

Journalists and public problems

Introduction

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This edition resulted from a growing number of questions surrounding the construction of social problems. This can be more simply explained by three dynamics.

The first dynamic refers to the unprecedented place occupied by issues which historically have either been concealed or received very little visibility. This new visibility is evident with the #metoo movement and with a number of books authored by victims of sexual abuse (Springora, 2020; Abitbol, 2021; Kouchner, 2021) that debate the issue of sexual consent in France. Many cases of sexual harassment in Brazil, brought to light through media investigations and social pressure (resulting in dismissals and imprisonment of the culprits), also illustrate this dynamic. Five years of #moiAussi (Pineda, 2022) in Quebec has allowed for a review, albeit mitigated, of the consequences of the problem, especially in the cultural industry sector. There are also everyday occurrences of racism that, similar to the “black lives matter” movement, have managed to garner the attention of the Brazilian media. Racial discrimination and police brutality against certain races (which include indigenous women and black men) in Quebec and, more recently, the Canadian immigration authorities’ bias against French-speaking African citizens have all been brought to the public’s attention by journalists from the public sector¹. The story of Joyce Echaquan, an Atikamekw woman who recorded a Facebook live video that showed her being insulted by healthcare

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workers at a hospital in Quebec, has forced the medical authorities to take a series of measures², and has even resulted in the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, to recognize the existence of systemic racism. We also have the visibility and growing number of debates on global warming, on pandemics, and on the hypothesis that there is a shortage of basic necessities, something that had previously been considered unimaginable.

Since many of these issues relate to scientific data and expertise, the second dynamic concerns the increasing role of scholars and experts as whistleblowers. The work done by the GIEC (French acronym for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) is a relevant example. The researchers - often supported by social movements - are also important. They have placed issues such as the risks of uncontrolled use of a number of molecules from chemical industries (Boullier, 2019) and the effects of pesticides on public health on the agenda. The media coverage of the Robert case in Quebec (the agronomist working for the Ministry of Agriculture who was fired after denouncing the influence of the pesticide and fertilizer lobby on research projects) not only led to the creation of a parliamentary commission on pesticides in 2019³, but also the adoption of a code of ethics and deontology by the Quebec Order of Agronomists and the revision of the law that protects whistleblowers.

What makes the growing visibility of these issues even more significant for the scope of this journal is the third dynamic, which has to do with various forms of journalism that value long-term investigations (Melo, 2020), critical expertise (Horel, 2015), and sometimes direct cooperation with scientists. These scientists are often used as sources by journalists and can legitimize the discourse of the “unseen” and their living conditions (Thiéblemont-Dollet, 2003). International groups of investigative journalists have used *big data* to show how multinational corporations and billionaires evade their tax obligations. *Bretagne Splann!* (<https://splann.org/>), an investigative media group funded by Internet users, has developed a kind of data journalism that accurately maps pollution intensities caused by industrial agriculture.

The journalists who draw attention to these issues also carry out immersive investigations that report the reality of work in French (Le Guilcher, 2017) or American (Schlosser, 2001) slaughterhouses and in heavy agricultural production areas (Conover, 1987; Mallet, 2017). In Quebec, public sector journalists have called on doctors who witness exceptionally high cases of cancer which they say are associated with mining companies. They have created a public space in which employers, employees, unions, and representatives from local administration and government

can debate the various processes and the need to put an end to the flexibility that the province of Quebec has allowed over the years⁴. Journalists have drawn the public’s attention to the effects this kind of work has on the health of employees and consumers, on the environment, and in creating inequalities. Although it may appear less creative, mediation by journalists is no less important. One can imagine that if there were no constant flow of interviews, investigations, and articles being published in the media, issues like sexual consent and harassment would never have had the impact that it does.

But is the term “social issues” in this paper really so transparent? Is invoking its “construction” not simply semantics or a useless label of epistemological radicalism? At the risk of relinquishing the prestige of heretical positions, it must be possible to be more consensual. Out of the almost infinite amount of “facts” or objects of discussion that exist within a society, not all of them reach the same status of information and social debate to become a “headline” in television programs, magazines, and daily newspapers. Facts such as the erosion of coastal areas, the presence of glyphosate residues in food products or tap water, or the cost of fuel are ignored. These facts can generate damage and create problems and anger. But they only gain public visibility and become an object of debate or public policy if the actors who fight for them (activists, journalists, academics, politicians) address said facts and place them into the public space.

