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PARTICIPATION IN THE HYBRID POLITICAL NEWSMAKING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON JOURNALISM EPISTEMOLOGY**

Abstract

The contemporary hybrid media system has certainly enriched as well as entangled the forms of political participation. Among the wide array of participatory practices, this essay considers specifically those aimed at creating, gathering, spreading and verifying information. It discusses new participatory practices in the process of newsmaking. In the more inclusive contemporary cycles of political information, multiple new media actors, emerging elites and non-elites, can produce news and news outlets which can become “spreadable” in the older and newer media, creating hype around an issue and often influencing journalists’ agendas. Moreover, newer media actors can participate in the circulation of news by endorsing and contesting news items produced by professional and amateur, top-down and bottom-up, mainstream and alternative news media. This article discusses, summarizes and lists those participatory practices; it then analyses them closely in terms of journalism epistemology. Although issues related to epistemology are overwhelmingly important in journalism, particularly in the contemporary hybrid media system, they have been largely neglected in journalism studies. Epistemology in journalism is to be understood as the criterion of validity that enables journalists to distinguish the false from the true, the probable from the actual. The legitimacy of journalism is intimately bound up with claims of knowledge and truth. Hanitzsch (2007) identifies two dimensions of journalism epistemology: the objectivism/subjectivism and the empiricism/analytical approaches. This essay explores theoretically whether and how new forms of creating, gathering, spreading and verifying information by non-elite media actors and newer media elites can modify journalists’ epistemology. The journalists’ attitude to reality is producing contradictory results: it includes new elites in the newsmaking process as well as favoring the diffusion of misinformation.

Keywords

Journalism; epistemology; hybrid media; political communication; participation.

1. HYBRID POLITICAL NEWSMAKING

During the last century, political communication research and journalism studies pointed out the limited power of publics to participate in the production of news. As Blumler and Kavanagh observed in 1999, “until recently, much political communication was a top-down affair”¹. Contemporary broadcast and press media professionals had a strongly

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¹ J.G. Blumler, D. Kavanagh, “The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features”, *Political Communication*, 16, 3 (1999): 209-230 (210).

imbalanced power to define values, formats, norms, and practices of production of political information². In the 20th century, political newsmaking changed to accommodate a single, hegemonic “media logic”³. With the development of the internet, scholarship on political newsmaking is abandoning the idea of an all-encompassing media logic.

Contemporary political communication environments prove to be characterized by a set of “competing and overlapping media logics”, i.e. multiple technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms simultaneously at work within “political information cycles”⁴. Particularly in relation to electoral events, controversies, and political scandals, the news cycles of the beginning of the 21st century have been described as assemblages of elite and non-elite media actors, from professional journalists to bloggers, from activists to wider network publics⁵. These contemporary news assemblages appear more inclusive than those that prevailed during the last century. Non-elite media actors take part in the cycles of political newsmaking at different stages over the course of time; they do so with different roles, through a multifaceted media environment, and following values, interests, and logics that can compete or overlap with those of elite media actors⁶.

Contemporary research on active audiences and protest movements shows an increasing ability of citizens to participate, during and beyond election campaigns and mobilizations, in the production of political content that can become “spreadable”⁷. Scholars observe that the ‘soft elites’ of contemporary movements⁸ exhibit an increasing “media reflexivity”⁹, i.e. an increasing capacity to follow the older media expectations and norms in the online production of their own information in order to reach also traditional media and their publics. More recently, scholarship has turned its attention to the “democratization of manipulation” in the media scenario, to the growing skill of wider online publics in “hacking the attention economy” (for fun, for money, because of an ideological agenda), to the “countless hacker-minded folks” who “have started leveraging a mix of technical and social engineering skills to reconfigure networks of power”¹⁰.

Despite the increasing inclusiveness of the contemporary newsmaking processes, they appear to be still dominated by intra-elite competition, with professional broadcasting and newspaper organizations co-opting newer media logics to reinforce their influence¹¹, and with new, emerging media elites interacting with older elite media actors¹².

In this scenario, the last-century boundaries that identified norms, practices and

² G. Mazzoleni, W. Schulz “‘Mediatization’ of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?”, *Political Communication*, 16, 3 (1999): 247-261.

