

Questioning the Norms of Journalism Researchers

Introduction

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This special issue¹ focuses on a cross-sectional examination of the norms of journalism researchers. The papers gathered in the following pages attempt to advance methodological and interdisciplinary discussions examining or re-examining the norms, conscious and unconscious, which factor into the construction of the objects of research and their analysis. In a way, these papers also examine the ways in which discourse circulates between various social realms, including journalism, academia, literature and politics. To question some, if not all, of the norms shared by a social group that shape its modes of behavior and actions seems to us to be a productive undertaking. Norms are intrinsic to social dynamics and play a fundamental role in the acknowledgment and implementation of actions, and most notably here, in the teaching and research practices of journalism. These norms provide an interpretive framework that enables an understanding of the circumstances in which social actors are immersed and which guide their possible (or preferred) modes of action (Heritage, 1991; Menger, 2009). In this respect, norms are for journalism researchers as much an interpretive resource as a mode of action, without ever being clearly formulated, discussed, or put to the test—as if these norms were universal and transparent and never interfered in the ways of being and doing journalism research. And yet, these shared norms in a scientific community enable the building of consensus among researchers. Though it may not be possible to speak in terms of research

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paradigms in the case of journalism (as put forth by Thomas Khun), there does exist a certain amount of evidence as to how particular research objects are chosen and treated (for example, the importance of studies on innovation, on the transformation of journalism, and in particular on technological change), and certain methods adopted (such as the analysis of news production or the use of interviews). This evidence reflects not only the norms inherent in the scientific field, but also those of other social realms (the world of media itself, for example). The will to investigate them in this issue stems from four characteristics of the world of teaching and research in journalism: the specific profiles of researchers, the ways in which they are part of a process of institutionalization of journalism research in different national contexts, the relationship between journalism education and professional standards, and the very nature of journalism research.

DIVERSE PROFILES

From the outset of journalism research structuring, which has increased since the 1980s, two figures of teacher/researchers have contributed to the analysis of journalistic practices and identities. The first is embodied in the professional journalist-turned-teacher who may have joined academia after a relatively long career in media. Her change in career is sometimes the consequence of being attracted to teaching; of a desire to transmit professional knowledge. It can also be a choice reflecting a lack of success, disenchantment with the requirements of the job, or a way to fulfill a desire for more stable remuneration (by obtaining a university contract). It may also be a way of prolonging a personal and professional ideal; by teaching, the journalist revives memories, tries to share his experience and know-how, and orients and trains a new generation. Some have even chosen to return to studies and obtain a doctorate. Others have simply joined research groups and acculturated themselves to the research process by working collectively with academics. They have all contributed to a better understanding of the practical conditions of news production and the requirements of the trade. Nevertheless, being the product of a highly normative professional environment, these researchers have sometimes produced a very strong normative discourse, which has been subsequently adopted and has circulated in professional and academic circles. The second category consists of teacher/researchers who follow a more or less linear career path, most being products of the traditional academic curriculum: in information and communication sciences, history, political science, sociology, linguistics... Despite the differences in their theoretical and methodological

foundations, their adherence to different schools of thought and their varied intellectual persuasions, these researchers nevertheless often share an interpretative framework that translates into a normative vision of the role of science in society and the adoption of commonly held modes of action that form the basis for “quality” scientific research.

The two figures merge in several departments or schools of journalism. Nevertheless, more or less caricatured representations may prevail: of the journalism teacher from academia who might be accused of not knowing anything about the work environment, and of the professional who may be criticized for her lack of objectivity and critical reflection. These stereotypes still permeate the corridors of some university departments or schools of journalism and may influence how educational programs are established, incite debates in university departments and give rise to empirical research (Mellado, 2011) or to polemics as to what constitutes “ideal” journalism training (Cunningham, 2005; Delano, 2009). These stereotypes are not insignificant as they reflect the fact that the relationship between teaching structure and research always raises the same challenge: “It may be asked whether the professional dimension of journalism training led by the members of the team, and the close ties necessarily maintained with the media, do not invite a move away from a sociological approach seen as too critical, often extrinsic or at arm’s length, and sometimes hermetic to the understanding of the representations of the actors.” (Frisque, 2016)

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF JOURNALISM RESEARCH AND ITS NATIONAL CONTEXTS

The construction and circulation of norms also depend on how national contexts of instruction and research in journalism evolve. The efforts of professional, academic and political stakeholders to establish a research field in journalism have given rise to specific modalities for defining and even practicing research—though, at present time, the internationalization of research and the escalation of researcher mobility may be attenuating this process. The Brazilian case is emblematic of these efforts. The striving for a certain autonomy by researchers in journalism within the field of communication (by both individuals and research collectives since the 1990s) began as a historical movement in the field presenting itself as “the philosophy of Brazilian journalism” based on works published by founding theorists, some of whom, like Alceu de Amoroso Lima and Danton Jobim, were practicing journalists (Marques de Mello, 2004; 2009). Authors such as

