

NEW PUBLIC SPACE, NEW FIELD OF JOURNALISM AND IDENTITY ISSUES

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RESUMO: A ascensão da Internet afetou quase todas as profissões, especialmente aquelas em que a comunicação e a partilha de informação são os aspectos fundamentais de sua prática diária. O jornalismo é, de fato, uma das profissões mais impactadas neste sentido, tendo passado por muitas mudanças em seus papéis sociais e cívicos na era da Internet. Este estudo discute essa mudança e a necessidade de adotar ferramentas digitais e técnicas para o jornalismo e, paralelamente, destaca as desvantagens da prática do jornalismo on-line, ou seja, a crise de identidade e o risco de propagação de amadorismo nesta área.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Jornalismo, Identidade Profissional, Amadorismo, Jornalismo Online, Novas tecnologias.*

ABSTRACT: The rise of the Internet has impacted almost all the professions, especially those which communication and sharing information are the core aspects of their daily practice. Journalism is in fact one the most impacted profession in this regard where it has undergone many changes in its social and civic roles in the era of Internet and Web. This study discusses the change – and the need to adopt – digital tools and techniques for journalism, and in parallel it highlights the drawbacks of online journalism practice namely the crisis of identity and the risk of spreading amateurism in this field.

KEYWORDS: *Journalism, Professional identity, Amateurism, Online Journalism, New technology.*

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Without the intention to fully endorse the message drawn from some analysis based on the signs of decline of traditional journalism and the imminent death of traditional media which is already stroked by the crisis of audience, we are at the point to accept a development which not only affects the professionals but also has its impacts on human life in all its social, cultural, scientific, political and economic aspects.

The journalism has indeed undergone many changes in the era of the Web. The simplification of tasks and the rationalization of the work plans are the most perceptible examples. However, these contributions of technology never justify the decline of journalism and the abandonment of the principles and particularities of this profession. On the other hand, ease of access to the materials, although superficially, and the possibility offered by the Internet to initiate the first steps towards a journalistic practice and to grasp the meaning and flavor of a profession which is of course much more than just putting something online, have brought hope to the amateurs who believe they are the next competitors of the professionals.

To stay on the bright side, it is necessary to emphasize that the innovation occurred in the journalism after the rise of the Internet, had the obvious consequence of improvement and the fulfillment of former techniques and methods applied within the profession to promote the field for better accomplishment of its divers social (to inform, to educate, to entertain, etc.) and civic (to criticize, identify and address the social issues, to provoke debate, and to engage citizens in public space) functions. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that this new form of journalism, although is more powerful than ever in terms of tools and techniques, but in the meantime it suffers from some drawbacks. Some of the drawbacks are the lack of homogeneity among its practitioners and also between those who publish online content, the crisis of professional identity, the hybridization of tasks practiced online and their fragmentation into small sections, the increasing tendency to collect, edit and forming the output of news agencies due to the tight competition on the market of online information, and finally the confinement in the office (desk journalism) and being satisfied by collecting the available online information.

In the present text, we will discuss the need to welcome and to adapt this digital revolution which seems indispensable for the survival of journalism as it

existed and defined by professional codes and charters. But shouldn't we be worried during this transitional period, about a possible upheaval of identity and nature of this profession?

THE CHANGE IN TOOLS AND METHODS OR THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY

An evident fact: the practice of journalism today is turned upside down and is evolved by the contribution of new technologies. Particularly by taking advantage of the opportunities and capabilities of the Internet which permits a considerable reduction in time and cost of information manufacturing, unprecedented access to knowledge and an acceleration in the transmission of content, super-deep changes in the modes of research and the different methods of collection, processing and production of information and in short, an absolute innovation in the ways of practicing the profession. The profession currently lives its modernization period, although at the cost of losing one of its strengths: the monopoly of all production, processing and diffusion of information.

According to some researchers such as Yannick Etienne, this technological evolution is far from marginalizing professional journalists but has of course broken the myth of an untouchable and unreachable profession. Hence, the sentiment of sharing the journalistic power and knowledge appears: "Although we observe, to some extent, the sharing of power and knowledge of journalism, we cannot yet talk that much about the marginalization of the journalist and their social role. Indeed, the magisterium of professional journalists has been shaken. But neither the journalists nor the traditional media wouldn't get out bled dry from the changes occurred with the emergence of new media".

