

## **ETHICAL CONCERNS IN JOURNALISM DONE BY NON- JOURNALISTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

If journalism has become post-industrial, we observe facilitators production systems, and publication of user-generated content (UGC) and the performance of professional and amateur sharing. In this context, it is necessary to question how ordinary citizens who practice acts of journalism ethically justify their work. This article draws on three episodes (England, Brazil and the West Bank) to deepen a debate on the approximation of values of amateur and professional journalists. The text also reviews examples of organizations and professionals who strive to harmonize relations in this new media ecosystem.

### **KEYWORDS**

Deontology; journalism; pro-Am; challenges

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It seemed like any other Thursday. Thousands of people were heading to work or school, filling the subway cars and well-known red double-decker buses. In less than an hour, four explosions rocked a bus and three subway trains in central London, killing 52 people and wounding 700. The eventful morning of July 7, 2005 went down in history as a sad terrorist act, but was also a landmark in the timeline of British media. According to journalist Torin Douglas, it was a turning point in the use of non-professional content in the news. For the specialist, the 7/7 “democratized” media<sup>1</sup>.

It was not an overstatement. The attacks caused many victims and a flood in the newsrooms of material produced by amateurs. In a single day, BBC, for example, received 22,000 text messages and emails with reports and information, over 300 photos and several videos made with common cameras and cell phones. For the first time, BBC’s solid and traditional board of directors considered those amateur videos more journalistically relevant than the professional ones. The User Generated Content (UGC) has received another treatment.

Away from London, in the tumultuous West Bank, a group of Israeli women, “peace activists from all sectors of society”, supply the Machsomwatch<sup>2</sup> site with reports of human rights violations throughout the dispute in the region. They are not professional journalists, but since 2001 they do a similar job: “we regularly document what we see

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<sup>1</sup> In an article of July 4, 2006, published on the BBC News website: “How 7/7 ‘democratized’ media”: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/5142702.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/5142702.stm). Access on February 28, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.machsomwatch.org/en>

and hear”. They are contrary “the Israeli occupation and the denial of Palestinians’ rights to move freely in their land”. They make daily observations at Israeli army checkpoints, denouncing what they consider abuses, and forward these reports to government officials and elected representatives, drawing attention to the conflict on West Bank. As they explain, they want “to influence public opinion in the country and in the world, and thus to bring to an end the destructive occupation, which causes damage to Israeli society as well as to Palestinian society”<sup>3</sup>.

Away from the West Bank, in Brazil, a heterodox media group gained international visibility by providing a set of independent reports on the demonstrations that shook the country in June 2013. Under the name Media Ninja - an acronym for Independent Narratives, Journalism and Action – the group brings together activists, professional journalists and amateurs communicators around the idea of offering an alternative to mainstream media coverage. The ninjas have decentralized actions, use social networks of the internet, do live coverage, no cuts or editing, and focus on social issues. The group emerged in June 2011, from the Post-TV, an initiative that prioritized the live broadcast of audiovisual content by Internet<sup>4</sup>.

Two years later, a flurry of protests spread like wildfire across the country, taking millions of people to the streets against the using of public funds to build stadiums for the 2014 World Cup, against impunity and corruption in politics, against increases in public transportation fares, among other topics. The so called June Journeys were the largest popular demonstrations since the impeachment demonstrations by then president of the republic, Fernando Collor de Mello, in 1992. There were marches in over 400 cities in all states, including assurances of support in other parts of world<sup>5</sup>.

In June 2013, traditional media tried to cover demonstrations but struggled in many cities, including being harassed. Media Ninja offered an impressive and relevant set. So much so that its scenes were played and appreciated by major television stations, despite the dubious technical quality and aesthetic inadequacy in many moments<sup>6</sup>.

What is there in common between these three unusual examples - the London bombings, monitoring the occupation of the West Bank and the protests in Brazil? From the point of view of communication, the episodes reveal traits that enhance public participation in the processes of information, and the production and dissemination of news content by amateurs. These cases also reserve ethical questions about practices and behaviors of the subjects of these actions. With respect to a reflection of the boundaries between professionalism and amateur involvement, the episodes also contribute to a definition of new emerging values.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.machsomwatch.org/en/about-us>

<sup>4</sup> Journalist Bruno Torturra, one of the chief organizers of Media Ninja, made a pulsating account of the collective in the 87th edition of the Piauí Magazine, December 2013. “Eye Street” is available in <http://revistapiaui.estadao.com.br/edicao-87/questoes-de-midia-e-politica/olho-da-rua>. Accessed March 10, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> [http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Cidades\\_participantes\\_dos\\_protestos\\_no\\_Brasil\\_em\\_2013](http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Cidades_participantes_dos_protestos_no_Brasil_em_2013) Access March 11, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> View: <http://www.adnews.com.br/midia/globo-desmente-policia-do-rio-usando-video-do-midia-ninja> Access March 11, 2014.

