

A PROFESSIONAL

or how to recognize one

Copyright © 2017
SBPjor / Associação
Brasileira de Pesquisadores em Jornalismo

DENIS RUELLAN
Université Paris-Sorbonne, France

ABSTRACT – The author, a journalism researcher, builds on points that have structured his investigation over the last 25 years. He begins with the initial developments in journalism studies, developing three areas of research on the common denominator for understanding professional identity: 1 – Understanding journalism as a construct (and not as permanent data); 2 – Analyze journalism as an object and result of competition whose objective is to enforce a symbolic order (or a dominant visual one); 3 – Understanding how this order is continuously subjected (or transformed) by individuals or groups of individuals.

Key words: journalism, journalist, professional identity.

UM SER PROFISSIONAL ou como percebê-lo

RESUMO – O autor, pesquisador em jornalismo, retoma pontos que estruturam sua própria investigação nos últimos 25 anos. Ele situa o contexto no qual inicialmente se desenvolveram os estudos em jornalismo. A partir daí, desenvolve três linhas de pesquisa sob o denominador comum de compreender uma identidade profissional: 1 – Entender o jornalismo como uma construção (e não como um dado estável); 2 – Analisá-lo como objeto e resultado de conflitos de concorrência cujo objetivo é impor uma ordem simbólica (ou uma visão dominante); 3 – Compreender como essa ordem é constantemente subjetivada (ou transformada) por indivíduos ou por grupos de indivíduos

Palavras-chave: jornalismo, jornalista, identidade profissional.

UN SER PROFESIONAL o la forma de percibirlo

RESUMEN – El autor, un investigador en el periodismo, reanuda los puntos que estructuran su propia investigación en los últimos 25 años. Presenta el contexto donde inicialmente se han desarrollado los estudios de periodismo. De ahí en adelante, el autor desarrolla tres líneas de investigación bajo el mismo objetivo de comprender una identidad profesional: 1 – Comprender el periodismo como una construcción (y no como un dato estable); 2 - Analizarlo como objeto y resultado de los conflictos de competencia, cuyo objetivo es imponer un orden simbólico (o una visión dominante); 3 - Comprender la constante subjetivación de esa orden (o transformación) por individuos o grupos de individuos

Palabras clave: periodismo, periodista, identidad profesional.

What kind of professional is a journalist? What kind of individual is he at work, what kind of collectivity in a society? When the scientific community started looking at this question again in France more than 25 years ago (it had already been raised on a legal level in 1935 when the law on the status of journalists was being approved), the works on journalism had a double service. At that time, French sociology in the media was heavily influenced by North American approaches which considered certain productive activities as having a particular social function necessary for a balanced society, similar to how bodily organs are essential to the functioning of the human body. This approach presented many problems: it placed society within a system of hierarchy; it denied that conflict was real and a condition of a social world; and it placed importance on activities and people by suppressing the history of its construction, its permanence and its transformation.

This scientific functionalism was strengthened by another name: the name of the actors in journalism (or close to it) in the production process of their own discourses. Journalists are the defenders of democracy in these discourses; their role is to denounce the ones in power in order to protect the people. This has been building up since the Enlightenment and has become such a present and effective part of journalism since World War II that it is hard to think about it in any other way. Critical structuralist sociology did not offer any alternatives. When thinking of the media as a tool for social domination, the most devoted zealots of these theories ended up validating social exploitation of journalism, the determinism of the functions. When a scientific paradigm is dominant, when it brings an important community under its premises, it does not allow for other options, that is why time is needed for analysis to evolve. Science is not linear, it does not advance in any specific direction, in fact, I believe it doesn't make sense to say it evolves. It is better to say its evolution is subject, in this case, to contexts, events and individuals, at the same time as it participates in these contexts, events and individuals. Science, as a permanent and continuous attempt for rationalizing the world, is heavily influenced by the actions of individuals and therefore influenced by a form of irrationality as human beings do not act on reason alone, they also act on their emotions. This text does not attempt to compare reason and emotion, but to show that rationality is also built on an emotional dimension of experience and action (DAMASIO, 1995).

