

The shaping of an online feature journalist

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Abstract

This paper explores the professional role and normative demands of online feature journalists. Through a longitudinal ethnographic case study of the work practice of feature journalists in the Norwegian online newspaper dagbladet.no, the paper uncovers how normative demands of a new professional role are negotiated within the online newsroom of a newspaper. It further reveals how the role of journalists is shaped by two axes: A historical axis of factors that have shaped the role of journalist throughout history, and a contemporary axis of the particulars of labour in modern society at large. The findings suggest that online feature journalists practice a more audience-driven and source-detached kind of journalism than their print counterparts. They further suggest that the remediation of feature journalism online yields increased status to the role of online journalists at large.

Key words: Online journalism, feature journalism, the role of journalists, convergence

Introduction

The role of the journalist today is undergoing substantial change. New skills are added to the professional role of journalists while traditional skills might be altered or even evaporated. Considering the role of online journalists, traditional skills like specialized, investigative beat reporting and deadline sensitivity have been downplayed and replaced by immediacy in reporting, multiskilling and -tasking, copy-paste mentality and 24/7-deadline (see Paterson and Domingo (eds) (2008) for an overview on the research on the practice of online journalism).

However, most of the research on online journalism is biased towards the exploration of online *news* journalism. There is no doubt that as online journalism evolves a complexity of

styles and genres emerges that broadens the diversity of online journalism and hence the role of online journalists. Deuze argues for a more rigorous approach to the research on the practice of online journalism, entailing enhanced focus on the ‘numerous new formats, genres and innovations in the production of online news’ (2008: 209). An increasing number of online newspapers across the world now include sections like ‘special reports’, ‘features’, ‘travel’, etc, which implies a coming together of two apparently widely different practices of journalism; Feature journalism and online journalism. Feature journalism is often associated with glossy magazines and newspaper weekend sections where readers are invited to spend time, relax and take pleasure in their reading. The dominant discourses of feature journalism therefore seem to contrast with the discourse of online communication as it so far has been portrayed in research on the practice of online journalism and the evolving role of the online journalist.

This paper investigates how the implementation of feature journalism in an online newsroom influences the role of online journalists and how the role of an online feature journalist thus is shaped. Through a longitudinal, ethnographic case study of the production of feature journalism in the Norwegian online newspaper *dagbladet.no* – which in 2002 as the first Scandinavian online newspaper launched a section entirely devoted to feature stories – the paper searches for answers to the question: What factors shape the role of an online feature journalist and how does the remediation of feature journalism in an online newsroom affect the role of the online journalist at large?

Framing this case study is an understanding of labour in general and media work in particular as undergoing substantial change entailing a more individualized and random style of work. The findings suggest that this modern life workstyle imprints the developing role of online feature journalists with unpredictability, randomness and devaluation of traditional feature reporting skills, evaporating for instance the reportage as genre. The findings further suggest that the influence of the work routine of an online newsroom creates a practice of feature journalism which is audience-driven rather than source-driven, provocative rather than empathic. The implementation of feature journalism in online newsrooms also provides online journalists at large with a more diverse role implying enhanced status.

Two axes that shape the role of journalists

Media institutions and the role of journalists working there do not develop independent of general trends in work culture and changing perceptions of labour in modern society. Thus, contemporary changes in the role of journalists must be understood in line with two axes: A vertical axis where the societal factors that shape the role of journalist throughout history are traced, and a horizontal axis where the influence of contemporary trends in work culture and new perceptions of labour is taken into consideration.

Concerning the latter axis, Sennett argue that ‘the culture of modern capitalism’ (2006) is marked by unstable and fragmented work institutions that expose workers to constant fluctuations in markets, business approaches, organizational models and governing, amongst other things. Beck (2000) argues that such modern institutions create workstyles marked by paradox, risk and uncertainty. Workers in such modern institutions are therefore deprived of the ability to sustain long term planning of their careers and thus their work ‘self’. Careers are no longer narratives where new skills build upon old skills to create a logic enhancement of knowledge and achievement within the institution. What merits in modern work life is rather an ability to accept and embrace rapid and unforeseen change and to quickly adapt to new and shifting demands in line with unpredicted institutional fluctuations. Successful work careers are thus becoming blind to past experiences, argues Sennett (2006). Old skills are neglected rather than developed, old knowledge forgotten rather than build upon. Thus, modern work identity and careers are constructed as much by chance and randomness as by actual skill and craftsmanship possessed by the individual. As Deuze notes: ‘success in keeping a job increasingly depends on developments beyond the control of employee or employer’ (2007: 2).