## 1 . IF YOU CAN'T BEAT THEM...

It happened not long ago, but it is always requisite to remember: there have been clearer boundaries between who produced journalistic material and who was restricted to consume it. For decades, it was up to a social group respond by the searching, selection, processing, hierarchy and packaging contextualization of scattered data, transforming them into news information. This group was organized professionally, establishing rules of conduct, grammar techniques and operating rules so that society could distinguish it as such. Journalists not only became a professional category as well as justified their existence and legitimacy of actions. Meeting a demand of societies, journalism became necessary for the evolution of democracy and fundamental to social development. Most people - that did not fill that occupation – was constantly fueled by journalists, recognizing in them the role of authentic producers of information of public interest nature.

For at least two decades, it began to erode the counter that separated journalists from audience. The coming technological potentialities from internet, from digitization of text files, sound and image, from the miniaturization of equipment and technological convergence allowed some highly transformative effects in relations between these quotas. The production and distribution of content became each time less complex, which nurtured and strengthened an increasingly global culture of participation and collaboration. The lack of geographic boundaries on the Internet turned the exchange of information more comprehensive, rapid and effective. These components have created a scenario of informative explosion and of increasing demand for content, also derived from the growth in the supply of materials. The fullness of the means of production and distribution of content, and the many opportunities to participate in the communication process also led users to spare mediators, those who stood between public and sources of information. The counter that separated producers from consumers was porous, hollow.

Satisfied or surprised, vigilant or worried, journalism professionals and companies in the industry were forced to recognize the ever increasing importance of the audience in the production content market. Dan Gillmor (2004) hastened to rename “former-audience” this contingent priorly alienated from production processes. Rosen (2006) referred to them as “people formerly known as audience”, those who write in their blogs, who post their pictures and videos, who tell the stories that they witness, who share what they know. That is, those which appear at the end of a system of unidirectional media, that do not conform to the passive condition of the receiver of an information.

Bruns (2008) gathered using, consumption and production in a hybrid term: “produsage”. According to him, the concept applies to contexts where there is creation and extension of information and knowledge led by common subject; contexts where the roles of consumer and final user disappeared, giving way to mixed functions, where the distances between producers and consumers were merely lost. On their communities, “users are always already necessarily also producers of the shared knowledge base, regardless of whether they are aware of this role—they have become a new, hybrid, produser”<sup>7</sup> (op.cit.: 2).

<sup>7</sup> The term “produser” was coined by Alvin Toffler in *The Third Wave* (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1980), and was reappropriated by Bruns almost thirty years later.

Keen (2008) criticizes the invasion of the amateurs, deeming them dangers that may even deteriorate the contemporary culture and civilization. The author's scope is broad and the attack is mainly directed to those who produce content of an artistic-symbolic nature, expropriating the intermediaries, whom were priorly the recognizers of talents and important values to society.

Walejko and Hargittai (2008) draw attention to different forms and levels of participation in content creation and sharing it nowadays. The authors point out that it is not just a matter of differences but also inequalities, especially between genders, which intensifies or may reinforce existing asymmetrical social structures. The alert is welcome and it is natural that it is formulated, like so many other concerns, given that life online increasingly reproduces and multiplies the dilemmas of existence *offline* in society.

Many other authors have dealt with themes of collaboration and increasing public participation in the processes of information/communication, but the recognition of the audience had a substantial boost with the publication in July 2011 of a massive document of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the U.S. agency of media regulation. In 468 pages, the study produced by Steven Waldman and his working group addresses not only commercial media, but also nonprofit media, characters from outside the system (like the government) and cross-cutting issues (such as media consumption, diversity, people with disabilities, for example). In all these sections, the study attempts to observe the changes occurred in media landscape with the arrival of new characters and capabilities. As expected, the FCC document also provides elements for a discussion of policies and regulation of media system in the United States, addressing topics such as broadcasting, cable TV, internet and mobile systems, ownership and media control, advertising and marketing, copyright and intellectual property. The most basic conclusion is that the FCC 's media landscape is changing so drastically and quickly that some of the current regulations "are out of sync with the information needs of communities and the fluid nature of modern local media markets" (op.cit.: 6).

Among the recommendations in the paper are the need for greater transparency in government so that journalists and citizens monitor their actions; public advertising budget should be addressed to local media; nonprofit media must develop more profitable business models; universal broadband and open Internet are essential for new media landscape to serve the purposes of the communities; and formulators should listen more to historically underserved communities in the developing of their communication policies.

