New challenges for an enduring code of journalistic ethics: the news media business model in the face of ethical standards and citizen participation

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Abstract

Technological advances have modified news media practices, introduced alternative formats for conveying information, and are transforming journalistic messages. However, the essential principles governing journalistic practice, those which the ethical codes support and enshrine, remain unaltered. The media outlets and journalists are not unaware of the necessary adaptations to their working lives which this situation demands, but editors and managers find it difficult to accept, and therefore incorporate, those emerging trends which would permit a real improvement in the quality of the products they create and offer to society: firstly, the introduction of ethical standards (ISO standards, ethics seals) into production, and secondly, the channelling of citizens' active participation in the reporting process (transmedia storytelling, social media). These are only being assimilated slowly and ineffectively. The media sector business model has to embrace and integrate both these realities into its organization and production system in order to survive and truly fulfil its public service mission.

1. A classic paradigm for addressing incipient challenges

In essence, the basic mission of the journalist consists of travelling to the place where the action is, closely observing everything that is going on, gathering as much information as possible on the actors and witnesses, and relating this accurately to their fellow citizens as soon as possible.

The importance of this particular way of contemplating the universe around him featured implicitly in the prologue of that fascinating medieval work by the Venetian merchant and traveller Marco Polo, *Livre des merveilles du monde*. This encouraged those interested – everyone from emperors to commoners - to find out about the globe and the peoples inhabiting it, through reading a clear and well-organised account composed by a direct witness by gathering information from sincere and truthful sources, the result of which he judged to be a true record, free from trickery or deception (1997: 13-14). Applying this worthy aim drawn from the incipient travel literature of the dawn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to the reporting of the beginning of the twenty-first century does not seem that unreasonable.

Despite the great ideological, political, religious, social and technical gulf separating us from the Middle Ages, the work of today's narrators has not really undergone any

radical changes in terms of its fundamental basis. One has only to remember the principles underlying that work considered to be a pioneering doctoral thesis on journalism (Atwood & De Beer, 2001; Sousa, 2004), *De relationibus novellis* (1690), by the German scholar Tobias Peucer; this attributes, to the intentions of the author of *novellae*, respect for and a search for truth, in order to avoid – possibly through being subject to partisan interests – the inadvertent inclusion of untruths, or the writing of unsubstantiated things about issues of importance (Sierra de Cózar, 1996: 44). Thus, the contemporary journalist, who daily administers the right to information granted to the citizens of free, democratic societies, is both assumed and obliged to strictly respect two sacrosanct principles: rigour and truthfulness. These requirements have not altered simply because technologies have changed the physical media used to convey information. Various far-reaching metamorphoses already occurred when the press witnessed the birth of radio and its surprising sound; neither did the mission of the press change with the appearance of the captivating moving images brought by television, and nor has this occurred today, even with the global consolidation of the Internet's potentiality. While it is true that there is no universal code of journalistic ethics, a possible future endeavour (Herrscher, 2002; Rao & Lee, 2005), there is one simple rule: be accurate and honest when interpreting reality.

What is now actually happening is that the socio-economic context in which the current media system finds itself immersed possesses some characteristics which form a new challenge: a challenge to the patterns and norms which until recently have dominated the professional exercise of journalism. We are indeed experiencing a time of technological transformation, overlapping a profound economic crisis, and witnessing a mutation of the business model; and both of these factors have an impact on professional ethics. In fact, various investigations confirm that job insecurity tends to make journalists more compliant (Figueras *et al.*, 2012).

In this context, two tendencies have emerged which have made a singular impact on how newspaper companies are conceived, organized and run, and on how reporters' work is being transfigured - but without disrupting the ethical guidelines which govern its functioning. The first is the growing tendency to introduce ethical standards into the communications media. And the second is the progressive and increasing participation of citizens in the creation of informational messages (Singer *et al.*, 2011).

