

## **OUTSOURCED INFORMATION: IDENTITY AND UNPAID WORK IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL JOURNALISM**

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### **Abstract**

The Age of Information has been extensively studied by Castells, in the late 1980's. Several of the implications discussed by this author at the time are observable nowadays, specially the ones concerning the tendencies to precariousness that labor activities related to information production present. Due to an increasingly accentuated demand for information, communication companies (such as TV stations and printed and online newspapers) have developed outsourcing methods of production of content. Said methods consist, basically, on the recruitment of a literate elite of professionals, originated from other countries, to produce quality "local news". In this article, we analyze a concrete case of outsourcing of information, performed by a French blog platform that mainly recruits contributors from Africa. Based on the analysis of the interviews carried out with ten of these bloggers, we show, albeit in an exploratory way, the emerging conflicts that the process of outsourced production of information generates. During the discussion of this subject, we mobilized concepts developed within the field of sociology of work and other recent theoretical productions on the precariousness of informational work.

### **Keywords**

Precariousness; outsourcing; information; blog; self-employed work

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Labor in the field of information produces complex identity relationships that we consider to be increasingly relevant as objects of study within the context of the significant changes taking place in the framework of activity and mobility flows required in the vast field of information, knowledge and communication. This idea is present in current debates specifically developed by journalists (Union of Journalists, 2015). In this paper, we will concentrate on the worldviews of a group of foreign bloggers, mainly Africans, who take part in the French media and who we interviewed as part of a broader project (Katembera, s/d). This is a group marked by precariousness at work, which reveals several identity features typical of the new work situations generated in the context of the Information Age.

Labor, as we know, provides many processes of construction of subjects that do not involve only the material conditions of workers, but also the way these individuals define themselves. Rodrigues (1970), in his book "Industrialization and Worker's Attitudes", shows that workers subjected to the same working conditions and the same relations of domination develop different attitudes, which can be attributed to the existence of distinct ways of structuring individual identities. Nowadays, it is widely accepted in the academic area that these identities are built in constant tension with the requirements

of the presence in the global space and, therefore, need to be mobile – if not physically, at least virtually.

Antunes and Braga (2009) present key concepts that allow us to understand this emerging reality (although our research is dedicated to the African experience). Among said concepts we have, for instance, the alienation of the informational labor, the multi-dimensionality of this phenomenon, and what seems even more relevant in the context of our research: the new and precarious collective identities and the production of new forms of economic exploitation, which focus particularly on the skilled workforce of some countries that have, in the global economy, lower costs of intellectual labor (Antunes & Braga, 2009, p. 9).

We consider that, in this matter, the dimension related to the qualification of the workforce is central, because, although within the regulation of the global economy the various continents and countries reveal different and unequal positions with regard to the cost of labor (including not only wages, but also worker's rights), this does not mean that these nations are in technological and/or economic backwardness. On the contrary: the population of said countries shows a certain level of qualification, part of it obtained through mobility towards centers in the developed the North. Therefore, such exploitative relationships tend to become even more powerful and ideologically significant when analysed in relation to the South.

Let us consider, in this regard, what Castell said in 2012 about the use of computers in Africa. At that time the scholar, describing the lack of adequate infrastructure for a real technological revolution in Africa, showed that the situation of the continent has evolved in such a way that it can no longer be described as “the least computerised continent in the world” (Castells, 2012, p. 117).

Given the various approaches to the phenomenon of the globalisation of work, we consider important, in this article, to discuss the main processes of reproduction of existing capital inequalities in the global space and to address, also, some of the mechanisms of recognition used on certain qualifications that globalised economy potentiates. Furthermore, as stressed by Corriveau (2000, p.5), the multi-nationalisation of companies favours “the creation of a productive capacity in other countries, through acquisitions or various forms of cooperation (commercial, financial, technologic or industrial, for instance)”. According to Corriveau, the main objective of these companies is to lower the costs of production. The production of information does not escape this capitalist logic.

After the exposition of the problematic that guides our study, this article intends to show the contradictions involved in the outsourced production of information in the era of digital journalism. We also try to evaluate how the identities of the individuals are affected and recomposed, considering the situation of exploitation in which they live - though they do not perceive their situation as such. In the second part of this article we will highlight the dimension of empowerment that the use of the Internet provides to these bloggers, with thousands of articles produced on the network.

