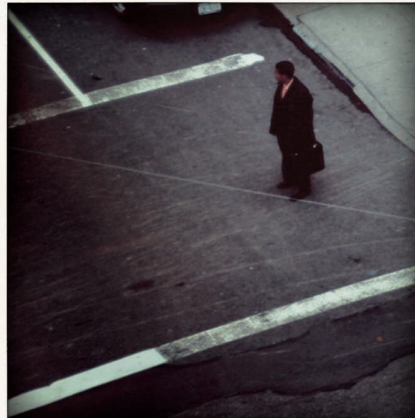


# Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere



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# Striving for noiseless journalism

François Heinderyckx

## 1. INTRODUCTION

News media are drifting away from newsworthiness. Swept along by short-sighted market logics, a large array of news outlets have actively sought to enlarge their audience (or limit its decline) by bending their offer towards allegedly more consensual, more universally appealing content. As a result, news media have converged into a universal model of soft news, short and punchy format and a neutral or obsessively balanced approach to anything that might imply ideology or controversy. These desperate attempts to appeal to the masses have largely failed in Europe and North America. Newspapers are particularly under pressure. Many have subdued their political orientation if they had one, entirely abandoning the ground of opinionated journalism to a limited number of outlets, including on television and on the web, some of which have escalated their ideological reading of events to the point of marked and open bias. Thriving on the demise of ideology and political engagement in regular media, some opinionated outlets are routinely indulging in content that is closer to harangue or misinformation than anything even remotely journalistic.

Coverage of sensitive issues like climate change, for example, has shown how some of these outlets go far beyond a politically engaged interpretation of events and bend facts to serve ideology. Meanwhile, mainstream news outlets have normalised a soft news approach based on the assumption that the audience likes being entertained, and therefore should not be bothered with complicated issues or events. Galtung and Ruge had already identified in the 1960s that “*the less ambiguity, the more the event will be noticed*” (Galtung & Ruge, 1965: 66). Media are nervously avoiding or downplaying stories that could be suspected of being boring or too complex or be seen as repellent by the larger audience. Inevitably, this results in a dumbing down of news, with a disproportionate emphasis on anecdotal

dotal and insignificant but juicy stories. Even major events fall victims to the diktat of the short, amusing or spectacular human-interest angle to news stories.

These developments are aggravated by an evolving context of increased pressure to reduce the cost of news production. This results mechanically in a reduction of resources, including human, i.e. the intellectual capital of news organisations. Journalists have to produce more content (see Davies, 2009) and also feed the cross-media platforms that have become a necessity (Paterson & Domingo, 2008). Even with the best inclination, many journalists simply do not have the time and resources to work properly.

And yet, islands of high-quality journalism (or should we just call it 'journalism') remain. In many cases they are thriving, coveted by individuals prompted by a desire not only to know, but more importantly to understand the world in which they live, work and vote. That particular niche of audience is a well-known elite characterised by a high level of education, qualified jobs with responsibilities and an enviable purchasing power. Marketers call them 'socio-economic group A' or 'social group 1', a much sought-after target for marketing and advertising. The overall result of this elitist reality is devastatingly simple: a growing information and knowledge gap is exacerbating the existing social divides. None of this might seem really new. The high fringe of news media has always been aimed at and used by a social elite with the interest, the skills and the financial means to enjoy the sophisticated journalism of quality news media. Yet, this is not inevitable. Are we not living in the information society? Efforts by public service media and the possibilities offered by digital technologies could have created a virtuous circle whereby a diversity of approaches would lead to a range of offer that could provide suitable news for various segments of the population. Instead, the current trend leads to a polarised offer between a largely homogenous, flimsy soft-news mainstream media on the one hand; and targeted, sophisticated, high-end outlets on the other.

This chapter could easily be mistaken for a case of nostalgia for the good old times, when journalists were inspired geniuses and news media were articulate, balanced and eloquent masterpieces. It is not. An easy cure for nostalgia is to browse the archives, be it of newspapers or television newscasts. My argument is one of taking stock of the inadequate way in which too many people are being informed, and to explore ways in which this can be improved, for the benefit of all. It is my contention that the news

media industry is in a deadlock after exhausting the possibilities for reducing the costs of production and circulation, and for enhancing their appeal to audiences. The tragic devastation of US newspapers in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008 proved how fragile they were by relying predominantly on advertising revenues. Meanwhile, the appalling collapse of News Corporation's popular newspapers in the UK showed where the escalation towards juicy stories could lead.

Criticism of news media and journalists is nothing new. Those voicing the criticism are usually seen as either utopians, moralisers or wrongdoers trying to cover their tracks. As a result, criticism is easily discarded as irrelevant and disconnected from reality. A wide gap is isolating the news media industry and practitioners from critical observers, the defensive attitude of the former arousing radicalisation among the latter. The ensuing dialogue of the deaf has not produced much to help either the prosperity of the media nor the ideals of the critics. Yet, both parties share a vested interest in promoting quality journalism and finding ways to adapt it to the disrupted context.

