TOWARDS NEO-JOURNALISM? REDEFINING, EXTENDING OR RECONFIGURING A PROFESSION

SPECIAL ISSUE ON ONLINE JOURNALISM, PART 1

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The present issue on online journalism, divided in two volumes (39/40), is a compilation of papers presented at the International Conference on Online Journalism, held in Brussels on the 3rd and 4th October 2012, and co-organized by the University of Louvain (UCL) and the University of Namur[2]. The conference allowed professionals and researchers working on online journalism from a variety of disciplines[3] to share research experiences and findings concerned with the redefinition, extension, and reconfiguration of the journalistic profession. Insofar as journalism is facing crucial changes triggered by the emergence of new communication and information technologies belonging to the so-called Web 2.0 paradigm, the conference provided an ideal context to examine whether present changes in journalistic practices constitute a prototype of what Castells (2009) terms mass-self

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2 The conference was organized within the research project "The transformation of the relationship with information in multimedia communication", funded by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (Action de Recherche Concertée ARC 08/13-11), studying the impact of information and communication technologies, specifically the Internet, on the communication of information and its structures.
3 Several disciplines were represented in the conference including sociology, ethnology, law, communication sciences, linguistics, and psychology. Papers addressing law issues regarding online journalism are not represented in the present volume.

communication: New modes of information production and reception, changes in publishing formats and supports, as well as transformations in the relationship with the audience.

The conference was guided by an attempt to answer the question whether 21st century journalism can be called *neo-journalism.* More precisely, the question concerned whether the prefix *neo*, as used in artistic movements, would be appropriate to qualify today's journalism as a practice that calls for a return to previous journalistic forms and values in force before the Web 2.0. In this sense, when applied to journalism, *neo* would refer to the revival of earlier ways of conceiving and doing journalism, that is, it would imply reinventing an existing topic. This reinvention can take many forms. On the one hand, as far as neo-journalism may arise from journalists' criticisms concerning early experiences of the appropriation of the Internet by news organizations, the term neo-journalism implies some kind of review of the present practice. The 'appropriation techniques' of the news organizations that aim at producing low cost online journalism lead to a standardization of contents on the Web and give rise to journalists' criticism of normative and legal vacuums. On the other hand, the concept of neo-journalism may also imply the persistence of some characteristics of early views about journalism that are reinterpreted in a context in which new technologies are producing changes in how journalism is conceived and carried out online (social networking sites, blogging, micro-blogging, audience measurement software, etc.).

Furthermore, neo-journalism may include a participatory ideal of empowerment: "Like the neo-television, which Casetti and Odin have qualified as a space of conviviality, proximity and above all interactivity, the term neo-journalism gathers its strength from its relevance to describe a kind of horizontal communication where traditional walls separating genres and roles played by protagonists disappear (the journalist is no longer the master of the sources)[1]" (Murhula et al. 2007, p. 86). Today, participatory technologies (blogs, micro-blogging, social networks) allow a series of actors scattered throughout places and institutions that do not belong to the traditional journalistic field to have access to public information. But what distinguishes journalists from citizens then, and where are the limits between journalistic and other information media?

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1   Editors' translation.

The collection of selected articles published in the present volume intends to confront investigations into the complex field of journalism from different angles, in order to bring to light the impact of information and communication technologies, especially the Internet, on media communication and its structures.

This first issue on neojournalism comprises studies concerned with the news making process and the different ways in which information is gathered, converted into news, and disseminated to the public.

Several authors are interested in the phenomenon of convergence. Renaud Carbasse and Marc-Olivier Goyette-Côté focus on Quebecor Média, a leading media corporation in Québec. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with current and former journalists of the group, their contribution aims to evaluate the impact of the institutionalization of convergence on journalists' practices and work.

For Bella Palomo Torres, professional polyvalence is the key to understanding the convergence processes. Working on data from a national study on the impact of convergence on the Spanish media system developed by the Infotendencias group between 2008 and 2009, she noticed that opposing realities exist even within the same multimedia group.

Amandine Degand presents the results of an extensive ethnographic survey conducted between the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010 in 11 newsrooms of French-speaking Belgium. She analyzes this intense criticism of the professionals interviewed as one of the main drivers of the permanent reshaping of journalism.

Based on an observation of the media's newsroom, Guillaume Sire analyses the way in which *l'express.fr* builds its online headlines. He describes the functions of each type of front-page news and examines how information displayed on each front-page is assembled into a strategic process that he calls the "Multi-Une".

Jan-Hinrik Schmidt, Wiebke Loosen, Nele Heise, and Julius Reimer investigate the relationships between audience participation and journalistic practices, and whether those relationships blur or reinforce boundaries between journalists and the public. Through a heuristic model of audience participation and an empirical case study on The *Taggesschau*, a leading new broadcaster in Germany, their results provide evidence for both blurring and reinforcing the boundaries between journalists and the public. Although certain aspects of journalistic practices are open to increasing audience participation,

others, particularly those concerned with journalistic standards and professional routines, are defended and reinforced.

Next studies use mixed methods, just between the observation of the news production and the analysis of its products.

Arnaud Mercier examines the uses of social networks by French journalists. Based on a twofold method combining a survey on twenty national media and an analysis of six-hundred journalists' *Twitter* and *Facebook* pages, he shows that *Twitter* has become a professional tool for journalists, and in which ways it is better suited for journalistic practices than *Facebook*. His results also show that *Twitter* has allowed for the creation of a "Journalists' Club" as professionals' tend to develop a self-focused use of the network, basically following their peers.

By means of a socio-economic approach, Nikos Smyrnaios examines three French pure players: *Owni*, *Rue89* and *Arrêt sur image*. His study relies on seven semi-structured interviews with journalists from the three newsrooms studied and on observations of the evolution of the websites between May 2010 and April 2012 in a diachronic perspective. The author aims at developing a plurality of economic models articulated into original editorial strategies for online journalism in a sustainable way.

Evelien D'heer and Steve Paulussen analyze the hyper local media platform *Het Belang van mijn gemeente*, a project launched in 2011 by the Flemish newspaper *Het Belang van Limburg,* which allows for the coexistence of professional editorial content and user-generated news content. By adopting a twofold method combining a content analysis of news pages and in-depth interviews with citizen reporters, the authors investigate similarities and complementarities between both types of content. Their results show that citizen journalists and professionals differ on the selection of topics for coverage: while the latter tend to rely mostly on official institutional sources, the former are more prone to be the source of news stories based on their own interests, experiences, and affiliations with local organizations.

This volume covers articles from different disciplines including communication studies, sociology, linguistics, and psychology presented in French or English by scholars from different cultural backgrounds. Most of the presented investigations are qualitative in nature and a few others adopt a quantitative approach. The multidisciplinary and multilingual approach of the research topic allows for deeper insight

into the vast field of information communication and, hopefully, a better understanding of the online journalism universe.

References

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