

The fights of journalism

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It may be time for journalists to acknowledge that they write from a set of values, not simply from a disinterested effort at truth”, writes sociologist of journalism Michael Schudson (2019, p.21) in an article that revisits the historical roots of public distrust in journalists. The issue of trust in journalists is notably marked by criticisms and attacks on their professional practices and perceived political and social commitments, echoing the numerous battles journalists have historically engaged in. These battles encompass the fight for press freedom and independence, access to information, source protection, environmental and climate crises, human rights (with a focus on women and minorities), the exposure of economic and financial scandals, the humanization of war journalism and, more recently, accurate reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In recent years, three journalists’ testimonies have garnered particular attention for their emphasis on a journalistic identity rooted in these professional struggles, urging society to better comprehend and defend their role. Underlying these struggles is the recurring theme of objectivity and neutrality, ultimately contributing to the distancing of journalists from their audience.

In the first article, “Defending Journalism in a World Dominated by Lies”¹, Mexican journalist Agust n del Castillo champions the traditional thesis of journalists as a counter-power. He asserts, “Journalism is a human right (...) a legitimate profession (...), a

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cornerstone of our democratic systems.” Del Castillo portrays journalism as a social practice confronting significant challenges in fulfilling its mission. Among these challenges is the “crisis of credibility of the media and journalists in the face of the emergence of new discourses and information options” that attempt to place “their agenda and their version of reality” above verifiable facts. This underscores one of the most critical battles fought by journalists and the media over the past decade: the fight against fake news (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024).

The issue of public trust in journalists is also central to an article published in 2022 by Sharon Moshavi, former senior reporter and foreign correspondent, and current president of the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ). In her article, titled “Trust Me, I’m a Journalist”², Moshavi outlines the obstacles and challenges that complicate the profession of journalism today. She references the Edelman Trust Barometer 2021, which indicates that “trust in traditional news media is at a record low.” Moshavi concludes that journalists are increasingly perceived as less “independent voices,” with misinformation often competing with facts. She highlights that “some “bad actors” are actively targeting journalists’ credibility— and too often succeeding, thanks to the enabling environment of today’s social media ecosystem.” She specifically cites the case of journalist Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 2021, who has been subjected to violent online attacks aimed at discrediting her and her work³.

Finally, Rosamund Urwin, media editor at The Sunday Times and the journalist behind the revelations of comedian and actor Russell Brand’s accusations of rape, sexual assault, and psychological abuse in 2023, reflects on six years of #MeToo coverage during a seminar organized by the Reuters Institute⁴. She identifies four key takeaways for journalists covering such issues: approach victims with care and empathy, recognize one’s own limitations as a journalist, be cautious of trolls, and move beyond the simplistic “he said, she said” narrative. Urwin emphasizes the substantial challenges journalists encounter when investigating and reporting on gender-based and sexual violence, as well as the backlash they may face. Her presentation underscores the dedication of journalists covering #MeToo cases and their collaborative efforts with civil society activists to bring these issues to light, despite potential career repercussions.

The struggles faced by journalists can be categorized into two types: internal and external to the profession. Internally, these struggles involve the defense of press freedom, the independence of journalists as a professional group (Ruellan, 2011), and the fight for their autonomy. Externally, they encompass the mediation of political and social struggles, the construction

and agenda-setting of public issues (Aubin, Neveu & de Souza Paes, 2022), and even the co-production of protest events with activists (Cervera-Marzal, 2015). A substantial body of literature has developed on the topic of media influence on social movements, ranging from strong dependence (Champagne, 1984) to autonomy (Obershall, 1993), as well as the independence of new alternative and activist media, particularly feminist media (Ferron, 2016; Fagundes-Ausani, 2023).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMITMENT-FREE JOURNALISM

Journalists’ fights, whether internal or external, invariably involve a degree of commitment, be it to their profession or to a political or social cause. Despite this, commitment remains a cumbersome identity characteristic for many journalists, often regarded as taboo. Many professionals shy away from explicit commitment, adhering instead to an image of excellence shaped by the myths and standards of journalism. Academic literature on journalism studies has extensively explored these standards and values, particularly focusing on objectivity and independence (Cornu & Ruellan, 1993; Gauthier, 1991, 2004; Tuchman, 1972). The archetype of “commitment-free” journalists (“*désengagé*”, Lévêque & Ruellan, 2010), who adopt the Anglo-Saxon model of fact-based journalism (Schudson, 1978) as their paradigm, has seemingly established itself as a professional ideal. This development has relegated to a secondary position a form of journalism historically identified as French, which is more opinion-based (Ferenczi, 1993). In the United States, notions of political neutrality, impartiality, and even objectivity only emerged with the professionalization of journalism in the early twentieth century (Schudson, 2001). In Brazil, the adoption of the North American journalism model began in the 1950s, but it took another thirty years for this process of distancing from intellectual commitment to take full effect. The significance of journalistic struggles for democratic freedoms became particularly prominent in the following two decades (Fico, 2010), driven by “the will of the generations of the 1960s and 1970s to lead the social transformations they advocated” (Kucinsky, 2003, p. 5).

This real and constructed opposition between neutral journalism— independent of any power and focused on reporting raw facts— and political, committed journalism — which participates in civic life and provides citizens with the tools to interpret democratic issues (Lemieux, 1992) —, underscores the ongoing debate about journalists’ commitment (or lack thereof). The ambivalence of journalistic commitment manifests in the tensions between engagement and detachment, or as Cyril Lemieux describes, between

the two contradictory imperatives of public grammar (representing detachment) and private grammar (representing commitment) (Lemieux, 2009).

