



Rethinking accountability in contemporary media organizations

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Acceleration
Media organizations
Paul Virilio
Relational credibility
Relational accountability

ABSTRACT

The recent past has shown that media organizations were not only unable to anticipate the international crisis, but also ill-equipped to help its audiences reflect on its implications. In this study, we analyze how the identity crisis that increasingly characterizes contemporary media industries impacts the traditional way news professionals deal with the questions of accountability. We set up three focus groups in South-Africa, France and USA involving newsroom managers to discuss their post-crisis perceptions of the changes in their professional conception of accountability. In this paper, we first explain and justify the use of this specific research method. Then we sketch the two main results emerging from the focus groups. Finally we embark on a philosophical analysis of the changes in the media industry by drawing on the work of Paul Virilio, in order to explore the acceleration in the media industry as a threat to accountability. In conclusion, we present the concept of relational credibility as a new form of professional accountability that makes journalists, publishers and readers co-responsible for the editorial content.

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1. Introduction

The recent past has shown that media organizations were not only unable to anticipate the international crisis but also ill-equipped to help its audiences reflect on its implications. The fact is that this crisis occurred while the industry itself was under financial pressure and when the identity of journalism was blurred due to the increasing development of social media and what is called 'citizen-journalism'. In this study we want to analyze how this time of financial recession and identity crisis for news publishing has affected the traditional way news professionals deal with questions of accountability.

We also aimed at comparing the situation between different countries and continents (Africa, Europe and North-America), where journalism history has not, during the former century, followed the same path. Indeed, there is a marked contrast between the roots of French journalism and Anglo-American one. If the origins of French journalism are found in its proximity to literary and political circles, the origins of Anglo-Saxon journalism are built on the reputations of duly recognized professionals in journalism. In this context, South Africa offers a very particular profile. Much of the media existing under the Apartheid regime has literally transformed its ideological positioning, supporting the democratic

transition, and changing from a government organ of communication to a supposedly non-political information conduit (Brand, 2010; Wasserman & Botma, 2008).¹ Our study involved three focus groups, in South-Africa, France and USA, involving newsroom managers.

In this paper, we first explain and justify the use of our specific research method. Then we sketch the two main results emerging from the focus groups. Finally we embark on a philosophical analysis of the changes in the media industry by drawing on the work of Paul Virilio, in order to explore the acceleration in the media industry as a threat to accountability. In conclusion, we present the concept of relational credibility as new form of professional accountability for the media profession.

2. Presentation of the methodology

2.1. Focus groups

The use of focus groups is a well-established mode of collecting information in social sciences (Markova, Linell, Grossen, &

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¹ However, it should be noted that this general reorientation is still fragile, as evidenced by the extensive debate in 2010 when the African National Congress (ANC) proposed a law to establish a tribunal for the press, supposedly to defend the "national interest." In reality, this law would have enabled the tribunal to sentence journalists to 3–25 years in prison should confidential classified information be published. There was an outcry against this proposal in South African intellectual circles, including those close to the two Nobel laureates Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee. At the time of writing, the outcome of the debates around this tribunal was far from settled.

Salazar-Orvig, 2007). It maximizes the observation of a large number of interactions in a small amount of time (Morgan, 1997), and allows both sense and shared meanings, even consensus, to be brought out and agreed upon, while also underscoring the disagreements, problems, and tensions that arise with respect to the modes of representations and practices. The use of this technique also demonstrates that what counts as testimony is never simply given, but instead evolves through a collective, interactive, and contradictory process of construction that the focus group makes possible (Duchesne & Haegel, 2008). Given that our study intends to question editors and publishers about the difficulties they encountered during the crisis, and how they make their ethical choices about news matters, the focus group seemed to us to be a particularly appropriate method of investigation. Moreover, this investigation by interview constitutes the principal mode of data collection for the study as a whole (Blanchet & Gotman, 2010).

First of all, the elaboration of the moderator's guide consisted in several steps. It began by recording in a notebook the themes addressed that the research question addresses. We constructed this guide on the model of a semi-structured interview rather than on the model of a classic questionnaire, in order to be able to provide the principal motivations and stages of the discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2009). This "discussion guide" evolved further after the first focus group was held in Paris on February 16, 2011, and again after the second focus group took place one month later in Johannesburg on March 16, 2011, allowing us to situate ourselves in a continually recursive methodology (Massey, 2011).