In the beginning of my research, thanks to my experience as a journalist, I had the feeling that this activity was in constant construction and evolution, it was being crossed by multiple conflicts which resulted in contradictory interests both in the collective and individual plan. I realized that even I was a part of these transformations and conflicts; I had ambitions and my personal action resulted in broader evolutions. This brought me to the conclusion that if you want to understand professional journalism, you need to analyze the identity of journalism. It was important to assume the role of sociology interactionist who was attuned to the lengthy history of contemporary understanding. I needed to find dominant structures and their resulting conflicts. At the same time, I needed to understand the individuals in order to understand how they act in society and how society makes them act.

Therefore, I went down three paths which I have been following until today:

1. Considering journalism as a construction (and not as a stable reality)

2. Analyzing processes and results of conflicts from competition whose objective is to impose a symbolic order (a dominant view)

3. Understanding how this order is continuously subjected (or transformed) by individuals or groups of individuals.

These three points are the basis of this article. I do not intend for them to be the only forms for studying journalism identity, but I believe it is important to consider them.

1 – Journalism, a historical construct

No one becomes a professional on their own, journalists cannot work alone. They exist because they have relationships with colleagues and employers, with their sources, and with public of their vehicle. They also exist because of the culture (values, norms and routines) they learned throughout training and over the course of their working lives (DUBAR, 1991). Journalists also acquire this culture because they, along with the others, help build it. From the beginning to the end of their careers, the world has changed a lot; technology, economy, social relations,

everything is different and is also a product of the individual inasmuch as they have contributed to this evolution. In other words, a professional is the result of history, their own history and the history which is bigger than they are and is rooted in the past. The more complicated, more conflictive and richer the history is, the more complex professional identity is.

The history of journalism and journalists is quite long. It shows that in order for journalistic activity to exist it had to carve its own niche; it establishes itself in the cracks between competing discourses. In the West which developed throughout the twentieth century, journalism was not the only (not even the first) attempt at describing the reality it helped build. The founder of the *Gazette* (the first newspaper in France in the seventeenth century) used to say, "history is the narrative of resulting events, the *Gazette* is just the noise that comes along with it". Journalism had competition from other forms that were propagating this noise: romance literature and painting.

Since the nineteenth century, literature has addressed more and more social issues. It started with discourse from romanticism, the narratives of love and epic combat. Authors such as Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Guy de Maupassant, and Emile Zola have added style and drama to literature in a more direct and realist way. It is based on real facts, the writers report quite a bit, travel and see events as they occur. Alexandre Dumas wrote a report in 1860 on the Italian revolution in Sicily, Emile Zola wrote romance stories revolving around the lives of miners, Victor Hugo wrote *Choses vues*¹ about his frequent trips which inspired his early writing. This realist literature (which led to the naturalist movement) was very popular among readers. Newspapers were carrying it (in the form of leaflets, which were the soap operas of the time) and, in some cases, readers traded their books in to buy ones on realism. Romance is a powerful form for describing social, economic, political and even cultural realities as it addresses all topics and describes all forms. In this way, literature is a medium of information for the public.

Art has also acted and evolved in the same way. Inspired by religion (characters and experiences of faith) and romance (nature, love, historical figures), art gradually started to leave these issues to one side and focus on describing social life, work, mundane relationships, streets and cities, culture, military conflicts and

colonial conquests. The artwork of Théodore Géricault, Gustave Courbet, Eugène Delacroix, and Auguste Renoir, among others, offer descriptions of shipwrecks, children working, popular celebrations, public execution, and the jury of a cultural competition as well as intimate relationships.

