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Dilemmas & Puzzles of Journalism

Dennis McQuail (1935 – 2017)

Editor's note

This paper is a transcript of the keynote lecture given by Professor Dennis McQuail at the “Rethinking Media and Journalism Practice” conference hosted by the University of Winchester’s School of Media and Film in 2013. Sadly this could not be published before his passing in June 2017. Still, we are honoured to have these thoughts which offer a definition of journalism, and set out dilemmas that theoreticians and practitioners across global divides may want to reflect upon as they reconsider the subject area. The paper collates several concerns militating against our understanding and practice of journalism and the media into ten dilemmas. Responding to these should keep us busy for a while as we ponder issues identified and questions raised, as we raise our own. Scholars are invited to note and grapple with key concepts, and to consider the mapping sentence offered, and mindful of historical, socio-cultural and economic specificities in their context, appraise existing, or propose fresh models. Media practitioners, especially practising journalists, are invited to augment the submissions from an esteemed observer of their profession (or craft) with their own experiences. This transcript has been edited and condensed slightly for clarity of communication in written form. The editor’s words are set out in square brackets.

Introduction

The conference is titled **Rethinking Media and Journalism Practice**. I am giving an introductory talk to that. I am doing so without a background in media practice. I can't speak as a great editor or even a junior reporter. I have never really practiced journalism so that is not where I am coming from as they say. The origin of a long-term interest nevertheless, in journalism, besides from a personal attraction to it or addiction even to the newspaper and the news, is first of all a general interest in, and a growing interest in mass communication, within which journalism is clearly an essential feature and has always been one of the pillars of the whole system of mass communication.

Secondly, and a more specific stimulus, was the time spent in the 1970s as an adviser or researcher to the Royal Commission on the Press in the United Kingdom in 1975 to 1977. In that, I was mainly concerned with the standards, or accessing the standards of the British press. That started off a trend of sorts. The next stimulus, as it were, was in transition to the Netherlands. I found myself involved in research and discussions of media policies there, in a very different context and very different systems. I became aware I suppose (not that I was unaware that there were other places than the United Kingdom) but I became aware that [the] United Kingdom was quite unusual. Not unusually good, but different, and in some ways unique. [Exposure through travel] helped me to see from a wider perspective—to be in another place [and] to look inwards into the UK from outside, and to other parts of the world. That experience developed into a longer-term interest in media policy [which] in the last year, especially since my formal retirement, focused on the normative theory of the press.

Those are thoughts which lay behind but were the specific origins of that book [*Journalism and Society* (McQuail 2013)], which was really a small scale project with a Russian colleague. The initial mission was to provide reading materials about journalism theory for students in Russian universities. When that project went on [to hit] the rocks, things happened... . With a little bit of encouragement, I turned it into something else, which is just an "Introduction to theory", and I enjoyed doing that in the long winter months which we had most of the year. There you have my entry into this topic.

I tried to think about what to say today, and I tried to think of something central in that work, and I ended up with the theme, "Dilemmas and Puzzles of Journalism". Now, these are, as you would see, theoretical points, but in my view they have a great bearing on practice as well. So the interaction between theory and practice—even our kind of theory, so to speak, academic theory—is quite an important one. I am certainly not saying that Journalism cannot be practiced without knowledge of theory,

but I am rather doubtful that reform of the media system or any major interference or assessment of what's going on in Journalism can be done without some grounding in theory. Well, a little justification.

Defining Journalism

A little more reflection on the theme before I deal directly with what I identify as these dilemmas—one or two remarks. One is the nature of journalism—what are we talking about? I mean, it's easy enough to use the term journalism but in fact, it is a common sense term that means **the work of those people called journalists who collect and write and edit and publish and distribute news around in the society and around the world**. That simple view works well enough in practice but it doesn't get one all that far, because there are many alternative versions of journalism. Many dispute what it ought to do. In some cases, there are variations in what it is—over time and between countries.