Professional work identity and thus professional role is therefore becoming increasingly individualized and to a certain degree unbound by historical developments. Online journalism is for instance often marked by an attempt to establish new normative demands for the practice of journalism rather than building upon traditional journalistic skills and craftsmanship. As a compilation of research on the practice of online journalism around the world edited by Paterson and Domingo (2008) shows: The online journalist is principally separated from her old media counter-part and she develop her role as much in conflict with as in alliance with the normative demands of old media journalism, thus making her strive to achieve professional status. Paterson

concludes: ‘the socio-cultural divide between old and new media journalists [...] remains profound.’ (Ibid: 6)

That being said, the role of journalists in a digital era does not develop isolated from historical trends. As argued by Dahlgren (1996), Schudson (2003), Scott (2005) and others; Journalism and the role of journalists were undergoing substantial change *prior* to the remediation of journalism in digital media. Much of the research into the changing role of journalists in a digital era has neglected the societal factors that have shaped the role of journalists throughout history – recognized as the vertical axis above. Change has therefore often been promoted as revolution rather than continuation of an already established process.

Ottosen (2004) has assembled the historical roots of the changing role of journalists as seven lines of conflicts by which the role is – and has been – shaped: the organization of journalist's trade unions; the fight for intellectual property rights; the fight for educational programs in journalism; the fight for freedom of expression and information; the development of ethical norms and standards in journalism; demarcation towards other professions, and technological conditions. Many of these lines of conflict can be recognized in recent research on contemporary changes in the role of journalists in the Western hemisphere (Deuze, 2007; Nygren, 2008; Singer, 2003; Marjoribanks, 2003; Ottosen and Krumsvik, 2008). Based on this body of research and on the findings of the case study presented in this paper, I will argue that the factors shaping the role of journalists in a digital era are:

- Convergence on macro (clustering of media companies) and meso levels (multimedia newsrooms).
- Competition from new markets and changing economic conditions.
- Blurring demarcations towards other professions.
- Weakening trade unions.
- New conditions for freedom of expression and information.
- Blurring boundaries between private and public spaces, mass media and private media.
- Intellectual property rights under pressure.
- Ethical norms and standards under pressure.
- Assets of new technology.

- Emergence of new styles and genres.

The last factor concerning new styles and genres is the novel offering of this paper, as this factor so far – at least to a certain degree – has been neglected in research on the changing role of journalists in new media. The aim of this paper is to show how these two axes – the vertical, historical and the horizontal, contemporary – influenced the shaping of an online feature journalist in an online newsroom.

The role sectors of a feature journalist

Framing the methodological approach of the study is an understanding of role in line with Goffman's (1961) distinction of role from role performance. Goffman defined role as 'the activity the incumbents would engage in were he to act solely in terms of the normative demands upon someone in his position' (1961: 85). Role performance on the other hand, is the actual conduct by an individual at work. Like Parson (1951) and Merton (1957) Goffman also emphasized that role and role performance must be understood through social interaction with what he labelled 'role others'. A journalist would for example perform one aspect of her role in interaction with sources, a different aspect in interaction with the audience and yet another aspect in interaction with in-house marketing personnel, and so forth. Goffman labelled these different aspects of role performance 'role sectors' (1961: 86) and these sectors might be broken up and/or altered in course of time. The normative demands of an occupational role and the performance of incumbents possessing the role are both dynamic – much in line with what Giddens (1984) perceived as a duality of structuration.

