

NEWS WITHOUT JOURNALISTS

real threat or horror story?

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ERIK NEVEU
Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Rennes (France)

ABSTRACT Journalism as a profession and know-how is caught up in a whirlwind of changes. The end of the newspaper would not automatically mean the end of journalism or of journalists, but it is difficult to imagine how the institution's collapse could occur without triggering an earthquake in the definition and practice of journalism. Journalism as a professional culture with codified abilities and characteristics runs the risk of being diluted and transformed into the vague continuum of those who are already known as "information workers". This article will suggest how several contemporary trends are challenging and redefining journalistic practice. The objective of this article is to advocate the possibility of defining the journalist as someone who collects facts that are not on a screen in his office, as someone who talks to the audiences that are not just consumers and as someone who maintains sufficient autonomy to practice the skills of a critical verifier of the news.

Key-words: journalism, transformations, role of the journalist, trends.

INTRODUCTION

This paper's title may sound bombastic. I fear that it is simply realistic. Journalism as a profession and know-how is caught in a whirlwind of changes. The nature of the media, of skills and knowledge traditionally linked to the idea of journalism is changing with a combination of brutality and anxiety, but also of excitement and innovation. A prominent manager of the French press, Bernard Poulet, wrote a much debated book a few months ago whose title is simply *The end of newspapers (La fin des journaux, 2009)*? The end of newspapers would not automatically mean the end of journalism or journalists, but it is hard to imagine how the collapse of the institution, which has been the cradle of the profession, of its working culture and identity, could occur without triggering an earthquake in the definition and practice of journalism. The threat can be simply expressed: Journalism, as a professional culture with codified and peculiar skills runs the risk of being watered-down into the blurred continuum of those already called "information workers".

To answer the question which structures this contribution, I will develop a three-fold analysis. I will come back to an over-debated question of defining a journalist first, briefly covering this topic that fills bookshelves and special issues of journals. Yet, how is it possible to consider the future of journalists, without paying a little attention to the history and current state of their identities?

From this definition, another part of this article will suggest how several contemporary trends are challenging and redefining the practice of journalism. Three of these major changes should be mentioned, which belong to different time-frames. The first and oldest is the growing ability of sources to combine direct pressure put on journalists with the soft-power of ready-made supplies of news, that need little more than a cut and paste operation to fill the pages and air time of the press and media. A second structuring trend is linked to the re-organization of capitalism and corporate management at the end of the blooming years 1945-75 (What the French coin as the "*Trente Glorieuses*"). The ownership of media and press groups during this period shifts from small familial groups to mega-corporations, increasing the pressure for profitability, and thereby redefining the practical conditions of the work of journalists. The last trend is the most recent and comes from the changes in the information supply, speed of coverage, and templates produced by the success of the Internet and its websites. However, the Internet has produced a chain reaction through the process called convergence, merging and combining television, radio and press with online news sites.

The last part of this contribution will consider how journalism and its professional identity are threatened and redefined. Its aim is not to forecast an always changing future – even if suggesting that the disappearance of many daily newspapers or their new positioning as niche-media for reduced and often privileged readership sounds more like cold realism than like science fiction. If trying to map the future structure and hierarchy of media and media uses is closer to reading in tea leaves than social sciences, I would plead the possibility of identifying some paths and strategies to avert the worst, to safeguard – without mystifying it – a definition of the journalist as someone collecting facts other than on a screen in his/her office, as someone speaking to audiences who are not only consumers but citizens, someone keeping enough autonomy to practice the skills of a critical news checker, and not the ambiguous task of laundering as "news" the messages and speeches of the authorities and powerful institutions.

The inescapable preliminary definition: Journalist/Journalism

The demands of social science (the rule of the preliminary definition so dear to Durkheim), propose a clear analysis and definition of the character and job of a journalist, threatened with disappearance, and with high risks for the bio-diversity of democratic life. Defining journalism is both a major risk and the *raison d'être* of too many books and studies; I will briefly confront this question here.

Suggesting a transnational and non-historical definition of the journalist ("A journalist is....") would be falling into the essentialist fallacy for at least four reasons. Journalism belongs to history with various types of submission to, or autonomy from the literary, political, and economic fields. Its levels of institutionalization (training schools, professional norms, and self-organization of the profession) are highly diverse. It is possible, as Dan Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) have recently proposed, to develop typologies and mappings of journalism using these parameters, but this would not produce a unified description of The Journalist.

Journalism is embedded in national traditions. Jean Chalaby (1998) has shown how an Anglo-American pattern was formed in the early twentieth century, and how it continues to be a major reference. However, the French practice has long been different, closer to literature, and more politically committed. The research developed by Afonso de Albuquerque (2005) or José Marques de Melo (2009) shows that Brazilian journalism was initially closer to the French literary style, and later with the *Diário Carioca* and the *Folha de São Paulo* closer to the American pattern, yet it still kept a strong peculiarity which they connect to the political vision of the "*Poder Moderador*".

If one considers the gathering of news, or its processing into papers and reports, the core practices of the profession have also been varied and changed. Denis Ruellan (1993) has given a stimulating approach which he coined the professionalism of the blurred (*professionalisme du flou*). Reading about Brazilian journalism, I recently discovered how the famous Brazilian journalist Gaspari reached a high level of productivity when collecting interviews at Galeão Airport. Gaspari asked politicians flying to Brasília to simply sign interviews that he himself had written, cutting, pasting and improving the politician's statements made in other places. The trick was highly efficient, but would probably never be taught in any journalism textbook!