³ D.L. Altheide, R.P. Snow, *Media Logic*, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979.

⁴ A. Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, Oxford: University Press, Oxford, 2013.

⁵ A. Chadwick, “The Political Information Cycle in a Hybrid News System: The British Prime Minister and the ‘Bullyinggate’ Affair”, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 16, 1 (2011): 3-29.

⁶ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*.

⁷ H. Jenkins, S. Ford, J. Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York: New York University Press, 2013.

⁸ P. Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets. Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, London: Pluto Press, 2012.

⁹ S. Cottle “Reporting Demonstrations: The Changing Media Politics of Dissent”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 10, 3 (2008): 853-872; P. McCurdy, “Theorizing Activists ‘Lay Theories of Media’: A Case Study of the Dissent! Network at the 2005 G8”, *International Journal of Communication*, 5 (2011): 176-187.

¹⁰ d. boyd, “Hacking the Attention Economy”, *Data & Society: Points* (2017), <https://points.datasociety.net/hacking-the-attention-economy-9fa1daca7a37>.

¹¹ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*; J. Van Dijck, T. Poell, “Understanding Social Media Logic”, *Media and Communication*, 1, 1 (2011): 2-14.

¹² Z. Papacharissi, *Affective Publics. Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015; A. Russell, *Journalism as Activism. Recording Media Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.

professions in the process of production of news have become blurred¹³. Trust in professional journalists – as well as trust in other expert intermediaries¹⁴ – is declining in diverse socio-cultural and political-economic contexts¹⁵.

In the “hybrid news systems”¹⁶, the political information cycles consist of both *ratified* political news, produced by professional journalists, *and* a wide range of other products that keep a political news format. The latter are produced by non-elite and new elite media actors, and they are able to influence the production of professionalized news. Concurrently, the “political disinformation cycles” see the participation of elite and non-elite media actors in the chains of production of fake news, following heterogeneous interests and judgments, including judgments about the falseness and truthfulness of news¹⁷.

In this essay, we draw on the multidisciplinary strands of research outlined above – on political communication, journalism studies, active publics, and activist media¹⁸ – to point out a set of participatory practices of non-elite media actors and emerging elite media actors in the process of political news production by professional journalists. We consider non-elite media actors those that do not possess the authority to attract media attention¹⁹ and have little influence on public debate²⁰. Within contemporary media systems, some of these non-elite actors have become influential on journalists’ practices. Within the category of what we call “emerging elite media actors”, the article considers mainly citizens, activists, associations, “loosely-organized” groups²¹, social and protest movements. We consider as “emerging media elites” several (individual and collective) actors that produce their own political news (or news-related content) through an increasing capacity to program the networks²², to reach the attention of professional journalists, and to acquire the authority to attract the attention of online and offline publics.

For analytical reasons, we present these participatory practices in relation to the phases of production of political news: the next section shows how, in the hybrid news systems, non-elite and emerging elite media actors can participate in the processes of creating, gathering, spreading and verifying news by professional journalists. Our analysis then focuses on how these participatory practices influence the practices and role conceptions of those recognized as professional journalists. The set of participatory practices presented will be discussed in terms of journalism epistemology, i.e. the ways

¹³ M. Carlson, S. Lewis, eds., *Boundaries of Journalism. Professionalism, Practices and Participation*, London: Routledge, 2015; H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press, 2006; A. Hermida, N. Thurman, “Clash of Cultures: The Integration of User-Generated Content within Professional Journalistic Frameworks at British Newspaper Websites”, *Journalism Practice*, 2, 3 (2008): 343-356.

¹⁴ G. Boccia Artieri, *Pubblici, cittadini e consumatori nella (social) network society [Publics, Citizens and Consumers in the (Social) Network Society]*, Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2012.

¹⁵ C. Peters, M. Broersma, eds., *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape*, London: Routledge, 2013.

¹⁶ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*

¹⁷ F. Giglietto, L. Iannelli, L. Rossi, A. Valeriani, “Fakes, News and the Election: A New Taxonomy for the Study of Misleading Information within the Hybrid Media System”, paper presented at the annual meeting for the Associazione di Comunicazione Politica, Urbino, December 15-17, 2017, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2878774.

¹⁸ L. Iannelli, *Hybrid Politics. Media and Participation*, London: Sage, 2016.

