

INTRODUCTION
TO THE ISSUE

ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNALISM:

emerging models and lived
experiences. Looking back and
looking forward.



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1 Introduction

The links between entrepreneurship, media and journalism are not new: Hardt (1998) shows how the great “captains” of the media industry of the industrial revolution and the turn of the 20th century received significant scholarly attention, sometimes to the detriment of the study of the daily journalistic work itself. However, the shift towards a greater online media consumption over the past three decades has coincided with the proliferation of new journalistic publications and businesses which experiment with ways to provide, support and fund journalistic activity online. To explain

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this renewed interest for the creation of new publications, we could mention among other things: the ability of journalists, beginner or experienced, to publish content directly online; uncertainties linked to the confidence, economic and identity crises of news media (Brüggemann et al., 2016); uncertainties of its revenue models after the financial crisis of 2007-2008, and consequently questions about the future of the journalistic employment market (Hang & Weezel, 2012). Yet throughout the 2000s, research on digital native media remained limited, with more attention being given to the transition of already established media (Smyrnaioi, 2013).

The growing space taken by entrepreneurship, its values and its practices in the journalistic world is happening in a context of interdependent changes in journalism and the media on several fronts at the same time: on the economic level (lowering of barriers to entry into the media market, emergence of native web players and of new information distribution channels, questioning of historical models of funding and distributing journalism products and the shift of the monopoly of access to advertising revenues towards new players), on the technological level (user generated content, a wider array of places where news is broadcasted and consumed, growing role of digital platforms in capturing data, audiences and revenues), on the social level (transformation of working relationships within and outside the industry, increase of the share taken by autonomous work, diversification of the ways to enter the journalistic labor market, and the “gig economy”), on the regulatory level (including the accentuation of media ownership concentration and of convergence strategies, helped by more flexible operating conditions for the culture and communication industries) or even on the cultural level (with in particular the possibility of experimenting with new formats and storytelling strategies, but through the redefinition of the relationship to readers) and ideological (greater attention given to individual entrepreneurship within the creative industries (Steedman et al., 2022), redefinition of career trajectories and of “desirable” of living paths since the turn of the 1970s). Together, these changes accompany and participate to shape new digital players, reorganize national and international media landscapes, but also redefine existing journalistic practices, organizational structures, and models of production, distribution and financing of journalism.

These changes are both profound and evolving: they created a favorable framework for the emergence of a multitude of

editorial projects on the fringes of established media players. Those projects are often supported by a small number of journalists, who take charge of all the aspects of the life of the media, from content production, to management and fundraising, including promotion, relations with readers and suppliers, etc. Journalists who embark on the adventure often define their activity as “entrepreneurial journalism” (Briggs, 2012) - to be distinguished (partially) from other forms of non-salaried employment such as freelance journalists (De Cock & de Smaele, 2016). Others mobilize several skills, know-how and qualities generally associated with entrepreneurship without defining their activity as such. However, these journalistic projects are all based on a certain level of deindustrialization of journalistic practice and work and aim to redefine them within flexible structures, by proposing new ways of doing and financing journalistic activity. To date, despite a growing interest in this academic object over the past fifteen years, the very definition of entrepreneurial journalism, the term most often used in the literature, remains incomplete and imperfect. Its current definitions remain “vague enough to result in a variety of constructed meanings” (Vos & Singer, 2016, p. 155). They insist either on the interactions between economic and editorial motivations, or on sensitivity to technological innovations, or even on the experimental aspect of this type of journalism, detached from the existing frameworks and constraints of traditional media.

Therefore, the turning point for entrepreneurial journalism could be roughly located at the turn of the 2010s, when the term has received a lot of attention from both practitioners, journalism educators and researchers in various geographical contexts. All are widely encouraged in this path by a handful of promoters and facilitators (Carbasse, 2015) who present journalistic entrepreneurship as one of the ways out of the crisis, encourage innovation, experimentation and risk-taking and envision entrepreneurial failure mostly in a positive way (Vos & Singer, 2016). However, with the hindsight of ten years of entrepreneurial journalism projects, we must acknowledge the extremely high rate of renewal of those publications, and that of internal resistance within the journalistic milieu.