Both factors constitute interesting challenges because the crisis of the business model should be considered as a magnificent opportunity to strengthen the foundations of self-regulation. In the business arena it would be worthwhile to investigate the correlation between profits and ethics, an apparently incompatible, contradictory relationship which nourishes the discredit of the profession. This estimation does not imply that all reporters are guilty, because isolated abuses do not reflect the culture and practices of the press as a whole, but it does indicate that there are repeated and continuing infringements which really reflect the irregular, inappropriate subculture which prevails in too many companies. The British judge Lord Justice Leveson arrived at a similar interpretation when commissioned to review the professional and ethical culture of the British press after the scandal which provoked the closure of *News of the World*. Undeniably, these reprehensible practices endorsed by press baron Rupert Murdoch —hacking the

Comunicação e Sociedade, vol. 25, 2014

New challenges for an enduring code of journalistic ethics: the news media business model in the face of ethical standards and citizen participation · Carlos Maciá-Barber

phones of the famous to get scoops— underline the importance of ethical governance within the senior management of news corporations.

Promotion of the introduction and consolidation of improvements in the governance of communications companies was the challenge addressed worldwide in 2011 by media outlet owners, editors and employees on setting up the Ethical Journalism Network (http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org), which describes itself as: "The global campaign to strengthen the craft of journalism: ethics, good governance and media self-regulation". This endeavour aims to declare that ethics permeate the communications business from one end to the other, encompassing and applying to all the strata making up the profession. The first step in this awareness-raising process is to admit that mistakes are made and that there exists a serious will to reform. Thus, whatever the limitations and deficiencies which could be mentioned, the self-regulatory figure embodied by the news ombudsman, for example, continues to be relevant and cooperates in creating more ethical, responsible journalistic organizations thanks to following these guidelines, in short: putting one's mission before one's own career, making a commitment to reporting transparency, acting on one's own initiative, promoting citizen participation, informing the public as consumers, watching over journalists' rights, encouraging management to fulfil their obligations, and not getting depressed or giving up even though there may be only too many reasons to do so (Maciá-Barber, 2014).

This set of practices could perfectly well be shared with other self-regulation institutions, such as those which sometimes assist journalists' professional associations. At any rate, this is something which occurs in Spain. In 2006 the current *Comisión de Arbitraje, Quejas y Deontología del Periodismo* ("Commission for Journalistic Arbitration, Complaints and Ethics") was formally established: an independent body subject to its own foundation which assists the *Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España* (FAPE) ("Federation of Spanish Journalists'Associations"), the largest professional group in the country[1], in the consolidation of the proper performance of its mission.

2. Ethical standards for a sustainable newspaper company

The image of any company progressively becomes linked to the ethical and social aspects of its activities, over and above mere financial achievements. Consequently, both for communications professionals and researchers it is vital to assess how to measure these intangibles, to determine what their impact on the real value of the news corporation is, and to weigh their effect on citizens' perceptions of that media outlet.

Along these lines, among the new ethical self-regulation mechanisms[2] which could be set up and which people are attempting to introduce into the media sector, are ethics

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[1] This internal ethical self-regulation body devoted to the journalistic profession has the aim of fostering and promoting arbitration, mediation, understanding and recommending apology. In short, it acts as a moral authority, and is explicitly recognised as such by the press associations and journalists who are members of these, thus guaranteeing compliance with FAPE's code of ethics.

[2] These should not be confused with recent initiatives outside the sector, even though their aims may be similar due to their priority objective or nomenclature; for example the new British institution The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) (www.ipso.co.uk), launched amid some controversy.

seals and ethical standards which accredit the quality of the organization's management and the quality of its information production[3].

2.1. Ethics seals: between voluntarism and marketing

Lord Justice Leveson, in his report published November 2012, designed to regenerate the British press after the *News of the World* scandal, included in recommendation no.35 the suggestion that the future new British regulatory body, among its affiliation incentives for media outlets, should consider the introduction of a seal which members could use as a recognizable mark of reliable journalism (Leveson, 2012) [4].

This is not, however, an entirely original idea. In the United States, the "TAO of Journalism" (Transparent, Accountable, Open), promoted by the Washington News Council, constitutes a very interesting precedent. John Hamer, the President, launched the proposal informally in January 2010 at the University of Washington (Seattle), as a project he had been working on for a few years. This initiative is based on the motto "A promise to your audience that you will be Transparent about who you are, Accountable for your mistakes, and Open to other points of view".

The three mainstays on which this model rests are: transparency regarding ownership of the media outlet and the interests it may cherish and those it serves; responsibility for the results of its work and the prompt rectification and correction of any mistakes it might make; and its openness to the plurality of viewpoints which fosters the active participation of audiences.

