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Researching the news in the hybrid media system: *An expert panel report*

Irene Costera Meijer, Richard Rogers,
Oscar Westlund & Tamara Witschge

Javier Díaz-Noci & Ana Serrano (eds.)



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ONLINENEWSRESEARCH



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ON THIS PAPER

This paper is a result of the project *News, networks, and users in the hybrid media system. Transformation of media industries and the news in the post-industrial era* (RTI2018-095775-B-C43). We present our insights on the latest movements of the Spanish media industry and their influence in the conception of news production during 2020. Specifically, we focus on the implementation of news business models, namely paywalls and membership models, and the movements regarding intellectual property to protect the industry - and their impact on journalists as well. The irruption of the COVID-19 pandemics has accelerated some tendencies in this respect.

AN EXPERT PANEL LINKED TO THE RESEARCH PROJECT *News, Networks and Users in the Hybrid Media System. Transformation of the Media Industry and the News in the Pots-Industrial Era* was held on the 9th of October, 2020, to improve the definition of approach to our research objects with the help of highly reputed scholars. Richard Rogers, Tamara Witschge, Oscar Westlund and Irene Costera Meijer were invited, and kindly accepted, to join our research group to a hand-on meeting to deal about three specific questions:

- 1) Which is the concept and nature of news?
- 2) What is a hybrid media system?
- 3) How should we focus our research on digital social networks and the news?

The session, held online because of the health situation, was conducted and moderated by Ana Serrano-Telleria, one of the heads of the aforementioned research project. She conducted the session, and has revised this report, which has been compiled and edited by Javier-Díaz Noci.

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A HYBRID MEDIA SYSTEM?

THE FIRST QUESTION WAS ABOUT the nature and concept of news, or, more specifically, to which extent may be thought that news is a commodity. The question, as posed by Anna Serrano-Telleria, is “how we could approach both conceptually and methodologically this redefinition or description of the concept and nature of news”. Technological adaptation, but how could we approach methodologically these controversies?

Irene Costera Meijer considers the *hybrid media system* a central concept because it “enables us to not only understand the changing media constellation and the changing media ecologies but also to understand how power works”, since in Andrew Chadwick’s book “the notion of power is crucial.” She thinks that “it not only opens up how media manipulate users but also the other way around, how users manipulate media.”

“The notion of power is crucial, it is not only about how media manipulate users, but also how users manipulate media” (Costera Meijer)

On the other hand, Richard Rogers prefers “more the notion of *platformization*, because it seems to me that the hybridity lies more in the platform.” Oscar Westlund agreed, because in his opinion “how everything connects with these platform companies in a form of hybridity.” Richard Rogers advanced some possible approaches from his point of view and experience: “Recently we completed a study for the Dutch Ministry of Internal Affairs¹ and the question was to what extent is there a sort of misinformation, or disinformation problem in the Netherlands”. What was found in this research study was, directly related to our question: “We found quite a lot “junk”. And this is a sort of technical term that was introduced by the Oxford Internet Institute as a kind of corrective or something different to say than the notion of fake news. And they defined it as a range of different problems... a range of problematic information”.

Rogers insisted that “it’s a very broad term but it has to do with largely the rise of extreme speech masquerading as news on the one hand, and then, also, secondly what they call computational propaganda”. Oscar Westlund added that it is in the work by professional journalists “where we can distinguish, in my view, journalistic news from other

forms of news produced by many actors.” It is important, and helpful to define the nature of news these days, “that there is now a kind of rising, emerging, sort of alternative media ecology that has those characteristics”.

Instead, Oscar Westlund thinks that “we have a large body of researchers that are making some really problematic assumptions about news” and that “we treat news as a form of blackbox”, so there is to a great extent many “normativity around the construction of this field” especially because “we have a lot of political communication scholars who study effects, they study news avoidance, they study incidental news exposure, cross-media news consumption”, and that “over a long period of time they have been using surveys, panel data”.

This hybrid media system approach, which Irene Costera Meijer likes because of the foregrounding of “complexity, interdependence, and transition. It is so because Chadwick's approach of a hybrid media system is Hybrid thinking and the fact that it “rejects simple dichotomies, nudging us away from “either/or” patterns of thought and toward -not only, but also- patterns of thought.” Moreover, “it draws attention to flux, in-betweenness, the interstitial, and the liminal. It reveals how older and

newer media logics in the fields of media and politics blend, overlap, intermesh, and coevolve. Hybrid thinking thus provides a useful disposition for studying how political actors, publics, and media of all kinds interact”, in Costera Meijer’s words.

