

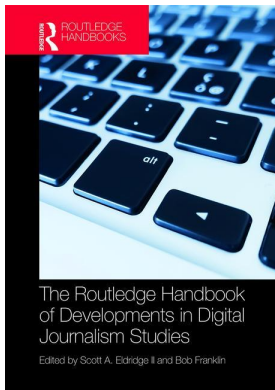
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3

WHO AM I? PERCEPTIONS OF DIGITAL JOURNALISTS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Tim P. Vos and Patrick Ferrucci

What it means to be a journalist has become fluid in the digital era (Black, 2010; Ugland and Henderson, 2007). Journalists have been asked to learn new skills, develop new routines, and adopt new outlooks (Anderson, 2013). Meanwhile, these same new skills, routines, and outlooks seemingly make journalists more like bloggers and social media stars, blurring the boundaries between professional journalists and citizens performing “acts of journalism” (Holt and Karlsson, 2014: 1795). Whether or not citizen journalists and bloggers have actually significantly displaced work done by traditional journalists is almost immaterial. The discursive challenge – all the talk about the changing definition of who’s a journalist – has registered in real ways, such as in how journalists have perceived their own professional identity (Ferrucci and Vos, 2016).

Against the backdrop of changing journalistic identity, a new identity of sorts has emerged for a subset of newswriters – digital journalists. As this chapter demonstrates, digital journalists see themselves as both distinct from citizen journalists and bloggers on the one hand and from professional journalists working in traditional media on the other hand. They can match the digital production, distribution, and interaction skills of the savviest of digital entrepreneurs, while also performing the journalistic social roles of a venerable, truth-based profession. This sets them apart, as they see it, as a new breed, evolved to survive in an age of technological and economic disruption. It’s an identity that is reinforced – albeit only recently – by the broader journalism profession.

So, what is the identity of digital journalists? How has the journalistic field perceived digital journalists and how has that played into their identity? This chapter explores how digital journalists construct their professional identity. It draws on interviews with more than 50 self-identified digital journalists and an analysis of digital journalists’ own public discourse and of the broader journalism field’s discourse about digital journalism in the trade press, journalism blogs, and popular press from 2000 to the present. The chapter indexes the legitimating norms and practices of the field by listening to how journalists speak about the nature of their digital work and what makes it distinctive.

Thinking about identity

Identity is a tricky, complex matter (Roccas and Brewer, 2002; see also Johnston and Wallace, this volume, Chapter 1). On the one hand, identity speaks to a constancy of character, to a steadiness, regardless of situation (Kopytowska and Kalyango, 2014). This is a cardinal precept of social

identity theory – membership in a group with shared values and routines is important in maintaining a fixed identity (Turner, 1982). Here, journalists never lose sight of what it means to be a journalist or to be a professional. Technologies may change, economic circumstances may shift, but being a journalist is still being a journalist (Craft and Davis, 2016). This steady knowledge of who one is allows the individual to maintain a sense of social identity and maintain productive work routines. If a journalist knows she is not a politician, preacher, or public relations practitioner, she can stick to the tasks at hand. She might even find self-worth in her fixed professional identity – seeing what she does as superior to the work of politicians, preachers, or public relations practitioners (Fisher, 2015; Kitch, 2014). Identity thus might also do important work in identity management, particularly when journalists are generally held in low esteem by the broader population (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). A clear and stable identity can insulate the journalist from external actors who would seek to attack, undermine, or just disparage journalism practice.

On the other hand, individuals can be quite adept at “compartmentalization”, thus sometimes maintaining multiple, even contradictory, identities (Roccas and Brewer, 2002: 88). Once we accept an adjective for a kind of journalist – broadcast journalist, business journalist, advocacy journalist – then we and they are primed to think about differences. Broadcast journalists are more performers than their print counterparts; business journalists have more specialized knowledge about their subject than general assignment reports; and advocacy journalists are more invested in the plight of their subjects than are traditional journalists. How does adding ‘digital’ as an adjective to ‘journalist’ reflect differences with other journalists? This, of course, requires understanding what digital journalists do that is distinct from work done by fellow journalists.

