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Citizen and the Press

Access to Public Information

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Abstract: The essence of a democratic process is the guarantee that citizens have free and easy access to public information. How can that be made possible and how can people learn to use that information critically? In earlier papers (Boef, et.al. 2008 and 2009), we discussed the relationship between public library, press and the free access to relevant information. In this paper, we concentrate on the role of journalistic media in making public information accessible for the citizen. Our starting point is the fact that the citizen, in shaping her or his position in relation to political and other societal issues needs fewer opinions of others, but more reliable information; verified and certified by professionals. That way, the citizen will become enabled to create and to ground his or her opinion. Based on that solid foundation, opinions and comments of others can be appreciated and rated. Finally, we will discuss the ongoing process of the disappearing of independent media and the negative effect on the democratic process, and hence the need for a new generation of Internet savvy civil journalists.

Introduction

The last years, trustful information is severely endangered by various trends. Firstly, by an increasing unreliability of the many facts presented in the press by journalists, as well as, missing adequate interpreting of facts and figures in context as Davies (2008) eloquently describes. Secondly, by the alarming decrease of the journalistic attention to the real functioning of companies, democratically governed institutions, as well as all other types of organisations with power. We see a shift away from news about governing issues and investigative journalism towards entertainment news. Apart from that, we witness a drastic reduction of the sheer number of professional journalists and the disappearance of old media, in particular daily newspapers. Due to these tendencies the numerical ration between journalists and public relations officers and spokespersons is deteriorating to the advance of the last group, whose role is to sell a policy and not to judge it (Prenger, 2011).

Unreliability of “the news”

Bill Keller (2011), former editor in chief of the New York Times, excused himself to his readers in an article about the way his newspaper dealt with the so-called weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. They took the information, the American government presented, about chemical weapons of Saddam Hussein for granted, without sufficient critical thought and therewith undermined the scepticism against a new war in Iraq.

This eased the American and British governments to use these proofs as *casus belli*. The whole year 2011 was the theatre of the so-called ‘Arab spring’. Anyone who takes stock at the end of that year must observe the following. In Tunisia, the dictator fled the country and according to foreign observers, reasonable fair elections have been taken place. The result is that an Islamic party gained hegemony and will dominate the new government. However, as a state under s’harīa law is not according to the hopes and ambitions of the youth, new protests flair up. In Egypt the former dictator will be put on trial, whilst a military junta started a fierce repression, by suppressing the demonstrations for democracy as well as censoring the press. On November 28, 2011 we have had the first day of unique democratic elections in Egypt. These will not move the military to the confinement of their barracks, as they hold important positions in the Egyptian society and economy and on top of that, there is only a restricted amount of parliamentary seats available for free elections. In Libya, finally the dictator has been killed, but the end of his regime would never have been reached without a massive military NATO intervention. This also proves the uncertain destiny of Syria, where the dictator is still holding power, as he is not confronted with bombardments by foreign forces.

World wide, the dominant tone of the journalistic coverage of the events was one of uncritical enthusiasm. Next to the term ‘Arab spring’ (which encompassed many, very different, countries), quickly the term ‘revolution’ came into use. Unfounded, the (strategic) optimism of the demonstrators was adopted in headlines such as: ‘The army is taking sides with the people!’ In this superficial partisanship, crucial information was neglected, at least the historical context. What was the fate of democratic protests in other, comparable countries? For example, in Iran, in 1979, protests resulted in substantial political changes, but against democracy. What happened in countries that obtained a new regime with the help of a western invasion? Take Iraq or Afghanistan: which parties took power and who do they represent? A further pressing issue is the lack of information on the specific countries and their many ethnic, historical, linguistic and cultural differences. Which parties are organised best and which parties receive support from abroad? This necessary information can be found in the western media, but are provided by specialists or local correspondents. However, this kind of information is hardly to never available on the central news pages and the many news web sites and news sections. By contrast, all kinds of disinformation about the rebels were eagerly published, to be discretely denied later. Such as the flocks of black mercenaries, who were fed Viagra to rape, on behest of Gaddafi, every women they saw. Or the former Dutch photo model and friend to Gaddafi’s son, who fled Hollywood style to save waters. It is just as Bill Keller argued; an uncritical following of what the western governments want to have aired to support their polity.

A same situation arises the way the media deal with the euro crisis and countries, with weak economies, who were bribed into the euro zone, such as Spain, Greece and Portugal. They are depicted in the press as countries inhibited by lazy parasites without any labour moral. Also here competent economists forcefully counter these bizarre notions, based on the real figures. However, this type of information needed to understand the true depth of the crisis, is not in the focus of the news. This is not only a failure of competence of journalists, but also an expression of political currents that thrive on xenophobic fears. A critical report of Médecins Sans Frontières, analysing its own

functioning, appeared in November 2011 under the title ‘Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed’ (2011), did not only wipe the floor with the romantic myths of the neutral medical doctor, who operate above the political squabbling, but also with the idea that at natural disasters, always immediate food supplies are needed. Only after the earth quakes in Pakistan of 2005 and the in Haiti in 2010, medical teams and their inflatable hospitals were badly needed. In all other cases the number of estimated victims was grossly overrated. Did the media deliberately paint a picture of the, perceived, incapacity of the local hospitals? Aid workers go anyway to the disaster areas, the study shows, because that is expected from them by the media. Also here, a minority of competent people was available for the public at large, who identified the exaggerations and disinformation based on research based facts.

