JOURNALISTIC PROFESSIONALISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

BEATE JOSEPHI
Guest Editor

Journalistic professionalism has been a contentious concept throughout its existence. Making journalism a profession stood behind the initial idea of establishing journalism schools, mostly at a tertiary level. These would provide the education enabling journalists to perform the role of information provider knowledgably, responsibly and accurately. Such professional expertise would also underpin journalism's claim to be an essential part of the political, social and cultural life of a country.

Yet the notion of being educated in academia for a job whose real life working conditions were very different met with distrust, not to say disdain, in the industry. In some countries, journalism education was provided on the job well into the 1980s. Other countries, like Spain and Portugal, from the 1930s to the 1970s, used tertiary journalism education as a licensing system and a mechanism to exert ideological influence. In Brazil, the licensing system lasted into the new millennium, abolished mainly because media houses opposed the restrictive employment situation. Journalism educators, on the other hand, emphasized journalism education as the best way to transmit a set of knowledge and skills necessary to ensure journalistic professionalism.

The advent of the digital age has shifted the discussion,

and reigned the debate. The rise of participatory forms of journalism, such as citizen journalism, posts on Twitter and Facebook, the ensuing abundance of news offerings, the stress of a 24/7 news cycle, and the pressure to attract and engage the digital readers have all led to a predicament deeply affecting journalists. Professional journalism has re-emerged as a tool in the boundary work of differentiating journalists from other participants in the digital information provision.

As it turns out, in this special issue, skills are the focus rather than boundary work, although all articles rest on the spoken or unspoken assumption of the primary role of journalism. The contributors are very much at home in the digital environment. Their emphasis is on the abilities required in the technologically transformed newsroom to strengthen journalistic professionalism. Interestingly, two articles deal with the visual, which is quickly becoming a crucial aspect of how the news is 'read' and how audiences absorb and react to information.

The first article by Paula Marques-Hayasaki, Carles Roca-Cuberes, and Carles Singla Casellas on the 'New professional Profiles and Skills in the Journalistic Field' is based on in-depth interviews. The article provides an overview of what is considered essential knowledge for journalists to assert their relevance in the digitally determined news ecology. Marques-Hayasaki et al. first of all distil from literature the salient elements of the digital transformation. Hypertextuality is seen as a medium of exploration but also as a distraction from the text through the linkages it affords. Importantly, the web has developed its own language that needs to be learned. Part of the transformation is interactivity, which turns the journalist from a by-line into a person who can be questioned and chatted with. This can happen instantaneously without waiting out the delays imposed by print. It also allows for the customization of news, tailored to the needs of a particular audience.

The World Wide Web is exactly that – worldwide. Audiences of the same language can be reached in far-flung corners of the globe. At the same time, because of this wide reach, the diversity of this audience has to be taken into account in an age when audience consideration has become paramount. More than ever before, journalists are encouraged to keep the clicks coming. Inevitably, this leads to pressure of having to market the news. This, in turn, can constitute an ethical quandary for journalists, who have to heed the demand for fast and possibly sensationalized

news delivery while guarding their own credibility. How do they negotiate this dilemma?

The answers Marques-Hayasaki et al. found among practicing journalists, editors and journalism educators in Spain confirm one particular point. Journalists need to learn a new language that ensures audience engagement; be this by presenting the information in an attractive and interactive way or sharing on social media. These skills, whether multi-platform production or social media skills, need constant updating. But some demands on journalists remain the same. Their professionalism is embedded in their ability to apply critical thinking and knowledge of verification in this ever-quickening information cycle.

The second contribution by Ana Gruszynski, Patricia Damasceno, Gabriela Sanseverino, and Ana da Rosa Bandeira similarly addresses the new skills in the move to multi-platform delivery, focusing on design as news provision adapts to the digital stage. In tracing newspaper design through the decades, Gruszynski et al. capture some of the leading concepts that helped shaping journalism as a practice. Newspapers moved from being subjective, active participants in political struggles towards being objective and creating content that was of interest to a wide public. Modern journalism, according to the authors, was built on values such as objectivity and the ability to generate a market of readers. These are still tenets of journalism in the digital age, although the form in which information is presented is ever changing. Redesigning layout has a long history, as the examples of front pages from the *New York Times* and *Jornal do Brasil* poignantly demonstrate.

