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► **To cite this version:**

Roselyne Ringoot, Denis Ruellan. Journalism as permanent and collective invention. *Brazilian Journalism Research*, 2007, 3 (2), pp.67-76. halshs-00730309

**HAL Id: halshs-00730309**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00730309>**

Submitted on 9 Sep 2012

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# JOURNALISM AS PERMANENT AND COLLECTIVE INVENTION

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Jornalismo / **SBPjor**

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**ABSTRACT** Thinking of journalism in new ways should be free of any form of essentialism. Journalism is a social reality which has been developed historically and is therefore evolutionary; it is a permanent construction; journalism has been established over time, it transforms itself and already is no longer what it was and we cannot imagine what it will become.

Journalism is also an area for multiple interactions which are necessarily complex; its perception cannot be reduced to those whom a process has appointed professional journalists; there are many other actors who are involved in producing information.

**KEY-WORDS** discourse order, professional order, heterogeneity, enunciation level.

## Dimensions of identity

Within an international network of researchers, le Réseau d'études sur le journalisme (the Network for journalism studies), we have developed this conception of journalism as a permanent and collective process of invention and we would like to show its productivity by applying it to two fundamental dimensions of identity:

- The formation of the professional group
- The formation of journalistic discourse

In fact, the bodies which structure the formation of the professional group in France, notably the Commission de carte d'identité des journalistes, (the Commission for journalists' professional identity card) and the trade unions are developing arguments which often contradict the concrete and effective measures they take or have

taken in the past. In addition, the analysis of the elements produced by journalists or “journalistic discourse” tends to relativize the standards for journalists’ formats of expression and the rules for writing. Here we would like to stress the relationship between the discourse and the mechanisms implemented to regulate the profession and the production of information. The journalism profession and production are learned from points of tension between “professional order” and constitutive lack of identity and points of tension between “discourse order” and dispersion. It therefore appears that instability and disorder are characteristics of the professional identity and the editorial identity of journalism.

### **“Professional order” and constitutive lack of identity**

Taking the analyses by Bucher and Strauss (1961) and Boltanski (1983) according to which the professional groups are loose amalgams of segments which are often very loosely coherent and find themselves thrown together at a moment in history, we have developed the idea of a “*constitutive lack of identity*” (RUELLAN, 1992 & 1993). As we see it, during the process which enables them to move from a poorly defined social condition to a professional status (this was acquired by the law of 1935), French journalists have gradually hardened a discourse on the profession, professionalism, and professionalization.

This discourse revealed an essentialist strategy which intended to establish journalism as an intangible and unquestionable component of democratic societies; it claims that only selected professionals, with verifiable skills, organized in a group, had the right to journalistic identity and practice; we often raise the idea of a “*professional order*” to structure the group and limit access to it. Supported by sister organizations in the West (the first international congresses of journalists took place at the end of the 19th century) and with the support of republican parties which conceived a consubstantial link between information and democracy, journalists organized themselves in a powerful trade union. They also mobilized universities to dress up a quasi-sectarian discourse in science - the Institut des sciences de la presse (the Institute for Press Sciences) was created at the Sorbonne and was run by university staff together with journalism professionals.

The important thing in this professional discourse is not to take it literally (an error which is commonly made by researchers), as it is a combat weapon above all, and when the combat was won it was easy to state that its objective was to enable journalists to access social notability and individual and collective respect. But, deep down, nothing in the formation of the professional group had changed, everything remained as the journalists had wanted it to remain: blurred.

So, for example, the journalists had achieved a situation in which a professional identity card was delivered by a joint authority under the control of the State; but they did not want the procedure to be compulsory, in such a way that as soon as the law was voted on and applied in 1937 the journalists carried on without it. The awarding of the card did not require any diplomas, and therefore fewer than 20% of journalists (card holders) had received professional training; ethical faults could not be mentioned to refuse the awarding or annual renewal of the card. And possession of the card did not provide authorization for the most important measure in the law: the conscience clause; in fact, many issues of jurisprudence remind us of the fact that the card is only one indicator of professional identity and that this may be proved by other means, such as an employment contract, for example.

Why, despite its pitiful effectiveness, is the card doing so well after seventy years? Because it confers this prestige, this notability that journalists have so desired (the Press was extremely corrupt between the two wars); the card is a talisman that we never show but can never be separated from; the fact that it is rare is what makes it successful. But there is one other important explanation: the awarding of the card enables the professional group to control the changing face of the group, and the employment market it governs.