The FCC recognizes the paradox: there are plenty of media and lack of reports and public records. "Communities benefit tremendously from many innovations brought by the Internet and simultaneously suffer from the dislocations caused by the seismic changes in media markets" (op.cit.: 7). Timing is confusing, but the report is optimistic: recognizing local media and communities, the U.S. can achieve the best media system the country has ever had. It is important to note that the regulator of U.S. communications distributes prerogatives and responsibilities to achieve media excellence among non-professional actors. Thus, it is not only the industry to improve services and information

products and entertainment. No wonder that Anderson, Bell and Shirky (2012) analyze the current scenario from the perspective that there is no longer a newspaper industry. “There used to be one, held together by the usual things that hold an industry together: similarity of methods among a relatively small and coherent group of businesses, and an inability for anyone outside that group to produce a competitive product. Those conditions no longer hold true” (op.cit.: 1).

Before, it was noticeable that there was a specific ethics for journalism, since the profession was well defined and its outlines were given by a set of ethical values. Journalists acted according to a set of recommendations, had clear strengths and counterexamples of action, and defined their field of action considering standards of conduct. Could be (and were) charged when contradicted these ethical standards. With the arrival of new characters and consequent porosity in the field, ethical issues can also be extended to the newcomers, creating new points of tension and discussion.

In the three examples in the beginning of this article - the 2005 bombings in London, the occupation of the West Bank and the shares of Media Ninja - it is possible to observe changes in the dialogue between sources, information producers and consumers, not just equating this dialogue, as many times, blurring the boundaries between one area and another. In all three cases, there is more than collaboration and audience participation. The episodes can “contaminate” journalistic ethics (so far restricted to professionals) with other concerns or parameters. It can bring out the adage that “if you can’t beat them, join them”...

## **2 . TRADING, COLLISION, ASSIMILATION**

The saying itself reveals a generous dose of resignation before a dilemma that is considered unsurpassed. But do journalists and non-professionalized users always relate the same way? As media companies have received and used the User Generated Content (UGC) in their platforms and products? Coexistence between these distinct contingents is always understood as a problem?

Attentive to mainstream British press of the end of last decade, Hermida and Thurman (2008) see a clash of cultures in this approach. The authors have made an account of how twelve sites of national newspapers in the UK promoted integration between its content and material produced by users. According their research, closeness contributed to overthrow questions of commercial and editorial staffs about the importance and value of these amateur content before seen quite suspicious. Area editors were also heard, in an attempt to gather fears and potentialities of integration. Among the concerns, was that not using public contents can help marginalize the means for the readers. Still among the concerns were the possibility of third party content to affect the brand image of media companies (with consequences to the credibility of its products and services) and the control of conversation, with a clear and rigorous interference on moderation comment. Professional identity, reputation and legal aspects could also be affected by the arrival of amateurs, feared the editors interviewed for the research. In this sense, the

integration of everyday amateur contents of everyday professional publications reserves challenges and the abandonment of prejudices.

With eyes still held in British reality, Singer and Ashman (2009) have addressed the case of *The Guardian*, where journalists still assimilate and negotiate their relationships with users. Traditional newspaper, the daily has sought to adapt to new media, investing in new narratives and interactive modes. In 2008, for example, *The Guardian* even received 350,000 comments on their stories in a single month. Singer and Ashman note that the rapid growth of various forms of UGC - “from comments to hosted blogs to “hyperlocal” news stories, means the journalist has far less control over what was once an essentially industrial process of making news” (p. 3).

The study relied on in-depth interviews and questionnaires. Questioned about essential marks for “good journalism”, the interviewed journalists mentioned “accuracy”, followed by “credibility”, “responsibility” and “competence”. The subjects also linked to CGU values like “free speech”. Some concerns were perceived, like little commitment to the authenticity of the reports, and how these users have the potential to degrade the credibility of the publication and its derivatives. In this sense, amateur participation does not show a danger regarding the technical competence of the public, but to the authority of the journalist and his canons. One point of note is the voltage that opposes the anonymity of users - quite widespread practice on the web - and the accountability of journalists, an emerging value.

In the survey, among the most traditional journalists connected to the printed platform seems to force an ambivalence in the presence and action of users: while the professionals highlighted the need to keep away from readers are urged to interact with them...

