; that they share users to a considerable extent; that through automated as well as manual means, information flows between them at considerable volume; and that they both exist as part of a broader, thoroughly interconnected social news media network means that—with the necessary adjustments—many of the professional and user practices we find on *Twitter* also translate to *Facebook*, and vice versa. “There is a high overlap in the content of the two networks” in many news contexts (Dewan and Kumaraguru 2014: 11); for instance, even in spite of *Twitter*’s renowned rapid

response to major acute events, it is also true that such events also “appear fairly quickly on Facebook. ... On average, ... in just over 11 minutes after taking place in the real world” (2).

And still, *Twitter* does hold a special place in this story—over the past years, it has been the most lauded as well as the most attacked platform for its role driving the transformations to journalistic processes. This is remarkable especially in the context of its continuing financial instability; *Twitter* is a platform that has still not managed to find a sustainable business model, and it is regularly rumoured to be the target of takeovers by companies ranging from Salesforce through Disney to Google (e.g. *Fortune* 2016). One 2015 op-ed in *The Guardian* even asked whether *Twitter* is “too relevant to fail” (Bell 2015: n.p.), precisely because its role in facilitating the publication, dissemination, and discussion of journalistic content means that it “could be the world’s independent newsroom” (Bell 2015). More generally, however, even if *Twitter* (or indeed *Facebook*) were to disappear, it is highly likely that they would be replaced by other platforms offering very similar functionality in the way that “Friendster [was] supplanted by MySpace and more recently by Facebook. ... Underlying services like Twitter are a set of characteristics often referred to by the catchall phrase, the real-time Web” (Hermida 2010: n.p.)—and social media platforms that incorporate these characteristics are likely to be a feature of the global media landscape for the foreseeable future, even if their names or their owners may change from time to time. As Bell puts it, “a world without Twitter or with a radically changed Twitter is now unimaginable, as if television went off air in 1963 and never came back” (2015: n.p.).

For the moment, at any rate, *Twitter* remains a major component of the nexus between journalism and social media. Conversely, news remains just as central to *Twitter*; as Broersma and Graham report, this “was publicly acknowledged in a series of tweets by founder Jack Dorsey on Twitter’s ninth birthday: ‘Journalists were a big part of why we grew so quickly and still a big reason why people use Twitter: news. It’s a natural fit. ... We wouldn’t be here without you’” (2016: 91). Traditionally, this may not have been true to the same extent of *Facebook*, where social networking amongst existing populations of friends and family was a core early driver of take-up, but news now also plays an increasingly important role there. This is why recent attacks against both *Facebook* and *Twitter* for their role in enabling the dissemination of ‘fake news’ (or more properly, factually inaccurate political propaganda) have drawn such instant responses from the management of both platforms (e.g. Zuckerberg 2016)—yet to single out only these leading social media



platforms as spaces where political propaganda circulates unchecked is overly simplistic and self-serving: social *and* mainstream media are equally implicated in this. Social media themselves *are* without doubt spaces in which mis- and disinformation circulates, but they also facilitate the rapid debunking of such information; mainstream media *should* have higher editorial standards that prevent the publication of blatant falsehoods and lies, and yet much of the political propaganda that is recirculated via social media originates from mainstream news articles that report the statements made by propagandists and demagogues without sufficient critical framing. Mainstream news organisations should not be allowed to shift the blame for ‘fake news’ to social media platforms without accepting their own share of responsibility—especially since, in the present media environment, they have a considerable presence of their own in social media spaces.

Finally, of course, the troubling rise of populism and propaganda in many established and emerging democracies is not simply a function of the institutions and platforms that produce and circulate news content; ultimately, especially in a social news media network, ordinary citizens themselves are the primary drivers of news dissemination and discussion, and how they—that is, how we all—engage with the news in this changing environment is now more crucial than ever before. This means that it is incumbent on every news user to ask themselves what sources they choose to follow (in social as well as in mainstream media); how they evaluate the information that reaches them; what material they select to re-share with their own networks, online and offline; and how and with whom they engage in discussion and debate, in public or in private. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance, as the saying goes, and this is even more true in a social news media network environment that has moved well past the point of “high modernism” (Hallin 1992) when the leading journalism outlets could still be relied upon to comprehensively cover societal developments and debates. Today, “in media-saturated societies which bristle with communicative abundance”, where ‘mainstream’ media no longer play the dominant role they once used to, we must instead all exercise our “monitory” civic duties (Keane 2009: 47), and in particular must combat propaganda and abuse on behalf of those fellow citizens who already feel too marginalised to do so for themselves.

