

Chapter 12

Changing Practices of Journalism

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Those who consider democracy as a fundamental principle for society have to monitor carefully the status of journalism. As we trust our elected politicians to represent us and our core interests in policy-related issues, we also attribute journalists a core position within that process. Journalism provides the necessary information to citizens to form opinions and to take decisions. Journalism is therefore a key element in democratic societies since journalists have the moral and ethical duty to provide correct and relevant information, and to analyze factual information in context within a critical perspective. In that perspective, the media as representatives of the Fourth Estate, have the obligation to monitor public affairs and to make sure that political or business elites do not cross the borders of their power. In addition to these tasks and functions, as Peter Dahlgren succinctly adds, the democratic role of journalism should even go beyond the information provision and watchdog function: 'It must also touch us, inspire us and nourish our daily democratic horizons' (Dahlgren 2009: 146).

In recent years, the journalistic field was challenged by a number of critical developments, among which the ongoing diffusion of interactive technologies, digitization of messages and convergence of media formats are clearly some of the most crucial ones. According to new media proponents, interactive media applications clearly democratize representation by making it a more direct relationship: as citizens gain access to inexpensive communication technologies the gatekeeping monopoly once enjoyed by editors and broadcasters is waning (Gurevitz et al. 2009; Coleman 2005). The Internet has indeed shifted communication to a much more personalized level, and both media and politicians are forced to address more channels in order to compete for the attention of a more fragmented audience, as well as target their messages to more fragmented groups than ever before. Therefore, the new media applications could be called the Fifth Estate, since they possess several key distinctive and important characteristics such as the ability to support institutions and individuals to enhance their 'communicative power' with opportunities to network within and beyond various institutional arenas, and the provision of capabilities that enable the creation of networks of individuals which have a public, social benefit (e.g. through social networking websites) (Dutton 2008).

At the same time, however, although there are major changes in the consumption of news and information (Meijer 2006; Mindich 2004; Jenkins 2006), a large majority of the public in many European countries still counts on traditional and professional media for information on political, cultural, economic and societal issues. Indeed, the Internet may have admitted an impressive number of alternative information channels, and the public may have been

attributed with more access than ever before to participate in the news production cycle, but traditional journalists in traditional news media still keep their role as main gatekeepers (Domingo et al. 2008).

Dynamics of Journalistic Professionalization: Who Are the Professional Journalists Then and Now?

Any observer of recent developments and challenges in the media sphere, who keeps a detached and critical perspective towards this ever faster cycle of future-forecasting on the impact of new technologies on journalistic professionalization, does not believe in simple or one-way answers. Indeed, some media scholars sketch a doom scenario and predict the death of core media, while others expect that new media distribution platforms will become the major players in contemporary societies. There are also opinions that journalism will become dependent on aggregated news sites that gather and recycle content, whereas some other scholars use the term 'user-generated content' (UGC) as a buzz word that might save the future of journalism, especially the future of local news. There is also the prediction that journalism will further enlarge with input from social and professional network sites. And these predictions, statements and suggestions are just a limited selection of arguments in the current debate on the real and fundamental challenges of digitization and their impact on journalism's professionalization.

In the context of ongoing debates about the real and fundamental challenges of digitization for media and journalism, a historical perspective on the development of the journalistic profession seems particularly relevant here.

Indeed, the first steps towards the professionalization of journalism can be noticed at the end of the nineteenth century, when journalists started to form their professional and formal associations. For instance, in 1886 in Belgium we note the foundation of the first union and professional organization for journalists. Similarly, in many countries around Europe, professional associations for journalists and writers were founded around the turn of the twentieth century (Terzis 2009). The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) was founded in 1926. This organization today has more than 600,000 members from more than 100 different countries. The IFJ authored the first international code on journalism ethics that was formally approved at a special convention in Bordeaux as early as in the year 1954. In 1972, this code was enlarged with another influential international code of journalistic ethics, the statement on duties and obligations for professional journalists. These ethical codes, based on agreed statements of peers, were an impulse for the further professionalization and institutionalization of journalism in many countries around Europe where national institutions for self-regulation were founded to control the compliance with the regulation.

