THE INCREASING OVERLAP OF JOURNALISM AND PUBLIC RELATIONS THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Roberto Adriani
Senior Partner Heritage House – PROI Worldwide, Milan, Italy
roberto.adriani@heritage-house.eu

Adjunct Professor of Languages of the Media, University of Milan (Università Statale di Milano), Milan, Italy
roberto.adriani@unimi.it

Abstract

Journalism is facing a new era, in which traditional rules and approaches are changing completely. The traditional distinction between journalism and Public Relations is getting more and more blurred.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate why this distinction is getting blurred and what the threats and opportunities are.

Through a narrative approach, the article analyses three of the main current examples of the overlap of journalism and PR: Social media Journalism, Brand Journalism and Blogging.

For each one of these examples, the paper points out threats and opportunities.

The main threat is that of getting click driven, feeding our audience with sensationalist news and stories. In this case journalism may abdicate its duty to be one of the pillars of public opinion. The fall out of this behavior is basically the loss of credibility.

On the other hand, the main opportunity today is the possibility for journalism to get closer to its audience, bringing it more tailor-made news and stories.

The take away of the article, is that this overlap between journalism and PR rises an issue about transparency.

1. Introduction

Since its first appearance, one of the main roles of the media has been to report news, opinions and thoughts in society, making a crucial contribution to shaping so-called public opinion in the modern era (Vaishnav H. 2019).

Digitalization has profoundly changed the way in which news and opinions circulate, enabling everyone to talk one-to-many and basically allowing people to bypass any kind of media (Alharbi B. 2017 and Ali S. 2017).

Of course this disintermediation takes diverse forms according to the country and its culture, but disintermediation is the common essential element around the world. This change also has a dark side as we know, but it is not the case to talk about the relationship between rising populism and social media here, as this paper has a different focus (Sinaga M. 2015 and Waisbord, S. 2018).

The revolution of disintermediation has had a huge impact on journalism as well as Public Relations (Newman N. Fletcher R. Kalogeropoulos A. Kleis Nielsen R. 2019). For the first time, PR practitioners have a great opportunity to create a direct dialogue between companies and consumers. A real peer to peer conversation takes place, in which consumers can interact directly with companies. At the same time, the media can bring the news directly to its audience, interacting with its readers.

This profound change has blurred the line between journalism and Public Relations. Journalism seems more and more *consumer oriented*, as it is constantly committed to engaging its readers as much as possible. Even the language of journalism is changing, taking PR as a role model.

Of course there are threats and opportunities in this new approach. While engaging readers with interesting news can be acceptable, grabbing their attention with more and more sensational headlines can be dangerous. Pushing journalists to use sensational language is the best way to break the ethical rules of journalism sooner or later. The click bait obsession is affecting journalism too now.

For this reason the objective of the paper is investigating the consequences of this overlap between journalism and Public Relations, in terms of threats and opportunities, for journalists and PR practicioners.

2. Social Media Journalism

The way in which we enjoy the news and its contents in general has changed significantly and it seems destined to evolve even more. Today, the contents are more personalized, accessible 24 hours and social. Social is one of the key words of contemporary society.

From a journalistic point of view, *social* means a Copernican revolution. It means a shift from the traditional top down approach to a peer to peer process, in which the audience is able to comment, reply or even modify the contents. In this way every single user is potentially both a contents creator and a self-publisher (Jian L. Usher N. 2018).

One of the main outcomes of this new media environment is that every user has more influence in the public debate than before. Every user is a link in a global network, connected to everybody else. However, this assumption deserves two important remarks.

First of all, although the web may appear perfectly peer-to-peer, it is not. While all the links are inter-connected, not all of them are influential at the same level and in the same way. Some of them are extremely influential, such as celebrities, politicians, journalists and organizations. The vast majority of users are influential only among their network of relatives, friends and colleagues.

The second remark is that this is not the first time we notice that even a non-celebrity can be influential through his personal and closer network of contacts, as the two-step flow of communication theory showed (Lazarsfeld P.F. Berelson B. Gaudet H. 1944). The big difference today is about technology. Social media platforms have empowered users so much they are able to extend their influence over their personal network of contacts, reaching many more users than ever. Social media platforms have made the two-step flow of communication dramatically stronger and performing (Arrese A., Pérez-Latre F. J. 2017).