## A Study in Precarity

One theme that underlies this entire volume, therefore, is precarity. By most accounts, the journalism industry—globally, and in many national environments—is struggling, and has yet to settle into a sustainable equilibrium following the successive digital disruptions (from the Web through user-generated content and social media to the shift to mobile news engagement) that it has experienced since 1990; “to paraphrase one columnist, the sky is falling and it is hard to know how many will be left to cover the story” (Mosco 2009: 350). But there is some cause for (cautious) optimism here, too: while the journalism *industry* may be struggling, it is also evident that public interest in, and use of, *news* has never been greater. As McNair reminds us, therefore, we should not mistake the industry’s past for its future: “the future of journalism is often conflated with the future of a particular journalistic medium, currently print. Newspapers are in crisis, it’s said with good reason, and thus so too is journalism” (McNair 2009: 348).

Newspapers certainly are in crisis: as the Pew Research Center’s *State of the News Media 2016* report states, for instance, the U.S. newspaper industry still hopes that its “core audience and subscriber base ... will buy [it] enough time to help ease the digital transition. But recent data suggests [that] the hourglass may be nearing empty” (Pew Research Center 2016: 5), and that the print industry has failed to implement the longer-term strategic measures that would enable it to transition to a digital-first model. The same report also suggests that television news, which had thus far proven considerably more resilient, is the next legacy news medium to be affected: “TV-based news can’t ignore the public’s pull toward digital”, and while its audience figures will have been boosted by the heightened public attention to the news during the 2015/16 U.S. presidential election campaign, “those audience gains followed a year of declines across the board in 2014” (6).

News organisations for whom their digital operations have already become a core concern stand to benefit from this digital transition, and least in principle: “nearly four-in-ten U.S. adults (38%) said that they often get news from digital sources .... That trails the 57% who often get news from a television source but outpaces both radio (25%) and print newspapers (20%)” (Pew Research Center 2016: 45). But included in those digital news access figures are both visits to conventional news Websites (28%) *and* news use through social media (18%), and underlying them is also a rapid shift towards mobile access: in 2015, for the top 50 U.S. newspaper Websites, “unique visitors on

mobile rose for 43 of the 50, with 35 showing a 10% or greater increase” (20). The shift to digital news has already happened, but the channels through which users engage with such digital news continue to evolve rapidly and will require further adjustment by the industry.

Finally, we might expect such developments to result in a substantial boost in industry revenue from online advertising. But this is only half true: while “total digital ad spending grew another 20% in 2015 to about \$60 billion”, that additional funding has not been directed in the first place at conventional news corporations:

journalism organizations have not been the primary beneficiaries. ... Even more of the digital ad revenue pie—65%—is swallowed up by just five tech companies. None of these are journalism organizations, though several—including Facebook, Google, Yahoo and Twitter—integrate news into their offerings. (Pew Research Center 2016: 6)

*New York Times* CEO Mark Thompson therefore has a blunt message for journalism organisations: “the plain truth is that advertising alone will not support quality journalism” (Thompson 2016: 109), and alternative funding models will need to be developed.

As the commercial news industry continues to struggle in this adverse environment, existing alternative funding models therefore gain additional importance. This includes first and foremost the public service media model in its state- or fee-funded European form; Tunstall points out, for instance, that “Europe’s public service broadcasters ... project credible news across TV, radio and online. The BBC has been described as producing ‘the biggest and best online newspaper in the world’” (2009: 388), and even though the exceptionally well-resourced BBC may constitute an outlier even amongst public service media organisations, the overall point is nonetheless valid. Alternatively, trust-funded non-profit models such as *The Guardian*’s, where the Scott Trust’s portfolio of non-journalistic commercial interests generates sufficient profits to sustain the news organisation’s operations even if *The Guardian* in itself is posting annual losses, may offer a different opportunity to support quality journalism into its uncertain future. Finally, the development of crowd-funded and community-owned news organisations is also worth exploring, even if the long-term sustainability of such operations—beyond an initial wave of enthusiasm and support—has yet to be confirmed. Such citizen-supported news outlets may well be most successful when they address niche topics or cover (hyper)local news that have a clearly circumscribed audience,

however—on the available evidence, it appears unlikely that they could grow to rival major regional or national news outlets.

