

# The Editorial and Public Debate

## Introduction

*A word from the editors by François Demers*



This issue examines that unique journalistic genre inextricably linked to newspapers: the editorial. Long regarded as noble in the journalistic milieu and in the outside world, the editorial has lost much of its luster in recent decades. In the North American and European context its slide to the bottom of the spectrum of prestigious journalistic activities (below the column, the blog, television news and even feature programming) follows the downward curve of so-called traditional media, especially newspapers, as the media landscape around digital media and public debate is reorganized. In South America, the editorial is strongly linked to media companies' expressed right to voice their opinions on matters of political or economic interest. Its decline may be indicative of media companies' powerlessness to express discourse or opinion in the current context, like in other parts of the world. The editorial losing its sheen could, however, also be a consequence of the emergence of "journalism of communication" and of hypercompetition between the media and between media messages.

This issue was overseen by Gilles Gauthier, professor in the Department of Information and Communication at Laval University (Quebec). He was joined by Professors David Pritchard of the University of Wisconsin (US), Constantin Salavastru of the

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Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Romania and Ana Teresa Peixinho of the University of Coimbra (Portugal). In this special issue, they have gathered five analyses examining the editorial's role in public debate, both in the past, and in the present context of the ongoing media experience. They seek to examine what exactly comprises the editorial and its conditions of production; the impact of the editorial stance in the public realm and the evolution of this practice both synchronically (in North and South America and Europe) and diachronically.

David Dowling reminds us, for example, by drawing on historical figures such as the American Horace Greely, the feminist Margaret Fuller and the socialist Karl Marx, how the editorial freed itself at the beginning of the nineteenth century from the partisan press when it responded to the challenges of the emerging commercial press seeking to be "all things to all people" and reach new readers in the working class. To achieve this, the editorial began addressing themes other than politics; mainly the human condition of workers, soldiers and the poor. A window opened, by way of the pen of strong personalities, allowing more liberal, even revolutionary and feminist, positions. In short, the editorial responded to new expectations, which included reflecting and contributing to building the "climate of opinion" of the era.

Guerreiro Neto, for his part, draws attention to another function expected of the editorial: that of voicing the identity of the newspaper and reaffirming it in the historical continuity of its brand, and revalidating the "we" in the like-minded collective of employees, owners, readers and allies. From interviews with editorialists and the study of their exchanges of opinion in daily life, the author shows how the editorials of two Brazilian daily newspapers, *O Estado de São Paulo* and *Folha de São Paulo*, are at the center of a daily confirmation of a consensual vision of the world by offering a more or less coherent continuity in positions taken. *O Estado de São Paulo* presents itself as traditionalist, self-sufficient and as having strongly-held views, while *Folha de São Paulo* is modernist, transparent and non-delimited.

For their part, Kenneth Campbell and Ernest Wiggins draw on the classic distinction in the North American journalistic milieu between journalism that "informs" and the editorial that "influences" to analyze what they identify as a growing trend in American dailies; that of no longer endorsing a candidate in presidential elections [NDLR: the recent election in which several prestigious dailies took a stand against the candidate Donald Trump would thus be seen as bucking the trend]. Overall, they attribute this trend to the decline in newspaper read-

ership over the past thirty years in the US, and the consequent reluctance to displease partisan groups. But they also point out, within the context of the theoretical framework of "framing," how the rest of the newspaper remains dominated by perspectives and points of view which orient the discourse in the direction of influence desired by the media company.

Camila Mont'Alverne returns to the daily newspapers *Estado de São Paulo* and *Folha de São Paulo*, but this time to analyze their editorial coverage of the debate between the Brazilian House of Representatives and the government in 2001 on the Internet Bill of Rights (*Marco Civil da Internet*). Again, the analysis tool is "framing," which shows the two dailies, and their editorials, affirming that they are fulfilling their watchdog role. They support the bill while exposing its shortcomings and the problems it may cause, all in the name of defending public interest. Both also highlight the conflict between the House and the government of President Dilma Roussef, which serve as a prelude to the pitched battle that will lead to her dismissal by the Senate with the support of the country's mainstream media, including these two dailies.

Finally, Marie-Christine Lipani examines the case of the regional daily *Sud-Ouest*, which publishes seventeen editions in eight departments in France. Her analysis echoes in some ways that of David Dowling who studied a specific moment in history when the editorial loosened the leash that bound it to its political master, allowing it to get closer to new readers. In this case, the necessity to remain "all things to all people" leads *Sud-Ouest* to entrust its editorial to four journalists, facilitating the plurality of points of view by playing the role of "gatherer" of public discourse in the public space offered by the newspaper, while continuing to "inject conflict" by taking positions unpopular with some readers, advertisers, patrons or stakeholders in the public debate.

In conclusion, these five articles depict the trajectory of the editorial which initially defined itself clearly as an extension of the freedom of expression of the owner of a partisan media. In this context the editorial had a clear goal: to state a position in public debate. The deployment of the editorial in the commercial press meant it now had to help increase the readership beyond the supporters of the owners' opinions, and at the very least, not scare away readers. In the era of mass media—possibly in the context of a monopoly—the editorial is characterized by the tension between these two directives: to defend a divisive opinion and to potentially be heard by all. In an era of oligopolies, it is common for media to auto-neutralize its rhetorical power to contribute to controversy so as to displease no one. Today, as the

pendulum appears to swing the other way, will the rise of niche media and the inflated preoccupation with personal identity free the editorial from being “all things to all people” and once again allow it to affirm the brand and offer incisive opinion?

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*English translation*

