Shifting boundaries: Objectivity, citizen journalism and tomorrow’s journalists

Bolette B. Blaagaard
Aalborg University Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract
This article examines the relationship between citizen journalism and professional journalism by means of a theoretical discussion combined with empirical data gathered through focus group interviews with students of international journalism. The article discusses the process and ongoing struggle within journalistic practice of keeping up the idea as well as the practice of journalistic objectivity. Working on from Schudson (2003), Schudson and Anderson (2009) and Tumber and Prentoulis’ (2003) analyses of journalistic professionalism, the article develops the idea of journalistic objectivity as it is faced with the technological advances that support citizen journalism. The interviews focus on the ways in which the students understand the tension of the changing relationship between professional journalism and citizens, brought about by citizen journalism or User Generated Content (UGC), and focus further on the question of how the students address and react to this paradigmatic shift.

Keywords
Citizen journalism, journalistic practices, journalistic profession, journalistic subjectivity, objectivity, professionalism, public sphere

… for the first time, we are not any more, that species that is proud of being a journalist, that species that is untouchable …

(Male student of international journalism, age 23)

Corresponding author:
Bolette B. Blaagaard, Department of Communication and Psychology, Communication and Information Studies, Aalborg University Copenhagen, AC Meyers Vænge 15, 2450 København SV, Denmark.
Email: blaagaard@hum.aau.dk
Professional journalism today is embracing, to a smaller or greater extent, new news agendas set by online and wireless citizens providing texts and images to global news stories (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2010). Although citizens have always had the opportunity – and taken it – to contribute to local news, by submitting letters to the editor, for example, the scale at which online and wireless technologies are enabling most people in the westernised world to have their say in public is unprecedented. The changing relationship between public and journalist has been underway for a while. Just short of a decade ago, Tumber and Prentoulis (2003) predicted a paradigmatic shift in war journalism as a consequence of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, 11 September 2001. They suggested that the media response to the attack would accelerate the process of embracing attachment and emotions into the culture of journalism:

As the journalist’s role as an interpreter becomes more pronounced and recognised, the psychological dimension of war reporting is opening up a new debate. […] What we may be witnessing is a paradigmatic shift which unsettles even further the public/journalist distinction from detachment to involvement, from verification to assertion, from objectivity to subjectivity. (Tumber and Prentoulis, 2003: 228)

Although American journalism no doubt was challenged in the face of the wars waged in the early days of the new millennium, it seems now that the paradigmatic shift is set to come not only from within the profession, but also from outside. That is, the recent technological changes have enabled the public to engage directly in the public sphere, seemingly unconcerned with the traditional gate-keeper role of journalism. This article explores this current scenario of professional journalism’s changing relationship to its audience-cum-citizen journalists and the implications for professional journalists’ idea of their practice. It argues that tomorrow’s journalists (i.e. the current students of international journalism) engage with citizen journalism as a source, a tool for their practice as objective journalists, rather than as a new way of engaging in news production and the public sphere. In this way, the students – perhaps surprisingly – share their understanding of new media’s impact on professional journalism with established professional journalists, for instance at the BBC (Williams et al., 2011). The firm fit with the established journalistic practice may reflect the students’ desire to land and keep a job in a competitive field, which has a reputation for weekly, rolling contracts and fierce dismissal policies (Freedman, 2010).

The article presents the result of six focus group interviews and one individual interview with students of international journalism at City University, London (2011–12). The questions the article seeks to explore, by incorporating the voices of students of international journalism into the discussion of citizen journalism, which draws attention to the distinction between the public and the journalist, are: in which way do the students of international journalism express awareness of the mediated public sphere in which they operate, and which is increasingly marked by the diverse voices and images of citizens providing an alternative news agenda online? How are the students of international journalism addressing this paradigmatic shift in their profession?

The article begins by addressing the issue and importance of objectivity in professional journalism. Concomitantly, the article addresses the idea of journalism as a practice or craftsmanship or as grounded in a particular and necessary ideology, which is here
exemplified by objectivity, but could also be further elaborated on with theoretical discussions about accountability, freedom of speech, or journalistic independence. As such, the issues presented within the discussion about journalistic objectivity provide an understanding of journalism’s profession, and thereby a starting point for understanding the students’ discourse on citizen journalism and their professional future. The article does not aim to give a comprehensive overview of the history and changing faces of objectivity in journalism. On the basis of the theoretical discussion, the following section provides a discursive analysis of the interviews with students of international journalism. Finally, the article rounds up its argument by examining the intersections and questions arising from the analysis.

