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NEW ROLES OF SOURCES IN JOURNALISM:

a study on information leaks (1970-2020)



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DOI: 10.25200/BJR.v21n3.2025.1804

Received in: January 15th, 2025

Desk Reviewed in: April 27th, 2025

Desk Review Editor: Marcos Paulo da Silva

Revised on: November 23rd, 2025

Revised on: December 18th, 2025

Approved on: December 23rd, 2025

How to cite this article: Amaral, M. C. G. R. (2025). NEW ROLES OF SOURCES IN JOURNALISM: a study on information leaks (1970-2020). *Brazilian Journalism Research*, 21(3), e1804. DOI: 10.25200/BJR.v21n3.2025.1804

ABSTRACT – This article analyzes changes in the profile of sources and the dynamics between journalists and sources of information leaks in five episodes: Pentagon Papers; Cablegate; the Snowden case; Panama Papers; and Vaza Jato. Based on the analysis of the corpus, five markers were established as methodological operators: the identity of the source; dynamics of approach; dynamics of collaboration; alleged motivation; and consequences. The investigation showed how new information and communication technologies play a fundamental role in altering the profile of leak sources and the dynamics they establish. It also pointed to the transformation of collaboration's characteristics and the prominence of the sources. Thus, we seek to show that the expansion of the role of sources influences the construction of news as a product and the media narrative as an authorized version of the facts, challenging traditional perspectives regarding subjectivity in journalism, the composition of journalistic authority, and the limits of the journalistic field.

Keywords: Journalism, Leaks, Sources, Subjectivity

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**NOVAS ATUAÇÕES DAS FONTES NO CAMPO DAS
PRÁTICAS JORNALÍSTICAS:
um estudo sobre vazamentos de informação (1970-2020)**

RESUMO – O artigo analisa alterações no perfil de fontes de vazamento de informação e em suas relações com os jornalistas em cinco episódios ao longo de aproximadamente 50 anos: Pentagon Papers; Cablegate; o caso Snowden; Panama Papers e Vaza Jato. A partir da leitura do corpus foram estabelecidos, como operadores metodológicos, cinco marcadores: identidade; dinâmica de aproximação; dinâmica de colaboração; motivação alegada e consequências. A investigação mostrou como as novas tecnologias de informação e comunicação exercem papel fundamental na alteração do perfil das fontes de vazamentos e nas dinâmicas instauradas por elas. Também, apontou transformações nas características de colaboração e protagonismo das fontes. Procuramos ainda mostrar que a atuação das fontes exerce influência sobre a construção da notícia, enquanto produto, e sobre a narrativa midiática, enquanto versão autorizada dos fatos, tensionando perspectivas tradicionais a respeito da subjetividade no jornalismo, da composição da autoridade jornalística e dos limites do campo jornalístico.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo. Vazamentos. Fontes. Subjetividade.

**NUEVAS ACTUACIONES DE LAS FUENTES EN EL ÁMBITO DE
LAS PRÁCTICAS PERIODISTAS:
un estudio sobre las fugas de información (1970-2020)**

RESUMEN – Este artículo analiza los cambios en el perfil de las fuentes y la dinámica entre periodistas y fuentes de filtraciones de información en cinco episodios: Papeles del Pentágono; Cablegate; caso Snowden; Papeles de Panamá; y Vaza Jato. A partir del análisis del corpus, se establecieron cinco operadores metodológicos: identidad; dinámica de aproximación; dinámica de colaboración; supuesta motivación; y consecuencias. La investigación demostró cómo las nuevas tecnologías de la información y la comunicación desempeñan un papel fundamental en la alteración del perfil de las fuentes de filtraciones y la dinámica que establecen. También demostró la transformación de las características de colaboración y protagonismo de las fuentes. Así, buscamos demostrar que la expansión del rol de las fuentes influye en la construcción de la noticia como producto y en la narrativa mediática como versión autorizada de los hechos, desafiando las perspectivas tradicionales sobre la subjetividad en el periodismo, la composición de la autoridad periodística y los límites del campo periodístico.

Palabras clave: Periodismo. Fugas. Fuentes. Subjetividad.

1 Introduction

Within traditional journalism, Ruellan (2006) states that media discourse on current events is built on the relationship between journalists, sources, and the public. Other actors play an essential role in this nowadays, such as platforms, media institutions, and the dynamics of social networks themselves; however, we cannot consider the changes that have affected journalism as a profession, as a business, as a way of knowing reality, including its very nature

and social role, without talking about the journalistic source. This type of source is an important actor with new characteristics and, as a result, is both a subject and object of new processes in journalism.

