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A matter of trust: Plagiarism, fake sources and paradigm repair in the Danish news media

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In December of 2015 two major journalistic scandals hit the Danish news media. The two scandals ran almost concurrently, which increased the media attention and was reflected in the coverage. In a time of diminishing trust in the news media these scandals represented a significant and acute credibility problem for the news media that were affected. Using paradigm repair theory coupled with theory about transparency, this paper analyses which strategies the affected news media employed to re-instore trust in their journalism, and thus in the traditional news paradigm. Like previous studies we find that the news media tried to distance themselves from the journalists involved in the scandals and describe them as 'bad apples'. In both scandals the news media also went to great lengths to investigate the accusations and publically document the transgressions of the reporters. This effort could be seen as an attempt to increase transparency about the scandals, but the reports focused only on the journalists in focus, and not on the news organization, where they worked. As a consequence the affected editors and news organizations largely avoided any blame and speculation as to their role in the scandals.

KEYWORDS: Denmark; Ethics; Journalism; Paradigm Repair; Plagiarism; Scandal; Transparency

Introduction

In Denmark, the Media Liability Act of 1991, section 34 (1), states that the content and conduct of the news media must be in accordance with sound press ethics. The first of the advisory rules of sound press ethics state that: "It is the duty of the media to publish information correctly and promptly." However, in recent years the news media have been plagued by a number of ethical scandals that have called into question not only how correct the information in the news media is, but also how exactly the news media has obtained the information they are basing their stories on. From 2010 a number of different media scandals led to an increased public and political debate on media ethics in Denmark (Blach-Ørsten and Burkal 2014). In May of 2013 this debate led to the revision of the advisory rules of sound press ethics, but in 2014 yet another big media scandal came

to light. This time a former employee of the tabloid weekly *Se og Hør* revealed how the magazine had paid for the hacking of the credit cards of Danish celebrities in order to write stories about them. The case ended in court with convictions of many of the involved journalists and editors. The *Se og Hør* scandal in some ways mirrored that of the News Of The World scandal in Britain in 2011 and was again followed by political and public debate on the state of media ethics. In these debates, reporters and editors have often sought to explain the ethical lapses by stating that the news media today is under constant economic pressure to produce more and more stories, while having fewer reporters to do the job than previously (Blach-Ørsten and Willig2016).

However, the news media today is not only under financial pressure. Indeed, both journalism as a profession and the new media as institutions have become de-mystified in recent years leading to, among other things, an increased public and political skepticism and criticism of both news media and journalists (Donsbach et. al. 2009; Blach-Ørsten and Lund 2015). The de-mystification of journalism along with recent ethical scandals in both Denmark and around the world has led to an increased focus on the credibility of news and journalism (Blach-Ørsten, Hartley and Flensburg 2018; Bucy, D'Angelo and Bauer . 2014). Credibility is here understood as "the quality of being believable or worthy to trust" (Bucy, D'Angelo and Bauer 2014,456). Even though public trust in the news media is general higher in Europe than in the US (Reuters2017) a focus group study on trust and the news media that was conducted by Kantar Media for the Reuters Institute of Journalism in 2016 with participants from both Europe and the US, found that trust in the news "is most readily associated with news content and, in particular, perceptions of its accuracy, impartiality and tonality" (Kantar Media 2016, 10). The report also states that trust in the news and the institutions of news is most "readily eroded by scandals and perceived vested interests" (Kantar Media2016, 6). Thus, the report concludes that trust in the news media was lowest in the UK due to the recent high-profile media scandals.

In the wake of the *Se og Hør* scandal much of the same could be said about trust and the news media in Denmark. So, when new ethical scandals hit the news media again in 2015, the news media were probably more keenly aware than ever before, of just how important it was for them to engage in the public debate that followed and to try to defend and repair the damage to their credibility that these new scandals inflicted. To investigate just how the Danish news media tried to handle the scandals, we turn to the theory of paradigm repair that have also been the focus of many

previous studies of journalistic scandals (Hackett 1984; Bennett, Gressett and Haltom 1985;; Hindman, 2005). The theory states that when faced with criticism news media will try to isolate the problem by pointing out that the scandal was due to a few 'bad apples' amongst the journalist, but not due to a problem with the news media as a business or journalism as a profession (Cecil 2002). Thus, Hindman (2005), in her study of Jayson Blair, argue that usually when news media engage in paradigm repair they seldom acknowledge the need for any kind of systemic change. However, in recent years the question of transparency in journalism has been raised in several studies (Karlson 2011; Blach-Ørsten and Lund 2015). Studies in transparency argue that the news media, in order to overcome the decreasing trust and resist the de-mystification of journalism, need to more openly engage with their users and sources, especially when it comes to the acknowledgement and correction of errors.