What, then, constitute the role of a feature journalist as it has been performed in old media, like newspapers and magazines? Based on a review of previous research and textbooks on feature journalism, Steensen (forthcoming) argues that traditional newspaper and magazine feature journalism is dominated by discourses of fiction, adventure and intimacy. This suggests that the role of a traditional (print) feature journalist consists of skills of narrative storytelling, skills of exploring places and phenomenon through reportage, and people skills, e.g. establishing intimate relations with sources in order to portray personal rather than professional issues,

emotions rather than opinions. A print feature journalist writing a sidebar feature to a news story would emphasise the personal and emotional consequences of the hard news. A magazine feature writer would in addition emphasise the techniques of narrative storytelling and explore places and/or phenomenon that are either untouched by news journalists or serve as background to hard news.

The role of a print feature journalist is therefore dominated by one role sector in particular: journalist vs. sources. Intimacy towards sources through reportage can be depicted as a main virtue of print feature writers. The question then is which role sector(s) dominate the role performance of online feature journalists and how the two axes that shape the role of journalist described above contribute in the shaping of these journalist's role performance and thus the normative demands of their role.

Notes on methodology

Research on how role performance and the normative demands of the role of journalists change under the influence of the axes outlined above, require a methodology of close observation of journalists at work, i.e. ethnography. Several researchers have in recent years pointed to the need for ethnographic approaches to the institutional production of online journalism (Boczkowski, 2004; Scott, 2005; Domingo, 2006; 2008; Cottle, 2007, Paterson, 2008). This call comes as both a response to the neglect of ethnographic research in newsrooms at large since the pioneers of this methodology – Tuchman (1978) and Gans (1979) – dominated journalism studies in the 70s, and as a recognition of the limitations of other methodological approaches as these have failed to give accurate insight into why online journalism and the role of online journalists evolve as they do.

The benefits of ethnography are that the method provides the researcher with a rich empirical material containing firsthand information on newsroom production. Ethnographic research therefore 'encourage a more qualified stance to some of the circulating claims and generalizations made about the news media', according to Cottle (2007: 1). The methodology however raises some questions concerning both the quality of how empirical material is gathered and the degree of generalization made possible by it. Paterson (citing Domingo) notes that actors might be disturbed by the researcher's observations, that the researcher's prejudice might

influence the study, that it is difficult to set down everything the researcher witnesses and that generalizations cannot be made, at least not right away (2008: 5). Puijk (2008) notes that in modern newsrooms much communication is withheld from the observer as it is withdrawn to the silence of the computer screen instead of displayed in face-to-face interaction. However, measures can be taken to avoid many of these methodological pitfalls. The most important is to ensure a triangulation of approaches securing different perspectives on the material. Observations should therefore be accompanied with interviews and document analysis. Furthermore, securing access for a sufficient period of time is necessary, so that situations and actions can be understood properly and in their right context. An example from the case study presented here can serve as an illustration: Upon my first visit to *dagbladet.no* I was struck by the silence surrounding the work practice. It took me several days to understand that the journalists communicated via chat even though they sat within voice reach of each other in an open-plan newsroom. It took me an additional couple of days to be able to understand what kind of matters they discussed through chat and to read their behaviour (e.g. body language) so that I understood *when* they chatted with colleagues about matters of importance to their role performance.

To give an as accurate account as possible on how the role of an online feature journalist was shaped, it was therefore necessary to apply a longitudinal perspective to the research approach. Only then could the complex nature of modern newsroom communication and work practice be 'decoded'. And only then could the rapid changes in online newsrooms over time (concerning staff size and hallmarks, processes of convergence, genre developments, economic resources, technological developments and so forth) be included in the approach, and only then could changes in role sectors be uncovered.

The case study of *dagbladet.no* is therefore based on four periods of observation (in May 2005, September 2006, January 2007 and November 2007) covering a total of six weeks. During these periods I sat in the open-plan online newsroom close to the Magasinet section desk, I followed the online feature journalists in their work and attended newsroom meetings etc. In addition, I conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with newsroom staffers (editors, journalist, marketing personnel and technical personnel) mainly in *dagbladet.no* but also in the parent organization of *Dagbladet*. I also analyzed documents such as annual reports and internal project reports. In-between the periods of observation I followed the section closely from a reader's point of view and corresponded with newsroom staffers through e-mail and chat¹.