So I tried to give a definition that is not a uniquely correct statement of what journalism is, or ought to be, or has to be, but is at least a sort of fixed point. I do that in the form of what used to be called a mapping sentence. So, my sentence defining journalism: *It is **an independent account; an account and an independent one of current event and circumstances**.*

It is an account of events. You might ask what that means—these are **relevant events**. Relevance is required in the thinking of what journalism is about. It is based on **evidence, observation or authority**. Those are supports for the credibility that is claimed by journalism, which does make a truth claim, typically. That distinguishes it from various other forms of communication:

Official announcements, well they may claim to be true but they are not widely thought to be absolutely, the unvarnished truth, whereas journalism is supposed to be unvarnished. [Then] there is propaganda. Much of that is not all that different. I'm not voiding the fact that the two concepts are not all that different in some respects [the process of gathering and disseminating information for instance]. Nevertheless, there is a definitional difference. [Typically, propaganda is deemed to be one sided and with the intention to deliberately evoke particular responses].

Made public is the next phrase in my sentence. So, journalism is **a public account and published on a regular basis**. There has always been the notion of journalism being continuous. [It is] maybe not strictly continuous, but [a] repetitive, recurrent set of accounts that make a reliable time sequence of informational items about what is going on.

To end the sentence will be a reference to the fact that all that was discussed so far will **follow established forms, conventions and norms that are followed by the journalists themselves**. These forms, conventions, and norms are also accepted and understood by sources, audiences and others concerned with the perception of journalism.

One other point to be made about these so-called dilemmas and puzzles is that journalism stems from much more complicated realities than a simple common sense definition can find. Indeed, providing a definition does not actually eliminate ambiguity, nor does it exclude various options and alternatives that exist in the field of journalism, depending on where you are. So, it is not at all surprising that there are alternative dilemmas and puzzles.

These are not dilemmas exclusive to the journalists; they are encountered at different levels because in many cases, the society makes certain kinds of choices in its media policy, laws and behaviour, relating to expectations of journalists. These choices reflect what kind of journalism is wanted. They are made at the level of media organisations and systems, organisations which may be even firms or state corporations. Whatever they may be, media organisations settle and determine outcomes of dilemmas confronting them, before it is filtered to any editor or journalists. The scope for response to what I call dilemmas (and there are different kinds) is somewhat restricted by circumstances of time, place, systems and so on.

McQuail's militating dilemmas

Things come in tens, and in talks they often come in tens. These points connect with each other; they tend to overlap, and could be collapsed into one, but ten is tidy. The first of them is a very simple one: **the dilemma of facts versus opinions**. This is a dilemma but it is also a bit of a puzzle. It seems to be settled by one version of journalism, objective journalism which stresses only the relevance of facts. At least [that] makes a great job of separating anything that isn't a **fact**—*meaning a demonstrable, unquestionable, validated truth that that can be verified and not open to doubt*. It is not that easy to find or specify where the fact is, or to recognise fact when one sees it. We know that. Nevertheless, this is an issue that arises continually. The dilemma has to do with **how to relate** with any kind of **comment, interpretation, or subjectivity** to what is presented as **factual information**.

That is one of the conventions of journalism. It is also one that is not very easy to sustain because we know that there is inevitable subjectivity and non-factuality in the selection of information that constitutes news. This is regarded as irrelevant, yet it is

significant to what facts we need to provide information about. There is *inevitably a direction implicit in forms of presentation and in language use*, and so on. In many ways, this is problematic—a clear convention, but in execution, quite fuzzy, and uncertain and arguable. This is hardly new knowledge and it certainly is not new to say so.

Entertainment versus Enlightenment is another one of those choices that constitute a dilemma, but it is not exactly a choice, because, again, news media (and we are talking particularly about [print] journalism) are more gung-ho resistant to any notion that they are essentially in the business of entertainment. [Rather, they insist] that it is all about information. Yet, some forms of journalism are primarily interested in the results of presenting information in a way that would entertain the audience in the sense of attracting them, keeping their attention, providing enjoyment—fun. [In other words, the bottom line for these is delivering a fair that will attract sizeable audiences.] There is much entertainment behind the news even when we discountenance [the] news junkies who devour it for amusement— whatever it is. Basically, what we are talking about in the end is the institutionalised press and conventions of the business of journalism. It is the difference between a more popular-oriented, circulation-oriented, more public-oriented type of journalism that deals with stars and entertainers and such. At the other end is the journalism of record—high politics, and diplomacy and economics, and so on. That is not really much of a problem, in that it is largely settled by a structure and a division of journalism into its various purposes— Enlightenment versus Entertainment. These seem to be options but they can be combined. It can be said that the way to enlightenment should be by way of entertainment. You attract the audience and then you feed them with some enlightenment and that is the path to enlightenment.