**Traditional objectivity and journalism**

Professional journalism’s modern heritage means that the rule of ‘Stoic…professional objectivity’ and ‘self-abstraction’ (Peters, 2005) has been promoted in professional journalism and mediated communication (Dahlgren, 1995, 2009; Habermas, 1989). Despite resistance, backlash, and ongoing academic and professional discussions, objectivity has had and still has (Muhlmann, 2008; Richards and Rees, 2011; Schudson, 1978; Wien, 2005) a strong impact on western journalists’ understanding of the journalistic practice and function in society. Though the term ‘objectivity’ may have been changed to the less positivist sounding terms ‘impartiality’ or ‘balanced’ reporting through these years of debate, some scholars believe that it is still the legacy of the positivist sciences that sustains journalistic legitimacy (Anderson and Ward, 2007: 46; Muhlmann, 2008: 10; Wien, 2005: 13). In these epistemological terms, the twin birth of positivism and mainstream journalism in the late 19th century has developed through scientific journalism, precision journalism and lately computer-assisted reporting, whereas it has been challenged by public journalism and new journalism (Wien, 2005) and currently by citizen journalism. The latter three question the primacy of objective reporting by situating the journalist amidst the society and the story, whereas the types of journalism supported by positivist assumptions extend a belief in the journalist’s objective ability to represent the world ‘as it is’ without affecting it. From the beginning, the aim of journalistic practice included (but was not limited to) unity of the readership – that is, constructing a unified ‘us’. The increase in readership simultaneously brought about an editorial urge to unite this growing readership under the sign of the factual. The press ‘clung to the ‘facts’ so that it could bring together readers who might well have different opinions on a subject, and hence reach a common denominator’ (Muhlmann, 2008: 6). Moreover, objectivity was underscored as a way of gaining the readers’ trust as the political affiliations between political party lines and newspapers journalistic angles withered (Schudson, 1978; Ward, 2008). New journalism, public journalism and citizen journalism may be seen as pockets of resistance to or even backlashes against the dominating journalistic concept, particularly in American journalism, of objectivity, by attempting to decentre the readers rather than unify them (Muhlmann, 2008). While professional journalism’s history helps connect and construct national societies (Anderson, 1991; Muhlmann, 2008), it seemingly moreover carries an inbuilt contradiction between universal objectivity and national specificity which calls on the profession to veil its bias and national situatedness through
discourses of professionalism (Schudson, 1978). Journalistic objectivity is therefore a disputed and fiercely discussed concept, which continues to draw strong opinions from scholars and practitioners alike.

**Journalistic objectivity and subjectivity**

However, recent scholarship has uncovered a more nuanced picture of practised objectivity. This scholarship suggests that journalistic objectivity should not be confused with scientific objectivity, and that the former in fact is a set of practices (Hampton, 2008; Richards and Rees, 2011; Ward, 2008), a ritual (Tuchman, 1972) or performance (Boudana, 2011). Although within the professional modern practice of journalism it is widely accepted that objectivity is an ideal that cannot be reached, it is equally acknowledged that the history of journalism has provided resistance and alternatives to the discourse of objectivity. Objectivity is then both an occupational norm and an object of ‘struggle within the larger struggle of professional jurisdiction [over definitions and particular forms of expertise]’ (Schudson and Anderson, 2009: 96). The occupational values are internalised and define the journalistic episteme (Tumber and Prentoulis, 2003). Moreover, journalists perceive emotions to imply contamination of objectivity (Richards and Rees, 2011: 863). Objectivity is then a ‘performance’, which can be ‘evaluated by the degree of truth that characterizes [the journalist’s] report’ (Boudana, 2011: 396). In order to perform adequately and to avoid contamination, journalists adhere to a set of principles and practices that restrict access of emotions, value judgments and political biases to journalistic products. These principles may be termed journalistic objectivity as opposed to scientific objectivity and include factuality, fairness, non-bias, independence, non-interpretation, and neutrality and detachment (Ward, 2008: 19). Save factuality, these principles make journalistic objectivity into an ethical concept that relies on the individual professional journalist to maintain the moral standard.\(^2\)