The purpose of this public commitment is to gain credibility and generate trust by exhibiting the "TAO seal" on the page, screen, web portal or blog of reporters, citizen journalists or specialized bloggers[5]. The "TAO seal" represents a commitment proposal which could be seen as "voluntarist", given that there is no organized, systematic, internal or external supervision which guarantees the degree of respect for the ethical and professional principles assumed, except citizens' assessment of how closely the code of conduct is observed; a kind of ethical crowdsourcing. I describe this kind of proposal as voluntarist not in a derogatory way but an appropriate sense, i.e. as the result of an attitude which bases its predictions more on wishful thinking than on real possibilities. In cases where a systematic violation of the ethical principles governing journalism is found, it is stipulated that the other TAO members may study and assess the possibility of revoking the "TAO seal" of the offending organization or individual.

A more professionalized type of mark is the "ethical commitment seal" issued by the Fundación del Consejo de Información de Cataluña ("Foundation of the Information

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[3] Within this line of research is the research project "*Deontología y excelencia informativa: implantación y consolidación de prácticas éticas en la empresa periodística*" ("Deontology and informative excellence: the introduction and consolidation of ethical practices in newspaper companies") (CSO2010-15575/COMU), run by the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (2010-2014), within the framework of the National R+D+I Plan funded by the Spanish Ministry for the Economy and Competitiveness.

[4] "A new regulatory body should consider establishing a kite mark for use by members to establish a recognised brand of trusted journalism" (Part K, Chapter 4, paragraph 5.41).

[5] The directory of member institutions and individuals includes individual commitments, those of media outlets and those of students' associations (http://taoofjournalism.org/directory).

Comunicação e Sociedade, vol. 25, 2014

New challenges for an enduring code of journalistic ethics: the news media business model in the face of ethical standards and citizen participation · Carlos Maciá-Barber

Council of Catalonia") (FCIC)[6], the only initiative of this kind to have been attempted in Spain (http://fcic.periodistes.org). The aim of this project, launched in Barcelona on 23 June 2013, is that each media outlet committed to compliance with the ethical code of the Catalan journalists should have a representative "hallmark" accrediting it, symbolizing the "renewed will on the part of journalists and media outlets to inform in an accurate, truthful and independent manner, and to be at the service of citizens". Given that information is one of the pillars of democracy, journalists have the obligation to act with sincerity and explain the facts and issues pertaining to the current state of society in a professional, coherent manner. The media outlets affiliated to the CIC and prepared to work in conformity with these criteria can demonstrate their dedication and exemplary behaviour to their readers, viewers or listeners through the adoption of this seal. On 15 October that year the seal was awarded to over 80 media outlets and associations connected to the information sector in the Autonomous Community of Catalona.

To obtain the seal, the companies and organizations must be members of the FCIC, be up to date with membership fees, and undertake the following commitments: a) to observe the ethical standards of the profession, particularly the *Código Ético del Colegio de Periodistas* ("Ethical Code of the Association of Journalists"); b) to accept the commitment before public opinion of respecting these ethical standards; c) to publish or disseminate the CIC resolutions which apply to them; d) to display the distinctive seal logo in a visible place within the organization and on its website, and disseminate it among the recipients of the information.

This seal can be revoked by a plenary session of the Council, after the case has been investigated, during which the views of the media outlet shall be heard, in the following cases: a) Pursuant to the existing resolution of the CIC, two or more infringements of the Code of Ethics during the calendar year; b) failure to fulfil any of the requirements undertaken on receipt of the seal; c) where the CIC considers that a particular action by the media outlet represents a serious breach of the Code of Ethics. Where the CIC proceeds to revoke the seal - a decision which can be appealed against - the media outlet can reapply after an interval of two years has elapsed since its revocation.

2.2. Limited implementation of journalistic ethical certification

While not specific to the sphere of communications, an interesting, completely Spanish innovation, the first of its kind in Europe, is the SGE21:2008 standard, introduced by Forética[7]. This certification represents the first European social responsibility

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[6] The Information Council of Catalonia (CIC), founded in 1997, is a self-regulation institution created to defend the exercise of ethical journalism and to protect the right to freedom of expression. Since its founding it has handled over 600 complaints lodged by citizens who considered that the ethical code of the Catalonian journalistic profession had been infringed. An investigation into the resolutions adopted by the organization up to 2012, entitled "Estudio de quejas del CIC en sus 14 años de trayectoria" ("A study of the complaints made to the CIC over its 14-year career") can be consulted at: http://fcic.periodistes.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/mem%C3%B2ria-2012.pdf.

