EPILOGUE: DIGITAL JOURNALISM

A golden age, a data-driven dream, a paradise for readers—or the proletarianization of a profession?

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In 2013, the late David Carr, a breathtakingly immodest chief drug confessor and solipsist from *The New York Times* who also acted as its principal technology booster, wrote this advice to young *anglo-parlante* journalists:

> Right now, being a reporter is a golden age. There may be a lack of business models to back it up, but having AKTOCA—All Known Thought One Click Away—on my desktop, tablet or phone makes it an immensely deeper, richer exercise than it used to be.
>
> *(Carr, 2013)*

It would be hard to think of a better example of armchair cybertarianism than this. Thinking about life on the other side of news, Tom Englehardt, a well-meaning critic of US imperialism (http://www.tomdispatch.com/authors/tom/) says we are living in a golden age of journalism because of what he dubs 'the rise of the reader' (2014). Perhaps unwittingly drawing on a discourse from decades ago in the work of Roland Barthes (1967) and Umberto Eco (1984), Englehardt celebrates our times because they supposedly signal the birth of readers as curators, splicing together stories from news sources that fly at the speed of thought across the globe to flit across their screens. Of course, Barthes and Eco were writing about textual and social relations and their impact on technology. Englehardt is writing about technological relations and their impact on texts and societies.

In addition to this new era of readers' hegemony over digital journalism, there is great excitement over such new technologies as 'drone journalism' and 'immersive journalism' (http://www.dronejournalismlab.org/; Nuwer, 2015). More importantly, Carr, Englehardt, and their ilk also celebrate this as an age of big data, when truth comes bundled in numbers that desk-bound journalists turn into graphs, which are visual and hence superior to other forms of knowledge. This epilogue interrogates these grand claims, engaging along the way in a rather somber critique of technological determinism.

I have some fragrant memories of technology and journalism over the years. I think the genre of an epilogue permits sharing such things. In the early 1970s, the phone ringing in the middle

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of the night meant that a telegram operator was about to read out a message from *The Economist* to my father, commissioning a story; my mother would take it down in shorthand and awake the next day with no memory of what she had done. I would go with my father to the telegram office late the following night so he could hand over his copy. In the late 1970s, walking into the radio station where I worked to read the morning bulletin and finding the journalist asleep on the floor or absent (drunk, in both cases), I would look for last year's carbon copy from the same calendar day to read, on the ground that at least seasonal stories might be similar. In 1981, as I waited for my first book review to appear in a newspaper, I opened up each Saturday's copy excitedly for weeks until it did so. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I had regular radio slots commenting on the popular, where I was introduced as 'our culture czar.' The ABC gave me a taxi voucher to come to the studio because they did not like the sound quality over landlines.

When I moved to New York in 1993, TV stations interviewed me in my apartment via groups that included journalists, sound recordists, cinematographers, and producers. A decade later, the group of experts had transmogrified into one allegedly multiply skilled person, who of course had to write copy as well as film and voice it, and do so across several platforms that repeated and reworked their copy. For my part, today I send columns instantaneously to editors from across the world—but am frequently unable to read what I have written for them because of the requirement to subscribe to the newspaper or magazine to do so.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given this personal history, I have strong and multiple feelings of *déjà-vu* as I trudge through the stupefying claims made for big data by journalists, academics, and corporate hucksters. First, I am transported to the 1970s and the touching credulity of cliometrics. At the time, we were assured that data would reform history and historiography, freeing writers and readers alike from inaccurate morganatic and social history alike (Woodman, 1972). Then I am suddenly thrown into the twenty-first century and evidence-based public policy (better known as policy-based evidence), which seeks to transform political science into the *ur-* discourse of statecraft, displacing an allegedly warlock world of extremism and populism (Marmot, 2004). Just when I think I am stably ensconced there, the catapult hurls me into the early 1990s. I emerge as a faithful, dutiful subscriber to *Wired* magazine in its heyday, signing up for a brave new world of liberty (so memorably skewered by Streeter, 2005).

