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The ground level of the news industry: contribution towards a political economy of the newsmaking praxis

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Abstract

There is a tradition in Journalism studies which focus on how the daily newspaper is the result of social interactions as well as of micro-politics that affect such practices. Currently, this scenario has been complexified by the introduction of Communication technologies that impact all stages of the newsmaking process (from investigation to consumption) and its legal formalization. In this theoretical paper, the objective is to present three points for discussion, regarding the current status of the professional practice of Journalism in Brazil, namely: a) the debate on the regulation of professional Journalism training and practice; b) the context of labor relations in the Journalism job market; c) the crisis of the narrative and the social role of the Journalist, considering cultural, economic, political and technological issues. Uncertainties regarding regulation of Journalism as a labor category, the fluctuating context, the deterioration of labor relations in this job market also the current crisis of the narrative and the social role of Journalists show a field of disputes with many possibilities left open.

Keywords: Journalism policies. Labor. Social role of Journalism. Narrative crisis. Journalism studies.

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Introduction

“Why Am I the one sounding like a grizzled ink-stained wretch who believes news should be about – I don’t know, news?” Clark Kent, 27 years old, the Superman, when quitting his job at the Daily Planet. “Go easy on us mortals, Clark. Times are changing and print is a dying medium. I don’t like it, but the only hope we have of delivering any news at all is to give the people what they want to read... to see on television, iPad or cell phone. And God help me, if a front page story about some reality star gets them to pick up a paper and maybe stumble on real news.” Newspaper editor’s answer (Superman, DC Comics, n.13, October, 2012).

Robert Darnton’s classic ethnographic study in the newsroom of North American newspaper The New York Times in the 1970s (DARNTON, 1990) as well as other studies on productive routines of Journalism (BERGER, 2002; ALSINA, 2009; TRAQUINA, 2001) have drawn our attention to the fact that a daily newspaper is the result of social interactions in the newsroom and micro-politics that affect their practices. Currently, this scenario has been complexified by the introduction of Communication technologies that impact all stages of the newsmaking process (from investigation to consumption) and its ongoing legal formalization.

This theoretical paper aims at presenting three points for discussion focusing on the current status of professional Journalism practice in Brazil, namely: i) the debate on the regulation of professional Journalism training and practice; ii) the context of labor relations in the Journalism job market; iii) the crisis of the narrative and the social role of the journalist, regarding cultural, economic, political and technological issues.

From the analysis of documents and news related to the regulation of journalistic activity, researches on the ergology approach to Journalism and theoretical production, we propose a broad mapping of the current scenario of Journalism in Brazil. Based on these data, we consider that uncertainties regarding regulation of Journalism as a labor category, the fluctuating context, the deterioration of labor relations in this job market as well as the

current crisis of the narrative and the social role of journalists show a field of disputes with many possibilities left open.

The debate about the regulation of Journalism training and practice

Over the last decade, some structural changes in capitalism have affected considerably the field of Journalism, such as globalization, more flexible capital-labor relations, and digital revolution. One of the consequences of this change is the resuming discussions over the institutional mechanisms for the regulation of journalistic practice. There are three paradigmatic elements in this scenario, which allow the debate about improving public Communication policies. These elements are mandatory university degree, specific training in Journalism, and The Federal Council of Journalism or Journalists.

In June 17, 2009, when analyzing the appeal filed by the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Union of Radio and Television Companies of São Paulo in 2001, Brazil's Supreme Court ruled that demanding a university degree in Journalism for the exercise of the profession was unconstitutional. Besides, the proposal to create the Federal Council of Journalism, as suggested by the National Federation of Journalists in order to replace regional offices and grant professional registrations, was rejected after symbolic vote in the House of Delegates in December, 2004. The proposal of professional self-regulation, made by the Executive Power on behalf of Fenaj, did not come to discussion in a plenary session (BRITTOS; NAZÁRIO, 2006).