Like other emerging journalistic and media practices, entrepreneurial journalism currently raises almost as many questions as it can provide answers. Nevertheless, many studies have highlighted the ability of this type of organizations to take into account other digital players previous failures, but also use digital-platforms from

the ground-up. Successful projects occupy editorial niches that extend the modalities of individualization of the journalistic offer and of piecemeal consumption. However, entrepreneurial journalism does not equate poor quality journalism, produced based on the expectations of algorithms: it is primarily within these structures that we are witnessing a resurgence of forms of long journalism, mooks or even hyperlocal journalism that fill the gaps left by other players in the media market.

In the absence of a consensus on what it is precisely and because of the heterogeneity of the publications it can give birth to, entrepreneurial journalism must be seen at the same time as an object and a set of hybrid practices based on a set of skills and objectives that can sometimes seem contradictory. In this context, research on entrepreneurial journalism needs to carry out several fronts: on the one hand, ask what both inherited structures and adaptive processes of entrepreneurial journalism allow journalists to do. On the other hand, we should investigate what the resulting publications are from a journalistic and socioeconomic point of view. Without denying the importance of this set of practices and structures, nor its contribution to the experimentation of a journalism “of tomorrow”, nor exaggerating its capacity to “save” journalism, it is clear that entrepreneurial journalism is one of the avenues for reflection to find a new media balanced ecosystem, in its ways of producing, distributing and financing information.

2 A multitude of experiments to support and feed the ongoing transitions

These editorial projects are emerging in a way that is both dispersed and congruent in as many national contexts. These will influence how they start and survive. Many case studies have thus documented the creation, trials and errors, achievements and deadends of entrepreneurial journalism projects, mainly in OECD countries (Berkey-Gerard, 2012; Briggs, 2012; Brouwers, 2017; Carbasse, 2019; Damian-Gaillard et al., 2009; Dvorkin, 2012; Meyer, 2011; Salles, 2019; Watson, 2017). However, an increasing number of extensive international, national or regional mapping also systematically reviews the diverse actors and contributory challenge or success factors in independent or digital native news outlets (Cook et al., 2022; Sembra Media, 2022; Splice, 2021; Warner et al., 2021).

Intermediary think tank institutions such as the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and other national and supranational political institutions have also tried to measure the extent of the phenomenon and to map the existing initiatives and their common points in distributing and financing their activity (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012; Charon, 2015; Naldi & Picard, 2012; Nicholls et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2015; Sirkkunen & Cook, 2012). One of the avowed objectives is, of course, to find a funding model that is sustainable for journalism, or at least capable of keeping the activity “afloat” while awaiting possible negotiations with platforms about their remuneration of journalistic content producers.

By design, entrepreneurial journalism structures stemming from a journalist-entrepreneur are small in size and scope and rely on the continuous involvement of a limited number of people that seek to establish themselves within a market by occupying a editorial niche or a market segment under-exploited by the competition: these players try to play simultaneously within the framework of established journalistic standards and practices, while also seeking to take advantage of the slowness of established players to test alternative distribution and revenue generating methods. These emerging projects also seek to create and feed communities of readers invested in the project itself or in the journalistic beat covered, by starting a real conversation with them (Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2018) or involving them through different ways in the editorial process. Thus, far from trying to replicate existing editorial and business models, these projects have gradually refined their operating model, as lessons emerged from the failure of previous projects. The replication of editorial structures inherited from traditional media observed during the 2000s, thus gave way to more defined informational niche - whether political, thematic, geographical or stylistic positioning - which is backed by a market serving an existing community that is still untapped (Carbesse, 2020).

Journalists remain mainly at the origin of the creation of new publications (rather than digital specialists or investors) (Nicholls et al., 2016) and continue to claim their belonging to the profession. Far from a radical break with the status-quo, entrepreneurial journalists seem to search ways to carefully differentiate from the existing ways of doing things while also affirming their journalistic legitimacy and belonging to the profession. This allow them to differentiate themselves from other online content creators (Gregersen & Ørmen, 2021). This claim to journalistic legitimacy is one of the keys to the journalistic and commercial

success of entrepreneurial journalism. In the same vein, entrepreneurial journalism also wishes to re-examine its relationships with actors in other fields of activity and with audiences (Carbasse, 2015; Grohmann et al., 2019; Hang & Weezel, 2012; Lee-Wright et al., 2012; Mercier & Pignard-Cheyne, 2014; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010).