## BRIEF THEORETICAL FUNDAMENTATION OF THE PROBLEM

It is important to observe that the organisation of the global economy and, more specifically, of the “digital economy” (see, for example, Lemoine, 2014), propitiates new types of exploitation that go beyond the physical borders of national states. In this sense we have, on one hand, the well-known forms of outsourcing of production costs, namely the relocation of jobs due to their lower cost; and, on the other, the combination of this kind of mechanism of capitalist expansion and the operating logic of the network. On this subject, let us quote Huws when he says that,

New forms of dollarization may very well be created among workers whose jobs are relocated and among those whose occupations are geographically fixed. The extent to which the relocated jobs will take root in a given geographical point is also dependent on several variables. If they take the form of an outsourcing focused solely on the work, then their anchorage is highly contingent. (Huws, 2009, p. 55)

Antunes analyses the multiple transformations that have taken place in the working world and pays close attention to their new morphologies, as well as their new discourses about “entrepreneurship”, “cooperatives” and “volunteer work”, for instance. To this author, these are, simply, some of the forms that the precarious work assumes (Antunes, 2009, p. 235). Antunes describes these “new morphologies” as follows:

There is (...) another very significant trend that is characterised by an increase in the new industrial and services proletariat. Said tendency has a global range and is represented by various forms of precarious work. Workers that are outsourced, sub hired, subcontractors and part-time employees, among many other similar forms of employment, compose this trend, which expands on a global scale. With the increasing disintegration of the state of social welfare in the countries of the North and the increasing deregulation in the South, plus the expansion of structural unemployment, capitalism implements work alternatives increasingly “informal”, as exemplified by the different forms of outsourcing. (Antunes, 2009, p. 235)

He adds:

Another trend we would like to point out is the expansion of the work from home, allowed by the decentralisation of the productive process, as well as by the growth of small and medium-sized production units. Through the telecommunications and information technologies (besides the advancement of the forms of flexibility and precariousness of work we are showing), and with the advancing equalisation of the productive capital, the domestic productive work has been experiencing an expansion in various parts of the world. (Antunes, 2009, p. 237)

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<sup>1</sup> Digital economy refers to economic models that have emerged globally thanks to the advent of New Information Technologies.

This network logic (horizontality, cooperation, deliberation, decentralisation, etc.) fits perfectly the outsourcing process (Braga, 2009, p. 69). Such configuration of the management of the “informational work” (essentially of the outsourcing of labour), in order to produce information by free labour, calls, as several authors who have worked on the classes and ways of social stratification point out, to the equation of the very social structures of societies (Scholz, 2013).

With regard specifically to blogging activity, it is observed that in Senegal, due to the expansion of information and communication technologies, as well as of the informational entrepreneurship circuits, a particular type of “new technological elite” has emerged. This new elite has the particularity of transitioning from a traditional middle class, linked to ownership of property and land, to another middle class that is becoming ever more important in politics and in informational areas. The same process of restoration of elites was observed in the Ivory Coast where a more detailed investigation on the phenomenon would be of great relevance.

Braga (2009) argues, somewhat ironically, that such restoration / conversion of elites, now marked by their relationship with the domain and possession of information reveals, in a more visible way, the positive effects of the implementation of policies that benefiting personal and capital mobility:

The opposition between rich and poor countries is not as serious (...) the conflict between the centre and the periphery tends to be mitigated by the success of emerging countries and (...) both the quality and quantity of work will increase despite the social fragmentation (Braga, 2009, p. 63).

However, this neoliberal paradigm, based on the defence of the movement of capital and on the circulation of rewards for all those involved, lets slip a few details we have observed in this kind of blogging outsourced work. One of those details is related to the legislation applicable in the country where the company that is headquartered sub-contracts. It is relevant to determine that the French legislation, to which RFI is subject, establishes clear rules of distribution of public resources and financial support to the media; such rules take into account the audience of each website, and regulate advertising rates due to the fact that results of the audience are measured by *Médiamétrie*<sup>2</sup>.

We can assume, therefore, the idea that we live in a time of structural change of the global economy. Information has become the central feedstock of today’s economic context, giving rise to what labour sociology scholars call “information workers”. Such perspective, as we mentioned earlier, is developed by Castells in several of his books on “The Information Age” (1998, 1999 and 1999 in the French editions). In said books,

<sup>2</sup> The funding of state media is determined by audience measurement criteria in the case of television channels or radio stations. The press also receives funding in accordance with the level of sales. When a radio has an Internet site (as is the case for RFI) users’ visits to the website are recorded by *Médiamétrie*. Mondoblog .org is a major partner of RFI, thus, visits to the blog platform are recorded as RFI’s. The new rules of *Médiamétrie* also serve to regulate mergers or acquisitions as it happened in 2013, when Nouvel Obs bought Rue89. The rules of *Médiamétrie* can be read at the following address, in French: <http://www.observatoire-des-medias.com/2013/12/13/le-nouvel-observateur-et-linfo-3-voix-avec-rue89-la-proposition-de-lobservatoire-des-medias/>.

the manner in which this economy continually creates new mechanisms of construction of the labour relations is questioned, and so are the resets/reconfigurations of the individual identities of the actors involved in the various processes of informational and communicational production.

We can also say that in a society where knowledge occupies a central position in the production of reality, in determining policies, in the occupation of ordinary people, and in the compulsive consumption of news, information, as well as a source of wealth, becomes a fetish and a source of domination. However, these mechanisms do not always reveal themselves as such for all those involved.

