



Essay

Towards Infocracy: The Fate of Journalism from the News Product to the Crisis of the Public Sphere

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Abstract: In the digital age, the concept of news relevance seems to be fraying, and the activity of selecting what is considered most important collides with much more complex problems of defining meaning, caused by less compact and coherent visions of the world. If it becomes increasingly difficult to arrive at a shared understanding of what is relevant, important, and interesting for the public to know, as worldviews and benchmarks proliferate, then the only possible measure seems to be to reward what is popular, what is successful, and what produces market-driven journalism. This is an example of what then led to the definition of so-called public journalism, a form of journalism that is attentive to the demands of the public and willing to give more space to the considerations and perceptions of users. However, by transforming itself into a “product”, journalism also changes the public’s sense of use, which is no longer to use information to acquire what one needs to know, but what one wants to know. The public exposes itself to what is culturally closest and shared, often allowing subjective emotions to prevail over the evaluation of facts. Through an analysis and critical comparison of recent international readings on the subject, this paper attempts to reconstruct, from a socio-mediological point of view, the path taken by journalism in the digital age, focusing on the value of news, the relationship with the audience, up to the crisis of the public sphere and the birth of infocracy following recent global crises.

Keywords: journalism; digital age; infocracy; crisis communication; fake news



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1. Introduction

The optimistic vision of a society in which the exchange of information is simplified and multiplied, guaranteeing a positive balance for the strengthening of the public sphere, as well as the possibility of a growing and effective collaboration of the public in the production of information, has progressively blurred with the transition from the network society to the platform society (Bentivegna and Artieri 2020).

The limits of digitalization are now quite obvious: from the progressive concentration of (mis)information traffic in the hands of a few multinational companies to the consequent oligopoly of the advertising market, or from the centrality of algorithms leading to a homophilic consumption of information to the crisis of public debate.

The veritable explosion of information made possible by the digital environment has highlighted how journalism is less and less able to reveal the social opacity of the articulated and complex societies in which we live. It seems clear that the principle that inspires it is not to “say everything”, limiting itself rather to separating facts from opinions, but to delimit facts through a reliable and credible mediation that manages to extract interesting content from the density (Sorrentino 2014; Costa and Gili 2014).

Journalistic work in the digital public sphere takes the form of an operation of subtraction from the reality of what is deemed worthy of being made public, in which the mechanisms of information production become even more visible (Karlsson 2011).

If the information system has, for a long time, linked sources to the public, translating facts into simple and effective formats for an essentially mass audience, it is now called upon

to establish a different and double link: to aggregate multiple pieces of information through an activity of deepening, updating and interpreting, providing accurate interpretative frameworks, showing the differences in points of view and, at the same time, involving both the sources and the public of information users in this work of elaborating content.

Be that as it may, what is emerging are new ways of building reputations, which pass through credibility that is built day by day thanks to the sharing of content among the many who, for various reasons, inhabit and frequent an enormously expanded field of journalism whose boundaries are becoming more and more labile (Bogaerts and Carpentier 2013).

In this more fluid field, the forms of digital fruition lead to greater volatility of consumption, which can quickly pass from one newspaper to another, or from a news site to sites with very different purposes, not to mention the thousand rivulets typical of the paths created by social networks. Achieving not only visibility but credible visibility in such a hybrid environment requires several prerequisites.

Certainly, the strength and tradition of the magazine, and its positioning built up over time, remain relevant. However, there is also a growing trust in individual journalistic personalities, often already established signatures who have begun to inhabit the digital world with their own profiles with greater skill, but also subjects who have managed to acquire their own specific reputational capital from below, through constant commitment and the ability to satisfy the demands of their followers (Cassidy 2007; Bruns 2010). It is no coincidence that the most successful newspapers and journalists today are those that present their assessments with greater clarity. Journalism has a strong and successful tradition in Italy, for example, but it is also developing in countries where the liberal model of separating facts from opinions was in force (Prior 2007). In these cases, the power of interpretation is defined by a precise political-cultural perspective, a declared ideological affiliation through which everything that is said is read and interpreted. The digital environment reinforces this trend precisely because sources, audiences, and journalists are inextricably intertwined, thanks to the multidirectional and immersive nature of the flows.

