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Newsroom dissonance: how new digital technologies are changing professional roles in contemporary newsrooms

Dodds Rojas, T.

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Newsroom Dissonance

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contemporary newsrooms**



Fieldwork

The fieldwork for this thesis took place between August of 2017 and February of 2018 in Santiago, Chile. The duration of the fieldwork was divided equally between two newsrooms. During the first part of my research, I conducted ethnography at the television station **Canal 13**, a Chilean free-to-air television channel, controlled by the Luksic Group. Particularly, I focused on **Teletrece**, Canal 13's news department and newscast, and **T13**, its website. During the second part of my fieldwork, I conducted newsroom ethnography at ***La Tercera***, a daily newspaper owned by **Copesa**. Copesa is a Chilean media conglomerate controlled by Álvaro Saieh.

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Promotores

Prof. dr. M. Maeckelbergh

Dr. M. Westmoreland

Committee

Prof. dr. P. Wouters (Voorzitter)

Prof. dr. B. Barendregt

Prof. dr. J. de Jong

Prof. dr. C. Grasseni

Dr. I. Awad (Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam)

Dr. M. P. Peirano (University of Chile)

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Prologue¹

Beginning in mid-October 2019 and extending for almost a year afterward, Chile was in the grip of waves of anti-government protests and cultural manifestations with tens of thousands of demonstrators taking to the streets and protesting across the country. The upsurge of this social outburst had its roots in a civil society that was rebelling against the uncaring economic and political elite that had effectively ruled the country since its return to democracy in 1990. According to Orellana (2020), Chileans were fighting back against the ‘commodification of humanity’, and thereby obliterating the myths and tales that once told the story of a neoliberal oasis in the south end of Latin America (Somma et al., 2020).

What started as a protest against recent fare hikes in the public subway system (Holland, 2019) quickly escalated when Sebastián Piñera’s right-wing administration decreed a state of emergency and instituted martial law in the country’s largest cities, making the military forces, who are not trained to address civilians, responsible for restoring public order and quelling the protests (Garcés, 2019). As expected, unrestrained repression was followed by public outrage, which in turn produced a groundswell of political support for the uprising, and soon, the number of protesters in the streets skyrocketed. By the end of October 2019, over a million people were gathering in the plazas of the capital city of Santiago, and many more revolted in other major Chilean provinces (N. Larsson, 2019).

After months of mobilisations and pot-banging ringing in public squares, malls, and universities, clashes between police and demonstrators left over 3,000 people injured and 20 dead. Bandaged eyes become a rallying symbol, as Chilean police were credited with blinding over 300 protesters by shooting rubber pellets directly at their faces (McDonald, 2019). Moreover, several national and foreign organisations published reports proving systematic and gross human rights violations in the country during the riots (Ravanal Zepeda & Marin, 2020). The coverage of the horrors occurring on the streets emerged in an endless live broadcast stream, simultaneously challenging the audience to identify and combat the menace of fake news on social networks. However, the ever-present dissemination of disinformation was caused not only by faceless bots operating on the margins of popular platforms but also by the heads of the national government: many falsehoods were intentionally sponsored by high-ranking political figures. In December 2019, Piñera claimed, in an uncompromisingly

¹ A previous version of this section has been published as “How Chilean activists used citizen-generated data to fight disinformation” (2020).

forthright manner during an interview with international media, that some of the videos that people were seeing on their feeds were actually ‘fake news’ and that many of them ‘had been filmed outside of Chile or misrepresented’ (Laing, 2019). This type of message – ‘some of the things you are seeing may not be real’ – was indeed difficult to disprove. Because of either political or technological limitations, many of which are discussed in this thesis, national television stations and newspapers were unable to fact-check the sheer number of videos and pictures circulating on social networks. Therefore, during the first months of the movement, the screens of millions of Chileans were limited to portraying supermarket lootings and barricades in flames. The videos of police abuse of demonstrators were predominantly relegated to independent left-wing digital media, which often were unqualified and unfit to trace the sources of all the material that came from the streets and were now accumulating in their small newsrooms.