In the specific case of this article, we analyse the redefinition processes of the identity of bloggers, from analytical dimensions that allows us to put in perspective the various sides of the phenomenon that Antunes calls “new ways of obtaining consent to economic exploitation” (Antunes & Braga, 2009, p. 9). The aforesaid phenomenon is attributed, mainly, to the “magic of the network”, that is, to the very idea of belonging to a network of bloggers. Indeed, it is assumed that there is an idyllic representation of the network, only made possible by the “ideological force present in this utopia of the information society”, as indicated by Braga (Braga, 2009, p. 65). This force of utopia becomes possible chiefly because the network logic produces, in a globalised world, a specific type of veil that is placed over the real relations of domination present in the vast and complex system of information production. In other words, the relationships of domination that occur within the context of economic exploitation of individuals who work in the production of information is obscured by utopic idealisation of the information society.

In face of the aforementioned ambiguity and contradictions, this paper aims to discuss some of the new relations of information production in the “digital economy” or “information economy”. It is a field still largely unexplored by the social sciences, though it is possible to highlight some Brazilian works produced in this field, such as the book “Infoproletário”, by Antunes and Braga (2009, p. 8). These authors highlight the differentiated nature of the “new economy”, which appears represented in the common sense level almost as a “non-work” since, in certain areas, it possible to gather certain characteristics that may be seen as not directly related to labour, such as lack of a time schedule, long-distance supervision, high levels of autonomy, pleasure and creativity.

This paper particularly explores the life and the micro-sociological perspective of bloggers, encompassing a discussion that aims to show the ambivalence of the process of outsourcing, globalisation and exteriorisation of work in the information area, into which new competences are transferred – in terms of collective mobilisation of political forces able to democratise the African continent – and within which the intellectual production of individuals is being appropriated due to a new order of exploitation in the world of financial economics. Let us remember, in this regard, Castell’s words:

A new social structure, the network society, is being settled across the globe in various forms and with quite different consequences to the lives of the individuals, according to their personal history, culture and to institutions to which they are submitted. The Internet is undoubtedly a technology of

freedom, but it can serve to free the powerful and oppress the uninformed and can lead to exclusion of the undervalued by those who have conquered valorisation. (2004, p. 317)

### **SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF MONDOBLOG**

Members/bloggers are selected through an online contest. About 150 new bloggers are recruited annually through this process. The project has been active for five years and contributes significantly and decisively to the production of online media content in French on the African continent. Candidates from other continents can participate as well, but it is relevant to clarify that almost 95% of the bloggers in the *Mondoblog* platform are Africans. Bloggers are selected after a call for applications is disclosed on the website of the radio program *Atelier des Medium* and on the RFI website. In addition, throughout the registration period, applications calls are made along the RFI schedule. Applicants submit an original content of their own authorship. Various formats are accepted, being the decision of the medium used to record this sample left for the contestant (it could be videos, articles, drawings or cartoons, photos, etc.). Those in charge of the process of selection will evaluate this material. In general, bloggers are men between twenty and thirty-five years old, mostly of African origin. Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo and Guinea are the most represented countries.

The candidates commonly have experience in the production of information, or are students from various schools of journalism (and may include Africans resident in France, United States, Canada or Brazil). Most of the recruited bloggers live in countries where the unemployment rate among young people is very high, but all of them have at least a university degree or are in college. In recent years, the platform has focused on the recruitment of women to promote women's participation in the production of media content in French on the African continent.

Relative to *Mondoblog*, it is evident that RFI's audience increases as the *Mondoblog* logo is used on the RFI website, which, according to the norms of *Médiamétrie*, transfers this audience to the radio's website. Moreover, bloggers are subject to French legislation when it comes to the existing law on the Internet, in relation to publishable and acceptable content. Of course, homophobic, anti-Semitic, suicide encouraging and racist texts are strictly prohibited. That is, from a legal point of view, producing information from the least developed countries does not mean that these bloggers are not subject to French laws and resource allocation rules, according to the location of the company for which they work.

### **METHODOLOGY**

As mentioned before, this article is based on interviews conducted in person with ten bloggers that write to the *Mondoblog* platform, which belongs to one of the most important radio stations in France, Radio France International (RFI). *Mondoblog* is a training initiative that makes use of the New Information and Communications Technologies

(ICT) and is geared mainly towards an African audience. The interviews were originally conducted for a Master's research (Rhukuzage, s/d) and were carried out in the course of a visit to Abidjan, following the snowball sampling method (or chain-referral sampling).

It is relevant to mention the fact that one of the authors of this paper and of the Masters research abovementioned is a blogger on the *Mondoblog* platform. This circumstance allowed more direct access to several bloggers who agreed to collaborate in the study, telling us a little more about their own experiences. At the time, as the study conducted was of an exploratory nature, we did not try to select specific types of bloggers, but only to have access to a group that would allow us to address some of the key ideas which we set off to work with, after the construction and definition of the problem.