Moreover, it is at the level of revenue generation and the assessment of the shortcomings of previous projects that entrepreneurial journalism stands out from other digital native journalistic publications: through their entrepreneurial sensitivity, projects born after 2010 tried to correct - without necessarily succeeding - the shortcomings of previous funding models, that one could qualify as “exaggeratedly optimistic” *a posteriori*. Conceived by journalists coming from traditional media, the first revenue models were almost all based on advertising revenue or subscriptions in a context of scarcity for both of these online, which Naldi and Picard had described as formational myopia (2012).

Trying to differentiate and economic survival also seem to be somewhat going together: for Nel and his colleagues (2020), entrepreneurial success seems to be linked to the degree of freedom of the press enjoyed by entrepreneurial journalists and by their ability to produce independent and original journalism. This degree of success is assessed, among other things, on the basis of revenue generated from readers, which is finally now one of the central elements of a funding model that combines a variety of revenue sources. However, far from being necessarily and systematically motivated by the search of profit, entrepreneurial journalists participate, on their own scale, in the necessary experimentation of contemporary journalism. By seeking to fill gaps in the existing media landscapes, by experimenting with new formats to “bring” journalism to the platforms where readers now consume content, by thinking about their distribution channels and their sources of revenue from the very beginning of the editorial project, entrepreneurial journalists also try to push back the future of journalism from the actors of the GAFAM. Careful consideration is given here to revenue diversification, based on resource allocation (Massey, 2018), nuanced understandings of value to generate audience revenue (Costera Meijer, 2022) and collaboration (Cook, 2021). There is also a growing number of practical resources to navigate and stimulate revenue experimentation (Radcliffe, 2021; Salaverría et al., 2019). However, these experiments are done by journalists, according to their own parameters, limits, objectives and value systems: the deployment of entrepreneurship in journalism is still done at an individual level within the journalistic sphere (Salles, 2019).

3 Entrepreneurship as an alternative to salaried jobs

In addition to the emergence of socioeconomic and technological conditions favorable to its sustainable establishment and growth, entrepreneurial journalism was also an attempt to respond to the scarcity of journalistic jobs at the turn of the 2010s, particularly in North America. Faced with pessimistic job prospects, both in the short and long term, one of the possible ways for new and unemployed journalists would be to create their own media and their own livelihood. These uncertainties have therefore encouraged and facilitated atypical work paths (Bozzi, 2020; Standaert, 2018) and relied on the creation and development of individual journalistic brands online: in these configurations, the journalist himself becomes the product (Aires, 2020) that must be promoted on platforms, both at an individual level and for its media (Klaß & Wellbrock, 2019). Branding efforts continue to be more important on the side of women journalists (Molyneux, 2019), often less promoted by the media that employ them or that commission freelance work from them.

The irruption of entrepreneurialism in the journalistic sphere now takes place at an individual level and is based both on the existence of the favorable conditions mentioned above, but also on an increasingly more precarious and on increased competition between young workers (Vallas & Christin, 2018). By valuing, among other things, experimentation and risk-taking, entrepreneurial journalism is not systematically synonymous with success, nor with the achievement of sufficient revenues to make a living. As the responsibility for their own success and that of their projects lies now upon individuals, but also by normalizing the precariousness that can accompany it while waiting for a success that will or will not come, entrepreneurial journalists put into light the transformations of work observed in journalism and other cultural and communication industries for a few years now (Cohen, 2015). On an individual level, all respond to varying degrees to a set of injunctions to flexibility, personal initiative and the individualization of personal success, based on a mythologized figure of the entrepreneur who would go from one project to the next. Moreover, entrepreneurship is often presented in speeches as meritocratic and generator of democratic structures, which does not always translate into reality (Flécher, 2019) as a multitude of external factors come into play: personal and professional networks, integration into the local journalistic environment and quantity of journalistic capital that can be

mobilized, ability to bring a project to investors, ability and desire to wear multiple hats at the same time (Carbasse, 2019).

