Aporias of Digital Journalism

I.
The emergence of the Internet has in many ways facilitated the work of journalists. Informations have become more accessible. It is possible to distribute information and stories with minimal delays in time. New platforms of publication have come about.

At the same time, however, journalism as a profession is threatened. The internet has lowered the bar of entry to publishing information and stories. Any individual with internet access can create her own blog. Furthermore, you can subscribe to Google-news, where google-bots trawl the web for news, and present them in an accessible manner. It is true that even Google-news are dependent on the work of a journalist (who writes the news being trawled), but at the outset this is not a necessary circumstance, because the newsmakers increasingly publish the stories independently of journalist-run media. In the long run the importance of journalists will thus be challenged.

Journalists thus need to reconsider their profession. In this paper I will suggest a Derridean reading of journalism, in which it is being argued that the importance of journalism in a traditional setting has been founded in an aporia. Aporias on the one hand represents a paradox or tension, while on the other hand being the very source of the productivity or significance of certain fields. I will suggest that journalism should be thought through the aporia that journalists on the one hand make room for certain voices in the public spheres – while on the other hand shaping this room, and hereby in a certain sense withdrawing the possibility of the free speech of the interviewees. The journalist operates by letting others speak – but only in certain (to some extent: pregiven) narratives. The work of the journalist is important because it gives voice to certain agents – by preventing it from being the interviewees own voice. The microphone of the journalist is essentially a tensed openness.

The microphone is technologically unidirectional. In the traditional setting the journalist thus lets the interviewee speak to the public. The new Internet mediated setting is, however, essentially bidirectional. The new media thus potentially facilitates the newsmakers and the public talking with each other. The separation between newsmakers, journalists and the public thus changes (as demonstrated in Gillmor 2004). Drawing on the hermeneutical insight that answers only make sense on the background of questions (Gadamer 1990, pp.368-84) one could say that the voice of the interviewee got its significance by being questioned by the journalist. The questioning of the journalist is therefore challenging, and thereby giving voice to the interviewee.

The dialogical setting of the Internet based media mean that this aspect of the journalist practice is no longer as urgent. It is no longer necessary that the journalist mediates a field of questioning between newsmakers and the publicity. I have, however, demonstrated that one should be cautious to assume that the bidirectional constitution of the technology necessarily entails a proper and unimpeded interactivity (in Hansen 2010xxxxx(activirtuality)xxxxx). This also affects the point about fruitful dialogues. The bidirectional media also carry tensions that are based in the very dialogical setting: In order for dialogues not to deteriorate into chaotic chatter and fragmented exchanges it is important that they are framed in certain ways – it is decisive that there is a certain narrative that connect the various contributions. A dialogue can only happen on the background of a general agreement that certain contributions and subjects are not accepted. Aporetically stated, dialogues are based upon the prevention of dialogues. Dialogues are only fruitful if the participants on the one hand listen to and recognize the contributions of the others, while at the same time not letting themselves be determined by the agenda of the others.

In traditional media for dialogue there are typically a limited number of participants. This makes it, to some extent, possible to control how fruitful the dialogue develops. The agents know, to some extent, who the potential participants are, how they react to certain statements, and it is thus possible to take these aspects into account when contributing to the dialogue. This is, however, decisively different with dialogues on the Internet. On Internet-based fora with open access,
everyone can potentially participate in the dialogue. This makes it somewhat unpredictable how statements will be received. This is one of the strengths of the Internet (if the diversity is handled fruitfully); it is, however, also one of the weaknesses (if the diversity is handled unconstructively – extremely unfruitful approaches to diversity is often referred to as trolling).

I will suggest that this is a situation in which the the journalist may have a fruitful role to play. In the new setting, journalists should focus on moderation of voices, rather than giving-voices. The journalist can go from being a provider of voice to be the moderator for the cast. That is, instead of being situated in the aporias of giving and denying voices, the journalists should be placed in the aporias of giving and denying rooms for dialogue. Through her training and experience to frame a story, assess sources, through her comprehensive knowledge about the media landscape, and through her ability to communicate with very different types of agents, the journalist has qualities that may help mediating voices to the dialogical rooms in which they can interact fruitfully.