The interviews followed a semi-structured record, based on the building of a script. Given the acquaintance we had with the bloggers contacted for the interview, we tried to maintain an informal environment that facilitated the communication process. Analysis of the interviews, which also benefits from the author's own experience as a blogger, was carried out following a thematic approach, in which we sought to establish the main reflective points of the speech of the interviewees. We have privileged, even at this stage, the direct speech of the respondents, as a way to highlight the implicit underlying processes of identity construction.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### OPACITY

In this paper, without aiming to follow a Marxist approach, we try to pay attention to the contradictions present in the global economic model that creates permanent margins and centres, and in which the francophone bloggers around the world are caught (whether or not consciously), usually taking part on a non-remunerated employment relationship. Therefore, paraphrasing Huws, we can say that this situation “captures very well the underlying tension of the whole class discussion: the tension between class as an analytical term (objective class position), and as the configuration of personal identity (subjective class position)” (Huws, 2009, p. 38).

Furthermore, still anchored on the theories of the same author, we can say that the “unpaid workers”, in such context, do their work not only in traditional workplaces, but also from their own homes. This organisational innovation brought by computers connected to Internet networks (Huws, 2009, p. 53), greatly deepens the process of opacity in labour relationships that take place in such contingencies. When we questioned some bloggers attending the annual training for *Mondoblog* in Abidjan<sup>3</sup> (it was not possible to question

<sup>3</sup> RFI organizes an annual training in web-journalism practices for the benefit of bloggers recruited that year. The first training took place simultaneously in the cities of Douala and Dakar in 2011. The second training took place in the city of Dakar in 2013, then it was organized in 2014 a training in Abidjan (where we conducted interviews with bloggers). In November 2015, another training will take place in the city of Dakar in Senegal. These trainings, besides serving in the transmission of skills, favor the strengthening of a network of bloggers and web-activists across the African continent.

them all, because we had to perform the interviews during our free night time), we realise that each defined their writing activity in both subjective and individualised terms:

I talk about all the affairs of Canada, Europe, Africa, being myself African, but I essentially talk about policy. I lived on this continent and that allows me to have a clear view of all that happens there. I read a lot articles on Africa, dialogue with people who understand about this subject. I once wrote a story about Rwandan politics, about Paul Kagame, where I spoke of the need for a democratisation of the country to prevent it from going into a crisis after Kagame's death. I have legitimacy to talk about Africa. I believe that writing can lead people to think like me, and that they can disseminate these ideas. The Internet and the act of writing can bring practical results in terms of changes. It's like the philosophy of the Enlightenment; it came from these people who believed that thought could promote change. There is a critical mass that believes that democracy can bring about change. (blogger 1)

When the abovementioned blogger was asked about his relationship with RFI, and about writing for a platform that belongs to the French government (through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the response he gave allows the identification of a subjective experience that is focuses on the appreciation of their work as a direct contribution to the shaping of the identity of Africa before the global world, and above all, it appears as a means to achieve personal social visibility:

*Mondoblog* is a participatory project. No one forces me to write. I am free to write about what I want and I use the platform to gain some visibility. There is no such thing as Colonialism for me, there was never any sort of imposition. My readers also have no problem with that. RFI contributes to the democratisation of Africa, Africans love RFI. The only thing I am sorry for is not having a million readers (laughs), it's okay, I have no technical constraints. No need to be paid, I knew from the beginning that there would be no compensation. No problem, I can write for three more years without receiving payment. I work part-time; I have free time. While I have the time I will continue to write on the blog. If I find a very hard work, I'll stop. But I also consider that taking me to visit countries like Ivory Coast and Senegal is a form of payment. (blogger 1)

The lack of payment is not seen as a problem by this blogger, nor by the other interviewees, who seemed to value as an important point in this work the visibility that the platform granted to those who write on it. Said visibility was understood as the key to their professional success as producer of news and as tastemakers:

There is freedom of expression in Benin despite some political crises. Thus, writing in this context is relatively easy for me. The traditional media is on



the hands of the ruling party, so blogging is an alternative to the lack of access to classical media. I've been arrested for 24 hours; I spent all day in court once because of my political militancy. Now I write about many issues regarding politics and the environment. I've been close to the ruling party but events led me to the opposition. Writing on the platform is paying off; people are shocked and outraged by my writing, people who believe that a young man like me could not be as critical of the government. These are powerful people. An article I wrote about the environment had a major impact, a major influence. People wrote to me to congratulate me. A figure from a major party wrote to me and verbally abused me as a result of my article. Since I'm in *Mondoblog* I have never suffered coercion. I respect the rules and the laws of France regarding the Internet. When it comes to homosexuality that is easy because it is in accordance with the rules of *Mondoblog*. I had other blogs where I created a great debate. Now, with *Mondoblog*, I prefer not to disclose many of my articles on social networks because the platform could pass the idea that I am writing under the command of RFI, in other words, the French, which could frustrate my readers. I believe we are contributing to the debate on the continent. *Mondoblog* is a well thought project, but I personally did not necessarily need it. (blogger 2)

