



# Journalism's "Invisibles"

## Introduction

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It may seem paradoxical to address in terms of invisibility a profession devoted to the unveiling, the making public, of information, of making events visible. Yet this profession consists of its share of shadows. To introduce a dimension of visibility/invisibility in the analysis of journalistic production brings up new questions. Indeed, what is invisible in journalism as institution, as process and as collective enterprise? Which actors, what structures, what processes, and what influences escape attention? To whose eyes are all these things invisible? The eyes of the public, the state or the law? Other workers in the press domain, the journalistic field, all those actors who roil in the public realm? Researchers themselves? What explains this invisibility, how does it function, and in whose interest? It may be the case of a deliberate choice to conceal questionable and suspicious influences. It may stem from strategies of domination or exclusion. It may be linked to the emerging nature of new practices not yet recognized, or on the contrary, to bygone issues, long-since forgotten, but whose structuring influences persist even if we are no longer consciousness of them. Unless it is the result of professional ideologies whose penchant it is to discreetly arrange the shadows and the light? Or does it reflect the limits of theories and methods of researchers?

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Journalism is a public job that ostensibly belongs (from byline to celebrity) to reporters. It's their business. The others who collaborate on this work, but do not sign or publish (technical and service personnel, management, researchers, archivists, graphic artists, sales agents, etc.) remain in the shadows. In the traditional sociology of journalism, there is a tendency to consider these other actors as functioning alongside or around journalism, forming a kind of environment defined by abstract concepts such as "production constraints," "organizational resources," "managerial strategy," "technical device," "extra-organizational influences," etc. – realms in which journalism moves and which are deep in theoretical meaning, but whose concrete, daily routine and embodied action remains just offscreen. But as soon as you open the "black boxes" of the "invisibles," whether "mediators" or "intermediaries" (to take the distinction Joel Langonné borrows from Bruno Latour in this issue), and interest is shown in their contribution, that is to say their ability to make a difference, it becomes necessary to see journalism otherwise and question it differently.

Studying journalism through the prism of invisibility invites an examination of both the mechanisms of journalistic production, as a collective activity (which necessitates the cooperation of several actors), and the respective positions of the actors in this cooperative undertaking. As has been pointed out by Howard Becker (1988) about art, "the work always shows signs of that cooperation. The forms of cooperation may be ephemeral, but often become more or less routine, producing patterns of collective activity we can call an art world." (Becker, 1982: 1)

Despite their involvement in this activity, some actors do not receive recognition for their knowledge and know-how in terms of skills, status, remuneration, or promotion by their employers, colleagues, or resource personnel, because journalistic production follows a segmented pattern – both explicit and implicit – that establishes a hierarchical social order among the positions occupied by the producers, whether internal to the media company (journalists on the payroll, analysts, technicians), or external to it (freelancers, casual employees, information sources). How is this system of recognition structured? What form does it take? Financial? Symbolic? What activities are recognized? According to which evaluation principles? And who, within the organization, validates this hierarchy of positions in terms of status, employment contracts, remuneration and career mobility? To answer these questions is to objectify the framework which defines the social relationship of resources (personnel, capital, technology) from

a perspective of economic productivity in a hyper-competitive environment. It is to access what Blanchot and Padioleau (2003) call the political economy of the field of journalism.

To work on the invisible aspects of journalism, is it not also to give journalists a taste of their own medicine? Journalism proclaiming itself, on many occasions, to be an art unveiling the affairs of others deemed to be in the public interest, does it not make transparency a virtue it practices little itself? Research published in this issue shows that journalistic activity is like any other social activity: it is based, whenever deemed necessary by the journalist, on accommodation with the rules (editorial and deontological), on compromise, and the use of crafty manoeuvres to facilitate the adaptation of the work to production constraints. Managerial edicts are interpreted and followed more or less freely with the help of sleight of hand, practical knowledge, tricks of the trade, know-how.... The empirical organization of journalistic work features its share of seat-of-the-pants craftsmanship. While a journalist may invoke the political and civic dimensions of journalism on one hand, she will be reluctant to expose her approach, routines, and protocols to the eyes of others (the public, the bosses, sources, and colleagues). She delivers a sanitized finished product, and takes care not to show the backroom, except in cases where the game of transparency (or simulacrum) may contribute to its celebrity.

