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

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VI. Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research aimed to explain how journalists and media workers are appropriating digital technologies into their routines and how, in turn, they have experienced an increasing level of professional dissonance in their work. Seven months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2017 and 2018 that included participant observation and semi-structured interviews with newsroom workers allowed me to conclude that the introduction of new digital technologies into newsrooms has fundamentally transformed journalism, including the way journalists are expected to work, the topics they are expected to cover, and the journalistic values they hold true. The results further indicate that transformations in the temporalities, platforms, and infrastructures within multiplatform newsrooms are producing high levels of professional dissonance in media workers because the values they have as journalists conflict with the tasks that they feel pressured to perform.

Although the consensus in the literature is that journalism is constantly changing, some authors claim that these changes are happening excessively quickly, thus making it difficult to identify the consequences of these transformations for journalists. Every time journalists ascertain the problem, all the pieces of the puzzle are scrambled as a new software or hardware is introduced, and the whole process becomes complicated again. In this thesis, I have illustrated that the technologies inside these newsrooms are indeed mutating, and journalists perceive that their practices, norms, and values mismatch with what they actually do. The gap between the idealised purpose of journalistic work and journalism's professional performance grows wider every day, as Chilean journalists specifically have found themselves unable to adjust appropriately to the requirements of their infrastructures.

Moreover, by analysing the changing professional roles on the basis of analogue and digital platforms, I have indicated that journalists' feelings of professional dissonance are often met with indifference by newsroom executives. While newspapers and television reporters are praised by editors for the journalistic content they produce, the value in digital reporters' work is attributed by the number of clicks that they draw from the audience. I have further argued that for an economically troubled industry, such as the media, digital journalists' ability to successfully capture the attention of users surpasses their journalistic values.

In this thesis, I have emphasised that a deterministic approach to understanding professional dissonance must be avoided. The literature that I have drawn from indicates that new technologies can be utilised to sustain value commitments in journalists, and although social

media platforms and tech giants such as Facebook and Google continue to push concurrently for the datafication of the audience and the production of content, online journalists are, in some contexts, successfully negotiating the gap between their occupational values and users' preferences.

Additionally, I have demonstrated in this thesis that journalists' feelings of professional dissonance do not necessarily emanate from the technologies that they are pushed to utilise; rather, they originate with the organisational decision to adapt to a business model that generates high levels of dependency between the newsroom and third-party social media platforms, which occurs when the organisations submit to these platforms' guidelines about how stories should be covered and produced.

In this thesis, I have presented the multiple changes that journalism in Chile has undergone in recent decades. However, the introduction of certain digital technologies has radically altered journalists' ability to negotiate editorial values and ideals. Rather, media professionals have increasingly felt trapped in routines established by third-party and external platforms that have dictated the way journalistic work must be performed to successfully maintain a revenue model that allows the newsroom to exist.

6.1. Findings

By observing digital journalists working in multiplatform newsrooms, I have demonstrated that media workers were experiencing high levels of professional dissonance in two newsrooms in Chile. The methodology that I utilised to study this phenomenon was particularly successful for two reasons. First, the materialities and technologies inside the newsroom gained meaning when they were observed in relationship with the performance of those journalists who utilised them. Unlike many of the studies about newsrooms and journalistic normative roles, I have claimed that to understand the role of digital technologies in the gap between what journalists say they do and what they actually do, one must observe how reporters interact everyday with the new infrastructures, temporalities, and platforms in the newsroom.

Second, the methods employed during this research allowed me to work in a circular fashion, that is, constantly contrasting my results during my stay in the field with the literature available on the subject. Consequently, I was able to understand new insights that arose during my fieldwork, from general questions about the usage of digital technologies by Chilean journalists to more specific enquiries about the transformation of professional values and job performances.

This research has illustrated that the recent political and economic history in Chile allowed for a rapid adaptation of digital technologies by the media industry. Chile has been called the first neoliberal experimental laboratory in the world, and unlike many other markets in the region, the nation presented an ideal opportunity to observe traditional television and newspaper newsrooms in a time of accelerated economic development and technological growth. The introduction of new digital technologies in these newsrooms was both surprising and sudden, even for many long-standing reporters and producers. The economic interests of those who owned the holdings behind these companies aligned with the interests of non-proprietary and third-party platforms and social networks, and journalists began to feel that they were being forced into patterns that did not align with their values, norms, and skills.

Consequently, I have explained in this thesis how the introduction of new digital technologies created new forms and platforms for doing journalism. The platformisation of news has shaped new hierarchies inside of newsrooms, distinguishing between paper, television, and digital reporters and associating different degrees of value with each; furthermore, this phenomenon has created a dependency between media organisations and online platforms as well as social media. This dependency has frequently been expressed in the way digital reporters write the news and headlines, the pictures they include, the number of sources consulted, and even the length of the stories.

As journalists have been pushed to follow the guidelines and editorial decisions of third-party platforms, their ideals of journalism's best practices have been unheard and unrecognised by editors who have found themselves constantly chasing clicks. Thus, media workers have begun to experience professional dissonance, as they have felt little or no freedom to contest or oppose the rules established by someone else. From the construction of a headline to the length and content of an article, journalists have seen their gatekeeping function fading, leaving behind a feeling of despair and frustration.

Moreover, I have presented in this thesis that new media infrastructures have been created to sustain such economic models. I have identified how media organisations, particularly *La Tercera*, were promoting an individualistic type of digital reporting. The physical layout of the newsroom replicated the value system and hierarchies, reflecting who the editors thought mattered and who did not. The feeling of professional dissonance in this newsroom was palpable in the way journalists had to drag their chairs to talk to each other and were physically excluded from the rest of media workers.

Additionally, I have demonstrated how new temporalities are changing the perception of the meaning of time in the news-making process. I felt these new pressures myself when I was

creating relationships with sources and suddenly, new sources flooded my cell phone, mixing themselves with friends and family. The need to have sources only one click away to report a story quickly has created new levels of intimacy and mutuality between reporters and sources. Moreover, I have argued in this thesis that despite some negative aspects that have accompanied new temporalities, some positive factors must also be recognised. New stages of obtainability can be observed in these newsrooms. By increasingly relying on MIM, reporters have begun to utilise basic digital technologies to free themselves from the economic and geographical constraints that once made distant stories impossible to cover.

The most important finding of this research is that Chilean journalists are experiencing one constant in modern journalism and multiplatform newsrooms: the unwearied state of professional dissonance. Depending on the platform on which they work, Chilean digital reporters have begun to resent their work and to begrudge the performance of reporters working for other platforms.

6.2. Final words

Many circumstances have changed since I started writing this thesis in 2016. The question of the boundaries of professional journalism has become more prominent in the literature than when I began researching the topic. Today, I can only agree with Stephen Ostertag's (2020) argument that in a world of alternative realities, attention economies, and tailor-made propaganda, journalism still matters. If anything, it matters more. As Wenzel and Nelson (2020) state, despite the many faces and definitions of journalism or the blurred boundaries, relationships are at the heart of this profession – those between journalists and their audiences, with their sources, with the economists who operate their newsrooms, and even with the platforms that now rule their content. The dynamics and practices in these relationships have changed, and the power balance has shifted with them; nevertheless, the increase of professional dissonance within newsrooms is indicative of journalists' desire to protect organisational cultures, identities, and values that, however tautological it may sound, evoke the intrinsic joy of being a journalist.