[7] Forética (www.foretica.org) is the Spanish association of companies and professionals for corporate social responsibility, which aims to foster a culture of ethical management and social responsibility by providing organizations with knowledge and useful tools for successfully developing a competitive and sustainable business model. It is composed of over 140 member organizations and over 100 individual members. It includes all sizes of business engaged in a range of activities as well as professional associations, third-sector organizations and academics of recognized prestige.

management system which makes it possible, on a voluntary basis, to audit processes and gain a certification in Ethical Management and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This certification is based on models which have already been consolidated (quality, the environment) enhanced by a multi-stakeholder perspective. In this way it systematizes relations with nine different management areas[8], for which it establishes criteria stipulated in a Code of Conduct and supervised by an Ethics Committee.

In theory, certain benefits can be expected from this certification. Firstly, it would serve to demonstrate a corporation's de facto commitment to CSR management to the different interest groups, thus strengthening the company's external image. Secondly, maintaining the certification, which has to pass external audits every year, would contribute to the continuous improvement of the organization's processes and activities, and would help to foster the responsibility, commitment and motivation of the human teams involved. On a third level, the certification would reduce social distrust and broaden market opportunities, attracting customers, providers, employees and investors and fostering their loyalty.

In practice, however, it is highly significant that so far only one Spanish company has achieved accreditation under this standard: MediaResponsable (2011) (www.corresponsables.es), an institution which performs various activities within the communications sector (studies, seminars, conferences, publications) but which is not itself a media outlet in the strictest sense.

The most advanced developments in this field correspond to the Swiss non-profit organization Media and Society Foundation[9], which has developed ISO[10] certifications in Europe specifically aimed at newspaper companies. These universal templates for quality management within the media are the standards[11] ISAS BC 9001 (2003) for television, radio and Internet and ISAS P 9001 (2005) for printed media, revised in the standard ISAS BCP 9001:2010, and the assessment orientation of which is the contribution of a media outlet to the development of democracy and society.

This certification does not measure specific, separate programmes or messages issued or published but, rather, evaluates the media outlet globally in terms of producing quality scheduling and really serving society. It is the result of a field study carried out in several countries (Canada, Colombia, India, South Africa and Switzerland) and the following variables were set as key ISO assessment points: independence and transparency, ethics, recognition of cultural identities, accessibility of the media outlets, innovation

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[8] The areas monitored are: senior management, clients, providers, people making up the organisation, social habitat, business environment, investors, competition and public administration.

[9] The Media and Society Foundation (www.media-society.org) is implementing a universal media quality management standard implying, among other things, quality control in the newsroom. We are a group of mostly retired media professionals working on a voluntary basis out of the conviction that society needs stronger media and that media will only be stronger if they become more transparent, more accountable and more efficient.

[10] The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) develops and publishes the international standards. Among the most popular are the ISO 9001:2008 (quality management) and the ISO 26000:2010 (social responsibility).

[11] Based on the ISO 9001 standard, a quality management system based on the continuous improvement cycle: plan, do, check, act.

and creation, social relevance and content quality, pluralism and openness to the world. Since 1 June 2012, Société Générale de Surveillance (SGS), the world leader in inspection, verification, testing and certification has been in charge of the certification procedures, including the follow-up audits. It takes between 9 and 18 months to obtain this certification.

In the official list of companies certified so far, one observes a notable lack of internationally recognised media outlets and big corporations, and at the same time the absence of media outlets in relevant nations from the different previously consolidated journalistic cultures. This meagre presence points to a very limited implementation of the system and generates doubt as to the future viability of the system.

On the international level, there exists another valuable quality management initiative, specifically for the communications sphere: the Sustainability Reporting Guidelines Media Sector Supplement (May 2012), promoted by Global Reporting Initiative[12] (GRI), with the support of Fundación Avina, la Fundación para el Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano ("New Ibero-American Journalism Foundation") (FNPI) and the Universidad Javeriana. Currently they are working on the G4 version, an improvement on the current G3.1 model. The guideline-setting process of the Media Sector Supplement Working Group, co-ordinated by the FNPI, was carried out between December 2009 and December 2011, involving 20 representatives from media companies and groups, and environmental, labour and non-governmental organizations (*The Guardian*, the BBC, Bertelsmann, Vivendi, *Clarín*, Warner Brothers, The Nature Conservancy, ANDI Communications and Rights, the International Federation of Journalists and Transparency International).

