

Mobile Journalism and New Skills in the Journalistic Field

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Introduction

In the early 21st century, the technological evolution of mobile digital devices, such as smartphones, laptops, and tablets, and the expansion of mobile internet networks (3G, 4G and, more recently, 5G) have boosted the development of mobile journalism (mojo), the journalistic technique that uses these tools to produce news content¹. Nowadays, all it takes is a smartphone with internet access to do the same revolutionary work that mobile journalists began doing at the turn of the century. What looked like a scene from science fiction, as defined by Stephen Quinn², has today become a common practice. As a matter of fact, the possibility of doing a live broadcast using only a smartphone with a live streaming app installed, thus dispensing with expensive satellite cars, tripods, broadcast cameras, and cables, is a concrete and effective reality.

The field of journalism also experienced other changes at the turn of the century: newsrooms changed format by prioritizing digital, the speed of news production has intensified, and individualized work became the norm³. The restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis have intensified these movements of change⁴. With the imposition of social distance, tools that enable remote and individual work such as smartphones and laptops have gained more importance in the stages of news production, from production, to editing and distribution⁵.

¹ Canavilhas 2021; López-García et al. 2019; Westlund 2019.

² Quinn 2009, p. 8.

³ Blankenship et al. 2019; Marshall 2008; Moretzsohn 2017.

⁴ Green 2020; Wang 2021.

⁵ Newman 2021.

In some cases, reporters have carried out fieldwork using only mobile devices. Al Jazeera's senior correspondent, Natasha Ghoneim, worked alone with her *mojo* kit, instead of having a team of photographers and producers. According to her, this was the solution to protect herself and the interviewees — although this did not totally eliminate the risk of infection, it certainly minimized it. "Shooting alone was often welcomed by the people I interviewed, many of whom were adamant about limiting exposure to other people, due to fears of the spread of the virus", affirmed Ghoneim⁶.

The central argument of this article is that mobile journalism meets some of the demands of the journalism labour market in the 21st century and has therefore experienced an improvement of skills and tools⁷. Some of these demands are: the individualized work and the accumulation of functions⁸, remote work⁹, web-oriented news production¹⁰, speed in news production and consumption, and the requirement for professionals to be up to date with digital technologies and their constant innovations¹¹. In terms of new skills in the field of journalism, this study will focus on three of them: the agility in news production, the flexibility in working with different formats of news content, as well as faster and easier access to interviewees and remote or crisis locations. These elements will be analyzed more in depth in the following paragraphs.

Agility

Journalists have become "24/7 journalists" as they process the intense flow of news on the Internet. It means that they are required to produce news at any time of the day or week. In 2007, Mark Briggs said that the principal goal of mobile journalists was to "constantly update the stream of intensely local, fresh Web content"¹². Today, all stages of the news production cycle (production, editing, and distribution) can be done with more agility using mobile digital devices, therefore further

⁶ Ghoneim 2021, par. 3.

⁷ Rodrigues et al. 2021.

⁸ Blankenship et al. 2019.

⁹ Newman 2021.

¹⁰ Steensen et al. 2020.

¹¹ Marshall 2008; Perreault et al. 2018.

¹² Briggs 2007, p. 39.

intensifying this strategy of promoting a constant flow of news on the web. The facts or events that used to be investigated in the field and then edited and published in a newsroom can now be edited and published, entirely or in part, in video, text, photo, or audio formats, even before the reporter reaches the newsroom. This advantage is used, for example, in the headline of an advertisement by Shoulderpod, a cell phone accessory company: “Be the first to broadcast a breaking news or event”¹³.

However, the intense flow of news focused on the web and the demand for ever more agility in news production are also targets of criticism in journalism. According to Sylvia Moretzsohn, the “fetishization of speed” means the total surrender of the journalist profession to the “logic of capital in the current times”¹⁴. Although she recognizes that the conditions of news production have always been tied to the rules of the market and the value of its main commodity (news), her critique is about the radicalization of the current flow of news production as well as the consumption and damaging consequences for the quality of this commodity. According to Moretzsohn, the ideals of communicating news to the public instantaneously (“giving the news first hand”) and “the priority commitment to truth — truthful, reliable information” are contradictory values¹⁵.

On the other hand, mobile journalists take the agility of *mojo* as an advantage over other more traditional methods. In addition, smartphones allow people to record or transmit events anytime and anywhere (if they have internet access), including unexpected events, without relying on a field team. Sky News reporter Harriet Hadfield takes advantage of this in delivering live broadcasts on her own by just using her *mojo* kit. She stresses that it takes “practice and skill”¹⁶ to prepare the smartphones, led light, microphone, and the tripod she uses, and to connect the cables — and prides herself on the fact that she organizes the whole setup in a few minutes. Hadfield’s working dynamics are described as follows:

“After arriving at the location, the first thing she does is to check for signal and data. Without these, there is no broadcast. Next, she has to open the Dejero+ app and, shortly after, calls the Sky team to make sure

¹³ *What Is Mobile Journalism?*, 2018.

