



The impact of digital technology on media workers: Life has completely changed

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abstract

Digital technologies have transformed the media industries for better and for worse, but how can journalists win the battles against layoffs, declining wages, and stress? Collective action and the reaffirmation of journalistic skill provide a big part of the answer.

This conference was a tremendous and long-overdue opportunity to unite knowledge workers of all kinds. Media workers and university professors and other culture workers need to work together because no one else can or will do what is needed. There is no white knight on the horizon, no one waiting to ride in and solve the many issues of media transformation, value for content or the infinite work expectations created by digital technology.

This is an on-the-ground review of what has taken place in the so-called ‘digital revolution’ in my industry, the media industry.

We have lots of cool tools now. We file stories on our blackberries from inside courts, from inside hearing rooms – from anywhere. We have cell phone cameras and video. We use Twitter and Facebook to track down newsmakers or people who know newsmakers. We can edit video on our desktops – in fact video is digitized so everyone in a newsroom has all the video on their desktops (when the server is working). We use services such as ‘Coveritlive’ to do press conferences via cyberspace – there is no longer even a need to go to the conference itself.

But the very technology that has given us cool tools has had significant side-effects. I’ve grouped them as follows: 1) the downward pressure on job numbers; 2) the downward pressure on wages; 3) the stress factor... or feeding the ‘need for speed’; and 4) the effect on collective power.

The downward pressure on job numbers

First the obvious: All this digitization has meant a move away from equipment-based jobs. Audio and video editing can be done on a reporter’s or producer’s desktop.

Videotape no longer requires lighting or sound technicians. A TV studio can be replaced by a big desktop set up known as Parkervision, which needs just one director/switcher; the rest is automated. The fact that digital equipment is easier to use has led to new expectations of how we work, and blurred job titles and job descriptions. There are producer/editors (one employer, S-Vox, calls them Preditors), and video-journalists at CBC, and whether or not their actual job titles have changed, the fact is that most media employees are doing a wide range of technical tasks in addition to other primary functions. For example, reporters at Canadian Press are expected to file copy, then do a voice report for radio clients, and many shoot video too. Sometimes they do online work after that. The growth in online departments hasn't made up for the huge losses of more traditional work.

Citizen journalism has allowed the numbers of reporters and photographers to be lower. It may not have directly led to layoffs but it's been an enabler of layoffs. The growth in numbers of amateur columnists and opinion writers is staggering.

And finally, and possibly most importantly, the digital revolution prompted another disastrous series of events in journalism: it fuelled the great rush to media convergence – those big conglomerates that are now coming apart. Media convergence has been the 'holy grail' for media owners since the 90s, but it was never about improving content. Media managers smelled money in the idea that you could cross-promote between TV, newspaper and online properties, so they rushed to own properties on all platforms. The problem is that every time one company bought a newspaper or TV station, the first thing they did was lay off people to pay for it. This approach has been the vicious cycle of the past decade. It has led to three big companies owning all media in Canada, major layoffs exacerbated by the October 2008 crash, a stripping of local news operations for the most part, centralization of work and one of the three owners in bankruptcy protection.

The end result? Huge drops in the number of reporters actually covering news. The Globe and Mail now only has one reporter at the Ontario legislature; it used to have five or six. Competitor Quebec newspapers are doing deals with one another: one will cover Ottawa, the other staffs Quebec City. CBC and the National Post (strange bedfellows) are sharing sports and business content. Here in London, the Free Press used to have a newsroom staff of about 130, but now it's in the 30s. It's like that everywhere. So what are the consequences? Only Tier One stories are done: the obvious stuff, the event, the major news conference, the disaster. Anything that requires digging of any type is very difficult when staffing is so low. When you only have a handful of daily reporters, you assign them stories that can be completed in a day, preferably less. So environment, education, city hall – the stories that take longer and some risk on the part of a reporter acting on a tip or a hunch – they are all at risk here. And no one notices because they think that because there are so many online sources and blogs and 24/7 channels that there's more news. There's not more news...just more sources of the same news. And lots of opinion

