Journalism and Platforms: From Symbiosis to Dependency
Introduction

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I n an article published on March 23, 2020, *The New York Times* cited an internal Facebook report[1]; in the midst of the COVID19 crisis, Ranjan Subramanian, a data scientist at the Californian firm, addressed the "unprecedented" consumption of news articles related to the pandemic on Facebook. He explained in detail how Facebook assigns "ratings" calculated by algorithms to both users and sources of information. Among the former are "Power News Consumers" and "Power News Discussers," people who read and comment much more than the average user. News sites are ranked according to a rating called NEQ (news ecosystem quality). At the top of the ranking are large mainstream media organizations such as national newspapers and TV channels. Publishers considered unreliable, marginal or militant are relegated to the bottom of the ranking. In the same report, it is explicitly mentioned that, through its algorithms, Facebook encourages the most influential users to consult more highly rated sources in order to disseminate "credible" information about the pandemic. A consequence of this strategy is that poorly rated sources experience a significant decrease in the number of clicks received via Facebook.

This example, among others, demonstrates that we are now far removed from the time when Mark Zuckerberg could seriously assert that Facebook

is merely a neutral technical provider[2]. Indeed, the Internet has been the scene not so much of disintermediation that some of its founders were calling for in the mid-1990s, as of reintermediation. The historical players in the world of media have fallen in with press sites that were created online and new players in the distribution chain: search engines, social networking sites (SNS) and aggregators, sometimes referred to as infomediation platforms (Smyrnaios, Rebillard, 2019). These platforms reconfigure the production, distribution and promotion of cultural content in a profound and complex way, and in return are shaped by the multiple uses to which they are put (Duffy, Poell, Nieborg, 2019). Their dominance also generates a reaction from all sectors of the cultural industry "who are adapting to their new economic environment and implementing strategies to take advantage of (and profit from) [them]" (Bullich, Schmitt, 2019, p.2).

What the platforms have in common is that they "process" content without producing it. Their algorithms play a role that can be described as editorial, or meta-editorial, with respect to access to news. This is why, from the early 2000s, the function of these platforms was compared to that of the traditional gatekeepers (Machill et al., 2004; Diaz, 2008; Röhle, 2009) whose function was to select and classify information by establishing a hierarchy (Hindman et al., 2003). This had traditionally been the realm of journalists, who have lost influence in this area (McQuail, 2005; Carlson, 2007; Bruns, 2008). In reality, platforms do not replace journalists, but operate a complement; they are charged not with publishing information but with distributing and promoting it, that is to say, putting it center stage of a space where some things are "more public" than others (Cardon, 2010). It is indeed an infrastructure that organizes a form of an "architecture of visibility" (Bucher, 2018).

The role and legitimacy of journalists should be reexamined within this context. Indeed, in a space where their content production rubs shoulders with that of public relations and regular citizens and where the hierarchy they establish between the different types of news may be at odds with that generated by algorithms, journalists find themselves obliged to change their practices and working methods once they consider that their mission is not only to "write" (or "talk," "film," "photograph," etc.) but also "to write in order to be read" (Siméant, 1992, p. 40). The question arises as to whether it is possible to distinguish news produced by the press from the other kinds of content on the platforms. What is becoming of the credibility and visibility of news produced by journalists, and the profitability of the companies that employ them, in the context of a "click culture" (Anderson, 2009) and "platformization" (Helmond, 2015) where journalists are "increasingly forced to oscillate between industrial and market logic on the one hand and civic logic on the other; […] torn between the obligation to respect the imperatives of sales and audiences, and their concern to ensure the best possible autonomy of thought" (Rieffel, 2008, p. 103)?