Everyone is involved in an ongoing communicative game.

But within this 'game of information-making,' it is necessary today to redefine actors, rules, and languages, to trace a (new)deontology, to map old and new phases of journalism, and to redefine the news and its value, in relation to the new socio-cultural and socio-technical processes.

2. Methodological Clarifications

The aim of the following reflections is to outline, without claiming to be exhaustive, the main stages through which journalism has passed from a socio-historical perspective. It will try to understand the "crisis" in the field of journalism by trying to understand how it could be better imagined for the future.

This reflection, while proposing a theoretical path, is considered important and useful in order to understand the state of the evolutionary process of the information system from the point of view of the technological infrastructure on the one hand and its socio-cultural effects on the other. The impression is that journalism, like the Internet, has undergone a historical transition with a utopian, over-optimistic flavor, and has absorbed its most questionable aspects.

Indeed, access to an open information space, accessible to all and rich in information of all kinds, has long been interpreted as synonymous with democracy and freedom.

Today, the Internet and digital journalism are increasingly revealing their technological "biases" and ethical and moral "pathologies", as well as the strong presence of media logics linked to the economic and organizational field, which contribute to making society even more unstable and unequal, showing difficulties in filtering out false information and actively involving its audience.

The reflection interweaves the history and sociology of journalism with the history and sociology of new audiences, seeking to define the relational dimension that underpins the processes of creating and sharing information. If, as will be analyzed below, the most

effective term to describe journalistic work has been gatekeeper—a guardian who decides what can be in and what can be out of the public eye, out of the shared attention of public opinion—the correct term now is networker, separator, and distributor of facts and news, capable of distinguishing what is to be published from the rest of the available content.

In this sense, contemporary journalism is—as already mentioned—a connection between information, or rather, a “work of relations”.

3. Journalistic Culture as Cultural Chaos

The large amount of news produced and, above all, the forms and ways in which it is disseminated, make it possible to distinguish between the function of informing citizens in order to act and participate in political life, and that of articulating the knowledge of a consumer audience in order to entertain them, focusing more on their emotional attachment (Hermida 2010).

Recognizing the cultural, professional, and political capacities of the public, with which to “ally” in order to offer richer information, requires a profound rethinking of journalism, in which the aggregation function of the many circulating information and its contextualization of the different discursive universes promoted by the web is strengthened. A different perspective also requires a rethinking of the processes through which reputation, credibility, and trust are defined in the journalistic negotiation.

Thanks to the greater centrality of the interactive and collaborative dimension, a more active role for the citizen/user in this process would give him visibility that has not yet been expressed and would favor the enlargement of the public sphere. But at the moment, this seems to be a long and difficult path that requires the attribution of a greater centrality to the curiosity of citizens, if anything favored by what Maddalena and Gili (2017) define as a “rich realism”, based on a conception of communication “as a total social phenomenon” that requires the integration of the different points of view, that is, this contextualization for a kind of habit of action that human beings can hardly conquer and maintain if they are not constantly reminded of and supported by vital community relations, openness to the world, and a non-skeptical education in critical thinking.

If the mass individualization and the multiplication of the newsworthy weaken the “common feeling”, it becomes all the more necessary to “pool”, through an innovative action that knows how to make the current means of communication more open and horizontal places of discussion, capable of restoring a rich and plural public discourse (Valeriani 2011).

Thus, we are witnessing a clear reversal of the journalistic function: from an institution aimed at forming public opinion to a product of a broad and informed public debate, and finally to a product that pursues public opinion.

Following the lowering of the barriers to entry, determined by the so-called disintermediation processes, both the sources and each person manage their presence in the public space through a particular communicative code, more or less effective, but still capable of growing the topics and the social subjects that enter the public discourse (Benson and Neveu 2004; Sorrentino 2018).

