

Sur le journalisme – About Journalism – Sobre jornalismo

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Call for Papers

Journalists and media construction of public problems

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Editors of this special issue:

France Aubin (Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Canada)

Erik Neveu (Université de Rennes 1, France)

Paula de Souza Paes (Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Brazil)

According to Gusfield (1981), a social fact only becomes an object of concern, of claim and of debate in public policies after a work of conversion has been performed by several operators (Best, 2008; Neveu, 2015). Included in these operators are journalists and, to a larger extent, the media, which contribute to the construction of public problems and present the interlocutors involved, the questions raised and any possible answers in terms of public action.

At a time when journalism is experiencing a double crisis; one of profitability and credibility (Poulet, 2011; Descôteaux, Brin, 2018; Benton, 2019), how can we understand its role in the construction of public problems? The theme of this dossier discusses the competitive exercise of fighting for the validation of problems and proposals and their “framework”. What place do journalists occupy in these processes? What changes does the new information ecology (intensive use of digital social networks and the multiplicity of information producers and sharing) (Rebillard, Smyrnaio, 2010) bring to the genesis of public problems?

Articles submitted for this edition shall focus on the following theme: the relationship between generalist information media and journalists and the construction of public problems. We recommend the articles be based on one of the three topics listed below; however, we shall not exclude other proposals that may not necessarily be based on these three topics.

1. Journalists as Mediators

Historically speaking, the media has played an important role in disseminating opinions, information and analyses on issues of public interest. Several researchers have demonstrated the relationship between the emergence of a public problem, the birth of “specialized subfields” (of journalism) and the specialization of journalists (Padioleau, 1976). This dynamic also includes the role of editorials and the emergence of specialized online media (*blogs, podcasts*).

Journalists give visibility to and also shape public issues, including a number of other issues such as the environment and climate change (Comby, 2015; Hertsgaard, 2020; Schields, 2020), politics (Gaxie, 2003; Mitchell et al. 2017; Dias, 2019), health (Marchetti, 2010), immigration (Benson, 2014; Paes, 2018), poverty (Demers, 2017), the stigmatization of neighborhoods in cities (Wiard et Pereira, 2018) or other dilemmas such as firearms regulation (Aubin, 2018), terrorism (Marthoz, 2017) or Covid 19 (Eutrope et Rodier, 2020; Powell, 2020) .

Although the relationship between the media and social movements may be a tense one, mainly due to journalistic routines (Francoeur, 2012), these social movements have added to increased public problems due to the relative openness of the media. There are also *whistleblowers*, who can be seen to symbolize the ambiguous relationship the media maintains with their sources, particularly when “field effects” (media and diplomatic) come into play, as in the WikiLeaks case where the logic of mediation was inhibited (de Neuilly, 2014).

One possible analytical path to understanding the complex cooperation/conflict relationship between journalists on one side, and *whistleblowers*, social movements and advocates of a particular cause on the other, would be to explore the rhetoric of those actors engaged in public problems. Are there any frameworks, narratives or arguments that pass through *gatekeeping* processes more easily than others and thus attract the attention and coverage of the press and media? A study by Henry (2007) on the successive frameworks of the issue of asbestos in France suggests that there may be. Does the economic crisis, which limits and minimizes newsrooms and journalists' resources, make them more susceptible to pressure and dishonesty from sources, whether promoting a problem or preventing it from coming about? How do rival/partner relationships between the press and sources evolve; is it through assumed cooperation, political collaboration, or instrumentalization?

2. Journalists as Promoters of Public Problems

Should journalism then be considered an area of activity structurally dominated by the political and economic fields and, as a result, restricted to just simply transmitting without much ability to autonomously promote public problems? There are a number of well-known examples that object to this. From Albert London to George Orwell, from Nelly Bly to, more recently, Barbara Ehrenreich (2001), some journalists choose to promote the problems they want to see on the political agenda. In fact, these successes are not restricted to notables in the profession or to highly impactful issues. The 2020 Pulitzer Prize¹ was awarded to a *New York Times* reporter for his “trivial” exposé of taxi drivers' lives were exploited through abusive contracts, which resulted in public investigations and reforms.

Are there any cases where today's journalism is the place where public problems are promoted autonomously? Do genres such as “moral panic” (Cohen, 1972) and *crusadism* get

¹ <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/brian-m-rosenthal-new-york-times>

their starting point in the media? Or, is anything changing in terms of the de-regulation of the information market, where journalists' credibility is rapidly diminishing and, in turn, benefitting other content producers? How is the relationship between journalism and public problems affected by the lack of definition of a *continuum* between activists who produce information, creators of independent forms of journalism, and journalists who define themselves as engaged? One case in point would be David Dufresne's work, a French writer who exposed the police violence against the Yellow Vests movement (the *gilets jaunes*) in France².

Fact-checking can also be used for analysis purposes. From its first appearance in the American press at the beginning of the 20th century (Bigot, 2017) to the recent creation of fact-checking agencies, journalists have been working to make media education a public problem as a way of responding to the explosion of *fake news*/false information and to avoid unsuccessful social debates caused by polarization. The collaboration between information media in numerous media education projects is part of a conversion effort which associates pandemic and infodemic; the spread of rumors and lying information (Frau-Meigs, 2020; Dolbeau-Bandin and Jaubert-Michel, 2020). But does educating the public about what reliable information is mean there is no more need for these issues to be discussed? Could the success of false, sometimes preposterous, news be the result of a lack of media coverage on issues that concern certain audiences, of social evils that have no spokespersons or whose spokespersons are unavailable? Would it be pertinent to try to identify at least some of the conspiratorial discourse (Danblon and Nicolas, 2010) or false news as a byproduct of expressing issues that cannot be constituted as public problems or that the journalistic world cannot embrace?

Investigative journalism also has an important place in re-legitimizing and defending the autonomy of journalism. This is especially the case for global journalism, which values the cooperative efforts of newsrooms from several countries to fight against increasing inequalities and the *carte blanche* enjoyed by the rich and the states. But the same question arises: what are the repercussions for the work of a consortium of hundreds of journalists that is above nation states who seem themselves disconnected from the issues promoted by journalists?

3. Public Problems without Journalists?

The emergence of a fifth power (the public) or the increase of its importance in the public debate (Bernier, 2016), including with regard to the role and status of the media, is accompanied by public problems that seem to be built up without journalists, appearing on a number of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Sexual harassment can be made aware of through #metoo and its different geographical variants, including femicide (Paiva, 2019) and domestic violence against women; police violence against the Yellow Vest movement; firearms regulations in the United States with #NeverAgain; structural racism with #idllenomere; or the Brazilian movement "NãofoiAcidente" ("NotAnAccident"), which calls for more severe penalties to be handed out to drunk drivers (Silva, 2014), and #BrequeDosAPPs, a movement calling for better working conditions for delivery workers employed by digital platforms.

We can question the limits in all of these cases. Would these causes and problems have had the same impact had it not been for "classic" media? Does that then mean that journalists

² www.davdud.net

are interested in causes that originate in other public spaces (Dahlgren, 2000), collecting the testimonies found there?

The deadline for submitting the full manuscripts (30 to 50,000 characters, including notes and bibliography) is **December 1, 2021**, at: france.aubin@uqtr ;
erik.neveu@sciencespo-rennes.fr; paulasouzapaes@gmail.com;
editors.surlejournalisme@gmail.com

Manuscripts may be written in **English, French, Portuguese** or **Spanish**.

Double blind review.

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