More than ever, the role of platforms deserves to be studied, analyzed and even criticized, given that access to news sites is now mainly from mobile devices and this mode of consumption tends to benefit platforms, particularly SNSs. The latter are creating an increasing number of services dedicated to news and more precisely so-called native formats, such as Discover for Snapchat, Lives and Instant Articles for Facebook, Apple News and Accelerated Mobile Pages for Google, which are notable in that they generally do not redirect to the media site that produced the news. Moreover, the native formats on some SNSs such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter see their visibility increased by algorithms to the detriment of traditional formats (external video inserts or links to the media site). These exogenous constraints incite news producers to adopt formats invented with very different contexts in mind, such as the interpersonal communication of one's daily life, like Instagram's Stories, destined to disappear after a few hours (Vásquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, López-García, 2019). Platforms that once were intended to *bridge* web users and news producers are being replaced by platforms which *keep* users within their perimeter by offering them everything they are looking for.

Moreover, the algorithms that govern the selection and classification of news on these platforms are for the most part opaque. This poses a political problem since we cannot be certain that some platforms do not favor a particular camp, party or ideology. But it also poses an economic problem since these platforms may benefit from favoring a partner site without the user being able to verify that the conflict of interest has not given rise to abusive value capture (Rieder, Sire, 2014).

When we consider that Google, Facebook and Twitter alone comprised more than 85% of the traffic of online news sites in the US in 2019[3], and that these platforms are investing heavily in technologies aimed at producing and hosting news, we can see how the media's dependence on these players is high and their margin for negotiation is low. This "media platformization" could lead, as a report by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism

points out, to a migration of journalism away from the media and its full integration into the Internet industry, which would transform online press into a "platform press" (Bell and Owen, 2017). The new structures of online news production and consumption ecosystems reflect a strong dependence on platforms in terms of audience and a dilution of the authority and editorial and technical autonomy of the media (Rebillard, Smyrnaios, 2019).

Journalists' initial enthusiasm regarding the possible positive impact on media of online social media networks quickly turned into angst about an upcoming "Armageddon" that would "put an end to journalism as we know it"[4]. Indeed, the sociotechnical apparatus of platforms that positions itself between media and audiences now plays a major role in the construction of the editorial identity of media organizations and their economic models. It contributes to the evolution of journalistic practices. It also has a significant impact on the way journalists view their readers and the territories covered, especially at the local level (Bousquet, Marty, Smyrnaios, 2015). These new representations of the readership, which are linked to the platforms' systems, are based on the exponential growth of metrics and audience analytics (Lamot, Paulussen, 2019). This quantification is encouraged by the platforms, even though it is based on a postulate of equivalence between the data and the actual reading of the article or the conversion of the accidental reader into a regular reader, a postulate that has been refuted by journalism research (Zamith, 2018).

Despite the growing importance of the phenomenon since the mid-2000s, little empirical research and few longitudinal studies were carried out on this increased media dependence on platforms until 2015, apart from a few case studies and analyses (Águila-Obra et al., 2007; Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Smyrnaios, Rebillard, 2009; Rebillard, Smyrnaios, 2010; Siapera, 2013). Since then, in response to calls to refocus the research agenda in journalism and media studies on socio-technical influences (Lewis and Westlund, 2015) with an emphasis on algorithmic systems (Napoli, 2014), a wave of empirical studies on this subject has followed (Tambini, Labo, 2016; Nechushtai, 2017; Nielsen, Ganter, 2017; Tandoc, Maitra, 2018; Marty, Pignard-Cheynel, Sebbah, 2016). Researchers have also examined the social and legal responsibility of the engineers who design infomediation platforms with regard to the news presented on them (Grimmelmann, 2014), and the possible conflicts of interest that could generate "incentives to bias."

This sudden emphasis on "the importance of studying not only journalists, but also other actors including managers, technologists, audiences, and outside entities like platform companies when researching change in news production" (Kalogeropoulos, Nielsen, 2018, p. 16) is welcome. This is also the goal we pursue in this issue.

Translation: Helmut Obermeir

NOTES

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/technology/coronavirus-facebook-news.html

[2] https://qz.com/770743/zuckerberg-says-facebook-will-never-be-a-media-company-despite-controlling-the-worlds-media/

[3] Source : https://www.parse.ly/resources/data-studies/referrer-dashboard

[4] https://medium.com/tow-center/the-end-of-the-news-as-we-know-it-how-facebook-swallowed-journalism-60344fa50962

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