

Production and Circulation of Journalistic Information in the Context of Struggles with Platforms

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Journalism faces significant challenges today, raising profound questions about its role as a key institution of democracy. Thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/2002) and John Dewey (1927/1988) have long emphasized the critical importance of journalism, and this perspective continues to resonate in contemporary discussions about its function in modern Western societies. One of the main challenges lies in the control of the production and distribution model of journalistic information by large technological corporations dominating the digital space, particularly Google and Meta. Unable to compete with the reach of audiences facilitated by the technological tools created and managed by these companies. Consequently, journalism's independence is undermined as it becomes increasingly reliant on the imperatives of clickbait—content designed to attract clicks—where algorithms dictate distribution priorities rather than the delivery of information vital for democratic participation and informed decision-making.

The threats to the essential functions of journalism as a pillar of democracy are inherent to the capitalist system. Even before the transformative impact of digital technologies, scholars like John McManus (1994) had sharply critiqued the market-driven model of journalism, highlighting its detrimental implications for democracy and society at large. According

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to McManus, the press industry itself often prioritizes economic imperatives over informational integrity, replacing “journalistic judgment with market judgment” and delegating the role of gatekeeper to the consumer, who ultimately decides “what becomes news” (McManus, 1994, p. xii-xiii).

The need to sustain journalistic production found a solution during the industrial era with the advent of advertising. Journalism began to rely on the advertising market for funding, introducing an inherent contradiction: providing a public interest service while catering to the audience as consumers, with these two perspectives holding distinct meanings. In that matter, public interest refers to the relationship between civil society and the State, encompassing tensions between private interests, or private property, and the collective interests of the community as a political entity and historical subject. This issue has been widely explored by theorists of various nationalities, including two notable Brazilian intellectuals.

From this perspective, Marcondes Filho, in his work *O Capital da Notícia – Jornalismo como Produção Social de Segunda Natureza* (1986), argues that “the main objective of hegemonic journalism is to sell a product, as it is a capitalist enterprise like any other” (De Oliveira, 2020, para. 2). Similarly, in *O Segredo da Pirâmide: para uma teoria marxista do Jornalismo* (1987), Genro Filho offers a Marxist analysis of journalistic practice, presenting it as a fundamental form of knowledge for societal emancipation. According to Genro Filho : “The realization of human freedom requires the development of the press in general, and journalism in particular.” (1987, p. 231)

These two contributions are essential for understanding journalism both as a form of knowledge and as one of the narratives of History deeply rooted in everyday life (Heller, 1989). Marcondes Filho’s analysis, which frames conventional journalism as a commodity serving the interests of capital, and Genro Filho’s perspective, which positions journalism as a vital production for society, provoke a necessary discomfort that fosters a deeper understanding of the historical contexts shaping journalistic production. As a praxis historically grounded since the 14th century, journalism mirrors the evolving transformations of social relations of production. Without this contextual lens, journalism risks being diminished to a shallow and ultimately ineffectual discourse.

It is worth emphasizing that this reflection requires a dialectical analysis, incorporating its dimension of negativity, to transcend the limitations imposed on journalism. In this regard, Rafael Bellan highlights the intervention of Portuguese professor José Luiz García, who states:

«The current situation, driven by new conditions for the production, dissemination, and integration of information enabled by the internet, fosters a blurring of the lines between journalism and what is referred to as content production. Branded or commercial content—commonly known by its English term branded content—is frequently negotiated with advertisers or corporations, placing journalists in what can be described as a kind of border zone. Using Anglo-Saxon terminology, this is also referred to as boundary-work. Thus, it would be more accurate to state that there is a thesis asserting that journalism constitutes knowledge, a form of knowledge distinct from common sense. This thesis is embraced, adopted, or defended by those who argue that journalism should be, or remain, a form of knowledge, rather than merely a production of content, branded content, or information that could, for example, be generated by robots. In other words, it is a thesis upheld by those who seek to elevate journalism into an increasingly refined and legitimate form of knowledge.» (Bellan & Garcia, 2022)

As García highlights, dominant commercial forces are steering journalism toward a transformation into branded content. At the same time, social reality confronts journalism with significant challenges, particularly the pursuit of a deeper understanding of that reality. In this context shaped by platformization, journalism finds itself at the center of a storm, oscillating between the economic dynamics described by Marcondes Filho and the dialectical logic of a praxis of struggle, where social movements serve as the driving force of this confrontation.

THE IMPACT OF PLATFORMIZATION: AN ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL STRUGGLE

The control of journalism by digital platform companies (particularly Meta and Google) has been addressed in the works of Bell et al. (2017) and other seminal studies on platformization, such as those by van Dijck, Poell, and Waal (2018), as well as Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck (2020). A special issue of the review *Sur le journalisme* was also dedicated to this topic (Sebbah et al., 2020). While some academic works have normalized journalism’s current dependence on these media conglomerates, Helmond’s (2015) analysis remains particularly salient and demands renewed attention. Helmond argues that Facebook’s logic extends across the entire internet, making it impossible for it to function as a public circulation space without necessarily pursuing financial goals. According to Hel-

mond, this logic redefines social and commercial interactions online, as Facebook, as a platform, is characterized by its programmable design, its operation as a multilateral market, and its capacity to integrate and expand external datasets (2015). The application-centric framework and the interconnectivity it fosters for data collection and transmission have effectively transformed the internet into a vast marketplace.