In the following we thus seek to combine the theory of paradigm repair with the theory of transparency. We argue that for paradigm repair to be successful in the age of de-mystification of journalism, and to restore trust in a scandalized news media, the news media need to more openly acknowledge and correct errors than have previously been the case according to most of the studies on paradigm repair and studies on transparency. To see if this is indeed the case, we analyze how the Danish news media that were affected by two recent media scandals responded to these scandals.

Paradigm repair and transparency

The theory of paradigm repair adheres back the work of Kuhn (2012)) who states that paradigms "are foundational systems that shape the conceptualized boundaries, norms, and practices of a given profession" (Perreault and Vos, 2016, 3). Applied to the study of journalism a paradigm is "a set of broadly shared assumptions about how to gather and interpret information relevant to a particular sphere of activity" (Bennett, Gressett and Haltom 1985, 54). According to Hindman (2005) the concept of a news paradigm was introduced in the 1970s by scholars such as Tuchman (1972) and Gans (1979), who all studied the professional norms of news and how journalist gathered, defined, and presented news. Thus the shared assumptions that make up the news paradigm are centered on the journalistic norms of "objectivity and impartiality," and indeed Cecil (2002) simples names it 'the objective news paradigm'.. According to other scholars, the journalistic paradigm is reflected in a core set of norms for professional behavior that are maintained via immersion in

newsroom culture where “news workers become socialized into the profession through reward and punishment and adapt to such practices as using official sources (…) to retain credibility as members of the interpretive community”(Hindman and Thomas 2013, 269).

Earlier studies have pointed out that the news media seem to have two major strategies for paradigm repair (Hindman 2005,. The first strategy is to reassert the value of the objective news paradigm: “This takes place through affirming the value of objectivity and its consequent professional norms” (Hindman 2005, 227). The second strategy for the media is to distance themselves from ‘bad’ journalism and ‘bad’ journalists. This way the the news media can marginalize the ‘‘wayward” journalist or news organization and make a distinction between the ‘bad apples’ that brought on the crisis and the ‘good apples’ that represent the rest of the journalistic community (Cecil 2002).”.

Using these strategies, the media publicly acknowledge the violations and challenges to the paradigm, while at the same time protecting the paradigm’s foundation, and thus the “(...) news media can continue operating as before because they have isolated and dismissed the anomaly” (Hindman 2005, 227). The same argument for not changing journalism as it is, also holds for the second strategy. Blaming the individual journalist that violated the norms, and not the institution insures that the paradigm repair work does not need to focus on questions of a systemic change in the way news is defined, gathered, or presented (Berkowitz 2000; Cecil 2002; Hindman 2005).

Recently, scholars of journalism have also turned to the concept of transparency as a way for journalism to re-gain its credibility and thus earn the trust of its users (Karlson 2011; Blach-Ørsten and Lund 2015) Whereas the studies of paradigm repair focus on single events that threaten the credibility of the news media, transparency focuses on a sort of ‘permanent campaign’ of paradigm defense. The argument here is that the news media constantly, through transparency efforts, should try to (re)gain the audiences trust by being more open about why a news story was selected, what influenced its productions process, which sources were used and why (including why some sources were not quoted), and, most importantly, the news media should be much quicker to admit mistakes and errors, apologize for them, correct them, and develop new routines and guidelines that could help minimize mistakes in the future (Blach-Ørsten and Lund 2015).