We observe in the above excerpt that this blogger practices a kind of self-censorship, since he sees his own position on the platform as uncomfortable due to the fact that it reveals some ambiguity in relation to his readers. He also defines his own activity on the platform as being marked by autonomy and independence, although he mentions the “duty” to comply with the French legislation on the Internet. Another blogger, on the other hand, does not have such a smooth relationship with *Mondoblog*. The excerpt below shows the statements of blogger number three, a case of conflict between a contributor and those in charge of the project in Paris.

The political crisis in Ivory Coast was a difficult period for journalists and people in general. I am not a journalist, but the Internet is an opportunity for anyone who is not a journalist to express him or herself. We can even, as regular citizens get to where journalists cannot go. I consider my role as a political one. Some friends ask me to write about certain issues. We are spokesmen of those who have no voice. It is difficult to measure the impact of our activity, but we know that we are read; people call us. I once wrote about the president and the parliament and the advisor of the national chamber called me. This shows that my article had some impact. Some people think we are colonised and not emancipated by writing in the *Mondoblog* platform, and that we are being dominated and coopted by France. But my opinion is that we take people's problems to a much higher level than just our countries. An article of mine was once censored; it was very frustrating due to the way it was done. I wrote about the sensitive issue

of homosexuality. On this topic, there is a Western point of view and the African point of view, and the way I approached the subject did not please the leaders of *Mondoblog* in Paris. We had a discussion. This episode shows that we do not have full independence; we have to write about subjects that are “good for them”. I wrote a long article, and a reader from Cameroon called me at six in the morning to tell me that my article had been removed from the site. Then I received an e-mail from RFI, telling me what happened. But other than that, everything is fine. (blogger 3)

Sensitive issues, such as homophobia, tend to give rise to conflicts such as the one described above. Because homophobia is a crime in France, any homophobic article (or at least pieces that could be interpreted as such) published would be problematic to RFI. This type of control was much debated internally because many perceived it as a “censorship” and an attempt to unify the ideas on a platform that claims to be plural. Such conflicts will most certainly resurface in the future, due to any other matter. It is important to note that this was, for this blogger, it was the only time in which he thought that his autonomy and independence were reduced. That highlights the relevance of cultural elements in the journalistic activity, as well as the delimitation of admissible boundaries with regard to issues related to human rights. This situation also makes clear the need to introduce in the problematic of journalism and blogging activity the ethical dimensions of these activities, in terms of the challenges imposed by interculturalism. The blogger whose testimony we will expose consecutively seeks to maintain a discourse that values his neutral stance towards social events, though he looks to gain, through his writings, personal visibility.

I don't have political motivations and neither do I like to share my opinions. I have a problem with Francophony. I don't understand why the French don't make the effort to spread the language in English-speaking countries. Once, in an event in France, the correspondent of *The Times* in Paris could only say “good morning” (in French). Well, on my blog, I write for people who can't speak. I talk about society giving voice to those who don't have one. For example, I speak of the impact of certain laws on particular populations. I do not take position; I show the two sides of the facts. I have had feedback on my writing, but I have no problems because I do not write about sensitive issues. About homosexuality, the most problematic issue, I know there will be a great discussion, so homosexuality in the country is a taboo subject. Writing for *Mondoblog* does not cause me any problems of autonomy or independence. I write about Africa, thus, I can't see how I could hurt French legislation. RFI is an impartial channel; I have no problems with them. I write to have a high visibility, to make my voice known. Anyway, my articles generate debate and reflection. I only write about stuff that really marked me, so I see no contradiction with what I said about the fact that I dislike to voice my opinion. I would prefer that *Mondoblog*

remains a non-profitable project, but I would like it to, maybe, generate more opportunities for us journalists. The problem whether *Mondoblog* will indeed help us get other opportunities. (blogger 4)

The question is very clear: “will *Mondoblog* help us get new opportunities?” After this first interview, this same blogger came to us and asked to be interviewed a second time, because he wanted to comment on a particular case: the murder of two journalists from RFI Mali perpetrated by Tuareg rebels:

I wanted to criticise the major newspapers and radio stations for sending their journalists to war zones. When a journalist dies, wouldn't it also be the responsibility of the media? Why don't they develop prevention mechanisms? Is it really worth going to combat zones? A journalist from RFI said such places are dangerous but that this is no reason to stop sending a great reporter to cover wars. The media needs to learn to say no to journalists. In *Le Monde*, a journalist wanted to go to Somalia. The embassy told him not to go because of the risk of terrorism, but he still went. Luckily he did not die, but the newspaper made him risk his life. (blogger 4)