Many professionals, including those who care for the elderly in nursing homes, realized that these institutions were not all promising. It took a unique sensitivity which came about through the Covid-19 confinement, and especially the well-argued denunciation of abuse and mistreatment in an investigative journalism book (Castanet, 2022), for a social fact to become the object of media attention in France. Shortly thereafter this object became a scandal and was the subject of a parliamentary investigation. The scandal was about teenagers who wore “*crop tops*” (t-shirts which leave the navel exposed), headbands, or very long skirts to school. They could simply be seen as youths following fashions or trends, but the Minister of National Education⁵ warned the public about how “non-republican” these crop tops were. If the minister’s successor had not invented the special category of “religious use of symbols”⁶ then the frequent use of headbands would have been seen as an indicator of hidden Islamic devotion, or maybe even Islamic tropisms in the future.

Working with social problems is not about focusing on found objects, on “already available” documents which are immediately identifiable by any person with reason and good will. It is about observing a specific work which enables us to “capture” them,

which elevates certain social relations or products to the status of a problem amidst an immense number of productions, situations and interactions that could be considered revolting, shocking, or at least debatable. It is one of the most powerful unifying points of an immense and rich scientific literature, largely from the USA, with contributions from Gusfield (1963), Spector and Kitsuse (1977), Best (2008), and the *Social Problems* magazine. A practical and didactic way of explaining this “work” of social problems could be to break it down into five operations, not necessarily in any chronological order (Neveu, 2020). A problem is identified when an actor engaged in a cause defines a situation as problematic which then requires discussion and corrective or preventive action. The problem is “framed”, which means its limits and challenges are defined. It is then condensed into a narrative that includes diagnosing the harm, identifying the origins (and perhaps the culprits), and assessing which measures should be taken. The issue is then justified, that is, its particular seriousness and importance is discussed and defined as problematic if confronted with what is called a “competition of victims”. The issue still has to be popularized by making it known and visible, giving it access to the public space which is a fundamental part of communication mediums. Finally, if all or part of these operations are carried out without interruption, the issue has a chance to become public policy and to receive some kind of response through budgets, regulations, and the institution of a body of agents.

We would like to highlight two dimensions, without delving too deeply into explaining these operations. The first dimension is the recognition that journalists and the media are closely linked to social problems. This is because the defense of freedom of information is itself a recurring social problem, as is the protection of journalistic sources and, more recently, the protection of journalists against harassment or the unprecedented violent and misogynistic discourse heard in the current democratic period.

The second dimension – which is also, as we shall see, the source of a practical difficulty for us – concerns the enormous disciplinary area of analyzing social problems. Ideally, this dimension would involve mobilizing a sociology of journalism and the media, a sociology of social movements that often defend a particular issue, and more broadly, a sociology of intellectuals and interventions in the public space (Eyal & Bucholz, 2010) and their institutions. Offering a sociology of social problems still means worrying a little about the functioning and instruments of public policies: where and how are budgets and regulations decided? Is “*venue shopping*” an option, which involves finding the decision setting that is most open (Brussels instead of Paris or Madrid, the environment commission from the Chamber of Deputies and not from

agriculture)? The list goes on to include the work of pressure groups (often less visible but essential), the role of international organizations, the phenomena of transnationalization by which social facts promote problems, discussion forums, the interpretive categories⁷ decision-making settings established in a supra-national dimension.

