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The Future of Journalism in Canada

- Sherry Aske, Carleton University

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The Future of Journalism in Canada

Lunchtime Roundtable- Saturday, March 4, 2017

Notes from Panel Member Sherry Aske

1. Describe what you do in your current job and how long you have been doing it?

I am a “wear-er of many hats” at CBC Ottawa, where I have worked for more than four years.

I have guaranteed work two days a week, on Saturdays & Sundays, when I work as the morning newsreader on CBC Radio.

Monday to Friday I’m a casual employee. What that means is I fill in for people who are sick or on vacation. There are about **8 different jobs I fill in for** including reporter, television producer, line-up editor, writer, social media editor, digital producer, web writer, etc.

As I don’t have a permanent position, I don’t always know my hours in advance. There are days when I’m not booked to work when I’ll get a call in the morning to come in. About 30-40 per cent of my colleagues are also casual workers who are trained to do several different jobs.

Before I was at CBC I worked in private radio in New Brunswick. I also spent a summer interning as a print reporter for the Telegraph Journal in Saint John.

In June I completed my Master’s research project on how Canada’s legacy news organizations are adopting digital strategies. It explored how **newsrooms are stretching and splitting resources** to cater to audiences who want news the traditional way (cable TV, newspapers, FM radio) and audiences who want news formatted for smartphones and social media.

2. How has that job changed in the time you have been doing it or has it in terms of what you are expected to do, skills you have to have etc.?

The fundamental skills don’t change.

- Know how to write
- Know how to pitch and chase a story
- Have as strong journalistic judgement

What’s changed is you have to be to tell stories on every platform. **You need to know how to shift storytelling styles for print, television, radio, online and social media.**

TECHNICAL VERSATILITY

You have to be able to use multiple editing systems and computer programs. We have a different program for editing video and audio, a separate program we use for writing and publishing web stories, another for creating video with text over top (TOV). It's endless.

GENERALISTS VS. SPECIALISTS

You might not use them everyday. It may be a week or two before you're filing for web again so you forget the rules and the conventions for that program, or you don't know it as well so you're not as fast, you're not as efficient.

We have no more beat reporters. We don't have a city hall reporter. We don't have a court reporter. **Everyone is more or less a generalist.** If you're a reporter you need to know (or be able to catch up quickly) on a range of issues because you're covering different things every day.

This also applies to writing styles and technology. You may go a week without filing a TV story and then be asked to do one. You're expected to be just as efficient with conventions and technical programs you may not use every day.

TELL ME SOMETHING I DON'T ALREADY KNOW

Our 6 o'clock television newscast has changed as people move away from cable. We realize that even our audience that is coming to us at 6:00 likely already knows the news of the day. So we are striving to give them a rundown, but then also provide analysis. there has to be a reason for them to stick around.

- It means more interviews that run 5 to 7 minutes to contextualize stories and to hear first-hand from communities that are affected.
- We just started in January doing remote shows 4 nights a week. So what that means is we are on location somewhere at the jail, at winterlude, at the school board meeting.
- We are doing fewer traditional TV "packs" which are time consuming to produce. Instead we're doing more Q & A style reporting where the host and the reporter stand together and walk through the story with visuals and clips.

3. What are the fundamental skills you think anyone needs to have who wants to get into journalism these days or in the next few years - how much can be taught in school and how much has to be learned on the job?

TEACH STORYTELLING SKILLS

HOW TO THINK FOR ALL PLATFORMS

- This is what you want for audio: for background sound, I need the sound of cash registers, I need the scrape of skates on ice
- This is what you need for video: the crowd shot, the close up of someone's face

BASIC EDITING

- You can teach audio and video editing: This is what a jump shot looks like, this is how to make a good edit.

JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS AND PRACTICES

- ETHICS (what's a conflict of interest)
- Libel and slander law
- What are the rules around court reporting

CANADIAN HISTORY, ABORIGINAL ISSUES, COMMUNICATION HISTORY, CODING, DATA MINING

I think the real trick today is not to specialize. If I was a j-school today I'd teach as many kind of treatments as possible.

I think there is a danger that schools can teach conventions that may change.

When I was in school there was this idea that, okay

- This is what a TV pack looks like.
- This is what a print story looks like.
- This is what a 1 minute and 10 second radio voicer looks like.

I'm Not sure schools can do that anymore ... if traditional storytelling formats (the article, the TV pack) are fading, so does the idea that there's a right way to do something.

