

WHAT CAN FIGHTING TELL US ABOUT JOURNALISTIC IDENTITIES?¹



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ABSTRACT – In this essay we argue that journalists’ engagements, their fights, reveal, indeed, the dynamics of how their professional identities are constructed. By engaging in a struggle, the journalist seeks to state something about himself, for himself (and his profession group) and for the others (actors that participate in this public combat). The journalism fights reveal the way the professional group (or part of it) tries to manage its relationship with rival actors at the same time it expresses a public discourse about its practice, its identity. The journalism fights reveal the temporary or permanent alliance journalists establish within the professional group, as so with external actors who share the same interests. Fighting is also participating in the construction of a social problem, by converting some issues/situations specific to the professional group to a subject that interest the whole society.

Key words: Fighting. Identity. Professional group. Identity discourse. Journalism professional sociology.

O QUE OS COMBATES PODEM NOS DIZER SOBRE AS IDENTIDADES JORNALÍSTICAS?

RESUMO – Neste ensaio, argumentamos que o engajamento dos jornalistas, suas lutas, revelam as dinâmicas de construção das identidades profissionais. O jornalista, quando se engaja em um combate, tem a intenção de dizer algo sobre si, para si (para o grupo profissional) e para os outros (atores que participam do combate público). Os combates do jornalismo revelam a forma como o grupo profissional (ou parte dele) busca gerir as relações com atores concorrentes ao mesmo tempo em que exprime um discurso público sobre sua prática, sua identidade. Os combates do jornalismo também revelam as alianças, temporárias ou permanentes, que os jornalistas estabelecem no interior do grupo, mas também com atores externos, que partilham dos mesmos interesses. Combater é também participar da construção de um problema público, por meio da conversão de certas questões/situações específicas ao grupo profissionais em um tema de interesse da sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Combate. Identidade. Grupo profissional. Discurso identitário. Sociologia profissional do jornalismo.

¿QUÉ NOS PUEDEN DECIR LOS COMBATES SOBRE LAS IDENTIDADES PERIODÍSTICAS?

RESUMEN – En este ensayo, sostenemos que el compromiso de los periodistas, sus luchas, revelan la dinámica de construcción de sus identidades profesionales. Cuando el periodista entra en combate, él pretende decir algo sobre sí mismo, para sí mismo (para el grupo profesional) y para los demás (actores que participan en el combate público). Las luchas del periodismo revelan la forma en que el grupo profesional (o parte de él) procura gestionar las relaciones con sus competidores mientras expresa un discurso público sobre su práctica y identidad. Los combates del periodismo también revelan las alianzas, temporales o permanentes, que los periodistas establecen dentro del grupo, pero también con actores externos, que comparten los mismos intereses. Combatir es también participar en la construcción de un problema público, a través de la conversión de determinadas cuestiones/situaciones propias del colectivo profesional en un tema de interés para la sociedad.

Palabras clave: Combate. Identidad. Grupo profesional. Discurso identitario. Sociología profesional del periodismo.

1 Introduction

Professional and academic literature on journalism does not usually give much attention to the role that fighting has in building identities. Engaging (publicly or not), taking sides, or participating in a struggle is often seen as a minority practice, almost individualist – something commonly attributed to *partisan* journalism or activist media (Andrade & Pereira, 2022; Grohmann et al., 2019). This relative disregard is based on a widespread perspective in the field regarding the evolution of the professional group. This perspective puts forth the idea that the evolution of the profession is almost linear, starting from a combative and opinionated form of journalism which gradually

evolved towards a non-partisan informative style of journalism that maintains the values of objectivity and impartiality (Deuze, 2005; Marcondes Filho, 2000; Seabra, 2002).