If a strong definition is impossible, the reason is also that Journalism is always struggling to protect its borders, or more precisely, to control

and to define its moving “frontier”. The more organized the profession, the more efficient its “border patrol”. Being considered as a journalist could mean having specific training in a journalism school. The small town correspondent who works part-time, the academic who writes his weekly column would not be labeled as “true” journalists, but the process of frontier building and frontier control would also mean co-opting new professions (journalism on the Internet) and organizing hierarchies (Press vs. Media, TV journalists being long considered as simple talking heads or dispatch readers). Thus, it is pointless to search for the essence of journalism, which has training, tasks and skills that could be similar everywhere, or simply consensual. Should one conclude that it is definitely impossible to approach any definition that would make sense to analysts from different countries? It seems more reasonable, and closer to reality, to suggest that different ways of practicing “journalism” can be nevertheless linked to some landmarks or professional imaginary which goes beyond time and space borders. Five of them must be briefly mentioned.

Researchers drawing on Michel Foucault (Chalaby 1998, Ringoot and Utard 2005) have highlighted how journalism is an “order of discourse”. Journalism is a highly codified way of writing and speaking, with templates and genres of papers, rhetoric organization (the importance of the lead, the five Ws rule). These rules of journalistic writing/speaking also organize journalism as a specific language, different from the language and rhetoric of politics, advertising, or literature. This journalistic discourse can be very different in Brasília, Rome, and Boston; it will be identified as journalistic¹ in all of these places

Journalism is also a practice of fact gathering, fact selecting and processing which would transform facts into news. An enormous variety of practices can be linked to this definition. However it is reasonable to argue that all share the claim that journalism is not (or should not be) the docile echo of messages and information produced by sources (companies, rulers, administrations). The classical distinction theorized by Tunstall (1971) between “gatherers” and “processors” emphasizes the existence of these two poles of journalistic practice: collecting facts, processing and ranking them to produce stories and reports.

Journalism claims a peculiar kind of authority. The meanings of words such as objectivity, reliability or accountability know many variations. But they share a core meaning: “*We do not tell tales, we check, we take care that we are saying/printing respects the ‘material’ facts*”. Journalists are usually specialized (in sports, business, politics,

science, local news, etc.), even when this specialization is to produce general information or comments on very varied topics (columnists). Finally, journalists, as members of any profession, are acting out myths (Le Bohec, 2000) which give meaning to their job, make it a noble task. Among the most structuring of these myths one must mention the idea of serving the public, of seeking objective reports of events, or being a shield for democracy.

Journalists: endangered species?

Another common denominator in the multi-faceted ways of being a journalist today is that all face strong shocks and challenges. One can imagine that tomorrow, a not so distant tomorrow, journalists would be replaced by information workers, shorthand for a conglomeration of jobs and activities with the common dimension of offering audiences news and information. The Internet is boosting the development of this new professional space. How would journalists dissolve into a broader group of information workers? Three types of explanations can make sense out of this change. Starting with the process having the deepest historical roots, I will first pay attention to the combined process of source professionalization and to the multiplication of the news-producing institutions. The analysis will then shift toward the effects of stronger commercial logics, of a change of balance between what was coined by Tunstall (1971) as the Press/Media enterprise (the corporate dimension) and the news production enterprise (journalism). Finally, I will focus on the most recent move, exploring the impact of the Internet on journalism. The result of these explorations can draw a rough sketch of the information workers that are replacing journalists.

From sources to communication floods

One of the basic skills of a journalist is that of building a network of sources: contacts, partners, or “deep throats” from the social world(s), covered by one’s newsbeat. These sources give institutional news, leaks, or background elements to make sense of the facts. Nevertheless, one of the challenges of journalism is that such sources are never passive, but pro-active. They work each and every day to flood news-desks with flows of official reports, press releases, and invitations to pseudo-events. Often, they behave as the public relations offices or the heralds of companies and institutions that employ or support them. This problem is not new. It can be traced back to as early as the 1920’s by Lippman in the U.S. What changed since these years? Mainly three things: the first is the

process, cleverly analyzed and coined by Philip Schlessinger (1987) as “source professionalization”. Administrations, companies, and NGO’s are using public relations and communication experts who are well skilled and often former journalists. They know how to anticipate the timing, the template and the visions of newsworthiness of the press and media. A second trend comes from the fact that the army of spin-doctors, public relations and communication experts is now much bigger in most democracies than the number of journalists. Aeron Davies (2002) has described western societies as “public relations democracies”. His book highlights how the production of economic information, which makes sense for major actors of business, is under strong control from the communication services of big companies and banks. The third change is how sources have developed various and powerful tactics to gain power over journalists. The rise of spin-doctoring in politics is too visible. One should also think of the production of media events which give birth to a virtual reality of artificial situations, scene-setting public problems from media events. Michael Schudson mentions the fact that Reagan was seen on U.S. TV screens congratulating the winners of competitions during the Los Angeles Para-Olympic Games at the very moment when his policies were curtailing the welfare budgets for crippled people. French President Sarkozy has transformed into an art this ability to identify the symbolic spot for an event or social problem, to express strong empathy with those facing the burdens of difficulties, to make vocal announcements of new laws and decisions that often have a follow-up limited to the organization of a new on-the-spot visit and the broadcasting of a new statement or promise. The major trick of sources is to be more journalist than journalists: why spend time to shoot some images if Greenpeace offers an exciting footage of noisy Geiger counters around the French nuclear waste treatment plant of La Hague, or thrilling views of activists protecting whales with their small boats facing the mighty harpoons of whale-hunters? Sources can also use the big stick, the threat of a very costly legal suit which the British *Guardian* experienced (Rusbridger, 2009a) when it published reports on the strategies of “tax optimization” (this very phrase being a successful public relations attempt to substitute for cheating on their fiscal obligations) of the Tesco group.

Of course, journalists are not powerless or blind when facing these threats and challenges. They were able to develop a new skill: deconstructing and criticizing media events, or spin-doctoring, but their imagination and competence cannot modify hard facts. There are more public relations experts and more professionals of communication and

advertising producing news, much more than journalists, and they tend to have higher budgets and more time.