¹⁹ P. Manning, *News and News Sources: A Critical Introduction*, London: Sage, 2001, 150-151.

²⁰ M. Kleemans, G. Schaap, L. Hermans, “Citizen Sources in the News: Above and Beyond the Vox Pop?” *Journalism*, 18, 4 (2017): 464-481 (471).

²¹ W.L. Bennett, A. Segerberg “Digital Media and the Personalization of Collective Action”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 14, 6 (2011): 770-779 (199).

²² M. Castells, *Communication Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

in which journalists justify their decisions, prove the validity of the facts, and reclaim their jurisdiction in the process of political newsmaking. As Exström states, epistemology refers “to the rules, routines and institutionalized procedures that operate within a social setting and decide the form of the knowledge produced and the knowledge claims expressed”²³.

Within a media environment increasingly concerned by the validity and truthfulness of the news that it produces and distributes – of which concern the growing debate on *fake news* and *post-truth* is the clearest proof – issues related to epistemology are consequently central.

The last section discusses how these participatory practices challenge the practices and the role of traditional intermediaries of political newsmaking, who are also called upon to develop a stronger sense of responsibility in their decisions on what information to gather and select to transform into news.

2. CREATING, GATHERING, SPREADING AND VERIFYING POLITICAL NEWS

Creating

Citizens can act as non-elite *resources* in news production²⁴ by creating their own content independently and directly asking journalists to report it, thus offering a sort of “information subsidy”²⁵. Also emerging media elites can act as *resources* for journalists. This is the case of WikiLeaks, which is a hybridization of investigative and data journalism and online volunteer activism²⁶. It has changed its strategy over time, shifting from providing *occurrences* to packaging a final product. As shown by analysis of the relations between WikiLeaks and professional journalists during the protests against the so-called SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) – a bill intended to expand the ability of US law enforcement to combat online copyright infringement – “the information that has had the most decisive impact has been animated and mediated by professional journalism”²⁷, which had the professional status and institutional resources to give WikiLeaks a decisive role in this political information cycle.

A particular way to gain attention from journalists is to orchestrate participation in spreading contents – through likes, shares, and retweets – and consequently transform them into ‘online events’. Several coordinated groups of people configure themselves as emerging elite media actors able to manipulate the online waves of promotion of particular contents. They deploy diverse techniques and skills to influence data traffic²⁸ according to the algorithmic mechanisms of each platform. The hashtag or meme campaigns on social media platforms – a variant of what we called ‘online events’ – offer interesting examples of (orchestration of) participation in providing *occurrences*

²³ M. Exström, “Epistemologies of TV Journalism: A Theoretical Framework”, *Journalism*, 3, 3 (2003): 259-282 (260).

²⁴ L. Canter, “The Source, the Resource and the Collaborator: The Role of Citizen Journalism in Local UK Newspapers”, *Journalism*, 14, 8 (2013): 1091-1109.

²⁵ Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting*.

²⁶ G. Coleman, “Hacker Politics and Publics”, *Public Culture*, 23, 3 (2011): 511-516.

²⁷ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, 109.

²⁸ J. Weedon, W. Nuland, A. Stamos, *Information Operations and Facebook*, 27th April 2017 version, available online at <https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/facebook-and-information-operations-v1.pdf> (last access 22nd June 2017).

for journalistic news. Those practices *create* events that media can cover. During the 2016 US Presidential Campaign, #TrumpWon was on Twitter's trending topics list the morning after the first presidential debate. Scholars pointed to the presence of a "highly organized group of interconnected accounts, dedicated to making their agenda as visible as possible": "users in these groups not only follow each other at significantly higher rates compared to the general Twitter user, but also clearly know who is a hub –who has the ability to accelerate the flow of information"²⁹.

Gathering

Non-elite and emerging elite media actors can perform the role of *sources* for professional journalists (they are contacted by journalists for information, content or comment on a story) and *collaborators* (they work alongside a journalist to provide complementary coverage of a story)³⁰.

Non-elite actors are most frequently used as sources. Participatory practices like publishing photos, videos, audio files, and texts related to a news event can offer evidence to journalists to tell a news story.