With specific reference to journalism, to describe this progressive fragmentation and deconstruction, McNair (2006) speaks of “cultural chaos”, due precisely to the fact that each of us is constantly receiving information from mainstream newspapers and other sources that are increasingly professionally equipped to personally manage one’s communicative needs, fragmenting the communicative offer and crowding the information ecosystem with differently attractive and persuasive voices (Thompson 1995).

In this way, the distinction between information and communication, based precisely on the centrality of facts and their verification, is weakened, and journalism gradually loses its monopoly on the production and dissemination of “news facts”. Practices that have been the basis of journalistic authority and the acceptance of the legitimacy of its modus operandi (Tong 2018).

It should be noted that in journalism, as in everyday language, facts are referred to as given entities, while the Latin etymology of the word *facere* refers to what has been done. This emphasizes the procedural nature of the construction of the action present in every fact.

Despite the important role played today by the audience in the production and distribution of content, the journalist is still entrusted with the task of verifying the givenness of the fact, which means verifying its indisputability. In fact, journalistic verification attributes not only the connotation of what actually happened, but also that of relevant and public interest, based on a solid agreement on the meaning to be attributed to the fact, that is, on the degree of stabilization achieved at the social level by the interpretations developed in this regard (Lorusso 2018).

For this reason, a fact does not in itself become news. It becomes so when a shared agreement on its meaning is reached.

With the digital revolution, these prerogatives seem to be disappearing, especially when the journalist loses the productive monopoly and thus, in part, the function of defining what is newsworthy.

Facts are less and less assembled, distributed, and enjoyed in a spatially and temporally defined whole, a constant flow brought to our attention through the network by individuals connected to each other thanks to methods no longer defined solely by journalistic mediation (Deuze and Witschge 2018).

It follows that the stabilization of meaning becomes more difficult to achieve, as the process of negotiating these meanings changes in form and content, involving a greater number of actors. The fragmentation of distribution processes and the segmentation of audiences have a negative impact on the effectiveness of sharing, making information more unstable and subject to constant reversals (Marini 2021).

Therefore, the expression “cultural chaos” precisely highlights the lack of uniqueness of direction of the message, now thrown into a crowded communicative environment where the lowering of barriers multiplies subjects, events, and newsworthy themes, favoring their introduction into a discourse-richer public, but also less confused, less controlled, and less verified. At the same time, the times of production, distribution, and fruition increasingly merge into a de-spatial instantaneity (Solito and Sorrentino 2020).

The term ‘chaos’ proves so effective because it contrasts with the concept of ‘control’, fundamental to the institutionalization of journalism as a place where the relevance to be shared is identified (Sorrentino 2018). A work of control that is less and less present in the information system and that, in the confusion, potentially allows everyone to enter the communicative arena, as already described, not only in the role of consumer, but also as producer.

The flow of communication that each one of us manages becomes more and more redundant every day, but above all, it leads to an expansion of what is newsworthy, that is, of the topics and social subjects that enter into the representation of reality produced by journalism.

This process gives a centrality to journalism and also represents a potential democratization of the public sphere, thanks to the multiplication of topics and social subjects that enrich the public discourse. However, it is precisely this abundance that makes the attribution of meaning more varied and tends to be uneven (Solito and Sorrentino 2019).

It is not a process of social homogenization that is produced, as is often claimed when talking about media products, but differentiation and individualization. Ideas, values, knowledge, and institutions are hybridized; complex symbolic apparatuses are structured.