¹⁴ Moretzsohn 2017, par. 301.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Fairweather 2016, par. 6.

the link is working. She then sets up her kit, assembling the tripod and making any attachments that need to be made. The sound team are called next, ensuring her earpiece works. After doing a speedy sound and framing check, Hadfield is then ready to go live"¹⁷.

Just like Hadfield, mobile journalists have a range of accessories and software that optimize the functionality of their smartphones, and each professional makes up their mojo kit according to their needs. The main items are a stabilizer, microphone, light, and external battery¹⁸. As far as software is concerned, there are many options both to improve the manual control of the device's camera and to edit and finalize the material¹⁹. However, mobile journalists highlight that the number of accessories that make up the mojo kit directly affects their agility when it comes to moving around in the field or recording an unexpected event. In fact, one of the main advantages of working with the mojo kit is that you are faster and more flexible than professionals who carry bulky and heavy equipment. So much so that Tomas Rumes said: "If you waste half an hour putting all the equipment together you lose the advantage of the smartphone"²⁰.

News production has not only become more agile with small, light-weight devices that have easy internet access and a range of functionalities, but it has also become more flexible. Mobile journalists tend to specialize in more than one news format. Let's take a closer look at this feature of mojo.

Flexibility

Today, the "idea that teaching someone how to write a story and conduct an interview is not enough [to train journalists]"²¹ is definitely concrete. New professionals must master a range of expertise and have a new mindset to handle tasks on their own that were previously divided among a team. According to Justin C. Blankenship and Daniel Riffe, this new category of professionals is familiar with multimedia production and "they are regularly expected to gather information,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *What Equipment Do You Need?* 2018; *What Is Mobile Journalism?* 2018.

¹⁹ *APPS for Mobile Photography, Video and Social Media* 2018.

²⁰ Rodrigues et al. 2021, p. 294.

²¹ Blankenship et al. 2019, p. 14.

conduct interviews, write stories, record audio and video elements, and edit it all together into a narrative news story, all by themselves”²².

To do this, mobile journalists rely on a range of functionalities available on the same mobile device that allows them to work with different news formats at once. In Dougal Shaw’s description of his “mojo diet” experience, we can note how the smartphone enables both individual and flexible work²³. It is also apparent that the journalist performed, at the very least, the role of reporter, video journalist, and editor:

“My way of doing a story is I go there, and I record everything on my mobile phone. I record it as a video, but I am also getting audio that way. Then I decide what different platforms I can put that story on, because I am a multi-platform journalist. How is it best going to work? I usually do a radio version from the interview that I have done. Then I’ll do video and if the subject is only worth two minutes, it’s going to work on Facebook. And I make a TV report as well because that can just be two minutes. But if it’s a bit more in-depth, it can be a five- or six-minute YouTube video. Maybe there’s another TV format at the BBC News where they take longer videos. It depends completely on the story”²⁴.

This individualized and multitasking way of working has provoked conflicting views in the journalism field. In an investigation of individualized work on US local television developed by Blankenship et al., some participants have accepted that these changes are “the next step in a rapidly changing technological environment that allows for more flexibility and eliminates unnecessary positions”²⁵. In contrast, others “have argued that, by asking a single person to take on the responsibilities of multiple people, the quality of the journalism produced will inevitably suffer”²⁶.

In one way or another, professionals have sought to update themselves on these new mobile technologies as a “form of job security”²⁷ since the ability to work with these tools and produce news content in different formats has become a recurring requirement in hiring new

²² Ibid, p. 1.

²³ Shaw 2018; Urlbauer 2019.

²⁴ Urlbauer 2019, par. 3.

²⁵ Blankenship et al. 2019, p. 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Perreault et al. 2018, par. 13.

professionals. But journalists are developing these skills for other reasons as well. According to Perreault e Stanfield, the “audience factored in heavily in the integration of mobile journalism skills — in that the use of mobile tools is often in response to audience interest”²⁸. In other words, reaching a wider audience is also a motivation for journalists to keep up with these new technologies and be active on online platforms, producing diverse news content on podcasts and social media such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.

Not surprisingly, in a survey with 53 mobile journalists from 24 different nationalities²⁹, 46 of them answered that they work with more than one type of news format, video being the main one, followed respectively by photo, audio, live broadcast, text, podcast, and 360° videos. Furthermore, the most popular answer that was given 12 times was the one that combined all format options³⁰. The results of this research indicate that mobile journalists have the experience of working with diverse news formats.

Therefore, mobile digital devices do in fact increase the flexibility in the journalists’ daily routine producing different news content and enabling online and individualized work. The following chapter discusses the third characteristic of *mojo*: a different approach to interviews using these devices and news reporting in remote locations or crisis contexts.