Thus we can observe in this discourse a great concern about the situation of journalists, be they African or Western, as well as the need of the blogger to transmit his critical capacity and capability, revealing other aspects of his reflectivity that, at first, were not disclosed. Another of the relevant dimensions that we sought to combine in order to understand the self-definition of a blogger refers to the reading and the speech they produce about the “rational” reasons that lead them to remain in an unpaid working relationship. The conclusion that we withdrew from the analysis of several speeches converges towards the almost absolute appreciation of visibility and recognition, enhanced by the opportunity to participate in a world-renowned blog. Without being able to be assertive about the degree of (un)consciousness of the domination associated with their blogger position, we found out that there was awareness of the tactic exchange between the free participation in the blog and the obtaining of additional prestige for themselves, as the testimony that follows exemplifies:

There are many ways to blog. It is a way to share things in various manners: in the form of articles or journalistic materials, social activism, political engagement, or even in literary form. In my case, I know that Morocco has several bloggers who are activists, which use social networks to mobilise people to their cause and their manifestations, do demonstrations. It's a way to have information that does not come from the media; that is not consensual and submitted to the government. I write short stories on various topics of social reality, things that we experience. My format is different because it is less subversive, but it gets people to put themselves on the other's shoes, to feel various emotions. I use a lot of humour since it allows the sending of several messages. I had a website before. But I use

*Mondoblog* to participate in a collective and community initiative. It was a breakthrough to meet and exchange experiences with other bloggers. I don't have structured goals, but socially (my writing) can have an impact. Some people who condemn other more critical materials end up agreeing with me because I use humour. I do a kind of education. I started telling these stories to my little nephew. That's how I started writing my stories that actually are created for adults. I make many mistakes in French, it is voluntary; they are a literary exercise. Every mistake is prepared. I chose an unpaid activity and don't want to sell my stories. Sometimes some newspapers use my writings, but now I can guard my texts against that. I'm not interested in have five thousand readers; I'd rather have five that read my crazy stories. (blogger 5)

As it shows in the speeches of other bloggers, it is clear that, to blogger 5, remuneration is not essential. Blogging is understood as an activity that allows other kinds of compensation, like the participation in the network, sharing things and ideas, meeting people and having new experiences. Therefore, we can say that the blogger is reproducing the mainstream discourse that tends to idealise the networking itself, overvaluing the most symbolic and intangible dimensions of this activity. As shown below, having a voice in the public sphere and, with it, being able to gain recognition and to consolidate a certain relational capital are the most evident goals aspired by the bloggers we interviewed. This reveals, mostly through their speeches, a large state of illusion regarding the participation in the network:

I worked as a journalist before going to Europe. So I started to write on the blog to avoid getting rusty. It was a way of doing the same old thing. For me, journalism is a passion. What I write has a partial effect. Writing in a blog is almost taboo in my country. It is seen as not serious. Neither the authorities nor journalists recognise the blogger. We have a recognition problem, which affects our access to the sources. The blogger talks about things as he/she feels them, as he/she experiences them; this is an authentic trait. Bloggers can give their opinions. It is a contribution to democracy. To be honest, it's a matter of responsibility, I have to wonder if what I write is bad to the readers and I have to try to avoid self-censorship. So far, none of my writings has been censored. I even wrote more critical pieces on the French policy in Africa, but nothing happened. I write for passion and conviction. Writing is a secondary activity, the platform that gives me a great opportunity to be visible. It is a pleasure; I have other sources of money. I know, from the beginning, that not even advertising is permitted. The remuneration of the blogger is the recognition of the reader. (blogger 6)

Let us observe, following the train of thought exposed previously, that the blogger number six idealises his work, which he regards as the “voice of the people”, and also

as a craft in the service of “truth”, in an almost sacred way. There are no marks on his speech that point to awareness of the situation of labour exploitation.

### **REFLEXIVITY**

We said that for the majority of the bloggers we interviewed, the very participation in *Mondoblog* emerges as a central element of the relationship established with the radio company, given the interest on visibility, which, thus, appears to be achieved or, at least, achievable. The social sciences have been critical of globalisation processes and, in particular, of the knowledge society, proposing that it is a society in which circulate various ideologies that legitimate the neoliberal processes and that, first, go through the conformation of workers to various situations of domination. Indeed, the equalising of the productive capital, it must be said, does not happen without the network logic being solidified on ideology, which requires this kind of organisation of social life. In fact, horizontality, autonomy (or utopia of autonomy), decentralisation and deliberation become global structural forms of social life. In addition, the blogger is included in the platform from a strategic position that aims to create an opportunity for his/her future. This clearly defines the relationship of between bloggers and the French radio station as being uneven, vertical, thereby breaking what we are calling the “network magic.” Thus, the working conditions and the production of information on the platform are subject to an economic logic, albeit hidden from most bloggers.