Meanings can be attributed to any situation, from the banal to the fundamental. It is therefore evident how the conviction, still intact (both among insiders and the public), that journalism is constituted by the simple summation of news, degrades and impoverishes the journalistic product, allowing any offer of information or actor present on the net to compete (Splendore 2017). The proliferation of texts without context, of redundant opinions on the events presented, leads from the objectivity of the facts to objectivism

(Contreras 2006), that is to say, limiting itself to providing opposing versions, juxtaposing statements, choosing, if anything, those that express clearer and more apodictic positions. Journalism, at least in part, removes itself from the uncomfortable role of deciding what and how to choose, leaving it to the user, who is likely to choose what confirms his or her own prejudices. By adopting this rhetoric of power distance, journalists seem to be aware of the impossibility of limiting themselves to facts and providing objective descriptions; however, they perceive this difficulty as a professional limit to which they do not know how to respond (Maddalena and Gili 2017).

They are therefore looking for alternative solutions, which can also be found in the absolutizing of data, which is often adopted in a completely uncritical manner.

A kind of surrender of journalism to the complexity of reality is revealed: unable to report it in its elusive completeness, we rely on the description of the different parts; in fact, more and more often, we rely on the opinions that these parties produce on the facts (Solito and Sorrentino 2019).

The completeness of information shifts from the multiplicity of sources consulted to describe an event or a social phenomenon, to the primacy of opinions. This wealth of opinions does not help to specify, qualify, or clarify the facts that have occurred, but only multiplies the existing perceptions around these facts. At best, it allows a climate of opinion to be defined, but not an exhaustive description of things.

4. Journalism between Forgery and Rumors

The problem we face today in relation to the information field is defined around three interrelated issues that circumscribe the perimeter that represents a possible information distortion in the public debate, capable of introducing a level of toxicity into the information landscape (Born and Edgington 2017).

The first issue relates to a perceived increase in disinformation, that is, the deliberate dissemination of false content in the form of news. This includes fake news, which, as we know, is not a new phenomenon per se, but what is new is the way in which these messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted (Freelon and Wells 2020). It is precisely these modalities that raise concerns about their impact on the functioning of democratic institutions.

This is a concern that has emerged and spread since 2016, when mainstream political communication was joined by a form of online computational propaganda that activated a significant volume of news sharing that reported false information or, in any case, contributed to information pollution. The second aspect concerns misinformation, the involuntary dissemination of false or misleading news, characterized by unintentional behavior in the dissemination of certain content and unawareness of the unreliability of the information used. The third aspect concerns propaganda, a field of information based on correct elements, but organized and packaged with the aim of gaining the public consent of a specific audience by discrediting the points of view of others.

Recent studies on the spread of disinformation confirm the central role of the web and social media in shaping this complex information landscape.

This aspect has grown, on the one hand, with the attention that the mainstream media have given to the phenomenon of fake news as a subject of journalism in recent years, and thus with an increased awareness in the journalistic community that it represents a problem to be remedied, as well as an issue to be considered in the ethics of the profession, making it a priority. On the other hand, this tendency to verify and deny is part of the professional culture of journalism, aimed at seeking the truth and providing the public with the elements of judgment useful for conscious deliberation for the development of a democratic society (Hassan and Pinelli 2022). The ethical imperative facing the journalistic profession is to correct manipulation and misinformation in order to reduce the communicative pollution of the public sphere and the production of harmful content, often fueled by specific audiences.

As underlined by Marwick and Lewis (2017), the contemporary communicative space is also inhabited by individuals and groups who act in a hidden way, proposing topics and

points of view to journalists and operating through online practices capable of influencing the mainstream media and thus the complex circuit of the public debate. Their tactics often include the practice of sharing content from local newspapers that contains only minimal false news, in order to gain credit in the overall information system by impersonating individual profiles that ideologically support this narrative.

These are actors who operate in a mix of ideological motivations, economic goals, and entertainment dynamics, and who derive satisfaction from manipulating the official media system. Therefore, news very often appears to be in line with one's own worldview and values and is therefore more likely to be considered accurate. Conversely, the accuracy of content that does not conform to one's own guidelines is underestimated.

The difficulty in recognizing and identifying the root of fake news lies precisely in the fact that it spreads like real news.