Rising business pressures

Managerial imperative, pressures for higher profit rates have had a significant impact on the newsrooms in recent years (McManus, 1995; Neveu, 2009). To prevent any ambiguity, it must be made clear that managing networks or producing journals has never been a philanthropic activity, and that media and press companies, as any other kind of business, must earn money. Trying to make profit with news-making is neither something new nor something morally or politically shocking, but at least two major trends emphasize these changes.

Many studies, especially those concerning the media groups in the U.S., have shown that a process of capitalist concentration has targeted press companies. When 80% of the press in the U.S. belonged to family-centered companies in 1950, 80% of the press and networks are now owned by huge media groups. The same trend exists in France (Lagardère, Bolloré, EMAP) or Brazil (Globo). The consequences of these changes are striking. Many groups are expecting from the media and press two-figure profit rates, and achieved them between 1990 and 2010, with the profit margin reaching even 35% in some slots of the regional press in the U.K. (Engel, 2009). The organizational structures of news-making have changed, weakening the symbolic border between Church and State, the newsroom, the commercial and managerial services. Managers have gained power over editors (Underwood, 1993). More and more often coming from MBA courses or branches of business without relation to the world of news-making, they view it as a business. They define the editorial contents that will maximize audience and profits, and read the newsroom activity as costs to be reduced and cash pumps with room for improvement. Unimaginable in the past, meetings involving advertisers, managers, and journalists are becoming less unusual.

Recording these changes without jumping directly to political or moral criticisms implies taking into consideration their practical impact on journalists and their careers. The answer is not ambiguous. Maximizing audiences and profits while reducing production costs means downsizing the newsrooms and correspondents' networks, curtailing budgets for reporting and recruiting risky freelance journalists. This growing army of freelancers, under the constant menace of unemployment, is more open to editors' "friendly" suggestions on how to frame or to angle a paper before any legwork. Lacking the collective solidarity of a newsbeat,

or simply of the documentary resources from a newspaper's archives, they are also weaker in regard to sources. These evolutions redefine newsworthiness according to the ability of newsbeats and the style of reports that maximize audiences and prevent the excess of critical spirit capable of harming or producing reactions from important advertisers. A journalist from *Le Monde* used to say that in some supplements of his newspaper – known as “advertising traps” – the right style of writing was “One subject, one verb, one compliment”. James Hamilton is probably a good interpreter of the times when he offers an economic rewriting of the famous rule of the five Ws to produce an “*economic theory of the News: Who cares about a particular piece of Information? What are they willing to pay to obtain it? Where can media outlets or advertisers reach these people?*” (2006, p 7). Since the web allows audience selection and targeting of an extraordinary precision, such trends have a bright future.

If one considers the power balance in the press and media worlds, it is also clear that the institutions which worked as checks and balances for journalists, and against management, have often been weakened. The NUJ trade union has been seriously defeated in the U.K by Murdoch and the number and influence of the “*sociétés de rédacteurs*” are shrinking in French media. It is thus logical to see this managerial redefinition of journalism moving towards the training stage. The appointment of J Lavine, professor of management as the head of the Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism triggered a fierce debate in the U.S. in 2006. He quickly gave a growing importance to courses such as management and media economics, to skills such as mastering multimedia work or better understanding the wishes of “audiences and consumers” (Schulman, 2006). Elisabeth Bird (2009) tells the story of the Pasadena Now online, where almost all of the Californian staff was fired. Raw information was sent by e-mail to a cheaper newsroom in India, plugged into the flow of press agencies; the coverage of the city council was done by a webcam covering all its debates and a software company has even recently launched a program capable of writing basic sports reports (Football, Baseball) using statistics on scores, ball possession, fouls or off-sides; the program user can even select different styles with a more or less formal language². Such examples are not representative, or not yet, but they show that questioning the future of journalists is not simply a horror story. The working conditions in the understaffed newsrooms of the free dailies which cover significant market shares (25% of the total circulation in France) offer another glimpse of the future.

All of these trends go back twenty or thirty years. They have

been significantly amplified by causes rooted in a shorter time-frame. The rise of the Internet is central here, even if it cannot be considered the only explanation for the most recent and dramatic changes. The French national daily newspapers, for instance, were losing readers and advertising before the advent of a strong online news supply, and the success of the free dailies is another explanation of their current crisis.

The impact of the Internet

The impact of the Internet has stricken the press and journalism which were already in serious trouble. It can be considered a three-fold impact (Estienne, 2007). The first is a substantial acceleration of the trends analyzed here. One of the effects of an expanding supply of online news, and of the supply of free newspapers, has been a shift of classified ads and advertising budget from the press to the Internet. Simultaneously, young audiences are massively giving priority to the use of online news sites, challenging the traditional process of generation renewal in press readership. The results of these combined processes are unambiguous. In the U.S., more and more newspapers are closing their paper edition to keep only an online edition, which is not always profitable! Ten U.S. dailies were for sale in 2009 without finding buyers, 19 out of the 50 largest are losing money. In 2008, 5000 journalists' jobs were suppressed, and 2009 has not been much better (de Tarlé, 2009). Yet, there is no need to say that a poorer press means fewer resources for its downsized staff of journalists.