Meditsch (2015) and Motta (2013) describe the process of establishing the first Brazilian instructional and research programs in journalism in the 1960s as an effort by intellectuals, journalists and academics engaged in the democratisation of Brazilian society (a vision opposed to the efforts of the military regime of 1964-1984 to create curricula in communications). In this archeological work into the field of research, researchers collaborate in the diffusion in the academic environment of a normative discourse which sees journalistic practice—together with teaching and research in journalism—as a function of democratization and a promoter of social change. A French counterpart study was conducted (Pélissier, 2008). It showed that after a slow phase of structuring, characterized as a time of incubation (referring to the work of Padioleau (1976)), research in journalism showed a “sudden acceleration in the production of knowledge,” during which the presence and the writings of Pierre Bourdieu brought focus to the debates and delineated the roles of researchers during the 1990s, before giving way to a more divergent period during which the work on journalism experienced a refocusing on scientific disciplines sometimes in isolation from each other (history, political science, information and communication sciences).

NORMS IN EDUCATION?

Researcher norms do not only relate to individual career paths (or specific national contexts, for that matter), but also affect the very nature of the relationship between education and professional standards. All teachers of journalism, whether they come from the professional or academic realms, are caught in a certain normative tension that constrains them, in the training of the students themselves, to reaffirm a set of norms—objectivity, sincerity, good practices, the ways of being a journalist and carrying out journalism—which does not necessarily agree with their own analysis of media and its practices. The teaching practice must reflect the ways of being and doing of the professional practice; it must be fed and be permeated by a relatively restrictive set of methods that can be presented as reproducible. And it is this reproducibility, this attempt at synching teaching with the actual conditions of practice, which sometimes founds a normative discourse. Sound basic techniques (the difference between journalistic genres, the ways of establishing one’s perspective; the “good” ways of titling, creating mock-ups, posing one’s voice, writing (Hellot and Malo, 2001)) are among the standards a teacher must transmit, without stifling students’ capacities to develop unique styles, views, and professional identities. And so emerge two fundamental challenges for both teachers and students: the first has to do

with the relationship between theory and practice, which has preoccupied the field of journalism education for a long time (Reese, 2004, Nolan, 2008); and the second relates to the permanent flux journalism training sectors experience or anticipate with respect to the evolution of the trades, practices and tools (Le Cam and Trédan, 2008).

NORMS AND JOURNALISM RESEARCH

In journalism research, norms are intertwined with all representations (scientific and non-scientific) produced following specific constraints and the possible or likely choices taken by the actor/researcher: 1) in the choice of research subjects considered legitimate from the perspective of a normative system; 2) in the definition and implementation of research methods and techniques; 3) in the adoption of theoretical or argumentative models deemed useful in the production of knowledge. In this way, the norms and representations relating to journalism that researchers adopt—whether practitioners or academics with no field experience—condition, shape and permeate the research. These choices articulate ways of conceiving journalism: in particular in recent years the importance of “big data” quantitative analyses, for example, and complex mappings, and the resolute defense of ethnographic-type field studies that stay as close as possible to the role players. These choices in methodology also reinforce the norms of researchers by reassuring them of the tenability of their own conceptions, and allow them to take part in fashionable trends or share methodological enthusiasm for certain ways of working. These conceptions of journalism permeate the body of research and often lead scientific work to prescribe in broad strokes what is and what is not journalism, and to attempt to bring the borders into question based on presuppositions or preconceptions that emphatically delimit the scope of their investigation.

This issue applies a cross-interdisciplinary approach in an attempt to examine the researcher/teacher relationship with systems of norms, which relate as much to the field of journalism as that of research, and which differ along generational lines and varied life and work experiences, all of which imply different ways of carrying out research in journalism. This issue’s authors explore the idea of the relationship between the norms of researchers and the construction and analysis of research objects, and discuss and deepen understanding on different points: by examining the nature of journalism from an epistemological point of view, which seeks to determine the fundamentals of a definition of journalism recognized by all (Gilles Gauthier); by highlighting the impact of academic debates on the trans-

formation of journalistic practices, most notably professional self-regulation mechanisms (Madalena Oliveira); by analyzing the movements of distancing (Gilles Bastin) or approximation/contamination (Sayonara Leal) of scientific production and its relation to journalism. These four texts try, in their distinct approaches, to position themselves in relation to their own norms as authors, or those of others. They only but introduce this study of the norms of

researchers in journalism, which would deserve so much more...

Helmut OBERMEIR
English translation

NOTES

¹ The idea for this issue grew out of the “Crossing Perspectives on the Methodology of Journalism Studies” segment of the Luso-Francophone conference, MEJOR, held in Florianópolis in May 2015.

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