Hybridity as a concept should be put under scrutiny, Tamara Witschge said as well, remembering an article by her, C.W. Anderson, David Domingo and Alfred Hermida,² and *The SAGE Handbook of Digital Journalism* (2016), and the question that in “the field of digital journalism everything is hybrid, it has become synonymous with the digital, as if everything that is new is hybrid.”

“Hybridity as a concept should be put under scrutiny” (Witschge)

HYBRID NEWS

In a hybrid media system, it happens a “hybridization of news” as well. Irene Costera Meijer provide some examples:

- 1) Influencers: Hybridization of news and marketing.
- 2) Social witnessing: Hybridization of journalism and social activism: it overflows and transgresses the

boundaries of alternative and mainstream media, for instance, live streaming of Black Lives matter demonstrations.

3) Citizen witnessing: new assemblages of digital technology and reporting, e. g. aerial drones with cameras and live blogging.

4) News as branding, with no clear distinction between sales, marketing and editorial departments, or content categories such as news and advertising (sponsored content, promotional news). One example is Vice Inc., which provides news as marketing signature, because content is real-time witnessing, repackaged as long-form naturalist documentary.

5) Hybrid news usage patterns: finding out about news and trying to make sense of its truth and trustworthiness.

However, this is not an easy approach, as Oscar Westlund indicated “we often fail to recognize how there are different and heterogeneous news, even within the realm of news within legacy news media, not least to say within startups.”

A final, and probably most important issue, is how can we explain *hybrid news usage patterns*, once again using Costera Meijer’s words, “how people are trying to make sense of truth and trustworthiness in this hybrid news media system”, or whether these patterns “are new, and which one are adaptations of old

ones.” Oscar Westlund recommends a “*New Media & Society* article by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Donald Matheson very different types of epistemologies in liveblogging compared to traditional news journalism so to say.” In this respect, Westlund reminds how “there are different standards, different methods, different routines, quite diverging kinds of knowledge” and distinguish between “either elite sources, networks of sources.”

Oscar Westlund reminds that “in my work with Mats Ekström who I honor as sort of the person who knows most about epistemology and the intersection of news we have tried to understand more about different epistemologies for different kinds of journalism.”

THE QUALITY OF NEWS

A specific question about the nature of news in the online world was placed by Javier Díaz-Noci, mentioning concretely the concept of *commodification of news*, “and the necessity and convenience of introducing some nuances on our perspective on at least some relevant topics”, since he recognized that in his research group “we focus first, but not only, on what media are offering in the first place, as if media were necessarily at the center of the so-called hybrid media system.” One major concern was

that of *information inequality*, because, in Díaz-Noci's opinion, "there are some theories that warn about the possibility of a new informational gap, so news are for many layers of people like pizza, and few others who can pay for good news have privileged access to good information, basic for democracy since are those news and op-ed pieces that help well-informed people to have an opinion on public issues."

Irene Costera Meijer answered that, in her opinion, "from a historical perspective that gap was always there", because, until a couple of decades ago, people needed to pay for their news. Anyway, this is a question that needs to be researched in the next future, to, in Díaz-Noci's opinion, to which extent "digital inequality in access to information, in general terms, can affect the quality of public debate and in the end, on democracy." Tamara Witschge agreed with Oscar Westlund and stressed "the importance of questioning our core assumptions: what does it mean to be informed? What is the role of news in this? What role does news play in democracy?"

Irene Costera Meijer tried to problematize it a little bit more aligned with the findings of her and Tim Groot Kormelink's book³, because they found that "people who are very informed may spend far little time

with news because they are very experienced in what needs a click and what doesn't, while both the concept of clicks and the concept of time spent are often used as self-explaining by news organizations."

Following this reasoning, whilst "news organizations assume, that when people click on something they're interested in it and when they spend more time with it, so from a user-perspective isn't necessarily true." This leads to the concept of *informed citizens*, and "we very much need to know more about when people themselves, the users, feel informed [because] this is about the experience of news", concluded Costera Meijer.