Using this as a backdrop, this article presents partial results from a research project (Amaral, 2024) that studies the changing relationship over almost fifty years between sources and journalists as it pertains to information leaks. This sample includes major information leaks to the press between 1970 and 2020. The following information leaks included in this paper were significant both internationally and in Brazil, and are symbolic from a journalistic point of view as they helped (and still do) shape the practice, identity, memory, and subjectivity of journalism: the Pentagon Papers (1971), Cablegate (2010), the Snowden Case (2013), Panama Papers (2015) and Vaza Jato (2020). “Vaza Jato” refers to the leak of messages exchanged via Telegram between the prosecutor and the judge of Operation Car Wash. Operation Car Wash (2014 to 2021) was a series of investigations into fraudulent management and corruption in the private sector and the Brazilian government.

Technology has come to take on an increasingly important role in obtaining, storing, and transmitting information, and has also resulted in an exponential increase in the volume and sophistication of data. This has led to breaks and continuities in journalist-source relationships, but the effects of the technologization of information on contemporary journalism have also led to a new type of source.

This article addresses the changing profiles and dynamics of sources that have provided leaks to the press in recent decades and how they have resulted in the creation of new source typologies, inserting new subjectivities – or a greater degree of subjectivity – in the news as a product, and also in the media narrative on a particular event. Due to the strength of these sources, this article will also analyze the role they play in the constant reshaping of journalism.

The changes we discuss with regards to the profile or performance of these sources are part of much larger changes within journalism, where fragmented production and distribution centers, different consumption habits, and new business models have generated a new journalistic ecosystem (Alves, 2006; Bruns, 2011; Anderson et al., 2013; Deuze & Witschge, 2016).

2 The methodology and working behind the scenes

Investigating the repositioning of sources in the context of information leaks requires us to first discuss the journalist-source dynamics and not the finished news story released to the public. As such, the research corpus consists mainly of the following biographies, autobiographies, and reportage books that give insights into behind-the-scenes accounts and problematization of the source's role: *Secrets* by Daniel Ellsberg, 2003; *The Snowden Files* by Luke Harding, 2014; *Permanent Record* by Edward Snowden, 2019; *No Place to Hide* by Glenn Greenwald, 2014; *WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy* by David Leigh and Luke Harding, 2011; *README.txt* by Chelsea Manning, 2022; *The Panama Papers: Breaking the Story of How the Rich and Powerful Hide their Money* by Bastian Obermayer and Frederik Obermaier, 2020; and *Vaza Jato. Os bastidores das reportagens que sacudiram o Brasil[Vaza Jato. Behind the Scenes of the Reports that Shook Brazil]* by Letícia Duarte, 2020. Not all of these publications had written accounts from both sides (source and journalist), so we filled this gap with interviews published on the following websites: CNN, Brasil 247, Veja.com (Walter Delgatti\Vaza Jato), and The New York Times (Neil Sheehan\Pentagon Papers).

Our research methodology was constructed in stages, in what Braga (2011) classifies as a continuous exercise of theoretical and methodological decision-making. The first stage was a free reading of the selected leaks from both academic and journalistic sources. We then performed an exploratory reading of the corpus in order to create an analytical matrix and search for patterns that could systematize the sources' actions and their ramifications. This led to establishing the following five methodological markers: source identity, alleged motivation, approach dynamics, collaboration dynamics, and consequences. The analytical phase involved selective reading (Gil, 2006), in which the more relevant parts of the corpus were selected by applying the aforementioned markers. Lastly, the interpretative phase involved establishing a relationship between the corpus and other readings, concepts, and theoretical constructs.

At the end of the exploratory and analytical phases, two aspects became clear: a drastic change in the profile of information leak sources, where the elitist-style of sources that used to predominate were now coming to an end. For example, the over-forty career bureaucrat with a top hierarchical position leaves the

institution, and a younger person with a lower hierarchical rank from that same institution (and consequently less committed to the institution) comes in to fill that position, sometimes with no higher education, but works in the field of information technology.

The second aspect has to do with behavioral characteristics of the sources that, although existed previously, had changed or increased significantly, such as collaboration and leadership.

Collaboration primarily refers to the source-journalist dynamics. Knowledge of journalistic practices – and the potential use of this knowledge to further the self-interest of sources – is nothing new. Fausto Neto (2017, p. 224) had already seen the transformation of sources into “actors who begin to edit their relationships with journalists, like mediators insofar as they master technical operations that used to only be in the hands of journalists”. What is new is the use of this knowledge in collaboration with journalists – either at the source’s request or out of necessity for the journalist. We then set out to establish this difference: a collaborative source is one that not only provides information but also participates (to a certain degree and with the journalist’s consent) in the newsmaking process.