An example of collaboration between journalism and non-elite has undoubtedly been that on UK MPs' expenses³¹. In that situation, journalists encouraged wide collaboration from their readers to gather information and check it. This was a crowd-sourced investigation; the newspaper published on its website thousands of MPs' receipts from the House of Commons, asking members of the public to analyze the data and discovering interesting news within those sources.

In regard to the emerging elite media actors that can suggest sources and evidence to gather to journalists, another example refers to the "news-media vanguards"³² developed in the reporting of political activism, protest and social movements. On observing different cases of mobilizations³³ – from human rights activists in Kenya and Gaza to Spanish Indignados or Occupy Wall Street – we can see an increasing number of professionalized media activists who adopt innovative communication strategies to cover protests, providing suitable evidence to journalists as well. Tools and evidences they provide are largely used by journalists in the process of newsmaking.

Spreading

Contemporary non-elite and emerging elite media actors can participate in the dissemination of political news produced by professional journalists through a diversified range of practices, including retweeting, sharing, liking, and commenting on social media platforms.

The spreading of journalistic news and other contents with a news format, in the

²⁹ J. Borthwick, G. Lotan, "#TrumpWon? Trend vs. Reality. A Deep Dive into the Underlying Data", 2016, <https://medium.com/i-data/trumpwon-trend-vs-reality-16cec3badd60#3hbcise7a>.

³⁰ Canter, *The Source, the Resource and the Collaborator*.

³¹ D. Anne, T. Flew, "The Guardian Reportage of the UKMP Expenses Scandal: a Case Study of Computational Journalism", Communications Policy and Research Forum 2010, Sydney, 15-16 November 2010. Retrieved on 27 April 2017 from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/38701/2/38701.pdf>.

³² Russell, *Journalism as Activism*.

³³ *Ibid.*, 95-102.

hybrid political news systems, involves also the media elites of popular culture: the non-political celebrities that feed infotainment and soft news³⁴. They can be prominent hubs of political newsmaking on both social media and older media, where they maintain a consistent numbers of followers. In the spreading of political news, these media stars can activate a process of “information laundering”³⁵ whereby the second-hand information is ‘cleaned out’: it is disconnected from the sources and enters the mainstream of ‘pop politics’.

Verifying

The verification phase is the one in which journalists determine the reliability of the sources that they are using. This phase usually – and obviously – happens before publication. Nevertheless, today even after publication further verification occurs. Participatory practices such as comments, suggestions, hashtags, remixes can dispute/contest/request clarifications or endorse/reinforce/support the news produced by professional journalists. The dispute or endorsement can refer to the frame and the news values, as well as to the veracity of occurrences, and the credibility of the source. Those practices are usually labelled *media criticism*³⁶, i.e. the social scrutiny of the quality of the news stories that have been produced. Those practices can activate journalistic transparency (journalists are forced to be more open and transparent about their sources) and accountability (journalists provide explanations about the procedure employed to produce news). Moreover, there are more structured initiatives of fact-checking and debunking of news items in which diverse actors (from citizens to emerging elites, from journalists to Facebook itself) can participate. Especially in an environment where *fake news* or *post-truth* are widespread, those initiatives of debunking involve an increasingly wider range of stakeholders and logics.

3. JOURNALISM EPISTEMOLOGY

In light of the foregoing discussion, our assumption is that, within the hybrid news systems, there is a proliferation of news formats – produced by a multitude of actors – that claim for their truthfulness³⁷. Journalists are therefore challenged on their jurisdiction to govern a body of knowledge. They are precisely challenged in their expertise to produce truth information. Moreover, this situation also implies that journalists are not just challenged in the process of creating, gathering and spreading information, but are also willingly or unwillingly involved in the production and distribution of both misinformation and disinformation.

In an environment like this, epistemology in journalism, regarded as the way journalists justify their decisions, especially providing evidence about the validity of the

³⁴ G. Mazzoleni, A. Sfondini, *Politica pop. Da Porta a Porta a L'isola dei famosi [Pop Politics. From Porta a Porta to The Island of Celebrities]*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009.

³⁵ A. Klein, “Slipping Racism into the Mainstream: A Theory of Information Laundering”, *Communication Theory*, 22 (2012): 427-448.

³⁶ D. Domingo, H. Heikkilä, “Media Accountability Practices in Online News Media”, in *The Handbook of Global Online Journalism*, edited by E. Siaperä and A. Veglis, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 272-289.