Just as important as knowing what digital journalists do is gaining a sense of how this unique set of skills and outlooks positions digital journalists within the broader journalistic field and how their position is reflected in their identity. The work of journalists generally has been legitimated as essential to democracy: savvy; modern, vital, and in touch with social currents; ruggedly autonomous; and essential to the market success of news organizations (Fallows, 1996; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014; Vos, 2012; Vos and Craft, 2016; Vos and Singer, 2016). It is likely safe to conclude that these expressions of legitimacy have formed a hierarchy – contribution to democracy would come first and contribution to financial success last in this short list. Granted, the remainder of these legitimating expressions has been harder to rank. Nevertheless, we should expect that standing – and with it, identity – in the journalistic field is ordered according to this hierarchy. Thus, political reporting – given its connection to democracy – grants a journalist more legitimacy than sports reporting. Likewise, professional journalists have historically marked advocacy journalists as practicing a lesser form of journalism, even questioning whether advocacy journalism is journalism at all (McMillian, 2011; see Montal and Reich, this volume, Chapter 4).

Another form of legitimating discourse within the field of journalism has been tied to how journalists view their social role or roles (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017; Hanusch and Banjac, this volume, Chapter 2). How a journalist understands the role of journalism has been described in terms of “professional identities” (Johnstone et al., 1976: 131). A role represents the outlook journalists bring to their work – it is what they see as valuable or essential in being a journalist. Journalists have constructed their journalistic identity, for example, as an adversarial role, disseminator role, interpretative role, and or populist mobilizer role (Weaver et al., 2007). But, here too, these roles map onto normative hierarchies – some roles have had greater legitimacy within the field than others.

Likewise, digital journalists’ identities will be formed against the backdrop of journalism’s legitimating discourses. Whether digital journalists are discursively constructed as essential to democracy or essential to profitability, for example, would likely shape how the field looks at digital journalists and how digital journalists think about themselves. Whether digital journalists

see themselves performing an adversarial role, a populist mobilizer role or other role will also constitute their identity relative to the field (Agarwal and Barthel, 2015). This ties to another cardinal precept of social identity theory – individuals will go to great lengths to see themselves positively and will seek for others to see them positively, too (Turner, 1982).

Meanwhile, the legitimacy and standing of quasi-journalistic actors – particularly those who share skills or outlooks with digital journalists – also come into play. Bloggers and social media stars can have general social legitimacy, but their legitimacy and standing will also be judged by journalists based on journalism's legitimating discourses. So, if digital journalists are discursively attached to these quasi-journalistic actors, digital journalists' own identity will also likely come into play and challenge their ability to maintain a positive self-identity. But, also following from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), if digital journalists see themselves as superior to quasi-journalists, constructing them as an out-group, this would be a basis for their own identity.

All of which is to reinforce that identity can be complex, made more so by a compartmentalization of identities. Digital journalists might identify with other professional journalists at one moment and see themselves as wholly distinct at another moment (Eldridge, 2016). Indeed, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) would support this notion. Thus, the challenge here is to account for journalistic identity in all its complexity.

The field's view of the digital journalist

One obvious source of anyone's identity is what others think of him or her. If those close to you think you are popular, clever, or smart, you would likely think that of yourself. Thus, the story of how the journalistic field has talked about digital journalists is a part of the story of digital journalists' identity. The story is not straightforward.

In the early days, when 'digital journalist' was beginning to enter the journalism field's vocabulary, the job was far from the pinnacle of the profession. It was seen as a job for those new to the profession; little more than marketing; a derivative of real journalism; and – in the least generous of characterizations – a corruption of journalism's social role and norms. In the boundary work being done by veteran journalists, digital journalists barely qualified as practitioners of journalism. Simply put, digital journalists were seen as the embodiment of journalism losing its way.