Art is also heir to Italian and Flamenco paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but these do not address any moral, philosophical or romantic notions: they are actually factual and descriptive; they denounce injustice and defend the weak. Even photography acquired a social status after its inclusion in the press in the 1920s and 1930s. Art acquired its social status between 1845 and 1910 (basically up until the beginning of surrealism) and was an important source of information on society and even political and cultural events. Even though only wealthy people could afford it, art would become quite popular inasmuch as painters would be recognized through their public exhibitions.

Once journalism became an industrial practice (in France, 1863) it experienced a significant increase in circulation and in the number of journalists (since it was necessary to write more and more pages for a growing number of competing newspapers). This process is preceded and followed by two other discourses, two other distinct forms of conveying information, society and current news. Actually, it is the romanticists and writers who know how to react and represent the main facts in reports with great ease, something journalism itself does still not know how to do. This is why journalism establishes itself between these two powerful *discursive forms*². There are two other competing forms: political discourse (politics has been present in newspapers since the French Revolution in 1789, the political and social situations are discussed and analyzed in the texts); and sociology, a new practice developed from the fringes of philosophy and literature around 1850, basing itself in the field of science around 1895. Journalists face competition which explains why they have a plural identity, something they inherited from literature, from politics and from sociology. This inheritance is visible in the goal of journalism to not be relegated to strictly factual information. Journalism acts on a literary level (it considers reporting as a bigger style that pays great attention to the form of the report), on an image level (the value of photography as a portrait and in reporting is

determined by its pictorial ability), by the influence of discourse (and political and social engagements make up the expertise of journalism), and by analysis (journalists do not only seek to report the events, but also to relate them to historicity and structure). In other words, journalism was built between literature, art, politics and sociology, its contemporary identity needs to remember this historic inheritance.

2 – Journalism, a work space

Built on the interstice between various forms of discourse in order to describe and analyze society, journalism exists by being able to define its specificity and establish strong relations with its environment. It establishes its specificity by slowly excluding competing forms of discourse from its field of expertise. This exclusion process was quite subtle, journalists had to follow two plans: materially speaking, they excluded everything that disturbed them from the social definition of journalism but also the symbolic plan, seeking to preserve the cultural heritage of contending discursive forms. This exclusion process was difficult to nominate. The title of *journalist* is needed for some actors. In France, there is a law from 1935 which establishes that only “professionals” (who mainly or solely work with journalism and are paid by a media vehicle) are recognized. This led to the eventual exclusion of writers, artists, politicians and academics from the field of journalism. But symbolically speaking, journalists seek to maintain a much broader identity since they claim to be people who also write in a style learned from literary practices, having the right to use their creativity to produce fixed (photographs) and animated (documentaries, television) images. Journalists also claim a political authority (the idea of “Fourth Power”). They also place themselves as specialists capable of analyzing society (the discourse on the technical aspect of journalistic practices). In order to explain this plural identity I borrowed from the idea of *flou identitaire* (loosely translated as “inaccurate identity”) (RUELLAN, 1993). Here, I was looking to highlight that the inaccuracy of journalism is constitutive and constructive. It is constitutive because there is a wide range of cultures inherent in journalism and constructive because it allows journalism to make use of a

variety of production vehicles. Thus, it establishes itself in a wider territory than is mentioned in the legal definition of “professional journalist”. Of course, journalism is defined by establishing its competence on a specific dimension: the currentness and speed of information. But this specification is relative. In the past, but especially nowadays, the tools allowed for other forms of discourse to be expressed in real time. What’s more is that writers, artists, politicians and sociologists already knew how to intervene quickly in representing currentness.