For example camera framing isn't the same for a Facebook Live as it is for the 6 o'clock news. It's not the same for a rant someone does on YouTube.

Why are we writing full print style stories on our website? We know most people are only reading the first two or three lines and the leaving. Why aren't we writing things that are two or three lines for them?

My fear for schools today is that they might try to put journalism in a box by saying this is how journalism SHOULD look. I think we need to emphasize how to build the pieces because we don't know what the puzzle is going to look like yet.

Round 2: What do you think journalism will be in 2042 and will those fundamental skills still be at the centre of the work journalists do?

Let's look back 25 years ago. 1992. The New York Times didn't have a website. Wouldn't get one until 1996. CBC established its web presence in 1995, so did the Globe and Mail.

So what that means is that in all likelihood, the device or medium we'll be consuming the news through in 25 years hasn't even been invented yet.

Things change SO quickly. When I was in journalism school at Carleton, I started in 2009. Tablets were the big thing. Tablets were going to save the news industry. Now it's mobile phones and there's a new app every week. Snapchat. Instagram. Message Apps. To reach audiences on these apps, stories need to be tailored specifically for each one of these platforms.

These aren't even questions my newsroom is ready to ask yet. We're still trying to figure out how to serve a Facebook audience.

The important thing for news organizations to take away from this is to CHALLENGE HOW WE DO THINGS. And why. **Are we doing something a certain way because we always have, or is it because it's actually serving our audience?**

I subscribe to Nieman Lab reports and there was an article this week that spoke to this perfectly, it just hit the nail on the head.

It's by James Tyner, a student, studying journalism at the University of Southern California:

He writes:

“Dear news media: Create news for people who have never read a newspaper. News in 2017 doesn't need to follow the production cycle of news in 1987.

For people like us, who didn't grow up with newspapers and who have used the internet since we were toddlers, a lot of the conventions of news today don't make sense...

Adapting a newspaper for the modern web isn't good enough for people who never read newspapers in the first place. We deserve something new.”

I love this.

In 2042, we will likely be creating content for people who have never read a newspaper, never seen a 10 o'clock national newscast.

So how would you package video if it didn't have to appear in the constraints of a newscast?

- Suddenly you don't need an anchor intro, if you don't need the boring two shots of a reporter nodding while they take in what someone is saying, or the walking shot of an expert as they sit behind a desk and you introduce their name...

What James is challenging us to do, is to **FORGET WHAT WE KNOW**.

There are companies doing this now.

- I would strongly recommend people check out AXIOS, which is a new media org from Jim Vandehei, the guy who created Politico
- It's an Example of how to rethink how we package news to actually serve the audience and not old school journalistic conventions
- They don't do clickbait (Axios is the Greek word for Worthy)
- Their mandate is to deliver "trustworthy news and analysis in the most efficient, illuminating and shareable ways possible"
- Something they're calling "SMART BREVITY" which I love

So what does this look like:

- It's built for mobile so the main page is a feed
- Each story is summarized in a frame (a photo) the size of your screen with enough info that if that's all you read, you'll know what you need to know
- If you DO want to read more you can keep scrolling - you don't have to click and be redirected to another page.
- Every story or "frame" is easily sharable

To prepare for 2042, news orgs need to be willing to CONTINUALLY adapt. It's not enough to change once, to add Facebook TOVs to our list of daily tasks and say, okay, we're digital now. It's keeping up & getting ahead of what's coming next.

What's Next:

- Virtual Reality storytelling (Putting the audience physically and emotionally in a story)
- Wearable technology - formatting news for smartwatches, for a world where there's a computer built into your bathroom mirror, your fridge, your glasses. Your contact lenses.
- Home assistants, Siri and Amazon Alexa.
- For radio it's finding ways to share audio on social media. It's podcasts. It's getting newscasts on demand when you turn on your car, not just at 7:30.
 - NPR has this amazing APP that's now partnered with Amazon Alexa that when you wake up or when you want it starts playing your playlist in the audio that you want it. So for me, I might have it set to give me my most recent local newscast, followed by the most recent national newscast, followed by the

newest episode of Canadaland or Someone Knows Something, followed by today's top hits.

We don't know what's next. We need to keep guessing. For large media orgs, the trick will be to try several things, to not keep all their eggs in one basket.

HOW WILL WE CONTROL FAKE NEWS

- fake news isn't new. there were muckrakers back in the day. Libel law was created for a reason.