MEDIA LOGICS

Another important concept which appeared during the seminar was that of the *information flow* and of *media logic*. Irene Costera Meijer insisted in this pair of notions, understanding media logics as "or technologies, genres, norms, behaviors or organizational forms", a way which "enables to research actors who create information flows in ways that suit their goals." Once again, the question of power is essential, since it "draws attention to flux in between the interstitial and the liminal and it reveals how older and newer media logics in the field of news and media,

and politics by the way, blend, overlap, intermesh and co-evolve.” Oscar Westlund intervened to explain “the power the platforms exercise is not the same power that the news media normatively want to exercise”, and, regarding research approaches, he remembered that “there are many layers under here that we need to discuss.”

“The power of platforms and of news media is not the same, there are many layers we need to discuss” (Westlund)

There is, in this hybrid media system, a bunch of different actors: “All these actors, the good ones and the bad ones, participate in a struggle to shape public discourse and define the news agenda, and all of these actors make use and operate in a variety of platforms and devices”, explained Costera Meijer. The central question to this respect is, thus, “how and why these actors behave as they do, and to assess the extent to which new norms are being forged and to identify the extent to which these norms are becoming embedded in the routine communication practices.”

This is the reason why Oscar Westlund prefers the kind of approach of those “scholars moving be-

tween journalism studies and political communications in their research outputs or at conferences because only then can they really familiarize with what news is from a journalistic point of view.”

Actually, as posed by Irene Costera Meijer, “there are so many logics and they all interact, the logic of algorithms, and the logic of platforms, and the logic of use”, for instance – and also the logic of politics. Answering the importance given by Richard Rogers to platform’s logic, Costera Meijer insisted in that “the system is not referring to an organization or a platform but it is referring to the hybridity of all these logics, of media logics in themselves”, and she placed the concept of *interacting media logics*. What she considers central is the question of power.

“Journalists not always have the facts at hand, they have an ideology where they strive towards truthfulness” (Westlund)

THE PRODUCER’S PERSPECTIVE

The question may be examined from different point of views. One of them is the one of the producers of news. Some problematic issues were identi-

fied in this seminar, for instance Oscar Westlund indicated that journalists “are a pressured profession where not always they have the facts at hand when they need to publish, but they have an ideology where they strive towards truthfulness.”

The question of revenues sources and paywall implementation was also mentioned in the debate. Linked to it, Javier Díaz-Noci asked whether, as the Spanish research group concluded, in many occasions it happens that “media are not being able of fully stimulating and stirring a good public debate within their own structure, probably because of technical constrains. Debate and discussion happen outside the walls, and now of the paywalls, of media.”

“Platformization is a concept which has an impact on revenue models, production models and on the codes of professionalism”
(Rogers)

Once again, Richard Rogers recommended to deal with the concept of *platformization*, “a term that Anne Helmond first came up with and I think what we’re seeing is, in terms of the revenue models but also in terms of the production models, that

the platform is having a major impact”, because hitherto “a lot of it has to do with the fact that the stories that are produced or the headlines that are written or whatever are rather analytics-driven”, and at the same time there some other factors that have an influence, for instance “the codes or the professionalism.” This could be also a reaction of some many news or media organizations “who are resisting being platformed so to speak.”

Javier Díaz-Noci, in the questions time, made the following reflection: “Media and journalists don’t longer so much go outside the newsroom to search for relevant and unique information, but rather they accept it, and they’ll accept the information and the news that is coming to them in the newsroom. And I should say that platforms haven’t helped to do that because a platform logic is very different... platform logic is that of the dissemination of news and the normative conception of journalism, in my opinion, was that the journalist and the media organization had to try finding some relevant information that was hidden or secret or that the power, the political power, didn’t want to make public, to elaborate it and then to disseminate it.”

THE AUDIENCE AND USERS' PERSPECTIVE

A question introduced by Irene Costera Meijer was that of the audience's perspective, which she defined as "how people make sense of their daily practices as actors in this hybrid media system", so that "to understand how people in this system deal with news which is no longer the prerogative of the large professional news organizations and journalists but involves a diverse array of actors, ranging from influencers to experts to politicians to engaged citizens and to people who bother me the most, the highly-skilled media manipulators or using a term from danah boyd, *conspiracy-makers*, who are creating a breeding for distrust and polarization." In Costera Meijer's opinion, agreeing with danah boyd, "it is important to analyse how such 'fringe groups can pervert the logics of media to spread conspiratorial and hateful messages under their false flag of conservatism'." Richard Rogers talked also about the *fringe groups*.

"How are fringe groups separated from others?

Are they gated fences or rather dotted lines?"