To reevaluate the crucial fight for journalism in the contemporary era, it is imperative to examine the dilemmas brought about by platformization. Two critical dimensions stand out: the production and circulation of journalistic information.

In the realm of production, a significant development—often framed as an advantage—is the adoption of tools like SEO (Search Engine Optimization). These tools enforce standardized content structures and emphasize the repetition of specific keywords to boost visibility and monetize content through search engines. This standardization, combined with formats designed to appeal to younger audiences who consume information at a rapid pace, encourages a culture of simplification and surface-level engagement at the expense of deeper critical reflection. Headlines are engineered to be eye-catching, meticulously crafted to provoke curiosity and drive clicks. The phenomenon has even given rise to the term journalism of sensations (Azevedo & Schaun, 2016), a euphemism for the sensationalism that many media outlets increasingly resort to in their quest to capture attention. The most significant casualty of these production trends is the erosion of context, leaving audiences with fragmented and decontextualized facts.

A key challenge brought about by platformization in journalistic production is the redefinition of what qualifies as «news.» While numerous studies have examined notifiability (as a criteria for selecting information) and the role of journalism as a public service, SEO-driven writing and content composition rules have introduced a new problem in newsrooms: topics now considered worthy of coverage must align with the most popular content on social media. This shift disrupts the traditional relationship between journalists and their audience. Put simply, it is now the audience that determines what counts as news. Consequently, journalism takes on a peculiar hybrid role—straddling the line between information and entertainment. Although the phenomenon of infotainment is not new to journalism (Berrocal Gonzalo et al., 2012 ; Brin et al., 2004), what stands out here is the normalization of practices designed to attract, recapture, or retain readers and consumers of relevant information. These efforts increasingly conform to the rules imposed by the platforms where news and journalistic content are distributed.

Circulation Under Domination: A Struggle for Autonomy

The distinction drawn here between production and circulation is, of course, purely didactic, as the logic of journalistic production is intrinsically tied to that of circulation—especially in an era where distribution platforms are no longer controlled by those who produce journalism. The traditional press model and even the early 21st-century news portals are now relics of the past. Today, content circulation has become a key battleground. Where media outlets once directly controlled their distribution, this power has now shifted to two dominant players: Google and Meta. These tech giants not only provide the platforms for production but also shape them to align with their networks and proprietary tools. The control they exert over content circulation dictates the integration of advertising into the informational ecosystem, with little transparency. For instance, publishers often have no knowledge of which ads or banners will appear on their platforms. The rules governing programmatic advertising remain hidden, with auctions entirely dominated on a global scale by these companies—Google being particularly influential. The Demand Side Platforms (DPS) system does more than manage advertising (Oliveira, 2024); it also directs ad revenues toward audience profiles, sidelining the editorial identity and priorities of media outlets. By stripping media organizations of their control over advertising revenues, Google and Meta tighten their grip on journalism, forcing it to adapt to their tools and rules for writing, investigating, publishing, distributing, and monetizing information—all at the expense of its autonomy.

Google News Initiative is a division of the tech conglomerate that offers tools aimed at «building a global news community»¹ including Google Analytics, News Consumer Insights, Realtime Content Insights, Google Looker Studio, and Google Consumer Surveys. To ensure accessibility, Google provides training sessions and tailored courses. This system has become virtually unavoidable, as even small independent and alternative journalism initiatives are drawn under the influence of these platforms. It creates the illusion that the journalism crisis can be «resolved» by conforming to the production and distribution standards dictated by these two dominant companies, which now constitute a global oligopoly in journalism and advertising.

The Commodification of Journalism: A Democratic Challenge

We echo the analysis of Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck (2019), who «argue that the institutional dimensions of platformisation—data infrastructures, markets, and governance—need to be studied in correspondence with shifting cultural practices.» (para. 2). This perspective

Table 1: *Media Funding: Alternative Models Supported by Platform Companies Until 2020*

Media Outlet	Financial Backer
Agência Lupa	Meta Journalism Project Mista
Agência Mural	Google News Initiative
Agência Pública	Google News Initiative
Alma Preta	Meta Journalism Project
Aos Fatos	Meta Journalism Project and Google News Initiative
Associação Desenrola	Google News Initiative
AzMina	Google News Initiative
Congresso em Foco	Google News Initiative
JOTA	Google News Initiative
Nexo Jornal	Meta Journalism Project
Nós, Mulheres da Periferia	Meta Journalism Project

Source: Compiled by Camargo, Nonato, Pachi Filho & Lelo, 2023.

is particularly pertinent to journalistic practices. Among the most troubling changes brought about by the platformization of journalism is the increasing role of news producers as «platform complementors» (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck, 2019, para. 21). This shift entails producing content specifically designed for platforms like Facebook and Google, embracing and adapting to their logics to reach audiences that do not necessarily align with those traditionally targeted by mainstream media.