Indeed, the new technology is not aimed to marginalize professional or classical journalism, although the identity of journalism is now under the Damocles sword of amateurism which is equipped with the digital tools and the multimedia, along with new informatics tools and communication instruments. This amateurism is sometimes too powerful as multinational corporations who are active in the field of computer science and are eager to enter into the field of information (Yahoo, Google, and others).

For Marie Benilde, journalist and author of the article titled “*multimedia copyist or journalist*”, “the portals of Yahoo, Orange and Google are indeed among the most visited news sites in France along with those of *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*”. According to her, the major feature of these players born on the Internet or coming from telecommunications, is the aggregation of content from other news sites and news agency output, while the traditional media newsrooms mobilize editorial offices dedicated to their on-line production (BENILDE, 2010).

In reality, in these types of online news production, launched by new information agents, who are powerful and equipped but amateur, the editorial line and the professional practices of information never succeed to recover their real particular sense. In practice, these WEB giants are exclusively devoted in recapturing and repeating, or in more optimistic view, in decoration and personalization of the same basic information produced in the professional editorial lines. In fact, the information represented on these kinds of supports has nothing in common with a purely professional journalistic practice. Regardless of the quality of fabrication and the professional level of information, Internet and new players, who invest there, have already shown themselves capable of being the potential support of alternative information.

Moreover, journalism can't ignore the new audience of information potentially present *online*, who are of course so different from that of the traditional media, who were used to be faithful to the paper or electronic form and were accepting all that being sent to them.

The new audience, better informed, younger, more demanding, curious, interactive and critical, won't be satisfied by consulting a single source of their desired information and is no longer interested in information given only in a single mode of expression. That's why sometimes we notice the truth that the mainstream media are starting to see their interests in including the use of the opportunities offered by the Web in their professional duties, and in mastering the social media like Twitter, Facebook, Blogs and Podcasts, and in integrating digital informational and communicational tools into their methods of work. That's why once in while we realize that the mainstream media are beginning to find their interests in incorporate the opportunities offered by the Web into their professional tasks in order to manage social media like Twitter, Facebook, Blogs and Podcasts, and integrating digital informational and communicational tools into their methods of work.

The same statement is made by Peter Dahlgren in *cyberspace and logic of media*: repositioning journalism and its audience, clearly explains the need for a major change in the journalistic field and the importance for the profession to invest massively and sustainably in cyberspace and adapt oneself into the demands of new audiences to avoid any marginalization; “with the advent of this new technology, the field of journalistic practices has been modified because the field of online journalism has seen the birth of its different audiences. Even if everything takes place very quickly, there remain only a few people to deny the potential importance of cyberspace for journalism” (DAHLGREN, 1999).

It is reasonable from now on to consider that the professional journalist who is blogging or the one who is mastering well the tools and methods of online practice is more talented in approaching their audience, because these actions allow them to express their professional values in a new field, to collect the spontaneous comments of the audience, to demonstrate their ability to interact with a new audience and to provide an enriched and well-presented information in various modes of expression.

Consequently, it seems that if Internet and its mediation tools of information and communication are managed well, not only they don't represent a threat for the profession but also they can be considered as an asset in hands of classic journalists in order to improve the performance and to promote their professional competencies.

FROM THE RISK TO SPREAD A KIND OF AMATEURISM TO THE OPPORTUNITY OF A LABORATORY FOR THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

The doctrine of the horizontal flow of information introduced by militants of civic journalism like Dan Gillmor, has finally found a breeding ground with the posting of the first Weblogs of information. Indeed, as Gillmor anticipates in his well-known book named *We the media*, “the distance between the producer and the consumer of information will soon disappear and each of them would then take a different role from what they used to, a role that we have just started to apprehend”. According to him, the lessons and expertise transferred by people who want themselves as the specialists of the information is finished and “the process of information production and reporting will soon look like a seminar or conversation”

between equal persons whose common feature is citizenship (between equal citizens) (GILLMOR, 2006).