However, the impact of the Internet on news production goes much beyond the simple amplification of already visible trends – it changes the very job of a journalist. In a business world, with powerful media groups, this change is called convergence. Journalists no longer work for a newspaper or a specific kind of media, they feed all the media and channels of their employers with news. The very process of convergence can hardly be challenged in itself. Is it not logical and businesslike to make the best use of journalists' skills in different media, to target a news report for the channel where it fits the best, considering variables such as diffusion speed or reaching specific audiences? The available research suggests that the experience of journalists in various countries and companies covers a great variety of situations. Investigating four multimedia news-desks in the southern U.S., Jane B Singer (2004) shows that a good portion of journalists express satisfaction. They got the feeling of richer tasks and gaining access to TV studios or positions of anchormen was considered a promotion. Beyond the variety of

objective reorganizations and subjective experiences, the main trends among journalists seem to be dissatisfaction and strain. Convergence downgrades working conditions and challenges self-esteem, which is one of the pillars of job satisfaction. Studying the U.S. multimedia group *Metro*, Eric Klinenberg (2005) captures the increase of stress faced by journalists in the world of convergence, where each hour is a deadline, living under the constant pressure of feeding the right media with the right contents. A journalist explains this pressure, describing his daily routines as being caught in an “*informational cyclone*”. The strongest strain, however, comes from feeling insufficiently trained to properly work in different media, from the anxiety of being a juggler having to produce for the web-site, the press, radio and television. The metaphor of the duck-billed platypus, which highlights the feeling of being a clumsy creature instead of having the grace of omni-competence, is sometimes used in newsrooms to make sense out of the surprising combination of skills required from journalists in the convergence era. Marc François Bernier’s (2008) study, among French-Canadian journalists, is perfectly clear regarding these problems. Journalists expressed feelings of frustration and disqualification. They were critical of the compulsory practice of convergence and felt unable to behave as good journalists in several media. The result is a high turnover rate, a shrinking belief in the founding myths of the profession. One of these journalists declared that companies are more interested in recruiting “*good employees than good journalists*”.

Still, the most important effect of the expanding supply of online news is to produce a continuum of sites and contents which blurs the amateur/professional and original/recycled news divides, challenging the distinction between journalism, commentary and public relations (Ruellan and Thierry, 1998). The web is also a huge mosaic of sites managed by companies, NGO’s and passionate fans, prophets, or hidden lobbies in quest of audiences. Many of these sites are user-friendly, exciting, offering generous amounts of news too. The explosion of the news supply also comes from blogs. Most of these only have family and friends to claim as an audience, and the huge majority does not claim to offer scoops or even comments on social issues. But among the millions of blogs, even if only a small percentage produce varied kinds of para- or meta-journalism, this means a galaxy of news supply. Very few among them have access to fame and significant traffic flows (*Huffington Post* or GregPalast in the U.S., *Koztousjours* or *Journal d’un Avocat* in France). The new undecipherable map of news supply also comes

from the opportunity of posting and downloading videos, sometimes shot from a mobile phone, on sites such as *You Tube*. It comes from the growing connection between social networks (*Twitter*, *Facebook*) and news circulation and production, or the invention of alternative media, such as the Korean *OhmyNews* (Kim & Hamilton, 2006), where ordinary citizens work with professional journalists. For the web users, the result is an almost infinite supply of free news sites, with layouts of code writing and narrative templates similar to those of the press and “official” media. In this new “sea of narratives”, it is not always easy to get the answer to very simple questions such as Who speaks (a media, a company, a lobby?), Who writes (a journalist, a public relations expert, a fan or an activist?) and What for (to inform, to plead, to criticize?). Can one interpret these changes that we are witnessing as the triumph of journalism? Using the journalistic order of discourse, its template and its skills is definitely the necessary condition for speaking in the new public sphere. All are journalists: here is the triumph of the profession! Such an interpretation does not fit in with many facts. Many of the basic principles and regulations of the profession are forgotten. The simple rule of fact-checking is no longer central, the basic functioning of many sites is based on cutting and pasting news produced by others, hijacking the work of real journalists, or laundering as “news” the communication of institutional sources or organized interests – these are a few examples.

To put it in a nutshell, the effect of internet can be summarized in a paradox. Never in history has so much data been available to mass audiences. Never has the production of accountable and analytical news – journalism – been so strongly weakened by the crumbling of its funding sources.

Here come the information workers!

What is the impact, the “convergence”, of the three trends surveyed here? One of the most important is the gradual shift of the workforce from journalists to information workers. What is the profile of this new cog of the news-making process? He/she is polyvalent, no longer specialized. The information worker is not defined by a specialty (politics, weather report) but by his/her ability to fill news-slots on varied topics, for different kinds of media and press. The logic of convergence and the management of a flexible workforce are combining here, and this process of de-specialization can be identified in three trends at least.

The most visible, and often brutal, is the growing importance of insecure jobs, of free-lance journalists condemned to cover a huge

variety of topics (Accardo, 1998) for low wages. Another trend is the disappearance of the specialized journalists who are considered part of the newsbeats which appear as the most costly or the less capable of achieving a significant audience or readership. The number of foreign correspondents is crumbling, even in the broadsheets. More than 520 journalists worked as correspondents for U.S. press and media in foreign capitals in 2003; there were only 350 in 2009³. TF1, the first French network has not even kept a permanent correspondent in Berlin, one of the country's top business and diplomatic partners. In the U.S., the "Military Reporters and Editors Association" has seen its membership collapse from 600 in 2000 to less than 100 in 2008. The explanation does not come, unfortunately, from the skyrocketing progress of peace and disarmament during the Bush years, but rather from downsizing and cost-killing strategies in the news business. De-specialization has finally become a managerial strategy, targeting what was considered as the excessive autonomy of "feudalities" among newsrooms. Many empirical studies suggest that such feudalities exist or existed, behaving sometimes like a newsroom in the newsroom. On the other hand, over-amplifying the mobility of journalists between newsbeats means losing skills, memory, or knowledge of the who-how-why, often modifying the power balance in favor of sources. The case study offered by Eugénie Saitta (2008) concerning the battle won by the editors of "*Le Monde*" against the political service of the flagship of the French Press is illuminating.