³⁷ S. Lewis, “The Tension between Professional Control and Open Participation”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 15, 6 (2012): 836-866.

facts they tell, becomes more important. Epistemology in journalism is the criterion of validity that enables journalists to distinguish the false from the true, the probable from the actual³⁸. The more convincing they are in marking this border, the more they are able to reclaim their jurisdiction in newsmaking.

For decades, journalists – particularly in the UK and the US – legitimized their claims for jurisdiction through the norm of objectivity³⁹; in that period journalists' jurisdiction was also recognized because of the absence of any competition in the field of news production. No other actors but journalists worked in that field; they were just pressurized by elite sources in search of a better coverage about themselves.

In order to stop non-professionals encroaching on their field of expertise⁴⁰, journalists have surely reinforced their *epistemological* practices, being more clear about the routines and procedures that they use to produce news⁴¹.

In his analysis of journalism culture, Hanitzsch⁴² identifies two dimensions of journalism epistemology: objectivism and empiricism.

The former dimension is related to how truth can be attained, and it is concerned with an “absolute sense of objectivity rather than with a procedural sense of objectivity as method”⁴³. It regards whether and to what extent there is a correspondence between *what is said* and *what really exists*. When journalists consider this correspondence to be non-existent, it means that they adhere to the view that news is selective and “that human beings perceive reality based on judgments”⁴⁴. The two poles are therefore *objectivity* (reality exists) and *subjectivity* (reality is a sum of subjective reconstructions).

The second dimension, which Hanitzsch calls *empiricism*, “is concerned by how a truth claim is ultimately justified by the journalist”⁴⁵. Journalists can justify truth claims *empirically* (offering evidence, proof of what they talking about) or *analytically* (presenting convincing reasons rather than evidence). In Reich and Glodler's terms⁴⁶, journalists express (even unwillingly) their position on the track that separates *objectivism* from *subjectivism*, and an *empirical* attitude from an *analytical* attitude, deciding ultimately what are facts (and how to use them in news terms).

4. EPISTEMOLOGY OF HYBRID JOURNALISM

Considering the review outlined above, the relation between journalism epistemology and the hybrid media systems mainly regards what is changing in journalists' everyday practices in terms of *objectivism* (how they conceive reality) and *empiricism* (how they provide evidence about their reconstruction). Therefore, in regard to journalistic

³⁸ Ekström, “Epistemologies of TV Journalism: A Theoretical Framework: 259-282.

³⁹ M. Schudson, C.W. Anderson, “Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism”, in *Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by K. Wahl-Jorgensen and T. Hanitzsch, London: Sage, 2009, 88-102.

⁴⁰ A.D. Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

⁴¹ J. Ettema, T. Glasser, “Investigative Journalism and the Moral Order”, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 6 (1989): 1-20.

⁴² T. Hanitzsch, “Deconstructing Journalism Culture: Toward a Universal Theory”, *Communication Theory*, 17, 4 (2007): 367-385.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁴⁶ Y. Godler, Z. Reich, “Journalistic Evidence: Cross-Verification as a Constituent of Mediated Knowledge”, *Journalism*, 18, 5 (2017): 558-574.

routines and procedures, professionals have to decide also which *new* media actors are sufficiently authoritative among the plethora of non-elite and emerging elite actors who inhabit the hybrid media systems, how to use them regarding the news production phases, and what role they can cover (as “sources”, “resources”, “collaborators”, to again use Cantril’s terms).

The most recent literature on journalism epistemology⁴⁷, combined with the types of participatory practices presented above, suggests that there is a great variance in journalistic conceptions about what is a fact, how to show evidence for it, and what actors are authoritative. Below we focus on what appears to be changed.

Creating

In discussing the creation of events that become news, we have referred also to the *information subsidy*. Non-elite actors are generally more likely to be successful and receive coverage from professional journalists⁴⁸. From an epistemological point of view, this procedure (i.e. non-elite actors produce press releases as well as hold press conferences that journalists decide to attend and cover) does not change much in journalists’ practices, except for the fact that new actors tend to be regarded as authoritative.