Long-time professional journalists had been closely guarding their authority and autonomy in the face of efforts to bring user-generated content into the big tent of journalism (see Lewis, 2012). As this war was being waged, digital journalists appeared on the scene to facilitate audience contribution and involvement. Digital journalists, with their digital-first mentalities, advocated for new ways of doing journalism: "We need to build relationship and community connection into the processes of newsgathering and into its starting points. This is key to making journalism less insular and more outwardly focused" (Sill, 2011). For some veterans, this put the digital journalists in league with the enemy. They were squandering journalists' hard-fought and hard-won professional autonomy. As one journalist lamented, "There was a time, not that long ago, when a news organization's credibility was *boosted* by [. . .] the distance it kept from its audience. All that played into its status as a Respected Institution" (Benton, 2008; italics in the original). The lamentation pinned the change on digital journalists and mourned the loss of journalism's standing – a loss that struck at the heart of journalists' professional identity.

Digital journalists were also sometimes seen as pawns of malevolent powers, again being depicted as naively trading in treasured values for uncertain benefits. Digital journalists seemed all too eager to play by the rules of third-party powers, such as Facebook and Google. For example, veteran journalists tended to "shudder" at the practice of search engine optimization (Rice, 2010) – writing online headlines to get a news story to appear prominently in search results or to get readers to share or click on news stories. This was precisely the kind of practice digital

journalists had perfected. Traditional journalists worried that the giants could not be trusted with journalism's best interests, arguing Google's end game remained largely "unknown in large part because, like most big institutions, Google limits transparency and is defensive when it comes to criticism" (Osnos, 2009: 28). Chasing short-term financial payoffs, veteran journalists believed, ultimately shortchanged public service journalism.

Legacy journalists rarely defended their publications' struggling business model; however, they remained fairly confident that the promises of a rosy digital future – represented by digital journalists at born digital news outlets – were either implausible or came at too high of a price. "Writers and editors know that click-driven Internet economics tend to reward lowbrow gimmickry" (Rice, 2010).

By January of 2013, however, the picture was different. A veteran journalist, whose career harkened back to the golden years of newspapers, hailed digital journalists as "a new wave of talent" (Dvorkin, 2013). "They relate to and engage with the audience unlike a past generation of reporters who could care less what readers thought (after all, what do they know?)" Dvorkin (2013) wrote. He added:

Using the tools of social media, they follow their colleagues as competitive beat reporters to gain insight from them. Most important, they banter with them in full public view, a far more raw, if not real, version of any "news analysis" than shows up in newsprint.
(*Ibid.*)

For Dvorkin, this also involves new perspectives on the 'scoop', "rid[ing] the crest of a competitor's scoop", and,

filtering it through their own eyes for different audiences. They produce their own videos, photos and galleries and podcasts to extend their reach. And they trust in Google, angling stories (and a story's headline) to give them the best chance of reaching the world.
(*Ibid.*)

This is a loving portrait of a modern, vital, and current field. But it is also not without a sort of paternal(istic) pride. The column concludes that the future will be ushered in when digital journalists and old school reporters learn from each other. So, what should the field of journalism learn from the new wave of digital journalists? Not only a new set of skills but a new orientation to the audience. These are journalists who reach out to the world. Journalistic autonomy – the kind that is unconcerned with the thoughts of readers – is disparaged as a part of the past. This makes the digital journalist more real than the cloistered journalists of a past generation.

But, above all, the digital journalist is elevated for the goods she can deliver. The digital journalist knows the alchemy of audience engagement. It was a mystery to traditional journalists, but audience engagement would, it was believed, transform journalism's prospects moving forward. Job ads for digital journalists began to catch and project the dynamism that digital journalists seemingly brought to a moribund industry. "We need a candidate that is full of ideas and aware of content which drives digital audience, as well as being fast, organized and accurate, with the ability to communicate brilliantly via social media" ("Job", 2017). The journalism field had long seen the "nose for news" as a mysterious quality that made a journalist a journalist (Vos and Finneman, 2017: 271). Here, and elsewhere, the nose for connecting to a digital audience is elevated in similar terms. It is what made a digital journalist a digital journalist.