The trend toward de-specialization can also be considered as the birth of a brand new specialty, a shift in journalistic skills. The information worker is a specialist of news reprocessing or recycling rather than a news producer (Rébillard, 2006). To use Klinenberg's funny metaphor, he/she is stricken by a new virus from the web, the virus which mesmerizes him/her in front of the computer. The information worker does not do much legwork, but works with dispatches from press agencies, statements from institutions, companies, and the officialdom. He fishes on the web. His core know-how is reprocessing information produced by someone else. One of the impacts of the convergence process among the *Metro* group in the U.S. was a collapse of 48% in the number of stories involving investigative reporting. But the shrinking of journalism is also, as has already been emphasized, the reduction of the volume and weight of international news at the very moment when "globalization" is used in each and every report. Translated into Tunstall's lexicon, the global evolution suggests that information workers are closer to the pole of processing than to the news-gathering origins of journalism. The

question faced is: where does the reprocessed news come from? From press agencies – at least for the companies able to pay⁴ - more often from institutional sources (companies, administrations and politicians, NGOs) that are usually offering information which does not paint them black. Speaking of recycling also leads to questioning the writing of templates. Journalistic formats will not lose their peculiarity but they will be closer to advertising ones, caught in the straightjacket of very short texts and attractive layouts, no longer available for pyrotechnics à la Tom Wolfe, as this is visible in the free *Metro*, from Stockholm to Madrid. To use the linguistic categories of Jakobson, an information worker must be obsessed by the "phatic" and "conative" functions of language – checking the contact, anticipating the audience reaction – much more than by those coined as "referential" or "meta-lingual", targeting the explanation of the backgrounds or questioning the precise meaning and choice of words. No more George Orwell, Joseph Liebling, or Albert Londres among them; their articles were awfully long and impossible to read, using more than a 400 word vocabulary! The growing focus on the quest for the attention of audiences, caught in a whirlwind of messages and media exposures, suggests the new trend. Modern journalism works as the "chewing gum of the eyes", to use Ramonet's metaphor about Television, rather than having to make sense of the world for oneself. Theorizing what they describe as a new paradigm of "*communication journalism*", the Canadian researchers from Laval University in Quebec (Brin, Charron, de Bonville, 2005) are offering an illuminating description of the style and rhetoric of these new news-workers. The claims of such journalists are no longer the analytical distance, the over-arching vision of those located at the core of the panoptikon or any authority linked to the old idea of Enlightenment. Communication journalists/workers are claiming closeness and simplicity. They boast that they identify with their readers' visions and needs. They promise nothing more than making things simple, offering useful advice to find one's way in a world structured by the consumption of goods, leisure, and services. This last category includes even politics. It is also the symbolic capital, the driving force coming from the belief – even if mythical – of belonging to an extraordinary profession, of serving the public which vanishes here.

The information worker is a man or a woman bound by many constraints. The size and format of his/her papers are defined by a computer program; working in an open space, he/she does not even have a private office space, most of the time he/she stays in the newsroom, the telephone and the screen replacing the old legwork. Of course

getting a secure job would usually require years of short-term contracts and free-lance experiences. When the practical conditions of the job are devalued, when even the opportunity to ennoble it into a vocation becomes dubious, then the risk of becoming cynical or disenchanting is strong. Another horror story? One out of four individuals who started as journalists in France in 1990 has already left the profession, often due to disappointment or weariness. Half of the German journalists consider from now on as their first mission “to entertain and to relax”, transforming into their subjective norm their objective experience. It is indeed difficult for the new generations of information workers facing the new definitions of their tasks to pretend to be muckrakers, frightening the mightiest, or the white knights of democracy. They can merely claim the minor public service mission of guiding consumption.

Averting the worst?

Before developing some suggestions concerning the opportunities open to journalists, researchers and audiences to advert “horror stories” in news-making, one must remember how “liquid” is the future, even the immediate one. Recently invited to offer his contribution on the future of the profession to a special issue of *Journalism*, Michael Schudson (2009) wisely chose to look ten years back. He simply highlighted that in 1999 the *Blackberry*, *YouTube*, and *Wikipedia* did not exist. Blogs were confidential, the social networks of the web simple dreams or blueprints. Anticipating tomorrow’s communication technologies, their uses or the ability of audiences and groups to behave as technology-poachers is impossible. Let us keep as an element of mystery the question “Where”, the puzzle of tomorrow: the hierarchy of media and the question of the future status of the press (luxury item, niche news for a happy few). Exploring the How would be less foolhardy. I suggest five approaches for helping tomorrow’s news producers remain closer to journalists and their myths than to the dull bureaucracy of data producers.

The resources of public support

A first answer may be surprising, challenging, or seem typically French. I mention it, however, with a high ranking, looking for the helping hand of the state. One can start here from two preliminary observations which are the frame of my argument. The first one comes from the very logic of the news business. If the trends which have been depicted here are confirmed, the current business model of news production will crash. If on the one hand advertising revenues and audiences are

mainly attracted by websites and news supplies that usually add and remove news produced by press and media which, on the other hand, suffer from a growing hemorrhage of funding and audiences, the final result could only be the disappearance of main news producers. How, then, would it be possible to recycle or process news which would no longer be produced? Such a self-cannibalizing system will require policy action, or future access to accountable and rich information will be the privilege of the well-to-do and well-educated. It will become news production shifting towards institutional and corporate sources without any journalistic control and critical processing.

A second starting point, and a more political one, would be to claim that a democracy is something more than the rule of market applied to politics. This does not mean that the market is evil, or that citizens never behave as consumers. One can even reasonably claim that a selfish and rational voting behavior, if such a thing exists other than in the dreams of rational choice theoreticians, can boost critical abilities. A democracy, however, is a system which needs citizens reasonably well-informed on public issues, and not only on sports results or sales, and such access to the news requires press and media.