However, in a strong defence of universal objectivity in journalistic practice, Sandrine Boudana (2011) argues that ‘the problem raised by this reliance on personal evaluation is precisely that it prevents an evaluation of professionalism’ (2011: 395). Boudana effectively splits the journalist from subjectivity. If a journalist is personal she/he is not professional. Leaving the personal, emotional, social and political subject at the door:

… [and] by assessing the authority of empirical standards, the concept of objectivity provides the journalists with distinct professional norms to guide their daily practices, while it also serves the public good. (2011: 395)

Boudana presents Tuchman’s work (1972) as opposing the concept of objectivity, because she sees objectivity as a norm rather than a set of practices. Rather, Gaye Tuchman found journalistic objectivity to be defined by journalist practitioners as ‘procedures [they] followed which exemplify the formal attributes of a news story or newspaper’ (1972: 660). Tuchman identifies these procedures to include presentation of conflicting accounts, presentation of supporting evidence or verification, the judicious
use of quotation marks and appropriate structuring of the news story according to the inverted news triangle (Tuchman, 1972: 665–669). A journalistically objective product is ensured by following these learnt practices. Tuchman does not lay claim to a philosophical or universal notion of objectivity. To journalists it has never been about ‘old-fashioned positivist conception of objectivity’ (Richards and Rees, 2011: 859) but a day-to-day ‘ritual’ (Tuchman, 1972: 661) or ‘pragmatic objectivity’ (Ward, 2008). Similarly, Stephen Ward defends pragmatic objectivity as ‘the epistemic evaluation of situated inquiry […]’ The evaluation of inquiry by objective standards is a form of standard-guided thought, of disciplined rationality’ (2008: 280); that is, journalistic objectivity is a set of practices that provide an ethical evaluation and interpretation, grounded in the particular situation and specific to the news-medium for which the journalist works.

The defences of practical objectivity as rehearsed above result in a recognition of a certain westernised standard of truth seeking. Neither of the theorists claims that there is only one truth, rather they believe that practical and pragmatic usages of journalistic tools of the trade may help obtain the closest thing to truth within a given socio-political framework. Although the value attached to these procedures varies, these frameworks are seen as flexible and changeable. In fact, they rely on collective beliefs and understandings and, as such, could be considered collectively subjective or social. Furthermore, much journalism and pragmatic objectivity rely on journalists’ ‘gut-feeling’ about whether a story is news (Tuchman, 1972). Thus, within the definition of journalistic objectivity remains the question of the journalist subject and of subjectivities – ways of knowing, experiencing and acting in the world and their impact on journalism and the public sphere. Despite the efforts to relinquish the personal and emotional attachments of the professional journalist through standardised practices and allow for only professional standards to be acceptable in journalistic practice, the fact that journalists are human beings, subjects too, remains largely unmentioned and unaccounted for.

Due to the current focus on journalistic objectivity as a practice that is flexible enough to accommodate the multitude of genres encompassed by professional journalism, a firm definition of journalistic objectivity proves a slippery enterprise. Whereas the above sketch of the changing understandings and practices of objectivity may seem like contained interchanges between objectivity and subjectivity, in fact scepticism against the ideology and practices of objectivity, arguments in supports of objectivity, and attempts at redefining it, all go hand in hand. And as I explore how students of international journalism understand the roles of and tension between journalistic subjectivity and objectivity, it becomes clear that the concept is still being negotiated.