II.
In order to articulate this suggestion and its implications, the Derridean notion of aporias will become decisive. Derrida presents aporias as “defects” that lead us beyond the limits of truth. In his deconstructivist approach he seeks to demonstrate how our limiting embeddedness in practical, epistemic and linguistic outlooks on the one hand is unavoidable. It is, however, on the other hand not fixed. We can become aware of our embeddedness and hereby contemplate and re-configure (deconstruct) it. This awareness has to come through our practical, epistemic and linguistic outlooks. There is no outside-perspective from where the limitations of our outlooks can become apparent.

One could say that one important aspect of our practical, epistemic and linguistic outlooks is to offer a systematic unity in our approaches, a systematic unity that is important to be able to navigate. If we were not able to approach the world in systematic ways, it would become indefinite, confused, unpredictable, and it would be impossible for us to navigate. Systematicity is dependent on reduction; I can understand that the vehicle outside my office is a bicycle in the same way as the other vehicles are. Even though they in many ways differ from each other (colour, age, form, etc.), they are still, in important ways, the same. If I am to approach bicycles in a fruitful way, it is important that I can focus on the sameness, and ignore the differences. My understanding of bicycles presuppose a reduced approach to the actual entities.

On the other hand, however, internal systematic unity and coherence is not enough in our approaches to the world. Our approaches are directed, which means that they have not only an internal normativity. There is also a question as to whether we are able to reach the desired aspects of the world. It is thus essential that the horizons of our approaches are adequate in relevant ways. If the approaches are based on reductions that make it impossible for me to make the relevant distinctions, the approaches will inevitably fail. So, if my understanding of the bicycle is only based upon the physical material (iron), then I will probably have problems distinguishing between bicycles and bicycle stands, and my ride home will therefore probably become quite uncomfortable. In that case the systematic unity of my approach has exaggerated – there is a need for a more distinguished approach.

The urge for systematicity and adequacy thus point in two different directions; systematicity points toward unity, whereas adequacy points toward multiplicity and diversity. Our practical, epistemic and linguistic approaches are thus tensed, and this is, according to Derrida, the source for their aporetic constitutions. Our approaches to the world are shaped by horizons in which we try to handle these tensions. They can, however, only be handled – not resolved. The tensions prevail as irresolvable impasses in our approaches – as aporias, non-passages.

III.
In Apories Derrida claims that
...culture itself, culture in general, is essentially, before anything, even a priori, the culture of death (Derrida 2000, p.43).

Any culture is an attempt to handle the fact that we are mortal – and the fact that our conceptions of what this means is essentially unfounded. Cultural practices are thus, due to their foundation on our aporetic mortality, generally aporetically structured too.

This is certainly a strong claim that could need further backing. It is, however, not important in this paper whether or not any culture and cultural practice actually is aporetically embedded. In the preceding section we have seen that the aporetic structure can be substantiated with reference to some intuitions about the tensed constitution of our practical, epistemic and linguistic approaches. In this section I will show that it can be helpful to analyse a certain practice in modern Western cultures – i.e. the practice of journalists – as aporetically constituted.

The articulation of the aporia will, however, also demonstrate why the centrality of journalists is today challenged due to the emergence of Internet-based media. The new media setting carries a relocation of the aporetic structure of communicative settings. The traditional battle of giving and depriving someone a voice in the public sphere is not as emergent as it used to be – since everybody can potentially have a public voice. The important battle today concerns the question of whether or not the participants in a public dialogue are conceived as being a relevant part of the prevailing narrative. Who is to be heard, and what role are we given in the dialogic landscape. In the succeeding section I will discuss whether or not journalists can play a crucial role in this new setting.

The evolution of journalism has been tightly connected with the emergence of mass-media (Habermas 1962; Habermas 1992, VIII). Starting with the printed press, it became possible with relative ease to approach geographically distant mass-audiences through newspapers. The geographical distance entailed that the readers could not be expected to know about the “situation” of the stories, and it thus became urgent that the stories were given a comprehensible narrative. The journalist profession was born. The profession was certainly altered in many ways with the introduction of new media such as the radio and TV, but structurally the job of the journalist was still to present stories to a distant audience.