The second characteristic refers to the prominence of the source, something we call protagonist sources. We use this term, originally coined by Christofolletti (2016), but in a slightly different way. According to Christofolletti, the prominence of the source is revealed once they stop being just sources and actually increase their sphere of influence and proactive movements, ultimately “overshadowing journalists and their media outlets”. Christofolletti places Edward Snowden, the source of the Snowden case, and Julian Assange, founder and editor of the WikiLeaks website, in this category.

The question that arises regarding this notion of protagonism is: why exactly did Snowden and Assange overshadow journalists and their media outlets? Certainly not just because they are initiative-taking –Chaparro (2007, 2014) had previously highlighted consequences behind the professionalization of sources, but not the ability to obscure. Could it be because they made their collaborative nature clear or because they challenged journalistic practices? Or could it be because they didn’t remain anonymous and became famous, or because of the consequences of their actions? I found it necessary to try and qualify this protagonism by investigating its causes and consequences.

The prominence of sources, for this article, is not only about sources being proactive by providing journalists with information; it is also about sources, through their own actions, creating new narratives around themselves, regardless of the news coverage of the leaked content.

By their very nature, collaborative sources and protagonist sources – classifications proposed in this article to integrate the taxonomy of sources – challenge certain journalistic concepts established by newsmaking studies (Martino, 2014) and (Wolf & Figueiredo, 1999), and by the notion of journalistic authority (Zelizer, 1992, 2014) by adding new subjectivities to the news building and the dominant narrative. Their actions, in the current fluid media landscape, are forces that act within and on the journalistic field as part of its constant reshaping (Di Salvo & Porlezza, 2020). We should keep in mind that even though the identification and analysis of the new classifications and characteristics in this study are limited to sources of information leaks, there is no reason to believe that they are exclusive to them since their constitutive conditions – which we shall look at later – can be found, to a greater or lesser degree, in other kinds of sources.

3 Subjectivity in journalism

In choosing to make public the information he had on the United States government’s surveillance program, Edward Snowden made two decisions: the first was to hand over the information to journalists, rather than disclosing it himself. The second was to carefully select those journalists.

In his memoirs, Snowden said that a website with a policy of total transparency, like WikiLeaks, would not meet his needs. He stated that he wanted a partner capable of assessing the potential dangers of disclosing classified information and that would help explain it by placing it in a technological and legal context. “Cooperating with some kind of media would defend me against the worst accusations of rogue activity, and correct for whatever biases I had, whether they were conscious or unconscious, personal or professional” (Snowden, 2019, p. 208).

Snowden uses the figure of the journalist as a guarantee of objectivity, of factual news, which would prevent the information

from being tainted by his personal opinion. However, when looking for professionals to contact, his criteria were much more subjective. It is important to note that when approaching the press, Snowden did not opt for traditional journalists: he chose documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras and Glenn Greenwald, who is now a journalist, but when Snowden contacted him, he was better known for his work in the legal field, despite being a blogger and columnist for *The Guardian*. In his book, Snowden recounts that he spent quite some time mulling over which journalists to select, but he ultimately decided to let the system he was trying to expose do the work for him: “I decided that my best partners would be journalists who the national security already had its eye on” (Snowden, 2019, p. 214).

This apparent ambiguity of the source, which protects against its own subjectivity through its relationship with professionals with strong opinions and positions, is a discussion that resurfaces from time to time about the place of subjectivity (or the impossibility of objectivity) in journalism. Steensen (2017) points out how many of the dichotomies in journalism – hard and soft news, entertainment and information, fact and opinion, emotion and rationality – have become blurred, making current journalism a complex field in which subjectivity and objectivity coexist in various ways.

However, Steensen points out that the subjective perspective of journalists is most clearly expressed on social media. More and more, professional journalists are interacting with their audiences in a more personal way, and consequently decreasing the level of representativeness of the institutions they work for. Expressing emotion and the tactic of drawing on details of their own private lives is nothing new in specific types of journalism, both old and recent, such as opinion and literary-based, etc. (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012). However, with social media, journalists who normally work within a traditional paradigm of objectivity are beginning to see themselves as private individuals with subjective reflections who do not seem to lose any credibility as news journalists (Steensen, 2017).

There are other subjectivities involved in building a news story other than those of reporters. A common occurrence in “objective” journalism is that the emphasis given to the “character” of a story fills that story with subjectivity and (when the reporter is lucky) emotion. But building a news story is much more complex than that; there are camera operators, investigators, editors: journalism is almost always a team effort. What we are arguing in this article is

that sources, through high levels of collaboration and protagonism, significantly increase their participation – and consequently the inclusion of different subjectivities – in the construction of news and the dominant journalistic narrative (to reiterate, the scope of this research was limited).