**Methods and definition(s) of citizen journalism**

The focus group interviews were carried out in the spring of 2011 at City University London, UK. The students’ age averaged 25.6 years and the groups consisted of eight male and 12 female students. As students of international journalism the students’ national backgrounds were diverse: UK (4), Germany, Egypt, Pakistan, Italy (2), Portugal, Australia, USA, The Netherlands, Japan, Greece, Hungary, South Africa, Bulgaria, and Spain. The interviews were semi-structured and aimed to touch on several important points while also being able to give space for the students’ own associations and identified topics.
Each interview began with an open question to the students’ definitions of citizen journalism. When asked directly, the answers ranged from ‘doing journalism that involves people somehow’ (female, 24), to ‘citizen journalism is just when someone who is not a professional journalist gets involved in traditional journalism. […] the accidental journalist’ (female, 23), and ‘amateur journalism’ (female, 23). ‘People’ and ‘journalists’ are here clearly separated. During the interviews it quickly became clear that the students’ educational training at the Department of Journalism had a very strong impact on their way of conceptualising citizen journalism as a journalistic tool or source for journalistic products. In Schudson’s words, citizen journalism was conceptualised as ‘para-journalism’ and figured alongside public relations firms, public information offices, political spin doctors, and publicity staff (2003: 3). But the students also recognise the boundary zones, i.e. the difficulty of defining citizen journalism in cooperation with professional journalism rather than against it. That difficulty is expressed in the following exchange of words that followed after one student (female (b), 23) described an incident in which professional journalists had posted a news story on their personal blog:

Female (b), 23: […] I don’t know if I would define that as citizen journalism.
Female (a), 23: It was a journalist?
Female (b), 23: Yeah. They put it on their blog.
Interviewer: So because he had training as a journalist, he was a journalist?
Female (b), 23: Yeah because he was a journalist and that was just an alternative platform for his writings, I don’t think it holds by definition as citizen journalism, I think it’s his trade, his profession.
Interviewer: OK so it’s not the format [that defines citizen journalism]. So if a journalist had watched this tsunami come in and sent his –
Female (a), 23: That would be really lucky.
Interviewer: – there were a lot of people on the beach –
Male, 28: What if a journalist was there?
Interviewer: – that would not be citizen journalism?
Female (a), 22: I would expect more from them, I would expect a piece to camera [laughs]. Do a report!

This exchange shows, although tongue-in-cheek, the fact that a journalist is seen not just as any victim of natural disasters, but as someone who can be expected to stand above the panic and fear and do a report, seems to follow the line of Boudana’s division between journalist and subject. It points to the idea of detachment that is a cornerstone of professional journalism. Journalism differs from para-journalism in the sense of the allusive definition of the journalistic profession.

From this starting point, the interviews developed into explorations of citizen journalism and professional journalism, which revealed several intersections, which I analyse below as five themes. The themes sprang from the interviews and were not introduced by the interviewer. In some interviews some themes were more prominent than in others, but they all stood out as ways of discussing the changing relationship between professional journalism and citizen journalism.
Findings from focus group interviews with students of international journalism

During the interviews the students of international journalism discussed the relationship between professional journalism and citizen journalism in relation to five different themes: (1) through an understanding of the potential of new technologies as ‘everybody is a journalist’; (2) through a discourse that referred to citizen journalism as a source for professional journalism; (3) through a discourse that referred to citizen journalism as a tool for professional journalism; (4) directly as a relationship between professional journalism and citizen journalism; and finally (5) through reference to professional standards of journalism.

Everybody is a journalist

The first theme, ‘everybody is a journalist’, is met with both scepticism and measured welcomes. Citizens’ participation in news production is seen as an attack on the journalistic product:

... Male, 23: Now we are under heavy scrutiny from everyone. If I do a mistake on my story, my readers will be able to comment on the mistake, identify it, correct the mistake, and if I don’t pay attention to it, I will be a bad journalist and my story goes from a static product, it transforms itself into a plurality(?) that is constantly changing, evolving, due to the contribution of every citizen.

Female, 27: … now you have to especially be really careful because everybody has an opinion, and everybody can tell the whole world about that opinion on the internet, but I don’t think it’s that new.

These examples point towards the fluidity of online communication as well as the challenge posed by the possible interjection from citizens into journalism. Interestingly, the responses to the seemingly omnipresent citizen journalism are often paired with a return to the imperative of journalistic skills:

Female, 27: There’s two ways of looking at it, you can look at the profession and say you don’t need to be trained to be a journalist, because everybody can do it these days, or you can look at it and say OK, you have to train journalists and you have all these other people who just tell about their stories but there are still journalists needed to produce real journalistic stories, for broadcast for example – that need certain skills.