As per Bachelard’s famous quote that “*the real is never what one could believe, but it is always what one should have thought*”, we did not believe that the literature on “*social problems*” was familiar to and accessed by the entire community of media and journalism researchers. It should at least be included into general scientific culture, even if that inclusion comes in the form of keywords and authors identified and mobilized. We should have thought more realistically about the persistent power of academic boundaries. We would have then been less surprised – maybe even disappointed – to receive a few proposals that clearly mobilized the terminology of the sociology of social problems and the operations that it seeks to integrate. A non-marginal part of respondents seem to have interpreted it as an invitation to research within the tradition of “content analysis” on how various segments of the media covered (or did not) an important social issue. Studies focusing on content, or that associate that content with “frames”, are certainly interesting and fruitful, but the political sociology of social problems goes beyond content; it is about the conditions under which it is produced and the impacts it has. The meaning of a text or a media message cannot be exhausted in its content and its rhetoric. One must try to relate it to a space and a temporality of production, to the uses and modes of reception (Bourdieu, 1982). Sticking just to the texts is akin to using a fishing net whose meshes allow for very big fish to pass through: the approach and activities of sources, the organization of work in newsrooms, the departure from formal practices and their relationship to social authorities, the nature of framings that are not employed or are inadmissible, the reactions of audiences and the public, and the possible impact of narratives in public policies. Putting this in terms of the sociology of social problems, some proposals only partially framed the problem as they did not address the actors engaged in it. Other proposals sought to legitimize either the cause or the status of these actors without placing their object within an approach that minimally understands the content and its production conditions. This means that the construction - or the work - of the social problem remains invisible.

What can we conclude from this distance between a call and its answers? The fact that we do not fully appreciate the effective dissemination of the sociology of public affairs which, although currently received outside the English-speaking world, does not necessarily belong to a broadly shared intellectual field. Obser-

vation also means verifying the constant boundaries and gaps in the field. No one can reasonably expect in a world where the social sciences is fragmented into sub disciplines and editorial incontinence⁸ that every researcher will master all its disciplines. It is clear however that, although it has gotten rid of a large part of the distrust and even hostility surrounding it, the great division between a literary-humanities focus (centered on the sciences of the text) and a social sciences focus (centered more on sociology and history) undoubtedly persists and resists. This division is not surprising given the institutional logic of the academic world: we get jobs and then we are mostly recognized by the discipline we work in. The persistence of this opposition is scientifically deplorable. It is “as if” two bodies of knowledge were established without much mutual contact. On the one hand, we have a science of messages and narratives where the meaning of words is in the words, while on the other hand we have one or more sciences that account for the way these messages are produced and received and what their social effects are without worrying too much about textual materiality, kind of like a black box or a playing field for the literate. Whatever does not go as expected should be seen as motivation as one of the objectives of this journal is to build bridges and connections between these two knowledge bases, these two approaches to journalistic activity. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to relativize this opposition by noting (these are the contributions that went into this edition) that even though we are not specialists in the construction of social problems, in practice we can combine some of their concerns by using a content approach that “sociologizes” them. This is what Sandra Nodari outlines, starting with the ways in which International Women’s Day is covered by Brazilian and Portuguese television and then moving towards the identification of visible sources and interlocutors. This is also what Marta Maia and Dayane Barretos do when they start with a reflection on journalistic genres (the witness) to reach questions about their reception, their ability to lead to generalizations. These two individuals are feminist researchers and are therefore used to the interdisciplinarity and the epistemological break. The latter, combined with sensitivity to epistemic injustice via the *standpoint theory*, favors the sociological perspective since, as everyone now knows, private is political.

The texts by Nolwenn Salmon and Baptiste Schummer explore the tension between key components of journalistic identity and respectability and what an *a fortiori* or militant position is. Although the political contexts are different (China for some, France for others), both address environment journalists. Due to the risk of repression or the desire to conform to the ideal of professionalism (Zhuanyehua) based on American journalism, young Chinese journalists who debate environmental issues do not

