Audiences for the Journalism of the Third Millennium

Lila Luchessi and Mariano Mancuso

NEWS PRODUCTION CYCLES FOR ANOTHER TIME AND SPACE

In the current unstable and ever-changing media ecosystem, journalism is forced to rethink its limits. Internet speed and the omnipresence of mobile devices redefine the traditional time and space references that used to determine the creation of news content.

Periodicity used to establish the rate for creation and publication but is now affected by an increase in consumption speed. Interested in the present as a timestamp, Internet users push producers to remove layers of information, causal contexts, and time serializations.

At the same time, the usual criteria to determine if something is newsworthy have become obsolete. The emergence of new participatory audiences that not only consume, but also create and spread information, has put in check the asymmetrical relationship that had prevailed between journalists and their audiences in the twentieth century.

L. Luchessi
National University of Río Negro, Viedma, Argentina

University of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina
e-mail: lluchessi@unrn.edu.ar

M. Mancuso (✉)
University of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina
e-mail: mmancuso@sociales.uba.ar

The adjustments made to bridge the gap between the interests of producers and users (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2015) cause a weakness in information producers. The informativeness of topics that make it possible to retain enough traffic and an audience flow to sustain the company's finances is not always acceptable for demanding users.

Given that the number of users is decreasing, segmentation and direct communication with potential clients also lead to a decrease in advertisers that threatens the finances of journalism companies.

This also modifies the body of knowledge that is now essential to produce, consume, and share information. The logic of traditional journalism no longer applies. Those who manage relevant data for people to coexist in society need to have other knowledge and skills that exceed their usual roles.

News values that have organized production of information for decades have changed and, with them, the ways of producing news. Journalists accept with resignation that they have lost their central position and focus on trying to satisfy—always late—the new demands and ways of consuming information of new digital audiences (Luchessi, 2016).

Facing a multiple, fragmented, and juxtaposed universe of audiences, media organizations broadly reconsider their information offering. Like before, audience rates determine the course of information, but now, given the large amount of data on audience interests and consumption, media companies interpret that data with a bias that proposes a certain immediate relationship with their audiences.

Metrics condition contents. Ever since traditional media have started collecting consumption data, the course of the offering has been determined by coverage (gross and net) or a focus on ratings.

In digital ecosystems, these metrics not only track navigation within each medium, but also in each of the articles published. Intersections with horizontal interactions, decisions to spread content in microblogging accounts (Jenkins et al., 2013), and the conversational exchange arising from that puts users in a central position.

Information professionals are limited to a role related to providing a very specific service: satisfaction of a few users that want to confirm their assumptions and be informed of news that do not necessarily coincide with what Twitter (renamed X) bubbles deem essential.

Politicians, journalists, and citizens that are influential in their peer groups, in small capsules (Muraro, 2000), discuss topics against the flow of digital discussion groups in which more ordinary members of society interact.

The current journalistic production process adapts each day to the consumption practices of its diverse audiences, which it easily segments, and to the digital technological innovations that set the pace for news production and circulation. In this sense, the latest technological innovations focus on speeding up news production automation processes, while journalists focus on tasks that are less informative and more related to user engagement.

Content is part of a new language that proposes a fluid, omnipresent, and social understanding of interpersonal communications (Aguado et al., 2014). News is no longer a product for final consumption but is now part of a network that generates value from the social relationships that users create with their interactions.

The media environment, where these users consume news, has been defined, as summarized by Scolari (2010), "by the consolidation of global information networks, convergence processes, and the explosion of new communication media and platforms, the emergence of transmedia storytelling and the appearance of a many-to-many communication paradigm" (Scolari, 2010: 24).

Users consume, produce, and are also consumed by media. For decades, the media industry produced content without knowing—with the current precision—who their audience was or what it looked like. Nowadays, this participatory audience consumes information from various devices—in particular mobile devices—with the digital fingerprint that such customized consumption entails.

The media-user relationship is as personal as can be. There is a shift from a media ecosystem focused on capturing audiences for ad sales, which is part of the traditional broadcasting model, to a new digital environment in which user information makes it possible to monetize their actions and interests in the narrowcasting models (Aguado et al., 2014).

Content customization, which for a long time has been the subject of research by large platforms that dominate the Internet—known as GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft)—also encompasses smart products (cars, refrigerators, etc.) and wearable technologies (watches, bracelets, eyeglasses, and even clothing) from which we can consume. A whole universe of businesses and platforms to connect with new audiences who media companies, rushed by the increasing audience and income losses, do not fully embrace as a possibility to mitigate the crisis of its financing models.