Public policies can in many different ways bring their contribution to a news production based on strong standards of quality, respecting the professional standards of journalists' codes. The state can help institutions and companies producing (and not just recycling) original and trustworthy news. A small tax on the salaries of each public relations expert or professional "communicator" could produce lots of money which could be channeled into financial support for press agencies – those respecting the requirement of "citizen contents". For over two centuries, even in the U.S. (Cook, 1998), peculiar and friendly fiscal regulations or postal rates have been applied. Paid public communication has been channeled first towards general information press and media. One can even imagine a system of public certification of the quality of the news with a kind of ISO label which could testify that most of the news are produced, not merely cut and pasted. Such norms should also pay attention to the relative weight of some newsbeats (politics, International information, social problems) which would receive a fair percentage of the newspaper pages or air time. More reactive repertoire policies could tax the websites or news suppliers based on the simple reuse or hijacking of news that they do not produce. A survey of the experiments carried out in different countries would suggest many solutions and paths: offering tax shelters for newspapers or media channels choosing to act as foundations or

non-profit organizations, or giving – as President Sarkozy did in France – a free subscription to a daily newspaper to all new citizens in the year they attain legal adulthood.

The major objection to such suggestions is crystal clear; they will open the door to a complete takeover by the state of the press and media. Journalism would become a state institution, re-inventing the Soviet System. It would be ridiculous to deny that such a temptation will exist, that the state umbrella could become more a threat than an opportunity, especially in countries with a frail tradition of democratic culture or lacking in checks and balances. But it is absolutely wrong to conclude that, practically speaking, state funding or regulations supporting a quality news-making will automatically produce a state-controlled media system. The history of many cultural institutions in the Western World suggests the opposite lesson. Many areas of production of free speech, creative thinking, and critical checks and balances have been both institutionalized by the state and are working as limits to this power. Such is the case not only of Universities and Academies in French history, but also in many Foundations or think-tanks receiving public funding, tax exemptions and freedom of organization which provide the basis for their influence. If public institutions working as public services of culture, information or education were really the slaves of governments, these governments would not make such efforts to weaken or privatize them! If someone wishes to hear on the French radio criticism of the government and columnists lampooning the president or prime-minister, the best advice would be to listen to public radios and not private ones. The balance sheet of pro-active policies of state support to the press in Sweden suggest that the result of these actions has been better survival in the face of economic challenges, more diversity of the press, and even more adversarial styles of reporting⁵. One of the safeguards established by Swedish law was the allocation of financial resources on the basis of clear and transparent rules, by professionals of the press and media, not by state administrations. Establishing a monitoring and regulating body, the majority of whose members should be journalists or representatives of the audiences, not civil servants or politicians, would be a wise precaution indeed. The mission of such a body should include a follow-up of these policies and the ringing of an alarm-bell if they were the Trojan Horse for political control of the press and media. The fact that the *Columbia Journalism Review*, which is not a loudspeaker of socialist ideas, is now publishing papers⁶ considering the pros and cons – with more and more pros – of public support for the press is a good indicator

of the urgency of such reforms.

In a report which is must reading, Leonard Downie and Michael Schudson (2009) recently considered “The reconstruction of American Journalism”⁷. In a political and cultural context very different from the French one, they were careful not to plead for direct state intervention, but developed, however, suggestions which are parallel to those mentioned here. Their first recommendation is a tax reform allowing “*any independent news organization substantially devoted to reporting on public affairs to be created as or converted into a non-profit entity or a low profit limited liability corporation serving the public interest*” (p 45). Their second recommendation was the following call: “*philanthropists and national and community foundations should substantially increase their support for news organizations that have demonstrated a substantial commitment to public affairs and accountability reporting*”. The third suggestion was an invitation for “*increased congressional funding and support for public media news reporting...*”

Using the partners' strength

A second approach for reflection could come from oriental fighting sports such as judo or aikido that use the opponent's strength together with their fighting spirit to resist and to win.

The desire of many readers and viewers to play a more pro-active role, the rise of a continuum of information supply between amateur and professional journalism, and the growing number of adding websites are not temporary crazes – they will last. Riding and taming the tiger is thus a cleverer tactic than opposing a pointless resistance. The balance sheet of the rich experiences of “civic” or “participant” journalism is worth considering. Here again, the remarks of Alan Rudsbriger (2009b), from the *Guardian*, are illuminating. He argues that on many issues and topics, amateur websites mobilizing many Internet-users can do better than understaffed journals or networks. *TheyWorkForYou* offers the most complete resource for identifying and evaluating the activities of British Members of Parliament and for making their speeches immediately available. *Fixmystreet* allows any British inhabitant to post information concerning the problems of streets and roads (potholes, graffiti, poor street lighting), making them available by simply typing a zip code, and producing a richer data bank than any local newspaper. The tactic of *The Guardian* was to mobilize the knowledge and participation of the audience. When a man, Ian Tomlinson, died during the demonstrations against the G20 meeting in London in April 2009, *The Guardian* called on

all those who had shot photographs with cameras or telephones to send their snapshots. It was thus able to produce the proof that he had been hit by policemen. When the scandal of the private expenses of British Members of Parliament covered by public money exploded, journalists were facing an impossible challenge: investigating all the available bills and documents would have meant checking nearly 500,000 documents. *The Guardian* made 460,000 of these documents available online and 23,000 Internet-users started ferreting, opening 210,000 of these files. They discovered more cases of corruption than a whole pack of investigative reporters would ever have, and their discoveries hit the headline of *The Guardian*, giving birth to critical and in-depth analysis by the journalists. When *The Guardian* started to investigate the strategies for tax evasion by big companies, some of the most interesting data were sent to its website by employees and trade unionists from the Barclays Bank. As it was already visible with the best or the “public/civic” journalism, there is clearly room for innovation in professional/amateur journalism, combining the best of the analytical and expressive skills of journalists with the investigative and ubiquitous resources of the audience. The *Guardian's* innovations have also been indexing the link to some of its papers and reports produced with the help of readers to their networks on *Twitter*. The number of people connected to the technology news section is now three times larger than the number of subscriptions, generating more advertising revenues which allow funding for good scientific journalists. Downie and Schudson (2009) highlight the fact that the most recent Pulitzer Prize for “explanatory reporting”, given in 2009 to two journalists of *The Los Angeles Times* for reporting on the causes and prevention of wildfires⁸, rewarded papers making wide use of online data but improving them by a “fresh and painstaking exploration”. Finally the more directly “participative” experience of “*Get Off the Bus*”⁹, supported by the *Huffington Post* and Jay Rosen during the 2008 presidential election in the U.S., had thousands of citizens contributing to campaign coverage going much beyond the small world of candidates and public relations experts and political reporters. It produced scoops such as the report of Obama’s desperate statement on rural working class voters: “*It’s not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns and religion or antipathy for people who aren’t like them*”. If the experience was criticized, it is mainly for its lack of fine editing, a weakness which would have been prevented precisely by more cooperation with professional journalists (Michel, 2009).