Journalistic entrepreneurship must therefore also be understood and analyzed in this context of journalistic “disemployment”: there, creating one’s own income and one’s own journalistic outlets are no longer just desirable objectives to answer the many calls to become an entrepreneur. They also responded to a real need, at a time in media history when the dominant players no longer hired enough people to absorb the influx of new journalists tempted by the profession (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012). While research on entrepreneurial journalism must take the measure of its contribution to the quest for collective sustainability, it must also pay particular attention to the individuals themselves who carry out these type of projects and to their individual aspirations: if for some it is a “life project”, for others it can be a form of hope labor (Rafter, 2016) whose purpose can be to showcase their journalistic skills, build a portfolio and document their achievements (Allan, 2019). In other words, some entrepreneurial journalists are simply trying to show their employability to the media that can guarantee them better working conditions: while waiting to enter the profession “through a big door”, the amount of hope labor required to grow their entrepreneurial project represents a significant additional workload (Scolere et al., 2018) that must be assumed alone.

4 In the field: what are the challenges for entrepreneurial journalism and its structures?

Entrepreneurial journalism initiatives belong to the large group referred to as “digital native players”. As such, they are not immune to a number of major trends that have been documented for these companies: analyzing the path taken by some of these organizations during the last decade O’Brien and Wellbrock (2021) highlight both the difficulties encountered by these companies to gain a foothold on the media landscape and get their stories seen in markets that are economically and symbolically still dominated by established media brands. Trying to challenge established players in their respective markets and on platforms that structure and condition the visibility of online content, native players and entrepreneurial journalists must be able to be seen by Internet users on a regular basis and get readers to their stories. In addition, setting up a sufficiently diversified and sustainable income system in a context where the propensity to pay for

information is particularly low and where crowdfunding campaigns have not made it possible to replace other sources of recurrent revenues poses some specific – but urgent – challenges (Ballarini et al., 2018; Nielsen, 2021). Consequently, despite limited needs due to their small size, these publications encounter many hurdles before reaching a financial balance. Here, the funding from government, para-government or from private foundations to support entrepreneurial journalism projects, on an ad hoc or long-term basis, is crucial. It varies from one country to another: whereas public funding of the media is done within a framework reserved mainly to media established in Canada, French digital news players, led by Médiapart, succeeded very early on in carving out a place for themselves in the public funding of news media. This obviously does not mean that the question remains insoluble. However, no “turnkey” solution seems to be emerging beyond the repeated need to diversify sources of funding for journalistic work as much as possible.

Moreover, if for many of them “survival is success” (Bruno & Nielsen, 2012), the high rate of bankruptcies for entrepreneurial journalism projects is not synonymous with complete failure either: Brouwers (2017) shows how failure is perceived as something potentially useful for journalism entrepreneurs. It allows them to assess what worked and what needs to be improved in a future project. Moreover, success and failure are a fluid concepts, relying on the expectations of each entrepreneur: it is therefore “a question of perspective” (Nicholls et al., 2016) where the achievement of financial profitability can be eclipsed by other kinds of personal or journalistic considerations. Thus, having an impact on the journalistic environment and on the society in which one works are among other indicators that can animate journalist entrepreneurs who are starting out (Robinson et al., 2015). However, to be useful to the journalistic community, the failures of existing organisations must be assessed through structured and critical post-mortems, something that is done far too rarely (Truong, 2016). For example, O’Brien and Weelbrock have proposed their own set of criteria, identifying many dimensions to evaluate the success of a project and determining the potential conditions for the success, which include managerial considerations as much as the journalistic experience of entrepreneurs.

In fact, by having both an elastic definition of what entrepreneurial journalism is, but also of what constitutes a success or not of the projects that result from it, allows each actor to set their own objectives - even simply to use it as a step towards something else in their career. Willemsen and his colleagues (2021) add on this subject that the very notion of

economic rationality which would drive - in theory - all the actors in a market, often leaves room for a good deal of instinct, improvisation and extra-economic considerations. The two elements that make up the syntagm of entrepreneurial journalism remain crucial here: the financing of the activity already discussed above through entrepreneurial strategies, and the quality and journalistic relevance that emerges from the project, evaluated from a journalistic point of view. However, while quality journalism remains expensive to produce and distribute (Nel et al., 2020), the question arises of the leeway journalists have to build cases and conduct investigations when they find themselves isolated and do not have a solid enough financial base to face possible pressures or lawsuits.