Journalists are totally immersed in this new environment, featured by this flow. News is part of an endless, worldwide conversation and even markets are a conversation, as the Cluetrain Manifesto stated (Levine R. Locke C. Searls D. Weinberger D. 1999).

For this reason, journalists are pushed to listen more to the community they broadcast to and they are required to pay attention to what audience is really looking for. From this point of view, social media journalism can be an opportunity, becoming much more accurate in bringing the right news to the right audience. It also means being closer to their readers and improving their fidelity. This opportunity also work for local newspapers - already used to staying close to their geographically localised audience - which may take advantage of this ability. Not to mention that

local newspapers usually have more limited financial resources, so social media platforms can be very useful to enlarge their market place in a very affordable way (Bowd K. 2016).

Another important opportunity is the opportunity publications have to see their articles shared and relaunched by readers, enlarging the sphere in which newspapers are enjoyed by the audience. In this regard, social media has brought the old word of mouth to the nth degree (Lavurusik V. 2010).
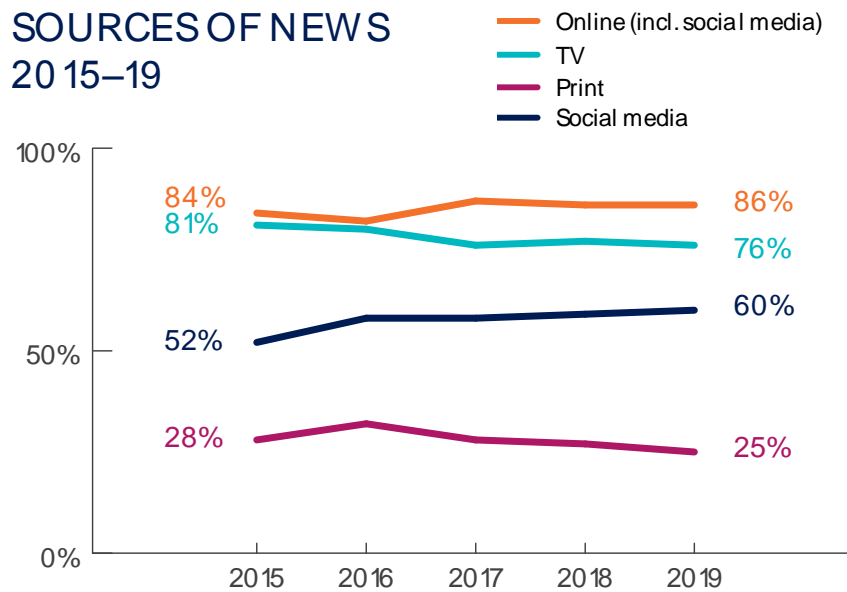

Figure 1: *Source of News 2015-19 (Digital news Report 2019)*

On the other hand, there are some concerns and threats. The way in which social media platforms run (algorithms first of all) may induce journalists to work as Public Relations practitioners more than journalists (Franklin B. 2011). Journalism and PR practice have lots in common and they are used to talking to each other. Consider that one of the most relevant PR practices is feeding the media with press releases and other newsworthy contents. But in spite of all of this, they are two different worlds. The main objective of journalism is to provide independent information, whereas Public Relations is intended to provide contents and news from a specific source which is usually a company or in the largest sense an organization (public institution, party, NGO, etc…). While journalism is grounded on independence, PR practice is grounded on transparency. As long as PR practitioners declare what the source of their information is, they are reliable and honest and the final judgement is in the hands of the media, consumers and public opinion in general.

For this reason, social media can also be a threat to journalism, as it can push journalists to cross the border between journalism and PR. This problem is already clear and the main worldwide publications (FT, The Guardian, Washington Post, CNN, BBC etc…) are already wondering what they can do to prevent this problem.

Sensationalist and untruthful headlines, for instance, are a problem even for mainstream publications. Journalists are evaluated by publishers (therefore their employers) also on the basis of how many *interactions* their articles get, since more interactions mean more advertising and more revenues for the publication. For this reason, journalists are more willing to write *clickbait* oriented pieces, in order to stimulate *likes*, *comments* and *sharing*. The final outcome is that today journalists are more Advertising sensitive than in the past, jeopardizing their independence.