By now, it is clear to me that the memories will just keep on coming each time 'big data' are invoked. I usually end up in the 1970s, because somewhere vaguely nearby to cliometrics lurked the real master discourse emerging at that time: a heady mixture of Cold War techno-futurism and neoclassical economics. This was that moment—its dread work stays with us still—that incarnated neoliberalism and technological determinism.

The ever-so-certain, entirely predictable academic and media discourse on big data in journalism duly performs various maneuvers: it lists websites that explain analytics; is careful to admire forebears who, you know, spoke to people in order to find stuff out and did quaint things like read documents; incarnates cybertarian ideology; does not value qualitative social science, such as ethnography; ignores political economy; is dedicated to essentialist views (there really *are* cohorts such as Generation X and they really *do* process, for example, pictures differently from their elders); pays little attention to scholarship on journalism or the media in general; finds journalistic norms, traditions, and innovations outside the Global North to be of passing or no interest; and leaves spectacularly unattended changes in the labor process due to pressures exacted not by technology but share market pressure and lizard-shoed financial advisors (Mair et al., 2013). Sometimes it goes so far as to be thrilled that big data will entirely transform journalism and put it into popular hands (Baack, 2015). (I think that means a technological elite within unaccountable social movements.)

Many journalists are complicit with these occupational hazards. Everybody's banging on about it these days, from *The Guardian*'s Sustainable Business podcast (*The Guardian*, 2015) to *The Financial Times* (Harford, 2014) to AT&T (Neff, 2014). True believers see the potential for adding value to research and investigative journalism as a saving grace of technological change for those with the right skills to participate, thereby offsetting the negative impacts of job losses (Mair et al., 2013). These information society chorines, many of them journalists, rejoice that a full 90 percent of all currently existing data was created between 2012 and 2013 alone (Hsu, 2013; Ramanathan, 2013; SINTEF, 2013). So much for Austen, Foucault, and Confucius. *Le Monde* has declared this the moment "When Mathematicians Became Sexy"—surely the most bathetic Romance-language headline of 2013 (Durut, 2013).

There are even obedient Schumpeterian celebrants of this new era, which supposedly clears out decadent, incompetent media companies (Brock, 2013 is a stereotypical example); earnest seekers after new business models (Braiker, 2014); or coin-operated managers engorging themselves in capitalist self-congratulation (D'Vorkin, 2012).

Such true believers would do well to consider the work of Justin Lewis (see Lewis et al., this volume), a noted figure in media studies who works with the fundamental understanding that the most quantoid of quantoids works with words, which have meaning at both denotative and connotative levels, and must translate them into numbers in order to do computation and then back into words in order to make a point. At the same time, the most qualtoid of qualtoids selects phenomena to discuss because they matter in some way—and numbers will always be part of what matters (Lewis, 1996, 2001, and 2008). I suspect the true believers in big data won't read Lewis, because their world is so tightly encased in certainty that being reduced to textuality might make it all end in tears.

But alongside the comforting certitude of diligent chorines, there is a dystopic side to contemporary journalism, where the digital is said to have diminished workers' and readers' attention spans alike, deprofessionalized reporters by proletarianizing and deskilling them, stimulated public relations, generated churnalism, and jeopardized on-the-spot reportage (Jackson and Moloney, 2015 and Macnamara, 2015 are sweetly ambivalent about this trend). Bob Franklin brilliantly summarizes these trends somewhat less contentiously than I could with this helpful list:

> the continuing innovations in communication technologies; the harshly competitive and fragmenting markets for audiences and advertising revenues; dramatic reductions in the entry costs of some online outlets for news; the collapse of the traditional business model to resource journalism; an expansive role for social media as sources and drivers of news; dynamic changes in government media policy; as well as shifting audience requirements for news, the ways in which it is presented and, given the expansive number of (increasingly mobile) devices on which it is received, even the places and spaces where news is produced and consumed.
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> *(2012: 663)*

Let us revisit the alleged birth of the newly empowered reader, the master of screen wizardry. It is certainly true that audience subscriptions are now much more financially important than advertising for journalism:

> Global newspaper circulation revenues are higher than advertising revenues for the first time this century. Audiences have become publishers' biggest source of revenue. The industry generated an estimated US$179 billion in circulation and advertising

revenue in 2014—which makes it larger than the book publishing, music or film industries. Ninety-two billion dollars came from print and digital circulation, while $87 billion came from advertising.