Thirdly, we consider the relationship again of **profit versus public interest or public good**. This kind of formulation is one we encounter with respect to normative theory or in criticism of media practice. One finds it in justification of public service media as well. It is a matter that is central to public media policy, which is designed to achieve some forms of journalism that would protect not just the interest of media owners and firms in the industry, but also the needs and objectives of society as a whole: its institutions, citizens [and] members of the public. Consequently, there are many tensions between the two poles—profiting at one end, and public interest and public good the other. But it is not simple as we know it. In many cases, news media (journalism) is conducted within systems that are self-financing. Therefore, in a sense the media are expected to make profit, but that without excluding concerns for public interest.

Journalism has often historically claimed to be pursuing a public interest while making an income for their organisations. The truth is they are not totally incompatible even though at some point tensions arise. The tensions can be severe because profit can actually interfere with the expected goals, especially of journalism in delivering various kinds of information or various kinds of service to wider society or public. Again, these are issues that journalists do not really settle one way or the other. They are where they are, they work for media organisations that have policies, and they know that there are certain choices to be made (for instance, who you would work for). These choices are often somewhat remote from everyday experiences. The whole spectrum of journalism, when it is very extensive—if you have a very well-developed media system—can have different sectors. Some are altruistic and advocative—so, partisan, and not interested in policy but in advancing some cause or interest. You can have purely commercially oriented organisations that have no other pretension than to maximize profit. This pattern cuts through a whole range of issues in relation to the entire situation of journalism.

My fourth dilemma is **To whom is it addressed?** To whom are these accounts presented? Who is the preferred reader (to go back to a term that was once common)? We use it here to call attention to those who the journalist or the editor think that they are addressing in their writing or broadcast. This statement may be another way of asking the *quid bono* question—who is the beneficiary of this journalism? Or who is the intended beneficiary of this journalism? Who is best served? Here, there aren't any alternatives. The alternative is but one option which may or may not be open to any journalist, but to that of achieving some personal satisfaction. There are quite a few journalists who value their trade or profession because they can write. They can imagine their audience and can try to please them. They may not care too much about who they might offend. Their concern is not maybe with who they offend, but who they might not interest, or who might not agree with them. This produces a kind of tension in the age of online responses and blogging and audiences talking back to journalists. There is some expectation that journalists would be responsive to the wishes of their audiences but often they don't really. They would very much prefer not to hear what the audience is thinking.

That said, there are alternatives. [Beneficiaries of the journalism practice include] the management, the firm, the individual's career. [Therefore, it is key to ask] which of these is the implicit addressee of a journalist's ambition [or performance]? Yet *the audience appears to be the biggest one*. **Satisfying the audience**—the readers and viewers or listeners—and **knowing that you are a popular source, is a central and gratifying motivation**. This is important both for organisations and individuals; it is really the dominant driver of journalism. I suppose of course, that there is the other less legitimate option of addressing or pleasing and benefiting a client, or a source or a sponsor, or someone of that nature.

Our fifth dilemma is that of **Freedom versus Responsibility or Accountability**. This is used in the sense of how much does the journalist need to reconcile with the claim of freedom, which is implicit in my definition [in] the term which I used: **independence**. It is a word which gives us clues to *the notion of journalists being free to speak and write on anything*, certainly on anything in certain terms. It also refers to freedom to have opinions and a proper place to express them and so on. **Balance** is expected to be the ideal that respects the rights and freedom of those who are affected in some way by a publication in journalism. That could be the topic or subject or object referred to in any publication. It can be beneficial or harmful, and also individuals can be offended. There are many ways in which that can happen. We are increasingly aware perhaps that there are publications outside the institutions. So, *non-institutionalised publications on the internet are raising new questions about harm and offence and control*. Such questions just did not seem, at least not openly so, to be clearly covered by those *points of law which were daily concerns to newspapers* in their aim to protect the newspapers' interests from claims against them. Some of these issues lay dormant in the background. This dilemma appears in so many forms. For instance, as a journalist you will determine how far to use your freedom which you have in theory, and where the boundaries are. This has to be [consistently] worked out. It has to be; it varies from place to another. It varies from one context to another, from one subject to another.