3. Brand Journalism

We said before that thanks to the new and and affordable technologies, every single user is potentially both a contents creator and a self-publisher. This is so true that even companies have started to create contents on their own. This is what is called brand journalism.

Even though there is not a univocal definition of brand journalism, the literature indicates that it is the way in which brand contents are designed and brought using a news media approach. Brand journalism is one of the consequences of the widespread availability of affordable digital technologies (Bull A. 2013).

Brand journalism applies traditional journalistic principles to organizational communication in order to achieve alignment and action behind the organization's purpose, vision, values, strategies, operating principles, and priorities (Kounalakis, M. Banks D. Daus K. 1999).

The debate around the real nature of brand journalism is also affected by the biggest discussion around fake news, post-truth and disinformation (Allcott, H. Gentzkow M. 2017). Scepticism about the power elites, the so-called "establishment", is a common feeling in many countries, especially in the western ones. Populist parties, conspiracy theories and even anti scientific movements are the results of this feeling, fuelled by the rise of social media. The rise of fake news has completely re-framed the media discourse (Flew T. 2019). For this reason, accepting the idea of journalistic contents produced by a company is still controversial (Karlova N.A. Fisher K. E. 2013).

Again, as in the case of the two-step flow of communication and the social media, nothing is completely new also in the case of brand journalism. Even before, corporations have always

invested in internal and external house-organs, corporate newsletters and media partnerships. Also in this case the difference is made by digital technologies and the opportunities they offer.

Thanks to this new media, a company can create and disseminate many more contents today more accurately than before. The fact that these technologies are relatively affordable, allows large companies to hire journalists, or in general people with journalistic skills, to manage brand journalism.

These people have an unusual background for traditional journalism or PR because they have both skills. This is why a new job title has been invented: not PR managers, not journalists but content creators. This more neutral name, compared to journalist, is another consequence of the mental inhibition to accept the idea of a journalist working for a company and not for a newspaper.

Regarding the real effectiveness in terms of marketing, there is not enough literature to establish how brand journalism really works because the landscape is fragmented and full of hybrid experiences. For now, we can only establish that it helps the consumer's engagement.

There are some innovative cases like Red Bull, which transformed its corporate website into an online magazine focused on extreme sports. In other cases, companies have chosen a more affordable way, writing news and stories to be hosted by dedicated websites for brand journalism, such as the case of CMO.com for instance, actually the most popular site.

However, as already mentioned, the literature does not yet offer a unanimous answer about the effectiveness of brand journalism in terms of conversion rate. Conversion rate is, in the marketing jargon, the percentage of those who click on a certain content which has grabbed their attention (an article in this case) and then decided to buy a product or service from the company who posted or sponsored the content.

Apart of the conversion rate, there are in any case some threats and opportunities for journalism and PR, with brand journalism. Bringing journalism best practices into corporations can surely help companies to engage more with consumers and stakeholders and consequently to better understand "real life", making companies more aware about social issues. It can be the first step to make companies more socially responsible and more oriented towards a real Corporate Social Responsibility. CSR is a subject strictly related to the relationship between journalism and PR but it is not the focus of this paper.

The main threat, as is easy to imagine, is about the real independence of the journalists who work for a company and the reliability of the contents they produce. Maybe, the more companies let their journalists be independent and free, the more the contents will be appreciated.

Paradoxically, the secret of reliable brand journalism is about companies acting as traditional publishers.

4. Blogging

The rise of blogs is another consequence of the disruption of the traditional top-down communication model in developed countries (Mallory J. (2003). Blogs are online spaces, usually owned and managed by a single person (but frequently also an organization), which reports news and stories reaching a wide audience. This is the prime example of the opportunity to become self-publishers as described above (Kaukab S. R. Mehrunnisa S. 2019).

In July 1999, Toronto programmer Andrew Smales became the first to launch a "do-it-yourself blog tool" at Pitas.com. Smales was inspired to create an "online diary community." One month later, Evan Williams, Paul Bausch, and Meg Hourihan launched Blogger.com, which quickly became the largest and best-known blogging website.

Smales offers his insight into why blogging has exploded as it has: "people like to peek into others' lives." Browsing someone else's blog provides the "voyeuristic thrill" of reading another's private diary, even if the blog's content is mundane (Woan S. 2008).