If the media are seen as political actors (Durazo Herrmann, 2016) and if journalists take on professional roles that often involve some type of engagement (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018), why do we talk so little about the struggles of journalism? In fact, the literature seems to have placed a lot of emphasis on the political interests of media organizations and their relationships with power groups, yet neglects the interests of the professional group of journalists. This is why journalists' public positions remain in the background. It is almost as if journalists just mirror the editorial positioning of the media outlet they work for. Maybe their combative stance is personalized: the expression of public engagement is associated with the political preferences of those who write, classified as an attack on the ethical precepts of the category. Either way, these two explanations do not acknowledge the intermediate level: the professional group of journalists.

In this paper, we argue that the struggles of journalism should not be based solely on a normative reading, which labels journalist engagement as an individualist practice. The first reason is that one cannot analyze journalist identities by merely looking at their professional roles within newsrooms (Örnebring & Möller, 2018). Journalists are (also) social actors, with political and corporate interests that encourage (or justify) an "activist" stance toward certain situations. What's more, journalists who participate in public debate are guided, in part, according to these interests. Secondly, and more importantly, the engagement of journalists and their struggles shed some light on the dynamics behind the construction of professional identities. When journalists are engaged, they are saying something about themselves, for themselves (the professional group), and for others (actors participating in public debates).

So, in order to think about journalists and their struggles, we must ask ourselves what they are fighting for, how they are fighting it, and with whom they are fighting. These are the guiding questions for this paper, which seeks to discuss how fighting helps us think about journalistic identities. Before moving forward, however, we question the arguments of functionalist sociology, which tend to minimize (or even disqualify) the dimension of struggles in studies on professional journalism. We shall then use some examples from Brazilian journalism to look at components of identity that come about from some of

these fights. Our conclusions advocate for the need to include this performative dimension of fighting in studies on journalistic identities.

2 The end of combat journalism?

The history of Brazilian journalism and journalists – and much of Western journalism – has been built on an almost linear transition from militant and opinionated journalism to informative journalism concerned with reporting the facts (Charron & De Bonville, 2016; Sodré, 1999). This narrative is also connected to the “professionalization” (in the functionalist sense of the term) of journalists (Ruellan, 1993; Le Cam & Ruellan, 2004). Several historical milestones mark the different evolutionary “phases” of this activity in Brazil: the introduction of the lead in the 1930s (Albuquerque, 2009), the modernization of newsrooms and adoption of the standard of objectivity (Ribeiro, 2003), the construction of legal frameworks that make higher education a requirement for entry into the profession (Marques de Mello, 2002), or even the adoption of the “market journalism” model in Brazilian newsrooms since the 1980s (Hallin, 1996; Pereira, 2004). The result of all these phases is the construction of a professional identity largely detached from different forms of activism and political engagement – except for some marginalized sections of the group which tend to be disqualified by hegemonic journalism.

This historical and linear narrative has clouded the many situations in which journalists’ struggles have collaborated (and still collaborate) toward building their professional *ethos*. In addition to these turning points, these breaks from the standards, the history of journalism and journalists is marked by moments of continuity, negotiation, and resistance which are reappropriated in the construction of what is to be a professional (Moura et al., 2015; Pereira, 2011; Ruellan, 2017). Exploring these gaps that challenge this hegemonic narrative about the history of journalism allows us to understand the many moments that journalists have engaged publicly and how they have tried to manage the contradictions between political interests (in a broader sense of the term) and corporate groups.

The actions of some journalists against the military dictatorship of 1964-1985 lend some particular insight into the tension between two orders of identity discourse. One discourse describes and defends the professionalization of journalists and the modernization of newsrooms and the Brazilian cultural industry

(Ribeiro, 1994). The other discourse has to do with statements against the government and the restriction of individual freedoms by journalists who worked in the hegemonic media, particularly the alternative press (Abreu, 2005; Kucinsky, 2003). This apparent contradiction is quite evident in the trajectory of individuals such as Mino Carta, Samuel Wainer, and Alberto Dines, who are sometimes referred to as modernizers of Brazilian journalism, and sometimes as representatives of combat journalism (Abreu et al., 2003). Likewise, the introduction of a “market journalism” model shortly after the country’s re-democratization process led to the previous generation of journalists being cleared out of newsrooms that assumed a more combative, engaged, and politicized *ethos* (Kucinsky, 1998). At the same time, some of these former combatants migrated to the worlds of politics, literature, universities, and independent media as journalism itself became more dispersed and segmented.