The empirical material secures a thorough and reliable insight into this one case. However, as the study is limited to only one case, generalization is made difficult. The case study will therefore primarily serve as a 'reality check' of the theoretical discussions above. However, comparison to other empirical research will be made to strengthen the validity of the study beyond this one case.

The role of the feature journalist in *dagbladet.no*

Dagbladet.no is today the second biggest online newspaper in Norway. The online newsroom has grown from 26 journalists and editors in 1999 to 53 in 2007, out of which 44 held permanent positions. With a few exceptions, all the journalists are organized in the journalist's trade union as most online journalists in Norway are². This implies that the factor of weakening trade unions will not play a role in this particular case.

When the section *Magasinet*³ was launched in February 2002, the intention was, according to one editor, that the journalist assigned to the section should do three things: Shovel stories from print to online, create communities where readers could discuss the print *Magasinet* stories and write stories of her own. Six years after the launch – in 2008 – three online feature journalists worked full time producing stories for the section in addition to regular contributions from other staffers and outsiders. Cooperation with the print *Magasinet* was by now minimized and the online feature journalists had gained the autonomy needed to sway the normative demands of their role. The section now mainly consisted of stories written exclusively for web and the journalists expressed an unwillingness to shovel print stories to the section. Text was however still the preferred medium of expression.

The work routine of the online feature journalists had by 2008 developed to in many aspects mirror the routine of their online colleagues. They produced the broader part of their stories without leaving the newsroom. Internet, e-mail and telephone were used as main channels of information, but they were able to research their stories more thoroughly than their colleagues and could spend several days on each story (in contrast to the other online journalists who normally produced several stories each day). They had to master a great variety of technical

skills, including some html editing and photo editing. They mastered all the different stages of production and publication themselves, from idea development to research, writing, editing, finding illustrations, publishing and post-publish editing. All these tasks created a great workload for the online feature journalists to master. They worked long hours and rarely had time to lunch. However, they expressed satisfaction with their work and felt privileged in their ability to write more in-depth stories.

The journalists were not isolated from the rest of the newsroom work practice. Whenever a major news story broke, they contributed to the coverage on the news sections. From 2005, the work routine also involved arranging so called net meetings, i.e. an online arena within the section where sources answered pre-posted questions from readers live. The same year the Magasinet section (in line with the other sections of *dagbladet.no*) also included a possibility for readers to comment on and discuss stories. Deciding which stories that were suited for reader discussions and then monitoring these discussions – and also participate in them – therefore also became part of the work routine. The implementation of these interactive features made user involvement a journalistic goal of its own. Story ideas should be suited to engage readers in debate and the stories should be written in ways that might provoke debate.

In 2007 – preceding a relaunch of the section – the online feature journalists wrote a journalistic program where they defined their journalism as ‘smart, surprising, of news value, controversial and debate inspiring’⁴. The program further stated that the journalism of the Magasinet section provided *dagbladet.no* with a distinct character of ‘seriousness, an impression of thoroughness, analysis and quality’. The program also emphasized the importance of demarcation towards both print feature journalism (but without any further discussion on what that would imply) and online journalism, in that the section would contribute to correct the general impression of online journalism as ‘sloppy and plain’. Furthermore, the program outlined two types of stories the journalists would focus their production on: Multimedia reportage and news features/background stories.

The program had by 2008 only partly materialized. Multimedia reportage was restricted to the occasional photo slide show and Flash video, but the lack of a Flash designer prevented the further exploration of this feature.

Analyzing role sectors and axes shaping the role of journalists

We can identify four different role sectors that are of importance in the process of negotiating the role of an online feature journalist in *dagbladet.no*: The online feature journalist vs. print feature newsroom staffers, the online feature journalists vs. other online journalists, the online feature journalist vs. sources and the online feature journalists vs. the audience. In the following I will analyze how the two axes shaping the role of journalists in a digital era that I outlined above worked to shape the role of an online feature journalist within these role sectors in *dagbladet.no*.