Why do journalists make these exclusions? Why adopt this strategy for rejecting something material that they maintain as symbolic? Because they fought for their jobs and their benefits. In the nineteenth century, the identity of journalism had not yet been established, and everyone claimed to be a journalist. This resulted in a lot of tension in the work market. Media owners did not respect the category, hiring whoever they wanted to. They often confused journalism with publicity. The salaries were low. The exclusionary definition of journalism is, however, the response the workers gave to this social situation. Defining journalists as “professionals” limited their access to jobs and even regulated the tensions in the work market. This also explains why they adopted a functionalist view of the profession as it justifies their conception of journalism and supports their interests. In fact, functionalism establishes professions as activities having social missions. It should be regulated by an organization for decisions as well as principles such as initial training and adopting a deontology. French journalists use the symbolism to justify their project material. In their discourses, they hold professional training and deontology in high regard, but in reality, they rarely implement them. In France, journalists are not obligated to take any initial training and there is no instrument binding them to any professional moral. The objective of journalists was never to submit themselves to rules for improving the social role they perform. In fact, they served as functionalist arguments for justifying the control of a work market they would like to exercise for their own benefit (RUELLAN, 1997).

From a sociological point of view, controlling this work place is not new. In fact, all these activities highlight the identical conflicting processes arising from competition for work and benefits (material and social), resulting in establishing privileges.

All those who want to establish a domain reserved for their own benefit act in the same way. They want to do it for the interests of society (public interest) and they create organizations capable of defending their own conceptions. The study of these organizations is particularly interesting. It places identity in a collective dimension and helps understand how these groups of individuals form their conceptions based on what has been defended in France over the last 135 years (since they started forming collective organizations to defend individual interests) and how this has evolved – in some cases radically. Furthermore, this study helps understand how ideas on the *métier* and the forms for defending its horizons knew how to adapt to what Jauss (1978) calls the *horizon of expectations*, the idea that a concept should not exist solely in the artist's eye, it also needs to be seen by the public. A work only exists when it is observed which is why it must be original to be attractive and understood to be appreciated. From a social point of view, I see that things work in the same way. In order to unite a collective, to form a collectivity, to build a professional group, we need an original proposition, but it can only be effective if it is coherent to concepts rooted in society. It needs to be received and understood by those who it is meant for.

This is why I believe it necessary to first have an interest in a collective organization. French journalists have formed three types of unions: corporate, professional and confederate (RUELLAN, 2014). The first trade union of journalists was called the General Confederation for Labour (for French journalists and writers); it was founded in 1895, the year of the great workers' revolution, and was inspired by socialism. This first trade union is corporate. It unites employees and employers. It is also nationalist and Catholic. According to its founders, the creation of the union was based on the need to defend the interests of journalists, but this analysis highlights that this deals especially with defending class at a time when industrial society was breaking apart, among those that benefitted from capitalism and those that submitted to it. Journalists do not want to belong to any working class which is why they praise this alliance between employees and employers. They want to merge their interests with those of their employers, which is financial, cultural and social capital. They also want to have ties to the Catholic Church because it opposes secularism of the state and the Republican control of economic

production. They are also nationalists because they do not align themselves with international workers who defend organizations for poor workers. The corporativism of journalists is more than just professionals defending the *métier*; it is a reaction of a small bourgeois class who fear the workers' movement. The history of the second group is representative of this relation between union ideas and the ideas of the time, their context of development. The National Union of French Journalists was founded in 1918 when Europe was in disarray after the events of World War I. This trade union was managed by the Human Rights League, an organization created in 1898 to defend a captain of the army who was wrongly convicted for treason. The League defended that collective rights are connected to the rights of everyone, of every individual. It was inspired by a growing idea in society that individuals were defined by free choice and not subjected to the masses, a uniform conscience. The trade union of journalists is developed from this concept and represents two-thirds of the profession, defending the rights of each one of its members in the name of a collective interest. Confederalism is the third form for organizing journalists. It considers journalism as a *métier* whose defense is in its ability to unite other workers and their unions. Since 1919, journalists have chosen to join confederate trade unions, but they are aware that this process led to the implosion of representation and defense of interests. In 1966, there were four trade unions (three of which were affiliated to different confederates). They tried to create a single trade union, a single organization, despite the strong ideological differences. This movement is only understandable if we consider that at the same time there was a broad process of grouping of the political and social left wings in France, a unification the consequence of which would be felt later when the progressive organizations won the elections in 1980 (starting with the election of François Mitterrand to the Presidency of the Republic). So, the history of the trade union, the history of defending the collective identity of journalists is closely linked to political change – this can also be applied to other countries such as Canada (LE CAM, 2009).