Digital journalists' audience engagement abilities have come to be seen in messianic terms – even being labeled as the "salvation of journalism" (Davis, 2013). As journalism's profitability took

on greater salience, digital journalists' importance also became greater. But, claims of journalism's salvation were not confined to retaining and monetizing audiences. Digital journalists' audience engagement abilities also spoke to journalism's democratic responsibilities, at least in the field's discourse. An engaged audience was an audience engaged in the public debates of its community. Digital journalists allowed their organizations to "use data to create 'actionable intelligence from the noise' by making sense of the constant flood of information, and encouraging evidence based debate" (Davis, 2013). A description of a digital journalist's audience engagement tool connected the two legitimating discourses: "It has been designed as a mission related investment which will generate ongoing income through commercial activity to provide ongoing funding for its mission of providing state of the art tools for media and democracy" (Senter, 2014).

In short order, digital journalists came to be seen as the vanguards of journalism's new age. For example, college and university journalism programs – long a source of legitimation for new forms of journalism (Vos, 2012) – embraced digital journalists as the new normal for the profession. The website for a college's new degree in digital journalism conveyed the perceived dynamism of the craft: "Now more than ever, we access breaking news as it happens – on news websites, blogs, and social media, via our computers and our smart phones" (Pace, 2017). The school promised the degree "reflects the rapid change in this industry and prepares students for a robust job market." Again, the legitimating discourse of vitality and modernity raised the status of digital journalism.

Likewise, industry-training courses have also portrayed digital journalists as harbingers of a new digital age. But a "master class" by the *Guardian* also stressed how digital journalism enhances traditional journalistic skills: "we explore how to tell a story from multiple angles and present data and eyewitness testimony in compelling new formats" (Guardian, 2015). Likewise, digital journalists offered new tools and abilities for verification – a skill and responsibility at the heart of professional journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). Digital journalists were lauded for taking user-generated content and "work(ing) through a verification process quickly" (Roper, 2015). Thus, the discourse about digital journalists tapped into the journalism field's broader legitimating traditions.

All of this is to say, if digital journalists were forming their identity based on what the broader journalism field was saying about them, they would be forgiven for seeing themselves in the most flattering terms. The more established digital journalists might also be forgiven if they had not entirely forgotten the earlier days, when the title of digital journalist carried less savory connotations.

The digital journalists' view of their identity

Digital journalists do indeed show signs of forming their identity in light of interlocutors in the broader journalistic field. Some still discursively position their identity in terms of earlier criticisms – defending the journalistic value of their work relative to traditional journalism and making a distinction between what they do and what bloggers and other interlopers do. But most appear to have moved on – constructing their identity in ways that position digital journalists as the vanguard of journalism. Digital journalists seem to embrace the notion that they are the salvation of journalism. The skills, tools, abilities, and outlooks they bring to the field are what will keep journalism astride with the times and thus keep the field alive and thriving.

Some of this identity construction reflects the recent praise of digital journalism from the broader field, but digital journalists also have a more expansive view of their value and hence their identity. Yes, they position themselves as wholly distinct from and superior to bloggers and other quasi-journalistic actors, but they also promote the work of digital journalists as distinct from and superior to the work of traditional journalists. It is traditional journalists – not digital journalists – who will be journalism's undoing.

Digital journalists ultimately construct their identity in terms of the roles they perform and in terms of the skills, abilities, and outlooks that allow them to perform those roles. While digital journalists tend to think of themselves in homogenous terms, what kind of positions the digital journalists hold seems to introduce some variation in how their identity is constructed. However, there is a surprising level of uniformity in how they talk about their work, their standing in the field, and hence their professional identity.

