

What Mainstream Journalism Unfortunately Is and Does – and Why That Still Matters: A Reply to Mark Deuze

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Professor Mark Deuze believes that institutions have become irrelevant to journalism. In his view, not institutions but journalists make journalism. This critical review of a recent article by Deuze argues that his position is incorrect and warns that it is irresponsible. In ascribing far too much agency to individual journalists, Deuze, perhaps unwittingly, mirrors a common trick played by neoliberal politicians, who assign responsibility to marginalized groups for major ills in society in order to deflect attention from the criminality of elites. Similarly, Deuze, himself safely ensconced in an academic institution, tries to convince us that journalists having nothing left to lose equals freedom of the press.

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Mark Deuze is a professor at the University of Amsterdam, which is currently ranked the world's number 1 in Media and Communication Studies (QS, 2019). He is a prolific author and considered one of the leading scholars in Journalism Studies worldwide. Let me preface the following comments by saying that I have no reason to feel unkindly towards him. In fact, he once wrote something nice about a book I published (Bergman, 2014; Deuze, 2014).

Yet, I feel compelled to critically react to his recent article, "What Journalism Is (Not)" (2019). The main reason is that in that article, Deuze makes statements about journalism and its study that I consider irresponsible, even dangerous. I hope that Deuze, who has some influence on young scholars and the direction of the field, will take the time to reconsider his statements.

My biggest concern is that Deuze ignores institutional contexts as explanations of what journalists believe and, especially, produce. He writes: "The industry that has arisen around journalism's everydayness does not define what it is – the idea(s), debates, and practices of journalists inhabiting these institutions do" (Deuze, 2019: 3). Brazenly, in a single sentence, Deuze discards ownership, commercial pressure, and newsroom hierarchy (power) as explanatory factors for what journalists believe and produce. It is simply reckless to do away with the detailed and empirical evidence produced by critical political economists and sociologists of journalism (e.g. Bennett, 1990; Gans, 1979; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999, 2004). Deuze is, of course, aware of the body of scholarship that he chooses to ignore. He himself notes that

educators and researchers ... have accepted explanations of newswork [sic] that assume journalists get their ideas of who they are and what they are (supposed to be) doing largely through occupational socialization and occupational con-

text, leading to more or less homogeneous understandings of what journalism is. (Deuze, 2019: 2)

For reasons beyond my comprehension, Deuze feels he can simply disregard these educators, researchers and their work. He puts conventional sociological wisdom and critical media scholarship on its head: journalists, not institutions, make journalism. He can only pull this off by consciously overlooking the central issue of power. Deuze declares blithely that in a hierarchical organization, power in fact resides with the employees. They make the institution. The institution does not make them.

In media analysis Deuze foregrounds the "micro, individual-level perspective" (Deuze, 2019: 2). But the explanatory power of the individual level of analysis differs from society to society. Deuze universalizes stereotypical western conceptions of journalism, including the existence of 'free' journalists, to the whole world. I respectfully invite Deuze to even merely survey the strictly regimented Chinese media. Would he really contend that the practices of Chinese journalism and its products are mainly the result of discussions among individual Chinese journalists? And of course, the world's 'free' media systems are overwhelmingly commercial media systems, elite-owned and strictly hierarchical. Hardly free, in other words. Then how are the journalists within those systems?

Deuze seems to believe that we all live in the digital age, where everyone can be an independent entrepreneur. That might be true for elites, including cultural elites like himself, but the vast majority of people on this planet live not in the digital but in the neoliberal age, where toil in the public interest brings slight if any rewards, and often punishment. All over the world a small minority of journalists works hard every day in difficult circumstances to speak truth to power and public. Even if they are not killed or imprisoned, their work often comes at great personal cost. The powers that be that they battle often include their own editors and managers. If we are to celebrate individual journalists, surely the ones that go against the grain of their society deserve the honor, not the generic digital journalist.

It is true that, as Deuze argues, the realities on the ground, namely in the newsroom and in journalists' heads, are messy and particular. Yes, journalists may believe what they like, including the opposite of what their bosses believe. But many of journalists' own testimonials show that the organization they work for by and large (certainly not completely) determines their output (e.g. Kennard, 2019).

Deuze's position on journalism has evolved:

Journalism, I originally believed, is first and foremost a set of values – such as breaking news, uncovering the truth, and providing a public a service. Second, these values would get meaning in the news culture in a specific time and place – a country, a medium, and a news organization. Third,

individual journalists would come to embody these values and their meanings in their everyday routines and practices at work. (Deuze, 2019: 1)

In part based on reflection on his own work experience in journalism, Deuze has come to endorse an opposite position: “As a former freelance reporter, I knew from personal experience that journalism is not this seamless, this well-organized – nor has it ever been.”

Clearly, Deuze is struggling with the central issue of structure versus agency (Godler, 2018). Again, he is not wrong in observing that, on the ground, realities are messier than academic analyses often let on, and that individual journalists possess a measure of agency. But he assigns far more credit to agency than is warranted while, as noted, putting aside a vast literature on critical political economy and the sociology of news that contradicts his position.