3 The development of media segmentation

Journalism has never been a homogeneous profession. In fact, the profession is made up of several segments (Bucher & Strauss, 1961), each with its own set of practices, careers, and values. There are, to a certain degree, combative forms of journalism that exist within these segments. The existence of these segments provides us with a simple, mainstream definition proposed by Barbie Zelizer (1993) as an “interpretive community” that brings together journalists. There are several communities and several ways of talking about the professional group and the group dealing with social reality; there are several ‘journalisms’.

To do so we must deconstruct the idea that combat journalism is viewed from an extraordinary or individualist perspective. What interests us (in terms of studies on professional identities) is understanding both the circumstances that lead journalists to assume a combative stance and the labels that other segments of the professional group (Becker, 1963) attach to certain types of journalistic engagement in order to appropriate or disqualify them. Basically, this is about actors who legitimize their struggles, and detractors who dismiss these struggles as either marginal or individualist forms of journalism.

This difference is present, for example, in contemporary debates on media activism. Regardless of the political positions that independent media adopt, what is of particular interest to

us here is the criticism made by mainstream journalists who often classify independent media as non-journalistic. We are also interested in the reaction of media activists who have a strong reflective and performative dimension to their work and their identities and aim to build a “new grammar” of journalism (Andrade & Pereira, 2022). It’s not so much a discussion about whether or not journalists should engage, the more pertinent question to these two groups is: how do journalists engage and in what contexts should journalists be combative? The answers these journalists give (also recorded by researchers in the sociology of journalism) offer interesting insights into the relationship between combat, identities, and segments within the profession.

4 Circumstances of combat

Discussing whether combat journalism exists or not is not a particular focus of studies on journalistic identities; what is more important is analyzing the circumstances that lead journalists to take a side, how these journalists engage, and the reasons why they fight for their particular causes, and how corporate arguments get mixed with defending the public interest in these situations. What is more important than discussing the merit of these struggles is understanding them as identity positions, collective ways in which We, Journalists (Ruellan, 2011) talk about themselves while also dealing with the discursive management of their professional territory.

Therefore, the different ways journalists fought against the military dictatorship in Brazil and in defense of re-democratization – and the public speeches made during (and especially after) this event – must be seen as a form of managing an identity that was under pressure of modernization. Faced with pressure from discourses about their professionalism, journalists tried to preserve part of the political-intellectual prestige that has historically marked its identity (Pereira, 2011). The Federal Supreme Court in Brazil later ruled that a graduation degree would no longer be required to access the job market and work in the profession, which led to a few segments of journalism standing up and fighting against this decision, and ultimately once again to segmentation. On one hand, corporations argued for graduation degrees to no longer be a requirement to enter the job market, especially in terms of precariousness and loss of professional legitimacy. On the other hand, some defend the

public interest and quality of information, with the idea that society, in general, would be the one most harmed by this removal of the mandatory diploma. This strategy, as we shall see below, not only ensures that discourse on journalists' identities continues, but also strengthens and legitimizes the inclusion in the public debate of a struggle of an apparently corporate nature (Pereira & Maia, 2016).

More recently, the large number of journalists engaged in debates about fake news shows how, at a time when the lines between labor boundaries are blurred and journalistic authority comes under question, they are trying to reinforce the importance of their professional ideology. Thus, from a journalistic point of view, the problem of disinformation is a consequence of the circulation and consumption of unverified content (by professional journalists, of course), especially on social networks (Moretzsohn, 2019). In this sense, these journalists use a very stable element of their identity discourse (producing "true" discourses about the facts) to deal with the legitimacy crisis and the emergence of new actors interested in mediating in the public space. It should be noted that this attempt to reestablish and blur labor boundaries during the "crisis" has repeated throughout the history of journalism, as shown in works from Costa (2005), Philibert (2017) and Ruellan (2011), and Moura et al. (2015).

