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FROM PARTICIPATION TO RECIPROCITY IN THE JOURNALIST–AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP

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The relationship between journalists and their audiences has long been a particularly fraught one, marked by a tension between dependence and resistance, reliance and resentment. Journalism is an inherently public activity, one that requires an audience to be practised. Since journalism around the world began to professionalize in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that connection between journalism and its audience – often mythologized as ‘the public’ – has taken on an even greater importance (Anderson, 2013). Journalists have increasingly seen themselves as performing a service for that public, beholden to the public interest rather than corporate directives or powerful interests, especially during the ‘high modern’ era that dominated late twentieth-century journalism in the USA (Hallin, 1992). At the same time, however, journalists have viewed this public, so crucial to their own professional self-perception, as incomprehensible, uninformed and irrational. They have continually resisted the input and influence of that audience as a threat to their own professional autonomy (Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978; Sumpter, 2000).

Fast-forward a few decades. Much has changed in a contemporary mediascape characterized by mobile phones, social media and networked platforms (Howard, 2015; Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Westlund, 2015). These new(er) technologies allow for more blended forms of information production, distribution and consumption, as ambient awareness systems – ‘broad, asynchronous, lightweight and always-on’ (Hermida, 2010, p. 297) – contribute to the hybridization of media forms and functions (Chadwick, 2013). Altogether, ‘the tenuous distinction between producers and consumers of content has faded’ (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 29), even while it is equally apparent that much of the information recognized as ‘news’ in society is still produced by many of the same legacy institutions that have dominated the scene for decades, making news organizations and their journalists stubbornly central to media work in the public interest (Anderson, 2013). The boundaries of journalism

do not simply go away. They are perpetually tested and negotiated, making them as salient now as ever because their contours reveal fundamental contests over what counts as journalism and who counts as a journalist (Carlson and Lewis, 2015; cf. Loosen, 2015). The question then becomes how might barriers as well as connections between journalists and audiences require a reconsideration of this producer–user relationship? According to what set of norms, values or expectations might such a re-evaluation take place? And, crucially, how might a reconfigured relationship between journalists and audiences contribute to the larger work of resituating journalism’s relevance for the various publics that journalism normatively serves?

Establishing a case for reciprocity

The participatory affordances of digital media, including blogs, social media and comment sections, have led several media executives and observers to call for the development of forms of journalism that are marked by robust, collaborative participation via networked publics (e.g., Gillmor, 2004; Rosen, 2006; Rusbridger, 2010). As Boczkowski (2010) and others have noted, many of the factors that shielded twentieth-century journalists from their audiences – lack of competition, insulation from market pressures and relatively weak tools to measure audience desires – have been altered or undone by increasing corporatization, a growing market logic and the development of sophisticated information systems for tracking digital audiences. Altogether, the digital media environment has complicated notions of ‘distance’ between journalists and audiences in relation to expectations of and practices towards one another (directly) and among others (indirectly) in networked spaces (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012). In addition, prominent efforts have been made to encourage journalists to engage their audiences more regularly and meaningfully, beginning with the public journalism movement in the 1990s. With its emphasis on ensuring that the public’s expressed agenda informed journalists’ news coverage, public (or civic) journalism helped refocus some of journalists’ attention on the importance of building relationships with audiences, though it failed to achieve broad, lasting implementation in American journalism (Nip, 2008).

Practically speaking, in the past decade most news organizations have become familiar with some degree of audience participation in the news process, even if they prefer to keep it comfortably at arm’s length (Singer et al., 2011). As Wall (2015, p. 807) sums up in her synthesis of the literature on citizen/participatory journalism, ‘this phenomena is now so intertwined with the workings of the professional news media that it is hard to imagine citizen journalism – or whatever one wants to call it – disappearing’. Indeed, there is evidence that at least some journalists, some of the time, have come to see openness and participation as necessary elements of the news process, with potential for diversifying discourse and connecting users with news organizations and each other (Lewis and Usher, 2013; Reich, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Singer, 2010). But, often within those same newsrooms, journalists also hold deeply constrained views of participation that conceive of it as a fundamentally one-way process that should remain under journalists’ control and serve

their purposes (Jönsson and Örnebring, 2011; Usher, 2014). Journalists are moving closer to embodying in practice a truly public-centred mindset that they claim to espouse, but they remain deeply limited in the degree and forms they will allow that participation to take.