Generally, the academic research on the profile of professional journalists – their roles and functions, relationships with news sources, as well as news management routines

adopted in particular news media – is rooted in the media sociological research tradition. The first academic studies were published in the 1950s and the focus of research was on gatekeeping processes (White 1950; Galtung and Ruge 1965). Other research on journalists and journalism zooms in on newsroom organization and news practices (Breed 1955; Rühl 1969; Tunstall 1971). The first profiling research on professional journalists was conducted in the United States: in 1971 three sociologists, John Johnstone, Edward Slawski and William Bowman, conducted the first large-scale survey with a representative sample of 1313 American professional journalists (Johnstone et al. 1976). The results show a rather homogeneous picture of the professional group. The average American journalist was male, young, white and was working in the newspaper industry. It could be noticed that the educational level was rather modest. Less than 30 per cent of journalists who participated in the survey had a formal schooling in journalism. Also, almost six out of ten journalists were younger than 40 years old, and eight out of ten were men. Despite some correcting trends for education and gender-specific characteristics this typology is quite stable. The follow-up research project by David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit in 1982, 1992 and 2002 (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986, 1996; Weaver et al. 2007) demonstrates this clearly.

Recently, a significant number of comparative studies were conducted with a goal to disclose the differences and similarities of journalists' characteristics from different countries. For example, David Weaver (1998) collected the results of national journalists' surveys in more than twenty countries and on different continents. He concludes that it is rather difficult to detect universal patterns in the opinions and ethical values of journalists. Comparative research on journalism profiles is hindered by the assumption that countries have homogeneous characteristics. As Stephen D. Reese (2001: 178) puts it, the internal regional differences in countries may implicitly intervene in cross-national comparisons. In addition, it would be interesting to start comparative research on other than 'nationality variables'. In other words, it might be interesting to focus on differences in the hierarchical position and career paths of journalists, medium specific elements, age, educational level, etc. And it will be most important to reduce bias and to construct international standardized survey instruments. The German researcher Thomas Hanitzsch (2007) is hoping for a 'World Journalism Survey' – a collective survey of journalists all over the world as a counter-programme of the 'World Values Survey' (conducted by Ronald Inglehart) – that is collecting data for more than 80 countries. Briefly, the main line of comparative journalism surveys conducted during the 1980s and 1990s can be summarized as follows: the typical journalist is male and highly educated; female journalists and journalists from an ethnic minority rooted background remain under-represented in the media; there is very limited consensus among journalists of different countries about professional values (as observed, only statements that focus on the importance of transmitting news as quickly as possible can aggregate consensual acceptance amongst journalists); large differences in attitudes on statements related to ethical aspects of journalism are rooted in cultural differences and journalistic development traditions between different countries (Weaver and Wilhoit 1986, 1996; Weaver et al. 2007). Interestingly enough, an identical result was obtained in a

research study which aimed to investigate how innovations associated with the Internet were perceived by journalists in eleven European countries (Fortunati et al. 2009). The survey of responses, which came from 239 journalists working for 40 of the most-read print and online news outlets, shows that even in a setting of internationally converging professional practices and norms, online journalism culture is very strongly influenced by the national background, namely the economic and cultural conditions.

In conclusion, there is more stability than change in journalistic professionalization practices: although affected by external influences (diffusion of new technologies), journalism is strongly influenced by situational factors, such as traditions and values of national journalism culture. At the same time, there are some very important shifts to notice: the gender gap is getting less steep although the gender differences still play an important role in the higher ranked professional journalist functions. Another very obvious observation is that journalists in many countries around Europe work in basically similar professional environments: they use similar equipment and new media technologies, and share certain ideas (e.g. informational function of journalism) in their occupational ideology.

The Impact of New Technologies on Newsroom Organization and Job Descriptions of Journalists

In the last twenty years, major shifts have taken place in European newsrooms. Digitization and convergence, especially, have changed the journalistic profession thoroughly. This has had an impact on newsroom organization but also on the job description of journalists. The package of journalistic professional tasks and skills has been transformed, and the traditional relationships between media owners and media professionals have also shifted (Franklin et al. 2006). Walters et al. (2006) conclude that those shifts result in the fact that more and more journalists are employed in a-typical professional circumstances. Although this can result into positive outcomes (extra availability of sources, more ample news coverage, larger reach), a majority of scholars refer to more negative aspects on workload (Franklin et al. 2008; Singer 2004; Dupagne and Garrison 2006; Meier 2007). In 2006, the International Labour Organization (ILO) warned for the increase of a-typical working conditions in media firms. In relation to this topic, they refer to the growing amount of freelancers, the shortening of labour contracts, the downward pressure on financial remuneration, the working hours that are difficult to combine with a regular family life and the limited chances for upward function mobility. A specialized research project among Flemish journalists (Teugels et al. 2009) and among Russian journalists (Verbitskaya 2005) demonstrates that the risk for burn-out pathology is more present among journalists than in workers from other professions. According to this research, journalists working with a freelance contract are especially vulnerable.