The networks do not discriminate on the basis of the authenticity of the content; in reality, this task would fall to the users. Their behavior in this regard can make the difference, for example, by choosing to cite an external source or by criticizing a piece of news. Often, when a multitude of information is presented without context or its original source, it is perceived as "noise" in cognitive terms, as the same fact can have diametrically opposite interpretations or be refuted by another piece of information (Sofri 2015). Rumors, gossip, and unverified news about war situations, celebrities, economic indicators, electoral campaigns, and government programs constantly emerge and are tweeted, shared, confirmed, publicly discussed, and become part of the new media ecosystem.

In this context, Cass Sustein (2009) underlines the importance of distinguishing between rumors and gossip: the former are related to the search for meaning, a hypothesis that helps us to create an explanation for an unclear situation, while gossip is about social consideration, uniting and influencing members of a particular group. The distinction highlighted by the scientist shows how, on the one hand, the quantity of information tends to increase but, on the other hand, this leads to a radical reduction in the quality of information.

Here we find the root of online hoaxes and post-truth: the overload of overloads is the problem, the mass of information into which we are all thrown without any filter, mediation, or education.

Chul Han (2023, p. 33) uses the term 'infocracy' to describe how information increasingly has its own logic, its own temporality, and its own dignity beyond truth and falsehood:

"Fake news itself is first and foremost information. It has achieved its full effect before any process of verification has even begun. Information flies past the truth and is no longer reached by it (...) the infocracy is resistant to the truth".

Digital communication, driven by algorithms, causes a reversal of the flow of information, which has a destructive effect on the information and democratic process. The discursive spaces are gradually being replaced by what Eli Pariser (2012) defines as eco-chambers, spaces that determine a state of isolation of individuals in the media, where information, ideas, and beliefs are amplified and reinforced by repetition within the isolated system.

For Han (2023), this accelerates the degeneration of the public sphere, as it relentlessly feeds and advertises the private sphere as a "mobile showcase", without passing on information transparently, only reinforcing a "communication without community".

This complicates communicative action, which requires large, stable public spheres and the co-presence of the other and his thought in the formation of one's own opinion (Arendt 2004).

According to Habermas (1984, p. 588),

"The concept of communicative agency is also necessary to consider actors as speakers and listeners who refer to something in the objective, social or subjective world, but who also relate their utterance about something in the world to the possibility of its validity being challenged by other actors".

For this reason, algorithmic personalization and the difficulty of filtering the content disseminated on the net prevent the presence of the other and the construction of a discursive movement, the latter understood as the simultaneous practice of listening and the formulation of one's own opinion. The opinion expressed by online audiences is not discursive, but "sacred", since it coincides entirely with their identity, which they cannot renounce:

"In the bubble of filters, the public sphere, the space where common problems are identified in order to try to solve them, loses its relevance" (Pariser 2012, p. 15).

In the face of all this, journalists continue to see themselves as intermediaries between sources and the public. However, the awareness that they need to capitalize on the greater communicative skills of both, as well as having to choose from a vastly expanded repertoire of issues and events, leads them to develop strategies to shorten distances. On the one hand, they often give the floor directly to the sources, from which they increasingly publish press releases and statements, as already mentioned, and also take up audio, video, and social messages produced directly by these sources (think of the centrality acquired in political communication—for example, from tweets or from the Facebook live broadcasts of the main protagonists). On the other hand, they stimulate the possible participation of the public, while avoiding the risks of disintermediation, by offering new opportunities for comment, interaction, and debate, which they then re-launch in an attempt to offer them a new protagonism that transfers to all information the more fortunate centrality of the public registered in the so-called Truth TV (Lorusso 2018).

However, it is difficult for this involvement to be transformed into real inclusion, both because it is still more advantageous to treat the public as consumers in order to satisfy them, and because it is objectively difficult to identify ways of really managing to acquire the many and varied skills present in society and to translate them into practices of effective involvement in information production, despite the many technological possibilities that exist (Hermida and Thurman 2008).

