

Chapter 10

Looking Back and Looking Forward: Journalism's Contrasting Two Futures

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a fictional dialogue between two women writers. Dr. Deborah Koen, a Historian of the digital era at NYU, situated in the year 2067, is “looking back” at a mid-2020 pessimistic text about the future of Journalism and journalists written by an Israeli journalist, Maya Ofek. As the dialogue unfolds, it examines some of the current concerns and visions about the future of Journalism, as presented by media theorists and critics, and how things “actually” developed eventually. At the heart of this dual-perspective text lays a fundamental question: can the human role of journalists as storytellers be replaced by algorithmic powers?

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to 2067. Meet Dr. Deborah Koen, a historian of the digital era at NYU who was invited to write a chapter for an edited collection about the early decades of the digital era, 1990 to 2030. For this purpose, she chose to go back to an unusual mid-2020 text by Maya Ofek, an experienced Israeli journalist who shared her vision about the future of journalism. Her text was written in a difficult moment in time, as the world was struggling with pandemic and political turmoil. The chapter - titled Looking Back; Looking Forward - begins with two entries from the original 2020 text by Ofek, followed by Dr. Koen's 2067 analysis of the zeitgeist and socio-political circumstances. Later readers are presented with another entry by Ofek the journalist in which she presents two futuristic news services - NaiR and SiFy - that would turn human journalists redundant. This is once again followed by Koen's text that examines how things developed from 2020 to 2067. Did the future of journalism eventually unfold according to Ofek's dark vision?

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Entry One: Dare to Speculate

What I am about to present here may turn me into a subject of ridicule in the eyes of my friends and colleagues, but here I am, willing to take that risk. For a short time, I am not obligated to the facts. Rather, I dare to look into the endless, empty space of the future from my small bright Tel Aviv flat. This is not what I was educated to do as a journalist. I can almost hear my legendary editor roaring: "Don't write about something that did not happen yet, you are not a fortune teller, you are a reporter! Stick to the facts, goddamnit." It is certainly not in my comfort zone, but here's what I discovered: futurism is liberating. Even if time will uncover my ridicule, who cares? I will probably not be around to witness this.

So, after this introduction let me tell you. Fifty years from now there will not be people like me, sitting in front of a screen, writing articles and news reports. What defined me as a person for decades will become obsolete, a thing of the past. But journalists will not be missed at all. We will all be surrounded with news, like water is to the fish in the sea. However, we will know much less about what is really going on. The information that really matters will not be available to us. Few people will care and fewer will be looking for ways to change this. (Maya Ofek, Times of Israel, June 6th, 2020).

Entry Two: The Dark Ten

As I write this piece, I am seated at a little white IKEA desk in the sunny (often too sunny) corner of my living room. I bought this cheap piece of furniture just recently during the second Corona closure. This setup is totally foreign to me and my discomfort nags constantly. The neighborhood's popular café, Comfortina, has reopened, but I did not go back to my regular spot. This is where I used to do most of the writing work, shoulder to shoulder with my friends—most of them are journalists and writers—looking over the national theatre building, Habima, forever debating if it is an architectural gem or a monster. I like it.

April's horrible closure has ended this privileged routine and left me exhausted and emotionally drained. Long days of strict closure, with a vibrant three-year-old in a flat full of toys and no friends or family, left a mark on both of us. The Corona closures were hard for many, but single moms were hit harder. Then, for a short moment, it seemed like Israel had beat the deadly virus and things reopened. PM Netanyahu rushed to brag that this was his own personal triumph over yet another enemy of the people. Now, cases are on the rise again and the daily death toll hangs like a dark cloud over our heads, growing quickly. People have become very suspicious of the government's handling of it all. I decided not to return to the café in the meantime and instead work from home. As a single mom, smoking and somewhat overweight, I cannot take any risk.

In many ways, the dystopian vision of the future has become our present. You expect me to dwell on the future of my profession? Look at what is happening here and now. If I were to tell someone ten years ago that the Shin-Bet will have the power to track down all of us and order home isolation for thousands of individuals, they would laugh in my face. Nowadays, however, they seem to cheer at this technological advancement. People are heavily fined if they go down to the beach! Writing about the years to come, thus, seems like a privilege right now. My thoughts are about tomorrow and next month, my worries are about our health and my ability to keep supporting both of us. Can this get any worse?

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