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Experiments in journalism. An introduction to the special issue

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INTRODUCTION



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For more than two decades, the news industry has been undergoing rapid and profound changes in the Portuguese and French-speaking world, like Brazil and France. These mutations have multiple causes: a crisis of the economic model of the traditional news media, technological evolutions, disintermediation due to social networks and platforms, disinformation, disaffection, even discredit, on the part of worldwide citizens. The coronavirus pandemic has accused certain aspects: the demise of printed newspapers, journalistic layoffs, new business models such as subscription and membership. Not to mention the precarious working conditions of journalists as a professional category to be protected from the virus in order to adequately perform their social function, since in countries like Brazil it was not included as a priority in vaccination campaigns.

At the same time, this global sanitary crisis has also shown the value of accurate and reliable information¹. Faced with these challenges, experimentation becomes imperative for the news media. By experimentation, we mean an experience carried out intending to achieve a result. By experimenting journalism has historically adapted to new contexts of production, broadcasting, and reception, in search of a viable

economic model associated with editorial choices and to respond to user's needs. Likewise, journalism research has traditionally investigated and adjusted itself to obsolescence as well as technological innovations.

In the journalism field, changes in the media landscape and technological innovations are giving rise to various experiments that concern organizations, processes, and editorial strategies with the imperative of keeping up with changing modes of information consumption. The development of digital technology (Mercier & Pignard-Cheyne, 2014) presents new possibilities in terms of production, editing, distribution, and increasingly personalized engagement of audiences. The transition from web-first to mobile-first (Hill & Bradshaw, 2018) favors cost minimization and versatility of journalists, technological convergence (Jenkins, 2008; Deuze, 2007), flexibility in the use of different formats. Young people consume more news through mobile services, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, which forces journalists to take into account the codes and grammar of the mobile, to promote more interactive relationships between journalists and their audience (Pignard-Cheyne & Van Dievoet, 2019).

One can refer to the experimentations as a “change or die” situation, for themselves represent a sign of necessary adjustment to new technologies in an environment of rapid disruption, as some research may suggest in the field of virtual reality (Watson, 2017; Tourseil & Useille, 2019), artificial intelligence and the use of algorithms for instance (Wölker & Powell, 2021) the autonomous production of journalistic content through computer algorithms, is increasingly prominent in newsrooms. This enables the production of numerous articles, both rapidly and cheaply. Yet, how news readers perceive journalistic automation is pivotal to the industry, as, like any product, it is dependent on audience approval. As audiences cannot verify all events themselves, they need to trust journalists' accounts, which make credibility a vital quality ascription to journalism. In turn, credibility judgments might influence audiences' selection of automated content for their media diet. Research in this area is scarce, with existing studies focusing on national samples and with no previous research on ‘combined’ journalism – a relatively novel development where automated content is supplemented by human journalists. We use an experiment to investigate how European news readers (N=300. For example, chatbots or artificial intelligence (bot) capable of discussing (chat)² (Veglis & Maniou, 2019) are used in favor of conversational journalism (Antheaume, 2016) that respects the codes of interactions via mobile.

Launched in 2015, Jam³, a 100% messenger media, is a chatbot that addresses young people in France by animating conversations around the major interests of young generations (news, series, social networks, travel, relationships, trends, and career, among others). Yet, these conversational agents are causing new ethical tensions (Dörr & Hollnbuchner, 2017). In addition to these technological innovations, these experiments also consist of new journalistic practices, ways of investigating (Bot, 2018), verifying (Gray et al., 2013), formatting, visualizing information (McCandless, 2012), and creating more attractive content (Lacroix, 2020) in order to reach new audiences, and above all to keep them while they are very fragmented. Do these experiments allow us to clear the way for the journalism of tomorrow or are they doomed to vanish in a near future?

As far as we know these experiments question the foundations of journalism, its borders, and even its epistemology. After all, they are led by a multiplicity of actors, journalists or not, media or not. The 2000s have been marked by the irruption of citizens as content producers (van Dijck, 2009). In this context, the new content generators modify missions and skills, identities, and professional trajectories. These experiments are renewing professional cultures by transforming the very profession of journalism, but they are also encountering resistance. They are sometimes the result of individual initiatives, or they are supported by original forms of organization within the media themselves: R&D departments, media labs like that of Agence France Presse⁴, which brings together journalists, designers, and digital editors. These new profiles make up multidisciplinary teams adapted to new modes of production, capable of imagining new forms of narrative (Hernandez & Rue, 2016). Other places, more unexpected, sometimes far from the media, like the Labo 148 in Roubaix (France)⁵.

The researcher questions these experiments through the discourse and practices of the actors, who are themselves divided between enthusiasm and resistance. How do they see themselves in their principles, values, and purposes? In their relationship to technologies, they question the place of editorial, the social role, and the meaning of journalism in its ethical and deontological dimension. If specific skills are identified, how can they be integrated into the training of future journalists provided by professional schools and universities?

As the articles in this special issue show, academic research in journalism is very interested in these experiments (López-García et al., 2019), and addresses it by using various paradigms far from a deterministic reading grid. Beyond the discourses of professionals, a

large place is given to the point of view of the users. Their relationship to information has changed: more chosen and less constrained by the timing of the media. Mobile devices in the form of smartphones are transforming the temporality of consumption experiences, from legato forms to staccato forms (Dholakia et al., 2015). How do researchers manage to impose their own temporality on a field that is constantly changing? This distance is, however, the condition for detecting invariants, cycles, and ruptures in the rapid succession of innovations. In a context stressed by the increase and massive circulation of content (Scherer, 2011) and disinformation (Arbulu, 2018), the researcher establishes a fertile dialogue with the journalists and brings her/his contribution to reflect on the conditions for the quality of information delivered to the citizen in our still fragile democracies.

NOTES

- 1 Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/dnr-executive-summary>
- 2 Retrieved from <https://larevuedesmedias.ina.fr/chatbots-et-si-linfo-vous-etait-contee-par-messages-automatisees>
- 3 Retrieved from www.hellojam.fr
- 4 Retrieved from <https://larevuedesmedias.ina.fr/medialab-de-la-fp-linnovation-au-service-de-linformation>
- 5 Retrieved from www.labo148.com

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