The fight for journalism, conceived as an essential social practice for democratic life, cannot be postponed. Platformization is transforming journalistic content into «contingent commodities,» as described by Nieborg and Poell (2018). Their theory outlines how the GAFAM companies (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) use metrics to assess the profitability of cultural products based on «relevant data regarding user engagement and retention, in the form of social references, comments, search rankings, and page visits» (p. 2). These metrics influence whether content is altered or abandoned. With their «success» criteria, the major platforms dominating journalism either amplify or restrict the visibility of certain information while marginalizing others (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

JOURNALISTIC STRUGGLES AND RESISTANCE: ALTERNATIVE AND INDEPENDENT MODELS

Journalism today faces numerous and complex challenges. Even initiatives designed to counter the harmful effects of platformization and its financial

logics are often absorbed by the funding strategies of international foundations. Organizations such as the Ford Foundation, Open Society, and Heinrich Böll, are emblematic of this phenomenon. Camargo highlights this dynamic in their 2024 thesis, *Capture and Reconfiguration of Independent and Alternative Digital Journalism: The Role of International Philanthropic Foundations* (*Captura e reconfiguração do jornalismo digital independente e alternativo: o papel da filantropia das fundações internacionais*). In countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, and the United States, the Knight Foundation, through its Centers², plays a pivotal role in promoting cause-driven, non-profit journalism, establishing itself as a model for the Americas.

Within this context, Camargo, Nonato, Pachi Filho, and Lelo (2023) conducted a study on the funding allocated to initiatives described as alternative and independent journalistic models in Brazil. They examine «the influence exerted by platform companies on the journalistic market, focusing on the relationships established between Google, Meta, and alternative models to media conglomerates in Brazil» (2023, p. 2).

Some of these initiatives received funding in 2020, as illustrated in Table 1.

In their conclusions, the authors state:

«While we acknowledge that the interference of Big Tech in media is not decisive, even in institutionally weaker contexts, the discourse promoted by these major technology corpora-

tions through their funding programs reflects an ideology of co-opting journalistic practices into the technical infrastructures and economic models of platforms. It is clear that the growing investments by Google and Meta in Brazilian journalism are part of their global efforts to mitigate criticism of their centralized and oligopolistic commercial expansion policies (Poell, Nieborg, Van Dijck, 2020), the most tangible effects of which include the economic weakening of various cultural production sectors.» (Camargo, Nonato, Pachi Filho & Lelo, 2023, p. 19).

However, some media outlets strive to develop alternative economic models that are detached from the funding frameworks imposed by platforms and foundations. Nevertheless, this path is exceedingly difficult, as control mechanisms, though subtle, prove to be highly effective. Funding projects introduce requirements for management, transparency standards, goals, impact indicators, and metric models, significantly complicating the emergence of genuinely alternative journalistic endeavors (Camargo, 2024).

In Latin America, several investigative journalism initiatives have emerged, facing the dilemma of practicing journalism independent of large media corporations while being financed by donations or grants from foreign foundations. To receive such support, these projects are often compelled to align with the priorities set by the agendas of these philanthropic organizations.

The current struggles of journalism extend far beyond simple technological adjustments; they strike at the very core of a profession that guarantees access to free and pluralistic information and embodies a constant fight in defense of democracy. In the face of the transformations brought about by platformization, journalism stands at a critical juncture: it must embrace technological advancements, the fruits of human achievement, while safeguarding its essential role as a pillar of democratic societies. As Poell et al.

(2019) emphasize, it is crucial to examine the institutional and cultural dimensions of this phenomenon to devise strategies that effectively address its challenges. Efforts to regulate the commercial activities of communication platform companies—such as Google and Meta—have become an urgent necessity. Such regulation could enable more transparent funding and, ultimately, ensure the independence of journalism.

In this context, the struggles for journalism, led by journalists themselves, are of paramount importance. The contributions of researchers featured in this issue of *Sur le journalisme*, titled «The Fights of Journalism», highlight the efforts undertaken in such a complex landscape. Advancing this fight begins with a thorough analysis of reality in all its complexity, taking into account the myriad elements that shape it.

The articles in this issue invite us to reflect on the crucial role of journalism during times of crisis, such as the pandemic, when it provided society with high-quality information to protect itself against COVID-19. Journalistic production became a weapon against misinformation, defending both science and life. The resilience of public journalism produced by Brazil's public broadcaster EBC stands as a powerful example of resistance in the face of authoritarian governments in the country. Moreover, specialized journalism focusing on culture, sustainability, and literature offers a vital space to promote journalism as a form of knowledge production, upholding its mission as an essential public service for democracy.

This struggle requires a clear understanding of the actors attempting to domesticate journalism, as such knowledge strengthens opportunities for resistance and empowerment. It serves as a reminder of an essential truth: journalism is a powerful tool for democracy and civic participation. If it were not, it would not provoke such intense battles.

NOTES

¹ <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/about/>

² <https://knightfoundation.org/knight-centers/>

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