It is also important to note that the focus groups, comprising 5–8 people,² were relatively homogeneous. Each of the participants shared two common experiences. The first is news production as editor or journalist, and the second is managerial responsibility (CEO, editor-in-chief, section editor, or entrepreneur in new media). The groups have a "common ground," allowing them to be situated in the same professional category and to share common experiences (Hydén & Bülow, 2003). The sampling logic used, however, allowed for some diversity; we had privileged participants who had different levels of experience, who had worked for as many different kinds of media as possible (press office, editor, internet start-up, 24-h news channel, national television networks, radio stations, etc.) and who had produced different kinds of content (video reportage, writing of dispatches or press articles, documentary, in both political and economic news as well as in entertainment). The goal was to take account of the different and contrasting situations in relation to the questions posed in the framework of the study.

2.2. An international framework: France, the United States, and South Africa

A qualitative analysis of focus group interviews and a textual analysis of media managers' discussions are the bases of our study, allowing us to compare the responses of newsroom managers across three continents—Europe (France), North-America (USA) and Africa (South-Africa). And so three focus groups, each lasting between three and four hours, recorded and transcribed in order to improve their reliability (Silverman, 1993), were successively held in Paris, Johannesburg, and Chicago; although there is no specific rule in this matter, we note that for Morgan (1997), three to five focus groups per investigation seems entirely legitimate and adequate for saturation.

2.3. Analysis of data

The ultimate aim of this empirical study is exploratory. With no a priori rationalizations, the problem emerges simultaneously with the production and the analysis of data (Wacheux, 1996). In fact, the interpretation of data from a focus group consisted first in distinguishing what seemed interesting to the participants from what seemed important. A good criterion for making this distinction is that of time spent discussing a topic. If the topic was discussed for a long time, and aroused an energetic and naturally contestatory debate within the group, this means that it is important to the participants. This method can be extended to all of the focus groups: if the same topics provoked the same level of interaction in each group, the importance of these specific topics are reinforced for the study itself via "group-to-group validation" (Morgan, 1997).

Furthermore, we quickly saw that many experiences recounted in the interviews were in the form of metaphors. We therefore opted to concentrate some of our analytic efforts on our respondents' metaphorical discourses (Hart, 2008; Tay, 2010), a current procedure in social sciences (Alvesson, 1993; De Graaf, 2006). Numerous studies have shown how, particularly in complex and changing environments, metaphors could vividly take account of social developments as well as ideas, values, and attitudes emerging in each individual (Cameron, 2003; Cameron et al., 2009).

3. Results

3.1. From objectivity to immediacy

Journalistic ethics has traditionally been in part built on the notion of objectivity. But today journalists no longer agree that objectivity is the watchword of their profession. For one of them, editor in chief of a popular celebrity magazine in South Africa, "You know we don't try to be objective, we don't pretend to be objective. We know it's non-sense there's no such thing as objectivity." Another adds: "We have to be fair, yes, but objective, no. It's a little inside joke objectivity. (Laughs)." Another reason why objectivity doesn't seem to be a priority, is that the audience wants "to have a spin on it. That's why they come to your brand, because they like the way you say something." What seems to have a priority, even among journalists, is the capacity to cover an event as quickly as possible while putting a "spin" on it that appeals to the audience preferences and tastes. It is no longer important to verify the information as often as necessary but instead to deliver a satisfying answer to consumers with the quickest level of reactivity.

For a former CEO of an international press agency, this transformation above all marks the end of "canonical" journalism and the development of new professions:

"Canonical meaning the figure of Hemingway or Beuve-Mery. . . The job that was unique - the high priest, with its robe and particular label - will divide itself. Just like an earthworm that is cut into small pieces and continues to live. It will split into many professions. That is what's interesting and they must be defined."

Do we then have to distinguish two forms of journalism, on the one hand serious news journalism and on the other immediacy-journalism? Although the participants seemed to agree on this point—namely, that there was on the one hand a "high quality/serious journalism" that benefits from time, space, and an inclination for nuance and moderation (especially when it comes to finding valuable, credible witnesses³), and an "immediacy journalism" on the other hand—the conclusions they draw from this

² The numerical composition of the focus groups is ideally between 6 and 12 participants, even if sometimes smaller or larger groups could be recommended (Massey, 2011).

³ "It's very hard, especially in television to find authentic people. (. . .) We are increasingly tempted to settle for a less legitimate testimony because the person

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