4 A new source profile

The identity of the source is the first aspect to consider when studying source-journalist dynamics in information leaks. It will largely determine everything else. The aim is to profile the source, assess the power it has to influence leaked content, and observe how it accesses the information, as well as its ability to copy, store, and transport the data.

New information and communication technologies have been reshaping newsrooms and the news ecosystem on the whole (Alves, 2006; Bruns, 2011; Anderson et al., 2013; Deuze & Witschge, 2016). In the leaks we studied, the importance they assumed at all stages of the process became clear, from the complexity of the information, storage, transmission, the dynamics of approaching the press (or choosing other avenues such as direct publication on the internet, whistleblowing sites like WikiLeaks, or social media), and the adaptations that journalism itself has been forced to make (international collaboration, technological innovations, new types of professionals inside newsrooms). Technological expertise, both on the part of the source and the journalist (or the lack thereof, in some cases), proved to be a key aspect in almost all leaks. Analyzing the identity of the sources in the reports chosen for this article has shown us that the profile of the source has also changed as a result of the technologization of information.

The profile of sources has changed because the ones who have access to information have changed. Nowadays, young people, fresh out of college (or not) and with high levels of technological skill, have access to complex and sensitive data. This brings an end to a kind of elitism in source profiles – and seems to be the main characteristic of sources responsible for digital leaks, as classified by McCurdy (2013) in a comparison to analog leaks. In the 1970s, during the Pentagon Papers era, only professionals at the top of the hierarchy had access to confidential information. One such professional was

Daniel Ellsberg, the source of the leak, who was an analyst at the Pentagon for years. A Harvard economics graduate, Ellsberg was employed by the Rand Corporation, a research NGO engaged in the military aspects of the Cold War. Ellsberg had the highest level of clearance possible for a civilian, a rank that, in military terms, falls somewhere between a lieutenant general and a major general.

That was the image that The Guardian journalist Glenn Greenwald had in mind when he met Edward Snowden in a hotel lobby in Hong Kong in June 2013. “I thought he was going to be a considerably older bureaucrat”, he told journalist Luke Harding (Harding, 2014, p. 11). The level of privileged access to top-secret material that Snowden seemed to have, and the sophistication of his political analysis, was not something Greenwald was prepared for. He expected Snowden to be a veteran of the political scene. “Perhaps this is Snowden’s son, I thought, or perhaps his assistant, who was going to take us to Snowden himself. Every possibility imaginable ran through my head, and none of them made any sense” (Greenwald, 2014, p. 46).

Snowden himself acknowledges that, although whistleblowers can come out of any level of institution, digital technology has brought us to an age in which “for the first time in recorded history, the most effective will come up from the bottom, from the ranks traditionally least incentivized to maintain the *status quo*” (Snowden, 2019, p. 204). The dependence that any decentralized organization (including the Intelligence Community) has on computers means that the lowest levels of the corporate hierarchy are filled with technologists whose legitimate access to vital infrastructure does not correspond to their level of authority – nor to their commitment to the institution; employees whose access to vital information is completely disproportionate to their ability to influence decisions and change, through protocol, the institutional culture. Snowden did not have a college degree and had not even finished high school. Nevertheless, his position at the National Security Agency as one of approximately one thousand system administrators gave him authorization to access a great deal of classified information that even other users with top-secret authorization could not access.

The source of the Cablegate leak, soldier Chelsea Manning, had in some ways a very similar profile to that of Snowden. At 23 years of age, she had access to confidential information thanks to her position as an intelligence analyst: “Lower-level analysts whose job is to filter information to prepare reports and analyses end up having

broader, deeper, and more specialized knowledge than people higher up the hierarchical chain” (Manning, 2022, p. 206).

In the cases studied for this paper, the source of the Panama Papers leak is the only one that remains anonymous to this day. He called himself “John Doe”, a placeholder name that U.S. police officers often give to unidentified male bodies. Based on the frequency and recency of the information provided, the source appeared to have had direct access to the Mossack Fonseca database, a Panamanian law firm specializing in creating offshore accounts for shell companies (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2020). Based on the journalists’ accounts, it’s impossible to discern the source’s age or exactly what his relationship with the firm might be. The only discernible fact is his technological capability to access all kinds of data. “It’s odd. When we look at the files, we come across emails exchanged just a few days before. It’s almost as if we were accessing Mossack Fonseca’s material in real time, as if we were inside the law firm that provides services to so many criminals” (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2020, p. 50).

Technology is enabling a different type of source; one that is younger and holds a lower hierarchical position. Walter Delgatti, a source in the Vaza Jato case, adds an extra wrinkle to the types of sources. He is an example of how sources of classified and sensitive information nowadays can be distanced from those involved in the leak. This distance is not only physical, but also refers to one’s possibility of being affected by the leaked content: unlike Manning, Snowden, Ellsberg, and, apparently, John Doe, who all worked in direct contact with the leaked information.