A more significant change concerns the contemporary emerging media elites that are able to provide a different as well as innovative variety of information subsidy and that have strongly influenced journalists’ practices. The case of WikiLeaks is the most striking: the organization provides evidences and proofs, often offered to journalism in a *big data* form⁴⁹. That content is more likely to drive journalists on the side of *objectivism* (the *reality* is exactly what WikiLeaks provides) and *empiricism* (they try to package those news stories in the most convincing way, using that evidence extensively).

A different, as well as intriguing, case is when a highly-coordinated social media campaign becomes an event to cover. The orchestration of a massive and coordinated endorsement in favor of a single topic, issue or frame, is increasingly gaining the attention of journalists for two reasons. The first one follows the traditional *journalistic logic*: an event that includes an impressive number of people is suitable to be transformed into news⁵⁰. At the same time, these events match one of the *hybrid media logics*, shared by older and newer media, following the “datafication”⁵¹ improved by websites’ metrics. Contents that are massively shared online by non-elite actors attract mass media attention because they enable journalists to enhance their age-old “vox-pop strategy”⁵², filtering out popular topics, prioritizing particular issues and users in their agenda. In this case, for journalists, *reality* appears to be exactly the *objectivized* flow of communication with which they can deal in front of their screens; in other words the fact is exactly what they can see before their eyes. Regarding the first dimension of epistemology in journalism, there is correspondence between what journalists say and what is really happening. Nevertheless, it is difficult to transform into news formats a campaign as such

⁴⁷ Y. Godler, Z. Reich, “News Cultures or “Epistemic Cultures”?, *Journalism*, 18, 5 (2017): 666-681.

⁴⁸ See M. Kleemans, G. Schaap, L. Hermans, “Citizen Sources in the News: Above and Beyond the Vox Pop?”.

⁴⁹ See S. Splendore, “Quantitatively Oriented Forms of Journalism and Their Epistemology”, *Sociology Compass*, 10, 5 (2016): 342-352.

⁵⁰ P. Brighton, D. Foy, *News Values*, London: Sage, 2007.

⁵¹ Van Dijck, Poell, *Understanding Social Media Logic*.

⁵² Altheide, Snow, *Media Logic*.

without a substantive effort of reconstruction, selection and interpretation. Journalists can obviously suggest following the #trumpwon hashtag, providing a large amount of evidence about the story they are telling, but they need also to present a convincing rationale for interpretation of that impressive flow of online actions. From an epistemology perspective this is a remarkable change, especially in certain journalism cultures – particularly those defined by the so-called Mediterranean model⁵³, which is usually regarded as oriented to comment and interpretation rather than being close to facts.

Gathering

Non-elite media actors are most frequently used as sources. From a theoretical perspective, it is difficult to understand what this means in terms of journalists' conceptions of reality, but photos, videos, audio files, and texts gathered from non-elite media actors are evidence that journalists use to prove their reconstructions (this again places journalists closer to the attitude of *empiricism*).

Slightly different is the interpretation of journalists' practices in using more refined media outlets produced by non-elite media actors. As an example consider when news websites (*El Pais* and *The Guardian*) have embedded the streaming of *People Witness*, the network that transmits events, assemblies or actions of the 15M movement⁵⁴. In that case, the change is not merely about journalists' routines and procedures in representing facts, but primarily about which actors journalists consider authoritative. On those occasions, obviously among other factors, the quality of the evidence that those activists provide appears to be decisive for journalists' choices. What is a journalistically interesting fact, how to show evidence for it, and what actors are authoritative to be displayed in news media appear to overlap. The peak of this overlapping is mainly the quality of the media product that those activists are able to provide, which generally fits the standards of the news websites as the result of both the increasing "media-reflexivity" of contemporary activists⁵⁵ and the professionalization of the "vanguards" of media activism⁵⁶ as presented above.

It is important to discuss also another case of media elites now emerging in the hybrid media system, which are able to algorithmically spread content among readers, to hack the attention economy, also gaining journalists' attention, in line with the patterns described above. Several newer media elites produce news (or at least they produce media content using news formats) that is able to achieve great popularity in terms of users, likes, shares, and particularly when they question professional journalists' jurisdiction. Cases such as Bannons' Breitbart News Network or Beppe Grillo's blog can be regarded in this way, but also the smaller, even individual, producers of contents with a political news format that are settling within the hybrid media systems. Within this group of actors, we can include the hoax or conspiracy websites, and the digital domains that adopt names that are too similar to those of the mainstream newspapers.