We propose that the concept of reciprocity offers a novel perspective for re-imagining this fractured relationship. Reciprocity – a principle of mutual exchange and giving in community that is linked with the core social attributes of trust and social capital – has taken on a broad range of forms both positive (Wellman and Gulia, 1999) and negative (Perugini et al., 2003) within contexts both online (Pelaprat and Brown, 2012) and offline (Putnam, 2000). When developed in relation to journalism, reciprocity can work within communities to encourage an active, participatory construction and sharing of news in which networks of community members and journalists work together to circulate information and sustain discussion (Lewis, Holton and Coddington, 2014). Reciprocity is not a cure-all for the mistrust and disregard that often plague the relationship between journalists and their audiences; these issues have deep roots in professional ideology (Lewis, 2012) and therefore cannot be undone by infusing a single social value into that relationship.

Still, we argue that reciprocity offers a useful new lens for imagining what the journalist–audience relationship could be, not only in reconceiving it broadly, but also in evaluating what participatory journalistic initiatives might work and why. We intend in this chapter to articulate how reciprocity might inform a rethinking of the journalist–audience dialectic, one that explores how it can be reformed rather than simply explaining its pathologies. Reciprocity does not, however, lead us towards a utopian ideal for journalism. Rather, the contingency in its development allows more space to critically examine the varied directions in which reciprocal relationships among journalists and their communities may take shape.

Reciprocity as a concept

Reciprocity is among the most universal of social norms and is inscribed in many civil laws and accepted in many cultures: ‘one should help those who have helped him/her in the past and retaliate against those who have been detrimental to his/her interests’ (Perugini et al., 2003, p. 252). While both positive and negative, reciprocity is generally understood as exchange between two or more actors for mutual forms of benefit. As such, it is considered a fundamental feature of human sociality throughout history. In the prosocial sense of sharing kindness in response to kindness received, reciprocity is a key starting point in establishing and maintaining personal relationships (Gouldner, 1960). Scholars have gone so far as to suggest that humans – or ‘homo reciprocus’, as the sociologist Howard Becker (1956) described the species in *Man in Reciprocity* – are, by nature, evolutionarily wired for reciprocity, and that reciprocal exchanges thus form the very basis for social cohesion and cooperation (see Molm, 2010). It is in this overall sense of mutualized gift-giving that reciprocity is deemed critical not only to interpersonal relations, but also to the

broader development of community, as members in a given locale or network take a greater interest in and learn to rely upon one another (Putnam, 2000). Beyond the offline social contexts familiar to Putnam's analysis of social capital and the role that reciprocity plays in fostering it, the social function of reciprocity is likewise important for digitally mediated spaces (Pelaprat and Brown, 2012).

However, despite such wide agreement about reciprocity as a social norm, there is less clarity in the literature – chiefly of importance to social psychology – regarding the conceptual definition of reciprocity (Perugini et al., 2003). Does it describe tit-for-tat exchanges conducted repeatedly between two parties? Or more like anonymous, one-off interactions? Is reciprocity as much about perception as practice, and is it equally about prosocial and antisocial forms of exchange? In taking up these and related questions, Perugini et al. (2003) developed survey scale measures, validated cross-culturally, that delineated first between beliefs and behaviours related to reciprocity and second between positive and negative forms of reciprocity. The upshot, they found, was that reciprocity could be understood as a 'subjectively internalized mechanism' that could be reliably measured via individual differences (2003, p. 275). And, as such, reciprocity could be manifest both in perception (i.e. a personal belief in the role of reciprocity in one's life) and in practice (i.e. a set of behaviours, or intended behaviours, suited to one's particular opportunities for interaction).