5 How much entrepreneurship should go into new journalists training?

Another element that runs through the research conducted on entrepreneurial journalism is the role of training in journalism and the need to educate future journalists on entrepreneurship matters. While entrepreneurship is already gaining ground at the university level (Chambard & Stevens, 2021), its place in journalism training has been seriously debated from the start. In 2015, we already noted the fundamental role of journalism schools in the popularization of entrepreneurial journalism (Carbasse, 2015), something that does not seem to have been denied since: a good portion of research remains devoted to these questions and to documenting the appetite of both educators and students for entrepreneurship.

To cope with changes in job prospects and career strategies, Baines and Kennedy (2010) tried to see how it was possible to make students aware of the multiplicity of options available to them during their time in school. For this, a few programs led by entrepreneurial journalism enthusiasts have set up training programs dedicated solely to entrepreneurial journalism, notably at New York University (Claussen, 2011). Elsewhere, when raising awareness of entrepreneurship and new forms of work is not the primary objective, several studies have sought either to document student initiatives in entrepreneurial journalism and to evaluate them (Berkey-Gerard, 2012), either to survey teachers to find out what they consider necessary to transmit to students in this domain (Barrett Ferrier, 2013) or to invite to a collective reflection to do more and approach entrepreneurship in a transversal way throughout the curriculum (Chimbel, 2016).

At another level, journalism educators and researchers also document the willingness of the new generations to embark on entrepreneurial journalism, generally through surveys intended for one or more cohorts (Buschow & Laugemann, 2020; Liang, 2020; López-Meri et al., 2021; Singer & Broersma, 2019). In particular, those show how students fear economic uncertainty and their lack of entrepreneurial skills (López-Meri et al., 2021), but also that potential successful students must already have a certain number of personal qualities, something that is difficult to teach (Liang, 2020). To complement these snapshots of young journalists disposition to entrepreneurship, Buschow and Laugemman (2020) seek to identify the factors necessary to spot students who already demonstrate predispositions in order to better support them in this path.

Finally, several contributions tried to temper the expectations and promises that can be made about entrepreneurship, but also denounce a fallacious reasoning that equates journalistic entrepreneurship with a way out of crisis for journalism. Thus, in order to avoid “selling digital dreams” (Benedetti et al., 2015), it would be more productive to separate education on the economic dimensions of journalism intended to help them understand how to start and guide their career on the one hand, and on the other hand, to promote acritical and blissful entrepreneurship in this context (Levine, 2014).

6 Redrawing the boundaries of journalism

The deployment of the logics, values and skills linked to entrepreneurship within the journalistic field also has important implications for existing socioprofessional journalistic groups, their meta-discourse, and their redefinition of the conditions of access to the profession. The porosity of the borders between journalism and other sectors of activity goes so far as to question the determinants of their professional cultures, as well as some of their paradigms (Lewis & Usher, 2016). Entrepreneurial journalists are also often called upon to jointly assume management functions (relations with freelancers, editing work, relations with suppliers, etc.), sale of advertising space or subscriptions, promotion-marketing and, ultimately, a journalistic job for which they were trained for. In fact, entrepreneurial journalism participate to shift the identity boundaries of journalism by accelerating a process of deindustrialization already underway in the media sector. It also puts an end to, or at least gravely damages,

the “Chinese wall” put in place between commercial and journalistic activities which had prevailed, at least in theory, since the industrial revolution (Carbasse, 2015). Although largely already underway, these transformation brought by entrepreneurial journalism do not go without their share of ethical discomforts, individual or collective resistances and fears within professional groups as a whole. Thus, no existing mechanism to guarantee transparency on financial issues or potential conflicts of interest has yet resolved the discomforts related to the management of crowdfunding campaigns (Porlezza & Splendore, 2016). The existing ethical standards, have not yet foreseen scenarios in which the simultaneous pursuit of potentially contradictory objectives by entrepreneurial journalists, other than relying on the good faith of the actors concerned (Carbasse, 2015).