As this paper has shown, the interviewed bloggers revealed to be happy with the opportunity to participate of *Mondoblog*. Only a few have presented more reflective discourse marks that point to an awareness regarding the domain situation that such participation may indicate. Blogger number seven demonstrates to be fully aware of the implicit and explicit conflicts that exist in a “work” relationship that subsumes the world of inequalities between North and South, marked by an “unequal economy,” where one observes that the “hand that gives, commands.” In this example, the writing appears, to this blogger, a conditioned activity, not directly but indirectly, since he does not write about the politics of his country, contributing to an agenda that is distant from his own world. After all “writing about two communities living in peace in my country will not be a subject of interest for the French”. Thus explains the blogger 7:

My country is a democracy, according to its constitution. But I prefer to say that it is a country like any other: we follow a democratic ideal. My problem when writing on the blog does not come from the politicians of my country, which is very liberal. I am a journalist and I have never had a problem. I’ve never been threatened, because my country is very liberal in regard to press freedom. I regret that France is the one responsible for this initiative because this breaks down our autonomy. The relationship between France and Africa is not fraternal; it is an unequal economic relationship. It is based on neo-colonialism. In the current context it worries and bothers me. The hand that gives always commands. The initiative not being African, the agenda

will not necessarily be African, some subjects will be valued for meeting their (the French's) interests (...) If you write about two communities living in peace in my country, this will not interest the French, but if I write about two ethnic groups that kill each other, even if they (the French) don't specifically know these groups, the article will be valued on the platform. There is a major voice that says what subject are of interest (...) I have my opinion about certain issues and give much importance to my traditions and, above all, freedom of expression. In journalism you can't speak openly, because there are editorial lines. But on the blog it has to be different. (...) One thing bothers me. Sometimes I write errors on purpose, because I don't like this idea of writing perfect articles. I think that my work does not have a big impact; I cannot claim to change things, although I have received some feedbacks. I once wrote about a young journalist who died at the age of 24 and in his funeral the leaders of the radio made speeches complimenting his professional skills, but we know he was only an intern for many years. I wrote about this, criticising the precarious employment conditions of young journalists. The article generated a debate among the professionals; some praised it, others not. I have frustrations in *Mondoblog*. Not necessarily related to the lack compensation, that's part of the contract. True, if I am looking for a way to monetise my content online, *Mondoblog* is a stepping-stone, I'm reading about this, actually. The blog helps me improve my writing; it is a laboratory. I am a reader of Hemingway, and I think that the life of a man always has headwinds. In life, sometimes we fight and we can't (win). I have a lot of frustration on the platform, with regard to editorial matters. (Blogger 7)

The statement of this blogger elucidates the separation between me/us Africans and them/French. We have noted throughout this paper that work has to be seen as a political reality, analytically questionable in terms of production relations, especially concerning the existence of remuneration. But work and, in this case, the blogger activity, is itself a profoundly cultural phenomenon and needs culture and conceptualisations that each individual has about themselves and about the others to be explained in the macro-sociological level, as well as in the level of experiences and sense assignments built by individuals on a personal level. In this regard, the fact that blogger number seven lives in constant conflict with the terms that organise the *Mondoblog* platform (for example, the requirement to write in "good French") draws our attention. Not only the blogger has to police himself, but this particular requirement about the idiom does not respect the specificities of language in each country, especially in African countries. Therefore, this blogger's attitude shows an act of resistance in face of what he perspectives as a process of homogenisation and standardisation.

It is important to note that in his article, Huws (2009, p. 56) addresses some of the issues that blogger seven criticises, such as the global positioning of the French language

on the Internet. Because of the competition with other languages, such as English and Spanish, other writing requirements for bloggers are generated, due to the fact they need to produce articles that conform to a standard norm of language in order to strengthen the visibility of French on the Internet networks. Besides, the standardisation of language opens up a range of job opportunities in the global market. Such configuration has the effect of producing a rupture between those who master the language standards or are subjected to it as imposed by France and those who do resist somehow. It is also possible to observe a gentrification within the African societies.

#### UNPAID WORK AND THE GLOBAL CONJECTURE OF WEBJOURNALISM

The globalisation process is somewhat ambivalent and it is possible to detect within it both positive and negative aspects. But this is not a very interesting approach for the present research. Perhaps the most interesting way to form a methodological point of view is to point out the effects generated by this “circulatory system of flows and bonds between nations” (Hall, 2006) on different spheres of social life, such as work, construction of identity, fetishizing of information, and so on.