Professional journalists cannot ignore this production, although the process extends beyond the traditional meaning of *gathering*. What it is happening is that jour-

⁵³ D.C. Hallin, P. Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

⁵⁴ Russell, *Journalism as Activism*.

⁵⁵ Cottle, "Reporting Demonstrations"; Iannelli, *Hybrid Politics*.

⁵⁶ Russell, *Journalism as Activism*.

nalists sometime *gather* some of those *fake news* stories to debunk, contrast and contest them (we detail this practice below). At stake in these practices is jurisdiction, i.e. claiming authority for the construction of news. Nevertheless, it also frequently happens that journalists – given the ability of that content to spread among readers – take it for granted and gather it as a source of information.

Spreading

Practices to spread journalistic news can influence the ways in which media professionals produce political news that is more suited to be spread⁵⁷. What is happening in journalism epistemology here can be defined as a datafication of the public interest. Also traditional media have been careful about the monitoring of media audiences⁵⁸; nevertheless, this process has never been so precise and influential as in the hybrid media systems. Given the hegemonic role of online analytics, journalists are increasingly deciding to report news that they consider to be spreadable, as well as keeping their attention on what they are actually spreading⁵⁹. Here the epistemology issue does not directly concern the fact in itself, but rather the conception of the *public interest*. At the same time, this process reinforces the legitimization of what knowledge journalists consider important to produce. That feedback, particularly social media and websites' comments, also helps journalists to understand how the readers *decode* their news and then helps journalists to take decisions accordingly.

Verifying

From the analytical perspective of journalism epistemology, the phase of ex-post verification is the most interesting for three reasons. First because it implies a high level of interaction between professionals and non-elite or new elite media actors. Secondly because it involves work to identify what is true from what is fake. Thirdly, because it entails the stage where different actors strive to claim their jurisdiction over the production of knowledge on current affairs.

Diverse actors can be called upon to participate in the verification of news through structured projects of debunking. These projects can be led by civic associations and by other resource-poor media actors, but also by journalists. Journalists also involve their publics in debunking “fake news” through specific projects or in relation to specific stories, addressing the shared problem of defining what is fake⁶⁰. This is the case, for example, of the web magazine *Slate*, which, in December 2016, with input from editors, developed a specific tool for internet users to “identify, debunk, and combat” the proliferation of stories “designed to look like news articles but whose key ‘facts’ have been invented by their authors – and persuasively debunked by reputable sources”. Another example of debunking that involves the collaboration between professional journalists and their publics was announced in February 2017 by Jimmy Wales, the co-founder of

⁵⁷ Jenkins, Ford, Green, *Spreadable Media*.

⁵⁸ Van Dijck, Poell, *Understanding Social Media Logic*.

⁵⁹ E.J. Tandoc, “Journalism Is Twerking? How Web Analytics Is Changing the Process of Gatekeeping”, *New Media & Society*, 16, 4 (2014): 559-575.

⁶⁰ Giglietto, Iannelli, Rossi, Valeriani, “Fakes, News and the Election”.

Wikipedia, who wants to create an independent, crowd-funded, site (Wikiritribune) that will bring journalists and volunteer contributors together: volunteers will vet the facts, check the language, and assure the transparency of the sources⁶¹.

In the climate of moral panic generated around “fake news”, Facebook has started various initiatives, including the building of ‘new products to curb the spread of false news and improve information diversity’⁶². In order to add additional perspectives on the news stories that circulate on Facebook, the company has launched a collaboration with third-part fact-checking organizations that will verify the community’s warnings and will decide what users and contents should be “flagged” as controversial⁶³. As well as for the creation, gathering, and spreading of journalistic news, several interest groups (with social bots or coordinated groups of high-skilled persons) can influence these practices of collective verification of journalistic news by planning waves of warnings to Facebook and third-part fact-checkers, on the basis of heterogeneous interests and judgments.