Method

In this article, we analyze articles that reference either the case of Michael Qureshi (MQ) or the case of Annegrete Rasmussen (AR) and were published in Danish media either in print or online in the period 1st of December 2015 to mid-July 2016. The articles include both editorials, analysis and columns, which are searchable in the Danish media database *Infomedia*. The MQ-case amounts to a total of 322 articles, whereas as the AR-case is somewhat smaller and amounts to 161 articles. Following Hindman (2005) we use qualitative content analysis. Firstly, we read all of the articles (n= 483) to get an overview of the two cases and also make a timeline for each of them. Secondly, we selected only those articles which had responses or reactions from the media organizations involved in the scandals (n= 132). Based on this sample we analyze both of the scandals with a focus on 1) if and how the affected news media distanced themselves from the errant reporters, 2) if and how journalism as a paradigm was defended, and 3) if and how the affected news media used increased transparency as a strategy in their defense. This is accomplished by searching out the 'core meanings' of the text while also letting the general theoretical framework, in this case paradigm repair and transparency, influence the reading (Hindman 2005).**Analysis**

The two scandals in question came at a time when but the public and the politicians had an increased focus on Danish journalism. They became public almost concurrently in December of 2015, but were, as media scandals, very different in form.

Regarding the first of the 2015 scandals, the case of sports reporter Michael Qureshi (MQ), it began when the tabloid newspaper *Ekstra Bladet*, where MQ worked at the time, had to withdraw an interview he had made with a famous football player. This was done relatively quietly, but a television sports program found the withdrawal of the interview so curios that they started their own investigation of MQ. On December 2. 2015, the program documented that MQ had used fake sources in his previous work; both quotes from sources he had never talked to and sources whose existence could not be verified by other reporters. The scandal that also affected MQ's former places of employment, another tabloid newspaper, *B.T*, and a sports magazine, was covered on and off until September 8., 2016, when the Danish police gave up a criminal investigation into MQ's reporting.

The second scandal, the case of Annegrethe Rasmussen (AR), began on December 11., 2015 and ran to 31., January 2016. On December 11., 2015 the online news site *Altinget.dk* ran a story by AG

about the grim prospects of 2016. On December 13., 2015 a reader contacted the site and claimed that the article by AG was plagiarized from The Economist. On December 14.,2015 the editors of *Altinget. dk* analyzed the two different articles, and on December 16., 2015 the editors of *Altinget.dk* publically accused AG of plagiarizing her article from The Economist. At the time AG also contributed material to a newspaper, *Information*, and to a magazine, *Journalisten*. Both quickly became involved in the scandal.

The affected news media's overall concern: Journalism under pressure

From the moment the two scandals started gaining media attention, it became very clear that the editors of the affected news media were very well aware of how media scandals can affect the news media in general and, of course, the scandalized news media in particular. One immediate concern was the question of trust in journalism, as one of the editors affected by the plagiarism scandals stated:

> "This is a case of a serious violation of basic use of other people's texts and thoughts. (…). It's serious, because the readers have to trust the credibility of the information they get in our newspaper and they must know where that information comes from. This trust we now try to repair by examining her (AR ed) recent productions". (Christian Jensen, editor in chief of *Information*, December, 16, 2015)

Another concern, voiced by the editor of another news media affected by the plagiarism scandal, was how scandals might lead to an increased political focus on media regulation:

> "I think press ethics is under pressure. We find that the politicians want to increase the penalties given by the Board of Press Ethics, and I think it is really, really important, that we as media keep the credibility flag high and that ethical standards high internally, so hopefully we can self-regulate instead of having politicians start making laws and tightening" (Rasmus Nielsen, Chief editor *Altinget.dk*, December, 17, 2015)

The blame game

In the case of both MQ and AR it was the editors of the affected news media, especially the editors of *Altinget.dk, Information* and *Ekstra Bladet* who took charge of the paradigm defense in the wake of the scandal. As a first step in repairing the damage both MQ and AR were let go from their positions. This happened within the first few days of the scandals in both cases. But as we know from other studies of paradigm repair one of the key strategies is to focus the blame on the reporters who are responsible for the transgression, while trying to avoid any blame falling on editors or

media organizations (Berkowitz 2000). To some extent this was also was also a strategy that the scandalized news media used in Denmark. In the case of MQ, this is exemplified by some of the central quotes by from editors affected by the MQ-scandal.