To this explication of reciprocity at the level of social psychology, behavioural sociologists have contributed structural approaches for modelling forms of what Molm (1994) called 'reciprocal exchange'.¹ Such exchanges may be direct or indirect in nature (Molm, 2010). In direct exchanges, benefits flow between two actors in one of two forms: unilaterally in reciprocal exchanges (A gives to B, and B gives to A, but *without* any guarantee of something in return) or bilaterally in negotiated exchanges (A and B give to each other only on agreement, as in a contract). In indirect exchanges, individuals give benefits to one another and eventually receive benefits in return, *but not necessarily from the same person* (Molm, 2010). Such distinctions between direct and indirect (or generalized) exchanges have been studied for decades (e.g. Lévi-Strauss, 1969), but recent attention has been given to the importance of reciprocity for understanding the dynamics of (online) communities: their formation and evolution, their network ties, the trust and goodwill that exist among members, and so forth (e.g. Ammann, 2011; Gaudeul and Giannetti, 2013; Lauterbach et al., 2009). Reciprocity in online and offline settings is of great social value beyond the exchange of beneficial acts themselves. As Molm, Schaefer and Collett (2007) point out, the value of reciprocity lies both in *instrumental* and *symbolic* outcomes. Instrumental values are those goods (such as gifts, conversation, attention and favours) that are gained through reciprocity. Symbolic values are the positive thoughts, perceptions and behaviours that may be communicated by reciprocity or observed by others.

To sum up the literature: more than a taken-for-granted social norm, reciprocity is manifest in individual-level perceptions and practices, whether in positive or negative forms; and it also represents a set of structured exchanges, whether direct

or indirect, involving gifts that may be instrumental or symbolic. Seen in this light, reciprocity is a multi-faceted concept of belief and behaviour, evident in various forms of interaction and leading to varied outcomes for individuals and society. Moreover, a key outcome is the contribution that reciprocity makes to the formation and perpetuation of community, including (perhaps especially) in the context of online communities (Ammann, 2011; Gaudeul and Giannetti, 2013; Pelaprat and Brown, 2012). But while reciprocity has been examined within the realm of online social interactions, the concept has yet to receive broad treatment in media and journalism studies.

Indeed, in the communication literature, the concept of reciprocity is often subsumed within or sidelined by related matters of trust and social capital – as in the case of examining whether social network sites foster social capital (Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2009). This relative neglect of reciprocity, as a distinct object of focus, points to an opportunity for (social) media research broadly (Lewis, 2015): how might reciprocity, as a key concept of social exchange, help scholars conceptualize a networked media environment increasingly characterized by the giving, sharing and re-circulating of information among peers? More to the point of this chapter, what might the concept of reciprocity, taken more purposefully, reveal about the social exchanges of journalism – namely, the growing variety and intensity of interactions that may be facilitated between/among journalists and audiences in social and digital media spaces?

Reciprocal journalism as a concept

Seeking to contribute both to the conceptualization of reciprocity as well as its application to journalism studies, we previously introduced the notion of *reciprocal journalism*: ‘a way of imagining how journalists might develop more mutually beneficial relationships with audiences across three forms of exchange – direct, indirect, and sustained types of reciprocity’ (Lewis, Holton and Coddington, 2014, p. 229). Such a definition assumes that journalists can exhibit positive forms of reciprocity to stimulate more meaningful and mutually beneficial exchanges with audiences, and that such exchanges may be direct and indirect, according to Molm’s (2010) structural theory of reciprocity. Additionally, we argued for recognizing sustained reciprocity as a third form, one that includes both direct and indirect reciprocity, but does so by extending them across temporal dimensions. Below, we briefly describe each of these three forms of reciprocity and their potential application in journalism.

