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To think "citizen journalism".

ABSTRACT.

Since 2005, the Internet has given rise to several novel initiatives concerning journalism designated by the generic term "citizen journalism". Underlying a set of heterogeneous systems, a unique principle can be observed: web users, who are not professional journalists, contribute directly to the production of the daily news. These practices raise a series of questions, one of which is the link, in the media and journalism, between professional and amateur practices (pro-am) and which we will examine in this article.

KEYWORDS: JOURNALISM, CITIZEN JOURNALIST, PRO-AM.

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Since 2005, the Internet has given rise to several novel initiatives concerning journalism designated by the generic term "citizen journalism". The offer includes a variety of projects and editorial systems:

- certain sites justify their initiative by criticizing traditional media and offering an alternative source of news (AgoraVox) while others have been created by major companies (Wat TV by the French TV channel TF1, YouWitnessNews by Yahoo and Reuters);

- some sites are designed as simple publication spaces, with minimal regulation of content posted by users (NowPublic, Centspapiers, AgoraVox), while others strictly control contributions, mixing them with professional content (Rue89, Ohmynews) or integrating them in a collective project managed by journalists (Assignment Zero);

- most of these systems are entirely dedicated to this means of production, but some appear inside traditional media in specific columns (the section Yo periodista on the El Pais website, reader blogs accessible via the Télégramme s homepage, the election period site Quelcandidat.com of the Dauphiné-Libéré newspaper and increasingly frequent encouragements on traditional media sites inviting users to submit news, photos and videos of an event they have witnessed).

Underlying these heterogeneous systems, we can observe a unique principle: web users, who are not professional journalists, contribute directly to the production of the daily news. They search for data, analyze and post it on line, with or without the help of professionals. These sites claim to involve tens of thousands of contributors. These figures are undoubtedly exaggerated or misleading (we would have to distinguish between regular and occasional contributions), nevertheless, they do indicate a significant movement and certain sites have a considerable number of visitors.

These practices raise a number of questions: Who are these web users? What motivates them and what is their background? Is their production specialized or are certain themes, or discursive forms, encouraged? What is the economic model of these sites? Who are the users that consume this production? We can observe, in particular, that these initiatives shed new light on the relationship in the media and journalism between professional and amateur practices, giving rise to a new appellation, borrowed from sports: pro-am (or proam) journalism.

Through these sites, are we witnessing the intensification of a movement already observed elsewhere, in the media and more generally in the cultural sector (music and video): the reshaping of content produced in part using external resources? This trend has developed in particular in audiovisual media, since the 80's, through the increased use of testimonials (ordinary people –like you and I –are asked to share what we have seen, what we know or what we have experienced). The use of testimonials by ordinary people has also increased dramatically in the non-daily press (specialized magazines). Over the Internet, these accounts can be expressed more directly, without the mediation of journalists or media (in blogs and independent wikis) or in cooperation with them (in cooperative forms where amateur and professional content coexist).

Whether independent or cooperative, does this reality indicate a "new regime of amateurism" (Cardon and Delaunay, 2007)? And therefore, should we question whether there has been a paradigm shift in the dominant belief system? After the era of transmission journalism, followed by opinion, information and, finally, communication journalism, as defined by Charron and de Bonville (1996, 2003), are we experiencing the emergence of *We The Journalism* (to paraphrase one of the heralds of citizen journalism, Dan Gilmor, in his book entitled *We The Media*) ? Does citizen journalism imply a radical change in media rules and environments?

We are not able to answer this question today. It would take several years to measure if what we

can currently observe is the sign of such a transformation. Therefore we will simply underline here the dimensions of research we need to carry out as the phenomenon of citizen journalism evolves in order to define its possible outcomes.