Delgatti, a 30-year-old law student, admits he had no interest in politics: “I never voted. Even when I was younger, I never voted. I always justified absence” (Delgatti, 2021). Delgatti claimed he had no connection to the individuals involved in the leak; he did not do anything intentionally (he was hacking someone else for other reasons) and, despite supporting the Lava Jato operation at the time, claimed to have no qualitative knowledge of the situation – either legal, behind the scenes, or political – of the investigations or their ongoing.

5 Sources and their collaboration

The sheer volume of information available on the internet today, the sophistication of data, and new forms of transmission

are forcing journalists to develop new technical skills. The Guardian journalist, Luke Harding, recounts that everyone involved in the Snowden case quickly went from novices to cryptography experts: “Very quickly, we had to significantly improve our espionage skills” (Harding, 2014, p. 115). Similarly, the technologization of information has been behind new collaborative strategies in journalism, such as international investigative journalism (Hume & Abbot, 2017), and public participation in activities had previously been exclusive to journalists (Bruns, 2011). Sources, whether leaks or not, are also subject to the same processes. In his doctoral thesis on collaborative journalism, Freitas (2016) pointed out that, for each of the major leaks, “not only journalists, but also sources become qualified for investigations and joint work, and through their own experience or by seeking information on prior news reports, they are better prepared to make individual choices” (p. 118).

A collaborative source has a certain level of involvement with journalists and the daily routine of news production (which is usually indicated at the time of initial contact). For example, a source can simply hand over the information to the journalist, no questions asked or involvement of any kind, or a source can negotiate how that particular material will be used, as Ellsberg did when he demanded the disclosure of the study in its (almost) entirety. Collaboration can occur on two fronts: understanding the facts or understanding the decisions made behind the investigation and dissemination of them, the editorial decisions. Edward Snowden, the most cooperative source in the investigation, exemplifies both types of collaboration. Guardian journalist Glenn Greenwald recounts that, in the Hong Kong hotel room where he first met Snowden, he was sometimes overwhelmed by the material the source presented – graphs, tables, memos – as he went through patiently and explained each one, contextualizing and relating the information (Harding, 2014). This lasted a week, during which time the news reports were written. Before meeting with the journalist, Snowden had already written up a glossary explaining the main technical terms and acronyms used by the US National Security Agency. He even insisted that all espionage documents be sent exclusively to the targets of that surveillance. “He thought that the Hong Kong media should have the information relating to espionage in Hong Kong, the Brazilian material should go to the Brazilian media, and so on. He was categorical on this point” (Harding, 2014, p. 120).

John Doe, the pseudonym for the source in the Panama Papers leak, simply passed on the massive amount of material to German journalists Bastian Obermayer and Frederik Obermaier. However, he showed from the very beginning that he wouldn't be quite so passive: "This story is similar to the Snowden documents, except that they are published in German. You need to partner with the New York Times or an English newspaper of the same caliber" (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2020, p. 18).

It is important to define what is meant by sources being involved in building the news. It can be argued that all sources are involved in building the news insofar as they provide the information (the facts and data) that will be passed on to the journalist. This is the truth. It's also true that some proactive sources, especially press offices, sometimes not only "got" the story they wanted published, but also the press release itself, which is re-published almost in its entirety. These kinds of interferences, however, are prerogatives of the source and do not constitute collaborative work. A collaborative source works with the journalist, either on his or her own accord or at the journalist's request, out of necessity or convenience.

The relationship between a journalist and their source, when building news stories, is part of what we call the productive practices of journalism. The way a news story is built and narrated gives it a certain meaning and influences, to some level, how readers will understand it. The study of these paths, rules, and practices for building news is called newsmaking (Martino, 2014). Newsmaking research generally takes an ethnographic approach and is able to identify not only continuities but also breaks from journalistic practices (Wolf & Figueiredo, 1999).

Newsmaking takes many aspects into account, one of which is the criteria of newsworthiness, described by Wolf and Figueiredo (1999) as a set of criteria that establishes the suitability of each event to be transformed into news. Once the newsworthiness of an event has been established, the next question is: out of all the available facts, which ones can be published, and which ones are the most relevant to be published? This is where the concept of news value comes in. News values establish criteria for selecting material, and consider the following four characteristics: content, availability of material, audience, and competition. The second characteristic listed here is the one that most interests us: the availability of material.