Identity relative to the journalism field

As a whole, digital journalists see themselves as the future of the journalism industry, as the people forging a path for new entrants into the field. They believe that what they are doing is strikingly different from what happens at legacy media organizations. One digital journalist noted this difference by discussing economics. “Look, they’re failing and we’re winning. It seems like pride is keeping some people from just changing to what works” (Interview, Digital Journalist 1). Another digital journalist predicted the future of the industry, a future that did not include legacy media. His description implicitly illustrates how he views what he does differently from what, for example, a newspaper journalist does:

Right now, we use newspaper websites a lot. We find out a lot about what’s happening in the city by reading their site and then through social media. So that gives us a lot of value, you know? Those operations won’t last much longer, though, unless they find some magic financial bullet. That won’t happen, though. When that happens, I’ll be affected because where am I going to find out certain things to write about? Don’t get me wrong, I dig up news a lot, but my job is really to take already-out-there news a step further. At that point, when I can’t rely on those places, social media will take on a larger role, and I’ll have to be more diligent in verifying what I find there.

(Interview, Digital Journalist 2)

Digital journalists saw themselves as evangelists for the gospel of audience engagement. Here, the digital journalists found themselves forever fighting legacy media, who “come off as ‘above’ their readers” (Hare, 2017). Digital journalists see themselves as closer to the public than other types of journalists. This is especially the case with journalists working at digitally native organizations. They believe their reporting style connects them to the people they cover as opposed to separates them. “We don’t decide what’s news on our own,” said a journalist working for a local digital outlet. “That’s the old style of journalism. We seek out people and talk to them before we decide what is quote ‘newsworthy’” (Interview, Digital Journalist 3). This distinction was made even clearer by a reporter who spent a decade at his city’s main newspaper before leaving for a digitally native news nonprofit:

Back at the paper, I had an editor who would oftentimes tell me what’s important for the day. I would then go out and report on stories about the topic. I would ask people in the community about the topic. Sometimes, actually more often than not, I would come up with an idea from just being around and I’d pitch to my editor. And then I would do the same thing with finding sources and everything else. I realized how wrong that is when I got here. At the paper, and most places like that, the public are just the people you talk to when you need them. Here, we stress that we always need them. We’ll have get-togethers where we literally will bring together all types of people and just talk to them. We’ll pick their brain. We also have them come to news meetings. What I’m getting at is the public, the people we cover in (the city), we involve

throughout. They are part of the process as opposed to just being some people good for quotes about what someone else deems important. Here we are part of the public, and, importantly, they're part of us.

(Interview, Digital Journalist 4)

Others also discussed how involving citizens in news production processes separates them from traditional journalists. While many digital journalists interviewed stressed that legacy journalists with a proper beat talk to a lot of people, they tend to be the same people. "When I covered education, I basically talked to the same seven or eight people. That's who I quoted. [At my current job], we have rules against that and basically policies that help us diversify how many people we talk to all the time" (Interview, Digital Journalist 5).

Thus, closely related to digital journalists' views of their relationship to the public is a strong sense of the role that digital journalists perform – a role that made them better journalists. Digital journalists argued that by focusing on interpretation, they are actually closer to the spirit of "true journalism" than traditional media employees. "I turn on the television sometimes to watch local news. Is that even news? Really? It's just high school-level reporting. They don't break anything. And they certainly don't explain anything," one interviewee said (Interview, Digital Journalist 6). He added, "We do the hard work. We do journalism. They just read a script that explains as much as maybe a third-grader wants to know." One journalist working in a legacy media newsroom in a digital capacity even criticized his own co-workers in a similar way:

We've been doing a lot of interesting things here lately, since we got a new editor a little while ago. We've become a better news company. That's because of us online though. We're publishing a lot of cool tools and interesting stories that you don't get in the newspaper. We won a big award in the city for one package I worked on. It did a lot of good in the city. But the people still working primarily on the newspaper end? They just do the same thing they've always done. It's a lot of boring stories told in the same boring ways.