In this example the student foretells the extinction of journalism as a profession only to reject this premonition in the following sentence by pointing to the particularity of the journalistic profession, the journalistic ‘skills’ that allow journalists to create ‘real journalistic stories’ as opposed to ‘just telling stories’. The student here sees journalism as something distinct from citizens’ participation and opinions, but this is not the only way the students relate to citizen journalism and its potential to make ‘everybody a journalist’:
Male, 23: One thing I’ve been defending in my country is that during our primary and secondary education, more journalism should be taught to our students because the new media that we are dealing with today, as she said before, anyone can become a journalist without ‘becoming a journalist’ officially but everyone can produce information and contribute, filter and select it and produce information. So people everywhere should have at least awareness of the principles of journalism.

Here, journalistic principles not journalists themselves, necessarily, are seen as the answer to the growing presence of citizen journalists. The student is suggesting a closer relationship between citizen journalists and professional principles. Theme 1 and theme 5 are, then, often paired and compared in the data. I return to theme 5 in more detail below.

Citizen journalism: Source or journalistic tool?

Theme 2 relies on a discourse which presents citizen journalism as a source to professional journalists, but it does so in discussion with theme 3: citizen journalism as a tool for professional journalism. The following sequence from one of the focus group interviews illustrates these negotiations:

Female, 27: So you can say people on Twitter are talking about a riot somewhere on the streets of Amsterdam. Then you put it on the website and say ‘There is a possible riot in Amsterdam relying on Twitter sources’, you would link to Twitter and people would understand where it came from. But they would have the information if they want to go there and demonstrate, they can go there. After you put it up as a fact saying ‘we finally know it’s true, there was a protest in Amsterdam two hours ago’.

[...]

Female, 27: Instead of saying Reuters, now you can say Twitter.
Male, 23: It’s a new environment, a new kind of tool.
Female, 27: It’s accepted as a source now in a way.
Interviewer: Twitter and Reuters are the same thing?
Male, 23: It’s the same if you compare, there was a robbery last night on the local supermarket, you can go to a policeman and he was patrolling that area and perhaps he might know something, or you can go to the other side of the city to the train station and ask people ‘Did you hear about the theft in the supermarket? Do you know what happened?’ And people because they have probably already heard, will tell you a biased version of the story. Have I made myself clear? Once again it’s different degrees of reliability.

Female, 27: Twitter is a tool as you said. It depends on who you listen to on Twitter. Reuters is a source. Twitter can be a source if you know that the person tweeting is a reliable source. So Twitter is a tool, it’s not a source. But I have Reuters and BBC so if Reuters on Twitter says something is happening and it’s not on their website I do take that, because it’s Reuters. And if the BBC says the same thing – I use Twitter as a tool to find out something before it’s online somewhere else. Facebook is a tool as well to get stuff out there.
The products that come from citizen journalists are seen in relation to professional skills, so that Twitter, as in the example above, is incorporated into the known set of journalistic practices. The last comment by the female student aged 27 crystallises the division between citizen journalism as a tool or a source for journalists by levels of trustworthiness. The students mention ideas of biased and unbiased reporting that refer to the idea of journalistic objectivity and are in turn connected to the pillar of journalistic practice, trust and otherwise professional practice in this account below:

Female, 23: If you’re relying on this person as a source of information at a demonstration, and he’s showing you police officers beating up civilians and he’s not showing why maybe they were beaten up – that could be one angle of it because maybe he doesn’t have the training of being unbiased and objective, he doesn’t know all these concepts.

The discussion about citizen journalism as tool or source pinpoints the ambivalent relationship to new technologies and their implications for journalistic practices. However, the discussion remains on the basis of professionalism and journalistic principles. Given the students’ field of study, this is not surprising perhaps, although the stark division between the public and the journalistic professional (the students) may be slightly unsettling.