We can start by observing that the expression citizen journalism isproblematic. It assigns too great a responsibility for certain media or individuals to bear and why them, and not others? Sometimes the term participatory journalism is used. This is a more neutral, operational expression. While it is less emotionally charged, it also reduces the phenomenon: users simply contribute to media output dominated by professional journalists, whereas certain sites (e.g. Centpapiers and AgoraVox) are completely managed by associate web users. We propose the expression *ordinary journalism*, in reference to the heuristic forecast of M. de Certeau and L. Giard (1983) of the advent of an ordinary form of communication. They define ordinary cultural production by comparing it to mass industrial output: One leads to homogenization (&) The other masks the fundamental diversity of situations, interests, cultural or psychological contexts, behind the apparent repetition of the objects it uses. The pluralism of reutilizations and social usages is a response to the uniformity required for mass production. Pluralism originates in ordinary use, from this enormous reservoir, not only in the number (mass) of people, but the multiple (the differences of individuals and groups) . Therefore, for us the term ordinary journalism has both a plural and singular form since it is practiced by a wide array of individual players whose common denominator (as far as we can ascertain) is secondary: they are not professionals; they inform others even though this is not their profession.

If we are indeed witnessing a transformation of relations between professionals and amateurs, we cannot analyze these trends using an essentialist and professionalist conception of journalism. As it has already been said (1993, reedited in 2007), Groups of professionals are born, live, reproduce and disappear molded by historic conditions (political, economic, technological, cultural) that are responsible for their specificity . I have proposed an analysis of the construction and modulation of journalism based on vagueness , according to the approach put forward by L. Boltanski (1982) who evokes the dynamic effect of boundaries in his study of a group of managers : Like the definition of criteria for belonging to a group, the creation of boundaries constitutes, in struggles, one of the technologies of objectification used by political movements and the institutionalization of boundaries between groups is one of the fundamental stakes of political struggles. The boundaries between groups (like the borders between nations) are not natural and a group created through aggregation around a center of attraction has no other limits, in practice, than the zone of uncertainty where one can feel, with more or less intensity, the attraction of other poles. However, produced by a quasi-legal action, that objectifies and institutionalizes a state of social relations, boundaries contribute to produce objective differences that justify their contours .

I developed this thesis to explain how journalism constantly incorporates new activities, new professional segments, by calling into question boundaries that were considered natural just yesterday. The history of professional journalism is one of slow aggregation of profiles as technologies enabled the creation of new fields of activity. The boundary between professionals and amateurs is also a historic construct; there is nothing natural about it. It was established in the 19th century, when industrialization of the press led journalists to become salaried employees and professional groups to structure themselves in order to occupy the workplace in the media. Thus professionalism created amateurism. In France, in 1935, a law was voted defining the term professional journalist and his specific rights, thus implying that an amateur form of journalism exists which is not illegal (Ruellan, 1997) and that we will refer to in this article as *ordinary journalism*.

We have to consider the ordinary as something other than a relation controlled by, subordinate to or proletarized by the professional. Sites that

