



#REINVENT

the new hashtag of journalism

The social networks have been responsible for a change in the role of the journalist. New genres, languages and channels have emerged hand in hand with the boom in technology. Nowadays, when it comes to informing the public, what is important is not the “what” but the “how”.

By: Magda Páez Torres

Photos: Leonardo Parra, Carlos Roberto Reyes

November, 1985: The Colombian Justice Palace was literally burning down during the armed assault on it by the M-19 guerrilla. In the midst of that chaotic scene, dozens of journalists crowded together at pay phones, the only available device to report the event live and direct. Eloquence flourished, since, due to the lack of technology, photos did not reach the press room as fast as oral accounts. “I was outside the building when the disaster took place. In that period there was no way to send videos or information in a direct way, so I hurried to find a pay phone, and I reported what happened the whole of that day from a store which sells candles,” relates Julia Navarrete, a journalist who fought a battle of her own that day.



YOURSELF!

Nowadays, the set-up is different. Intelligent phones are new protagonists in the coverage of tragedies, incidents and background material. Pictures, testimonies and evidences flow like water and they uncontrollably spread once they reach the virtual world, that is, the social networks. The once indispensable notebook has been replaced by tablets and cell phones!

What, then, is the current role of the journalist? Are the social networks reinventing journalism? What kind of impact has technology had on the work of the communicator? Fátima Martínez, from Spain, and Juliana Colussi, from Brazil, both professors and researchers at the Journalism and Public Opinion Program of the School of Human Sciences of the Universidad del Rosario, have devoted years to doing a number of studies which seek to answer those questions and many other concerns related to the subject.

Those experts start with a premise: Today, what is important is not the “what” but the “how”. In that context, where information abounds, being the first with the story is no longer enough. Therefore, another variable

enters into the game: The way in which it is told. And it is not only a question of style, but also of creativity, they clarify. “The journalist who knows how to investigate is no longer sufficient, because he or she also needs to know how to produce, be innovative and create new narratives. The market is looking for a person who is able to do a 360 degrees story, one which captures the public,” Colussi notes.

Even though the current panorama is complex for some novice journalists, due to the surplus of journalists and the economic crisis many communications media are suffering from, Martínez believes that the key is to exploit the new narratives and open a space in another niche. In her opinion, the major media should not be a straitjacket or the only objective of the professional journalist. “The Internet gives you the chance to be your own spokesperson. I tell my students: This is your time, if you want to create something new or have your own YouTube channel. I think that journalism is more necessary today than ever,” she believes.

Although such efforts are still timid, there are already virtual initiatives which stand as landmarks. In Spain, Ignacio Escolar, a journalist, blogger and analyst, is the mainstay of a digital communication medium which he founded in 2012 – *eldiario.es* – a space which has become consolidated and significantly risen in importance. It is presented with a striking slogan: “Journalism, despite everything”. And despite all of the difficulties and the steep path towards consolidating a project



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of such dimensions, the portal now boasts of six years “on the air”.

In the case of Colombia, a good example would be the *Silla Vacía* [the Empty Chair], which managed to take off and gained a broad readership. While still tiny, other projects have followed it which are engaging in the battle to present news. “I prefer the small digital medium which is creative rather than the big, very hierarchical one. We see the need for a serious self-criticism in the major media, since the zeal not to go against the editorial line inhibits creativity. It is clear that when you wager on a digital medium, what you win is freedom,” Martínez says.

The concept of freedom also extends to the genres of journalism, which broadened with the revolution in technology. In her study entitled *From the column to short mobile information: An analysis of the genres of journalism in the political J-blogs of Brazil and Spain*, Colussi found that while the news item continues to be the queen of journalism par excellence, there is now a combination of many languages and the way has been opened to what are known as cyber-genres. To attract the cyber-public, the media now rely on the online interview, the multimedia news report, comic strips, interactive infographs, surveys, chat rooms and forums. The range of genres is now up to date.

Twitter: The niche of the Journalist

The leading role which the social media play is so clear that now, in almost all cell phones –the one of your friend, neighbor or relative – there are three indispensable applications: Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. From the

time they wake up to the time they go to sleep, people are connected to the world through these platforms. But there is no doubt that everyone has his or her favorite space.