In this chapter, I propose to use the concept of *noise* to help us characterise the current situation and explore ways to improve it. While it has become so fashionable to call upon Marshall McLuhan to shed some old light on new issues, I would offer, instead, to go even further back in time, to Claude E. Shannon. After all, in spite of the erring ways that Shannon's theories produced when transposed outside of their original setting (that of telecoms engineering), he remains a fundamental reference to conceptualise noise as the core impediment to efficient communication. Shannon writes (1949: 11):

*During transmission, or at the receiving terminal, the signal may be perturbed by noise or distortion. Noise and distortion may be differentiated on the basis that distortion is a fixed operation applied to the signal, while noise involves statistical and unpredictable perturbations. [...] a perturbation due to noise cannot always be removed, since the signal does not always undergo the same change during transmission.*

My contention is that news media audiences are affected by three distinct varieties of noise: (1) proliferation of channels, (2) inadequate selection and (3) suboptimal reporting.

## 2. EVER MORE CHANNELS AND EVER DENSER

One of the alleged benefits of the digital revolution is to provide the means for ubiquitous access to fast-flowing information. Instant notification of events and quick access regardless of where one is located is now in the DNA of the information society. As it became undisputable that this corresponded to a critical need for all citizens in industrialised societies, a flurry of new products, platforms and services has bombarded the market, most claiming the title of 'killer application', one that, soon, no one will be able do without. Many of these applications are related to news. Websites devoted to news, many specialising in specific topics, have bloomed to the point that users are soon confronted with the difficulty of keeping up even only with those they found most interesting. A range of technologies was developed to enable users to concentrate, to aggregate, to store and to pass on to others ('share') the content produced by their favourite sources in an integrated form, and preferably one that actively pushes content towards craving audiences. From Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) developed in the pre-web era, to RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feeds and other web syndication formats, to social media (including sharing platforms and micro-blogging feeds) and smartphone or tablet applications, countless solutions have become available to assuage our allegedly insatiable thirst for news.

But does it? In practice, the news-anxious will struggle to find the right tools, with the right settings, to harvest selectively the news that matters. The search for selectivity (aiming to miss nothing while avoiding the irrelevant) is a permanent quest for innovative solutions, many of which, over the years, are marketed as the ultimate, all-in-one, nothing-else-needed application. In the absence of the ultimate news-feeder grail, users are reduced to cobbling together any number of applications, which are essentially as many channels. Each of these channels comes with its own feed of messages in a particular form, leaving the user with the task of taking them all in and assimilating what seems appropriate.

Whatever the sophistication of these channels, their mere number, along with the heterogeneity of the content provided (form, nature, credibility, bias) and incontrollable levels of redundancy combine to produce a confusing and mingled soup of news. In essence, we are faced with the sort of background noise against which it becomes difficult to distinguish the important from the accessory, the relevant from the trivial and the reliable from the twaddle.

Moreover, new voices have joined the chorus of news-related content production. Be it via participatory or citizen journalism, blogs, micro-blogs and forums, current events are announced, discussed and commented via a wealth of channels mostly centred on the web. Not only do those new outlets add to the chatter of news content, they also disturb the balance of the news ecosystem, while “*professionals no longer control ethical discussion about proper media practice and responsible journalism*” (Ward, 2011: 3).

Today’s news junkie will typically be overwhelmed by the constant prompting of the many channels erupting from the computer screen, the mobile phone and the tablet computer, quite apart from the attention still required by what remains of the traditional media (radio, television, newspapers and magazines in particular). The combined output of these channels constitutes a deafening background noise that drains our cognitive capacities and, paradoxically, makes it less likely that we will, at the end of the day, have been exposed to the right messages, those conveying the news that is relevant to us. The intensity of noise is increased by the high level of redundancy of content among those many channels. News stories released by news agencies and/or a handful of influential media are instantly drawn into a frenzy of replication so that the user must not only catch the bits of news that are relevant, he or she must also discard the replications and variations of the same stories.

The noise generated by the range of news outlets can be more than metaphorical. In many cases, the chatter of the different notification chimes, combined with the sound of online videos or podcasts, on top of the sound of a regular radio or television programme, can create a remarkably noisy and stress-inducing environment.

### 3. INADEQUATE SELECTION

News selection lies at the heart of the very notion of news media. A complex (and largely unexplained) chain of processes penetrates through a countless number of events taking place in the world (and beyond) to select the handful that will become news. The diversity of news outlets is largely justified by the need to offer a range of news feeds likely to match the specific expectations of different segments of the audience. In a competitive market, each of us will choose any number of outlets that combine to assuage our need for news. But convergence and editorial mimetism have greatly reduced the actual diversity among the major players, whose desire to attract the largest possible audiences has led to a deplorable



mishmash of more of the same. The situation today is one of polarisation between mass-audience news media and narrow thematic, highly selective outlets.