The GRI-MSS guidance is divided into three basic content areas: a) the general context of how the organization's mission is understood (strategy, profile, structure, corporate governance, senior management focus); b) the management approach (how the organization tackles a determined set of aspects in order to contextualize them); c) practice indicators: financial, environmental, and social (labour practices, human rights, society and product responsibility).

On the whole, most of the GRI's experiences are concentrated within Europe and America, particularly in those nations which have a certain tradition of journalistic self-regulation mechanisms, whether public or private (the Press Council, news ombudsman, codes of ethics), such as the United States, South Africa, France, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Brazil or Colombia. The United States has taken the lead in this initiative in terms of the number of companies assessed (9) and the other top nations on an international scale are Spain (6), Brazil (6) and South Africa (6).

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[12] A non-profit organization founded by CERES and the United Nations Environment Programme in the United States (1997). Its aim is to promote the drawing up of sustainability reports in all kinds of organizations. The institution maintains global strategic alliances with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Global Compact, (UNGC) and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). GRI and its Sustainability Reporting Guidance act in synergy with the Earth Charter Initiative, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

3. Ethics in citizen participation: transmedia storytelling and participatory journalism

3.1. The growing presence of media prosumers

Currently, a new kind of narration known as transmedia is beginning to flourish and attracting extraordinary attention. The term "transmedia" is attributed to Henry Jenkins, former director of Medialab's Comparative Media Studies Program, based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He explained that transmedia storytelling refers to a new aesthetic arising in response to media convergence, which imposes new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. In the case of journalism, it concerns those stories which are unfolded through multiple media platforms, and to which each medium contributes in a manner characteristic of our understanding of reality, an approach more integral to the development of the franchise than models based on an initial text and secondary products (Jenkins, 2008: 31 and 283).

Until now, transmedia storytelling has been restricted to productions of fiction. Consequently, the arena of multiplatform journalism is largely unknown territory. Carlos Scolari maintains that transmedia storytelling can be defined by means of two variables: the story is told through various different media or platforms, and audiences participate in the construction of the narrative world (2013: 180). This thriving practice is to be found under the wing of the phenomenon known as citizen journalism and is linked to cyber journalism, under the auspices of audiences and their age-old concern for active participation. Involvement today can be more direct, thanks to the metamorphosis of the rigid structures of the media outlets, now finally undergoing progressive decentralization and democratization. But perhaps not yet fertile enough ground for utopian grassroots journalism, created by the people for the people, such as that advocated by American journalist Dan Gillmor.

However, the era of the *prosumer* has indeed dawned; this was envisioned by Alvin Toffler in his book *The Third Wave* (1980), in which the "producer" (a professional or provider) is also a "consumer"; in other words, he who consumes a product or service participates in its production; as he possesses specialized knowledge about it, he demands a high level of quality.

The growing phenomenon of media concentration and newsroom convergence is, however, heading in the opposite direction. Like the owner of the media outlet, journalists are not only reluctant to admit open criticism, whether internal or external, but now feel uncomfortable, sceptical or terrified at the idea of public participation in the process of creating the information product (Bowman & Willis, 2003: 50-53). And yet, in this regard, the recognition of freedoms established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is quite conclusive (Article 19). For centuries citizens have expressed dissatisfaction at being relegated to the role of mere recipient, and they are quite right to do so. Let us not forget that as well as receiving, the legislation recognizes citizens' capacity to disseminate and, significantly, to investigate, in order to satisfy their right to information.

Consequently, all those initiatives which contemplate direct citizen participation are clear signs of a change in trend in the journalistic sphere and in the necessary essential structure of democratic society.

For Marty Baron (2014), executive editor of *The Washington Post*, one of the reasons for his self-confessed enthusiasm about the future of journalism is precisely the connection with readers caused by the new form of telling stories and the competition with other production sectors which makes it necessary to pay more attention to audiences[13].