With the number of professionals hired in newsrooms continuing to decrease, along with the instantaneous publication of

news, there is increasing consideration given to the ease and speed with which an event can be covered: how accessible the event is to journalists, how technically manageable it is within standard journalistic methods. This is why Wolf and Figueiredo highlight the material from sources that can be easily incorporated into production routines. The large-scale leaks we analyzed for this paper show that collaborative sources can make an event more accessible and available by being able to compensate for a journalist's lack of technical knowledge about the content of the leak, thus increasing its news value.

6 The prominence of sources

Leaking information to the press is just the beginning. Once the content becomes news, the leak itself becomes news. The media, therefore, communicates different aspects of an event: 1) the content that was supposed to remain secret, 2) the disclosure (who leaked it and how it happened), and 3) the news coverage of said disclosure.

Quéré (2012) highlights two dimensions of an event: an immediate experience and an object of investigation. An immediate experience occurs at the time the actual event occurs, and the way it affects collective daily life and individuals (França & Lopes, 2017). By stimulating emotions in people, the event becomes something to understand, and thus gains a second life. It transforms into an object of which we become aware, and consequently acquires new forms of operation and new characteristics. These two dimensions coexist; they are intrinsically related and it is impossible to separate them. When major information is leaked, it's often not just the immediate effects of that leak that are considered. The leak itself becomes an object of analysis and investigation, generating controversy and contradictory opinions. This elevation to the status of an object of discussion is even more pronounced in leaks where the source plays a prominent role.

In a literary sense, key sources are the protagonists in journalistic narratives that follow the leak and, with varying degrees of familiarity with journalistic/media protocols and procedures, also look to share their version of events while remaining visible.

The space in which all of this happens primarily occurs in the media.

The media can be the place where events arise and are produced (in their existential dimension), and also the space where events are echoed (and acquire their second life) (...) Sometimes this second life is so transformative and causes so much impact that it acts equally (and again) as an existential event. This, in turn, will be commented on and will transform, again, into a second life, in a growing spiral. (França, 2012, p. 16).

One phenomenon that sustains França's growing spiral is the recirculation of news on social media (Zago, 2011, 2017). This is where the so-called cyber event emerges (which is either generated within social media or from an external event that unfolded on social media), which even becomes the subject of news from traditional media outlets, in a feedback loop. Much of the narrative constructed around the protagonist sources and by the protagonist sources takes place online with the circulation and recirculation of news, comments, and testimonials, or in campaigns supporting the sources, as was the case with the "I am Bradley Manning" campaign, launched on social media by artists and activists.

Nevertheless, the ease with which information circulates online is not the only factor that determines whether a source will be a protagonist or not. The study on sources of information leaks showed that the identity of the source of a given leak (whether it remained anonymous or went public, whether it fought or surrendered, whether it fled or was arrested) are all elements that determine if the public and the press view the leak as being less interesting compared to the leaked content (this happened in the Walter Delgatti case, the source of the Vaza Jato leak, and in the Panama Papers leak). Or, conversely, the leak will take on a life of its own (with the source being the protagonist) and become yet another media narrative produced as a result of the leak (as in the cases of Daniel Ellsberg, Chelsea Manning, and Edward Snowden, sources in the Pentagon Papers, Cablegate, and Snowden scandals, respectively).

When the stated motivations and consequences (two of the five established markers) are systematized in the research, we found that the source's protagonism seems to be closely linked to its motives, and may shape, to some degree, its future: Ellsberg, Snowden, and Manning all became activists and speakers, symbols of the values that led them to leak the information. This is different from Delgatti (Vaza Jato), whose motivations were not as apparent as he seemed to have ulterior motives, and only reappeared in newspaper headlines as part of a shady criminal/political party dilemma¹.

After the diplomatic cables leak (Cablegate), Chelsea Manning, who was already in confinement, saw her position in the media change; the leaks were no longer the most important topic. “The treatment I received from the American Armed Forces became a story in itself in the press” (Manning, 2022, p. 176). At the time, the German Parliament’s Human Rights Commission wrote a protest letter criticizing the U.S. government. More than two hundred professors from the law schools of Harvard and Yale – including a former professor of then-President Barack Obama – signed a letter condemning the conditions under which Manning was being held, labeling them as a violation of human rights. However, three days after the start of her trial, Manning saw her media prominence take a back seat to another leak. On June 5, 2013, news broke of Edward Snowden’s leak.

It was a difficult time for me. It completely sucked the air out of my defense. Practically all the press packed up and left, and I couldn’t blame them. This was a huge and important story on their watch. And although public opinion has shifted to our side since my arrest, suddenly they might consider me the bad leaker, the one who was in prison, the one who couldn’t give an interview, the one with supposed personal problems. Ed was the hero. I was arrested before I could publish my narrative, my side of the story, and now my second chance to do so has been wiped from the front page. (Manning, 2022, p. 207).