Mass audience news media obsessively aim for the lowest common denominator in an attempt to enlarge their market base and appeal to a larger audience. Their news selection is guided by an urge to respond to the alleged tastes and expectations of the wider audience. Self-generated dogmas proclaim (though not openly) that the audience dislikes politics and foreign news and that it craves gossip, scandals and emotions, preferably connected to celebrities. Appeal is preferred to relevance, surprise to interest, amusement to importance, sensationalism to truth-seeking, hype to critical analysis. This trend, which engulfs even public service media, is aggravated by each economic crisis, when the profitability or the viability of particular media is at stake and when attracting audiences is so vital that it overshadows other considerations, ethical and otherwise. It drives large portions of the news business away from the essence of journalism, if we accept that "*journalism's best practices, its norms, and its ideals are ultimately justified by appeal to the creation, maintenance, and promotion of a democratic public sphere*" (Ward, 2010: 204).

The situation is further aggravated by an endemic trend to oversell information abundance as a major benefit of information and communication technologies. James Curran (2010: 27) calls it the "*dynamics of misjudgement*". The marketing of the information society stresses that technology is the gateway to endless quantities of information. News outlets ride on that wave by promoting the quantity of content that they make available. This escalation on the theme "more is better" is in complete contradiction with a central responsibility (and key added value) of news media, that of selection. When news media open the floodgates of information to conform to the climate of opulence of information technologies, they dramatically increase the level of noise, thus further impeding news reception.

#### 4. SUBOPTIMAL WRITING

Writing a news story, regardless of the medium, requires skills and time. Even though online media have technically abolished any limitation on the volume of news content, news media are swept along in a long-term trend towards shorter, sharper and simpler writing. Even websites, which were originally thought to be the long awaited medium for as-long-as-you-want articles, soon came to be ruled by diktats of brevity when it was

found that web users did not like to scroll down. Meanwhile, free newspapers strove for a model of short and sharp articles, the whole paper being conceived to be read by commuters during their short travel time to work.

Current news story writing is not only characterised by concision. It is also affected by a misplaced concern for precision and neutrality, conceived as a modern substitute for truth and objectivity. In concrete terms, news stories are often cluttered with largely irrelevant details, as well as an abundance of comments and interpretations. Facts and opinions are easy to gather, and they make for cheaper material than thoughtful and documented analyses, at a time when journalists are expected to produce much more output than before, with obvious consequences for the quality of what they produce. Between 1985 and 2005, the amount of editorial space filled by British journalists in the leading newspapers has tripled, not even taking into account the time most have to devote to the website, their blog, etc. (Davies, 2009: 63). Not only do journalists have to produce more, but they are also under unprecedented pressure to be quick. Whatever the medium, its website and other digital channels cannot endure any delay. The "*speed of transmission is a factor in the trading of news as a product*" (Phillips, 2011: 81).

The resulting news discourse is thus affected by its own intake of noise as a combination of hasty writing, clutter of irrelevant details and contorted opinions. Audiences are repelled by the effort to absorb content that ultimately will leave them frustrated by a lack of understanding of the events being reported. The noise and the generally unpleasant experience are likely to drive audiences away from these new forms of journalism, thus precipitating the decline of news media. Much of this hit-and-run journalism produces news stories that are both unpleasant to the senses and distressingly uninformative.

Interestingly enough, a radically different approach to writing that has so far remained marginal is thriving. Generally referred to as *narrative journalism*, it is characterised by a markedly literary writing style combined with some degree of interpretation of the events by the author. Mostly present in print media, this form of journalism contrasts sharply with the current canons of short, dry, factual writing found in many newspapers and web sites. It offers the advantage of bringing a rich and nuanced account of events, phenomena, stories, processes and other social realities. The reader's experience combines the pleasure of literary work with the gratification provided by a sense of proximity and intimacy with the topic,

its actors and the context. Significantly, successive efforts to conceptualise narrative journalism and how it fits into the journalism landscape have coined terms that imply a renewal or a revival of journalism. Tom Wolfe (1973) appropriated 'new journalism' to designate the non-fiction writings of such authors as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer or Joan Didion in the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, Robert S. Boyton (2005) forged the term 'new new journalism' to refer to a new wave of literary journalism that is "rigorously reported, psychologically astute, sociologically sophisticated, and politically aware" (2005: xi).