Direct reciprocity is the basic building block of online community. Individuals develop a sense of connectedness as they engage in unilateral (that is, non-binding) forms of reciprocal exchange, giving without a guaranteed response and yet with hopeful expectation of something valuable in return. Retweeting, liking, favouriting, commenting: each of these common forms of sharing and participating online invites direct reciprocity. When such actions are rewarded, as in the case of bloggers linking among each other (Ammann, 2011), trust, bonding and affinity may more

readily develop (see Molm, Schaefer and Collett, 2007). For journalism, direct reciprocity can take the form of journalists simply responding to tweets and comments; Andy Carvin, for instance, famously relied on Twitter conversations with activists, protesters and other sources on the ground to help him contextualize and verify information during the 2011 Arab Spring (Hermida, Lewis and Zamith, 2014). Audiences, in this sense, may be more willing to exchange information directly with journalists if they perceive that they might be heard and, in some cases, receive information in return.

If direct reciprocity implies exchanges between journalists and audiences in a one-to-one fashion, *indirect reciprocity* points to exchanges that are witnessed by others and intended for community benefit, in a one-to-many fashion. This more generalized form of reciprocity occurs as the beneficiary of an act returns the favour not to the original giver, but rather to another member of the social network (Molm, Schaefer and Collett, 2007). As Person A gives to Person B who gives to Person C and so on, such gestures benefit group members and also signal to other people (that is, potential group members) the kind of bond developing within the group. Reciprocity, or merely the observation of it, thus contributes to a pay-it-forward dynamic in successful communities (Lauterbach et al., 2009). Hashtags, for example, can represent a form of indirect reciprocity: even while perhaps responding directly to another user on Twitter, users can relay hashtagged information that may facilitate more generalized communication among a set of users following that hashtag, potentially developing broader ‘news streams’ of affective, personalized storytelling (Papacharissi, 2015). Tweets around #Egypt during the Arab Spring, for instance, led to certain actors and frames being crowdsourced to prominence, thereby contributing to the gatekeeping and framing functions of journalism (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013). Moreover, take the example of the #Ferguson hashtag that sprang up in response to protests surrounding police violence in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 (see Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). Beyond helping community members inform and coordinate with one another – akin to a direct reciprocity function – the hashtag also served as a megaphone and discussion forum for broader national conversations around race and police brutality. People went from directly relaying information back and forth to others in a geographically bounded network, to relaying information and ideas to others outside the network in the hope that it would facilitate a more generalized response of understanding and conversation. Thus, for journalism, indirect reciprocity points to opportunities for more publicly visible interactions that encourage further contribution from others and transcend barriers of time and space.

The longer and more enduring such exchanges become, the greater potential they have for developing *sustained reciprocity*. In journalism as in other social interactions online, direct and indirect reciprocity can be enacted nearly immediately, especially in moments of crisis, but they also may not last much longer than that, limiting the long-term impact of exchanges of goodwill. For reciprocity to reach its fullest potential and contribute most meaningfully to community dynamics, it should be perpetuated over time. As Molm, Takahashi and Peterson (2000) point out, when

people value the continuation of a relationship, they are less likely to exploit one another. For journalism, this means imagining interactions with audiences, whether online or offline, that carry greater expectation for the future – an expectation that such interactions will continue, for one thing, and that they will remain mutually beneficial. Sustained reciprocity may be most actionable at the level of community journalism (Robinson, 2014). Such journalists, understanding the nuances of their audiences, can more readily develop carefully patrolled spaces for community members to interact with journalists and with each other (Lewis, Holton and Coddington, 2014). To cite one example: the *Houston Herald*, a newspaper serving a small community in Houston, Missouri, has emphasized reciprocal discussions and information sharing with and among community members on its Facebook page. That, in part, has helped develop the *Herald's* social media presence over time, leading to a Facebook following larger than the town's population (Mayer, 2012).