All of these products and technologies give privileged access to important information on users, their preferences, their routines, and their social connections (Aguado et al., 2014). Collection and analysis of such data are key to understanding this fragmented society of minorities (De Bustos & Casado del Río, 2016).

Media have been taking advantage of this asset only for a short time, and almost exclusively to apply more or less strict paywalls and to develop apps as a way to compensate their decreasing ad income and their increasing audience loss (De Bustos & Casado del Río, 2016).

CONFIRMATION BIAS IN NEWS PRODUCTION CYCLES

In the current media ecosystem, changes in audiences give way to new information habits in society. The Internet is nowadays, in particular for young people, the main channel to access information. After the COVID-19 pandemic, this scenario deepened while audiences, in particular young groups, began losing interest for news content at a faster pace, overwhelmed by a constant excess supply of digital content (Quian et al., 2023; Reuters Institute, 2023).

The endless volume of user-generated content entails that information treatment is more specific, as well as the need to localize events and information that account for a demand that is inserted in a local context and that requires hyperlocal accuracy.

In Argentina, in particular, information is consumed through all media, even in social media. Digital media are still in control: for 77 percent of people, they are the main source of information, as compared to 92 percent in 2017 (Reuters Institute, 2023). This trend is mirrored globally. Overstimulated by an almost endless amount of information options, audiences no longer require more information, but better journalistic offerings, news that are clearer and more relevant for their lives.

Both for information and for entertainment purposes, these new audiences are perfected as information hunters and gatherers (Scolari, 2013). The fact that they can engage with content makes them enjoy being immersed in stories and reconstructing them by linking content within the same storytelling world (Jenkins, 2006; Scolari, 2013). It is increasingly evident that the media and their audiences need each other.

While markets are saturated with content and information, media companies are more and more dependent on whether consumers are committed with the content offered (Scolari, 2013). This excess supply does not mean we are more knowledgeable. Society's information flow grows each day, hand-in-hand with technological development, but human capacity for assimilation remains the same. This promotes blind consumption, or plainly the rejection of information, as shown by the survey carried out by Reuters Institute (2023).

Given this critical situation, journalism needs to be reinvented based on new strategies and immersive storytelling developed around user experience (Romero-Rodríguez & Torres-Toukoumidis, 2018). Media must learn how to co-create news with their audiences. In particular with younger people, whose current practices anticipate information habits that will become the norm in the future.

Han (2021) warns that the current information overload prevents us from seeing facts as they happen. This not only affects audiences, but also journalists and decision-makers in media companies. "Information falsifies the events" (Han, 2021: 7). The huge quantity of data that audiences generate upon contacting information content, the digital fingerprint that media collects, reinforces certain previous notions that those media companies had about their audiences and practices.

They confirm information biases that prevail in the interpretation of metrics and in decisions, subsequently taken, on strategies to adapt and connect to these audiences. As stated by Sosa-Escudero (2019), having too much data does not mean having all data. And, from our perspective, having too much data does not mean that the data obtained is meaningful.

Metrics—the rating of our time—show user's actions, but not their motives or if other content that was not available would have been necessary for them.

Metrics are a photograph; they portray specific moments that do not show the whole journey. Upon choosing an image to make a decision, form criteria,

create agendas, and give rise to public conversations, the contextual framework is ignored.

Media have so much information on audiences that these organizations think they know them, but, in fact, they only know their bias. "Information alone does not illuminate the world. It can even darken it" (Han, 2021: 11). The dark side of data collection methods supports and extends the distance between media and their audiences.

Faced with the algorithm, human beings lose the ability to act on their own. Algorithms, situated between journalists and audiences, are black boxes. Even without access to their internal systems, without knowing how they work or collect information, decisions are taken based on their results.

Despite the data available to the media, they repeat their journalistic strategies and multiply the news offering (amount over quality), in particular, with the incorporation of new technologies, such as AI, with the main purpose of accelerating and increasing news production. Moreover, the media continue to turn their backs to audience participation and the creation of information communities. They either exclude audiences from news production altogether or foster dialog among different audiences, but then decide to stay out of it.

Confirmation biases of media companies consolidate a repeated interpretation of their audiences and, far from reeling them in, they keep pushing them away. The biased view of users, their positions, and the data they share becomes a practice that tends to take the part for the whole.