want to be seen as being engaged or militant, which paradoxically keeps them in a reflective practice and, therefore, critical and committed to official discourses, as Salmon clearly shows. On the French side, Schummer exposes the succession of frameworks that led to the construction of glyphosate as a social problem by illustrating a series of wars being waged (ideological, cultural) between journalists who question the dangers of glyphosate and journalists who stress it is harmless. We are reminded of Padioleau’s theory (1976) of the rhetoric of critical expertise. It combines rigorous investigative work, an objective approach addressing numbers and data, and in-depth knowledge of the social universe that the journalist reports on, which involves both information-gathering procedures and action strategies based on professional representations. It allows for the affirmation of points of view which are not based on an *a priori* ideology or an adherence to a group, but on the strength of field investigation. This is, in many respects, the position of journalists in France who warn of the dangers of pesticides or chemical molecules that are expeditiously put into circulation. Accused by other journalists of being activists, these professionals are simply concerned with going beyond what “regulating” science says, quite different from the places where knowledge advances (Demortain, 2013), where a broader palette and demanding research and experience allows us to better understand all the effects of a drug. If they seem to take sides by acting as whistleblowers, isn’t it because one of the functions of objectivity is to choose the right side in the face of facts? One could also argue that one of the functions of critical expertise is to take sides in the face of different modes of interaction on the streets (since situations are plural, characterized by immediacy, intensity of events, sensitivity of issues, personal involvement), thus consolidating the professional competence of journalists. When dealing with the way the media cover the news, William Gamson (1992) emphasized the power of a double structural bias that inhibits journalistic expression. Except in the rare case where there is almost universal disapproval, journalists can hardly use “injustice frames” or narratives that describe situations as unacceptable or unfair based on an explicit view of fair and unfair. Nor can they easily employ “action frames” or narratives that describe the social relationships that can or should be modified by collective action. Asked about certain positions that are considered more political than sociological, Bourdieu mocked the university students’ fears of having their impeccable “little respectabilities” tarnished and dishonored, emphasizing instead the “duty of intervention” for those who are aware of things that can cause harm or suffering to their contemporaries, or who can avoid them by collective action. Should we extend this responsibility to journalism? Some of the major daily newspapers

have been doing this for some time with regard to environmental coverage, like *The Guardian* in 2019 (*Guardian Climate pledge*) which refers to the need to raise facts and causes on certain issues and assume the role of a professional committed to a cause.

Each reader will appropriate the articles in this issue according to their interests, curiosities and theoretical inclinations. We will highlight two connections between the contributions.

The first connection corresponds to one of our calls for papers. Yes, journalists can be promoters of social problems. The texts by Sandra Nodari and Marta Maia and Dayane Barretos all address journalism. Nodari addresses it indirectly and Maia and Barretos address it alternatively, but they all share an interest in identifying and legitimizing those who are engaged in a particular cause, namely women and their essential role in identifying subsequent problems.

Nodari clearly shows that the absence of female sources in Brazilian television news corresponds with the invisibility of female problems. This is different from Portuguese television news, which gives a voice to sources/people engaged in their country's problems, and as a result, recognizes the existence of female problems (violence, inequality, etc.). In her text, she makes it very clear how important the relationships between journalists and their sources are for elaborating a "social problem". There are a number of problems with female voices going unheard: it prevents them from being placed in dialogue with other women, especially on a "special" date (March 8); it also hinders their ability to reformulate or question certain media frameworks on women's issues in which they could be consulted as "experts" on, or even issues where they could materialize the "problem" from a woman's perspective..

Apart from the "harmless" choice, when journalists make their interlocutors speak they are "framing" them, which shows that their interdependent relationship with the sources is structural⁹. The text is even more relevant for this dossier as it allows us to think of media production as a collective construction and therefore shows that it is also possible to think about (eventual) deviations from the framework of the "problem", mainly because we can currently observe a "sophistication" of militant feminist discourse.

The text by Maia and Barretos emphasizes the systemic character of violence against women in Brazil, a generalization that must be placed in the great battle of ideas which began at the end of the old bipolar world, but also situated in the colonial context. Their text deals with testimony, which embodies situations, trajectories, and experiences of violence that come out