Overall, then, reciprocal journalism resituates journalists in the network. It casts them in a community management role: journalists may catalyse reciprocal exchange directly with audiences/users, indirectly among community members and repeatedly over time. And as a practice with roots in a social-psychological concept, reciprocal journalism involves not just behaviour, but motivation as well. Simply posting tweets with a community-based hashtag or responding to reader comments and inquiries does not constitute reciprocal journalism if it is not undertaken with a motivation to give something of value with the expectation of receiving something similar in return. It is important to note that these actions *may* do such things; there is little evidence that journalists *actually* do such things within a reciprocal mindset, particularly given what we know about their general reluctance to engage with audiences (Singer et al., 2011). As yet, there is little empirical research regarding reciprocity in and for journalism. In one study, Borger and colleagues (2014) found support for the reciprocal journalism model as they examined participatory news projects from the audience perspective. The citizen participants, they noted, expected something in return from journalists for their contributions; consequently, projects often failed when such expectations were not met and users quit participating. Such findings suggest that reciprocity may play a crucial 'bridging' role between journalists and audiences: users are more likely to remain engaged when they feel that someone on the other side is returning the favour. What is yet to be understood, however, is what reciprocity in journalism looks like from the perspective of journalists.

Reciprocity from the perspective of journalists

Taking up the challenge to unpack the nature of reciprocal journalism from the producers' vantage point, we surveyed a large pool of US newspaper journalists and editors (hereafter referred to as 'journalists') in February 2014. Using a randomized, stratified sample drawn from the media contact service Cision, we collected 546 completed surveys that included responses to open-ended

questions about journalists' engagement with readers that asked respondents to think about how they engaged with audiences, directly and indirectly, on a daily basis and over time. From those responses, we were able to glean the various lenses through which these journalists view reciprocity in journalism and, in some cases, how they demonstrate reciprocity in their professional routines.

In terms of *direct reciprocity*, which most journalists surveyed recognized as an important and relatively new trend in the news creator–news consumer relationship, journalists tended to view such exchanges as another extension of their professional engagement with readers. Where emails replaced telephone calls, tweets and Facebook posts have begun to supplant emails. Many journalists reported working diligently to return phone calls within a day or two, to respond the same day to emails and to respond within hours to messages sent via social media platforms. While many journalists noted that face-to-face interactions helped to develop the strongest connections with their sources and readers, they acknowledged the power to enhance those ties with social media responsiveness. Indeed, those surveyed listed 'responsiveness', 'speed of responses', 'following up quickly', 'allowing audiences to teach us' and 'deeper engagement', alongside other more traditional tenets of good journalism such as accuracy, consistency, truthfulness and balance.

Notably, while several journalists reported that audiences continued to use phone calls, emails and social media channels to seek praise or to express concerns about particular stories or reporting techniques, many said they spend a sizeable portion of their time building relationships through direct reciprocity in their communities, both online and offline. At the local level, journalists described themselves as the 'face of the community', frequently finding ways to attend community events, seek audience input on stories, listen and respond to critiques, and make engagement with their readers a 'casual, intimate feeling of reciprocated benefit'. Others noted that they attempt to respond 'thoughtfully' and 'politely' to reader comments and posts on Facebook, and to thank readers for providing information or sharing their stories through retweets, favourites and mentions on Twitter.

These same journalists made it clear, though, that when it came to inappropriate or vulgar comments from audiences, they either ignored them or removed them from public feeds. This, as one journalist put it, 'is in the best interest of our community'. Such actions – those performed with the greater good of the community, not just the individual, in mind – fall more closely under the category of *indirect reciprocity*. For smaller, more local publications, journalists valued their direct interactions with readers as a means to illustrate for their community of readers the depth of their dedication to their craft. By being amenable to public concerns and critiques and actively listening and responding to public input, these journalists argued that others might witness or hear about their actions and take more positive, and potentially more engaged, approaches to the newspaper. In terms of social media, journalists reported fairly heavy monitoring of reader comments and posts, frequently serving as secondary gatekeepers when they deemed information irrelevant or inappropriate. Still, the majority of journalists took an optimistic approach to indirect engagements on social media, using them as platforms to

extend the discourse around stories by asking questions, providing extra links or creating hashtags as a means of inviting a larger crowd into the conversation. They saw maintenance of social media channels as a challenge saddled side-by-side with opportunities to expose larger, more diverse audiences to their content. In order to reach those audiences, journalists said they needed to create welcoming environments built on relationships and exchanges that others could easily see.

