

The Making of Digital Good and Evil:

Technology, Cultural Values and Professional Boundary-work in 21st Century Journalism

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There are (at least) two key debates in the extremely diverse professional discourse over the most recent, 21st century transformation of journalism. One is concerned with the role of technology in changing the nature of journalism, tagged with the term 'digital disruption'. The other is on the fuzzy state of journalism as a profession, the difficulties of telling a journalist from a non-journalist, and negotiating the hierarchy of the practices and practitioners, in sum the process of boundary-work in journalism (Lewis 2012).

In my talk I aim to show a perspective from which the two debates can be seen as actually one. Over the history of professional media discourses concerning the professional, as well as technological rights and wrongs have tended to intertwine, making professional and technological values interchangeable. Technologies defined as "good" in constantly changing coordinate systems may have represented similarly diversely defined proper professionalism and conversely, "evil" technologies could have been perceived as tools, manifestations of unprofessionalism. In the last two decades, remarks like 'unreliable bloggers', 'only a blog' or 'credible journalists' and 'respectable newspapers' were made within everyday professional discourses. More recently, when social media is labeled either as a creative tool for news sharing, or as 'the electronic version of pub gossip', rivaling relevant social groups (Pinch-Bijker 1984) are trying to define, create and legitimize the notions of the professional good and evil with value judgments, prejudices and stereotypes associated with technologies regarded as good or evil. In the narratives of media professionals and journalists, on the one hand, technologies perceived as new often emerge as fabulous tools to revolutionize the profession and to enhance storytelling capacities, and on the other hand, as heralds of professional doom or potential tools to weaken basic journalistic values.

In my talk, through discourse analysis of professional debates and case studies I wish to show how the perpetual renegotiation of professional values in Anglo-American journalism's ideology (Deuze 2005) is intertwined with the construction of values attached to 'new' and 'old' media technologies. With the help of theoretical tools borrowed from models of Social construction of technology (Pinch-Bijker 1984), boundary-work (Gieryn 1983) and boundary object theory (Star-Griesemer 1989), I argue that cultural meanings and values attached to media technologies and platforms converge with the boundary-work of journalism, the construction of professional hierarchical structures and values. I call this interrelated discursive pattern platform-centered demarcation. My central thesis is that platform-centered demarcation is a non-technologically deterministic (Gitelman 2006, Marvin 1988), interactive process: cultures and values of journalism also shape the interactions, uses and innovations of media technologies (Nguyen 2008), as technology frames the nature of discourses.

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