Sources continue to characterize their visibility through the traditional logic of going public; attempts at disintermediation aimed at reaching their audience directly are made, while maintaining the tension towards persuasion rather than participation as central. Indeed, the opportunities offered by digital communication seem paradoxical to accentuate the objective of legitimizing one's own actions, making little use of the eminently relational status of social networks and maintaining vertical communication.

This makes it even more difficult for journalists to implement processes that truly tap into the public's 'imaginative capacities' (Kim et al. 2018).

However, the centrality of users also lies in the more active role they are inevitably required to play in sifting through the vast amount of news available. The selection and verification of information typically requires journalistic skills. Knowledge of the working methods of journalism becomes indispensable in order to find one's way through this flood of information. This raises the urgent question of media education. The term "digital divide" not only refers to the existing gap in technical skills, but also, and increasingly, to a cultural problem of literacy.

5. The Crisis of Journalism in the Recent Global Crises

Particularly in recent years, following recent global crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian–Ukrainian conflict), the media ecosystem appears to be marked by a crisis paradigm, affecting both democratic institutions and the credibility of journalism (Blumler 2016; Davis 2019; Sorrentino 2018). In this context of mistrust, the phenomenon of news avoidance emerges. This phenomenon has various causes, such as information overload, structural inequalities (economic and socio-cultural), or even the perception of incompetence (which mainly affects women; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020; Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021; Edgerly 2022). Contemporary communication ecosystems are not simply the result of media convergence (a phenomenon extensively studied over twenty years ago), but constitute a hybrid and multidimensional set of tools, languages, production practices,

technologies, economic dimensions, and political connections. As partially mentioned, they constitute spaces of interconnection with the (increasingly fragmented) public sphere, with the logic of digital capitalism (Srnicek 2017), and with spaces of tactical resistance to the power of platforms (Van Dijck et al. 2018).

The practice of avoiding news and sources that are perceived to be “not of quality” or “not up to par” has its roots precisely in the spread and proliferation of rumors and disinformation.

Traditionally, news avoidance has been associated with political disinterest, apathy, or anti-politics (Strömbäck et al. 2013; Strömbäck 2017). More recently, some of the literature has moved towards more complex interpretations of the phenomenon. For example, Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) distinguish between ‘intentional and unintentional’ news avoidance to identify, on the one hand, a deliberate and conscious way of resisting news that is misperceived, and, on the other hand, an absolute disinterest in politics that is seen as challenging the foundations of liberal democracies because it contradicts the model of the ‘informed citizen’. This second version of news avoidance has received more attention from scholars interested in highlighting the structural and cultural features that might encourage or discourage news avoidance (Karlsen et al. 2020; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020; Villi et al. 2022). A related aspect is the “news-find-me” effect, where the public no longer cares about actively searching for news but settles into the “comfort zone” provided by recommendation algorithms (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017).

Another line of research has investigated variables at the individual level, linking information overload to news avoidance. A key role at this level is played by perceptions of self-efficacy (Park 2019; Chan et al. 2022). The concept was developed by Albert Bandura to identify a psychological characteristic defined as an antecedent of behavior, i.e., the perception of being able to perform and complete a task.

The contemporary media landscape is dominated by a constant and omnipresent flow of information, resulting in the phenomena of information overload and social media fatigue (Bright et al. 2015). These phenomena are interrelated, as exposure to information overload is one of the main reasons for experiencing news fatigue, which includes a range of feelings and sensations, such as the perception of ‘exhaustion’ in keeping up with the constant flow of information, or the feeling of exhaustion, burnout, and ‘techno-stress’, variously identified in the medical literature, all of which lead to a behavioral response of refusal to use technology (in the specific case of social media fatigue) and/or access journalistic content in general (Ravindran et al. 2014). The user must therefore be able to feel a sense of self-efficacy in navigating this stream without incurring these risks; otherwise, they would prefer to avoid the news. In addition to the amount of information they are exposed to, concerns about its quality may also be a factor; they must be confident that they will be able to distinguish accurate news from false or misleading news. To conclude on this point, it may be useful to point out that self-efficacy is also included in the Eurobarometer surveys on news consumption habits.