Freedom is enshrined in an unwritten code, or norm, even in the most liberal systems, and its application is variable. With certain topics and themes one can claim a degree of freedom. In a western kind of liberal society—given the historical background—you can normally make religious and political views known with considerable scope, whereas, with certain other kinds of content, you can't. Even [with] gossip, it [is] uncertain about how far such [freedom] can be allowed. *There is no great claim on freedom of expression for advertising*. Indeed, the scope for sponsored material is contested anyway. And so at one end, there are quite a lot of things that don't gain the respective freedom. This therefore is a dimension that is very complicated and variable. I leave it like that.

The sixth entry here would be **the difference between instant and long term reporting, so journalism of the moment versus long-term reporting**. Now, on the face of it, you might say that is not a dilemma. You have certain types of journalism that are in the business of providing a daily agenda which has to be revised all the time. You want the *latest information* about *where things are going* and *what's happening*. Then, you have a kind of backup army of those who are going to *interpret and comment* and *provide the longer term perspectives that are missing* from stories. In practice, it doesn't much work like that. There is relatively little of the second kind of journalism in the daily news media of television [and] radio, where there is hardly any space for

it in a similar way to the news. Similarly, newspapers have limited capacity for doing that, except in a somewhat disguised form, or forms more like gossip, not terribly much like background interpretation of the events of the news. There are more additional **soft news**. Anyway, that sounds like a simple matter but actually we have reason to know.

A pre-occupation with instant news has a number of other consequences. It means [we are] always focusing on what is happening, on breaking news. It explains the importance of getting scoops. It goes with extreme competition for the same news story, the same sources, therefore impoverishment of the total supply of information that is transmitted. That way is limiting. It also encourages a kind of amnesia about the sequence of events—what happens next and what happened in the past. This has been one of the sources of criticism of journalism, that constant pre-occupation with a breaking story that happens to have more sensational or dramatic elements is deleterious to the overall public interest that might be served by good journalism or an adequate press (using press in its widest sense for public news media). There is no real remedy for this.

This situation is also well connected to the business of news. It is relevant to ask *where the finance is going to come from and who is going to pay for news, who is going to pay for background news?* Will it be supported if it were provided? It may be that the balance between instant and more reflective long-term (interpretative) news is in some way a matter of adjusting to demands. In effect, it can be argued that you can always find the background if it is needed. It may be also that online media, with their capacity for providing references to other past events in the same event frame, could possibly offer assistance on this matter. [With online media] you aren't compelled to go through the dustbin to find last week's or last month's news to know where an item of news came from or how it started; you get to know that without much trouble.

Number seven is another, we've come to the biggest chestnut, the dilemma in choosing between **Observation and Participation**. The most central notion of journalism as I defined it above is one that stresses its **monitorial role**, as an **observer and a messenger**. It is not in the first instance thought to be engaged or participating in conflicts and activities and movements in the society. Nor is there expected to be any active involvement from the media. But of course in reality [it does]. First of all there is a perfectly respectable (in the sense of being valued) form of journalism which is partisan. It *overtly and openly seeks to provide a view of the world according to a consistent ideology or set of interests*. This could be political, religious or some other perspective. Nevertheless, we sometimes have a problem of where to draw a distinction between these things. Inevitably, journalism gets drawn into social activity, and is far from the process of facilitation of other activities in the society that are of an active, engaged, involved kind. Theories of public sphere for instance are based

on the notion that the media including, to a large extent journalism, would be part of a process of debate and discussion and circulation of information that makes the society go round. It is not distant from society. In fact the notion of a totally monitorial journalism would be fairly abysmal. I remember there was a publication called Keesing's Archives, and I don't know if that still exists [See at http://keesings.com/index_new.php], that was what [we] got when we went to the library to find out about past press coverage. It was like news agency material, telegrams or messages—absolutely bald items taken from the kind of news agency material that is sold or made available around the world. It is so bare and unsatisfying that it might answer certain questions but it is not what we think of as journalism, and not what we want when we open the newspaper or turn on the television news. Sometimes one might long for it, but generally not.