of the vague or abstract. It is not a simple exercise, it must avoid *pathos* in order to avoid singularizing or stigmatizing the life situation. But one can apply what Christophe Traini (2009) calls a sensitization device: a tool for mobilizing emotions that leads towards the rational, it helps take a shocking event and explain the social relations that are behind it. Beyond the journalistic genre, we can also understand the testimony as an update – and a struggle for recognition – of the experience as a source of scientific knowledge for feminist research in academia, an epistemic struggle that has been going on for several years. What Maia and Barretos' contribution illustrates is a more militant record, one that is more linked to alternative media (for example, *Amazônia Real*, *Agência Eco Nordeste*, *Portal Catarinas* and *Revista AzMina*) and focuses on the dissemination of initiatives or disasters in civil society. The militant dimension of the action is more explicit here with the will to mobilize a larger, more assured public and the rhetorical strategies which are used to obtain a plurality of sources which represent different actors mobilized for a cause. Official data are not central in these narratives and there is an emphasis placed on the different power relations in women's lives, such as conditions of poverty or even religiosity.

The contributions of this issue are also an invitation to return to the issue of writing strategies of engagement/distancing, which corresponds to the second connection between the texts. Marta Maia and Dayane Barretos' article on the power of testimony as a resource that can enable awareness by letting voices be heard is a powerful illustration of this. It is as if the testimony, once placed in a journalistic narrative, shapes/conforms journalism into a unique register because it is far from the "hegemonic" and ethical one; it is committed to searching for the complexity and contradictions of human experiences of women, and does not try to establish a single "truth". The work of a group of media outlets (mentioned above) that seeks to geographically cover a "social problem" reinforces this argument.

Nodari invites us to question the inseparability between investigative practices, adopting certain sources, and the event as shaped by journalistic coverage (Silva et al., 2020). Journalistic objectivity can be about distancing and shielding the journalist from militant engagement, but it also gives journalists the ability to base their writing on factual summaries and official statements, and not as a protagonist who challenges the entire spectrum of social causes that affect society. This mostly occurs with "seated journalism" (computers and cell phones) and is less frequent with street journalism.

But isn't the position of those who defend a cause the same position adopted by the Chinese journalists

that Nolwenn Salmon presents to us and who will bring up a whole series of problems and scandals involving the environmental damage that occurs in their country? Doesn't this also apply to the French journalists studied by Baptiste Schummer who warn about the dangers of glyphosate? In the words of Albert Londres, if these journalists place "the blame on the wounded" then they are unwilling to call themselves militants.

In summary, using the sociology of social problems is worth defending, but not for researchers to work in a discipline that is not their own and distance them from other types of knowledge. It is worth defending because even if it is only addressed and not furthered,

it offers disciplinary connection tools of rare interest, between the "internal" analysis of discourses and narratives and the elucidation of the "external" social logics that shape them, avoiding blindness and ignorance born of confinement in disciplines of social sciences.

Translation: Lee Sharp

NOTES

^{1.} Romain Shué (2021). Retrieved from: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1843320/immigration-refus-etudiants-africains-francophones-trudeau-discrimination>

^{2.} Catherine Lévesque (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/politique/2020-09-30/mort-de-joyce-echiquan/la-pire-forme-de-racisme-denonce-trudeau.php>

^{3.} Patrice Bergeron (2019). Retrieved from: <https://lactualite.com/actualites/pesticides-la-commission-parlementaire-est-sur-les-rails/>

^{4.} Jean-Marc Belzile. (2022). Retrieved from: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1885025/cancer-arsenic-nickel-abitibi>

^{5.} Jean-Michel Blanquer, interview with RTL radio, September 21, 2020.

^{6.} Pap Ndiaye, interview with *Le Monde* newspaper, October 14, 2022, p.12.

^{7.} One example is the « sex-worker » category, which takes the stigmatized character of the « prostitute » from New York to Paris via Montreal (Simonin, 2016).

^{8.} In 2021, the two main English-language academic journals dedicated entirely to journalism had published 2,892 pages of articles in eleven issues (*Journalism*) and 1,449 pages in twelve issues (*Journalism Studies*), respectively. This means that reading what the members of your academic subfield write is a full-time job in itself, and does not make disciplinary openness any easier.

^{9.} Ringoot Roselyne, Ruellan Denis, « Pairs, sources et publics du journalisme », dans : Olivesi S. (dir.), *Sciences de l'information et de la communication. Objets, savoirs, discipline*, Grenoble, PUG.

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