

These notes are from a module I taught at [Vesalius College](#) on "The New Media Environment: Crisis, Conflict and Communication". They are the result of a series of interviews with journalists and media specialists operating across the EU.

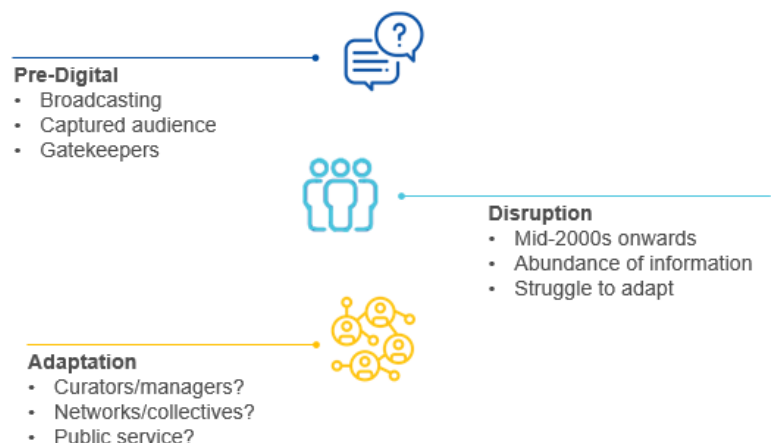
Journalism is undergoing a massive transformation - no one would deny that. Indeed, media is a cornerstone of how our societies work in Europe, and they are arguably one of the sectors most challenged by digitalisation. To understand why this is taking place, it is best to think of modern journalism as transitioning through three phases in relation to the arrival of digital..

THREE AGES OF MODERN JOURNALISM

Pre-Digital

Among the distinct features of this pre-digital period was the nature of the information flow. It was a broadcasting model - one-way and hard to verify. In many ways, news organisations (especially public media) had more captured audiences. The limited selection was driven by the high cost of involvement.

Journalists were the gatekeepers of information, with highly concentrated power. This gave practice of journalism a somewhat mythical quality and as a journalist working for a recognisable organisation, authority by name. This came with advantages (more accountability and a less noisy information environment) and disadvantages (less diversity in voices and the corruption/complacency that comes with concentrated power).



Disruption

When the disruption began is debatable, but it is clear that by the mid-2000s, with the mass adoption of social media, that the traditional media model was coming under significant pressure. The costs for sharing information on a large scale dropped and "citizen journalists" entered the scene. While this made the media environment more diverse, it also destabilised it. People had less confidence in information and people became more vulnerable to misinformation.


With this spike in competition and noisy media environment, media organisations struggled to adapt. New models were explored - subscriptions, donations, grants. One of the most prominent from this period was the

“clickbait” style advertising model - where you create a headline grabbing click and cram your article full of as much advertising as possible.

Adaptation

Now we are in the age of adaptation. The future is unclear, but we can speculate based on certain trends:

- **Journalistic collectives** formed by groups of journalists banding together to extend each others’ reach, usually around specific interests or to take advantage of each others’ skills.
- In an interconnected world, digital gives rise to **cross-border collaborative journalism** (particularly in Europe as there are EU grants that encourage this). Forming cross-border temporary collectives over issues to put together a story is a good way to break the big stories with limited resources. A good example of this is the Panama Papers.
- Under pressure, **larger organisations feel the obligation to be more things to more people**. For example, the New York Times have become big figures on the podcast scene. The Washington Post ran TV-style coverage on their website during the last election.
- **Journalists themselves are under pressure to merge roles** too - in the past a journalist might specialise in print or TV, but today a journalist might prepare the same story in print in one publication, in audio for a radio show, as a short video for a TV station and tie it all together on their social media account. This is epitomised in “mobile journalism”, where a journalist does all the editing, production and corresponding required for a story on their phones.
- Increasingly, **journalists take on the role of verifying and channeling reliable information**. Storify is a good example of this, a platform that tells stories from social media posts. In many ways this indicates that journalism is moving from an active (writing a story and fact checking yourself) to a reactive model (finding the story and fact checking someone else).



Consequences

- New voices
- New pressures
- New skills
- New strategies
- New sources

NEW PRESSURES

In short, the new things that journalism needs to consider can be summed up as:

- **New voices** due to the lowered bar for entry.
- **New pressures**, whether on the economic model, on the information environment or on individuals engaged in journalism.
- **New skills** needed to stay ahead of the curve, as with mobile journalism or equipping your newsroom to perform new sorts of task (like [audience development](#)).
- **New strategies** to stay afloat in a difficult economic environment (clickbait, tailored media, etc.)
- **New sources** for information, whether that's plucking stories straight from social media or specialised tech use and data journalism.

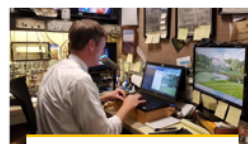
One of the topics I covered for the course, chosen because I felt like it encapsulated aspects of all of these pressures was user-generated content or UGC for short. It is not a phenomenon exclusive to journalism (indeed, the second story in this very newsletter is a UGC story), but it is one having an impact on the world of journalism. I think [this story on the Brussels Attacks of 2016](#) explains some of the implications well.

It also raises some interesting questions.

With a world of information swirling around, are journalists destined to become curators of content? If they do, how will they manage the tension that has always

existed between verification and speed? Indeed, if we are in a world where everyone is racing to get the be the first and all information is gathered rather than generated, then speed (already of critical importance) becomes even more central to whether a story is successful.

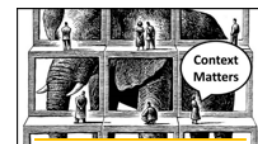
User Generated Content



Phase One
Monitoring, collecting
and verifying UGC.



Phase Two
Getting permissions.



Phase Three
Contextualisation and
publication.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

There are so many more angles one could look at modern journalism from that I haven't even touched on in this course. [AI is a notable absence](#) - what if algorithms choose the news we see based on our established preferences? Public broadcasting is another angle worth delving into - with all of these changes, what are the value of public broadcasters? What roles do we expect them to fulfil? In a world where we are increasingly "segmented", can we even identify

the public interest? Finally, another area worth exploring is the relationship between [the media groups and the platforms](#).

As communicators it is obvious why this is important. The media landscape concerns us. The information environment is the environment we operate in. These dynamics affect the channels, the strategies and the methods by which we do our work.

As citizens it should concern us even more so. These are not just questions of how we receive information - there are questions about how we guarantee accountability, how we identify the truth, and how we see the media's role in our lives.