From the point of view of the construction of identity, globalisation radically modifies the formation of subjects, as we have seen from the interviews. It especially reinforces adherence to a certain idea of shared identities. That is, the social actors, from the processes in which they are inserted, tend to define themselves according to the same order of belonging. In this case, individuals find themselves belonging to a network of reflected worlds, spaces for the reconstruction of the self. We have observed in the reports of the bloggers that most of them define themselves in relation to their activity on the Internet and that more specific identity components appear to be less revealed (such as ethnic, racial, religious and linguistic elements). This concurs with the ideas that Appadurai<sup>4</sup> (quoted in Freire-Medeiros & Cavalcanti, 2010) has about the relationship between globalisation, technology and modification of identity landscapes, including the experience of ambiguity created in the very development of the work, that, on the one hand, creates conditions of social and professional visibility, but, on the other, is sustained on the basis of a non-formal, precarious relationship:

What I would have to say about it is that, yes, globalisation produces uneven activities, but many of the images built about this production of inequality under globalisation schemes or under neoliberalism are explanations formulated from vertical or national and static models (quoted in Freire-Medeiros & Cavalcanti, 2010, p. 192).

Like other approaches to human capital and the circulation of knowledge have shown, despite the increased casualization and flexibility in the labour market in the era of “information workers” (Castells, 2004), it is possible to observe a mobilisation of the personal investment of workers and also of their intellectual capacities. Rosenfield

<sup>4</sup> See also Bell's interview (2001).

(2009, pp. 173-174), in a study about call centres, demonstrated this thesis. Therefore, even if we adopt a critical perspective on the change in work in the information age, we cannot overlook its contours in terms of providing workers with conditions for the building of strategies of empowerment, especially by creating mechanisms of social recognition in the global space.

However, it is important to return to Rosenfield's study, which showed similar results to the ones obtained from the analysis of the interviews we conducted with bloggers. Indeed, in our study and in Rosenfield's work, when asked about the representation they had of their own work, interviewees said they were a "stepping-stone", demonstrating, despite all the contributions reported in terms of recognition, a "fragile identity", and furthermore, an instrumental engagement with the activity they performed. In this sense, it is very pertinent to highlight the fact that in both studies participants refer to their activity in a instrumental manner, understanding it as an opportunity, a "route" to something better, in particular as regards the opening (or opportunity) that may be brought about in this global world. Let us mention in this context the following statement of this author:

(They) develop a provisional identity at work because this is a temporary job. Their personal investment rests on the future professional prospects. Employment in call centres is a stepping-stone, a way to financially enable more noble future goals, like training and working in the training area. Their relationship with this work is instrumental (Rosenfiel, 2009, p. 184).

When talking about the bloggers that participated in our study, it is possible to say that they also create an identity in the Internet world, to strengthen their reputation as a professional bloggers or as journalists with skills in what is usually called web journalism. Therefore, their participation in blogs can be understood as an adaptive strategy, given the overall operation of logic that overwhelms the labour relations in the information space<sup>5</sup>.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This paper aimed to enumerate, starting from an empirical research involving interviews with several bloggers who write on the French Mondoblog, the main features of the globalisation of the work of the blogger/journalist in modern times, considering the division and inequality processes that appear through the systems of production of information and knowledge worldwide.

It was possible to observe organisational trends in the production of online information, in special the tendency to "hire" bloggers and journalists who act as correspondents for radio channels, television stations and sites of general information, without offering them a remuneration. Our work also shows that most bloggers that "produce the

<sup>5</sup> An exchange of emails with Professor Rosenfield made us change the title of this work by adopting the concept of self-employment rather than a first option suggesting situations of underemployment.



news” *in loco* are not aware of the situation of exploitation in which they are involved. Our analysis also debated the question of the formation of the identity and of the subjectivity of these workers, revealing the existence of concealment mechanisms that hide the condition of exploitation, by means of other forms of compensation, that relate to both psychological and materials rewards (such as recognition, visibility, annual meeting in Africa for training sessions and training to digital journalism, etc.).

Bloggers are, therefore, entangled into the general framework of the global economy, which is based on the production of information, that is, in a context where capitalism is restructured in cultural terms (Braga, 2009, p. 64), in which arise new forms of inequality in labour relations. Or, in other words, we are witnessing the production of new identities: the rise of a global informational and highly qualified “proletariat”.

Our study also shows that the recruitment of bloggers is part of a crisis of traditional media, which appears as a result of the global economic crisis. It is therefore a modification of the structure of the market of journalism (divided between North and South) that is reconfigured through integration opportunities afforded by information and communications technology, as well as through the logic of network organisation. In other words, it is a complement of the theory of globalisation that fundamentally shows the overcoming of geographical and temporal constraints between North and South with regard to the production of information.

Finally, this article introduces – or at least explores – from the words of the actors of the *praxis*, other emerging dimensions with respect to the circuit activity of journalists and bloggers in the global space. A space that, as noted in several cases, including in the conceptualisation of “censorship”, is not uniform or amorphous; it is a space full of differences and profound cultural contradictions that intersect with the practice, the *hexis* and the journalistic ethics and also lead us to equate the advantages and disadvantages of discussing and implementing a language and a particular way of being a blogger in this conflicting, multiple and diverse global space-time of citizenship. //

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