They also noted that direct and indirect forms of reciprocity needed to be repeated consistently. As one journalist wrote: 'I have found that good relations [with readers] come over time.' In this sense, *sustained reciprocity* was deemed critical in the process of building trust, loyalty and longevity in readership. While some journalists argued that sustained reciprocity was as simple as responding to tweets and occasionally engaging in hashtags or live conversations on Twitter or Facebook, others again noted the importance of face-to-face interactions. One journalist at a local newspaper said that he worked hard to remember birthdays and other milestones of his readers, reaching out to them when he could or bringing up such dates when he bumped into them in public. Such attention to detail, he said, was a cornerstone of 'building a relationship of trust and credibility'.

In sum, the US journalists we surveyed, especially those working for locally oriented and mostly smaller publications, suggested that reciprocity in its various forms is an integral part of building and maintaining a sense of community with and among their audience. While some expressed a reluctance to engaging more deeply with their readers, the overwhelming majority related reciprocity with opportunities to build trust and social capital both directly with individuals in their network and indirectly within their communities broadly. Altogether, this reinforces what social scientists have long argued: that (prosocial) reciprocity is a key ingredient for meaningful, sustainable communities (Becker, 1956; Gouldner, 1960; Molm, 1997; Molm, Schaefer and Collett, 2007; Putnam, 2000), including emerging forms of community online (Ammann, 2011; Gaudeul and Giannetti, 2013).

Concluding discussion: the future of reciprocity in participatory journalism

Overall, the literature suggests that journalists have a conflicted relationship with audiences. After so long ignoring them as part of their professional purview in gatekeeping what counted as news, journalists are increasingly aware of who reads, watches and listens – both in the aggregate sense of quantified audiences (as they learn of user preferences via digital metrics) and in the more individualized sense of social media interactions (as they learn of user preferences via comments directed at them via Twitter, Facebook and so on). This chapter has focused on the latter sense, considering how the journalist–audience relationship might be re-imagined through networked technologies, ones that, both in their technical affordances and their cultural milieu, encourage more relational forms of exchange among users in the network. Such a perspective repositions journalists as network-based actors – as community organizers who engage rather than simply town criers who publicize.

The literature suggests that such a shift is already occurring to some degree, as news organizations begin to recognize the generative potential of user participation in the news process; yet, those same newsrooms find it challenging to overcome deeply held roles and routines that prioritize professional control over open participation (Lewis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Usher, 2014).

While there is no one solution to resolving that tension, this chapter has suggested that the concept of reciprocity may offer a starting point for reconceptualizing the journalist–audience dialectic: what it is now, what it may become and how it may be evaluated in the future. Reciprocity is more than a Golden Rule social norm. It represents a complex set of perceptions and practices, generally thought to be (though not always) positive; it also represents a set of social exchanges that may be either direct or indirect, involving ‘gifts’ that may fulfil an instrumental function (as in the exchange of information) or a symbolic function (in contributing to goodwill and cultural capital). A particularly salient outcome of positive reciprocity is the development of strong community, as much in online as in offline relationships. On these points, the literature is clear. Extending this to the particular case of journalism, therefore, reciprocity may offer a vantage point for considering how reciprocal beliefs and behaviours, manifest in various types of reciprocal exchanges between journalists and audiences, may contribute to an improved ecology of engagement and collaboration between the two. Such an ideal arrangement we conceptualized as *reciprocal journalism*, which envisions journalists developing more fruitful exchanges of mutual benefit with audiences (Lewis, Holton and Coddington, 2014). Such reciprocity may surface in direct (one-to-one) and indirect (one-to-many) forms; as they are observed by audiences and sustained over time, they can contribute to improving both journalist–audience relationships and larger community dynamics in which they operate. There is, it would seem, great potential for reciprocal journalism. Yet, is such a utopian view possible or even desirable?

As noted by some journalists we surveyed, reciprocity presents complications for professionalism. Of particular concern, journalists discussed institutionally enforced priorities or boundaries as well as ethical considerations when considering how to engage with audiences (or not). While some reported that email and social media interactions were either organizationally monitored or mandated (or both in at least one case), others were more worried about the potential outcomes of reciprocating with audiences. As one journalist put it: ‘I’ll certainly help readers, both those I know and those I don’t, but that help doesn’t trump news judgment.’