That's what I call observation and monitoring—it fades into the other roles of journalism such as the **watchdog role** and **the critic**. The other end of monitorial, and the more participative one becomes as a press, then we are entering into the field of **active investigation**—taking up a position to expose corruption, scandals, wrongdoing at high level. It becomes intimately connected with conflict in society. Well, that somehow seems to go against the grain of the central journalists' tradition, and yet it is also impossible not to recognise that this is one of the great benefits of independence. **It is a requirement of independence that you should be willing to do that.** And then as I mentioned, there is the **journalism of advocacy** which is by definition participant. So it is a complex field.

Now the big chestnut is whether **journalism** is a **profession or a craft**. [This is] not a question that one has to answer—and I don't intend to—just asking questions leads on to reflections. The notion of a profession involves the idea that the profession, in this case journalism, would **control its own membership entry and qualifications**. It would **establish norms of content which would internally and voluntarily police**, in the sense of promote observance. It would have as a profession, **an ethic of public responsibility** and **service to the public interest**. These [sic] supposedly is what true professions should have. The only one I can think that really fits in this category is Medicine, though there are limits to that. There aren't so many professions as agreed [which still have fitting ethics]—it may be an old fashioned idea. I'm not sure about its ethics [i.e., the common perception of these practitioners makes the ethics of the profession arguable], but Accountancy is theoretically ethical. The Law has its ethical principles and normative commitment but also its limitations.

Well once one begins on this path, you soon discover that journalism is lacking in several respects but it is not [lacking] totally. One of it is that there is no central skill. I mean, what is it that journalists do that no one else could do? That is unanswerable. There is nothing really. I mean they observe, they take notes and they write and speak

out. We can all do that without being a journalist. To that extent also, journalism cannot really claim a monopoly on this activity of reporting on events in the society in the same way that at least a medical profession can lay some reasonable claim to a monopoly on accreditation of those who practice. These weaknesses have been even more exposed by the developments in online media and citizen journalism.

Now one more dilemma is **media logic versus the alternative to media logic, which is logic**. Basically, it should communicate itself in that media logic is a term that was coined to refer to the take-over of the information or communication activity, by those whose skill it lies in; the presentation with the goal of attracting interest and attention and maximising what a given medium has to offer. So, media logic in the case of audio-visual media includes always having pictures of anything, and not having use if there is no picture. If it can be a moving picture, better than a still picture. If it's got a person in it, of course, that is almost essential. It is essentially personalising. It has to be as dramatic as possible even if that is irrelevant. So all these things about our beloved journalism—including the extreme novelty and the possibility of instant reporting and direct reporting—***all these things feed into this media logic which distorts the selection because the form and the presentation come before the judgement about significance or relevance of information.*** Well that has been argued and one sees examples of it all the time. That is somewhere in our mixture and mixed up with some of these other dilemmas about entertainment and profit discussed earlier.

The last point is an important one. It has possibly already led up to the concerns that we describe as **cohesion versus conflict**. It has to do with the idea or overriding norm that one might have of *what the public interest is*. There are different ways of formulating that. One way is this: is it best (as has been argued) for the media to express and work on lines of difference and essentially encourage conflict on series of *creative destruction*? That change is necessary and change requires unease and tension in effect? Yet, conflict irritates people and causes power to react and overreact. Some societies at least theoretically appreciate the benefit of this, but others do not. The more liberal societies, because of their doctrine of freedom of expression, tend to be, or are at least, tolerant of the idea that the media and journalism can, if not actively promote discord, at least respect, reflect, express discord and not conceal it. Other societies value the cohesion and unity of the society. In practice of course, even in these context of a liberal kind, where tensions and conflicts are [approved of] given a pat on the back for theoretical reasons, journalism and the media were [or] are at the same time engaged in reinforcing, expressing, [and] conveying national cultural values and ideas. It's very hard not to [note this] every time you are in another country that you know something about. [It is easy] to have the impression that the typical journalism of news media is more supportive of the way of life, and the interests, and the ideas and the outlook of their own place.