Social Science and Journalism

A third suggestion would emphasize how much social sciences can become a resource for journalists, both to support a kind of back-to-basic movement as well as to strengthen their professional identity. Such a proposal may sound like a paradox when anti-intellectualism is so strong in many journalism schools, at least in France (Ruffin, 2003). Also, when any kind of knowledge or training lacking immediate, practical or technical utility is considered a lost investment or pointless resource. To be clear, the issue is not to transform journalists into sociologists. Sociologists too will fight for their own territory, and publishing sociological papers would probably give the final blow to a sick press. But as it has been explained by Carlos Eduardo Franciscato and Josenildo Luiz Guerra (2006), using or poaching social sciences can permit the production of strong and innovative journalism. One can mention here precision journalism, combining statistical data and reader-friendly computer graphics to highlight social trends or complex issues. Journalists can also use the skills of ethnographers, practicing immersion or empathy journalism (Boynton, 2005). I would suggest reading the books combining papers written by Leon Dash (1997) or Adrian Nicole Le Blanc (2004) in their ethnographic explorations of the depths of the ordinary lives and souls of the poorest and most marginal Afro-Americans. One of the very few texts capable of transforming financial bubbles and stock exchange crashes into something understandable are the papers produced by Michael Lewis (1989), a journalist “embedded” at Salomon brothers, as a bond salesman in Wall Street and London. The mix of sociological perspective and detective inquiries giving birth to the books by Jon Kracauer about the voluntary disappearance of a young student “*Into the Wild*” (1985), or the violent behavior of Mormon fundamentalists (2004) is also worth mentioning. Here is journalism capable of looking at the backstage of power; paying attention, without populism and with empathy, to the losers and the wretched of the social world. The fact that such journalism has become so rare – especially in the daily press – might be a reason for its crumbling sales. This journalism, supported by social sciences, can offer a rich palette of feature papers, reports and social investigations deep and human, pleasant to read and challenging. No blogger or information worker will do it by a simple process of data-mining in front of her/his screen.

Another major issue can be mentioned here. The transformation of journalists into information workers also comes more than once in the name of audiences. Some people in the Marketing or Research and

Development (R&D) Departments do know what the audience/readership wants: shorter papers, less blah-blah, less boring international and political news, funnier, more thrilling and more useful news. A recent French PhD thesis by Marie Brandewinder (2009), was devoted to the consultants who prepare new layouts and new templates for the press, who explain to journalism how to write sexy and on which topics. One of her discoveries was that the majority of these experts and pundits speak in the name of the public without ever having made the smallest practical investigation of its wishes (the impact of their prescriptions is usually a bit more crumbling of sales). Conversely, the French press groups which show the best resistance to the loss of readership are those having strong R&D services, making traditional sociologically-oriented inquiries, debating with academicians. These groups organize frequent qualitative and quantitative investigations on the readership, its profiles and habits, its feedback to newspapers' contents. Here again, an applied and serious use of sciences, combining the knowledge of academics with that of companies' R&D services would certainly not reveal that viewers/readers are a mix of morons and fashion victims unable to read more than 1,600 signs or to understand messages utilizing more than 500 different words.

Journalism Unbound

Winning back the value of creativity is another approach. For several reasons, including: standardization of article sizes by computer software, newsroom downsizing, convergence considered as a mere importation of screen layouts on paper pages, the invention of new formats and original templates has shifted from newsrooms to websites, from journalists to talk show hosts. The obsessive focus on practical training in many journalism schools should also be questioned. When the good journalist is simply someone answering the five Ws in 400 words, using computer software to put a video on line, or cutting and pasting press releases into a paper, in-depth analysis and bright style vanish.

Journalists must explore and invent new genres, practice textual and visual interbreeding to conquer new audiences. The New Journalism has offered an example of an original and striking combination of ethnography, soft news and experimental writing. It offered this kind of realistic approach that Brecht defined as "making sense of the complexity of social relationships". To suggest examples borrowed from the French press and media, narrative *métissage* could mean reinventing old genres. Legavre (2004) shows how the portrait was reinvented, combining photographs,