Professor Fátima Martínez explains that due to its particular features, Twitter is the favorite outlet for journalists and politicians. In the end, it is a network associated with the elite, focused on information and debate. The places where people really get together are Facebook and Instagram, she points out. To that, Colussi adds a very important fact. During the past two years, Instagram has soared in a dizzying manner, especially due to its young public. There, they find what they wish to consume in a quick and visual way. Journalists are also beginning to break into that network, wagering on the conquest of the younger generations.

But what does a communicator look for in a social network? In 2013, Martínez and Colussi did a study entitled *The journalistic use of Twitter by the accounts of the newspapers El Mundo and El País*. Among their conclusions, they found that the main factors which lead a journalist or a communications media to accede to this platform are the opportunity to make their own contents go viral, the possibility of sharing the latest news items, the search for sources, an interaction with the public and the positioning of one’s personal trademark.

The growth of the participation of journalists in Twitter is confirmed by another study by Professor Fátima Martínez, entitled *The new media and the journalism of the social media*, a survey of 50 heads of Spanish communications media which found that 100% of those media publish their news items on the social networks, 98% have a corporate account on Twitter and 80% have a personal account.

But – a warning – journalism still owes a debt to its public in the area of interaction. The abovementioned analysis of the Spanish newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo* showed that those news media are more concerned with disseminating information than establishing a virtual “contact” with their readers. The researchers believe that, so far, the media in general have





not made much progress in that respect. The ones in Colombia are even more backward because, among other reasons, journalists do not have enough time, they believe.

The “marketing” of fake news

Just as the social networks have had a positive impact on the spreading of journalistic information, they have also been responsible for some headaches, since the “democratization” of information has provided opportunists with the possibility of circulating “fake news”, which sometimes becomes viral and causes harm.

The concern which this has caused among the communications media in Colombia is such that some have implemented systems of verification, in conjunction with the public, that is, they are calling on their followers to share their doubts about certain news items so that they can apply filters and determine whether they are true.

In 2018, Professor Juliana Colussi did a study during the electoral campaign in Brazil and concluded that a number of politicians took advantage of the virtual world to spread fake news which favored their interests. Their favorite networks were Facebook and WhatsApp. “Our analysis found that nearly 60% of the information which circulated was false or partly false. When a candidate publishes fake news, he not only misinforms the public, but he lessens the authority of the traditional media,” she notes.

And that does not only happen in Brazil. It goes on in many countries, especially in the scenario of Latin America. That being so, journalism also faces the challenge of restoring the credi-

bility which has been undermined by the disinformation spread by some groups of power.

According to Martínez, the key is for the journalist to defend his or her mission on a path where there are many temptations. “If you encourage investigation, work in the field, go to the place where things are happening and do interviews, you are doing what is right,” she adds.

Is reporting dying?

The concept of reporting has also changed for the new generations who practice the profession of journalism.

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According to the researcher Fátima Martínez, 86% of the journalists she interviewed for her doctoral thesis admitted that they use the social networks to gather information, contrast facts or contact other sources.

While it is true that there are times when it is indispensable to obtain information from platforms like Twitter, since there are even politicians, like U.S. President Donald Trump, who make major announcements on that channel, the social networks have become the easy way out for some professional journalists who, just because they like to, prefer “virtual reporting” to work in the field.

In the opinion of Martínez, many journalists now enclose themselves in their newsrooms and do not go out to report the story. That attitude thus represents a big challenge for journalism faculties: They have to ensure that their future professionals get closer to the real world and connect them with reporting. “As a teacher, I make them go out to the street, I tell them to turn off their cell phones and computers so that they learn to share things with people. We need to recover that direct contact with the sources and the scenarios,” Colussi says.

It is clear that the social networks have changed the concept of journalism. Today, the communications media rely on followers who send them pictures from remote places where the news is happening: It is known as participatory journalism. Technology has enabled ordinary citizens to make videos of their surroundings and participate in new sections of the media which allow the public to denounce wrongs.

In this context, the challenge of journalism is to reinvent itself, without jeopardizing its traditional focus on analysis, depth and criticism. Instead of demonizing technology, we should understand that history is still being written from the newsrooms, but with another ink, other actors and other eyes. ■

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