In this context, homogenization of voices, frameworks, and ideological-political stands creates a sense of unanimity that is not actually unanimous and that does not actually exist.

Diversity, which seemed like an attainable goal, tends to unify criteria, homogenize contents, and make social discussion binary.

If, as asserted by McLuhan (1964), the medium is the message and language is governed by algorithms, the fact that the algorithmic construction of social meanings has a binary result causes everyday practices to be binary as well.

REFERENCES

Aguado, J. M., Feijóo, C., & Martínez, I. J. (2014). El impacto del ecosistema móvil en las industrias culturales. *Revista Telos, 99*, 136–145.

Boczkowski, P., & Mitchelstein, E. (2015). La brecha de las noticias: La divergencia entre las preferencias informativas de los medios y el público. Manantial.

De Bustos, J. C., & Casado del Río, M. A. (2016, June-September). Emergencia de los GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook y Amazon) y cambios en el sistema comunicativo. *Revista Telos, 104*, 38–48.

Han, B. C. (2021). *Non-things: Upheaval in the lifeworld*. Taurus.

Igarza, R. (2009). Burbujas de ocio. Nuevas formas de consumo cultural. La Crujía.

Igarza, R. (2012). Internet en transición: A la búsqueda de un nuevo estatuto para la cultura digital. In S. de Cultura de la Nación (Ed.), *La ruta digital: Cultura, convergencia tecnológica y acceso* (pp. 147–158). Secretaría de Cultura de la Presidencia de la Nación Argentina.

ITU-International Telecommunication Union. (2023, March). *Measuring digital development—Facts and figures: Focus on least developed countries.* International Telecommunication Union, Development Sector, ITU Publications.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide.* NYU Press.

Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable media. Creating value and meaning in a networked culture.* NYU Press.

Liuzzi, A. (2014). Transmedia 'Historytelling'. De documentales interactivos y géneros híbridos. In F. Irigaray & A. Lovato (Eds.), *Hacia una Comunicación Transmedia* (pp. 66–86). UNR Editora.

Luchessi, L. (2015). Nuevas rutinas, diferente calidad. In F. Irigaray & A. Lovato (Eds.), *Producciones transmedia de no ficción. Análisis, experiencias y tecnologías* (pp. 12–24). UNR Editora. Editorial de la Universidad.

Luchessi, L. (2016). Descentramientos, influencias y reacomodamientos en el ejercicio periodístico. In A. Amado-Suárez et al. (Eds.), *Periodismos argentinos: modelos y tensiones del siglo* (Vol. XXI, pp. 37–50). Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Luchessi, L. (2018). Viral news content, instantaneity, and newsworthiness criteria. In R. Gambarato & G. Alzamora (Eds.), *Exploring transmedia journalism in the digital age* (pp. 31–48). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-3781-6.ch003

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man.* McGraw-Hill.

Muraro, H. (2000). Políticos, periodistas y ciudadanos. De la videopolítica al periodismo de investigación. Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Murray, J. (2016 [1997]). Hamlet on the Holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace*:* The Free Press.

Quian, A., Elías, C., & Soengas Pérez, X. (2023). Consumption of information and citizen's perception of the sources consulted during the Covid-19 pandemic: A study of the situation based on opinion polls. *Profesional de la Información, 32*(4). https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2023.jul.13

Reuters Institute. (2023). *Digital news report 2023.* Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023

Romero-Rodríguez, L. M., & Torres-Toukoumidis, A. (2018). Con la información sí se juega: Los newsgames como narrativas inmersivas transmedias. In L. M. Romero-Rodríguez & A. Torres-Toukoumidis (Eds.), *Gamificación en Iberoamérica* (pp. 35–53). Editorial Universitaria Abya-Yala.

Scolari, C. (2010). Ecología de los medios: mapa de un nicho teórico. *Quaderns del CAC, 13*(1), 17–25.

Scolari, C. (2013). Narrativas transmedia. Cuando todos los medios cuentan. Grupo Planeta.

Sosa-Escudero, W. (2019). Big data. Breve manual para conocer la ciencia de datos que ya invadió nuestras vidas. Siglo XXI.

Speedtest (2023). Speedtest global index. *Ranking mobile and fixed broadband speeds from around the world on a monthly basis.* https://www.speedtest.net/global-index.

Van Dijck, J. (2016). The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media. Siglo XXI.