Many journalists and other media professionals working outside news organisations were discontented with the manner in which traditional media were covering such abuses if they were reporting them at all; consequently, a variety of different bottom-up or grassroots journalistic projects started emerging from their efforts. Two projects garnered my attention from the beginning: ChileRegistra and FastCheck. These initiatives combined a journalistic-oriented ethos with the politics of visibility (Milan, 2015) for those whose rights had been infringed upon. While these projects are ingenious, their emergence signifies more than simply the citizen-journalist response to this particular crisis. These innovations are also a reaction to what Chilean citizen-journalists and digital activists thought was missing from the already large ecology of media organisations in the country: On the one hand, they desired a technological infrastructure that allowed media outlets to gather and verify information that was circulating on social media, separating fake from real events. On the other hand, they knew that they needed an editorial perspective that saw police abuses as systemic rather than isolated events. The October Revolution in Chile, as it has come to be called, came with the outgrowth of an interconnected ecology of online information-gathering, fact-checking, and news-reporting platforms produced by organised citizen-journalists and digital activists. Only four days after the beginning of the protests, journalists Miguel Paz and Nicolás Ríos started ChileRegistra.info, a repository of audiovisual material and information regarding the ongoing protests. ChileRegistra stores and distributes videos that have been previously shared by volunteers and social network users who have attended rallies. According to these journalists, whom I later called for an interview, traditional media could not present videos of human rights violations that had been shared on social networks simply because they were unable to verify

the sheer volume of audiovisual material reaching the newsrooms. Thus, while users' pages on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were filling with images of atrocities committed by military personnel, media outlets would primarily broadcast live images of riots and barricades, which produced increased levels of mistrust between the demonstrators and the press. As a response to this problem, ChileRegistra had two main purposes: First, the journalists aimed to create a 'super database' with photos and videos of the protests, including military and police abuses. Second, they intended to identify the creators of videos and photos already posted and shared on social networks to make these users available as sources or witnesses for both traditional media and prosecutors. National newspapers, such as *La Tercera* and *Publímetro*, among other local and international media outlets, have already utilised this platform to publish or broadcast data collected within the repository.

The second project, FastCheck, is a fact-checking enterprise based on the photo and video-sharing social network Instagram. It was created by a group of former journalists and media professionals who rely on volunteers and unpaid experts to check and report on the veracity of the information that they are attempting to analyse. A news segment on Televisión Nacional de Chile, a public service broadcaster, portrayed images of a pharmacy being consumed by flames amidst the mass revolts, and FastCheck became famous when they proved that there had indeed been a fire, and that the blaze that people saw on their screens had not been altered digitally.

After conducting semi-structured interviews with the leaders of these initiatives, I concluded that rather than seeking to replace traditional journalism, these projects aimed to assist and support, albeit critically, the work of traditional media outlets by providing repositories of corroborated, easy-to-access, fact-checked information. In turn, news organisations have recourse through the databases provided by these activists and are utilising this option to reduce professional dissonance and disinformation on their own platforms.

These examples carry important implications for understanding the Chilean media landscape on the cusp of the worst civil unrest since its return to democracy. The ways in which these organisations operate seem to reinforce the hegemony of traditional media during conflict, as a journalistic ethos hovers over the way these initiatives are understood and operated; however, these praxis-oriented projects also illuminate digital activists' ability to create structures of resistance, thus politically engaging in the production of news. Additionally, they fight both institutional and organic disinformation and assist failing media infrastructures by creating devices that enhance and encourage transparency (P. Harvey et al., 2013), which in this case morally exhorted traditional media workers to react properly to the turmoil.

Disinformation is likely to continue to be a reality for the majority of Western societies and a topic of interest for academia (Freelon & Wells, 2020). As Morgan (2018) posits, the basic infrastructures of public life are under constant attack, while manipulation and disinformation only grow more sophisticated on every technological platform available. Furthermore, these factors are set against a background in which governments have entered a state of disinformation warfare (Zannettou et al., 2019). Concurrently, journalism, which is still seeking a sustainable financial model, is under extraordinary pressure (Freedman, 2019; Pickard, 2011).