But at the same time, for all the growth in its digital advertising revenues, the social media market itself is also far from settled; it too remains precarious, and that precarity affects the many personal and professional endeavours that now fundamentally rely on social media. The robust current performance of platforms like *Facebook* obscures the fact that this remains a notoriously fast-paced industry that can experience comparatively rapid shifts in platform popularity; further, even popularity with a large number of users does not automatically translate into financial sustainability, as the cautionary tale of *Twitter* and its decade-long search for a sustainable business model shows all too clearly. Again, even if these platforms themselves disappeared in the short or medium term, it is unlikely that the idea and practices of social media—including the practices of news engagement via social media—would disappear with them; they have been too deeply ingrained in our everyday lives by now. However, professional journalists as well as ordinary news users may be forced from time to time to relearn how to publish, disseminate, discuss, and curate the news on yet another new social media platform, building new public personas and adjusting their practices to the specific affordances of each new platform as they do so.

In this precarious environment, then, where both the news industry itself and many of the communicative tools, channels, and platforms that it relies upon to disseminate its stories remain subject to rapid change and transformation, “the journalistic paradigm is continuously refracted. ... Repairing it has become more complicated, if not impossible” (Broersma 2013: 29). Indeed, if ‘repairing’ is understood to mean restoring journalism to the former glory of its mythical golden age of “high modernism” (Hallin 1992), that aim is now simply unattainable: the mediasphere has transformed too far. Instead, “a more chaotic communication environment is coming into existence” (McNair 2009: 348), and for the journalism industry the primary aim at present must simply be to develop a sustainable *modus operandi* that suits this chaotic, complex, and constantly evolving media landscape; once a dominant species, professional journalism now needs to find a habitable niche in the new media ecology. This repositioning has clearly created new opportunities for alternative competitors, including both the ‘born-digital’ citizen journalism operators who have established themselves since the early 2000s as credible new voices in news coverage and debate, and the propagandists and demagogues who have gained greater prominence in more recent years

and now threaten the very future of liberal democracies—proving McNair’s point that “chaos can be creative and liberating. It can also be confusing, and destructive of things we might wish to preserve” (2009: 349).

The *New York Times*’ Mark Thompson therefore offers this bleak warning: “winter really is coming for many of the world’s news publishers” (Thompson 2016: 108). We might extend this warning to some of the other elements of the social news media network that we will encounter in this book, too: winter may also be coming for *Twitter* and other social media platforms unless they can find a way to achieve financial sustainability and address the significant issues with incivility and abuse that have been flagged in recent times. And indeed, with the successes of Brexit and Trump, and a variety of other, more minor successes for propaganda and demagoguery, arguably winter has already set in for liberal democracy itself: the coming years will be critical in determining the future shape of the political world order, and the developments to come will affect the lives of many millions of people. “Navigating this emerging cultural chaos will be confusing, and disturbing at times, at least for the generation which grew up in the more settled times of the late 20th century. But it will be exciting, and rich with possibility” (McNair 2009: 349). Yes, winter is coming for journalism, but the existing, emerging, and potential practices of journalistic and para-journalistic news engagement documented in this volume also show that a vast number of news users are now prepared also to report, disseminate, discuss, and curate the news, with or without the help of professional news workers. This will not and cannot replace conventional journalism, but it has the potential to facilitate the critical engagement with the news that an industry operating under conditions of precarity can no longer reliably undertake on our behalf—especially in the new social media spaces where a substantial amount of everyday news engagement now takes place. Such developments are a source of hope, even in our troubled times.

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