Without necessarily considering entrepreneurial journalism as a “big sellout” of the existing values of journalism (Benedetti, 2015), it seems that entrepreneurial journalists tried to shape their entrepreneurship practices around their existing framework of journalistic standards. Trying to find the difficult balance between a journalistic mission and economic stability remains an element of differentiation and a form of “quality and trust label” vis-à-vis other content producers online with which entrepreneurial journalists often share a precarious position in the larger media ecosystem (Gregersen & Ørmen, 2021). Moreover, the term journalism continues to carry a certain prestige and its own set of connotations that not all online content producers seem ready to live with (Fulton, 2015). Here again, far from trying to make a radical break, to “disrupt” the established journalistic order, most successful entrepreneurial journalism projects have built their business around their core journalistic values: the emblematic case of Médiapart, analyzed by Wagemans and his colleagues (2016) seems to be much more a reaffirmation of a certain number of fundamental principles than a break from existing norms. In a similar vein, it seems that potential entrepreneurial journalists students remain open to technological and organizational change as long as these can fit within the journalistic normative framework (Singer & Broersma, 2019).

Yet, here again, the organizational structures and practices that make it possible to bring together all the objectives, entrepreneurial and journalistic, have yet to be built: not only are we still finding reluctance to manage journalism and commercial activities simultaneously (Vos & Singer, 2016), but there is also a fear of the work overload that this generates (Hunter, 2016), including the mental workload of entrepreneurial

journalists. Consequently, the new generation of journalists and entrepreneurial journalists will have to be able to manage all the economic or technological constraints, since they find themselves in a position on the fringes of the journalistic field (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2019). Here, among the interesting avenues of reflection are the creation of new forms of collectives of workers and entrepreneurs, in the form of worker cooperatives (Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016), social entrepreneurship (Cha, 2020; Liang, 2020) or others, yet to be found.

7 Opening the perspective

This special issue is part of the growing body of work on entrepreneurial journalism over the past decade. One of the added value of the two articles selected for this issue is that they give another perspective than the one most often studied, that is Western and/or American media outlets.

By delving into the analysis of the revenue models and strategic choices of Mexican and Brazilian media outlets, all of them digital natives, this issue decompartmentalizes the understanding of issues related to entrepreneurial journalism, while echoing mechanisms, pitfalls and issues widely shared around the world. In other words, the research of Stefanie Carlan Da Silveira and Alessandra Natasha Costa Ramos (in Brazil) (2022) and Diego Noel Ramos Rojas and Sarely Martínez Mendoza (in two Mexican states) (2022), thanks to their very close proximity to the field and to economic, social and cultural contexts, question not only the uncertain viability of new forms of journalism, but also the validity of how entrepreneurial journalism is thought of by researchers.

In particular, their analyses highlight once again the importance of revenue sources and management practices deeply rooted in the business models of legacy media and of the previous century, proof that the paradigm shifts and discursive postures of these players, touting the innovative character of their positioning, often still combine, and sometimes obligatorily, effectively innovative aspects with others, clearly older such as (institutional) advertising and public subsidies.

One of the crucial points for the viability of these media, which are both young and run by small teams, is to achieve a shift in the relationship with their audiences. From both an editorial and economic point of view, the two studies highlight the increasingly important role played by audiences, whether subscribers or not, in the future of an entrepreneurial project in journalism. In this respect, journalism is

no different from other cultural products, but it is essential because for many of the media outlets analyzed in the two articles, one of the only tangible opportunities for growth remains the expansion of the subscriber base and the notoriety of the media among the public, rather than the aforementioned sources of revenue. The other opportunity, underlined by the analysis of the Mexican media outlets, is to be found in a broad diversification of the activities. Which, as an unavoidable return to the very old question of identity and legitimacy, forces each actor to make complex trade-offs between the essence of the journalist's profession, which is fairly shared and well expressed, and the choices he or she must make so that this essence has a chance of being expressed in the medium term, in a viable project.

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