In shaping the narratives, the journalist chooses a certain perspective, angle, point of view. In doing this, the journalist emphasizes and focus certain points, other aspects are left out or at least only peripherally presented. Furthermore, since the mass-media reach a mass-audience, they cannot cover everything that might have been considered relevant for the audience; it is therefore necessary to be selective as to which stories are being covered at all.

The task of the journalist is thus essentially tensed. On the one hand there is a vast amount of material that could have been presented for the audience. On the other hand, the journalist products would lose their relevance, if journalists attempted to cover everything. The audience would be overwhelmed by the amount and complexity; and each reader/listener/viewer would be presented with stories that she does not necessarily find relevant. The journalist is only successful to the extent that she masters the fine art of deciding what is relevant, and what is not. And there can never be a full mastery of this art. There will always be some extent of dissatisfaction among the newsmakers and the audience – because notions of relevance vary.

The practice of journalists is thus situated in an aporia. On the one hand, it is essential that journalists make selections and decisions as to what is relevant. On the other hand, it is essential that the journalist presents what is felt as relevant for a multiple and diverse audience. Within a traditional mass-mediated journalist practice this tension cannot be solved. It is not a fault in journalism – it is, on the contrary, what makes journalism so important in the mass-media structured public sphere; because journalists have the assignment of doing something that has no perfect solutions, but can nevertheless be carried out in ways that are more or less fruitful in the
IV.
The journalist setting is radically changed with the emergence of Internet-based media. On the one hand, the Internet certainly serves as a powerful tool for journalists in their everyday practice. The Internet has in many ways facilitated an immediate availability of a huge amount of information, that can be used in the research of the journalists. This is, however, also the case for the potential addressees of the journalist products. Newsmakers increasingly communicate through Internet-based media which are available for everyone. If, for example, someone is interested in the views of the prime minister, she can visit the prime minister's blog, facebook- or twitterprofile, and see for herself. Or perhaps even ask the prime minister directly.

Less actively engaged agents can subscribe to various news-bots that search the Internet for news, and publish it according to the criteria of relevance that the agent has specified. The agent is certain that she mainly receives the news that she find interesting, because she has defined the criteria of relevance herself.

Thus, if we look at the traditional aporia of journalism – the tension between the huge amount of information and the necessary sorting of narratives based on criteria of relevance – we note that the urgency of both aspects of the aporia have changed. On the one hand, we no longer depend on receiving the information through traditional mass media because the information is already available to us the Internet. Secondly, search-bots on the Internet facilitate user-defined sorting according to self-defined criteria of relevance. If the aporia of journalism vanishes, the urgency of journalists vanishes too. The question is therefore whether the aporia of journalism vanishes or merely changes. We will suggest the latter; the assignment of the journalist is no longer to navigate in the aporias of giving voices (from newsmakers to the public), but to navigate in the aporias of moderating voices (between (semi-)public agents).

It is probably not controversial to claim that the Internet is a medium of dialogue. In the late 20th. century Gadamer proposed a model for dialogue in which he claimed that dialogues happen through a fusion of horizons, meaning that both (all) participants in a successful dialogue would gradually come to a common ground for dialogue that would be more comprehensive and balanced than the starting point of each of the participants – e.g. in (Gadamer 1990, p.311 + 380). In Gadamerian terms one could thus say that the informational form of notion that lies behind digital technology like computers and the Internet constitute a “language” that makes it possible for seemingly incompatible phenomenons (like sound, the visual, text) to be represented in one language (code), making mutual exchanges possible. The informational notation form thus constitutes a horizon that, in certain respects, make a more comprehensible understanding of these phenomenons possible.

We will not refute this account of dialogue as based upon the extension of horizons. We will however claim that it is inadequate – it needs the Derridean twist that was articulated in section II. Even though it is true that dialogues lead to fusions of horizons, it is important to notice that the fusion itself must be based upon an (often implicit and inarticulate) common agreement that there are some things we do not discuss. Signification can only happen on the background of spaces, silence, blanks, in-betweens (Derrida 1969; Hansen 2009). Dialogue can only happen in the tension between the urge for systematicity and adequacy; and systematicity necessitates certain reductions.