Research results on changing job descriptions for journalists focus on the growing demand for multi-skilled journalists. The trend for convergence implies that journalists have

to work for more than one type of medium. The average journalist does not work exclusively anymore for a print medium; he/she also provides content for the online environment and – increasingly so – for an audio-visual format (photo and filmed material). This multi-skilled profile demands a lot of flexibility from journalists (Dupagne and Garrison 2006). Also, the technical job demands come to the forefront. For instance, journalists in an online newsroom spend a great deal of their attention to technical aspects related to the medium. In this respect, their job description goes beyond the traditional definition of news gathering. On the other hand, journalists working in an online environment have fewer opportunities to go outside of the newsroom to gather stories, and this implies that they have a larger focus on desk journalism.

The interactive logic of Internet media has also made a dramatic impact on journalists' professional identities. Instead of just being gatekeepers, online professional journalists must also become sense-makers; instead of being agenda-setters they must become interpreters of whatever is both credible and valuable (Singer 2006). In other words, professional journalists working online are now being asked to acquire new professional competences and, in addition to being good reporters and communicators, they must also become critics, interpreters and evaluators, as well as watchdogs of political and economic power (Balčytienė and Harro-Loit 2009).

As reported in different research studies, the urgency to adapt to cross-medium skills was first experienced by journalists working for local media. Local media were the first to ask for a combination of print journalism, online journalism and broadcast journalism, and they were often the first to integrate user-generated content. This puts a lot of innovative stress-related elements in the job description of local journalists. It is interesting to notice that survey results reveal that journalists working for that type of media have a younger average profile; many of them have started their careers in local and regional media (Deuze 2007).

In spite of certain drawbacks associated with new requests on professional performance, the Internet has indeed become a great asset to the work of journalists. It provides immediate access to an enormous amount of information which helps the news-gathering procedures and journalistic working routines. Especially in situations where deadlines are the major characteristic of the job, this is a positive shift. However, this new situation makes journalists experience an ever bigger workload due to the fact that newsroom management assumes that the news production process could be speeded up. The expanding possibilities with the Internet, mobile phones and other devices also eroded the dividing wall between the journalists' personal and working environment (Perrons 2003; Rintala and Suolonen 2005).

All these changes have dramatic effects on how journalists work and what online reporting strategies they apply in their everyday practices. As demonstrated, many of these strategies are focused on using other kinds of publicly available information (such as PR news, promotional writing, translations from other online information sources, etc.) rather than developing original journalism online (Lund 2002). In this context, a particular concern with the online production of news is the originality of production – to put it more accurately: the amount of real journalistic input provided by communications professionals.

The multiplicity of online media actors does not necessarily result to a great deal of news diversity: it appears that most mainstream online journalism simply offers new ways of consuming journalism of the same content, which is topically grouped with toolbars that allow quick linking.

One more line of analysis of academic research on professionalization shifts, focuses on the relationship between digitization and the career paths of media professionals. Different research studies report a growing number of employees in the audio-visual and multimedia industries, while at the same time many other professional journalists' job opportunities are affected negatively. Many traditional journalistic jobs in the media industries have changed into new jobs that are specifically tailored for young ICT-wise newcomers, most of whom prefer working in freelance jobs (Dupagne and Garrison 2006; Perrons 2003; Saltzis and Dickinson 2008).

Job opportunities within the journalistic field are now more and more linked to technical skills, and media firms have the luxury to pick and choose as there are more volunteers for a job in the newsrooms than there are jobs available (Hollifield et al. 2001; Alysen 2005). The recent financial crisis of 2008–09 and its shift into one of the major economical crises of the last decades has indeed worsened the emerging situation. Many media firms have reduced their newsroom staff referring to the breakdown of advertising revenues. Recent research, pre-crisis however, already shows that traditional criteria for the selection of journalistic staff (such as diploma, knowledge of foreign languages, writing and interviewing skills) are becoming less prominent in the final decision process. Next to the desirability for technical skills, the flexibility to adapt to rapidly changing working conditions, as well as memberships to different social and professional digital networks are becoming more prominent elements in the recruitment evaluation procedures for new newsroom staff members (Austin and Cokley 2006; Becker et al. 1993). These shifts in job selection variables are more evident in audio-visual media jobs than jobs in print-related media (Hollifield et al. 2001).

Constraints and Opportunities for Content Production

Journalists who work in multi-tasking job environments also have to establish more public-oriented attitudes. Hence, one of the new phenomena in journalism is the growing impact of user-generated content procedures.