5 Comrades-in-arms

We always fight with someone. In a way, combat is an expression of alliances within a social or professional space between actors and segments, but also with participants outside the group. Regardless of the relevance of the cause or the results of a particular struggle, it expresses, through an us versus them relationship, the tactics, competitions and rivalries, the game of interactions, and the interests of certain groups of actors to associate themselves with or distinguish themselves from each other.

The journalists and their fight against the 1964 dictatorship cannot be dissociated from the coalitions they built with other militants, activists, and intellectuals (Kucinsky, 2003), with whom many of them often shared the same spaces of sociability (Pereira, 2011). Engaging with these actors not only involves taking a political stance (in defense of democracy, for example) but also denotes a step towards creating their identity.

Likewise, the end of the mandatory journalism diploma and the ensuing debates led to journalists being divided between professional elites (those against mandatory graduation as a requirement to work in the profession) and journalists at the bottom of the salary pyramid who allied themselves with trade unions, academics, and left-wing parliamentarians to establish a Constitutional Amendment Proposal (PEC 206/2012) that advocates for graduation degrees to be mandatory. By expanding these alliances, the group sought to associate its claim with the broader defense of society's interests, as journalists would be responsible for "defining and constituting social phenomena, thus contributing to the formation of public opinion regarding facts and events of life" (Brasil, 2012, p. 8).

Lastly, when debating fake news, journalists often align themselves with actors from scientific, political, and legal circles in denouncing the negative effects that spreading this type of content has on society. Concerning the covid-19 pandemic, journalists and scientists working together to expose scientific misinformation was of particular importance as these two actors shared common interests and similar values in terms of the credibility of information. What we have here is a kind of interdependence between these groups of actors who have seen their epistemic authorities threatened by the infodemic (Oliveira, 2020).

6 What can being combative tell us about journalistic identities?

The engagements and struggles of journalism are important resources for identity construction. They reveal how the professional group (or part of it) seeks to manage relationships with competing actors while expressing a public discourse about their practice and identity. Being combative is, therefore, a way for journalists to talk about themselves, to legitimize their identity to a wider audience while also instilling a feeling of unity in the group. This mainly occurs because their fights express the defense of interests primarily in the corporate sphere, but also because they unite differing (or even competing) segments in the workspace around a single cause.

The fights that journalism wage reveal the alliances (temporary or permanent) that journalists establish within the group, but also with external actors who share common interests. These alliances have a dual role: first, they facilitate access to public debate, reinforcing the

social relevance of causes usually limited to the interests of journalists. The success of some of these fights depends on these actors' ability to associate their demands with the defense of values such as individual freedom, truth, quality of information, and commitment to the public interest. Secondly, choosing their "comrades-in-arms" shows the willingness of these actors to publicly expose elements of their identity discourse by associating with other groups that share common values and interests. Analyzing these alliances helps shed light on and understand the continual blurring and sharpening of the professional boundary (Ruellan, 1997). To paraphrase a saying: "tell me who you fight with and I will tell you who you are".

Being combative also means participating in the construction of a public problem by taking certain issues/situations that are specific to journalists and converting them into topics of interest to society. By promoting a problem, journalists act not only as mediators of public debate and gatekeepers of the media agenda but also (frequently) assume the role of "cause developers" (Aubin et al., 2022), interested in justifying and popularizing a problematic situation (censorship, political repression, misinformation, etc.) among public opinion.

Studying the struggles of journalism requires one to let go of the futile opposition between activism and professionalism to be able to describe and analyze how public engagement and the struggles undertaken by journalists are permanent and constantly changing, reinforcing and renewing their identity discourse for themselves and society.

NOTES

- 1 This article was partly presented at the opening conference of the Rencontres internationales de recherche sur le journalisme/ International research meetings on journalism, from December 8 to 10, 2022, in Bordeaux (France).

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