In 2009, the Ministry of Education set up a Commission of Experts that has submitted a proposal to develop National Curriculum Guidelines for Courses in Journalism. Despite the support of Journalism institutions, such as the National Forum of Journalism Professors (FNPJ), the Brazilian Journalism Researchers Association (SBOJor) and Fenaj as well as the Brazilian Association of Interdisciplinary Studies in Communication (Intercom), the project was analyzed by the High Education Chamber of the

Federal Education Council only in February, 2013 and endorsed by Minister Aluísio Mercadante in September, 2013.

In case of further theoretical debates about professional training and job market, these three events are related to the studies of political economy of Communication, according to Ramos and Santos (2007), Dantas (2007), W. D. Braga (2007), Rebouças (2005) and Bolaño (2000). It is not our intention to analyze these events from a legal point of view. We aim at discussing the political economy of Communication from the journalistic practices, contributing to other recent studies that have analyzed these events. Among these studies, it is worth mentioning the analysis of epistemic foundations of the Supreme Court and the idea of having a university degree in Journalism (Fausto Neto, 2009); a historical perspective of the relationship among university degree, certificate in Journalism and professional identity (Lopes, 2012); the story of social Communication studies in Brazil, from minimum curriculum implementation to specific curriculum guidelines for courses in Journalism (Moura, 2002; Dib, Aguiar and Barreiro, 2010), and criticism of press coverage strongly opposed to the proposal of the Federal Council of Journalism (Romão, 2008; Brittos and Nazário, 2006).

The context of labor relations in the journalistic job market

Structural changes in today's society, such as increased productivity, competitiveness and profitability due to deregulation of world economy (CASTELLS, 1999), have also changed the way information is produced, challenging assumptions about professional training and highlighting the crisis of the journalist's social role. The process of generalizing technical mediation has been causing deep transformations in the productive practices and from a superficial theoretical view, these changes entail the journalistic field, but only as a changing object. However, in our point of view, it is simultaneously a transforming force, as seen in its historical record.

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1997), the journalistic field, with its agents and the dispute between economic and ideological

powers, was established in the 19th century. This polarization is present in capital-labor relations: on the economic side, due to journalistic enterprises and the marketing aspects of information, press has become a business platform; on the ideological side, there is the professional culture of Journalism and its values, such as ethical responsibility, social commitment and credibility. The paradoxes of Journalism history require an ongoing struggle for defining what Journalism is and how news is produced. According to Traquina, not only the growth of newspaper market but also this new paradigm – provide information – has allowed the emergence of values that are mostly related to Journalism: “the news, the search for the truth, independence, objectivity, and a sense of public service” (TRAQUINA, 2005, p.34).

When it comes to the organizational context, these debates involve economic and political interests of companies that provide journalistic information as well as ethical values and deontological rules that govern the profession of journalist. According to the theory of Journalism (TRAQUINA, 2005), providing news depends neither on the will of the journalist nor on the editorial guidelines of the company he or she works for; it depends on intense symbolic negotiations between many social forces involved in the information process, which compete for access to and power of media space. Moreover, the daily routine in Journalism consists of both lack of time and broad information gathering network to investigate events and sources, creating a web of facticity (TUCHMAN, 1978). Besides, the interactionist perspective of news making theory (WOLF, 2003) indicates the existence of noticeability criteria, news values applied to determine the stories to be told and news to be released. According to this theoretical view, noticeability criteria are related to “importance” and “interest”.

News: importance versus interest

Discussing the criteria “important news” and “interesting news” seems to be a key issue for journalistic practice in the era of online Journalism, because it means asking a question about

the main problem of Journalism: what events are considered important or interesting enough to become news? Important news, which aims at public interest, and interesting news, which draws the public attention, seem to be in opposite sides. However, when studying this subject, authors do not agree: whereas Gans (1979) makes a distinction between “important news” and “interesting news”, Schudson (1978) prefers naming this distinction “information” and “stories”, and Bird and Dardene (1993, p.265) state that it is necessary to set aside the difference between important and interesting. According to these authors, news considered as a long-lasting symbolic system “teaches” the public much more than its components, even if these parts aim at informing or entertaining.