Successful outlets for narrative journalism are mostly found in print periodicals such as *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Rolling Stones Magazine* or *Vanity Fair* in the US; *Granta* in the UK; *XXI* or *Muze* in France. Though these publications are largely confined to the upper echelons of society, their success shows that, in spite, or possibly because of the widespread trend towards shorter formats, the audience enjoys a form of slow journalism that takes the time and finds the words to show (and sometimes expose), to explain, to bring to life, to allow empathy and to provide useful details and nuances. There are similar signs on television, where, for example, news magazines featuring current affairs documentaries have maintained decent ratings with formats largely unchanged for ages. In the US, *60 Minutes* was created in 1968 and is still aired in prime time on CBS; in the UK, BBC's *Panorama* was created in 1953 and is still a landmark in television news; in France, *Envoyé spécial* has remained on prime time since 1990 (France 2).

## 5. CURBING THE NOISE

News media are trapped in a maelstrom of largely self-generated noise, leaving the audience frustrated and disconcerted by a sense that it is so difficult to be informed in the information society. This worrying paradox can be traced back to at least two causal factors.

First, the media industry has made indiscriminate use of information and communication technologies. For fear of missing the next big trend or killer application, media have embraced technological innovation with far too little consideration for the broader picture. Unable to anticipate how new technologies will or will not reshape the market, news outlets have been prone to adopt a large number of tools and devices as they appear, in an agglomeration whose complexity and sense of modernity are baffling, but whose coherence is escaping the users themselves. The escalation to-

wards multimedia, multi-channel, push notifications, pseudo-interaction and ever more content of all kinds is unsettling. Reckless deployment of technologies is often motivated by the erroneous assumption that whatever a particular innovation allows will be immediately and massively adopted by the users. If something is possible, people will crave it. Not only that, but they will stop doing what they did before, so that this new technology will replace old uses (and these predictions usually come with very precise timelines). The prophecies of ICT and telecoms industry leaders and consultants have so repeatedly been proved wrong (Curran, 2010) that it is puzzling in itself that anyone even listens to them any more.

Second, media companies have resorted to uninspired and zealous application of doctrinal free market logics. Assuming that audiences were attracted by nothing but entertaining content, that they could not endure hard news, particularly regarding political and international topics, and keen to enlarge their market base by promoting mass-appeal and consensual content, news media organizations have dramatically altered their output. By dumbing down mainstream news media, they have decreased their value in use, and, as a result, the very relevance and legitimacy of the news business. Short-sighted business models seem to be growing oblivious to the very core trade of journalism and news media, i.e. *selection* and *editing*.

*Selection* of relevant events and issues tends to be replaced by a process of merely sorting the floods of messages and documents circulating at a particular time. News outlets are obsessively trying to provide access to ever greater quantities and diversity of content, thus collapsing the roles of wholesaler and retailer, the roles of news agency and news outlets. Yet, “[t]he selection of news is perhaps the hub of the news production process” (Campbell, 2004: 125).

*Edition* also tends to be overlooked in the ICT frenzy. In the US, “much of the new investment in journalism [...] is in disseminating the news, not collecting it. [...] In many parts of the news media, we are increasingly getting the raw element of news as the end product” (Pew, 2004). The editorial side of the news business is neglected because it is associated with a large portion of the running cost. Staff cuts are, arithmetically, the easiest way to save money in the news business. But it is also the surest way to slash the intellectual capital, which brings the essential added value of journalism. The editorial process, to be performed properly, requires time and manpower. Staff cuts and the race for speed in dissemination increasingly deprive

news organizations of both. From the audience's perspective, technological wizardry does not compensate for the thinning of editorial work, so that audiences may be turning away from news media for a reason.

Handing journalism and news media back their primary role of sense-making will mean toning down or completely abandoning a number of weak basic premises turned diktats: "more is better", "faster is better", "trivial is attractive", "serious is repulsive", "the audience wants to participate; interactivity is a requirement", "whatever technological innovation has to offer, people will adopt massively", "public authorities should not intervene in a media market best left to self-regulation".

As journalism and media at large are at a "critical juncture" (McChesney & Pickard, 2011: ix), we have to seize the opportunity to allow news media to reclaim their fundamental role in society (Levy & Nielsen, 2010), including one of sense-making, allowing citizens to understand their world and act on this basis. New technologies offer tremendous possibilities for improving every step of the news chain from fact-gathering and fact-checking to dissemination, from crowdsourcing and collaborative writing to multi-channel access. Yet, every one of these opportunities can backfire into a contribution to the already deafening background noise that is submerging the news sphere. If efforts could be directed toward noise reduction instead, if media companies and public authorities were to reclaim significant space for a reinvented quality journalism, the dynamics of news media would breed tremendous business opportunities while reinforcing some of the foundations of our modern democracies. This urgent plan of action should not feed on any nostalgia for the good old times, but instead make use of innovation in an inspired and reasoned way to develop and safeguard a form of noiseless journalism.

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