Deuze’s belief in the huge amount of power individual journalists supposedly have is nothing less than astounding. He himself acknowledges that:

Precarious working arrangements have come to determine newswork [sic], even for those who in fact still enjoy a contracted job with a salary and benefits. Few, if any, reporters and editors have control over what will happen next in their careers, seeing how colleagues are losing their jobs left and right (and facing empty chairs in the newsroom). (Deuze, 2019: 1)

Before commenting, let me cite another passage to do Deuze’s argument full justice. He writes that:

Although I have argued before to always include the micro, individual-level perspective when theorizing journalism (see Deuze, 2009), it never occurred to me to question the implications of the way journalism is constructed, everyday day [sic] again, by journalists, and how this deceptively straightforward point has become so much more consequential considering profound changes in the working conditions and ways of “making it work” as a journalist (particularly since the collapse of the dot-com bubble, the rise of a platform economy, and a coextensive collapse of traditional business models for news and newswork [sic]. (Deuze, 2019: 2)

Deuze’s point, then, is not just that journalists make their own history, but that they can make it more forcefully than before, presumably because of the changes he identifies above.

Deuze turns reality on its head. He argues that journalists have more agency in the neoliberal, digital age, whereas in fact they have less. In part due to the precariousness of their labor situation, journalists are currently in a much less powerful position to affect the news industry. More and more

journalists lack institutional support for their work. More and more do they lack economic security. More and more do they need to rely on their own devices and limited resources. The provision of the information that dominates the public sphere was never as centralized as it currently is. Professional journalism in the digital world is increasingly controlled and concentrated in the hands of fewer owners. A few companies, Google and Facebook, dominate the internet and receive much of the advertising money spent. It is thus common sense to argue that journalists’ agency has decreased instead of increased.

Janis Joplin’s lyrics about freedom being just another word for nothing left to lose, apply here. Deuze, himself safely ensconced in an academic institution, twists and turns until journalists having nothing left to lose becomes the equivalent of freedom of the press. The real current state of journalism is much, much darker. As Noam Chomsky has insightfully tweeted: “Freedom without opportunity is a devil’s gift, and the refusal to provide such opportunities is criminal” (Chomsky, 2018). The degradation of media institutions deprives journalists of the opportunity to do their work well, with disastrous effects on public discourse. Instead of disregarding institutions or even celebrating their demise, we should devise and implement ones that will enable journalists to truly and freely serve the public (McChesney and Nichols, 2010).

In sum, the problem with Deuze’s views is that he disregards institutions and their influence and overestimates, to an astonishing degree, the autonomy of individual journalists. Of course, journalists make their own history, but, as Karl Marx noted long ago, not in circumstances of their own choosing.

Here is what is so pernicious and, frankly, dangerous about Deuze’s views. He proclaims journalists have the power – and thus the responsibility. But if journalists indeed make journalism, then they are the ones responsible for the Iraq-war debacle instead of the elite-controlled commercial and public news organizations, and for any of the other failures of the mainstream media, including in ‘free’ countries such as the Netherlands (Bergman, 2014).

Though strange to say, Deuze pulls the same trick that many rightwing, neoliberal politicians do. They blame marginalized groups, such as immigrants, for the ills caused by big corporations and colluding states. In other words, they assign agency and responsibility where it largely does not belong, thereby deflecting attention away from the main culprits, often their financiers: the corporate world. Similarly, Deuze tells us that journalists make journalism, thereby handing them the responsibility for journalism’s content and current failing state. Rather, the real culprits are the commercial news organizations who, with collusion from their neoliberal governments, are running journalism into the ground while making as much money as they can, as quickly as they can.

Deuze tries to convince us that institutions do not matter

anymore: “What I no longer believe: that the news industry as it has traditionally been organized is necessary for journalism as an ideology to survive and for the work of journalists to remain relevant to people’s lives” (Deuze, 2019: 1). There is only some truth to this. Indeed, a few journalists working outside the news industries will remain true to the ideals of journalism, and the work they produce will be relevant to people’s lives.

In the meantime, in the actual world, online and off, traditional journalistic power houses – privately-owned, hierarchical organizations aimed at making profits, usually by pleasing advertisers – remain responsible for producing much of the ‘news’ consumed, especially foreign ‘news’ (Bergman, 2014; Boumans et al., 2018). This ‘news’ repeats and affirms the views of the elites, who are literally ruining this planet, including with their frequent calls for illegal and unnecessary wars. This ‘news’ largely ignores the climate change crisis and excludes many reasonable and humane perspectives on world affairs. Such is the state of the ‘news’ that many people consider relevant to their lives, if only because the people around them do. Such is the state of the ‘news’ they consume day-in-day-out, with, unavoidably, major effects on their worldview. Now there’s a story. I wish Deuze would use the platform provided by his top institution to tell it.

Bio

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