It seems that Bird and Dardene’s point of view does not cover the most recent structural changes in Journalism in the era of digital technologies and contemporary hybridization of information and entertainment, creating the neologism “infotainment”. The term first appeared in the United States, in the 1980s, to describe the combination of news and fun, revealing a “tendency to provide attractive news at any cost” (NEVEU, 2006, p.19). Infotainment has encountered criticism from many authors and received other names. Kurtz, for instance, calls “pink Journalism” the current phase of Journalism, which focuses on language innovations, layout, abundant use of colors, attractive designs, infographics, photographs, and illustrations (KURTA, 1993, p.47). Leandro Marshall in turn prefers defining the contemporary journalistic activity as “transgenic Journalism”, which combines information, marketing, advertising and entertainment.

In this paper, the decharacterization of the classic definition of newspaper is about hybridization of information and advertisement, according to which “instead of reporting news, newspapers have the mission to advertise products, ideas and characters” (MARSHALL, 2003, p.41). This marketing strategy is based on increased media coverage about behavior, human interest, TV programs, movies, music, fashion, weather forecast and sports. “Entertainment news has replaced serious news because it has

greater effect on the public and the costs are much less expensive to the company.” (MARSHALL, 2003, p.27).

If Wolf believes that news considered important should necessarily be selected, then the aspect “interesting” will involve an analysis more open to the opinion of journalists, because it is closely related to the representations these professionals have of their audience. To that end, “interesting” news report an event based on “human interest’, what is unusual, small curiosities that draws people’s attention” (WOLF, 2003, p.205). Before the Internet, noticeability criteria related to the audience were very fragile and portrayed more the journalists’ assumptions about their public than real data on media consumers. “The term of reference constituted by the public – or better put, by journalists according to the opinion they have about the public – and the boundaries of this reference are one of the most interesting and less investigated aspects” (WOLF, 2003, p.213). Then, this seems to be another great disruptive point between the idea of Journalism related to mass media Communication and the current concept of online Journalism, in which the audience tries to interact with the news in real time, often establishing the next stages of work by the number of accesses and comments, which are controlled by web management devices.

Gans (1979) gives some clues on how to determine the “interesting” aspect of news. This author highlights some categories of “stories” (bizarre, shocking, heroic, of human interest) which are used to identify events that correspond to the news value “interesting”. On the other hand, Golding and Elliot (1979) claim that there is no difference between “important news” and “interesting news”, because the ability to draw people’s attention and entertain the audience is a resource to accomplish journalistic ideals, such as publishing stories of social importance.

The solution is normally the co-option of one ideal by the other, in the argument that to inform an audience you must first have its attention, and that there is no point preparing serious, well-intentioned, high-minded journalism if the audience registers its boredom by switching off. Thus entertainment is high on the list of news values both as an end in itself and as a means to other journalistic ideals (GOLDING; ELLIOTT, 1979, p.177).

A dispute over the definition of “Journalism” emerges in every historic period. At present, a simple answer is not enough because information and Communication technologies allow regular people to experiment with practices previously restricted to journalists. Therefore, more than trying to answer the platonic metaphysical question of the nature of Journalism, which is about the unchangeable essence of Journalism, a question asked according to Michel Foucault’s genealogical method aims at understanding the difference between past and present. This is why Kovach and Rosenstiel’s question “what is Journalism for?” gains an ethical-political dimension to overcome a deadlock previously discussed in this article. “The primary purpose of Journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (KOVACH; ROSENSTIEL, 2004, p.31). Even if this point of view is an important reference to journalistic practice, it should be acknowledged that it is an idealistic position, due to a variety of senders of messages, interests and priorities in the digital era, making the process of choosing all “necessary information” to build full citizenship more complex.