The authors argue that design has now become an integral part of journalistic skills. With news in many countries being predominantly consumed on mobile phones or tablets, visual presentation and the placing of image and text have become of vital concern for media outlets. While the authors suggest that those skilled in the creation of web pages and online presentation of text, data visualization and image are well placed for the future, they also warn of a loss of journalistic values. By making the growing of audience size a priority, ethical and critical standards could be slipping. But Gruszynski et al. do not see design implicated in this dilemma. In fact, for them professionally understood images and tools of visualization cannot but enhance journalism's intellectual concepts.

One area where a boundary has been *de rigeur* is between journalism and PR. Chantal Francoeur delves into this paradoxical relationship where both sides need to work together yet due to their divergent professional aims remain deeply suspicious of each other. The time constraints enforced by the 24/7 news cycle have further intensified journalists' dependence on PR, and PR is exploiting this fact by offering 'ready for online' content. Francoeur, in an earlier study, estimated that between 40 and 75 percent of journalistic information is based on content from the PR industry; other scholars put this figure even higher.

To assess how journalists distinguish their own work from PR material and PR help, Francoeur conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with French speaking journalists, identified through having made front-page news in various media outlets in the province of Quebec. An analysis of these interviews, coded around core concepts, revealed a number of 'interpretive repertoires'. The interviews did not resolve the paradox but intensified it. While all journalists reiterated their professional ethos of serving the public they also acknowledge using PR material, especially from those practitioners they describe as 'trustworthy'. Particularly prominent among the interpretative repertoires was the 'game' repertoire, that is seeing the daily PR – journalistic tussle over information as an almost playful contest of outwitting each other. One extreme tool by PR is to deny access to officials, while on the other hand journalists, as it were, always have the last word. Francoeur, in her discussion, emphasizes that despite all the boundary work the two parties have to work together since otherwise they would end up in a 'dead end' scenario, which would serve neither of them.

The media has long been seen as the agenda setter of public debate, especially in the political field. Fernanda Cavassana de Carvalho and Isabele Batista Mitozo have tested whether this assumption also extends to the Internet. They chose the time period of the 2014 Brazilian presidential elections to study the websites of 11 Brazilian papers – three national and eight regional or local ones – to ascertain whether their websites attracted readers' posts. They also delved further to determine the nature of these posts. As national and local elections were held simultaneously, both were taken into account. However, the findings show that with regard to posts and comments the national papers carried greater significance. In terms of the nature of the posts, the comments were overwhelmingly either in

praise or critical of a candidate, with praise being more frequent than criticism. Based on these results, the authors conclude that journalism, also in its online environment, plays an important role in stimulating civic deliberation.

The last article in this special issue again turns to visual language. Maura Oliveira Martins contribution offers an in depth exploration of the changes that have occurred in television journalism. Citizens' input via amateur footage, but also the use of surveillance cameras and hidden cameras brought to the scene by reporters, have changed viewers' attitudes and expectations. According to the author, television is deeply involved in a process of experimentation with narrative formats. Citizens' recordings have introduced a different version of reality to the screen, which is perceived by the audience as un-mediated and authentic. Also, cameras, mostly on mobile phones, are now omnipresent promising to reveal events and moments that previously would not have been captured. Odd camera angles and low technical quality are seen as signs of authenticity and mediatic non-interference, which lets conventional journalistic narrative appear as highly controlled, if not contrived. This development, the author concludes, has a deep impact on television journalism, which is pushed towards creating camera content that has the effect of greater genuineness. Only by succeeding in this search can TV journalism regain, if not preserve, the credibility it once held.

This special issue ends up pushing the boundaries rather than erecting them. While all authors want to see journalism retain its position in society, they pinpoint the areas where the new skills underpinning journalistic professionalism should come from, especially in the field of journalistic visual culture. As the last contributor very aptly shows, conventionally mediated pictures are now easily recognized for their orchestrated nature. The audience demands otherwise. First and foremost, the language of the web – whether visual or textual – needs to be learned to attract and maintain audiences. Further, a new aesthetic should be explored and embraced that offers seemingly unmediated participation in events. The audience clearly has entered the age of participation, and wants to feel involved. This extends not only to interactivity with the written word, but also to an expectation to be 'present' at events and be shown them as they happen and

'as they are'. With the audience's attention having become media's most prized asset, journalists will indeed have to have the skills for the new rules of engagement.

Beate Josephi. Honorary Senior Lecturer in the Department of Media and Communication of the University of Sydney, Australia. Member of the Worlds of Journalism Study project and former member of the IAMCR Executive and International Council.