

Journalism and Social Networking Sites

Innovation and Professional Transformation or Imposition of “Sociability”?

Introduction

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Ever since researchers began studying the professional practices of journalists, the use of digital networking tools has been the focus of much of their analysis. Indeed, whether it be the Minitel (Jouët, 1987) or the web in its infancy (Pélissier and Romain, 1998; Rebillard, 1999; Deuze, 1999; Boczkowski, 2002), these tools have not only played an important role in the news gathering process and in the professional socialization of journalists, but also in their relationship with the public and sources. Now a new family of web tools seems to be attracting the attention of observers: the social networking sites (SNS), whose two emblematic representatives are Facebook and Twitter. These tools, whether for the purpose of posting links, publication, distribution or archiving, drive today's newsroom transformations.

Beyond the role they now play in delivering the news (Yang and Leskovec, 2011), SNS also serve as tools in the news production process itself. Several studies in France (Mercier, 2012; Jeanne-Perrier, 2012; Pélissier and Diallo, 2013), Europe (Cision, 2012; European Commission, 2012) and the United States (Armstrong and Gao, 2010), conclude that journalists increasingly tend to integrate them into their daily work routines. Twitter is perceived more as a professional tool, whereas Facebook is used more for ordinary and personal interactions (Smyr-

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naios and Rieder, 2011). This divide is also reflected here: five of the eight articles which make up this issue deal with case studies on the uses of Twitter by journalists.

Journalists' use of SNS in their daily work is varied: keeping up-to-date, finding topic ideas, accessing sources, promoting their work, and communicating with readers and colleagues. If their level of penetration among journalists is high, differences remain, principally related to variables of age and seniority in the profession (the youngest tend to use them more and believe them to be more credible), but also in the type of media (journalists working for online media and major conglomerates are avid users).

It should also be emphasized that the overall evolution of contemporary journalism seems in accordance with the use of SNS (Rieder, Smyrniaios, 2012). The growing number of freelancers over the last several years has increased the number of journalists who depend directly on their personal reputation to find work (Pilmis, 2010). Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn are good ways for them to maintain a well-stocked contact list. They also serve to demonstrate their presumed professional competence (eg, reflected in the number of followers). The same trend also affects a population of self-employed professionals in the media sector like consultants, PR experts (often former journalists), and web and computer professionals (Christopherson, 2004). The success of these professionals depends directly on the visibility of their work and their person on the internet. This visibility requirement, enhanced by the intensive use of SNS, is now entrenched in most of traditional media which use them as tools for the training and development of "digital literacy skills" within the context of the restructuring taking place in media companies. What at first may have been a progressive appropriation of social platforms has become an *imposition*, a strong term chosen for the title of this issue: henceforth, to be a journalist one must be able to not only marshal, but also navigate, this panoply of applications and websites as well as their demands of sociability. The imperative to use SNS is now clearly formulated everywhere by the *media brands* themselves, who together deploy a discursive and semiotic lobby impossible to circumvent. The imperative, which is publicly deployed, is also acknowledged by media managers and executives. They see in the SNS means to support the economic and organizational changes of their businesses.

Having integrated these constraints, journalists invest the SNS with a focus that could be characterized, at least in part, as *strategic*. This focus is not explicit; it is mixed with other activities, including

one that aims to "connect" by building relationships through verbal jousting exchanges or the sharing of links, images, and sources. The notion of sociability therefore appears necessary to understand media practices at work within the frameworks imposed by websites that have made it their vocation to appear as "social" rather than wholly as media.

Indeed, acts of sociability (consisting of peer or public recognition, orchestrated by the rules of interaction allowed by the social networking sites' *apparatus*) were essential, starting with the adoption phase. This phase was one of intense production of accompanying discourses, largely produced by the journalists themselves, on the theme of innovation in professional practices. The study by Josiane Jouët and Rémy Rieffel, based on semi-structured interviews, shows how this labour of linking to "others," fed through the semiotic and technological blender of a "social network" brand, quickly became structured around conscious practices and active tactics of professional journalists. After a fairly short period of careful observations and games of trial and error, the profession integrated a set of standards on an international level. Once having met the sociability requirements made by media publishers and the brands themselves, the profession set out to establish an identity through the mobilization of dispersed media by having recourse to the use of portfolios of social network accounts and profiles set up in several SNS platforms simultaneously.