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*(World Association of Newspapers and
News Publishers, 2015)*

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But the US newspaper industry, for example, is 60 percent of the size it was 20 years ago, and digital subscriptions are worth much less money to papers than print ones (Franklin, 2014: 470–471). Is this what the chorines want?

And what are readers gleaning, given their much-vaunted mixed-media, multi-platform style of sovereign consumption? The science available is largely educational, and it shows that cell phones have a negative impact on learning. For "low-achieving and at-risk students," banning their use is "equivalent to an additional hour a week in school, or to increasing the school year by five days" (Murphy and Beland, 2015). And college? Cornell's renowned "Laptop and the Lecture" study, published in 2003, showed that lecture attendees remembered lessons better if they did not use laptops during class. Lots of research in the decade since has confirmed the risks of technological multitasking with smartphones and the value of note taking with pen and paper rather than digitally—and not only for those doing so; others get distracted by people typing in ways they do not when surrounded by old-style note-taking (Hembrooke and Gay, 2003; Sana, Weston, and Cepeda, 2013). The research even shows, paradoxically, that people who engage heavily in media multitasking are worse than others when given multiple tasks to do. Sending texts and engaging with social media seriously diminish these capacities and learning in general (David et al., 2015; Gingerich and Lineweaver, 2014; Lawson and Henderson, 2015; Ophir et al., 2009).

Now let us look at what is happening in job terms. Everybody knows about disemployment and underemployment in the Global North's journalism. How did this come about? In part because the conglomerates that have come to own much of the *bourgeois* media do not see what they do as part of a public trust, as business conducted in the public interest. Rather, they view all their properties as designed for profit, with margins determined by stock markets. Given the decision made so early on to post news free on line, this has made for large-scale lay-offs and proletarianization. Again, technology has been to the fore in enabling these activities.

Consider Mindworks Global Media, a company outside New Delhi that provides US and European newspapers with Indian-based journalists and copyeditors who work long distance. There are 35–40 percent cost savings on employing local reporters (Lakshman, 2008; Tady, 2008; http://www.mindworksglobal.com/). Or perhaps your firm of choice is LocaLabs, formerly Journatic, which has used stringers from outside and inside the United States, paid at best US$10 an hour without healthcare coverage to write allegedly 'hyper-local' stories they took from Internet sources and published under *noms de plume* (Tarkov, 2012; http://www.locallabs.com/).

Either way, we are seeing the New International Division of Cultural Labor, first discerned over 25 years ago, ineluctably making its way into journalism. Latin America may be a model for this—in Brazil, for example, public intellectuals routinely have to take more than one job, and journalists frequently moonlight as PR writers (Paiva, Guerra, and Custódio, 2015). But the digital world is seen as a force disrupting the *clientelismo* that has dogged much of the region, where interlocking directorates and oligarchical tendencies have seen Colombia, for example, normally run by politicians with significant media interests. The prospect of instant, unedited, on-line access as an alternative has excited many (Montaña, 2014).

This is not entirely to be lamented. First, it is high time that those in the Global South turned the tables by delivering stories to the Global North about the latter, after a century

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that was mostly the other way round. That reorientation also serves to destabilize the narrative of decline centered on Europe and white settler colonies, because it is truly a golden age of journalism in the Global South with the growth of literate middle classes (World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, 2015).

Finally, let us examine the deprofessionalization that accompanies the rise of public relations and churnalism and the demise of participant observation and research. Journalism is a long way behind the times in terms of ethics to cover prevailing social relations of technology and work arrangements. A study of 99 codes around the world found that fewer than 10 percent had evolved to address such questions (Díaz-Campo and Segado-Boj, 2015).

I am left with a profound sense of ambivalence. The utopic and dystopic poles of debate about the future are compelling, depending on your orientation to romance versus critique, techno-futurism versus techno-skepticism, capital versus labor, and Global North versus Global South. These discomforting antinomies have many midpoints, of course. A blend of history as well as contemporaneity, political economy and ethnography as well as early adoption and multiskilling, will be our best guides in these uncertain times.

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