‘You can actually do the kind of journalism you want to do’

It is, however, within the discourse of theme 4 that the students speak about the direct, and their personal, relationship between journalistic practice and citizen journalism. The following sequence illustrates this:

Female, 24: … Blogging is a broader theme I think, because you can have a blog about whatever to write about anything, and it doesn’t necessarily define you as a journalist, to have a blog. But I think it is still useful for a journalist to have one, the other way around.
Interviewer: Why is that?
Female, 24: Because I feel like when you have a blog, you can actually do the kind of journalism you want to do, and when you work for someone else it’s not really that way …

Here, citizen journalism is talked about in terms of freedom from the restraints of journalistic practices and principles. Citizen journalism, when presented in their personal or professional blogs, becomes a way of showing a profile and a commitment:

Female, 24: I think the only time I’ve ever had a pure blog was when I was living in Argentina, but it wasn’t just my thoughts, it was more articles but from that perspective of living in a different country. There was a personal element to it but each article was distinct so it was writing about aspects of the society. It wasn’t strict journalism in the sense of the work I do online. It’s kind of that grey area really between writing about yourself and writing news.
Female, 27: I just started a blog for our online course. I started on green issues – green living and so on … and also just to try and find out more and show that I kind of have a commitment to something. But it would probably be more citizen journalism than any actual professional journalism – because I wouldn’t try to show balanced coverage or anything like that. I’m just trying to put down my thoughts and gather information and so on.

Finally, citizen journalism, when seen from the perspective of cooperation between professionals and citizens, is found to be largely problematic in terms of recognising rights and in terms of fees and accreditation:

Female, 24: … Long story short I think there are a lot of people who will just want to get those images across and just want to get information out, and to them they don’t think, ‘Oh I’m doing this because I want some journalistic accreditation’, they’re just doing it because the information needs to get out. Citizen journalism is very different in some regions to how it is in London for example.

[...]

Female, 27: But I think that’s a problem for journalists, if you go somewhere – if it’s just the London protests or you go to Egypt to cover something, any area where there is something happening – and you go there with the motivation that you want to start being a freelance journalist, you can’t really do that any more unless you have something very special because everybody is just taking photos in Egypt. So I think people who go out to cover those kinds of things are threatened by citizen journalists.

Female, 23: So maybe actually journalists have blogs and stuff not so much because it’s their dream to have their own blog but because it is difficult to work for the mainstream media, it’s recently become I think the pathway to mainstream so people first start blogging and then the mainstream start purchasing your stuff and et cetera. Actually to be honest I’ve created a Youtube channel and I’ve started blogging my things there!

The students recognise the professional pitfalls in the relationship between citizen and professional journalism, but they also understand both the personal and professional benefits of the relationship, although they largely remain sceptical. However, as the last example illustrates, the students also recognise the usefulness of online presence in an increasingly competitive professional environment. They frequently refer back to journalistic principles such as objectivity, accreditation and fact checking as a standard and critique of citizen journalism and participation.

**Keeping up the standards**

Theme 5 illustrates the discourse of professional standards of journalism:
Male, 23: I still think that I have the skills, I have the knowledge, I have the sources, I have the contacts that other people don’t have.

Male, 23: … Are journalists still needed? Yes they are, because once again, in every political situation in history there is always someone trying to spread biased information or wrong information. In Iran that also happened, some protestors said they were controlling Sony Ericsson; they didn’t control it at all. So journalists are still needed to filter, to select, to think about information. But for the first time, we are not any more, that species that is proud of being a journalist, that species that is untouchable.

Female, 24: Journalists play a really important part because I’m sure a lot of people who read these [WikiLeaks files] wouldn’t have been bothered to do so if it wasn’t handed to them.

As mentioned above in relation to theme 1: ‘everybody is a journalist’, the standards of professional journalism are often evoked in response to that exact theme. Returning to the discussion about Twitter versus Reuters, the students conclude that it is not about where the information comes from, but whether it can be accredited, i.e. it is put through the journalistic set of practices:

Female, 27: Well it’s still credible if you can show where it came from.

Male, 23: Once again it’s not about the tool. We’re talking about simple things that have ruled journalism forever. Our teachers are always saying, ‘Attribution, attribution, attribution’ – you can’t affirm anything without attribution. Who says that? It’s the same, who says that, where did that come from.

Although, the students represent journalism in very practical terms, simultaneously they hold up journalism as a particular profession:

Male, 30: You get a (?) source of information coming your way, you filter it, make it in a presentable form, and then disseminate it. This is the role of the journalist. Citizen journalists are not journalists per se, they are contributing to the body of knowledge and everything, but they are not trained and this is not their profession. Maybe they are campaigning for it, maybe they feel strongly for it, maybe there is something wrong in their area and they are going to try to add to the main body of journalism.