interviews and mini-biographies, utilizing psychological and sociological tool kits, seriousness and smile. Long considered as dull and boring, the old genre of the obituary recently gained new youthfulness in “*Le Monde*” with elegant black and white photos and long papers sometimes used as alibis for looking back at commitments or moments of history with or without capital H. Narrative interbreeding is also invention and diversion. Due to the low cultural status of television, it is only during the eighties that columns dedicated to TV criticism appeared in the press. Journalists such as Serge Daney (1988), Daniel Schneiderman and Pierre Marcelle transformed the commentary of TV programming and shows into a witty and illuminating exploration of French politics and society. Launched in 2003, *So Foot* offers a surprising redefinition of a sport magazine. This monthly combines interviews and gossip. Its readers can find in the same issue sexy pictures of players’ girlfriends, reports on clubs or fans with a true sociological background and ironic self-analysis. The initial bet was to produce a journal which would not claim to get scoops from leading characters (coaches, star players). The distance from these powerful sources will provide the freedom of a less deferential style. The audience support was strong enough, less than ten years later, to give *So Foot* enough weight to gain interview access with the French coach Domenech, lampooned in each issue. The quest for new patterns of journalism is also visible online with *Mediapart*. Access to this online news site is only possible with a paid subscription. The editorial contents combine the contribution of journalists and a “club”, fed by the blogs of subscribers, including a significant number of academicians, offering in-depth analysis of major policy issues or events. As websites exist for every kind of passion and interest, journalism would have to explore and invent niches. In a French media landscape where tradition of magazines such as the US *New Yorker* or *Esquire* never existed, a handful of journalists, fed up with shorter formats and curtailed travel budgets, decided to launch a quarterly, *XXI*, dedicated to long reports, investigation of ordinary lives (fruit-pickers in Provence, postman in the remote French countryside). The bet looked like suicide, but after a difficult start, *XXI* rose from 23,000 issues sold to 45,000 eighteen months later, with subscriptions skyrocketing from 500 to 5,000 in two years.

Giving back to journalists and journalism their ability to attract audiences also rehabilitates critical speech. Critical is not a synonym for partial or politically committed, it simply means questioning authorities and institutional discourses, challenging the routines of common sense which is often the mask for power and interest. Why should audiences

spend money and demonstrate their trust to support business journalism when it is hypnotized by the neo-liberal doxa and the spokespersons of big companies, which revealed an extraordinary blindness in anticipating the stock exchange crisis of 2008? Why should working class audiences behave as addicts of media and journals which describe them with visible disgust as the “populist” threat to democracy, or as responsible for the illegitimate burden of welfare expense?

After criticizing the devastating impact of business rationality, considering too often media and journals as cash-cows, and as a business whose only peculiarity was its high profit rate, one may suggest another look at the business of journalism. Economic theory emphasizes the competitive importance of “comparative advantages”. Which are those of journalists in the new media landscape of online news? They will not come from their ability to produce more news on more topics than the army of amateurs and semi-professionals feeding the net, nor from mobilizing power where they will always be defeated when a social network or social movement launches a call for data from Internet users. Basically, the comparative advantages of journalists remain fourfold, and perfectly identified, even by those in charge of recruiting for multimedia companies (Fahmy, 2008):

1) A know-how for checking facts quickly, for “sourcing” and tracking the producer of information. Without such processing, it is impossible to make any efficient distinction between public relations, hoaxes and reasonably believable facts.

2) A speed/accuracy balance which remains the best way of giving background and in-depth interpretations to the news, as well as to produce something as accountability of the statements of primary definers. This difference comes mainly from the very organization and potential for coordination of a news-desk: specialized news-beats, trained professional, and access to archives and networks of sources.

3) The command of an “order of discourse” which, often more than amateur bloggers’ or webmasters’ speeches that tend to lack good editing (Russial, 2009), can combine clear expression, correct use of the language and expressive or emotional strength.

4) The power of professional myths; they are always bigger and better than professional reality which is also made up of compromises, cynicism and constraints. As long as they live, they inject, however, in journalists’ subjectivities the feeling that they serve truth, democracy, or the community, but always something greater than routines. Myths can boost what Bourdieu describes as *Illusio*: a self-propelling faith and

energy, larger and more powerful than those of the mercenary public relations expert or the part-time blogger.

Moving beyond and above the realm of economics and the issues of business, the truth is self-evident. A society is not simply a system of markets worth being envisioned with some solemnity, human societies are also puzzles to be understood, with different experiences to be made visible, injustices to be challenged, shared goals to be identified. Journalism cannot manage all these issues and journalists have not always deserved praise for their ability or determination to face them. But even labeled as “information society”, a world without journalists would be more impenetrable, more difficult to understand, more open to manipulation.

| NOTES

- 1 If a French professor writes in the margin of a student's essay « *journalistique* »... it means not deep enough, full of clichés. There is no need to say that “*très universitaire*” (very academic) is not a compliment when used in a newsroom.
- 2 Cf Yves Eudes, L'ère des Robots-Journalistes, *Le Monde*, March 10, 2010, p 15.
- 3 After reaching a peak of 60,000 in the early nineties, the number of journalists in the USA has been rolled back to its level of 1970 (40,000).
- 4 A way of cutting the cost of the subscriptions is also to reduce them to the minimum level. In November 2009 the U.S. Group *Tribune* decided to reduce its uses of the Associated Press. In France the regional newspapers “*Paris-Normandie*” and “*La Provence*” ended their subscription to the *Agence France Presse*, to buy only the “France” dispatches service of Reuters at the cost of 60,000 euros a year, against the 550,000 of the full subscription to AFP. One of the unanticipated consequences of this cost-killing choice was a loss of information for the popular newsbeat concerning crime stories.
- 5 See Karl Eric Gustafsson's report: <http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/3011/a/19032>
- 6 Bree Nordenson, “The Uncle Sam Solution: Can the government help the Press? Should it?” CJR September-October 2007, pp 37-45, and more recently a complete editorial “A Helping hand”, November-December 2009, p 4.

- 7 <http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/cs/ContentServer/jrn/1212611716674/page/1212611716651/JRNSimplePage2.htm>
- 8 <http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2009-Explanatory-Reporting>
- 9 The name is a reference to Timothy Crouse's book "The boys in the bus". Crouse showed how the permanent closeness of journalists, politicians and their advisors, spending weeks in the same buses, hotels and planes was producing both dependence on the official sources and a shared vision of what mattered and was newsworthy.

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Erik Neveu is a Professor of political science.
Centre de Recherches sur l'Action Politique en Europe/ CNRS
Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Rennes (France)
E-mail: erik.neveu@sciencespo-rennes.fr or erik.leteure@wanadoo.fr