One of the defining characteristics of this sociability in the SNS apparatus is that it is immediately visible to all who are linked to the journalists' "profiles." This being the case, some journalists set out, in a discipline-specific manner, to incorporate in their daily output snippets of content transmitted over certain networks: Geneviève Chacon, Thierry Giasson and Colette Brin's article shows how journalists focus on following Quebec politicians in their reports on Twitter. The link to the public and to peers is no longer the principle objective, as we had originally envisaged in the call for publication of this issue. This aspect of the apparatus gives way to a practice oriented towards an editorial goal and a re-professionalized journalistic exercise. Banu Akdenizli's study also heads in this direction: the modes of expression of Turkish journalists using Twitter allow them to do their work by bypassing binding and fossilized official rules. At the same time, the tool can serve as a powerful lever for self-promotion.

Two other features particularly visible in the area of online news are echoed in the use of SNS by journalists. First, there is the rise of "desk" journalism, which is essentially based on the reprocessing of existing material rather than on-the-ground repor-

ting (Paterson and Domingo, 2008). In this context, SNS participate in the restatement process and the dissemination of unoriginal news content (Messner, Linke and Eford, 2011). On the other hand, they also allow journalists to explore distant social spheres which are *a priori* remote or impervious, such as those of social movements that shook Europe in recent years. Joan Linares and Laura Pérez show this trend by analyzing Catalan journalists during the Indignados protests of 2011.

Another development of journalism in line with the rise of SNS is the growing tasks related to accountability (Datchary, 2010). Though this is exercised primarily in the scope of news sites and spaces provided for this purpose (comments, blogs, etc.), it can also overflow and spill over spaces less or not at all institutionalized, like profiles and the personal pages of journalists. Managing the relationship with the public then becomes more complex and leads to the implementation of various strategies that can extend from the refusal to engage in dialogue to a full commitment. Eugenia Siapera and Ioanna Iliadi label these strategies “affective labor” in this issue; an emotional investment in the creation and maintenance of personal relationships with some of the public and sources, the practice of which becomes central to the daily activity of some journalists. In this context, the binding dimension of the “participatory” exercise is offset by a sense of taking part in the renewal of the profession and of acquiring professional expertise valued in the labour market.

Finally, the tendency of journalists to mix work and social life on SNS regularly generates tensions between, on the one hand, media managers concerned with the good image of their organizations and, on the other, journalists defending the principle of free expression online. If managerial injunctions are designed to narrow the use of SNS to the promotion of media organizations – as shown in the article by Frauke Zeller and Alfred Hermida in this issue, along with that of Diana Rivero Santamarina, Kolobika Meso Ayerdi and Ainara Larrondo Ureta on the local level – journalists for their part resist and attempt to negotiate individual spaces of freedom. Twitter and Facebook thus become new fields within which play out this historical power struggle over journalistic autonomy (Lemieux, 2010).

In the context of the broad mobilization of this apparatus, contributions selected for this issue, *Journalism and SNS*, did not explore the dimension of professional discourses (it appears that the term “social network” is not debated in the media and among professional). Nor did they investigate the imposed use of this technical panoply (applications, sites, third-party web analytics, syndicating tools,

etc.), which is deemed appropriate and accepted, to the point that manuals and posts on the networks themselves flourish, and according to which it would even be dangerous for a journalist not use them. Similarly, the theoretical and historical dimension of the study of forms of expressions on the SNS has not been addressed; the point of view of researchers being apparently that the dominant tools are Twitter and Facebook. What is central in this issue are the *uses* of SNS. These are widely described in the issue, drawn from concrete cases. They indeed show, as the intuition of the initial call for papers suggested, that branding expertise is growing in many professional sectors. The actors in this dissemination remain in the shadows: journalists seem to be the hawkers of practices which serve the industry.

Researchers therefore merely *measure* the effects of these impositions, which aim to stir the processes of change and the integration of social networks within reinvented and reorganized newsrooms. Journalists are then actors, both by being party to these discourses, and by being supportive and active as users of the panoply of networks; but they are also witnesses, and perforce sometimes solitary, of the disintegrating effects of an individualizing journalistic discourse.

It remains to be seen, therefore, what the news and media will gain from this: in what measure do SNS add value to news and professional practices, as claimed by those who provide both its promotion and dissemination? From an economic standpoint, do the social networks represent a last resort to attract new audiences, or are they simply a locus of news “pollination” and self-centred professional monitoring? If the introduction of sociability was greeted optimistically by the professional group at first, the secondary economic consequences explored in this issue demonstrates that it serves, above all, the SNS, which are less likely to preserve the contributory and “social” ambitions they promoted in the early days of their existence than, say, the journalists that make use of them.

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