A journalist may also remove himself from the attention of others through anonymity, pseudonymity, false identity, the practices of incognito, and hidden cameras – invisibility is not always a constraint. The capacity to conceal oneself to escape criticism or the control of others is a valuable resource. In this issue, Beatriz Marocco and Nilsângela Cardoso Lima's article recalls that journalists can have excellent reasons to conceal their identity behind a pseudonym. It may be a case of necessity for journalists who produce critical political articles in an authoritarian political context. But what they gain in security, they lose in recognition. Conversely, the alias may also serve as part of a strategy to gain distinction and publicity in a highly competitive environment. In this case, the alias is the equivalent of a trademark intended to grab and hold an audience.

Incidentally, Howard Becker's hypothesis should not be taken as gospel: if all significant contributions to the collective work leave their mark, the relationship between the two (the mark and the contribution) is not always easy to establish, especially when the signatory's interests are best served by covering her tracks.

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**SHIFTING SPACES, PLURAL IDENTITIES, COMPLEX  
RELATIONSHIPS**

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In the news process, that which is upstream of the journalist (that is to say his relationship with sources and other actors involved with him in the production of news) escapes public knowledge most of the time, but not the interest of researchers, who want to understand the conventions, conflicts and collusion which structure the relationships and interactions between journalists, their sources and media personnel.

For half a century, and from every corner of the planet, the sociology of journalism has produced many studies – too many for us to mention them all here – on the relationship between journalists and their sources; on the interdependence of media or journalistic specialists and socially defined professionals considered resources (liaison officials, political players, agents of artists or athletes...). Also studied have been the social characteristics and production methods of the journalists themselves, which reveal the behind-the-scenes of journalistic production, namely micro decisions – the succession of operations that overlap each other to define and create the editorial product. This scientific work is unending, most notably in the context of the profound changes undergoing the world of media today because of digitization and its consequences. These changes make it such that we still only poorly grasp the organization of news production and the system of relations in which journalists participate. The identity and activity of sources is changing. New actors are involved in the process, new modalities of news communication are developing and new opportunities appear. In this context, the boundaries between the territories of activity of actors become fluid. New tensions, overlaps, cooperation and rivalries emerge, creating new areas of uncertainty for actors, and unknowns for researchers. Contributions to this issue provide several examples, such as Guillaume Sire's work on SEOs in news sites – intermediaries between journalists and external partners (including the ubiquitous Google) – at the boundary of professional universes and imagination (sometimes in opposition), or that of Pierre-Carl Langlais and Guillaume Hueguet, which focuses on collaboration between journalists, computer scientists, activists and academics, working together to define and promote data journalism.

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**INVISIBILITY AND RECOGNITION: A GAME OF DRAWERS**

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Formal and informal hierarchies erected between workstations, statutes, or functions in a given professional space create zones of invisibility and defi-

ciencies in recognition. The task is to grasp, in all their complexity, the modalities of operation and legitimation.

The definition of the criteria of access to journalistic activity and the conditions of its exercise are subject to constant struggles between the agents involved in this social domain, especially as it affects the contractual relationship between news organizations and journalists and non-journalists. Publishers, unions, employers and public authorities debate the fundamental prerequisites for being a journalist, including initial training, work experience, skills, and subject matter and/or technical expertise. They also negotiate within the framework of collective and company agreements. These agreements determine the types of contracts, pay scales, assignment of functions, integration in decision-making – in short, the establishment of formal arrangements between individuals and organizations, and the delegation of the respective positions of news producers. As a result, these processes include as much as they exclude (given managerial variations) because of the editorial and economic segmentation of the sectors of media, and the social and occupational characteristics of the “invisibles” involved in each of journalistic subspaces. This heterogeneity, structural and morphological, constitutes an obstacle to the consolidation of these “invisibles” in a collective commitment, insofar as it makes it difficult to develop strategies to adopt by employers, public authority, unions and the public in hopes of gaining recognition. The question of recognition, therefore, takes different shapes depending on the distance of the agents observed vis-à-vis journalistic institutionalized space. These belong to the centre (payrolled journalists), to the periphery (freelance copy editors), or to the fringe (SEOs, computer scientists, activists), as evidenced by the contributions to this issue.

