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Murphy, Katharine - *On Disruption*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2018, ISBN: 9780522873795 (pp 122)

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As many journalism educators know, teaching journalism in the age of disruption can be both a source of inspiration and despair. On one hand, nothing could be more inspiring than being in a classroom of young and old people who have put their hands up for journalism. On the other, the constant change means that we can never be sure of what we should teach and how we should teach it. Plus, when it comes to digital skills, the tools of the trade might have changed since the last iteration of the course and this means we have to update our syllabus.

You could, of course, argue that the foundational techniques and bases of journalism are still the same, but as Katharine Murphy argues in her excellent book *On Disruption*, the difficulties in teaching journalism is not only because practices journalism itself has changed, but because '[journalism's] disruption is society's disruption'. In other words, since a journalist's job is to tell stories about societies and to map out some of the most important issues that societies must grapple with, we cannot afford to talk about changes in journalism without including how people's relationships with media, and with each other, have changed dramatically since the time when Murphy started her career as a journalist in 1996 to when the book was published in July 2018.

This short book is not only a timely contribution to debates about contemporary journalism but also on the nature of technological disruption in societies. Murphy's book strikes a good balance that combines journalistic storytelling, interviews, existing commentaries and summaries of some of the best scholarly research around disruption in journalism.

Murphy begins her book, like many good traditional journalists would, at the beginning: she tells the story of her first days starting as a print journalist at an Australian newspaper, *The Financial Review*, in 1996. Like most journalists, she also talks about her former editor who helped shape her career. This first part

does not feel indulgent, partly because she moves quickly to the contrasting realities of print media with online media, but also because some of the most important insights in the book are based on her own experience as a part of changing newsrooms full of journalists and their overlords who are often as confused about digital disruptions as the people they are supposed to inform.

Murphy then talks about what these changes look like in newsrooms in Australia, including her own, and this is where the books are the most insightful. Her analogy comparing newsrooms with car factories provides one of the clearest explanations about why recent changes in the journalism industry are indeed, deeply disruptive.

The final part of the book asks the most important question that is answered with a refreshing honesty: 'what is journalism in these disrupted times, and how can we make it meaningful?' To answer this question, she first quotes the classic work of Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2014), *The Elements of Journalism*, as a foundation to her optimism that journalism will survive the disruption. What comes after, however, is a refreshing and shrewd honesty about a fact many journalists know, but rarely admit: every good, clean story that comes looking like beautifully pre-arranged words, every confident on-camera delivery, is simply an end product of constant doubts, hand-wringing, questions, grey areas and contestations. In the age of disruption, Murphy provides a practical, useful advice:

It is productive to own these difficulties, these shades and nuances, rather than pretend they don't exist, and produce screeds of righteous certainty, which are very easy to read, but are often intellectually dishonest. It's important to respect the audience enough to be transparent rather than write fiction dressed up as journalism (704).

Another important point that Murphy makes about these digital disruptions is that they are dealt out in increments: 'little tidal surges' that makes it hard to talk about with clarity, as the small changes creep into the ways journalists produce their work. Changes were introduced incrementally, little by little, until suddenly we find ourselves in a situation where everything needs to be 'new, now' and politicians are saying 'Axe the tax' and 'Stop the Boats' because three-word slogans and zero-sum rhetoric seem to be the only effective way to break through the constant stream of information that we all must deal with.

This familiar political and activism strategy of 'public muscling up of the base.' is, however, also a continuation of a logic that journalists and media companies have also helped create with their imperative of conflicts. 'Tribalism', in Murphy's words:

... has become a commodity, both for establishment politicians, who want to hold their core support against outsider insurgents, and for media companies, who need engaged audiences to survive the disruption that has played out brutally over the last ten years (505).

Another important point of the book is the unwillingness, or inability, of journalists, to be frank about the changes that are happening. As a journalist, Murphy admits that the culture of newsrooms, where reporters are not supposed to talk about themselves, often results in journalists avoiding talk about the changes that are happening and the struggle they face every time another change, another thing, is added to their plate. They prefer to keep on keeping on. This admirable professional pride and culture, however, means journalists who are faced with a changing media landscape and politics, in Murphy's words, could often prefer to 'hang a lantern over dysfunction in politics than interrogate the link between politics not functioning optimally and the disruption in our own industry' (290).

I remember the feeling of not knowing how this story of disruption would end, which, for a journalist, should be a familiar feeling. However, as Murphy describes, even as, like her, I worked for an employer who did not consider numbers as the most important thing, I started to be overly curious about how many people read my stories, how many people clicked on it, which parts they read and which parts they did not like, and I became quite obsessed with making sure that my story did well 'on social'. When a story that I did gain a high number of Facebook likes, I felt good about it and thought about emulating this success in my other stories, and in no time at all I started preaching about social media strategies without really thinking deeply about how it was a big disruption to the way I did my job.

In the book, Murphy shares her experience of trying to build a community through digital platforms – in her case, through live blogging. This closing of the distance between journalists and readers is, indeed, a wonderful and useful thing that needed to happen to allow journalism to function for everyone and prevent the 'voice of God' approach. However, this also created other challenges, since this means that we are basically watched quite closely and constantly by our readers.

But seen from the other side, technological disruptions mean that media companies, and even individual journalists in many cases, are able to map the habits of their audiences. We are not only speaking of eyeballs simply in a metaphorical sense now, since there are eye tracking devices that allow media companies to study when their readers' eyes start to wander and where their eyes wander to and for how long.

The book, more than anything, is a call and a statement on what Murphy thinks journalists must do more often: to stop and listen and to discuss these challenges and disruptions. Murphy highlights the importance of some of the most basic principles in journalism, but she also asks that journalists and media companies need to be more frank and open about what disruptions mean for them.

What this book does not do is explain in detail how journalists and media companies have changed their storytelling approaches and management styles to respond to, or cater for, these digital, societal and psychological disruptions. But this was simply not the point of the book. As a whole, her ability to move from citing theoretical research to empirical detail based on her experience

shows her steady hand and clarity of mind. Her analogies, from kabuki plays to car factories, are well-shaped and delivered to contain and clarify the complexities of the disruptions which are multi-layered.

It is a hopeful book. As Murphy writes, the best we could do is 'to go on ... for as long as the endeavour remains viable'. And viable I hope it will remain for a long time, despite the difficulties we journalists and journalism educators face.

About the reviewer

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