Chronicle of irrelevance: the crisis of narrative and the social role of journalists

Times of great technological transformations, which have changed economy and social life, have also given fuel to studies on Communication – an area that has grown worldwide thanks to these changes, especially in Western capitalist countries. This happened in the first decades of the 20th century, after the consolidation of daily newspapers, when cinema, radio and television industries have become popular along with a range of cultural goods extensively advertised. Now, at the turn of the 21st century, it is happening again due to many opportunities opened up by the Internet. Journalism in particular and intellectual production in general have been deeply affected by the new production and marketing tools, and their effects go far beyond the purely incorporation of digital media to daily working routine.

In the case of Brazil, there is evidence that these innovations as well as the resulting marketing scenarios may transform or divert the specific nature of Journalism, classically understood as the one that focuses on its social role. To start with, the hesitant recognition of diploma weakens Journalism as a labor category and imposes a symbolic loss of status, showing that Communication field has been facing a process of fast, uninterrupted and uncertain changes. Therefore, it is a great opportunity for academic observation, research and reflection, aiming at curriculum development to form the new generation of media professionals.

Those who are familiar with the structure of media Communication and media coverage procedures as well as the actual reality of the area have already made the first critical diagnosis: “The technological and social developments themselves have reduced the social role and literary aspect of journalism. This is because we are not only scribes, but also writers, storytellers of reality” (DINES, 2010).

In order to address the first part of the statement above, regarding the possible reduction of the social role of Journalism in the context of social media, there is a simple and clear landmark to start with. According to the Constitution of 1988, the Code of Ethics for journalists, and the Code of Business Conduct for newspaper companies, it is widely recognized that the right to information and freedom of speech are important in safeguarding democracy. In the name of this guarantee, crucial to the development and advancement of community, the Federal Constitution protects source’s identity (Article 5, line XIV).

Professional journalists have the exclusive right to protect their source’s identity, which shall be valid during the exercise of profession; this condition seems not to have been modified during the period of deregulation. This special prerogative is enjoyed by the only labor category protected from coercion, people who research, access and disclose facts relevant to society. It is assumed that they have credibility to get as closer as possible to “the truth”. Journalists were legally granted in stony clause a clear role of social mediators.

Here is the first undeniable evidence of the social importance of a journalist's work. This dimension is linked to ostensive, on-site and systematic monitoring of public spheres of power. Thus, we have reached the classical concept of Journalism: to inform, monitor, report, educate and, finally, entertain. In this list of priorities, which has shaped professionals' mindset and organized the daily newspaper coverage over decades, politics in particular and news report in general are considered core journalistic activities. In times of online Journalism, gradually and inexorably replacing paper with digital screens, none of these definitions have ceased to exist or be defended, but they are in the process of further change – and, in some cases, an inversion of priorities. Year after year, entertainment news continues to achieve high audience ratings. Taking the traditional journalistic point of view into account, it is the least relevant contents that draw Internet readers' attention, a heterogeneous public that produces an overwhelming flow of different kinds of messages.

It is well known that the preference for light content is not something new and is not totally bad, as previously discussed, because drawing the reader's attention is the main goal: it has always been a great niche in the cultural industry. However, what seems to be different now and has called our attention is the changes in the news making process, which are able to influence the definition of new professional values and profile. It is all happening during a challenging moment for media companies: the process of making millions from advertising, which support newspapers, magazines and TV programs, is different on the Internet, considered the future of business.

Searching for financial health, media conglomerates check the web constantly - giving emphasis to the most popular contents in their portals – and, in an erratic scenario, they may use this parameter to create and advertise products. People are led to wonder: would an impulsive, fleeting click of an Internet user, highly motivated by images, be the main indication of relevance of a piece of information? Does the number of accesses indicate long-lasting preferences for triviality, pranks and futility or does

this kind of audience measurement mix momentary attention with interest and importance? What can be naturally and effortlessly enjoyed and easily widespread – we only have to roughly compare music and a book.