Well it is not surprising; it is a **consensual view on the world**. Theoretically, this is a more difficult point. **One of the issues that come from a number of international cross-cultural studies of journalism is that this division is quite a major one**. The biggest one is in trying to establish a normative consensus about journalism amongst journalists and those who work in the profession. There is a differential valuation of what is regarded as the cohesive purpose of news. This has connection with the history of development, sometimes where that was the allocated role of the media, to help promote progress, which requires a certain amount of or quite a lot of cohesion, or countries which had a background of autocratic rule, where that was an accepted way of society. These orientations linger on. History has long term impact and it shows up in these differences. It is also relevant to notice that in the United States, supposedly the home of freedom, for a long time—for over 50 years—there has been questions asked about the toleration of dissent and alternative voices. For instance, allowing communists to speak on the radio or publish or whatever. That division that I am talking about is reflected in, and it is quite strong in sections of public opinion not accepting that freedom of expression extends to the enemies or perceived enemies of the country. So it is in this country [the UK]; it is true that now the toleration of various kinds of activities by the press which is offensive very easily wakes the wish to limit or control and even punish. There are new movements in that direction. It is a long term dilemma that will not go away, it has consequences.

Conclusion

There are three possible conclusions but I go for the shortest which is this: the end is nigh. That covers everything one might want to say about new media and online media and the end of journalism. We are very familiar with this view. It promises much good but also many disasters for the press institution and the way things have been done, and the responsibility of journalists in the media. So the end is nigh, but...

First of all, I will say that **these militating dilemmas will not disappear** unless the world changes completely. The institution of journalism as it has been worked out over two hundred years, has disseminated in a form which is not so different. It varies. For whatever reason, you might regard it as another aspect of imperialism, but it's not just that. There are benefits and attractions in the model of journalism that was notionally underlying the objective idea in the definition that I spoke about. That is largely the starting point and then it has changed according to socio-cultural and political realities of a place. I don't see why the coming of new media should essentially change this.

Yet what we have will change. It has reflected real needs and values of the society which are changing too. Needs also change; there are needs at different levels. The needs that audiences experience, or think they experience, and think we will have;

these change. There are also needs of the social institutions; [needs] they have, or think they have. Media industry have needs too—they know they have, in the short term, to make money. All these will not really change quickly. Nor can we expect technology to drive change, at least not of the magnitude that we are talking about. It is not the main driving force. It will have an effect; things will be different but they will be different in a way that is modified by current precious demands. I know exactly where that leaves me; the end is nigh, but not yet. Not in the short term, not possibly in your lifetime, perhaps that's going a bit far. My lifetime, certainly. I'll leave it at that.

Postscript

Q: What is Public Interest? In some climes it is reduced to the interest of the powerful? How relevant might this be in news selection—actual journalism practice as opposed to theory?

It is a highly contested term. There is no agreement on what it can be. It could be positive in its different forms. The central claim of the Liberal Free Market School of the media is that it is precisely in public interest that there are no rules, restrictions, guidelines, state influence, or public interference. Therefore, maximum freedom of the market is in the public interest so that it will produce this free market place of ideas so that we have alternatives, competition, and diversity. That is a theoretical position that is not always fully realised. However, it is not easy to contest it if it is strongly supported. There is a publication, a free market academic publication, called Public Interest. It is ideologically consistent in that it promotes pro-market views. To put profit versus public interest will seem bizarre to that school. However, when we withdraw from that extreme position and we consider power holders versus the people, it is not that you can't say these are different public interests. But how do you measure them?

I agree that [such thinking] is not open to the journalists while on the job. It is not an active ingredient in their thinking. It is not open to a journalist to work with such detail, it doesn't help. So you work with the material you have for the purposes that you have.

Q: In a practical sense of their job, what should independence be to journalists?

Independence is somewhat an uncertain concept. It is very hard to know where it takes one, or where it is to be recognised. Independence is in the Liberal model secured by the ability to own the printing press or the organisation and the capacity or ability to use it however you want. That [is] some kind of independence, but in practice it is not necessarily any true kind of independence of mind or thought or attitude—an unrealisable ideal.

Basically, independence is more practical. It is more of a lack of ties to specific sources of power or lack of influence from specific economic interests and similarly ideological positions. Independence involves stripping away these external influences on decision making on what to inform about and how to do it. It means moving towards participative types of governance.

Reference

McQuail, D. (2013). *Journalism and Society*. London: Sage.