The participation of non-journalist citizens in the process of production and dissemination of information and the journalistic presentation of their comments, criticisms and analysis of witnessed current events, has reached their highest level in events such as the Iraq war and the attacks of September 11, with an unprecedented resonance of the news blogs and websites posted by ordinary citizens as well as specialists and experts in various fields, or even by chroniclers and freelance journalists.

These new media created on the network of networks (Web) have been able for the moment to take over the information market by becoming even the sources for these events, while the image of news provided by the professional media was, as Michel Claessens mentions, “completely artificialized, directed, cut and reassembled in the studios” (CLAESSENS, 2002). This initiative was reappeared some years later in form of social networks, in a very large, widespread and significant manner, first in Iran during the post-election protests in 2009 and then in the recent riots in the Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East called Arab spring.

Indeed, the Internet is well placed in the position of a new incarnation of the public space, this time larger and more accessible than ever; a place previously reserved for the classic press and traditional media, to engage citizens in public debates by providing them the opportunity to speak freely on all aspects of society. Dr. Younes Shokrkah journalist and university professor in Tehran observes an initiative there to practice a sort of civic journalism, which aims to “bring together people to discuss general issues and challenges and to let them know the function and role of media like the Internet helping to solve these problems.” (SHOKRKHAH, 2010). Indeed, it is just after the appearance of new media and the emergence of a new public space (whose participants are able to collect, analyze and distribute information) that journalists have had their professional identity, power and legitimacy seriously at risk.

PROPAGATION OF CERTAIN AMATEURISM

This is how the democratization of the Internet has created new uses and new needs in which the classical and traditional journalism is not able to answer. Indeed, Web 2.0 has ushered in the era of “active interlocutor” and the

ownership of information by any individual. The increasing public participation in the production of information, due to the opportunities provided by Web 2.0 has favored the spread of certain amateurism in the information processing and, more generally, in journalistic practices, by making them very accessible. For Estienne: “With the Internet, we have entered the era of the *mass amateurism* and the widespread dispersion of journalism beyond its borders.

With the rise of self publishing and the spread of amateur journalism an *extra-professional* journalistic sphere is emerging” (STEPHENS, 2008).

Of course we have been taught that many voices are better than one. Furthermore, it is true that digital technology and the contributions of the Web 2.0 exploded the number of potential producers of information and content publishers. But what is it the key issue today? To have access to information or to find the most original and authentic information which meets the fundamental questions and that can be trusted. This huge volume of content, always available on the Internet, could it serve the public as viable credible and relevant information? Will users be able to manage this overloaded information space and to discern the true information? How will they manage to take the best of advantages out of it? What is the journalistic value of the content offered online by the amateurs?

These are the questions that requires more attention during the analysis of journalistic gestures of amateurs, especially those practiced on the Web where there is a greater ability to reproduce the information already released by other sources in a different fashion. Indeed an extraordinary field is provided to manipulate text data, graphics and audiovisual through simple software and, if necessary, by the more sophisticated ones. Thus, given the lack of the necessary control and editorial constraints that requires the passage of ready-to-distribute information by one or more filters, a breeding ground and a good opportunity exist to disseminate false information.

In addition, today it became clear that the information overload, the abundance of huge anonymous views and flow of content produced by amateurs whose reference sources are not well defined would only confuse people who are looking for real information. For Bernard Poulet, “The contribution of amateurs cannot replace the specificity of the job of professional journalists who adhere to deontological codes, check before publishing, and finally, are seriously doing what primarily is a profession. The multiplication of perspectives, their uncontrolled and often anonymous

proliferation does not necessarily contribute to the understanding of events" (POULET, 2009).

Therefore, it is not logical to consider all initiative of the production and distribution of online content as a result of professional journalism. However, it would be better to pay attention to the concern of identity that still weighs the profession, especially after its recent changes due to the development of ICT, inviting them all the time to ask vital questions about their ways of intervening in the new media space, their new audiences, their functions and professional vocations, their reasons of being, and their ability and potential to adapt to fundamental changes and new social realities. That's why Nicolas Pélissier inspiring by the thinkers like Charron and De Bonville evokes the idea that "journalists, like researchers, are more than ever looking for a new paradigm for apprehending the current realities" (PÉLISSIER, 2001-2002).

The unavoidable success of the Internet has evolved the information universe and the profound transformation imposed by the constraints of the new networks of information and communication to the social relations, were the preamble to the idea of an information society where the media, news organizations and journalists must face the need for modernization of their statutes.