The manufacturing floor of news industry and the decline of news

There is no guarantee that people who see celebrity photographs are not interest in the outcome of the vote in Congress. However, it is a fact that news portals continue to highlight old sensationalist topics on the front pages. In a kind of light schizophrenia, they live side by side with hard news, selected according to journalistic hierarchy. It is also a fact that great, shocking, exclusive news, regarding not only politics, but also domestic affairs, with superb texts and images, do not make headlines in news portals – and do not have power in print media. Those who know Brazilian press industry is aware that news, the great moment when the reporter becomes a reality teller or a story teller, is going down. This is the part mentioned by Alberto Dines.

Over the last decade, downward trend in news has been noticed in the academic field (MAGNO, 2006). The generation of journalists that graduated in the 80s and was active in the period of post-redemocratization, political investigative Journalism, have witnessed the respect, space and status given to a reporter who got the scoop on politics, economy or any domestic affair. Also, the constant competition among newspaper companies to hire the author of a successful article. As the employer used to match the proposal, reporters used to have high wages, improving career prospects. At present, the competition for hiring a gifted journalist basically does not exist and professionals newly hired have wages close to minimum wage.

Scripts have changed since the 1990s. They have also become shorter and less expensive. Before cell phones and the Internet, in order to plan the edition, editors depended exclusively on the reporter, who used to make contact by landline telephones after the investigation. Not only the newspaper company, but also the

reader and the source depended on the reporter. Being the main sender of the message, he had high bargaining power because neither the source nor the reader had their own distribution network, like government and corporate websites, blogs and social media. As reporters represent independent citizens as well as private and party groups, they are unable to promote consensus. Besides, this mosaic of information that emerges from the Internet also contributes to dilute and diminishes the importance of the reporter, who is often target of Internet users in favor of conspiracy theories and against “bourgeois press”. As previously stated, today any regular person can perform a journalist’s task. In face of this reality, it is not an overstatement to say that the work of a journalist has lost its importance, even though it is essential to keep and value a person who critically mediates power and citizens.

Excluded from center stage and discouraged to tell great stories, reporters are more unlikely to feel the rhythm of streets. Even press conferences are held online and the news stream is updated from the Internet, which should not be a point of arrival but a starting point. A survey commissioned by *Comunique-se* Portal and carried out by Deloitte Consulting, in August, 2012, with 711 professionals, 50% of which from print newspapers and magazines, with an average age of 36, has shown the following results (Source: “Fala, Jornalista!”, Oct, 2012):

- 71% of people said that work demand is greater than the number of employees;
- 80% said that the Internet has affected media performance. Effects on professional practice;
- 43% said that more journalists are making the transition to corporate Communication;
- 26% stated that more professionals have become freelance journalists;
- 24% said that more journalists are losing their jobs;
- 34% said that the profile of professionals has changed;
- 20% said that digital media has replaced press media;
- 17% said that journalists were laid off.

The following question was also asked during the survey: what is more important from the point of view of Brazilian press professionals? 27.6% of people said respect to market rules, slightly higher than second place; 27.4% said freedom of speech. This result can be seen as a likely reaction to the defensive attitude of the government over the past years, when establishing “media control”. In any case, based on this answer, a significant part of press professionals has shown a new “set of values that determine work choices” (FIGARO, 2008, p.122) different from standards. To support this hypothesis, we have highlighted the following question: what is more important in a company? Transparency (33%); personnel management (27%); quality of services (19%); quality of products (8%); social responsibility (5%); others, such as credibility, ethics, and responsibility (2.5%).