(Interview, Digital Journalist 7)

Finally, one digital journalist explicitly discussed what he considered the difference between what he does and what legacy media journalists do. He said,

I would go as far as saying that what a lot of people considered journalists do isn't even journalism. They just repeat back what others tell them. No thinking. No context. No explanation. [. . .] Without that, it's not journalism to me.

(Interview, Digital Journalist 8)

Thus, digital journalists form an identity that placed them at the forefront of journalistic excellence (see Witschge and Harbers, this volume, Chapter 5). Digital journalists have also been asserting their deft ability in advancing the bedrock skills of journalism, such as verification. They use sophisticated digital tools for "establishing the date or location of an image or video, or simply corroborating written accounts of an event" (Bartlett, 2014). Digital journalists have claimed their place as savvy, resourceful reporters and editors.

Identity relative to organization role

Digital journalists still found some old newsroom assumptions have died slowly – like the persistent assumption that "digital has time to do tasks other departments 'don't have time to do'" (Hare, 2017). Such attitudes were seen as throwbacks to a time when digital staff consisted of

newly hired young people who were all too eager to please veteran journalists. For the most part however, modern digital journalists feel empowered in their organizations, and this is reflected in their identity. Their organizational attachment also functions as a clear line of demarcation between digital journalism and quasi-journalism, such as blogging and citizen journalism, and thus validates their standing and identity.

Meanwhile, the jobs digital journalists hold within their organizations also influence how they form their identity. Reporters, for example, define the concept of a digital journalist differently from editors. Journalists who work in both roles also define themselves slightly differently. For reporters, a digital journalist is someone who gathers and then interprets information for the public. This role of interpreter is vital and important. Digital journalists believe it sets them apart from other types of journalists. “Just reporting what happened at some point is meaningless today,” said one reporter for a digitally native news nonprofit. “Breaking news, that’s what newspapers and TV care about too much. It’s completely antiquated” (Interview, Digital Journalist 9). Numerous reporters interviewed communicated this mind-set and distinction. One journalist who only published on digital platforms but worked for a legacy media organization noted that her job required providing the public “with a way to understand news” (Interview, Digital Journalist 10). She explained that citizens can “learn about what’s happening at that very moment from peers on Twitter and the like,” but she “provide(s) a framework for understanding what’s actually happening in the world.” Numerous digital journalists referenced social media as something that not only changed how they work but did not change legacy journalists, to their detriment. Said one long-time journalist working at a digitally native organization:

That’s a losing game. It’s a game journalists can never win. Yeah, maybe, every so often, a journalist might beat the public breaking news, but it happens rarely. So many newspaper journalists seem to spend more time trying to break news on Twitter than they do writing interesting and important stories. Here, we don’t break anything, and we don’t waste precious resources trying to break anything. That’s not what we do well. We know what our audience needs, and that’s stories that beyond the ‘what happened’ and try to figure out why it happened and how it happened and what we can learn from it.

(Interview, Digital Journalist 11)

Others echoed with similar comments, explaining that social media essentially let anyone break news and, therefore, this effectively changes the role of a journalist. These digital reporters believe that their identity is shaped by interpreting information, something legacy media still fail to accomplish. One reporter did not explicitly discuss how she views her role, but implicitly did by comparing herself to her legacy counterparts. “I only recently started here. I had to leave [the newspaper I previously worked at] because I felt like they believed it was still 1999. All they cared about was scoops. It did not make sense to me. A journalist [today] does not look for scoops” (Interview, Digital Journalist 12).