Therefore, the practice of news avoidance, even if problematic, seems to adapt to some characteristics of the contemporary communication ecosystem.

This is characterized by phenomena such as post-representative democracies (Keane 2013), in which politics and political parties have lost power and influence, together with the crisis of credibility of journalism (Sorrentino 2018), its structural transformation (Smith and Higgins 2020), and the more general crisis of public communication (Blumler 2016; Davis 2019). Indeed, the loss of references linked to the mechanisms of representation (primarily procedural, but also sentimental with regard to parties, symbolic with regard to sources of information) has favored the development of a new model of citizenship, in which participation in the public sphere is manifested through criticism, monitoring, and adherence to collective processes that take place mainly (or exclusively) online.

The growth of a model of ‘critical’ citizenship had already been observed at the end of the last century; attention was drawn to the fact that citizens, while adhering to basic democratic values, signaled a distance from the institutions of representation (Norris 1999).

Critical citizens were therefore portrayed as suspicious but attentive to politics (Geissel 2008). Over time, this distance has widened, and, thanks to the proliferation of the Internet, critical citizenship has in many cases evolved into ‘monitoring’ citizenship (Rosanvallon 2006; Keane 2013), and also into active citizenship. This process has developed because the center of power has shifted from representative politics (parliament and political parties) to economic–financial bodies and advanced technocracies; in this scenario, digital media have become more important in mediating the relationship between citizens and institutions. In the logic of post-representative politics, the individual citizen has, on the one hand, become weaker and more solitary, and, on the other, has taken on the possibility of directly controlling power (Fawcett et al. 2017).

Paradoxically, and especially in contexts of strong ideological polarization, we can also observe that this surveillance behavior is directed against the media, which used to be defined as “watchdogs”, although the US narrative on “watchdog journalism” was quite different. The reason for this is that the media are in a phase of decadence, which “refers to the wide gaps that are opening up between the rosy ideals of free and fair public contestation and the punishment of power, the unencumbered plurality of opinion, and the public commitment of representatives to the inclusion and equal treatment of all citizens, even in transnational contexts—broadly speaking, the ideals of watchdog democracy—and a rougher and more wrinkled reality in which the media are deeply involved in the dirty business of promoting intolerance of opinion, stifling public scrutiny of power and encouraging blind acceptance of the way things are” (Keane 2013, p. 119).

Therefore, in the sphere of information, the monitoring citizen has a critical consumer profile; for example, the practice of avoiding news that insists on boycotting sources reminds us of this. This is particularly relevant in an ecosystem where the algorithms of social media platforms, which are the main distribution channels for news, reward sources and content based on popularity rather than quality. In this case, avoiding news would be a tactic of resistance to the logic of algorithms that underpins the logic of the media tout court. The comparison with the dynamics of consumption is not inappropriate; indeed, the information system has undergone a marketing process that has its roots in the 1980s. On the other hand, the same citizenship is still affected by a similar process of commercialization (Crouch 2004).

In this context, news avoidance needs to be interpreted as a more complex phenomenon than it appears at first sight; the practice of avoiding sources and content could be read as one of the tools that the critical/monitoring citizen has at his disposal to orient himself within the information ecosystem (by making a selection among the overabundance of content to which he is exposed), and even to express his disagreement with certain production mechanisms. While news avoidance is detrimental to the model of the informed citizen in liberal democracies, it can be one of many landmarks of citizen engagement in the context of post-representative democracies and the post-public sphere.

6. (Open) Conclusions

We are faced with an ever-changing information landscape, which almost seems to signal the journalistic need to order the plethora of senses and meanings produced by modernity, thus responding to the ongoing and growing crisis of trust in the media (Sambrook 2012).

A decline, the one described so far, which seems paradoxical in comparison to what has been described so far, given that it is occurring mainly in countries with more solid democracies and where journalism has acquired more autonomy over time. It is also important to note that all this is taking place in a more accessible, but also more crowded, information context.