Singer and Ashman conclude that journalists are struggling to “ethically accommodate the opportunities for freedom and dialogue presented by UGC while safeguarding their credibility and sense of responsibility” (p.18). These professionals try to incorporate issues raised by the presence of amateurs within a legal framework already existing in the company. Singer and Ashman refer to the principles of the Scott Trust, a document that guides journalists of *The Guardian* for decades. Endures the maximum that the newspaper bears - “Comments are free but facts are sacred” - but the dilemmas of CGU bring up new challenges, since the product offered to the public is not the exclusive result of work and decisions of professionals.

The changes we have witnessed two decades ago are not cosmetic, but “tectonic shifts” (cf. Anderson *et al.*, 2012). For the authors, who dedicated to a courageous analysis of the current situation of American reality, journalism no longer depends on one industry to be produced and distributed. It is essential to contemporary life, but a restructuring is essential, and many opportunities to do a good work are in new ways of acting. The authors acknowledge that some activities are best performed by amateurs, by crowds and machines; other by journalists, conventionally.

The process of journalism is so being radically remade by the forces of technology and economics that there is no longer anything that might be described as “an industry” for the individual journalist to enter. There is no standardized career path, set of tools and templates for production, or category of employers that are stable and predictable. (p. 40)

For Anderson, Bell and Shirky, “the journalism industry is dead but journalism exists in many places” (p.76). The advent of the internet has allowed not only the emergence of other characters, but a new journalistic ecosystem. Thus, in the eyes of the characters, news organizations in the United States would no longer control the news as before, because they cannot guarantee coverage the facts by themselves. The recommendations of the study are from learning to work with others to recognizing and rewarding the collaboration, including links to source materials and using systematized work by others. Nothing more decentralized...

### **3. TEACHING, INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT**

Discussions on the arrival of amateurs, organizational strategies for better utilization of user-generated content and experiences supported in combination, enable collaboration or symbiosis show that today, in theory, everyone can do journalism. In varying degrees of quality, diverse audiences, at different scales, but may offer products and services that compete with what we were used to call professional journalism. Some issues can derive from this assertion: Is journalism at risk? Does it lose with these new conditions and the arrival of outsiders? If the expertise does not seem like a problem, can the same be said about ethics? In other words, were journalistic ethics overcome? Are we close to that? Can one expect the user to follow the same ethical guidelines of professional journalists? Can the amateur be charged if he counteracts them? Is he prepared to act this way? If not, how should he conduct himself?

Ward and Wasserman (2010) argue that the growth of citizen participation in the media is changing journalism and its ethics, causing the emerging of an “open media ethics” form of wider interest. Unlike most closed systems – usually, professionals - this ethical encourages a more open and participatory approach, whereas a code applies not only to journalists but to all users. An open ethics also allows greater involvement in discussions, effective participation and review/determination of content, for example. Professional ethics tend to be more closed and journalism in particular erected their barriers with its doctrine of autonomy and objectivity, remembers Ward and Wasserman. Recent changes in media ecology have also caused changes in industry ethics. “Citizen-based new media are reshaping media ethics, and have the potential to create a global ethics discourse that is inclusive and participatory” (p. 281).

The authors acknowledge that it is a complex task to achieve a more open and global level to media ethics. To do so, it takes more hospitality - for an effective participation in the process -, sincerity, tolerance, respect and self-reflection. One must seek the truth and foster a sense that transcends social, material and national borders.

A secure path may be in education, on the teaching of journalistic ethics for amateurs. Professor Jan Leach is the one who signals this direction, for whom “journalists are not - nor should be - the only ones to raise ethical questions and discover a place in the digital territory to standards of credibility of content” (2009: 44) - ditto. As she explains, these questions are resultant from “demands and possibilities of this new media environment—one that now embraces social engagement as a core function” (p. 42).

The author indicates aspects in which one perceives disconnection between news and emerging practices in digital/social media: authentication of information sources, especially when the data are provided anonymously; ensure the reliability of the content published on sites/blogs hosted on news media; dissolution of conflicts of interest; lack of supervisory practices and/or lack of accountability for acts of users<sup>8</sup>. These shortcomings suggest the need for ethical guidelines, she says. Leach recalls Jay Rosen, who said that the digital environment is an open system. “For digital doers the challenge will be to find ways to embrace this open system without sacrificing what it takes to sustain credibility. Here are two recommendations: transparency and education” (p.44).

The first concept is gaining more space in the schedule of complex societies, especially in regard to acts of governments. The demand of this accountability is based on transparent and public actions, and accountability of decision making and outcomes. As the expectation spreads in all directions, journalism itself has been infected by it, generating slogans like the one cited by Jay Rosen, for whom “transparency is the new objectivity”<sup>9</sup>.