ONLINE, A DIFFERENT PRACTICE WITH ITS OWN ISSUES

Web journalism or *online journalism* is compound words whose final meaning is duo to their first component. In other words, it's with the terms "Web" or "online" which those compound words find their true meaning. This is a model of journalism which is practiced in responding to the almost particular requirements of a new medium called the WEB. The vanishing agent of classical journalism, the promising of the future journalism (New mode of journalism) or accelerator of self-publication, whatever they are (Web, Internet, multimedia and digital technology) they have imposed themselves, some years ago, in the heart of any discussion about the journalistic practices.

FROM INSTANTANEITY TO VERSATILITY

With Web, the instantaneity of production and distribution is now one of the most significant features of the online content. Valerie Jeanne Perrier, Florence Le Cam and Nicolas Pélissier mention this in *self-publication websites: privileged observatories of effervescence and journalistic excesses of all kinds*: "Publish online suspend the time

constraints related to dissemination standards of the traditional media. For a journalist of a daily or weekly, and any other person, publishing on their website means to publish whenever they wish to publish” (JEANNE PERRIER, LE CAM and PÉLISSIER, 2005). Online, the content can be updated anytime and anywhere (inside the newsroom as well as outside of it). Thus, the pace of production and distribution of online content is much faster than the traditional process of information fabrication.

In addition, for the regular updating of content, the practitioner of online journalism is asked to be flexible in carrying out other tasks that in the classical media were reserved for the editors, technicians and non-journalists employees of companies the press. For Eric Dagiral and Sylvain Parasie, “beyond the constant updating of articles, here the journalist takes the responsibility of heterogeneous tasks since not only he writes and publishes online, but he even carries out himself certain tasks of illustration and page layout” (DAGIRAL and PARASIE, 2010).

Of course, the journalist within the online editorial is not asked to reach a professional level in technical fields – recording and editing of sound, image and video or illustration and layout of text – or to demonstrate its expertise as an engineer. However, he must be aware of the role and possible impact of each of these elements and media on the information. As pointed out by Alain Joannes, The spirit of flexibility acts like an intellectual suppleness to enrich the information: “It must be mentioned that if the journalist is capable of recording diffusible sound and if, in addition, he is able to do some basic audio editing, his journalistic practice is considerably enriched since, by recording, he plays the role of a discernment between audio and the written word, while preparing an attractive information architecture. On the contrary, the writer who ignores the specific contributions of the sound, impoverishes the overall offer of his firm and in fact, causes the waste of time of the readers” (JOANNES, 2007).

The versatility, the sign of the rationalization of journalism in the era of the Internet and the essential strategy to reduce time and costs of online production, is an operating factor which has a double-effect on the autonomy of the journalist. On one hand, it allows him to use the available tools and software, according to his taste and style, to shape his narrative journalism in a better way which fits the nature and content of information. On the other hand, versatility presents itself as a deterrent to prevent practitioners of WEB journalism from going towards a specialization. Contrary to the traditional media there is no question of the thematic specialization on the Web. The online journalist has not the choice to specialize for one of the different redaction

services, as in the traditional newsrooms. He must have the ability to process information in all its forms and themes. This lack of thematic specialization most of the time challenges the autonomy of online journalists and makes them more and more dependent compared to the specialized journalists of the professional media.

INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATION ON THE WEB, THE BREEDING GROUND FOR COPRODUCTION OF MEANING WITH THE AUDIENCE

The real mediatic communication supposes a sort of interactivity that comes from active participation of audience during the broadcast, even during the preparation of the message. Interactivity has become, after the emergence of the Internet and its means of communication, an essential component of a communicative process. This powerful interactivity leads journalists to build an informational package whose meaning depends heavily on the interpretation of the audience. In other words, the true meaning of information in an interactive context is normally the result of a compromise between what the sender meant and what came out of the interpretation of the receiver. This means that the journalist as an engineer of content takes the responsibility to collect, analyze, process, produce and transmit the information while he isn't considered as the only one to give the meaning to his product. Indeed, the transmitter and the receiver are in constant collaboration to give meaning to the transmitted information in an interactive type of communication.