The narrative characteristic to transmedia journalism does not ignore or alter the bedrock of reporting: honesty, accuracy, justice and completeness. That is, to narrate a story impartially, without changing the facts or testimonies, in the most complete manner possible. Thus it does not transmute the classic principles of journalistic narration; rather, transmedia storytelling should contribute to a more complete fulfilment thereof. The interactivity which fuels transmedia journalism makes it easier to obtain the versions of those concerned and greatly speeds up the clarification of the accounts given out, the process of comparing the data put forward and also reinforces exercise of the right of reply.

The main ethical challenges presented by transmedia storytelling are still the traditional ones. The essence and the purpose of journalism do not change because of the medium chosen to give material form to a possibly true version of reality.

In which case, the first difficulty concerns veracity, precisely due to those origins steeped in the creativity and fiction proper to cinema, television, marketing and the novel, the formats from which it emerged. Let us not forget that credibility and likelihood do not mean, equate to, or imply veracity. The hoaxes and rumours which fly round the web on a daily basis are sometimes even gathered up by the media.

Secondly, there are also the challenges of maintaining the indispensable informational neutrality, impartiality and balance, or avoiding the undue taking of sides – political, ideological or corporate... – and not confusing reporting with political agitation or propaganda (*agitprop*).

Thirdly, the care and thoroughness lavished on the discursive procedures originating from the gathering of materials, the selection of images and texts, the resource of graphics and music, the use of gender, or the slide downhill towards reprehensible sensationalism in news reporting or the deplorable phenomenon of "infotainment".

Finally, it is necessary to stave off the threat of re-enactments and misrepresentation, ranging from the inclusion of elements of fiction and dramatizations to a variety of misleading procedures employed to gain information.

3.2. Ethical control by the public through social networks

The integration of the social networks into the practice of journalism is another of the contemporary challenges; and this has a bearing not only on how reporters use them to draw up journalistic messages, but also on the way in which citizens receive, interpret,

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[13] Baron's paper, full of self-confessed "unsatisfied optimism", caused a great impact at the International Symposium on Online Journalism (ISOJ), organized by the Knight Centre for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas at Austin (USA).

judge and comment on their work. That is to say, on how citizens control the quality of the product. Therefore, now is the time to consider a possible shift away from professional ethics towards citizens' ethics with regard to communications (Ward & Wasserman, 2010).

It is precisely "citizen journalism" which hopes to take advantage, at least in part, of this tacit delegation which falls to the journalist. Company owners and professionals are obliged to foster the participation of the public, and this should be considered as an added self-regulation exercise. Moreover, public participation constitutes a duty, because audiences are jointly responsible for improving communications (Maciá-Barber, 2007: 127). Furthermore, the public also holds joint responsibility for the ethical creation of the product. Simply accepting a message manufactured using dishonest methods is not acceptable; or would we, in order to denounce an abuse, be prepared to accept dishonest acts on the part of the information source (leaks, breaches of confidentiality, violation of communications privacy)? The production line must keep its cogs immaculately clean from start to finish. It is our right – and also our obligation - to support full compliance with the professional standards of those who help to ensure our right to information.

In 2013, 15% of companies in the European Union (EU28) used social networks to find out about consumers' opinions (Eurostat[14]). This is a fairly small percentage, which was significantly surpassed in the cases of some nations: Malta, 44%; Iceland, 30%; Ireland, 26% and the Netherlands, 24%. Let us take citizens' involvement in product improvement a step further, and have the consumer participate in the development or innovation of goods and services; here the percentage falls to a mere 9% (the Netherlands stand out with 18%). However, in the case of big companies (250 or more employees), the size corresponding to the communications media, the situation ostensibly changes: the percentage climbs to 17%, and the leading countries are the Netherlands (32%), Finland (30%), Sweden (25%) and the United Kingdom (24%).

Also under investigation are new monitoring methods for identifying the information which will be relevant in the social networks up to two months in advance, which will make it possible to recognise worldwide trends that help to predict social movements or consumer reactions to products: data from 50,000 Twitter accounts should be enough to anticipate which issues will go viral on the Internet[15]. While this model is not a magic crystal ball, one can imagine how useful it could be for social or public service journalism.

These signs and trends suggest that the media, regardless of their particular social mission, are already – or soon will be – in full interaction mode with audiences in the building of journalistic messages.