Invisibility, when it is produced by strategic ignorance, contempt, exclusion or willful blindness becomes a method of border management of the journalistic field, a weapon of disqualification of practices deemed illegitimate or insignificant (like institutional journalism, tabloids, porn, weather reports, paparazzi...). This dimension of social visibility is central because it questions the very definition of journalism. In some cases, invisibility, when it is experienced as a lack of recognition, gives rise to different forms of struggle for recognition. The analysis of the relationship between media companies and freelancers, proposed here by Faiza Naït-Bouda, fits into this perspective. The latter are “invisibles” kept at the fringes of the former. Though they may have the status of journalist, and produce content, they are still not totally integrated into the organization. This relational inequity is the product of a

permanent tension between employer strategies characterized by the non-recognition (invisibility) of this category of employees, and that of freelancers attempting to acquire recognition (visibility) through the judiciary and through peers in the public arena (in light of their social utility).

The issue of invisibility (defined as lack of recognition) also touches the dialectic of conservatism and innovation. Several contributions to this issue focus on emerging practices (*youmag*, data journalism, the work of SEOs...), and highlight the struggle for the recognition of new ways of working, of defining the status of new actors, inherent in the conflicts arising from the abandonment of old practices. The analysis proposed by Pierre-Carl Langlais and Guillaume Heuguet about the process of the collective development of a manual on data journalism shows that, for proponents of this emerging practice, it is not only a question of stabilizing definitions, practices and conventions, but also an attempt to define a territory and to recognize the journalistic dimension and legitimacy of this activity.

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**INVISIBILITY AND THE ROLES OF ACTORS :  
A PLASTICITY OF MEANINGS**

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These emerging practices exist mainly in the domain of digital media. Because of their socio-technical characteristics, online media establish new dividing lines between the visible (that which is on the screen) and the invisible (technical and software backroom). There is also innovation in the status of companies and products concerned, which are under development or searching for viable editorial and business models. In these contexts, to function, individuals cannot depend on stable and routine distribution functions, skills and activities based on formalized principles of the division and coordination of labour. These situations encourage the emer-

gence of new forms of cooperation, especially among journalists themselves, and between journalists and socio-technical system professionals. Contributors to this issue provide several examples: SEOs discussed by Guillaume Sire; developers and archivists who work at *youmag*; and computer scientists, activists and academics who work on the practice and definition of data journalism. These new cooperative efforts explore coping strategies of actors facing, for example, the demands of productivity, the hair-trigger rendering of news, a lack of legitimacy, or the imperative of economic survival. These areas are ideal for analyzing practices and discourses under construction before they are formalized into managerial devices. The researcher can observe the development of skills and power relations, and the roles of actors in the professional activity before they set out principles of production of the order of the standardization of processes, outcomes or standards.

These types of collaboration are particularly prevalent in areas of digital production. Yet, they are not new. Historical research is there to prove it. In this issue, Viktor Chagas reminds us of this by highlighting a class of ancient, but rarely studied professionals: news vendors, who, although working in the shadows, played an important role at the time of military dictatorships by distributing banned newspapers and being part of the resistance alongside journalists.

The purpose of this issue is to explore the relationship between journalism and invisibility. The contributions, far from exhausting the subject, show that problematizing journalism from this angle opens new avenues of research, either by attracting our attention to neglected objects, or by making us see in a new light objects that our theories and methods once made familiar to us, but now deserve a fresh look.

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