The online feature journalist vs. print feature newsroom staffers

The role of the online feature journalist in *dagbladet.no* was initially established through a process of *convergence* (reflecting the first factor mentioned above); The Magasinet section came into existence through a joint initiative from the newsrooms of the print Magasinet and *dagbladet.no*. The initiative implied a close relationship with print feature journalists and editors, and what might be interpreted as a subordinate role to them since the idea was that the online feature journalists mainly should process and shovel the works of print feature journalists to an online environment. This subordinate role however clashed with the autonomy of performance needed to provide the role with *status*, and a demarcation towards print feature journalists and editors was therefore called for.

The autonomy provided them with what Goffman (1961) labelled *role distance*. They did not deny that they were feature journalists but needed to distance themselves from the normative standards of the traditional role of feature journalists by performing the role in a different manner. This type of work behaviour serves as an example of how modern work identity is created as much by deskilling as by acquiring (new) skills. As pointed out by Sennett (2006), holding on to old knowledge and traditional skills might prove to be a disadvantage in modern work life.

However, the online feature journalists preserved some of the normative standards of their print colleagues. In interviews they (and the other online journalists of *dagbladet.no*) expressed quite conventional ideas on what feature journalism and the role of a feature journalist in general should be, including possession of good writing skills, storytelling proficiency and in-depth coverage providing background to unfolding news. Applying these skills might be seen as a

response to the factor of *competition from new markets* mentioned above, as there was a general feeling in the newsroom that these skills, as they were practiced in the Magasinet section, provided *dagbladet.no* with a competitive advantage towards other online newspapers.

The online feature journalists of *dagbladet.no* also initially expressed a wish to apply another normative standard from the role of conventional print feature journalists, namely producing reportage – the genre that dominates print feature journalism. But as time went by, the lack of reportage in their production routine became a normative standard of their role, as they felt readers provided the same kind of ‘human touch’ to their stories as the method of reporting did for their print counterparts. This devaluation of the reportage as genre therefore ended up as a performance of role distance towards print feature journalists. It also ended up as illustrating a point concerning contemporary trends in work culture and perceptions of labour in general: Outsourcing of work and blurring boundaries between leisure and work activity. What in old media newsrooms is considered a core journalistic work activity (doing reportage), is in an online newsroom outsourced to a leisure activity performed by non-professionals (the audience).

Online feature journalists vs. online journalists

The devaluation of reportage as genre coincides with the observation made by other researchers of online journalism that ‘traditional reporting skills have been downplayed by those working online’ (Singer, 2003: 148). Given the physical location of the online Magasinet desk in the open-plan online newsroom, there is no doubt that the role sector where the online feature journalists interacted with other online journalists of *dagbladet.no* made a great impact on how the role of the online feature journalist developed. The online feature journalists perceived themselves first and foremost as online journalists. The already established work routine of the online newsroom – where *blurring demarcations towards other professions* (like technical personnel) was a key factor – therefore made the role of the online feature journalist much more multi-tasked than the role of their print counterparts who concentrated on doing research and writing. This resulted in two things: The advantage was more control over the final product and hence more freedom, the disadvantage was a bigger workload and hence more pressure.

These effects are well documented in research on the work of online journalists at large. In Norway, a report issued by the journalist's trade union on the working conditions of multimedia journalists showed that 58 per cent of these journalists felt they didn't have time to

fulfil all the tasks they were supposed to carry out. The report concluded: 'To work as a journalist in the world of new media seems incompatible with having a middle ranged quality of life' (NJ, 2008: 7). Simultaneously, the multimedia journalists expressed great satisfaction with their work. Similar findings are presented in a Swedish study (Asp, 2007, cited in Nygren 2008: 72) and in a 2004 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report on the future of work and quality of life in the media (cited in Deuze, 2007: 94).

The factor *different ethical norms and standards* mentioned above also made an impact within this role sector. Online journalists have been criticized for lowering the ethical norms and standards of conventional journalism through – amongst other things – lack of accuracy due to the immediacy of reporting (Deuze, 1999; Hall, 2001; Singer, 2003, 2006; Rasmussen, 2006; Domingo, 2006). This factor played a dual role in the shaping of the online feature journalist in *dagbladet.no*: The online feature journalists were influenced by it as they felt accuracy could be acquired post-publishing in collaboration with readers as readers would e-mail them corrections or post corrections as comments to the stories published. On the other hand they also felt a need to distinguish themselves from the online (news) journalists, as they saw it as their role to be pioneers in the process of increasing the standard of online journalism. Again we see a display of *role distance* and deskilling rather than building upon old knowledge and conventional skills. The online feature journalists needed to distance themselves from both traditional feature journalists and online journalists in order to sway the normative demands of a new role for them to perform.