Two ideas stand out in Manning’s speech: the value of one’s own narrative and the weight of media endorsement. She sees the importance in building an understanding of guilt or innocence, of conveying her point of view, her own narrative, to the public that could ultimately mean freedom or a life behind bars. And she regrets that when she had this chance, she lost the spotlight, the visibility: the front pages of newspapers were now covering Snowden and his narrative.

Making their version of the facts take precedence is fundamental for sources of information leaks. If discovered, the source will be judged not only by the State (when possible) but always by public opinion. “Ultimately, in democratic societies, we are the ones who determine whether a leak is merely a crime or a transformative action, regardless of the legal process that the perpetrator may face” (Pait & Pinheiro, 2014, p. 24). The entire disclosure of the leak, including the media coverage, has an impact on the leak itself. In this mediated ritual, the leaker’s past and personality are subjected to societal scrutiny. What were their political motivations? What personal

dramas drove them to do that? Revenge, betrayal? Or a genuine sacrifice from someone who sees no alternative but to change what they believe is wrong?

The protagonism of sources in information leaks also acts as an auxiliary force in asserting journalistic authority (Zelizer, 1992) for that particular story, that is, the reporter's right to have their narratives of the event recognized as the most legitimate. When establishing journalistic authority, Zelizer states that certain "critical events" allow journalists to access and renegotiate the meaning of their work through the confrontation of different narratives of memory.

Large leaks make for good critical events. Analyzing the Snowden case from the concept of a critical event, Ribeiro and Bertol (2016) highlight its symbolic importance, and attribute much of this symbolic value to the way the coverage was conducted, and how it was constituted through the many different accounts of journalists – the retellings, in Zelizer's terms. But they also draw attention to the accounts and the very prominence of the source: Snowden, while in exile in Moscow, was participating in online debates where he recalled the event and reiterated the importance of his decision to go public with the National Security Agency documents. "The demand for their presence, even if virtual, indicates how much their version is valued, certainly to the detriment of others" (Ribeiro & Bertol, 2017, p. 57).

7 The hybridization of journalism

When analyzing the forces that protagonists and collaborative sources exert on journalism, one must take into account Bourdieu's operational concept of journalism, which he describes as a structured social space that houses a permanent struggle for power and suffers the impact of internal and external forces. These are relational spaces that are subject to structural forces and composed of interacting agents whose behaviors are determined by their position in the power structure of that particular field at that particular moment (Bourdieu, 2011).

The emergence of what we call modern journalism (Schudson, 1981) is defined by a set of routines, values, habits, and notions that are learned in the classroom or in the day-to-day routine of the profession: we have the concept of news value (Wolf & Figueiredo, 1999), journalists acting as gatekeepers (White, 1999)

and watchdogs, the notion of objectivity (Tuchman, 1999), the constraints and censorship which journalists are subjected to, either by the media company or colleagues (Breed, 1999; Soloski, 1999) or even by the very nature of the job (Traquina, 2012; Gans, 2004).

Zelizer (1992), however, argues that focusing solely on journalism as a profession is not enough if one wishes to understand the totality of journalism as a practice. He suggests a theoretical framework based on the idea that journalists are a “transnational interpretive community” (or “tribe” as Traquina (2002) calls it) that shares common frames of reference. The concept allows for the study of the following dimensions of journalism that have not previously been explored fully: the centrality of storytelling, informal contacts among journalists, and the relevance of journalistic discourse on reporters’ actions during significant events (critical incidents) that help shape and reshape journalistic authority.

While fundamental, these concepts, created to explain the nature and practice of journalism, are undergoing a process of evaluation, revalidation, or even transformation in the face of new realities caused by technological advances. There are many practices, inexact definitions, and new actors – or old actors with new responsibilities – exerting influence on the journalistic field, the boundaries of which are constantly being redefined.

Eldridge (2019) argues that activities on the margins of the journalistic field should not be seen as a problem if we accept the idea that, with the rise of digital media, journalists are no longer the main (or only) news providers. Alves (2006) foresaw this reality when, almost two decades ago, he stated that journalism had ceased to be the privilege of journalists. Other actors were beginning to bring news to the public in different formats that are somewhat dynamic and more or less accessible, but not all of which follow the logic of journalism. Therefore, we shouldn’t necessarily see them all as journalists, but rather consider journalism as a field that is built between these forces, where those who come from the center of the field (the “traditional” journalists, aware of and devoted to the strength of their own journalistic identity) and those who come from the peripheries (the interlopers). Along the same lines as Bourdieu’s notion of field, Alves says “making concessions to the significant complexities in understanding the dynamism of journalism at its boundaries” means the field would not be conceived as having its boundaries as a space of entry or expulsion, but rather as a space of social relations (Eldridge, 2019, p. 13).

