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New ecosystem in journalism: Decentralized newsrooms empowered by self-organized crowds

Introduction

Monica Gaudio writes a story about a medieval apple pie recipe, and the story is published on a website. At the last days of October 2010 she realizes her copyrighted article has been republished without her permission on a printed food magazine called Cooks Source, and advertising supported magazine serving the audience in New England.

Gaudio writes to the editor asking for an apology and a donation of 150 dollars to the Columbia School of Journalism. Instead of an apology, the editor responses saying that she should be happy that her article has been edited and thus improved. The editor says: "But honestly Monica, the web is considered "public domain" and you should be happy we just didn't "lift" your whole article and put someone else's name on it! It happens a lot, clearly more than you are aware of, especially on college campuses, and the workplace".

Monica Gaudio gets upset and blogs about the incident. The story spreads virally online. Other bloggers pick the story, and finally the traditional news sources too. In 24 hours numerous stories are published about the case, Cooks Source's Facebook page is full of angry wallposts, and the comments on Twitter are heated, too.

The citizens of the Internet start to investigate the case and the possible legal consequences. It turns out that it is not plagiarism, but rather a copyright infringement, because Cooks Source has credited the author.

A person with a nickname Rubken starts to collect links on Cooks Source's Facebook discussion board to the content that the magazine has republished. Others chime in and post more links. He sets up a public Google Doc spreadsheet to list the content in a safe place. The person behing the nickname is a British web enthuasist called Ruben Kensig. In his listing it turns out that the magazine has republished content from numerous sources.

The Cooks Source case is interesting in two ways. First, it shows again the crowd's ability to organize itself in a heartbeat around a task online. The act of organization happens without an existing structure that would define roles and the strategy for the task.

Second, the wisdom of the crowds turned out, once again, be extremely powerful. Not only to spread the word of the case and the unfair treatment that the writer had received, but to solve the problem, do more investigation, and create more relevant information about the possible copyright infringement.

The Cooks Source case is only one, yet fascinating example in its unorganized, ad-hoc nature of the power of self-organizing and collective intelligence[1]. Crowdsourcing, a manifestation of collective intelligence, is used to harness people's brain power to various tasks with the help of Web 2.0 tools. T-shirt designs, logos, world peace, solutions to complicated scientific problems, work, all that is being crowdsourced. Yet we are currently seeing only the beginning of the possibilities collective intelligence will create.

The number of people having an access to the internet is increasing, and more and more people can participate in tasks online, whether the tasks are of ad-hoc nature as in the Cooks Source case, or in a more organized manner like in many crowdsourced processes. The power of collective intelligence becomes easier to channel in different tasks with the Web 2.0 tools, as well as the increase of cognitive surplus[2] in the society. In the future, people will act more often

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[1] More about collective intelligence, look at Levy, P. 1997. Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace. Perseus Books, Cambridge, MA.
[2] SHIRKY, C. (2010) Cognitive Surplus. Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age. The Penguin Press. New York.

as swarms gathering around a certain task until it is completed and then continue to the next tasks, just like in the Cooks Source case.

The power of self-organized crowds channeling their brainpower in various tasks will have an enormous impact on our society, and in all its parts. Journalism is one of them, and the crisis in the business models in the industry is speeding up the need for new systemic solutions in the field.

As the traditional media institutions and production models are unraveling, collective intelligence in all its manifestations becomes more significant in the production, delivery and organization of journalism. Along with the big thaw of traditional structures also the business models for journalism are proved to be at least partially dysfunctional. The traditional business models are proved to be partially useless in the digitalized age of information. For example in the newspaper business, print subscriptions and advertising doesn't bring anymore enough revenue to maintain the production model, as the print readership is in decline, the audience has moved online to read free content, and the advertising online isn't as lucrative business as it was on the print[3]. As a result, the newsrooms in the United States have faced cuts and layoffs, some papers have folded and moved to be published only online[4]. The amount of journalist positions has decreased[5] and many journalists are looking for work and doing freelance work instead of working as staff writers.

Instead of big, self-sustained media houses leading the industry, the future of journalism will be about collective intelligence and self-organized knowledge workers. This development is already occurring at large in the US, where journalists are working in heavily networked based models as well as outsourced models such as Patch, Demand Media and the Huffington Post.

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[3] Aitamurto, T. 2010. Kymmenen väitettä journalismin tuhosta, ja miksi niistä ei kannata huolestua. Raportti Yhdysvaltain journalismin trendeistä vuonna 2009. Helsingin Sanomat Foundation.
[4] Downie and Schudson, 2009),
[5] The New Yorker: Out of print. The death and life of the American Newspaper. 31.3.2008

In this article, I will describe and discuss how the shift from traditionally organized workforce into self-organized crowds is impacting the journalism industry. I'll describe the shift by looking into three different cases that represent new production models in journalism.

Network-based journalism: Volunteer work, decentralized newsrooms

In the new production ecosystem in journalism, the content is wholly or in part produced by networks. For example, the Huffington Post, the success story of online journalism, has grown from a niche political blog to an over 20-million-reader online publication that covers almost anything from business to politics, from travel to education and divorce.