This process of demarcation towards other online journalists helped the online feature journalists to achieve status. They were respected by their colleagues who felt the *Magasinet* section distinguished *dagbladet.no* from other competing online newspapers. They also possessed an attractive role for applicants of journalistic positions. When several positions as journalists in *dagbladet.no* were announced in 2007, including a position as an online feature journalist for the *Magasinet* section, the *Magasinet* position by far got the biggest number of applications – more than one hundred. This stands in clear opposition to findings in surveys conducted in Norway (Bjørnsen, 2003), Britain (Hanna and Sanders, 2007) and Spain (Sanders et al., 2008) where online newspapers were found to be the least attractive career option for students. However, the status achieved by the online feature journalists of *dagbladet.no* reflected the position *feature journalism* had amongst the students in the same surveys. In Norway and Britain feature journalist was the most sought after position in the profession among the students.

The online feature journalist vs. sources

The factor of *assets of new technology*, as mentioned above, made it possible for the online feature journalists of *dagbladet.no* to lean heavily on the Internet as their main channel for finding sources. This led to an increased distance between the journalists and their sources, as many of the sources they consulted were second or third hand sources. Steensen (forthcoming) found that more than 50 per cent of the sources displayed in the stories were other web sites like Wikipedia and foreign news sites. In a qualitative text analysis of one concrete story, Steensen (2009) found the story to comprise of *nothing but* second and third hand sources, making the story deprived of any direct contact between the journalist and the original sources.

This point to the changing conditions for *intellectual property rights* in new media – another of the factors mentioned above that historically has shaped the role of journalists. The struggle for intellectual property rights has been sacred for journalists, as it has provided their role with important boundaries towards other communicators without such rights (like public relations officers). Furthermore, it has provided the role with normative demands also held by authors and artists. However, *assets of new technology* and *changing economic conditions* entailing increased demands of productivity have brought a copy-paste mentality to online journalism (Deuze, 1999; Hall, 2001; Singer, 2003, 2006; Rasmussen, 2006) that undermines the conventional understanding of intellectual property rights from within the profession. The factor *convergence on macro (clustering of media companies) and meso (multimedia newsrooms) levels* pushes for shovelling and (endless) re-use of journalistic material in several media outlets. The online feature journalists of *dagbladet.no* did not express a strong wish for producing original material – they perceived their role as much as providers and samplers of information made accessible by others. Their claim to creativity and originality was based on *how* the information was sampled and presented rather than on the information itself.

Again we see how the feature journalists of *dagbladet.no* construct their work identity by neglecting traditional knowledge and skills. The kind of source detachment displayed in the work practice of the online feature journalists marked a clear boundary towards print feature journalism where close relations between sources and journalists often are called for in order for the journalists to portray personal issues and emotions. The lack of role performance within this role sector established new normative demands for the online feature journalists. The detachment

from sources pushed their journalism towards a more provocative kind of communication rather than the empathic one arising from the ‘human touch’ reporting of traditional feature journalism.

The online feature journalists vs. the audience

This role sector proved to create big changes to the normative demands of the role of the online feature journalists in *dagbladet.no*. Where print feature journalists rarely have contact with their readers, the online feature journalists not only got a vast amount of direct e-mail response from readers through their hyperlinked by-lines, they also incorporated readers both in the production and the publication of their stories. Readers were perceived as content providers both in the sense that the discussions the stories generated were regarded as valuable content in itself, and because the journalists ‘outsourced’ the human touch reporting to the audience. Furthermore, the readers were perceived as active searchers of information. The journalists felt their stories gained credibility if all sources were displayed through hyperlinks, thus allowing the readers direct access to the sources. This kind of journalistic transparency is rarely found in print feature journalism.