3 – Journalism, a subjected order

Lastly, it seems to me that a non-essentialist approach to journalism for historicizing and relating both social and conceptual evolution should consider the construction of a collective identity as a process of establishing order, something which Michel Foucault (1971) calls the *order of discourse*. This order aims to enforce and perpetuate a representation of the world that establishes social relations behind the strength of symbolism. It is also necessary to consider that this order is not permanent, it is in constant evolution and, above all, constantly subjected by individuals. The order enforces itself on individuals but is also made by individuals who use this enforcement to free themselves and benefit from it.

In order to analyze this order, it is useful to use the idea of *device* (FOUCAULT, 1977). The device consists of all the following lines of discourse: the speech of social actors, legal and regular texts, social organizations, departments and material processes, rituals, scholar and profane texts, “what is said, and also, what is not said” that enforces social rules on individuals; an order. Therefore, everything speaks. If we observe production (of a report, a collective interview, but also a media newsroom or radio or TV studio), the place of individuals, the form in which they communicate their status among each other, the use of tools, the explicit and implicit rules, the texts of definition, the academic works, the testimonies of actors, the publishing mediums of media (specialized editorials and even celebrity press), all this is representative of an order of discourse that organizes social relations, structures itself and contains conflicts. The device appears when the set of these apparently independent elements are networked together. When observing and analyzing social determinations, it is necessary to try and understand how individuals submit to this order, how it serves and frees them. They submit to the authority because they often have an interest (material or symbolic) to do so; domination cannot be understood if one does not admit that individuals are the actors of its perpetuation and integrate the rules which become legitimate (BOURDIEU, 1993). They also know how to free themselves from it when they wish. Put in another way: a device is only able to be very effective when it has flaws and fissures (DELEUZE, 1989) that allow individuals to subject it and perpetuate

the order at the same time as transforming it. An order is only efficient when it is appropriated and defended by individuals who will make it evolve in order to better perpetuate it.

I have also studied deontological codes that limit journalism to professional journalists and regulate the strong relationships between journalists and their environment (political power, peers, employers, sources and the public – RUELLAN, 2011). The deontological codes are an order of discourse which should be perceived in a device that understands not only the texts of professional morals but also the laws, the publications from trade unions and associations, the works from university researchers, books and articles on the topic from journalists, and all the instances developed by social actors to enforce this order, as is the case for council of journalists and ombudsmen. It is also important to realize that deontology is present in a variety of spaces such as courts, commissions on resolving labour disputes, even corporate or external committees where labour conditions are discussed. Taking all these spaces where deontology develops into account allows for understanding how the order of discourse is reproduced. But this also leads to understanding how this order is subjected by individuals and collectives. The deontological rule evolved according to contexts, dynamics, and tactics that organizations developed to maintain journalists' authority within journalism, to defend their work territory and resources. Deontology is a normative context where each individual has their own ethical answers to questions of professional practice. The codes cannot give these answers because they are imprecise and full of flaws. That is why each journalist must correct them or use their own solutions. This is why, under relatively equal situations, two journalists will act differently; the constraints and contexts are never the same.