- who knows, maybe journalists will become accredited like doctors, or lawyers. we had an article up about that the other day. Is that how you give content consumers a guarantee that something was held to a certain level of standard. Of course the reason that's hasn't happened is it's very hard to come up with criteria to enforce. Do you block out Rebel media? Can you license journalists without becoming a censor?

- I'm biased because I work for the public broadcaster, but it creates a strong argument for the existence and maintenance of a public broadcaster. Canadians need a guarantee there's a source they know they can trust when it comes to telling their own stories.

depending on who you talk to, news fatigue or the trump effect

polarization - if social media continues to be the main way people get their news, there is an increased risk people may not be exposed to opinions and ideas that conflict with their own
what role do media organizations have in this context?

so how do we expose people to new ideas, and beyond that, how do we get them to engage with it, discuss what they're seeing rather than just an in-out option of dismiss or share

ROBOT JOURNALISM, WEARABLE TECH, MULTI SCREEN EXTREMES

There are things I like to think about - how much of work will be replaced by robots, by AI? I requested a graphics pack from our graphics department from Winnipeg a few weeks ago. We send them a concept and say I'm hoping you can show some snow banks, appearing at different sizes. You send the script you've written that the anchor will read as the graphic moves.

He sent it back to me, and it had an automated robot voice narrating the story as these different snow banks appear.

The other thing people talk about is that less people are doing the same thing in broadcast now that used to take 3 people. There's no longer a sound person, a camera person and a reporter. There's a reporter. Who's also the editor, the radio reporter, the web writer, the TOV creator, the live Tweeter, etc. Etc. But there will be very new roles in 2042 that we can't currently imagine. Yes camera people, photographers are losing their jobs. But newsrooms are hiring "data journalists," computer programmers, coders. VR editing, stitching requires a level of skill most newsrooms don't have. The Missing and Murdered Aboriginal VR documentary the CBC did called the Highway of Tears - they had to hire out VR studio to produce that.

All of this to conclude that 1) there will be journalists as long as there are Canadians with stories to tell... and there is a need for a third party to fact check them and tell them. How do you produce stories for someone getting constant pings from wearable technology. Who has a screen attached to their eyes and headphone chips planted permanently in their ears? Who has a computer with push notifications on their fridge, on their toilet, on their. Multi screening like to increase.

BACKGROUND

The reality is 70 per cent of our audience comes to us through a mobile phone. Not a desktop, not to our homepage, but through social media And about the same percent are coming to our stories through side doors, (so facebook, twitter, search engines, reddit, they're not coming through our homepage)

So picture this, when I started I'd go to an event worried about gathering for two platforms, I'd have a camera person, and I was also expected to Tweet, take photos.

Now VJs go to events they have full tripod, full camera, by themselves, they drive themselves, they're

expected to gather for all platforms even if they're not filing for them all. They're expected to tweet, very hard to live tweet if you're also operating a camera. Tweeting isn't just messages, it's video. So tweet back some video. Again, they also have to shoot their interviews and broll on a broadcast quality camera ... it is pretty difficult to shoot with a phone while you've got a camera on your shoulder. And now we're emphasizing facebook lives. So go to this event and host a Facebook live. And our VJS, as if their heads weren't already exploding, are like, that's great, but then I can't film... I have to gather at some point... I can't interview people for a Facebook live and use that material in my superhour broadcast piece... so there are some things that we just can't have one person do. There are events we'll send multiple people to for that reason. One example would be the protest outside the american embassy after trump came out with his travel ban. We sent two people to do a Facebook live, one person to host it and one person to film it. And we sent a VJ to do TV and radio.

Biggest challenge besides the number of goats there are to feed in terms of platform, is less new, is the need to tell everyone something the second it happens, without pause, without crafting it, without fine tuning it, get content out immediately, because if you sneeze, blink, twitch, someone will have it first. That is not so good for the art of storytelling that gets taught in schools. Not good for the art of listening to people. You do lose someone of an ability to listen to what someone is telling you when you're at a remembrance day service if your balancing a camera, a cellphone, worried about white ballance. You can become a content factory as opposed to a journalist. I don't know what the solution to that is. One of the things I hate so much about being a reporter, is the pressure of having to feed all of these services all at once made it impossible for me to take anything in. You're fighting the clock. And it's, thanks but I need my 10 second clip and I need to keep going, or file it, I don't have time to ask you the follow up question.

That's not good news for fact checking not good news for the quality of stories you can tell.