The Huffington Post's content production model relies heavily on its voluntary contributors. More than 6 000 bloggers write about their areas of interestes and expertise for free on the site. The content they create attracts readers, and the traffic turns into advertising revenue to the publisher. The Huffington Post newsroom is based on decentralized networks, that produce content when they want and about what they want, with a little organizational structure.[6]

In the traditional production model journalists worked as staff writers in a physical newsroom, or as freelancers that are paid for the content they produce. In the new ecosystem, part of the content is produced for free. A model similar to the Huffington Post is being used at many publications. A number of local news sites such as the AOL-owned, massive Patch-network publishes content that is produced by paid staff writers and contributors as well as publish content submitted by volunteer contributors. In the global level, AllVoices.com publishes content that is produced by volunteer contributors. The contributors can also get paid if they become regular contributors and meet certain requirements.

In networked publishing models the role of a publisher shifts from being a content producer into more of a curator of the content, and the self-organized contributors produce the content. Thus, the writers can choose journalism to be a task that is done every now and then, rather than being

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[6] The author of this article is a Huffington Post blogger.

a full-time profession. However, whether professionals or amateurs, the writers organize themselves, and produce content on topics they find interesting and relevant.

Outsourced Work: Be a Journalist Whenever You Want To.
New players called content farms are changing the model for content production as well as the price for journalism. One of these game changers is a Southern Californian content company called Demand Media which produces journalism as a modern content factory.

Content factories are pushing the price of content down and at the same time maximizing the revenue. Topics are determined by an algorithm that defines which keywords are currently the most searched on the Web, and which topics will create the most traffic, which maximizes the advertising revenue. The content is published either on Demand Media's own websites such as eHow.com, or on their partners' websites. In the latter cases the content can be sold and the advertising revenue can be shared.

On Demand Media, the assignments are delivered to writers and photographers through virtual assignment desks. Basically anybody can take on assignments from Demand Media, without being a professional journalist. Content factories pay the writers a little, for example 15-20 dollars a piece. It is hard, even impossible to make one's living solely on producing content because the pay is so minimal, and content factories have been critized for their low salaries and uneven quality. However, they are becoming an integral part of the journalism industry. Not only by creating and publishing traffic attracting content online, but also by partnering with traditional publications. For example USA Today, one of the leading newspapers in the United States, publishes Demand Media's travel tips on the paper's travel section online. The advertising revenue is shared by Demand Media and USA Today.

The content factory model has two important effects on journalism. First, the price of certain kind of journalism (often called service journalism) goes down. Second, the production model changes the way how journalism is done. Content factory is like a virtual content production room, in which an algorithm decides which stories will be written. Anybody anywhere can take on an assignment and submit a piece of text to be published through Demand Media.

The model is similar to models that crowdsource work, such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk, Crowdflower or SamaaSource, companies crowdsourcing work. Anybody can take on a task, for example a transcription job on Mechanical Turk. The pay range starts from a less than a dollar. The workers can independetly decide when to do a task on Mechanical Turk - when they sign up for the service they are not required to commit for anything.

The content factory model chops content creation into small pieces, and the pieces are delivered to the workers. It is like a modern, virtual assembly line, in which everybody has their own defined role to do. However, there is a clear distinction between the real-world assemblylines and these new virtual ones. The old assembly lines tied the workers to a certain place and time: the modern assembly lines don't. They give the workers freedom to sign up for tasks when ever they need to. They organize themselves around these virtual assembly lines.

Journalpreneurs: Create Your Own Work

As most newsrooms in the United States have gone through layoffs, more and more journalists are working as freelancers. They are looking for new revenue sources, and some of them, such as crowdfunding, require self-organizing the whole work flow from the beginning to the end. On crowdfunding platforms, such as Spot.Us, freelance journalists pitch their story ideas, and community members - basically, anybody who comes to the website - can donate for the pitches they like.

Every pitch has a price attached to it, and the price is the cost of the story, the payment to the writer. Journalists can also gather money for other production costs than the pay, for example travel costs or material costs such as copying documents. The amount of money is a fundraising goal: when the set amount of money is raised, the story will be reported and delivered. Usually the reporter writes several updates about the unfolding story before publishing the final piece.

On Spot.Us, the journalist has to take responsibility of the whole journalism production process from finding the topic, marketing the pitch in public and convincing the community to donate to

it, as well as doing the actual journalistic data gathering work and last, writing. This is radical in journalism, because traditionally, journalist focuses only in the story production. However, creative work is increasingly merging with commerciality[7], and this development is occurring also in journalism.

In this new era, new skills are being required from a journalist. He or she becomes more of an entrepreneur selling his work, or in the case of journalism, journalpreneur, which is a word created from a combination of a journalist and entrepreneur. Journalpreneurs identify independently the topics for the stories they find relevant, and produce content independently, without relying on traditional media houses in the process. Instead, the public becomes more and more important, even as a provider of financial support as in the Spot.Us model.

Conclusions

As the production models and business models for journalism are in a big shift, self-organized knowledge workers are an essential part in a new ecosystem that is evolving. In this new ecosystem a part or all of the content is created on a voluntary basis. In network based models, as the Huffington Post, the newsrooms are decentralized, and the networks create the content. As a consequence, the power of determining how journalism is produced, who produces journalism and defines the topics, shifts from big media organizations to smaller entities - new publications such as the Huffington Post, and new production models such as Demand Media and Spot.Us. But these new entities don't hold the power as the old ones used to hold: their content production is decentralized, and the power is in networks, in nets of self-organized knowledge workers, that decide themselves when, where and how to produce journalism. They also determine themselves, whether journalism is an expression of professional production, or about completing a task to earn some extra money. These new models give journalists, or non-journalists, space to organize themselves around the work the way they want to.

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