practice ordinary journalism demonstrate that professional and amateur practices do not take place inside parallel but rather airtight spaces. They cooperate in the production process. This leads us to propose considering, just like the different worlds of art described by H. Becker, that journalism appears to be a network of cooperation within which all the players carry out tasks that are essential for the successful completion of the work (1982). This metaphor leads us to the recognition that whoever contributes something to a work, in any way whatsoever, takes part to an extent in its production (2006). Thus, the journalist is supported by a division of labor between players who do not work in the same place, with the same tools, with a strictly identical goal, among whom we can find not only professional journalists, but also technicians, managers, and amateur contributors. The players act according to rules, conventions and cooperative schemes that enable these worlds (&) to successfully complete their everyday tasks . By situating the players that contribute to the work of an artist as reinforcement staff Becker establishes a hierarchy at the center of which he places the author. If we transpose this idea to journalism, the journalist is the key pivotal figure in a relationship with sources (who contribute by providing information) and the public (who, by consuming information, influence editorial choices). The failure or limitations of several experiments in ordinary journalism developed over the last three years contribute to the notion of reinforcement staff . Bayosphère (San Francisco, USA) shut down because it did provide assistance and support for user initiatives. Ohmynews (Korea) and Rue89 (France) work essentially with journalists, amateurs making only complementary contributions. Assignment Zero has, conceptually, assigned amateur web users (who search for information) to professional journalists (whose role is to collect and enhance the data). But other evidence suggests that ordinary journalism could be placed at the center of editorial structures. As media reduce personnel and means for reporting, tools for capturing and rapidly transmitting information have become commonplace and increasingly images of fortuitous events are produced using ordinary cameras and telephones. Published spontaneously on sites like Dailymotion or YouTube, they are now purchased by large media companies like CNN and posted on their sites. Of course, the quality and quantity of this material is not sufficient, but we can attribute this to a lack of experience among ordinary people which could soon be remedied. Their capacity to assimilate and reproduce conventions and cooperative schemes has been amply proven in media practices based on testimony, participation in debates and even interviews of individuals who are increasingly more informed concerning journalism. This is why the hypothesis that we are heading towards a situation based on mutual reinforcement between journalists and web users, each relying on the resources of the other, seems plausible (O. Trédan, 2007).

As Michel Foucault suggests (1971), this change is not something out of the blue, emerging from nowhere. The order of discourse in the media (or journalism) has been built by formulating a whole series of exclusions and taboos, among them the independent expression of sources and ordinary people. If the journalist, acting as a gatekeeper, excluded the live statements of social players and audiences, this means that it existed potentially or was repressed by rarefaction processes . And above the discursive order that provided a sense of unity, discontinuities emerged whose genealogy needs to be explained. In other words, we need to situate the emergence of a phenomenon such as citizen journalism within a chain of events or ask what came before it. In France, we could read in the Manifesto underlying the creation of the left-wing newspaper Libération in 1973: Libération is you! Libération is not a paper created by journalists for people, but a paper created by people with the help of journalists . This profession of faith could be adopted, in extenso, by many sites such as Ohmynews, Assignment Zero and Rue89. The daily paper Libération never succeeded in its project of ordinary journalism. Yet, 30 years later, the idea has resurfaced and seems less of a pipe dream. What happened over the last 3 decades; what other events can be linked together so that we can understand how the boundaries between

professionals and amateurs have evolved? This does not mean that what we are witnessing today is only the expression of what has always existed, of a timeless order. On the contrary, the transformation is taking place, has a starting point (that we must discover) and has gone through phases, a chain of events. Thus it is probable a link should be made with public journalism, defended in the 80 s and 90 s (Watine, 2003). We can observe the same principles: the media, in order to win back public confidence, must consult audiences to decide which subjects are important. Media users are active citizens, not passive spectators, who are willing to take part in public life. To move from public journalism to citizen journalism a line had to be crossed: the boundary between professional and amateur was blurred by the direct participation of audiences in production of content. There is therefore a discontinuity, but within a coherent chain of events.

We also need to understand how the journalistic order is organized to control discursive emergences, how it tries to maintain boundaries. As M. Foucault has pointed out (1971), in every society, the production of discourse is at the same time controlled, selected, organized and redistributed through a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off powers and dangers, to master the random event, to avoid its heavy and formidable materiality . This means, in particular, maintaining a division between different forms of journalism, and especially to reserve for professionals the privilege of certain practices, or levels of practice. Thus, for example, for a long time it was argued that journalists went out into the field and reported facts. This privilege no longer exists in the age of cell phones, miniaturized cameras and the Internet. Arguments have therefore recently focused on moral issues: while everyone can be a reporter, only professionals are capable of deontology, according to union magazines. Discourse is also controlled through the rarefaction of talking subjects , which means controlling who can speak. For example, concerned by the proliferation of citizen journalism websites that could compete with them, media companies have proposed, through a government report (it is also worried about the

proliferation of such sites), that web users who practice this type of journalism be paid. Some sites have started paying part of their earnings, generally a pro rata number of hits. Paying contributors is a way of creating loyalty and exclusivity that has already been used by daily papers. Observing that in villages there were teachers, priests and civil servants willing to write for the media about local news, even free of charge, regional papers started to pay them like stringers (badly, with no job security) thus creating a local news monopoly.