Accessibility

Interviews recorded by a single journalist using the *mojo* kit are different to those where the interviewee is faced with a journalism crew and professional filming and lighting equipment. Mobile journalists have noted that interviewees generally feel more comfortable with them and that there is greater emotional accessibility towards interviewees and the added advantage of getting better stories³¹. According to Panu Karhunen, people tend to be more willing to be interviewed with a smartphone because it is a technology that has become very popular and familiar to people. Consequently, *mojo* interviews are also more

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Rodrigues et al. 2021.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ghoneim 2021; Karhunen 2017; Shaw 2018.

intimate³². Moreover, this approach could also be preferable when journalists have to conduct interviews that may embarrass the interviewee. For example, in stories involving homeless people³³ or victims of domestic violence, smartphones facilitated the news report because interviewees "often forgot that there was a camera recording"³⁴ and so felt more comfortable telling their stories.

However, the simplicity and low cost of mojo equipment could also have the opposite effect of discomfort or distrust in the interviewees, especially when these are authorities or celebrities used to big productions. As mentioned by photographer Luisa Dörr, after photographing US personalities such as Hillary Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, and Serena Williams for the *Times* magazine using only an iPhone, "photographing people on the street and my friends with the iPhone is one thing. Photographing powerful, famous women is quite another"³⁵. Certainly, mojo does not have the same prestige that other journalistic approaches have with the public. However, experts have argued that the more professionals use digital mobile devices in their work routine, the more this negative effect tends to diminish³⁶.

In the scheme proposed by Panu Karhunen³⁷, the mojo accessibility is also geographical and physical, in the sense of extending the mobile journalist's access to the most remote locations. The reduced volume and lightweight nature of mobile digital devices, especially smartphones, make them easier to carry and, therefore, easier to work in areas where a crew that carries heavy and bulky equipment would find it difficult to operate. For example, mobile journalist Leonor Suarez did some news reporting inside the silver mines of Potosi in Bolivia and in the caves of Pozu'l Fresno in Spain for RTPA, the public radio and TV company of Asturias³⁸. In these two extreme cases of work in remote locations, a team with two or more members using larger filming equipment would make it difficult for Suárez to get in — whereas, with her mojo kit, she was allowed access by security forces. This fea-

³² Karhunen 2017.

³³ Shaw 2018.

³⁴ Ghoneim 2021, par. 5.

³⁵ Pollack 2017, par. 10.

³⁶ Rodrigues et al. 2021.

³⁷ Karhunen 2017.

³⁸ Suárez 2016.

ture of *mojo* increases the autonomy of mobile journalists because they can work alone and independently.

According to Diana Maccise and Montaser Marai, working with digital mobile devices also “allows them [mobile journalists] to be less noticeable and better able to blend in with the crowd”³⁹. An Al Jazeera journalist used this feature to record the documentary “Syria: Songs of Defiance” with a smartphone. At the time, the government of Bashar al-Assad had banned journalists from the Qatari media company from working in the country. As Maccise and Marai point out: “By using a smartphone, the undercover journalist was able to gather images the world otherwise wouldn’t have been able to see”⁴⁰.

However, the safety of journalists is an urgent issue. The number of journalists’ deaths motivated by retaliation for their work, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), more than doubled from 2019 to 2020⁴¹. Even though mobile journalists can be less noticeable within social manifestations, according to Stephen Quinn, the condition of mobile journalists is one of vulnerability because they almost always work alone and do not have the help of co-workers⁴². Therefore, media companies must make the safety of journalists a priority.

Conclusion

News production in the 21st century requires new skills from journalists making the profession more challenging. In a way, the ever-increasing adoption of mobile digital devices in their daily work routine is a reaction to the labour market’s demands for individualized and multitasking work. On the other hand, these technological tools give journalists some advantages such as agility, flexibility, mobility, and autonomy. The growing importance of digital mobile devices is reflected not only in the development of *mojo* as a journalistic technique but also in the increase of news consumption through these devices⁴³.

³⁹ Maccise et al. 2017, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 9.

⁴¹ Dunham 2020.

⁴² Rodrigues et al. 2021.

⁴³ Newman et al. 2020.

Not surprisingly, traditional media companies such as the BBC and Al Jazeera have encouraged their staff to work with mojo⁴⁴.

It is evident that mobile digital devices allow journalists to work the news production cycle in a much more agile way, so that they can maintain the constant flow of publication and updates on the web, even when on fieldwork: the so-called “24/7 journalist”. The combination of functions within smartphones has also enabled the same mobile journalists to produce a range of diverse news formats. In addition, the reduced size and mobility of these devices and their popularity make it easier to work in more remote locations and make mojo interviews more comfortable for interviewees — which can be an advantage in getting better stories.

Finally, this study understands that the changes in journalism in the 21st century are structural and in-depth and that they respond to the new impositions of the neoliberal labour market. Therefore, they are not the only consequences of the implementation of new technologies in the journalists’ routine. But it understands that some aspects of contemporary journalism, such as individualized and multitasking work, remote work, web-oriented news production, and agility and flexibility in news production, have influenced how journalists have used these tools and led newsrooms to increasingly adopt mojo.

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⁴⁴ Maccise et al. 2017; Shaw 2018.

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