The second recommendation of Jan Leach – to invest in education - requires joint efforts, planning, continuity of action and a good dose of openness by organizations and professionals. That is, for an effective media education (in general), it is necessary for companies in the sector and journalists to be willing to open their black boxes and show the public how news is produced, how editorial departments work, how the field relates to other groups of interest and power centers. Such openness can antagonize towards commercial and corporate interests. With regard to a specific niche education - the one that would address and content of a newspaper knowledge ethics - present the same difficulties with certain specific complicating.

If journalistic ethics opens itself, as stated by Ward and Wasserman, how will this process be conducted? If closed in a professional group was not so easy to get consensus on codes of ethics and conduct guidelines to follow, imagine a broader perspective, which includes users who cannot simply accede to prior commitments made by reporters outside the expectations of society. In this sense, ethical engagement is a first halt being faced. How to involve heterogeneous users in a complex and conflicting process

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<sup>8</sup> There are many authors that enumerate new/old dilemmas and concerns for journalists in digital media. Some of these lists are coincident and also indicate areas of mismatch between decanted in journalism practices and habits that will consolidate in social media. Ure (2013), to whom the administration of accounts on social networks, relation with the sources, interaction with users, verification of information, error handling, inserting links and the distinction between information and advertising content are some of the most important dilemmas for journalists who venture as social media users. See also Christofolletti and Giovanaz (2013).

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://journalism.colorado.edu/2014/03/14/jay-rosen-transparency-is-the-new-objectivity/> Access March 9, 2014.

such as ethical debate on personal behavior and get them to accept and assimilate a set of values that might be unfamiliar to them? The attentive reader can promptly answer: Education is the shortest path to bring these separate quotas. Yes, but you must remember that the educational process is a two-way street that involves teaching and learning, willingness to share, critical reflection and assimilation of knowledge. Organizations and professionals must be willing to open an ethical framework formerly confined; to users, they should accept to participate in this game, including increasing their participation in the discussion and decision making on the most relevant values and the most recommended and acceptable practices.

Somehow, in my view, this debate updates a dichotomy externalized in the 1990s that contrasted two models of software production. Raymond used a metaphor to distinguish them: cathedral and bazaar<sup>10</sup>. According to him, the former is more closed, proper of industries and large corporations who engage in programming and writing computer codes. Their teams are restricted and the work is done according to a vertical logic, with chains of explicit command and clear guidelines to follow. The “bazaar” works as a great as a marketplace of ideas, where one works with very large teams, without geographical or occupational boundaries, no chains of command and collaboratively. The cooperative and porous logic allows production to move from the inputs of the participants, with shared decisions and plural responsibility. Following Raymond’s Cathedral Microsoft’s metaphor, Mozilla is bazaar. Internet Explorer is a software-owner, a result of the production of cathedral model, while its competitor, Firefox browser, is derived from a bazaar action based on professional developers, hobbyists, dilettantes...

Recent history shows that dispersed and heterogeneous users are able to articulate, discuss and define bases of acceptable conduct on the web, in the form of “web etiquettes”, for example (cf. Christofolletti, 2011). But I highlight that this matter of journalism reserves extra care, since its practice affects third parts, focuses on organizations and personal reputations, and also contributes to the formation of the understanding of reality and ideas, concepts and judgments that comprise it. Meaning: the scale of action is greater and potential risks and losses too.

Observers of the occupation of West Bank, amateurs who help make up the Media Ninja and Londoners and citizens who “covered” the attacks in 2005 may have been busy producing journalistic or para-journalistic reports. Technologically, they were fitted with devices enabling them to do so. Emotionally, they were involved and were willing to provide such reports. But would it also be ethically engaged to reflect on care and dilemmas derived from journalistic action? Do these quotas feel the need of moral belts to justify their actions? Do they feel they have fulfilled the public and other groups interest on such and such choices and decisions?

The questionings do not cease in this article. We are all in the process of redefining the social, cultural and ethical foundations in this new media ecosystem. The amateurs

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<sup>10</sup> In May 1997, Eric S. Raymond presented the Linux Kongress “The Cathedral and the Bazaar”, a text that became an obligatory reference to movements in the free software world. The document has been updated several times and ended up being as a kind of manifesto for activists opposed to the single model of proprietary software. <http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/> Access March 10, 2014

are part of the current reality and constitute an irreversible phenomenon. In these times when we are discussing the nature of journalism and who can help provide it, it is essential to insert one more question: Who is willing to discuss foundations for a new journalistic ethics? This question will not be answered only by professionals. Incidentally, they also depend on amateurs to participate in this discussion to, also, redefine the boundaries of their everyday actions. //

[Translation by Ana Paula França Laux]

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