However, the social networks also make it possible for citizens to respond to – i.e. supervise - the content disseminated by the media, and also enable interaction with the advertisers who, today, fill the coffers of the newspaper companies. We need cite just one landmark case, involving ethics, corporate social responsibility and advertising, which

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[14] "Purpose of social media use" (updated to 30 January 2014).

[15] The following are collaborating on a study which aims to apply the "sensors hypothesis" to social networks: a group of researchers from NICTA (Australia), Yale University, University of California-San Diego (USA), the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (Spain).

occurred in Spain and set a significant precedent, illustrating the break from the dominant communications model in which it was the media that determined, how, to whom, when, where and what was to happen.

"La noria" was a TV talk show broadcast by the Spanish channel Telecinco, from 2007 to 2012, the ratings leader in its prime time slot throughout that period. On 29 October 2011 the programme featured an interview with Rosalía García, mother of a minor nicknamed "El Cuco", convicted of covering up the rape and murder of Marta del Castillo, another minor, whose body has still not been found. In exchange for her testimony, the woman was paid some 10,000 euros. This commercialization of human feelings angered a journalist and blogger, Pablo Herreros, who made an appeal to citizens' consciences and persuaded them to apply pressure on the advertisers using that television slot for their commercials. His "cyber-activism" campaign began by informing the companies owning the brands that their images were being associated with a behaviour which citizens would not tolerate. Together with a group of associates he drew up a quick list of the advertisers concerned. The next day he posted a message on his blog to mobilize citizens' support, which ran: "These are the brands which sponsored the mother of a criminal." And he also published a letter on the website of the online activist platform *Actuable*, later *change.org*, addressing each advertiser, asking them to apologize to the audience for unintentionally funding immorality and to demand that their commercial would not be shown during the programme. Twitter did the rest. Within two weeks, all the companies had withdrawn their advertising; the shares of the television network plummeted by 25% during the crisis, and the programme was shut down. And from the Parliament and the Senate Spanish citizens unsuccessfully demanded that the Government should bring in regulations to govern situations in which criminals could be paid for talking about their crimes on television. In November 2013 Herreros published a book about citizens' movements within the social networks, in which he gave a detailed account of this event, and which he entitled, very aptly: "*El poder de las personas*" ("People Power").

Boycotts should not be employed on a regular basis as they are an undesirable tool; but this one served as a last resort to improve, if only very slightly, the work of professionals and company owners. However, at the same time, it showed that the power which can be wielded through social networks possesses serious ethical implications which users should be aware of and must accept.

4. Epilogue. reducing fear of accountability

Responsibility and transparency; these two virtues are the key to future improvement in newspaper companies' activities. Being responsible means being answerable for things, and paying due care and attention to everything which is decided on or created. And transparency means avoiding doubt and ambiguity. This approach requires humility, knowledge of one's own limitations and weaknesses, and acting in accordance with such knowledge. All media outlets are accountable to their audiences and to society: if they make a mistake, they must recognize and rectify it. And take steps to ensure it will

not be repeated; excuses are not enough. Too often, the only errors reflected on the front page are those of the competition, and a self-satisfied, complacent press is condemned to repeating the same blunders over and over again.

The fear of accountability displayed by the owners, editors and managers of the news companies should be mitigated in an institutionalized, organized and continuous way. A balancing of accounts which includes ethics throughout the length of the structure, like a backbone. A procedure which presupposes, but surpasses the profession's traditional codes of ethics.

While both necessary and useful, ethical standards are not in fact new trends: the real innovation lies in accepting and consolidating this practice within the communications sector. A world-wide, global agreement on the variables to be studied and measured when assessing an organization, and on the appointment or, if applicable, the creation of a suitable institution to undertake supervision would help to introduce such a consolidation – but currently we are very far from reaching such conformity.

Ideally, there should be effective citizen participation in the decision-making of the corporate control bodies and stable, daily collaboration with journalists on the formulation of their messages. To achieve this, therefore, the requisite training in media consumption should be consolidated, in order to reduce a media literacy deficit which limits, if it does not actually prevent, citizens' real, effective and beneficial presence in the process of communicative production, and which hinders the public from developing a deep-rooted consciousness of their ethical co-responsibility towards improving the way our media outlets function.

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Comunicação e Sociedade, vol. 25, 2014

New challenges for an enduring code of journalistic ethics: the news media business model in the face of ethical standards and citizen participation · Carlos Maciá-Barber

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