(Witschge)

There was an agreement on this question, for instance Tamara Witschge underline that this is "a very complex and interesting question" several questions: "Where are these boundary lines? Are they dotted lines? Are they gated fences? What's separating these actors from one another? Who is consuming that, and indeed are they amplifying, are they giving it back?". Those fringe groups, certainly, may include *media manipulators*, as Costera Meijer said, those who "spread conspiratorial and hateful messages."

Javier Díaz-Noci asked "to which extent are those engaged users willing to share information and different points of view, and to discuss on them." Oscar Westlund agreed and added that users "have a lot of pressure on them to understand, to make sense of, and act upon what's being presented to them in this more fragmented media landscape where markers of credibility are converging and blurring, who's behind this news, and I think this takes us to questions of media information literacy or news literacy and different efforts to combat fake news but also to understand how news media and fact-checking sites operate." There is some room for hope: "It is reasonable to assume that users will become more critical also to legacy news providers and institutions of journalism. So,

from such a perspective, if median information literacy increases, likely they will also express opinions and be more generally critical.”

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Related to digital social networks the question of the nature of platforms arose again. Oscar Westlund reminded that “the role of platform companies there is important, and I would say they’re more into the walled gardens we saw with the dot com in the end of the 90s insofar that Facebook is a shut system, is not open to everyone, you need to be inside it”, and focused on how those platforms “are the proprietary of their algorithms and their data.” Whilst those platforms are based on the public discourse of connecting people, “we’re treated as data commodities sold to advertisers and other stakeholders”, said Westlund, and at the same time they have the capacity “to change our action and line of thought.” In this respect, Westlund placed the opinion that, to some extent, legacy media pretend the same thing, “we want to change your attitude and your knowledge because we know a lot and we do this for a good democratic purpose” – nevertheless, he recognized that platform companies “perhaps have some other type of interests.” Oscar Westlund ended saying

that “I think this is a key thing for us to zoom in more and to understand more”, even because those platforms present themselves as publishers, but they are rather hosts of information and for this reason they consider that they “should not be hold accountable for the information itself.” Westlund thinks that community principles – such as moderation- and transparency are topics to be investigated.

Tamara Witschge brought the question of public discussion spaces on the Internet, at least from a European perspective, “we need to have a public version of Facebook with a different logic and interests”, and added that “a growing number of public media actors in the Netherlands are reflecting on whether we need to have an alternative to Facebook that is driven by public instead of commercial values.”

In this respect, the role of publicly tax-funded news media services is considered crucial by Westlund – and Witschge provided the example of <https://publicspaces.net>.

Costera Meijer, instead, disagreed, because even those publicly funded news media services are on YouTube, Facebook or Twitter, thus assuming, in her opinion, the logic of platforms. She exposed that “it is more complicated. Even publicly funded news media are looking for (new) users on these platforms and tend to adapt

their content to their different logics., which may not always be beneficial to the quality of the information.”

Irene Costera Meijer, for instance, mentioned “Twitter as a sort of amplifier concept or amplifier mechanism”, how even some legacy media contribute to amplify some messages first launched in Twitter, since media organizations accept that some actors are providing them with news via the social networks, and she mentioned Whitney Phillips as a very interesting author on this topic. Javier Díaz-Noci agreed: “Twitter or Facebook are in the business of dissemination. Some research we’ve done about has shown how some relevant actors, meaning sources and politicians, are using that chambers to amplify ideas and opinion using the form of news.”

Richard Rogers came back to the importance of methods, and specifically referring to Twitter “I have counted about 14 different techniques to study Twitter's API analytics, the various ways to collect data, the types of analysis.” Actually, as Oscar Westlund remembered mentioning an article by Seth Lewis and Logan Molyneux, the research on Twitter and the journalism dates back to 2008.⁴ Moreover, in his opinion “there are so many studies using Twitter because Twitter is publicly available”, so he made a called, aligned with Gerard Goggin and

other scholars, “for a study of more diverse platforms.”

“It is worthy to go beyond Twitter, because it is publicly available, and study more diverse platforms as well” (Rogers)

On the other hand, Rogers posed another very interesting question: “What's the audience? Who's on Twitter? There are so few studies on Twitter demographics”, and insisted on how many studies have found that the Twitter population is not, actually, representative of any international population. Besides, there is not such a typical digital social networks' user. One use is the one that Donald Trump does, to use Twitter as a broadcast medium – or a press release, Irene Costera Meijer added, as metaphors which may conduct our research in different directions. Richard Rogers perceives a switch in the way Twitter is used around 2010, with the appearance of micro-celebrities and a clear visibility labor.