Recently, in a study by Florence Le Cam (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) on emotions in journalists' workplace, we started to relate two production devices to the personal experiences of these individuals. We studied television news and reports on war. They are different devices because one relates to a permanent technical space (studio) but does not relate to just objects, places and techniques. Actually, the device is the possibility of placing heterogenous discourses in relation to each other which ultimately create a social order. The tools, the spaces

and the technology speak, but so do the actors in this process, the media, the laws, the institutions of control, the company rules, the researchers who study journalists, everything *placed in a network* ends up designing an order of discourse which determines social structure. This is what makes television presenters and reporters who report on armed conflicts become symbolic figures of the *métier*; the former embody the ideal vision of journalism (abnegation, courage). Part of this order of discourse is produced by the journalists themselves. In fact, they often write about their work and themselves. In fact, they often write about their work and themselves. Taking an interest in these autobiographies we saw that authors often make reference to their emotions. This is in contrast to their image as representatives of a *métier* which is generally defined by a distant and neutral position in regards to their objects and actions. In other words, the autobiographies of journalists informed us of the more subjective part of producing information; the authors have stated the feel emotions while working (something which is not surprising), but they also use those emotions to develop their activity (what Arlie R. Hochschild called *emotional work* in 1983). They therefore choose this profession as a way of experiencing strong and renewed feelings, as a way of suffering from the adrenaline attached to stressful, tense, fearful and happy situations provoked by performing the profession itself. This search for emotions is a subjectivity of the device in the sense that individuals use their feelings to fill in the holes revealed by the ordered discourse on the *métier*. It also draws attention to the fact that this subjectivity is not a misleading use but a condition of performing journalism: one can only be a television presenter or reporter on war (exhausting activities from a physical and psychological point of view) because one might find intense personal satisfaction, so strong in some cases that they become addicted to it, as if it were a drug. Journalism is often presented as profession of passion, and it is this part of the professional which we seek to emphasize.

*This paper was translated by Lee Sharp

NOTES

- 1 Note: “Things Seen”, is a literal translation
- 2 The idea of discursive formation was developed by Michel Foucault in many of his works. See proposals from Roselyne Ringoot and Jean-Michel Utard (2005) for the use of this concept for analyzing journalism.

REFERENCES

- BOURDIEU, P. **La Misère du monde**. Paris : Seuil, 1993.
- DAMASIO, A.R. **L'Erreur de Descartes: la raison des émotions**. Paris: Odile Jacob, 1995.
- DELEUZE, G. Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif ?. In: **Michel Foucault philosophe. Rencontre internationale**. Paris, 9, 10, 11 janvier 1988. Paris: Seuil, 1989, p. 185-195.
- DUBAR, C. **La Socialisation. Construction des identités sociales et professionnelles**. Paris: Armand Colin, 1991.
- FOUCAULT, M. **L'Ordre du discours**. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.
- FOUCAULT, M. Le jeu de Michel Foucault, entretien, *Ornicar ? Bulletin périodique du champ freudien*, July 10, 1977, pp. 62-93. In : Foucault, M. **Dits et écrits 1954-1988 par Michel Foucault**, T. III, Paris: Gallimard, 1994, p 298-329.
- HOCHSCHILD, A. R. **The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling**. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1983.
- JAUSS, H. R. **Pour une esthétique de la réception**. Paris: Gallimard, 1978.
- LE CAM, F. **Le journalisme imaginé. Histoire d'un projet professionnel au Québec**. Montreal: Leméac, 2009.
- RUELLAN, D. **Le Professionnalisme du flou. Identité et savoir-faire des journalistes français**. Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1993
- RUELLAN, D. **Les “Pro” du journalisme. De l'état au statut, la**

construction d'un espace professionnel. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1997.

RUELLAN, D. **Nous, journalistes. Déontologie et identité.** Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2011.

RUELLAN, D. **Le journalisme défendu. Modèles de l'action syndicale.** Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014.

Denis Ruellan is a professor at Paris-Sorbonne University, immediate assistant to the CELSA and a member of the Gripic laboratory. He has published many works on collective construction in the field of professional journalism. He also holds an interest in the engagement of individuals in the work place.

RECEIVED ON: 19/03/2017 | APPROVED ON: 01/04/2017