The card is awarded according to rules defined by the law, by a commission made up of representatives of employee trade unions and professional organizations; despite the amount of work every year (there are currently thirty-six thousand journalists whose cards must be renewed and there are over three thousand new requests which must be examined), two members provide an opinion on each case and the “*borderline cases*” are the subject of long discussions during plenary sessions. The examination of these cases shows that on the one hand the commission’s work interprets the law and on the other that somewhat unusual profiles are presented each year.

Indeed, when the law was adopted, it would have been easy to reserve the card just for journalists who produce articles for the written press; a few years later certain specific profiles had to be “*assimilated*”, such as translators, revisers, stenographers, editors’ secretaries, photo-journalists and radio and television reporters. Then, and increasingly over the last twenty years, new profiles have continued making representations to the card’s commission. And this pressure completely explodes several principles which created the standard ideal profile of the journalist drawn up by the trade unions between the wars. So, today, card holders may be employees of non-media companies (associations or town councils, for example); their legal employment status is not always a salaried one, they are authorized or constrained to take on more “independent” forms; therefore, the subordinate link which binds the journalist to the employer and protects him or her from uncertainty is more and more distended; finally, journalism activities may be carried out in combination with other tasks, notably communication and teaching, as long as these other activities represent a minor share of their income.

This expansion of profiles can be explained in several ways. In France as elsewhere employment is increasingly deregulated and this general condition also affects the more defined professions like journalism; it is becoming difficult to refuse professional status to individuals on the grounds that they do not meet the standard, of which they are already victims. Another reason is due to the extraordinary transformation in the communication and information landscape. Until the Second World War, journalists and advertisers shared the same employment market, which was a small one. Then came public relations managers, radio and television producers and a short time ago, website producers. Most of all, media outlets have grown like mushrooms, within the usual trading area, but also in connection with organizations (public administrations, associations, trade unions, businesses) which are both the source and producers of these media. But this explosion has come as a shock to journalists, who have had to invent strategies to respond to this movement. The first was anathema, the discourse of journalistic purity which resisted the rape of information by communication; this discourse seems to be less and less relevant given that a quality “*source journalism*” (SANT’ANNA, 2005) is asserting itself and is used as a reference for “traditional” journalists. The second is the amalgam strategy; the

incredible information market is not developing in the trading media as much as in the organizations; however, unless they let another group form in front of them, the journalists must incorporate these individuals who are inventing a new professional territory. This phenomenon concerns France, but our analysis appears relevant to us in the case of Brazil, where this reality can be measured: 60% of journalists in the private market are employed as “extra-redação”, i.e. outside standard media businesses.

### **“Discourse order” and dispersal**

The other structuring factor we want to question here is that of journalistic discourse, in the sense of language production, that which is produced by work. If the idea of a professional order has implied the structuring of a group, the idea of a “discourse order” is also an underlying one. The affirmation of a professional journalism is structured around a specific discursive production which implies specific skills. The distinction between professionals and amateurs (non-professionals) in journalism has a corollary of the distinction between discursive know-how. The journalistic discourse is distinguished from the types of discourse with which it cohabits historically: political, literary, educational, religious, scientific, intelligent, and so on.

Taking inspiration from Michel Foucault, the English sociologist Jean Chalaby (1998) assimilates the invention of journalism with the emergence of a new “*discourse order*”, with the institutionalization of writing rules: 5W rules, reverse pyramid, etc. Reporting also appears as a strong marker for journalism on which the break between opinion press and information press is founded. More generally, journalistic genres are consubstantial to professionalization, as the professional manuals and teaching which are dedicated to them show.

In this perspective, journalism is learned as a *set of socio-historically circumscribed utterances that we can relate to an enunciative identity* (MAINGUENEAU, 2002). This is an interpretation of Foucault who places emphasis on the homogenizing factors of discourse: a group of peers, a professional field, a specific enunciation. This “*contrastive*” conception considers discourse as an autonomous space: exaggerating a little, discourses talk to each other, meet each other, avoid each other or confront each other, but remain intact by themselves.

This appears extremely simplistic to us, as we are forgetting the dimension of instability and dispersal which Foucault associates with the concept of discursive order. Thinking of order, for Foucault, also means thinking of disorders ... (as Becker thinks of deviancy at the same time as standard). We defend more an “*integrative*” conception of discourse by putting forward the argument that a discourse is always crossed by several discourses, and by basing ourselves on the concept of *dispersal*. This conceptualization highlights two characteristics which are essentially a paradox:

- On one hand, we consider that journalism produces specific discourse and knowledge which can be marked out, notably by recurrent enunciative forms
- Moreover, we consider that journalism is the product of several discourses which work on it and structure it.