What the student in the quote above is expressing very clearly is the struggle for professional jurisdiction (Schudson and Anderson, 2009). Information gathering, filtering, structuring and disseminating are what the journalistic craft is made up of and it is those skills that bring about professional journalism. But it is the claim that ‘it is not their profession’ that allows the student to go on to claim that citizen journalists may be campaigners or otherwise biased. It is the abstract notion of ‘the profession’ that enables the redefinition of problems and tasks associated with any profession (Tumber and
Prentoulis, 2003). Not surprisingly, the professional, but abstract, standards of journalism run through all the discourses of citizen journalism that are identified in the focus group interviews and single interview. This is not surprising because the students are students of international journalism and are taught a certain set of practices. It is also a given that the students wish to make money out of their talents and training, and are therefore perhaps less inclined to find citizen journalism, which often is rather cost efficient, unattractive. Although citizen journalism, blogging, tweeting, and public comments provide a way of profiling the young professionals in the increasingly competitive field of journalism – and the interviews make mention of examples of well-paid journalists who started out as bloggers – it is moreover important that their trade provides them with an income. As the economic landscape of the media is under growing pressure, young journalists need to find the right balance between ‘the logic of Google’, i.e. ‘the short-term commercial gains of “hits”, against the possible long-term loss of cultural capital if they are seen as too “sensational” …’ (Phillips et al., 2010) or politically motivated.

However, the degree with which the standards of professional journalism are regarded as a base line for the students’ communication about citizen participation in the production of news is, if not surprising, then at least unsettling. They still account for a particular idea of what a journalist is in contrast to a citizen. The journalist ‘species’ (male, 23) is upheld as an identifiable abstraction.

Whereas it is mainly in theme 4, which focuses on ways in which the students address directly the relationship between journalistic practices and citizen journalism, that the hierarchy between citizen journalism and the profession is presented less stringently, and allows for some understanding of the benefits of keeping a blog, for instance; the struggle to define journalistic practice and to own the profession is still apparent.

In what follows, I conclude by discussing the particular hierarchy set up between objectivity and subjectivity, following up on the first section of this article, while relating it to the findings in the readings of the focus group interviews.

**Journalism, craft or profession**

In the above examples of the students’ discussions, it is clear that to the students, although citizen journalism may be a platform to journalism, function as a source, or even break a news story, it is not journalism because of its lack of journalistic structure. By this, the students do not refer to writing skills or even truthfulness of the report. What citizen journalism is lacking is checkmarks on the journalistic practice checklist. ‘The principles of journalism’ (male, 23) are sketched out as ‘you get a (?) source of information coming your way, you filter it, make it in a presentable form, and then disseminate it’ (male, 30); however, it seems that the principles are indeed more intangible than that. Whereas it is obvious to the students that a journalist like Robert Fisk is ‘anything but objective in his reporting’ (male, 28), Fisk’s credentials as a journalist are not questioned. Similarly, a trained journalist who breaks a story on a personal blog is considered a journalist nonetheless (female (b), 23). However, mobile phone footage and tweets from a natural disaster and from inside the kettle at British riots in mainstream news or personal blogs are citizen journalism.
What makes journalistic practice what it is, is the day-to-day ‘ritual’ (Tuchman, 1972) or ‘pragmatic objectivity’ (Ward, 2008) connected to an editorial backbone or institution, as discussed in the beginning of this article. It is defended as pragmatic and guided by particular westernised rationalisations, despite the inconsistencies and hidden subjectivities. This defence of practical objectivity is mirrored in the students’ discussions:

Female, 24: I wanted to say something about objectivity. [...] Each media outlet they define for themselves what their objectivity is. So I definitely think citizen journalists should be treated as sources because they are not – we don’t expect them to have balance probably, that’s why.

Interviewer: Would you say the mainstream media have their own chosen balance?

Male, 23: There’s always an agenda one way or another.

Interviewer: So [what you mean is that] there are no editorial guidelines within citizen journalism.

Female, 24: Yes.