The relationship between blogging and journalism is controversial, as many bloggers still do not report news, but only comment on stories reported by professional journalists (Rogers T. 2017).

Most bloggers find topics on social networks (58%), followed by online magazines (53%). However, not all topics derive from the internet: sources for blogs also come from face-to-face communication (51%) and own considerations (50%). Journalistic offline media plays a crucial role for 42% of the respondents, and press releases are of interest to about 41% (Open School of Journalism, 2017).

Table 2: *Blogging and Journalism (Open School of Journalism 2017)*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Blogs are a new/other form or journalism	33.06% 40	40.50% 49	15.70% 19	9.09% 11	1.65% 2	121
Bloggers take over topics, facts, and interpretations from journalists	16.53% 20	30.58% 37	29.75% 36	19.01% 23	4.13% 5	121
Journalists take over topics, facts, and interpretations from bloggers	10.74% 13	23.14% 28	38.84% 47	21.49% 26	5.79% 7	121
Bloggers criticize journalists	9.92%	28.10%	23.97%	29.75%	8.26%	121

		12	34	29	36	10	
Journalists criticize bloggers		9.09%	28.10%	31.40%	23.97%	7.44%	121
		11	34	38	29	9	
Bloggers render better services than journalists		7.44%	11.57%	33.06%	33.88%	14.05%	121
		9	14	40	41	17	
Journalists render better services than bloggers		17.36%	30.58%	35.54%	14.05%	2.48%	121
		21	37	43	17	3	
Bloggers and journalists compete with each other		14.88%	29.75%	23.14%	23.97%	8.26%	121
		18	36	28	29	10	
Bloggers and journalists can/should cooperate		43.80%	42.15%	9.09%	4.13%	0.83%	121
		53	51	11	5	1	

It is reasonable to suppose that online journalism as source of inspiration for bloggers is even higher than 53% if we consider that the 58% (social networks sources) also includes many online newspapers who share their articles through social networks.

In addition to this, bloggers' comments are usually written to spark reactions from the audience, in order to get interactions and engagement. In fact, the same survey reveals that 96% of respondents do blogging in order to improve their professional opportunities (id. p. 5).

Being able to grab the readers' attention and having a high rate of engagement with them, produces advertisement investments and many other ways to get paid to sponsor something. It is the case here to remember the pervasive phenomenon of the so called web influencers (MacKinnon R. 2005).

In this case, the border between journalism and advertising is even more blurred. Therefore, lawmakers and public authorities have started to oblige bloggers to clearly indicate with #ADV all the contents which are paid for by companies. This decision also produced a paradoxical event, when many secondary bloggers started to post a fake #ADV in their posts, pretending to be paid by a company and hoping to attract real companies in that way (Morvillo C. 2019).

The close relationship between blogging and journalists is also proven by several phenomena. First of all, many top journalists are bloggers as well. It is interesting to read their opinions because quite often their blogs are more explicit than their articles written for mainstream media.

Another interesting element is the fact that online newspapers usually host a blog, led by one of their journalists. In general, blogging can be an opportunity to offer a greater stimulus and more points of views for public debate, feeding the right to free speech. However, literature shows that more audience engagement does not necessarily mean more social inclusion and active citizenship.

The emergence of the so-called "fifth estate" (Dutton W.H. 2009) of networked bloggers contributing through alternative media was supposed to herald a wider role for the audience in journalism, articulating important news, generating public debate and facilitating new forms of accountability. However, it is increasingly clear that audience inclusion has not been as participatory as expected. Research into news organisations' use of social media reveals that it does not always provide the heralded opportunities for the audience to become more active in the news-creation process, with limited user participation on websites and users rarely allowed to set the agenda (Wahl-Jorgensen K. 2016).

5. Main Findings

Although the media scenario is constantly changing, literature offers us some findings that can be synthetized as follows.

First of all, the relationship between journalism and PR practices is getting more and more intense and it even suggests an interpenetration in the near future.

We can also say that a blurred line between journalism and PR can foster new opportunities for everybody: journalists, PR practitioners, audience and consumers. On the other hand, there is a risk of a lack of transparency.

While how corporations are using the language of journalism to engage their consumers is clear, how journalists and publishers can really benefit from the digital revolution is still unclear. Further studies may focus on the current trends, try to identify which business models news companies will adopt in the next future, to really leverage on the new digital environment.

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