Sandrine Lévêque shows that commitment is a concept extensively studied by political science researchers, yet its definition remains rather vague (2016, p. 46). From the perspectives of politics and activism, commitment represents an individual's long-term investment in a political organization or social movement to defend particular ideas or causes. In journalism, commitment is understood in terms of the opposition and paradox between the roles of magister and mirror. This commitment exists within a broader context, marked by a tension between two poles: journalists operate both "at a distance" and "in contact" with sources and audiences (Lévrier, 2016). Commitment in journalism is not without purpose; it serves as a resource that enables journalists to fulfill themselves. Prior to entering journalism, many individuals often engage in political, associative, or trade union activities. A complete break from these commitments upon entering journalism would be more surprising (Lévêque, 2000). As Max Weber (1919; 2003) noted, getting involved means taking sides, assuming a viewpoint without obscuring inconvenient facts, and thus waging a battle.

Howard Becker, in an article dedicated to defining and discussing the concept of commitment, highlights the numerous meanings associated with engagement. He defines it as "a descriptive concept to emphasize a form of action characteristic of specific groups or individuals [...], an independent variable to account for certain types of behavior" (Becker, 1960, p. 1). Studying commitment allows for an examination of both individual attachment to coherent activity trajectories and the collective dimension of commitment to a cause or struggle (Becker, 2006). The notion of commitment is thus useful for explaining the coherence of behaviors, considering factors such as duration or involvement in a specific time period, and a common goal behind an apparent diversity of activities. Commitment can then be regarded as coherent individual or collective behavior, in relation to societal sanction and control, which may or may not lead to combat. Etienne Quingnon eloquently captures the essence of journalistic commitment by stating, "Commitment thus means choice, a willingness to intervene in the public space, to give voice to one's share of the truth, to shake consciences if need be and thus participate in history in the making, in the bubbling of the social cauldron" (Quingnon, 2015) in an article dedicated to Albert Camus as a journalist.

MULTIPLE FIGHTS

Commitment and fights in journalism can manifest in various forms: advocating for workers' rights, whether salaried, independent, or freelance; champi-

oning the causes of women journalists (Damian-Gillard et al., 2021); or representing minority groups (T.L. Jackson, 2022). The 2010s witnessed the emergence and development of new online media outlets with explicitly feminist discourses, challenging traditional press and so-called women's media (Olivesi, 2017). In addition to gender issues, journalists also commit to social issues (Lévêque, 2000), ecological concerns (Comby, 2009), and European matters (Tixier, 2023), often within specialized media or specific sections of the traditional press, particularly online.

This special issue, "Journalism, a Profession of Struggles," delves into the historical and contemporary battles fought by journalists, newsrooms, and professional groups to defend the integrity of journalism. It explores their efforts to uphold the identities, roles, practices, autonomy, prerogatives, territories, and the rights and interests of journalism workers. Additionally, it highlights the political and social battles journalists engage in, portraying them as cause entrepreneurs (Cobb & Elder, 1972) or moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963) who set agendas and frame public issues, often in collaboration with NGOs or activists.

Several key questions are examined: What motivates these struggles? What are the stakes? Who are the key players involved? How are these battles conducted? What are the outcomes, and how can setbacks be overcome? Analyzing these struggles enhances our understanding of how journalistic professional identities are constructed and deployed. It sheds light on the relationships between various actors within journalism and their interactions with other spheres and worlds (Langoné et al., 2018). Furthermore, it provides an analysis of the evolving power, role, and place of professional discourse in journalism and society. Professional struggles within journalism include defending one's editorial staff (Dupuy, 2016), asserting one's place, prerogatives, and power internally, advocating for changes in practices, and upholding ethical standards (Ferrucci and Kuhn, 2022). Journalists also mobilize to protect themselves against external attacks on their work or media organizations (Gonzalez, 2021). These diverse struggles are embodied in various forms, including structured, informal, and sometimes temporary collectives (Dupuy, 2016).

The articles in this volume focus on organizational and professional issues, showcasing the struggles of journalists and various professional groups or subgroups to defend journalism both internally and publicly. They explore different forms of combativeness and commitment among journalists, illustrating contemporary journalistic struggles across diverse contexts. These struggles include battling for access to information, government transparency, source protection, and better working conditions, as well as

fighting against discrimination and inequality. Journalists face new challenges due to the rise of disinformation practices promoted by powerful actors and transformations in their production processes, roles, and relationships with audiences. These changes significantly impact their identities, fields of action, and autonomy as journalism professionals.

NOTES

¹ Del Castillo, Agustín (2024). Defensa del periodismo en un mundo dominado por la mentira. Blog La feria de las vanidades, 3 de mayo, 2024. Consulted on 10/06/24 : <https://wordpress.com/read/feeds/158136140/posts/5222682466>

² Moshavi, Sharon (2022). Trust me, I'm a journalist. IJNET International Journalists Network, January 10, 2022. Consulted on 10/06/24 : <https://ijnet.org/en/story/trust-me-im-journalist>

³ See : Posetti, J., Maynard, D., & Bontcheva, K. (2021). Maria Ressa: Fighting an Onslaught of Online Violence. Centro Internacional de Periodistas. <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/maria-ressa-big-data-analysis>

⁴ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/calendar/six-years-me-too-reporting-what-weve-learnt>

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