The students recognise the possible bias of media institutions but elevate editorial guidelines to an abstract notion deemed more trustworthy than the unbalanced and subjective reporting of citizen journalists. Professional journalism is ‘objective’ because of the professional editorial standards that back it up. This is the ‘background system that allows for a characterisation of journalism as a profession rather than a craft’ (Tumber and Prentoulis, 2003: 217). In journalism this background system is based on ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’. Citizen journalism may borrow the craftsmanship developed through a century of journalistic work, but citizen journalists will never be professionals until they have the skills, knowledge and sources (male, 23) of the professional journalist.

Professional journalism is justified by the students because ‘in every political situation in history there is always someone trying to spread biased information or wrong information’ (male, 23). This quote exemplifies another of the journalistic narratives on objectivity: journalism as the Fourth Estate. By means of journalistic objectivity, professional journalists stand as a buffer zone between the citizens and the state. If journalism was acknowledged as merely a craft, upholding this zone would be unnecessary. It can therefore be ventured that the higher moral ground, the background system, occupied by the journalistic profession and carried forth in the younger generation of journalists, is necessary for the survival of the current state of journalism and of society. This loyalty towards the present system and institution as the guarantor of objectivity and professionalism forces the students, moreover, to consider their own professional profiling online and their subsequent (lack of) potential employability in an economically strained profession.

Conclusion

The interviews with the students of international journalism show that the students think of citizen journalism as another journalistic tool to find news angles and sources, or a source in its own right. That is, the students make room for citizen journalism within an already stable idea of journalistic practices rather than allowing citizen journalism to challenge the practice. The interviews lay bare a hierarchy in which the students
repeatedly position their profession in opposition to citizen journalism as a new aspect of para-journalism (Schudson, 1978). Although, the students recognise the ability of new technological developments to turn everybody into a potential journalist, they uphold the clear distinction between the public and themselves, or their profession. This may be partly due to their sense of losing their job security in the face of the emergent online news agendas. As an answer to the growing body of citizen journalists, some students favour public education in journalistic principles and others favour strengthening journalism’s professional standards within the profession. The discourses that the students present spin around the allusive idea of the journalistic profession by emphasising the practical as well as the more intangible ideal of objectivity. Journalistic objectivity’s two heads – as both a practice and as an abstract ideal that vouches for certain expertise and power of jurisdiction – are recognisable in the students’ answers and discussions. When the students reflect on the usefulness of citizen journalism, it is mainly in terms of creating an online profile for themselves or being able to write freely about what interests them. Citizen journalism is not seen to be useful to the public sphere beyond its connection to professional journalism.

Seen from a journalistic perspective, then, the struggle for definition and jurisdiction goes on. However, in the heat of this struggle what may be forgotten is the enlargement of the public sphere through technological advancements. Although the majority of western Europeans still get their news through the mainstream media (Hafez, 2007), other information sharing and facilitation of knowledge that make up the public sphere nevertheless continue to grow and boundaries are shifting. Tumber and Prentoulis (2003) suggest that changes in subcultures of journalistic occupation such as war reporting after the New York terrorist attacks may signal the beginning of more radical changes related to the whole of the profession and allow for emotions and subjectivity to take greater part in journalistic practices. The findings presented in this article suggest that the shifting cultural expressions enabling that kind of change may not develop from within the profession alone, and may indeed be met with substantial counter-pressure from the journalists of tomorrow, before subjectivity will be allowed a place within the practices of the journalistic profession.

**Funding**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

**Notes**

1. For an in-depth discussion of the origins of journalistic objectivity, which is beyond the scope of this article, see Peters, 2005, and Ward, 2008: 9–86; also Daston and Gallison, 2007.

2. The latter two principles (non-interpretation, and neutrality and detachment) are frequently questioned, and largely rejected after the propaganda of the Second World War and 1950s McCarthyism (Boudana, 2011; Ward, 2008).

3. Because the group of students that were interviewed for this article only amount to approximately 15 per cent of the number of students enrolled, it is necessary to point out the tentative nature of this study. Further student interviews and studies into the trajectory and popularity of citizen journalistic products are necessary for a fuller picture to emerge.
References


Biographical note

Bolette B. Blaagaard is Assistant Professor at Aalborg University Copenhagen and honorary visiting fellow at the Centre for Law, Justice and Journalism, City University, London.