Therefore, the most correct term to define what has happened and what is happening in journalism and in the relationship between the public and digital information is ‘transition’.

An information system in transition is journalism that is shedding its skin, and it is clear that its audience is also changing. The fact that the latter appears increasingly skeptical

and cynical can be an “advantage” for public opinion itself, because it constitutes a goal for journalism that struggles to pursue quality and quantity at the same pace (Zelizer 2004; Schudson 2013).

After all, as Solito and Sorrentino (2020) suggests, journalism has always been a multifaceted cultural practice embedded in a complicated social landscape and destined for constant change. Journalism is not something solid and stable that can be pointed to, but a constantly changing denotation that is applied differently depending on the context.

If, in its first phase, mass journalism had above all an educational function, in which the normative character prevailed, then the information tasks would become central, strengthening the role of impartiality attributed to operational procedures such as objectivity, impartiality, and completeness; in addition, and above all, it would be used strategically to build trust and reputation (Solito and Sorrentino 2020).

Today, online information requires researchers and professionals to work around new paradigms that provide for greater interaction between the various players in the journalistic negotiation, as well as the ability to include users, with their skills and their skeptical and demanding vigilance, in an increasingly “dense” public sphere.

The distinction between the production and consumption of information, as described in the previous paragraphs, is becoming increasingly blurred.

The journalistic system thus sees its own space for action compressed by the new skills of its interlocutors and, above all, weakens its own specificity, which consists in sifting through the vast world of communication for adequate information through careful verification of what is happening, carried out according to shared principles.

It is therefore necessary to understand what journalism is becoming.

A “field” that perhaps represents (and will represent) less and less the institution that defines a shared world, but which will have to try to bring the multiplicity of interpretations into dialogue, maintaining the function of guide within society (Solito and Sorrentino 2020).

The functioning of the latter depends on the ability to contain dispersion and to find new reasons for “being together” and for “sharing”, through legitimized syntheses based on common principles.

In conclusion, the difficulties of journalism, which have recently manifested themselves in the success of the term ‘post-truth’ and in the frequency with which fake news and the need to contain it are discussed, are due to a number of causes that are redefining journalism’s legitimisation criteria, the operational methods that qualify it and the role of each social actor in the negotiation of what is news. Without a strong awareness of the need to broaden our gaze on these issues, it will be difficult for any effort, however laudable, to overcome the limits of post-truth to be effective. The starting point, however, is to regain confidence in the “promises” of journalism.

The crisis of trust is a much-discussed topic, not only in relation to the role of the media and journalism, but also in relation to politics, institutions, and science. Underlying this is also the need to change the nature of authority by emphasizing its dialogical aspects (Giddens 1990). For the world of information, this can be translated into the need to better involve the public users in the production processes.

Whether we still talk about journalism or postjournalism, we still need its core product, on which individuals weave the networks of meaning that then justify their actions. This is where journalism should start again, rethinking its promises in the context of the transformation of the digital public sphere.

The idea of journalistic post-information is in fact linked to the lack of realization of these promises. To be ‘beyond’ journalism means to live in an era marked by news that does not arise from the reality of facts, but from decisions or demands of power centers that guide the parabola of news and decide its disappearance. The perverse mechanism of shows known as talk shows amplifies and imposes the birth, development, domination, and cancellation of artificial news or news born from the deformation of facts to the point of reducing them to the desired material. This is a condition of our times, which explains

the impression of disorientation and chaos that torments citizens and takes away voters' confidence (Colombo 2007).

Although there are those who urge us to play it down, reminding us how journalism has always been in transition and stating how having a more skeptical and cynical public is an advantage for public opinion, because it constitutes a goad for journalism (Schudson 2013), there is no doubt that journalism is changing its skin. The quality of that skin in the coming years depends on many factors.

Certainly, also on the perseverance with which journalism studies will continue to take up the call of one of its leading scholars: to take journalism seriously, that is, as an important cultural and anthropological challenge.

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