Such concerns, coupled with evidence that news audiences increasingly expect reciprocity from journalists (Borger, Hoof and Sanders, 2014), highlight some of the disconnect between what audiences want and what journalists are willing or able to give in reciprocal exchange. In many newsrooms, journalists already feel harried and stretched thin, as lay-offs force those left behind to produce more with less, particularly in a ‘hamster wheel’ climate that prioritizes content churn over quality (Starkman, 2010). Add to that growing demands for journalists to incorporate digital, mobile and social media throughout their work, ratcheting up the technical complexity of cross-media news work (Lewis and Westlund, 2015), as well as

broader challenges in shifting the journalistic mindset from publishing a product to providing a service (Picard, 2014). Suggesting that journalists, in addition to all that, take on more frequent, more purposeful and ultimately more time-consuming forms of engagement through various forms of reciprocity – well, the notion may not sit well with many journalists, to say the least.

Moreover, recall that reciprocity has a negative as well as a positive component to it (Perugini et al., 2003), meaning that reciprocal exchanges may be prosocial and antisocial in nature: building trust in one instance and undermining it in the other. Consider, for instance, how many social media exchanges are far from ‘mutually beneficial’, insofar as they feature forms of hate, revenge and trolling. In a less scalding but still concerning sense, the very patterns of reciprocity that foster community may also limit the diversity of individuals and ideas within communities. There are well-documented problems of homophily on social media and the Web generally, which tend to reinforce insularity and a general reluctance for people to reach beyond their social networks to encounter diverse people and viewpoints (Zuckerman, 2013). If reciprocity in its various forms serves to perpetuate communities of like-minded users, it may, at the same time, marginalize other voices and possibilities for cross-pollination. In the case of journalism, for example, niche publications or community news organizations may successfully develop rapport and reciprocity with audiences over time, but those same patterns of familiarity may make it intimidating for new members to join the conversation without feeling out of the loop, much like online forums that prioritize the contributions of veterans over new users.

For journalists, reciprocity may serve a deleterious purpose in a different way: though it is public-centred, it may not be oriented towards the public interest. Instead, journalists might approach reciprocal relationships as ones of consumption in which audiences are expected to reciprocate by providing page views, subscriptions or other economic functions rather than by participating as a civically engaged public. To the extent that reciprocal journalism is advocated on the organizational level, it has a particular potential to take on this commoditized version of reciprocity as a way to meet corporate and financial aims.

Merely having and holding an audience should not be the ultimate aim of reciprocal journalism. Rather, it should be viewed as one of a number of promising approaches that journalists may take, given the expanding opportunities of social media, to develop greater connection with and among community members. More broadly, reciprocal journalism poses a fundamental rethinking of journalism and its place in relation to audiences or ‘people formerly known’ as such (Rosen, 2006): users in the network who not only can participate in the media environment, but who may also expect something from journalism and journalists that is quite different from more familiar conceptions of the professional self. Indeed, reciprocity forces journalists to honestly and substantively grapple with the following questions: ‘what does my audience actually want when they reach out to me or rely on my work?’ and ‘am I actually giving it to them?’ That is, a reciprocal perspective challenges journalists to not rest on lazy assumptions about their democratic importance

(cf. Peters and Witschge, 2015), but to proactively unscramble audience needs apart from journalists' assumptions about them. In this sense, reciprocal journalism could serve as a kind of diagnostic tool: a means of measuring the degree of journalists' receptivity to and understanding of audiences with whom they interact – a starting point for assessing the meaningfulness of the thing called participatory journalism. It is true that many journalists may lack the resources – or simply the time – needed to reciprocate as a regular part of their work. Nevertheless, merely recognizing the generative role of reciprocity in communities may set in motion a new kind of professional imagination about journalists and their audiences.

Note

- 1 This section draws on material published in Lewis, Holton and Coddington (2014).

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