> "The methods used by MQ are completely incompatible with being an employee of Ekstra Bladet (…)." (Editor in Chief Poul Madsen, December, 4, 2015)

A sports editor from the tabloid newspaper *B.T*. where MQ had previously worked, also stated that:

> "I am completely convinced this that this is a one off case (…)" (Flemming Fjeldgaard, December 8', 2015)

Another editor, from a sport magazine that had also had published hundreds of stories by MQ, said:

> "We condemn the methods of Michael Qureshi. As several other media we have been deluded, and we apologize for this, especially to our readers. On the basis of this we will go through our internal procedures with the purpose of avoiding a similar thing in the future."(Publishing director Marika Bark, Egmont Publishing Sweden, December, 10, 2015).

In the case of AR the editor in chief of the newspaper *Information* called the examples of violations "extremely extraordinary" (Politiken, Feburary, 9, 2016), and the editor of *Altinget. dk*, where AG also contributed columns, stated:

> "The similarities between the two texts are regrettable. As a minimum, there should have been a reference to The Economist. It is a violation of our ethical guidelines and we take it very seriously." (*Altinget. dk.*, December, 16, 2015)

The problem is clearly presented to be caused by the journalist in question, not the system. In the later evaluation done by *Altinget. dk.* of some of AR articles, their editorial chief Anders Jerking and editor in chief Rasmus Nielsen write:

> "As a correspondent you orientate yourself in many types of news media, but every journalist also knows that you have to reference your sources if you quote stuff from other media outlets. Plagiarism is forbidden. (*Altinget.*dk. December, 19, 2015)

However, the editors also take some of the blame for the scandals, even though it is clear the guilty party mostly is the reporter him/herself:

> "Apart from one case, we have not found people, who were suspicious of Qureshi. He cheated us all. It should not have been possible. But it did happen. The responsibility falls back on all of us, who has supervised him over the years, and in the end me as the chief editor." (Editor in chief, *B.T.*, Olav Skaaning Andersen, March, 4, 2016)

In fact, the editors are sometimes quick to openly talk about responsibility in both cases, but no editor explains what this responsibility in reality means and which consequences it might have for them. In the end, no editors were laid off or resigned as a consequence of the scandals.

Distinguishing between good and bad journalism

Another important part of paradigm repair is also to reassert the values of good journalism over the bad. Here the argument is often that the violation is not just bad journalism, it is simply not journalism at all. As one editor in chief puts it regarding the MQ-scandal:

> "I hope that it's a single case. I see it more as fraud than Journalism. I'm very sad about this case and that it has hit B.T" (Editor in chief *B.T.*, Olav Skaaning Andersen, December, 8, 2015)

A sports editor at the same newspaper also states:

> "Let me put it this way (…). I have never had colleague who used these kinds of methods, not once. This is not ordinary (…)" (Morten Crone Sejersbøl, December, 7, 2015)

In the case of AR the editor in Chief of *Information,* Christian Jensen, also state:

> "We have clear rules on how to use and quote other material. We have never agreed to an article where everything is based on material from other news media and no quotes or references are used." (*Weekendavisen*, December, 18, 2015)

In this way journalism in general is protected against the scandals since they are framed as not really being journalism, either because it is fraud or because the texts in question do not adhere to the common rules of journalism. In their paradigm defense the editors often refer to 'rules' and 'methods' that MQ and AG have not adhered to. It is implied in the argument that these rules and

methods are what separates 'bad' journalists from 'good' journalist, but it is never clearly stated exactly what these rules and methods are, or why they did not prevent AG and MQ from breaking them.

Scandal transparency

Overall we see several overlapping strategies in the two cases when it comes to paradigm repair. Firstly, in both cases the journalists are fired and their articles are investigated. The scandalized news media announce their actions publicly and thus stress a transparency strategy. Secondly, the scandalized news media make corrections to existing articles and withdraw articles on the basis of the investigations. And thirdly, the editors talk about an extra focus on the existing rules and procedures, especially when it comes to (anonymous) sources, quotes, and references. Lastly, two of the scandalized media make new or change their ethical rules as a consequence of the scandals..

Though the different news media claim that an investigation of the article produced by the scandalized reporters is necessary in order to repair the trust, the news media could also have chosen to investigate a number of articles in general (for comparison), but they only investigate the articles of MQ and AR, the deviant journalists. *Information's* rapport on AG is the most thorough and consists of 22 pages, with most space taken up by an in depth analysis of 11 articles with "ethical problems". All the reports are made public online and thereby the news media show transparency in the repair work. The message is: We have nothing to hide. The editors also participate in interviews with other news media and the result of the investigation into MQ's work is presented in a live online one hour long press conference with the editors of *Ekstra Bladet*. What the editors do *not do* is raise a debate about the journalistic culture of high production pressure or raise questions about copying or quoting in general.