NEWS AND DEMOCRACY

One of the most suggestive conclusions of the seminar is that we should avoid prejudices and assumptions about the importance of news in democracy and revise it at the light of

the new tendencies in research. This is a topic placed by Oscar Westlund, when he said that “we can do much more that complements the surveys when we use trace data and see what type of news are they actually being informed by because ultimately I'd say that the sort of assumption that if you consume news you're an informed citizen leads us very wrong.” A good example is how online media are working with new business models, at least in some countries: “I'm amazed to see like major news companies in Scandinavia doing like a profiling with five segments of their loyal readers, those who pay.” Westlund suggestively described some patterns: “they take those who are the top readers, the news omnivores among those who are already paying, and they take like the top readers and then they say: on average these top readers spend some minutes per day on news. And then they fraction that according to different beats.”

“The sort of assumption that if you consume news you are an informed citizen leads us very wrong”
(Westlund)

One question posed by Javier Díaz-Noci is that “one thing is to be exposed sometimes to incidental news, and to more fragmentation”, and the question of “whether more quantitative of news means necessarily a better chance to build by ourselves a better informed opinion or whether the active role of media that we assume all the time has probably changed in the last few decades.”

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Another interesting concept introduced by Oscar Westlund is the necessity of understanding the media landscape: “On the one hand we have the normative idea of news media while shifting their power, and power is a key concept here, their power to inform for important reasons and for democracy.” He considers important to compare not only the Western media systems, but also, for instance, the Middle East, for instance “the syndicates in Egypt and how they exercise power in their media system.” Apart from legacy media, power is based in many other organizations now.

In this respect, Javier Díaz-Noci wondered “whether information means power and whether power means information.” In his opinion, “in some relevant topics, we saw that

information is in the hands of very few people. Media rarely have an active role in searching for information and points of view, they just accept and reproduced the information produced by some other (relevant, by the way, sources)."

Apart for recommending to focus not exclusively on Twitter ("a highly saturated field") but also on some other social network platforms, decidedly "I would generally advise to do a study where you try to capture a broader spectrum of platforms", Oscar Westlund remarked the importance of "the alternative news media", insisting in the importance on not just concentrating on particular or national cases, but "it needs to be theoretically informed or adding some new layer."

SUMMARIZING IT ALL

Trying to summarize it all, Ana Serrano thinks that we should "not to be so straight to give definitions but instead metaphors, descriptions of what is going on", making "proper descriptions" of what is to be considered news, for instance, and accepting that there is "an intricate nature of continuous evaluation."

Another conclusion is that, alongside with the concept of the hybrid media system, we should consider the concept of platformization as well, understood as an approach to

the logic of platforms. Potentials and opportunities of technology are important, but to focus on professional values is even more crucial.

Another key point is to focus on who is on those platforms, for instance who is on Twitter, and have also an open mind on some other social media.

The question of values is also relevant to our research, linked even with the ones attached to transmedia productions, for instance authenticity and transparency – Serrano insisted.

The necessity of doing more research on the information-misinformation dichotomy was also highlighted in her conclusions by Ana Serrano, "it's quite important for us to understand how news around us are produced, the struggles of power" and "bear in mind the media from outside the legacy media." In this respect, she remembered a sentence by Jeff Jarvis, who said: "The role of a journalist is not to combat misinformation, is to provide quality content." "What he is basically saying is 'don't amplify misinformation by fighting it'", added Irene Costera Meijer.

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- ¹ Richard Rogers, Sabine Niederer. *The Politics of Social Media Manipulation*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020.
- ² Witschge, T.; Anderson, W.W.; Domingo, D.; Hermida, A. "Dealing with the mess (we made): Unraveling hybridity, normativity, and complexity in journalism studies". *Journalism*, 2019, 20(5): 651 –659.
- ³ Costera Meijer, I.; Groot Kormelink, T. *Changing News Use: Unchanged News Experiences? – Disruptions*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2020.
- ⁴ Lewis, S.; Molyneux, L. "A Decade of Research on Social Media and Journalism: Assumptions, Blind Spots, and a Way Forward". *Media and Communication*, 2018, 6(4).

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The *Online News Research Papers* series is devoted to present the insights and results of our research line on digital journalism and online news, as well as in the intellectual property law applied to the digital world.

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**INEQUALITY IN THE
DIGITAL WORLD**