Finally, we should consider the continuity between of the professional and the amateur and to do this we cannot only observe the blurring of boundaries. Everything becomes clearer if we do not exclude, right from the start, the ordinary from the definition of journalism. Using Foucault s notion of discursive formations (1969), that R. Ringoot and JM. Utard (2006) proposed to apply to journalism in order to apprehend its perpetual invention, is heuristic. Foucault suggests considering regularities in scattered discourse, on the level of objects, enunciations, concepts and themes. If we can observe regularities, even in very distant discourse or discourse between highly foreign players, in widely varied forms, then these must be included in a set referred to as discursive formations. Foucault explains therefore that madness consists in what is said about it, in words, acts, and systems, not only by doctors, but also patients, administrations, churches, justice, the police, technologies, practices, research, management methods and politicians. Mental illness has been constituted by all that has been said about it within the group of enunciations that have named it, divided it, described it, explained it, told of its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it and eventually gave it a voice by articulating, in its name, discourse that was presented as its own . From this standpoint, journalism appears to be constituted also by the ordinary, by what is said by non-professionals about it, their means of receiving it (as reception contributes to the co-construction of meaning) and practicing it. As both receivers and producers of information, audiences can thus be included in the players that take part in networks of cooperation . The

perspectives of Becker and Foucault are not incompatible; they complete each other.

Finally, this approach involves a triple departure:

- from the linear model of communication that leads to the study of information as a one-way process, as a selection mechanism that is controlled by an essential central figure, the professional journalist, and considers sources and audiences as peripheral to production of news. It is useful to bear in mind that this model, that prevents understanding of the construction of information, remains highly pregnant. Only a few rare studies have succeeded in avoiding the media-centrism decried by P. Schlesinger (1992). As G. Bastin points out (2003 ; inspired by Strauss, Becker, Abbott) information is created within a context, by people who are interacting, cooperating with and confronting each other, who risk their careers, who are part of an economy based on relations of production that they constantly help to create (and thus transform). Sources and audiences must be seen within this interaction with amateurs at the crossroads of these two bodies ;

- from the functionalist model of professionalization, that characterizes almost all work concerning journalism. This model imposes a link between the construction process of a profession and improved quality of information resulting explicitly from a distancing of these two communications bodies: the sources and the audiences. However, we must bear in mind that professionalization is a process by which a group of individuals is organized around a field of expertise (or competency) and claims the privilege of reaping the material and symbolic profits. This claim leads to the exclusion of competitors, especially amateurs. Sources and audiences have been placed outside the production process by the professionalization movement, but we

can imagine that they do not accept this exclusion and continue to seek a more legitimate place ;

- from the essentialist definition of the notion of profession. Whether the term is synonymous with a group, job, business, art or assignment, it always means to do, to perform an act of production. And this is inherently social, practiced in a context, through interaction, which means, just as obviously, that it is not stable, that it evolves and that it is perennially inventing itself. The idea we have of a profession, in a given era and space, is the result of production relations between players: the definition of a group is determined through work. The evolution of technologies, production resources and the players involved transform the nature of the activity and its representation.

The irruption of amateurism (in volume, since it has always existed, the new aspect is its importance) in journalism should therefore lead us to formulate the hypothesis that its definition has been transformed under the influence of this trend. The intensification of relations between professionals and amateurs, the multiplication of ordinary contributions to traditional media products and alternative offers, the development of mixed workplaces, are likely to change our conception of journalism and its professional character.

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