5. PERSPECTIVES ON JOURNALISM EPISTEMOLOGY

By considering the news production phases, the essay has explored forms of creating, gathering, spreading and verifying information enhanced by non-elite media actors and newer media elites within the hybrid media systems. Those practices have been explored in terms of whether or not they can modify journalists’ epistemology, as defined by Hanitzsch⁶⁴, through the two polarized dimensions of objectivism/subjectivism and empiricism/analytical approach.

Hybrid media systems appear to have instilled and spread among journalists an approach closer to an *objective* conception of reality: the occurrences that journalists recount are no longer just *subjective* reconstructions of institutional sources (press releases, press conferences, and so on); they are also what journalists can see and observe in their work often driven by non-elite or emerging elite media.

The reason is eminently organizational: journalists work mostly at their desks: the facts that they can observe on their screens are often exactly those facts that become news. The equivalent of the traditional *legwork* – aimed to go where the action is and occurrences happen – is *using digital media*. By *using digital media* we mean practices like reading a hashtag campaign involving an increasing number of people or selecting what new media elites such as WikiLeaks create and produce, gathering as sources what people all around the world post and share about important events, sometimes creating an event. Those happenings can be regarded as *objective reality* developing before the journalists’ eyes.

With regard to the second dimension of epistemology (empiricism vs. analytical approach), the attempt by journalists to provide unambiguous evidence for what they report – through crowd-sourced data, photos, as well as mere screenshots of different tweets – move them towards empiricism. This appears to be a change, considering that

⁶¹ <http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/04/wikipedia-founder-jimmy-wales-launches-wikiritribune-news-by-the-people-and-for-the-people/> (last access 30 April 2017).

⁶² Weedon, Nuland, Stamos, *Information Operations and Facebook*.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ T. Hanitzsch, “Deconstructing Journalism Culture: Toward a Universal Theory”, *Communication Theory*, 17, 4 (2007): 367-385.

journalism studies have usually considered journalists as inclined to keep a procedural sense of reality and several journalism cultures – especially within the Mediterranean area – as more inclined to an analytical approach (rather than that based on evidence).

Another key feature of contemporary journalism – the importance of spreading news – is exerting effects in terms of epistemology. As discussed in this paper, the algorithmic culture⁶⁵ is encouraging a datafication of the public interest. The chances for news produced by non-elite or emerging elite media actors to enter the process of journalistic news production are greater than in the past. These chances are greater also for so-called “fake news”. In the hybrid cycles of (mis)information, hoaxes, conspiracy theories, non-verified contents, and false photos are things that happen in front of journalists’ eyes and can be reported by journalists with some sort of evidence. The journalistic practices that follow the algorithmic turn, together with the conception of reality as what is happening in front of the journalists’ eyes while they stare at their screens, and the habit of using digital evidence, are reinforcing the diffusion of fake news through the hybrid media systems.

This contemporary journalists’ attitude toward reality is producing contradictory results in terms of jurisdiction in news production. On the one hand, journalists make efforts to provide as much evidence as possible from their screens; on the other hand, the evidence is ‘certified’ by the online analytics, entering the journalistic news because of its online popularity⁶⁶. Even when media professionals try to debunk “fake news” produced outside the traditional journalistic field, they attribute resonance and legitimization to a plethora of media actors among whose aims is also to dispute journalists’ jurisdiction. The growth of collaborative projects of verification and debunking, involving journalists and their publics, is a trend that counter-balances the spread of fake news. Nevertheless, journalists lose a part of their jurisdiction even when they rely on non-elite media actors to ask for evidence or help to debunk fake news.

The ways in which journalists reclaim their jurisdiction in the process of political newsmaking, how they justify their decisions, how they prove the validity of facts, have always been central issues for the quality of democracy. In the contemporary media environments, increasingly concerned with the validity and truthfulness of the news, and in the more general context of depreciation of expert intermediaries⁶⁷, issues related to journalism epistemology become urgent. Further research is necessary to understand what participatory practices and what media actors have more power to influence journalists’ epistemologies and what effects develop in the concrete, diverse democratic societies, journalistic cultures, and hybrid media systems.

⁶⁵ T. Striphas, “Algorithmic Culture”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18, 4-5 (2015): 395-412.

⁶⁶ Giglietto, Iannelli, Rossi, Valeriani, “Fakes, News and the Election”.

⁶⁷ Boccia Artieri, *Pubblici, cittadini e consumatori nella (social) network society*.