Dialogues are thus, like any other practice situated in an aporetically based tension. On the one hand dialogues are dependent on contributions that to some extent challenges the prevailing horizons; an exaggerated challenge will, however, on the other hand destroy the dialogue, the dialogue will fall apart (fragmentation), it will lose focus and dialogical progression will become impossible.

This aporia is also found on the Internet. One of the ways in which it is handled is through the creation of communities. Communities in various ways frame the kind of participants that
participate in the dialogue. There are various ways in which this is done. On a technical level it is possible to setup limited access to the community. I many communities you need to be invited, or at least to create a user profile, and if you do not act according to the prevailing codes of conduct, you may risk being excluded from the community. Another selective mechanism is the focus of the community. Communities that discuss poodles are not attractive for agents that are not interested in poodles. This is not to say that there will only be dialogues about poodles, but the chances for a qualified feedback will be higher, if the subject has some affinity with the subject of the community.

Still, should it happen that a participant joined the community and contributed unfruitfully one will often see that the other participants will try to educate the user, pointing out how he breaks with the norms of the community. At other times the intruder will be bullied in various ways, in order to make him abscond by himself. Communities of a certain size will often have to institutionalize this process by introducing moderators who have the power to rebuke, edit/delete contributions and even exclude offending users.

The task of moderators is a difficult one. Their primary goal is to facilitate dialogue – through elimination of dialogue. Moderators only have to intervene if the ongoing dialogues are threatened. Due to the aporetic foundation of dialogues, there are, however, no clear-cut criteria that defines when a dialogue is threatened. Dialogues need challenges (in order to keep on moving), they need surprising input that are sometimes in the situation felt to be problematic. It is often the surprising contributions that move the dialogues forward. On the other hand, dialogues fall apart if every contribution is surprising, if it is not possible to work out some common horizon within which the various contributions can be understood.

Moderation is thus a practice that is in many ways similar to traditional journalism. The moderator needs to assess each voice in the dialogues and determine whether or not they contribute fruitfully, in a suitably surprising way, to the prevailing narratives. The moderator needs to be selective and reductive, in order for dialogues and narratives to flourish.

In order for this to happen successfully, it is decisive that moderators have comprehensive and broad overviews. They need insight in where to find what – in order to guide contributions to their proper places. They need skills in assessing contributions as to their worth in substantiating a narrative. They need qualifications in seeing potential narratives, that are only in their making. In short, they need to be journalists.

Our suggestion will thus be to rethink the practice of journalists from being situated in aporias of giving and denying voices; journalists should rather situate themselves in the aporias of facilitating and reducing dialogues – i.e. the aporias of giving and denying rooms for dialogue.

**Addendum.**

It is, however, not obvious that the prevailing practices of moderation are optimal. Currently moderation usually, as described above, mainly happen as editing and deletion of contributions, supplemented with the exclusion of users. This gives the communities a unified profile. The aporetic foundation of the moderating institution entails that actual censorship is problematic. It could be that some users would actually have found the censored contributions fruitful. For some communities, at least some of the more experimentally oriented communities, it would therefore be more facilitating for the dialogues to introduce several moderation filters. Moderation-filters could be several users with moderating authority, but instead of actually deleting contributions and users, they could mark the contributions in various ways; they could either indicate that the contributions would be more suitable in another context, or they could indicate that they find the contributions wholly inappropriate. And the other (ordinary) users could then “subscribe” to the moderating filters that they sympathize with, and thereby gain the filtering, recapitulations and ordering that is necessary to comprehend the contributions as contribution to a certain narrative.

This would make the aporia of moderation more dialogical than the prevailing practice. There will be no contributions that are actually censored; everybody can in principle read everything. But
it is at the same time possible to participate in a dialogue that is more focused, more epitomized, but also more narrow.

This kind of moderation is probably not suitable for every community; it takes a community that is very open, a community that is willing to be affiliated with a vast amount of differing views – probably also radical views; and it takes users that are willing to be “in rooms” with different kinds of views. Even in such cases, old-fashioned moderation will probably still be necessary, in order to cope with illegal contributions. The general line of moderation will however be more dialogical. This will not solve the aporias of moderation; it will, however, entail that the aporias of providing and denying voices will be less urgent. This kind of communities would take serious the dialogical potentials of the Internet – and it’s aporias.