The second act of transparency comes when the editors publicly announce that they will look at procedures and editorial processes. Thus as part of thef the paradigm repair the editors do accept part of the responsibility, as seen in this example:

> "We definitely need to look inwards and be self-critical. Has our control been good enough? Have a procedures been good enough? No, they haven't. And that we have to improve." Chief Editor Christian Jensen, *Politiken,* December, 18, 2015)

However, in general the editors state that there is nothing wrong with the guidelines and working methods in general. The solution is not, like in the Blair case, that editors have to resign.. The answer presented by the news media in these two case are rather that if our - otherwise good procedures had been working - this would not have happened. As seen in this quote in the AR-case:

> "Our rules and procedures are as such clear enough, but in this process we have not been able to catch these things" (chief editor, Christian Jensen, *Politiken*, December 18, 2015)

Paradoxically, while they all talk about reviewing and revising the rules, they also assert that the rules and procedures all are good enough. In this way they admit indirectly that the methods cannot be trusted, but we will continue to use of them, only making sure that the other journalists have knowledge of these rules and procedures.

> "We want to make sure that our rules and procedures are clear to editors and journalists, employed and freelancers. In the future, we will have a sharp focus on this point when we edit the newspaper" (The evaluation of the AR-case made by Information,. Feburary, 92016).

It is worth noticing what the media is not transparent about, and do not point out, a solution to the problems. For instance they do not investigate the *working process* of making the specific articles, especially the increased production pressure on journalists in the Danish news media. This point is, however, brought up several times during the scandals by the chairman of the Danish Journalists Union, Lars Werge, who says that "quality takes time":

> "If your editor requires a certain amount of units from you, then you have less time to research, find sources, write well and get another pair of eyes to read it through. We saw that Michael Qureshi wrote a very high number of articles, just as Annegrethe Rasmussen delivered content to many different media companies."Politiken, December, 17, 2015)

Thus the Danish scandals, and the paradigm repair work done by the editors of the scandalized news media, end in the same way Cecil (2002:56) described with the affected news organizations mostly avoiding addressing any systemic issues of journalism such as the increased production pressure.

Discussion

The journalistic paradigm represents a context of shared values, but as many researchers have argued it can be damaged and require repair when journalists violate what are thought to be the core values. When this happens journalists and media institutions attempt; "to restore faith in the paradigm (…) by isolating the people or organizations that stray from the rest" Berkowitz (2000, 126). ". Summing up; in the two cases we observe similar strategies of paradigm repair across the different news media outlets. For instances editors are quick to try to define both the cause and the solutions to both scandals. Editors are also quick to distance themselves and their news media from the transgressors by describing them as *bad apples* (Cecil 2002) and by arguing that what happened had in fact little to with 'real' journalism. Instead the transgressions are framed as either fraud or the work of a single person how did not abide to the normal rules and methods of (good) journalism. Though the editors take a little of blame, mostly by apologizing and promising to do better in the future, the perhaps core question of increased work pressure is only raised by a few actors.

However, the news media seem to react with more transparency than in previous scandals of a similar nature. In 2011 the newspaper Information, who has a key role in the AG scandal, was caught in a similar case, when one of the newspapers foreign correspondents had interviewed a source who had been deceased for a couple of years and other sources claimed never to have talked to the reporter. In 2011, the reporter in question was also fired, but no investigation into his work was launched. I In 2015, however, the news media affected by either the MQ-scandal or the AG-scandal launched a thorough and public investigation into the articles by the scandalized reporters. This is could be seen a sign that Danish news media in both cases did indeed have an increased focus on transparency. Despite this, one could also argue that the increased use of transparency should been seen as part of the same 'old' paradigm repair argument, since the transparency efforts are only focused on the 'bad apples', while the media organizations and their editors go free. Thus, the different investigations into the articles by MQ and AG are mostly used to show and document their 'deviant' journalism and to justify thier firing.

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