As already mentioned, in the environment of pressing deadlines and shorter newsbeat procedures, journalists have adapted new routines that help them to manage the ever growing news flow. Some of these new routines are reflected in the sourcing practices. On the one hand, we observe that journalists prefer to give priority to authoritative sources (Ericson et al. 1989; Fishman 1980; Gans 1979). The type of information these sources provide is analyzed as more reliable, and therefore limits the amount of time that has to be spent checking and double-checking (Dimitrova and Strömbäck 2009; Hampton 2008). On the other hand, although this routine has proven to be useful, a negative trend is also

observed. A growing number of political, institutional and economical actors provide ready-made press information and press releases that are processed in the media content often with limited – or even without any – journalistic mediation (Brennen 2009; O’Neill and O’Connor 2007). According to Balčytienė and Harro-Loit (2009), in this context, two content production strategies can be observed as emerging online: journalistic production as interpretation and translation. The mode of interpreting requires journalists to analyze, re-think and re-visit issues obtained from source information. Online journalists working as interpreters are changing journalistic discourse: they are checking and double-checking the information, finding missing angles in the story, conducting additional interviews, etc. The translating mode of online information production, in contrast, deals with the process of adaptation of journalistic text from one medium to fit the requirements of the other (online) medium. Translating does not require changing the discourse but the structure of the text through the addition of hypertext links, finding and indicating sub-topics in the text, adding multimedia elements and other kinds of online functionality.

In addition to relying on PR and other ready-made sources of news (such as news agency material), another time-saving procedure of reporting is the use of media content from other media groups what results in content mainstreaming and, to some extent, also in information redundancy (Deuze 2008; Erdal 2009). This copy and pasting type of journalism is more prevalent amongst online journalists (Cassidy 2008; Phillips et al. 2009). This is a result not only of their heavy workload and continuous deadlines, but also of the desk journalism that is a major defining characteristic in their job description (Boczkowski 2009; Machill and Beiler 2009).

As a paradox to these top-down and competing media sourcing practices, journalism is confronted with bottom-up initiatives. Due to the new digitization processes, the classical sections of ‘Letters to the Editor’ have now competition from online user-generated content. The traditional sources that dominate the public sphere have now broadened with the voices of the citizens themselves (Bivens 2008; Singer 2006; Dimitrova and Strömbäck 2009; Messner and DiStaso 2008). Journalists who gather local news have especially integrated those civic actors into their news production routines. This sub-group of journalists is also facing an excessive workload in newsrooms that are shrinking in terms of staff, and their job description is about all-round production while they cannot that easily adapt to a copy-paste journalism which has originated in content from competing media (Davies 2008).

For journalists, the preferred news sources are other media (Boczkowski 2009), news agencies (Machill and Beiler 2009) and press releases (Lewis et al. 2008). This preference in sourcing is induced by the growing importance of desk journalism instead of the traditional journalistic news gathering which is more time consuming (Raviola and Hartman 2009). The new information technologies offer a lot of immediate access to valuable information through search engines (Machill et al. 2008; Jha 2008; Phillips et al. 2009). Some scholars raise their voice to criticize the qualitative effect of these routines (Pavlik 2000; Machill and Beiler 2009). One should not be blind to the cost- and time-efficiency possibilities that are generated, but prudence is called for. It is not unthinkable that media owners will

urge journalists to use this type of ready-made sources as a general rule. It is especially the journalists facing the hardest workloads who are driven into this pattern of hyper efficiency that directly leads towards poorer journalism diversity and quality (Bird 1999; Erdal 2009; Fengler and Russ-Mohl 2008). Online newsrooms journalists adapt particularly easily to this type of secondary sourcing, again due to the continuous deadlines and pressures they face. This is even more so because of the fact that online news floors are by definition more open for testing and experimenting with new technological formats and new information generating channels (Chung 2007).

The second major line that digitization has opened is the communication line between newsrooms and the public. Weblogs are well established and have proven to be a promising bridge between journalists and their public. Journalists use weblogs to restore, and keep, contact with their public (Bivens 2008; Domingo and Heinonen 2008; Robinson 2006). With the emerging popularity and applicability of new interactive technologies, a wide array of alternative online communication platforms have emerged offering all kinds of insights into global political matters and certain problem areas such as environmental issues, health safety, fraud and corruption, assuring security, fighting terrorism, etc. Some of these online applications of social character offer specialized information, while others are accessed by general audiences. An important and distinctive feature of these platforms is their global and transnational orientation, which is especially useful for journalists in accessing background material on important issues. Some research studies also confirm that reporting on European politics, for example, increases in the European media with the advent of a younger generation of professional journalists, who rely on a clearer and more active understanding of the European dimension involved in their daily trade (AIM Research Consortium 2007). Younger journalists are also the ones who use the Internet as a primary source for background information, useful sources and critical views – these journalists have new media skills and understand the European dimension; they also have a critical approach to issues communicated by officials, thus they rely on new opportunities for analytical and investigative reporting offered by new media.