In order to balance revenue and get the audience involved, media organizations have turned into content, sound and image providers for desktops, tablets, cell phones etc., not to mention other technological services. Thus, multimedia professionals are needed in real time as well as top executives should be able to combine information and marketing to create new products. In practice, due to segmentation and large number of messages, traditional media industries may oppose the Internet as a free territory and lose their alleged social role – the supposed “universality” of speaking on behalf of the community. Instead, with new products, they may end up giving priority to specific niches of contents and clients – not to the public in general anymore. In a way, it is a natural process. However, it is also contradictory, because we are at a point today that new readers are entering the information, education and cultural market without knowing their demands of citizenship. They are responsible, for instance, for generating large print orders of popular newspapers over the last years.

Based on the scenario described above, it is expected that the required profile for media professionals change. It is totally possible to imagine that, in a not too distant future, journalists may not be the majority in private media companies – but marketing, advertising, web design, technology and business professionals,

not to mention a range of associated professionals. But the fact is that we will continue to need journalists with ethics and critical thinking in order to carry out the work of social mediation. As a place of production of knowledge about the immediate dynamics of society, Journalism needs to overcome the feeling of having become a mosaic of irrelevant chronicles in order to affirm its position as discursive mediator of many interests and conflicts that compete for access to public spheres in democratic societies.

Final considerations

Journalists are professional mediators. They mediate between the State and society, social fields and diverse interest groups. This social mediation role is comprised of great part of modern Journalism ideology. However, mediation has a political content, because it involves the relationship between the parties, which often leads to power struggle and negotiations with opposing ideas. Therefore, professional mediation made by journalists is affected by economic, moral, religious, marketing and political issues. In that sense, it is worth mentioning the research conducted by the research group led by Roseli Figaro about an ergology approach to Journalism (FIGARO; GROHMANN, 2012). Taking into account the opinion of hundreds of journalists, from the point of view of labor relations, Figaro found out that deterioration of work conditions due to increasing use of freelancers in newsrooms is not always perceived as such; many young journalists in this situation do not consider time spent on the Internet (reading other newspapers, replying e-mails or updating social media accounts) as part of the “job”. This group of journalists/workers, with weak connections to media companies, makes it easier for share capital to interfere with media, representing an important factor which influences Journalism as entertainment:

When there are no organizations for public communication, society suffers from the overvaluation of the pole of the confrontation of the public / commercial. This leads to an imbalance between the poles. This imbalance manifests itself in all other institutions and organizations of the society. This

imbalance also appears in cultural production. It results in overvaluation of the entertainment as the matrix that shapes journalism, advertising, fiction, and other modes of discourse. The diversity of views and aesthetic is impoverished. Non-measurable values are undermined as well as the idea of living well, which end up undermining the company or organization itself. (...) It is a difficult, conflicting dialogue that brings to companies and social movements the challenge and responsibility to find alternative proposals. (FIGARO, 2008, p.137).

Finally, let's go back to *Superman*. The author has imagined a brilliant online journalistic blog to explain the resignation. "This is what happens when a 27-year-old guy is behind a desk and he has to take instruction from a larger conglomerate with concerns that are not really his own. Superman is the most powerful person on the planet, but how long can he stay sitting in his home with someone breathing over his neck and making him feel the less important person of the world?" (LOBDELL, 2012). According to author Scott Lodbldell, Clark Kent will not work for anybody else. Even hoping to see a modern "alternative media", redesigned for the 21st century, created and managed by journalists extremely aware of their social role, it is still an ongoing process. According to Wu (2012), it is important to consider that the Internet runs the risk of sharing the same fate of the telephone, radio, TV, and press, which started as the promise of democracy and became private empires.

Uncertainties regarding regulation of Journalism as a labor category, the fluctuating context of labor relations and the crisis of the narrative and the social role of journalists highlight a field of disputes with many possibilities left open. Different social fields, fighting for legitimacy or hegemony, where the voices multiplied by the possibility created by the Internet raise old issues and maintain ongoing struggles that show some of the main axes of tension in journalistic practice today. This paper aimed at focusing on this privileged moment of social transformations, in which new practices and regulations still consolidate, and affect the definition of what is daily meant by "Journalism".

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