The decisive problem is the ad hoc interest for a situation in a foreign country. A country, suffering from a disaster, immediately eclipses from the attention, as soon as a new disaster strikes elsewhere. Long term and structural profound attention for a country or problem is more and more missing.

Media do signal the electoral yoyo effect in more and more countries, especially in countries where two large parties or two blocks compete for the attention of the voter. But to point out the winner, that was the loser of the former elections, and will definitely lose the next one, does not attribute much to the knowledge of the real problems in that particular country.

It seems journalistic media adopt ‘fact free policy’ on a large scale in recent years.

Public Relations and Journalism

The structural journalistic problems seem to be connected to the alarming decrease of journalistic focussing on the functioning of companies, democratically governed and other institutions. But this decrease of interest and the shift to entertainment news as such, is not the cause of these problems. The responsibility of a journalist – independent, but concerned and informed – is to construct the news as a tool to inform about issues that are important to the public, based on the underlying facts, backgrounds, analyses, etc. Or, in the words of James Fallows (Lloyd 2004), to give a broad public some common source of information for making political decisions, and to inform people about trends and events they must be interested in. As we haste to add, reliable, certified information. What is more interesting, Silvio Berlusconi’s relation with the mafia or with a minor, former, beauty queen?

The real problem is that the civilian receives a lot of information, but he gets it more and more directly from the institutions themselves in stead of from the critical journalist.

The communication branch in the Netherlands and other countries has grown largely during the last years, as well in number (in 1999: 55.000; at present between 135.000 and 156.000) as in professionalism. At the same time, the number of professional journalists has been decreasing (to 15.000 at the moment) – and unfortunately, their professionalism as well – while web media do not (yet) compensate this loss in the field of news, analysis, and interpretation (Prenger 2011). Public Relation professionals may well work in the field of internal communication, focussed on the employees within an organisation, or in the field of marketing communication. But now every single indi-

vidual investigating journalist finds several PR-professionals on his or her way, trying to divert her. These developments make it easier for the communication professionals to set their own political agenda. Especially, government officials know exactly which items can have a dramatic effect in a 'mediacracy'. Some of them even pick a sexy news item that can divert the attention from more serious others. The drastically reduction of staff does not mean that even spectacular ways of misdemeanour by corporations or governments remain unnoticed. This kind of misdemeanour is just what the scoring drive of media wants to expose. So, the lonely investigating journalist suddenly sees himself supported (and overruled) by colleague reporters who go for the hype. To his regret, their presentation of spectacular misdemeanour follows the laws of entertainment news, uncovers no possible causes that request structural improvements, but at the most, points to a 'scapegoat'. Moreover, more and more channels appear by which government and business can bypass independent journalists to get their – undigested – message to the public.

But, it would really be a menace to democracy if independent journalists surrender to the PR forces. The Dutch minister of Internal Affairs, Mr. Donner, stated last year that freedom of the press has nothing to do with public governance. Journalists, in his opinion, tend to use the Dutch Law for Freedom of Government Information (WOB) in improper ways.

Social Media

In today's torrent of (often uninvited) information are many sources that belong to the domain of social media. These media will become even more important as channel for suppliers of news and especially, useful background information. Unfortunately, the veracity and the context of this information are more often than not ambiguous. It is the role of professional journalists to filter, analyse and adapt this material in the local context and level of knowledge of the reader. Luckily, many of the sources, e.g., blogs, are created by experienced experts. Journalists should develop a practice where it is normal that they, collegially, submit their information to (scientific) experts for comments and, even more, should establish a sustained working relationship with the 'hands-on' experts. They could practice more 'meta journalism': inform the public about the circumstances and the limits they meet in doing their work for a news paper or a network. This way the public can judge by itself and it can help people to use other information critically.

All these, journalists should undertake, with the aim to create a higher and politically more useful quality of the democratic process. Furthermore, journalists should actively use social media – 'crowd sourcing' is an excellent example – to get special information from 'hands on' experts, important for the democratic process. They can show and teach the citizen how to measure, in a simple way, the pollution of his environment and then condense this into a publication. Show the reader where on the Internet he/she can find the laws and rules to which governments and companies have to adhere and how he can determine that they are being violated. Subsequently journalists can offer the citizen the legal procedures that he can use in resisting these violations; especially by involving other citizens – including the experts – in their resistance. Journalists also can refer to the best practices of successful predecessors.

But the most important thing is, journalists must keep being aware of the magnitude of their task: helping the public to make its choices, from the Assurance Company, education institute, employer, Internet provider, to the political party or movement, as he wishes to improve the quality of his life and the life of others.

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