Nevertheless, ChileRegistra and FastCheck demonstrate that Chile lived, or is living, in a period of revolutionary hope in which citizens can meaningfully contribute and become, similar to many other digital activists around the world, ‘increasingly aware of the critical role of information as the new fabric of social life’ (Milan & Velden, 2016).

In times of already dwindling trust levels toward journalism (Hanitzsch et al., 2018) and increasing media cynicism, it is no surprise that news sceptics turn to alternative sources of information during social unrest (Kohring & Matthes, 2016; Tsfati, 2003). However, Chile had literally entered a state of emergency overnight with a government that saw its legitimacy becoming further imperilled; consequently, the administration started desperately spreading false information, believing that the failure of becoming lost in a sea of fake news would have been the ‘responsibility of the citizen, who could always have been more active, more vigilant, more participatory’ (P. Harvey et al., 2013, p. 308). Therefore, Chilean activists and citizen-reporters fought back. The disinformation that originated from political spheres of power, unchecked and uncontested for the longest time by constantly shifting traditional media because of its sociotechnical and political limitations, was repelled by a structure that refused to be rolled back, and instead, by utilising the most rudimentary of all technologies available, resisted.

Although I was raised in Chile, today I live in Amsterdam. As protesters began gathering, I could only follow the news as any other Chilean abroad: behind a screen. I placed a monitor in my room, streaming in a loop the YouTube channels of the prime-time late-night news of major media outlets. During the day, I frequently checked different social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, or projects such as ChileRegistra or FastCheck, and from time to time, I received news and tips from friends and fellow journalists over WhatsApp or Signal. Information started flooding every digital space available: a video posted on social media in

the morning had several different interpretations by that evening, and dissimilar explanations were offered by experts across the entire media spectrum by night-time.

Amidst the social unrest caused by this crisis, I started to receive urgent phone calls and lengthy messages from the same journalists I had interviewed a year prior as part of this thesis. We had maintained contact since I spent almost seven months working with them, but the informality that had characterised our chats – which centred mostly around newsroom gossip, such as who had been fired or promoted – was now replaced by high-strung and weary voices quietly whispering off-the-record stories about articles that were killed before they were ever published, journalists who were fired for refusing to include their names in the byline of stories they knew were fake, and calls that came from ‘all the way up’ to request a different headline or a more favourable picture of the president. During my fieldwork, I courteously pushed journalists to recall cases in which they had faced censorship; however, now these tales of forced silence were pouring into my phone.

I called a journalist who still worked in one of the newsrooms in which I conducted my fieldwork, and we talked until 5 a.m. Amsterdam time. He spoke at length about how the situation was unravelling in his own newsroom. He described how unions were trying to protect journalists who were being condemned by media organisations and audiences alike for signing their names to articles that were later proven to contain false information, although these journalists had been mandated by their editors to publish the stories. I scribbled down the names of journalists who had been sent to report on the streets only to return to the newsroom to find that their stories would not be published. Although I could see a new day dawning outside my window, I felt compelled to continue taking notes and asking questions, unable to stop due to the intensity of the stories I was hearing.

As I finally slept, I realised that the stories that I present in these pages belong to a Chile that has vanished literally overnight in a cloud of smoke, tears, and blood. The field in which I laboriously worked for months had seemingly disappeared, and even if I ever were to return to those same buildings, I could never return to the same newsrooms.

Yet, the anecdotes that my sources were telling me do not subvert or undermine the ethnographically driven story of this thesis. Rather, the chapters ahead are a roadmap to understand the falling and failing of the Chilean neoliberal oasis; to recognise why new structures of resistance are trying to support and assist rather than replace traditional media; and perhaps most importantly, to identify the reasons why media organisations can simultaneously bury human rights stories and utilise pro-revolution activists’ projects to diversify their production of news and corroborate the basic details of their stories.

The issue I discuss in this thesis is not how things were vis-à-vis how they have changed, as both journalism and politics are fickle. Instead, I observe a constant in modern journalism and multiplatform newsrooms: the unwearied state of professional dissonance.