The downward pressure on wages

Digital technology has allowed our work to be outsourced. There's word that ad designer jobs at the Hamilton Spectator and Waterloo Region Record are to be outsourced to India or the Philippines. Thomson Reuters does its business headlines from Bangalore, and in a twist on our perceptions of ourselves, Thomson Reuters offshores some work to Toronto. Its Japanese desk is here because it's cheaper than Tokyo. Canwest newspapers (Montreal Gazette, Ottawa Citizen, etc.) have their pages laid out at a non-union plant in Hamilton, Ontario.

Freelance rates have shifted from stagnant to declining over the past decade. In fact, freelance rates haven't really changed in thirty years. There are fewer clients to sell to (blame conglomerate ownership), and engagers can demand 'use in perpetuity'. Consequently, the creator no longer owns the item after it's sold so there's simply less incentive to do this work. If we are to truly corral knowledge workers into moving in the same direction, we need to fight to change labour laws that consider many of them independent contractors. That's the next frontier.

Then when you add in the citizen journalism factor, you have to conclude that our work, our intellectual property is simply being devalued over time.

Feeding the need for speed

A major impact of all of this has been the changing expectation of what people can actually do in a single day. A Canadian Press reporter told me that as a wire service (news service) reporter, it's always been this minute, this second. But now she says it's faster. Gone are the rough deadline times of 12 noon and 5 pm. Now the expectation is file video, audio and print, all the time. It's all about getting those six paragraphs out faster than anyone else. The pressure is to beat the other news services' online news.

Another example of how digitization has given us an unlimited capacity for immediacy comes, once again, from Thomson Reuters. Employees in Bangalore read news releases and pump out short tweet-size headlines for the financial markets within three to five seconds – hopefully faster than Bloomberg or Dow Jones – and they are timed. They may put out five or six tweet-size headlines on a single quarterly report in 30 seconds.

Live television producers at CBC are soon expected to Tweet from the scene in addition to producing live events. Because apparently being live at an event is not immediate enough. There's a demand for added colour on Twitter...immediately, of course.

And at a recent conference I heard about how a Toronto Star sports columnist does three or four blogs, then goes to the game, then does a column for the next day. And he may also participate in a 'Coveritlive' chat during the game.

Can everyone be expected to function in such a super-speedy environment? Will the main criteria for success be speed, with content and context a distant second?

The effect on collective action and power

The good news is that the blogosphere and social media in general can be powerful tools to link people if they are harnessed appropriately. During the CBC lockout in 2005, my union made a conscious decision not to force the 5,000 affected employees to walk around doing picket duty. Instead, because we knew there were a lot of different activities they could do to earn strike pay, they were 'set free' to use their skills. They did so in amazing ways. There are parallels to the US writers strike a couple of years later. Our members did community radio, blogs, podcasts, concerts in parks, and organized events, but it was all orchestrated online and it all carried our various messages.

The bad news is that we are all losing exclusive control of the tools of our work. This is a real problem for freelancers. Why? Well, we at the CBC got bargaining rights for freelancers in 1981. This happened specifically as a result of Quebec's Union des Artistes arguing that because they had to use tape machines, typewriters and other equipment inside the CBC building, they had sufficient community of interest to allow for representation by the union representing employees. The labour board agreed and that's why we are the only union in North America that has bargaining rights for freelancers. Unfortunately, that argument could not be made today.

Conclusion

So we have a big job to do. We need to ensure the specific skill sets in our work continue to be valued and to fight against the generic media model where everyone can do everything, from anywhere, and for free if possible. We know people are used to getting content for free – be it editorial content or intellectual content. Let's educate the public about the real value of solid and reliable information. We need a coalition of knowledge workers and a campaign – and of course, we can put to use all those cool digital tools.

the author

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