The increased importance of this role sector in the shaping of the online feature journalist might be perceived as a response to the factor of *competition from new markets* mentioned above. The interactive nature of their journalism is a common feature in online communities, online multi-player games, weblogs, etc – all services that create precedence in online discourse. Moreover, it also reflects the factors of *new conditions for freedom of expression and information* and the *blurring boundaries between private and public spaces, mass media and private media*. Many researchers have focused on how online journalists are merging with their audience under the influence of these factors to create what Deuze has labelled ‘dialogical journalism’ (Deuze, 2003: 207). A vast amount of research focuses for instance on how weblogs influence journalism (Matheson, 2004; Haas, 2005; Wall, 2005; Robinson, 2006; Singer, 2005, 2007) and on the rise and influence of civic/public/participatory journalism (Massey, 1998; Glasser, 1999; Deuze and Paulussen, 2002; Friedland, 2003; Allan, 2006; Nip, 2006, 2008) as a way of involving the audience in the practice of journalism. As Singer points out: ‘[...] boundaries between journalists and their audiences have blurred as millions of people have discovered and begun to exercise the ability to express themselves online’ (2007: 79). This development challenges the traditional role of journalists as gatekeepers as it allows alternative flows of information to enter both the

production and publication of journalism. In *dagbladet.no*, provoking the participation of readers became a journalistic virtue for the feature journalists – perhaps the most important one.

Conclusion

I have in this paper outlined two axes that shape the role of journalists in a digital era and showed how these two axes worked to shape the role of an online feature journalist in the Norwegian online newspaper *dagbladet.no*. The role of the online feature journalist was shaped under the dual pressure from the normative demands of two already established and widely different roles of journalists – online journalists and feature journalists. Both pre-established and developing normative demands of the role of online journalists and the normative demands of print feature journalists contributed to the shaping of the role of the online feature journalists. However, the two role sectors that made the greatest impact were interaction with other online journalists and interaction with the audience. This must be perceived as a direct result of how the role performance was embedded within the already established work routine of the online newsroom. Had the online feature journalists been affiliated with the print *Magasinet* desk rather than the online newsroom, the role might have developed quite differently. As it now was, the result was a multi-skilled practice of feature journalism entailing a devaluation of reportage as genre and emphasizing audience participation. This marks a shift from source-driven to audience-driven feature journalism, where debate and sharing of information and knowledge replace intimacy and adventure as dominant discourses.

The implementation of feature journalism in *dagbladet.no* created a new professional role within the news site and it affected the role of the online journalists in *dagbladet.no* at large, increasing the perceived status of their role and providing them with an off-the-news-beat arena to explore their writing skills and storytelling proficiencies. The case study therefore shows how the development of new styles and genres influence the role of the online journalist. The importance of this factor should be taken into account in future studies on the developing role of journalists in new media.

Furthermore, the developing role of the online feature journalists of *dagbladet.no* clearly shows how contemporary work identity is constructed in opposition to rather than in cooperation

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with old knowledge and skills. Within the time frame of just three years, the aim, focus and actual practice of feature journalism in *dagbladet.no* changed considerably. Demarcation towards how the role of feature journalists traditionally has been perceived defined new skills, new knowledge and new practices of journalistic work. The fluctuating nature of the work practice pushed what in one moment was perceived as a core work activity (doing reportage) into a leisure activity to be conducted in private spaces. In short: The shaping of an online feature journalist in *dagbladet.no* reveals the unpredictable and liquid nature of labour in modern society.

Notes

¹ The empirical material was analyzed using the qualitative analysis software HYPERresearch.

² There are no statistics available on the degree of trade union organization amongst online journalists in Norway, but according to Tore Sjølie, the secretary of the Norwegian journalist trade union (NJ), the degree of organization in online newspaper is as high as in traditional media (i.e. almost 100 per cent), but considerably lower in online news sites not affiliated with traditional media companies.

³ <http://www.dagbladet.no/magasinet/>

⁴ ‘Magasinet v. 2.0’, unpublished, internal project report (my translation). The other quotes in this paragraph are all from the same report, which is unpaginated.

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