There is no doubt that media convergence, the crisis of the business model, and the emergence of social networks have led journalists to perform actions that were not previously required of them – technical actions, management/financial actions, and actions related to the platformization of communication and dissemination on social networks. This sometimes raises questions about actual journalistic authority (Molineux & McGregor, 2021).

In the same way that journalists are beginning to perform tasks outside of traditional journalism, other non-journalist actors are starting to gain status within the field. For example, Di Salvio and Porlezza (2020) point to hacker sources as an example of the hybridization of journalism, where the logics of traditional media and new media now coexist. This coexistence is a constant negotiation between the new and the old as the emergence of new functions and new perspectives leads to different roles and norms of action for actors who behave and act in accordance with the norms and standards of traditional journalism (Tandoc, 2019).

Many news organizations hold that some specific actions directly contribute to news production, and that these actions require new skill sets which are not a part of traditional journalistic training, and therefore are not a part of the training of other professionals. Some of these positions are of an editorial nature (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). Tandoc (2019) argues that by classifying these new jobs as editor-level positions, some media outlets seem to fully assume that the tasks involved are directly related to journalism.

8 Final considerations

Technological changes, ever increasingly rapid and profound, are changing not only how we interact with machines but also how we relate to and perceive the world. They have given us a society in which online participation and collaboration are a part of everyday life, and the production and sharing of journalistic information are no longer limited to professionals.

From the perspective of source analysis, all these changes have produced a type of source with the capacity, interest, and often the demand to act with a greater degree of involvement in all areas of news production. What's more, the internet and social media increase the chances of a source being heard and noticed by the public (when

it can or wants to), and of that source seeing his or her own narrative in circulation. Through this, we see the possibility to transform and intensify the characteristics of collaboration and leadership of any kind of source, which has been demonstrated, to varying degrees, with the leak sources analyzed in this paper. The characteristics of collaboration and leadership did not emerge with digital technology – the ‘analog leak’ (Pentagon Papers), which the research establishes some comparisons to, presents a highly initiative-taking and very collaborative source. What the research shows is the broadening of the perspective, and sometimes the necessity of these actions, due to the technologization of information.

Collaborative sources contribute to the construction of news (within the scope of journalistic practices), while protagonist sources assist journalists through their presence on media, establishing the dominant narrative for a given critical event. However, when analyzing the sources of the five leaks presented in this paper, we found that, despite whatever new aspect they may bring to the field through their actions, none of them has a journalistic identity or recognizes the spread of journalistic information as its main activity. As such, all of them stay within their traditional roles as sources in journalism. Along with their new actions, collaborative or protagonist sources also present a few theoretical and practical questions. Firstly, because by considering the (new) actions of the source as part of the forces that affect (and originate from) journalism, we can further explore different perspectives regarding the shaping and reshaping of the field.

Secondly, because they add their own voice to press narratives. This can occur through increased participation in news construction or through the production of their own narratives in journalistic events after the leak, thus altering the public’s perception of the event. This perception had already been somewhat altered with the emergence of online, mediated journalism (De Azeredo Soster, 2024), a type of journalism where “the multiple possibilities of access, media convergence, multimedia and the fragmentation of texts point to distinct aspects of the constitution of the singular signifier, that is, of the structure that guides the perception of events” (Pontes, 2017, p. 176).

When new voices are added to the construction of news or the circulation of narratives that influence the establishment of journalistic authority, other subjectivities are necessarily added.

Here we are in line with other authors who understand subjectivity as a constitutive part of journalism (Steensen, 2017; Soster, 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012), especially in its social nature (Moraes, 2019; Pontes, 2017) and not just in niches such as literary journalism, cultural journalism, etc.

Although they appear more prominently in cases of information leaks, nothing leads us to believe that the circumstances that make up a significant degree of collaboration or protagonist are exclusive to them. The same can be said of technology and how it changes the dynamics between sources and journalists. A broader investigation into the performance of other types of sources could, as a complement to this study, indicate the robustness of such an inference. More than a crystal-clear definition of a type of source, the collaborative and protagonist classifications seek to shed light on nuances that may indicate new practices and directions within journalism. This could provide a more in-depth understanding of the changes that sources go through – both in terms of profile and actions – in light of new concepts or traditional theories and concepts to help identify any limitations of said theories and concepts.

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.cl.df.gov.br/-/a-ideia-dele-bolsonaro-era-implantar-o-caos-em-caso-de-derrota-diz-o-hacker-delgatti-a-cpi>

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DATA AVAILABILITY: The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

TRANSLATED BY: Lee Sharp