But while digital journalists working as reporters form their identity around the idea of interpretation and analysis, digital journalists who report and edit spoke of interpretation but also did not disregard breaking news. “Traditionally, it’s an essential function of journalism,” one digital journalist said. “But today, with technology the way it is, we can’t make that our journalistic priority” (Interview, Digital Journalist 7). Another journalist, who estimated he spends 75% of his time as an editor and 25% as a reporter, talked about covering breaking news as something “that happens” but not as something “the people that come to the site look for.” He said:

I know what we do is a little different than what’s out there. But I’ve worked at a half-dozen news places. I’ve been a journalist for a while. When I started in this field, a lot

of journalists based their reputation on muckraking, on getting that big story before anyone else. Here and other news websites, that big story is always welcome. But it can't be the 'be all, end all,' you know? If that's you, then you probably need to work for old-fashioned news. Here and other places like here, that story is nice, but it's small potatoes. We want to give people information and tell them what to do with it. Does that make sense? That's a major shift I've seen in journalism.

(Interview, Digital Journalist 13)

Seemingly, when a digital journalist also works as an editor, there's an understanding of how consistently changing and updated content is essential for any website's survival. This is potentially why they see their role as journalists slightly differently from journalists only working as reporters. This difference could be the reason that while their identity is still shaped around the role of interpreter, primarily as a way to distance themselves from traditional journalists, they also have a less dismissive view of dissemination. For example, one journalist explicitly discussed this, rationalizing the performance of both functions:

I think we're different than the *New York Times* or Channel 7 or whatever, ABC News or something. All they care about, at least first and foremost, is breaking a story. They want to own it. And we'll do that sometimes because it generates real traffic. That does not mean that kind of thing is our thing. Just like the news at 6 might occasionally have a story similar to something we might run. But our stories should go beyond breaking it. We'll own a story, but probably from right when it's born, from when it's an infant, I guess.

(Interview, Digital Journalist 14)

In general, the role that digital journalists occupy within their organization has an impact on how they form their identity as a journalist, but only to a certain extent. The essence of being a digital journalist concerns, in their minds, publishing a different type of news from news published by legacy media. However, editors, who face the pressure of populating a website, still identify – even if only slightly – with the main ethos of legacy media.

Identity relative to quasi-journalists

While digital technologies have allowed for subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in the journalism industry and in the everyday routines of journalists, they have also let other actors enter the journalism field. For example, while media criticism was once relegated to the fringes and only published in predominantly journalistic outlets, now blogs can perform this function (see: Vos et al., 2012). Digital journalists define their identity partly by separating themselves from interloping actors, people on the fringe of journalism who might be mistaken for a journalist by the general public (see: Eldridge, 2016). "When I tell people I'm a digital journalist," one interviewee said, "people assume I have a blog. I don't have a blog. A blogger is not a journalist" (Interview, Digital Journalist 14). Another journalist noted that just because someone utilizes certain journalistic practices, it does not make that person a journalist. "Social media lets people break news now. They can comment on stories and even have places to publish their own stories. I'm a journalist because I get paid by a reputable place to do journalism. Those people are not" (Interview, Digital Journalist 15).

Many of the digital journalists interviewed expressed frustration with what they considered a lack of the same credibility given to legacy journalism. They implicitly and explicitly argued that

this was due to the democratization of digital tools and other industry trends. “When I got my first job in journalism,” said one interviewee with only three years’ experience,

I told my friend about it. He asked if I was a citizen journalist. I’ve read about citizen journalism and still don’t know what it is. We shouldn’t use the word journalist to describe something like that because it makes our jobs look trivial.

(Interview, Digital Journalist 16)

One journalist with decades of experience discussed how as a digital journalist, he could engage with the public and make them a part of news production processes. However, later in the interview, he dismissed the labeling of anyone as a journalist, especially the public.

We have this idea that anyone can be a journalist now because we can all reach people. But that’s kind of crap. I do something very different than regular people do. I do something very different than a damn blogger. I don’t think just anyone could do what I do. It takes experience and expertise to be a good journalist, not just access to a webpage.