We think of journalism from the circulation of discourses at work and from the heterogeneity of constituent factors, using Foucault's demonstration (1969) on the formation of intelligent discourse, notably that of psychopathology, which is based around the categories of actor, action, institution and plural location. In his intelligent discourse study on madness, the author insists on the combined action of actors and mechanisms (the doctors, patients, administrations, the Church, technologies, practices, research, management, public policies, etc.) and on the tangling up of discourses.

So, if journalism installs an object of knowledge, an enunciation, and strategies (or positions) which are specific to it, this discursive identity is the product of a regulation of multiple dispersals (RINGOOT, UTARD, 2005). By proclaiming themselves as information professionals, journalists erect information as an object of journalism knowledge, but this object is really unstable as it is built both by what is said and what is said about it. Information does not exist by itself; it may only be defined according to its medium (written, audio-visual, multi-media) and its temporality (rate of appearance). It takes form through various categorizations: social activities (political, culture, etc.) relation to the territory (local, national, international). Information is also produced according to standards which can be noted in the discourse of different actors (the journalist, the legislator, the teacher, the trade unionist, the press baron, etc.). Information is an object of knowledge dispersed according to the operational frameworks which make its production

possible and according to the reflexive discourses which recommend what is must be or describe what it is.

In the same way, we cannot reduce journalism to a fixed and stable type of enunciation, neither at a given period nor over time. If the codification for writing information enables us to distinguish journalism from other socio-discursive practices, it is also subject to variations and borrowing. The identity of journalistic discourse rests more in the inter-discourse it organizes than in enunciative purity. This means then observing the exterior of journalistic discourse from its own interior. This dimension is particularly tangible in the management of source discourse in general and in specialized journalism in particular. The journalistic discourse is based around the social discourses which feed it by installing methods for regulation: reported discourse techniques, genres which organize the source discourses (interview, portrait, reporting, etc.) or documentary resources (analysis, enquiry, etc.). Journalism is built according to other discourse regimes for which it organizes the circulation and transformation.

The career of Salam Pax's warblog (2003) is totally symptomatic of the dispersal regulation process in journalism: highlighted and commented on in the traditional press, notably in the United States and Great Britain, this blog has also been published in France as a facsimile in *Le Monde*<sup>2</sup>. On the enunciation level, a new form of expression is legitimized; on the information level, the informative value is recognized. This logic at work is not just related to the potential in new technologies, it is more inherent in the inter-relation between journalists, sources and target audiences. The objects of journalism knowledge are also built by sources as shown by Philippe Schlesinger (1992). Research devoted to the construction of public problems points to the role of associations and bodies in influencing the current situation in journalism, notably the rise in power of questions related to the environment, the ecology and risks in general. Sociology of mobilizations insists on the inter-action between media and sources (NEVEU, 2000). This co-construction of information has the corollary of a discursive co-construction which is particularly visible in the processes to categorize actors and event designation (KRIEG, 2003).

The strategies or objectives in journalism which rest in the articulation between object of knowledge and enunciations also escape a single modeling. Journalism is what the actors of the



time say, and by “actors” we mean not just those we designate as professionals, but also those whose discourse transforms perceptions. Dan Schiller (1979) demonstrated how the concepts of objectivity and professionalism which accompany the introduction of technical standards have been led to legitimize the commercial Press in the United States in its self-appointed role as a defender of public interest towards the middle of the 19th century; here professionalism was defined by employers. Maria Elena Hernandez-Ramirez (2006) explained how, in Mexico, in the 1990s the process of reforming press-government relations which produced a great amount of discourse on the professionalization and professionalism which was finally acquired by journalists was an element of the economic liberalism policy which was meant to accompany liberalization of the media; here journalism was expressed by the State. M. Palmer (1983) and we ourselves (Ruellan, 1993) highlighted the essential role of realistic and naturalistic literary currents in establishing the practice and figure of the reporter, in France at the end of the 19th century; this was formed by a discourse which was artistic in nature and external (in part) to journalism.

### **Conclusion**

These considerations lead us to the conclusion that the profession, the professionalism and the professionalization are structured by the discourse of journalistic products and by the discourse held by social actors at a period in history. The double imperative which involves articulating the two discursive levels has led us on one hand to review the role of discourses in the formation of the professional group from the interactional approach and on the other to revisit Foucault's discursive formation concept and to retain more particularly that of dispersal. The constitutive lack of identity which characterizes the group of journalists and the dispersal which characterizes journalistic production enable us to take on a complex identity which is constantly being rebuilt. The tensions between the opening and closure of the group and the tensions between discursive order and disorder are neither accidental nor occurring only from time to time. They appear to us more as an identity component of journalism.

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