Redefining Circulation from a Network Perspective

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Writing in the early days of network society, the historian Michael Warner asked whether "the absence of punctual rhythms" in online communication required to "abandon 'circulation' as an analytic category" (Warner 2002: 98). This paper takes up the challenge that circulation indeed needs to be reconfigured for digital and networked contexts, where the objects that circulate are no longer material artefacts but references between data points (e.g. users, sites, platforms). In journalism studies, circulation traditionally referred to the number of copies distributed by newspapers. Increases in circulation are and were often associated with the growing importance of journalism in society. The concept of circulation itself so far has remained critically unexamined in journalism studies although digital media have decisively changed its meaning and dynamics. A logic of growth continues to be tied to circulation, nowadays implied in statistics of users, growth of platforms or numbers of trackbacks in social media and online communication. Such numerical evidence tends to short-circuit questions of meaning and public relevance although a growing body of work is dedicated to analyse cultures of circulation online (Horsti 2016; Braun 2015; Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013).

The aim of this paper is to offer a critical revaluation of circulation from a network perspective, outlining how digital circulation needs to be disentangled from growth or distribution. Instead, the processes in which meaning is generated through circulation need to be contextualised within 'natively digital objects' in networked communication (e.g. tags, html, web ontologies) that allow for digital circulation to take place (Drucker 2007; Rogers 2013; Beer 2013; Hui 2012). Through this dual focus on the level of meaning and networking, the paper suggests that circulation can be developed into a critical concept to study journalism in a networked environment (Valaskivi & Sumiala 2014), where references between different types of users and types of content proliferate in decidedly disjunct temporalities.

The presentation will include preliminary findings of an empirical study on how circulation differs between different networks of actors - journalists, activists and lay users of social networks. The case study investigates distinct dynamics of circulation around a group of bike activists who initiated a referendum on bike-friendly infrastructure in Berlin in June 2016. The analysis will contrasts circulation on Twitter with coverage of the initiative in German regional and national news media.

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