(Interview, Digital Journalist 4)

Digital journalists also believe that reporting must be part of their job – something else that sets them apart from bloggers and in league with legacy journalism. While they often stress the importance of interpretation and analysis, it cannot be on its own. Fundamentally, digital journalists believe there is a distinction between a journalist as someone who talks to the public and engages with sources and someone who just writes his or her opinion. “Some people who get called a reporter are just like Sean Hannity,” one digital journalist said (Interview, Digital Journalist 2). “They just write an opinion. That’s not what I do or what I think my site and many others do. We get our information from primary sources. We don’t wing it.” Other digital journalists interviewed conveyed similar thoughts, stressing that writing about news does not make someone a journalist: “If we really want to get down to it, I think most people called a journalist isn’t one. And that’s because we all publish to websites. That sounds similar. But the devil is in the details” (Interview, Digital Journalist 17). That digital journalist went on to explain some of those “details.” She said, “Everybody has opinions. Is everyone who mentions Hillary Clinton on Twitter a journalist? No. We do the hard work, the necessary work” (Ibid.).

Journalists interviewed also made a point to distinguish themselves from what one interviewee called “social media stars”. Those interviewed described actors on social media who aim to break news or have created a following through targeted, curated tweets. These people are not journalists, according to digital journalists. “There are people I follow on Twitter,” one journalist said, “and they have hundreds of thousands of followers from basically tweeting other people’s stories. They have ideology-based audiences. It’s no different than aggregation” (Interview, Digital Journalist 12). The digital journalist went on to argue that like aggregation, people on social media who merely disseminate other people’s stories are not journalists. Another journalist echoed this with a similar comment.

We have well-connected people here in (my city). They have a huge audience that follows them. And if I publish a story, it might reach x amount of people. If those well-connected people tweet about my story, it might reach 10 times the amount. But that doesn’t mean they’re doing the same thing as me. It doesn’t make them a journalist because they’re spreading news to people.

(Interview, Digital Journalist 18)

Digital journalists clearly see bloggers and social media stars as an out-group to journalists' in-group. Interestingly, when digital journalists are casting these interlopers as non-journalists, they are more apt to identify with the broader journalistic field. However, this is quickly forgotten when they consciously focus on the place of digital journalists in the broader journalistic field.

Conclusions

"Who am I? I'm the salvation of journalism." The digital journalists studied here are not humble. They seek to see their subgroup in positive terms, and they are supported by the broader journalistic field in those efforts. Recall that the label of "salvation of journalism" was applied by someone who is not a digital journalist to digital journalists. Digital journalists are, at least recently, being socialized into a clear sense that they are vital and savvy. Job advertisements, training programs, and professional forums and trade press constantly validate digital journalists' elevated standing in the field.

By identifying their chief skill and outlook as audience engagement, digital journalists have tapped into two forms of legitimating discourse. Audience engagement could be seen as engaging citizens in democratic self-governance. It could also be seen as building audience and hence aiding the profitability of the journalistic enterprise. While profitability has historically been shaky ground for journalists' claims of legitimacy (Vos and Finneman, 2017), its salience has been significantly heightened, just in time for digital journalists to ride concerns about profitability to new professional standing.

Digital journalists expressly reject journalistic autonomy in its old-fashioned sense. They also reject the dissemination role as the normative heart of journalism. However, nearly all other forms of traditional journalistic legitimacy are now invoked in praise of digital journalists. This is a remarkable shift in a remarkably short period of time.

Further reading

For more on the identity of digital journalists see the 2016 article by Ferrucci and Vos. The article theorizes the fluidity of digital journalists' identity while also noting how a populist mobilizer role anchors their role identity. Like this chapter, Eldridge (2016) has also examined how digital journalists have challenged the boundaries of the journalistic field, fighting for a place alongside traditional journalists. His 2014 article (Eldridge 2014) touches on similar themes, focusing on the ways traditional journalists have marginalized digital upstarts such as WikiLeaks. Meanwhile, a 2014 article by García-Avilés examines the ethical frameworks used by digital journalists – frameworks that have relevance for digital journalistic identity.

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