Alternatively, weblogs also offer the public a possibility to enter the journalistic news process; the user-generated content can become a positive stimulus and challenge traditional journalism (Messner and DiStaso 2008; Regan 2003; Usher 2008). Both points of view remain rather theoretical. Only few journalists expand their activities with a weblog, and if they do so it is often under pressure from their employers. And at the same time, the content of the majority of blogs on the public side are non-journalistic. But even if the few exceptional informational public blogs are taken into consideration, one has to admit that traditional media are not eager to tap into their provided content. Only in extraordinary situations (e.g. tsunami catastrophe, London metro bombings) is the provided information from the public used for traditional media content (Domingo and Heinonen 2008).

Shifts in Journalism Quality

The trends of technological innovation and digitization described in this chapter are in line with the long-standing evolution of journalism labelled as ‘tabloidization’. Since media institutions are more and more keen on maximizing their audiences, they end up adapting to mainstream taste and interest shifts. In his book *Flat Earth News* (2008), Nick Davies very vividly describes how this process of cheap production and tabloidization was merged with the negative aspects of technological diffusion and innovation as described above. According to Davies, journalism becomes hostage to the large content directing campaigns, and the cost-reducing news gathering routines as we described earlier are preventing that media content in playing its role as a key factor to the Fourth Estate: ‘Generally journalists, like any other professionals, prefer to do their job well. I say it because this profession has become damaged to the point where most of the times, most of its members are no longer able to do their job. They work in structures which positively prevent them discovering the truth [...] The ethic of honesty has been overwhelmed by the mass production of ignorance’ (Davies 2008: 28).

Davies accuses the media for not taking seriously the baselines of quality journalism anymore. Even the fact-checking part of the reporting process is often neglected. He gives some blood-curdling examples that provoked media hypes, as well as policy hypes (e.g. the millennium bug), and concludes eloquently: ‘Journalism without checking is like a human body without an immune system. If the primary purpose of journalism is to tell the truth, then it follows that the primary function of journalists must be to check and to reject whatever is not true. But something has changed, and that essential immune system has started to collapse. In a strange, alarming and generally unnoticed development, journalists are pumping out stories without checking them – stories which then circle the planet’ (Davies 2008: 51).

Generally, many of the journalistic practices described above are technologically driven, however far more important changes in journalistic production are driven by the financial cutbacks in the newsrooms. Davies describes modern newsrooms as news factories and he defines journalism as ‘churnalism’, which according to Davies, is a manifestation of journalists failing to perform the simple basic functions of their profession, i.e. journalists are quite unable to tell their readers the truth about what is happening on their path. Such journalists are no longer out gathering news, but their professional roles have instead been reduced to passive processors of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories, whether real event or PR artifice, important or trivial, true or false (Davies 2008). Indeed, different research studies disclose that journalistic outcome in many conventional media is in most cases just cutting and pasting practices. For example, researchers from Cardiff University measured the input of ready-made content by third parties in so-called quality newspapers and reported astonishing results: the highest scores were for *The Times*, a newspaper with a long pedigree, which adapted 69 per cent of its content from wire input, while *The Guardian* scored the lowest rates, although almost half of its content was wire-based (Lewis et al. 2008).

Discussion

Generally, two visions can be drawn from this discussion on how changes in production technologies will affect the profession of journalism. One of them sees structural changes, such as changes in institutional and organizational conditions of how journalists work and what discourses they construct in the new media enriched environments. This view also sees online journalism development and professionalization as processes of active learning and re-learning, with a need to rapidly adapt to changing external demands (rapidly changing technological and economic conditions, as well as audience requests) and working conditions. The other vision strongly relies on contextual factors and relates to the particularities of communication histories and traditions of national context and national communication culture, and their impact on working routines and messages communicated. All in all, these two visions disclose two conflicting paradigms of globalization and localism. As discussed above, journalistic production is strongly affected by the rapid diffusion of technological innovations. At the same time, European journalism also remains highly culturally sensitive, specific and framed through situational factors such as national traditions, values and norms.

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