This opportunity to participate on journalistic stage due to the opportunities of Web 2.0, advanced today to the point where some scholars like Roland Canu and Caroline Datchary have observed a kind of "democratization of journalism" that could even result, in some situations, to the occupation of the place of professional journalists with a so-called technocrat public, autonomous, and independent of all mediator: "The development of Web 2.0 facilitates the participation of users in the production of information. It seems that this participation accompanies a "democratization of journalism" and its corollary: the challenge of a specific expertise (selection and translation of information) which is specific to this profession. The public would indeed acquire the means, by this media, to empower itself and even to bypass the professional journalists" (CANU and DATCHARY, 2010).

Some others such as Jean-François Fogel and Bruno Patino have found a new paradigm of journalism in this progress of the public where the normal and conventional supply-demand media is questioned: “for the journalism, it is about the emergence of a new paradigm: the passage of a universe governed by the offer of producers to a world where consumer demand has the final word. All the traditional modes of journalism are in fact governed by the offer of content defined by an editor or a chief editor making the index of their written or audio-visual media. But from now on, online, on the contrary, it’s the demand of each member of the audience which defines the content of the media” (FOGEL and PATINO, 2007). In fact, according to the rules of this new information Bazar, it’s the audience that plays the main role.

Also, to understand what is interactivity and how it works is essential and even vital to all sectors, including information activists who tend to get involved. The interactivity of the media and journalistic field in the era of the Net is not limited to the ability of audience to upload a video recorded by a camera of a mobile phone, to edit a website or create a media file. Certainly, the Internet offers a wider range of tools for self-publishing and communication flows compared to what is offered by any other medium. But the essential point in this context is to facilitate the establishment of an engagement process and a spirit of active participation that leaves the surfing audience to willingly navigate in cyberspace and act freely on its personal way of searching and sharing of information. “Give people control of your media, they will use it, do not give it, they will leave” is the remark of Jeff Jarvis, one of the bloggers in an older track in the cyberspace compared to Jean-Francois Fogel and Bruno Patino who stressed that “On the Internet, the audience is in our hand”. (FOGEL and PATINO, 2007)

According to Marc Lits, this new public space of debate and sharing of opinion and information, created by cyberspace and the explanatory burst which it generates must be related “to the evolution of time-management and the logic of interactivity that create participatory illusions, which is further strengthened in the development of hypertext systems, of interconnected networks. All the data in the world are now available online directly and in real time, seeming to abolish space and time” (LITS, 2008).

In this context, one can also refer to the *hyperlinks* that allow the audience to dictate their experience and their knowledge of “content” through their choice of clicks. Indeed, the links represent one of the basic tools of online interactivity on the field of cyber journalism. These links allow users to move from one point to another within the

same page, in the same site or even on external sites and related pages. They link the various elements of a long and complex work, presenting multiple points of view and adding depth and detail to the basic information. A typical work of online journalism may consist of making a set of links to web pages, in which they themselves may contain links to other websites.

Of course, with the abovementioned specificities, such as the ability to produce a non-linear narrative and a different reading, the presentation of another mode of interaction between the sources and the public and the ability to enrich the content *via* the possibilities for navigation, hyperlinks and interactivity, which are exclusive to it, the online practice of journalism does not perfectly obey the same procedure and method as the classic version; but anyway this mode of journalism is called to perform the same missions, to assume the same responsibility and pursue the same goal as any practice of journalism in traditional media.

To conclude, I summarize in one sentence, the same concept that I have developed throughout the text: online journalism differs from traditional journalism by its own features and characteristics that result from the ownership of available tools and techniques on the web while respecting the three principles of navigation, hypermedia and interaction. However, it seems necessary to emphasize on the obvious fact that this new form of journalistic practice still has too much difficulties for totally impose itself as a separate category by deviating from the principles of traditional journalism. In other words, we are still far from the point of giving a precise definition for this activity.

Non-homogeneous and essentially composed of people with a minimum of expertise in information technology that are being integrated with agencies and media companies or the hired agents of the online news websites, the group of web journalists is not yet well-recognized, organized and trained as a unified group. Moreover, they need to work hard to impose themselves to the profession, either through specialized trainings or by interaction with professionals, and so try to overcome the crisis of confidence faced by online media.

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