

Why should we expect worlds to collide? - Exploratory reflections departing from a case study analysis of “*Jornal de Notícias*” (Portugal)

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Introduction

As 2008 came to a close the avalanche of discourse on the demise of newspapers (and traditional media in general) grew to such an extent that consideration of any alternative scenario became almost difficult to utter. Academic articles, conferences, newspaper and magazine features were abundantly produced on thematic variations which went from ‘The End of Newspapers’ to ‘The End of Journalism’ (testing these expressions in a popular search engine we can easily get in excess of 23 thousand references for the first one and over 290 thousand references for the second one and there is even a dedicated ‘Newspaper Death Watch’ site with constant updates). The broad assumption of this production – particularly the one that identifies one possibility with the other – revolves around notions like the collapse of rigid business models, the breakdown of producer/user fidelity/trust, and the failings of a self-centred and entrenched professional (the journalist). The present seems to be enunciated as a ‘the end of days’ period, with images of irrevocable perdition funnelling our reasoning towards one single possible outcome – the imperious necessity of complete reinvention, not necessarily with the same agents¹.

It would be both difficult and unwise to dismiss the signs of profound change but it is our contention that precisely at a period when the ‘user’ seems to have acquired enhanced relevance – the ‘long-tails-of-convergence-culture-in-an-internet-galaxy’, as we have been told – attempts at generalizations might lead us to ‘false anticipations’ (in a process which has a number of similarities with

¹ As a mere example we could mention Jarvis, Jeff (07-04-2009). “The speech the NAA should hear”, BuzzMachine. Available at <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2009/04/07/the-speech-the-naa-should-hear/> (access on 07-04-2009).

the 'three utopias' one, as described by Domingo, 2006). Business models are not collapsing at a simultaneous pace nor are they collapsing for the same reasons (in fact, collapse might even be an appropriate description only if applied to particular products in a limited number of media spheres); the breakdown of producer/user trust can only marginally be attributed to the emergence of the internet and its personal publication/networking capabilities (it has far broader, older, and certainly also particular justifications); and the image of a self-centred and averse to change professional could easily be more in tune with a 1970's stereotype than with reality itself.

These caveats notwithstanding it should also be noted that extrapolations from anglo-centered examples must in this particular area be made with extreme caution. As such, the notion that media production and journalism as a profession in particular are in a 'state of flux' (Ruellan, 1992; Preston, 2009) seems to be a much more helpful description of current events; it both eschews the side-effects of most of the noise that surrounds this subject and helps us to focus on the complexities of reality and on its multiple effective challenges. Having already stated that our intention is not to refute or diminish the scope and breadth of ongoing transformations we would tend to consider that substantial gains are to be made when the observation is primarily focused on the hub of change – the newsroom. Following seminal work by Gans (1980) and more online oriented studies by Boczkowski (2004), Domingo (2006), and Paterson and Domingo (2008) this paper emerges from an ongoing ethnographic research at "*Jornal de Notícias*", Portugal's second widest audience daily newspaper (average 2008 circulation of 101.000)². This research started in November 2007 and data has been gathered from a series of processes: a journalist's questionnaire, a users questionnaire (accessed through the site), a series of semi-structured interviews (journalists and editors of the online newsroom and editors of the paper newsroom), and selected interviews with board members, and the heads of technical and e-business divisions. Direct newsroom observation took place from May 2008 to July 2008 and also in December 2008. Complementary research data was also gathered during the same period.

² Data from Associação Portuguesa para o Controlo de Tiragem e Circulação (APCT), available from http://www.apct.pt/homepage_00.aspx (access on 07-04-2009)

JN online's second life

Jornal de Notícias (JN) was the first Portuguese newspaper to have a web presence. The online edition was launched on the 26th July 1995 and resulted from the efforts of a very small team of computer engineers and journalists. Despite its initial impact – namely near the Portuguese speaking communities in Northern America and Europe (Bastos, 2000: 173) – the fact is that during the following years the project never gained enough momentum to overcome the sholverware phase. Two journalists had the task to carry newspaper content from one CMS to another (via Wordpad) whilst making an effort to update newly created user-oriented areas (Molinos, 2006).

From 2000 onwards two distinctive realities would combine to hinder any significant change: the contraction effects of the dot.com bubble vaporisation and the acquisition of *Jornal de Notícias* (until then part of the Lusomundo group) by the telecommunications giant, Portugal Telecom (PT) (in a deal which could be seen as the Portuguese equivalent of the AOL-Time Warner venture). PT clearly invested in aggregator portals – like zip.net and sapo.pt – and placed established content brands under their control. When *Controlinveste* acquired JN in 2005 its online operation was bound to sapo.pt by an unfavourable long term deal. The renegotiation of that precise deal, in 2007, paved the way for more ambitious plans. During a meeting of *Controlinveste*'s top editorial and business managers, in November 2007, the head of the group, Joaquim Oliveira, announced the intention to present new sites for *Jornal de Notícias*, *Diário de Notícias*, and TSF (news radio station) during the first semester of 2008.

Internally, the renovation process had already been set in motion (last quarter of 2007) and involved the intention to initiate a broader transformation, as the executive editor³, Alfredo Leite, mentioned during a January 2008 interview: “we need to change the whole editorial structure; I cannot have work shifts from 20 years ago providing for the demands of three distinct products – JN, JN

³ In the current structure of JN the managing-editor is the person in charge of the online venture's editorial output.

online, and Global⁴”. His intentions, as expressed in an internal document to the group’s board, were to be given the capacity to change practices in order to achieve changes in content and form. Nevertheless, those changes were not meant to extend to full newsroom integration: “that particular solution could make a newsroom like this one unmanageable; rather than having everyone working for both paper and online I would prefer to have everyone more alert to the possibilities; that would be an important step forward”⁵.

Having opted for this incremental strategy – which we could perceive as somewhat preceding the four dimensions of convergence that Domingo et al. proposed when analysing Spanish examples (2007) – it followed that discussions on the editorial objectives, structure and visual look of the new site – commissioned to an external designer - were mainly conducted between the executive editor, senior editors, the online editor and sub-editor, some section editors, and the art director (on a different level, discussions occurred with *Controlinveste*’s head of e-business and multimedia, with the externally commissioned implementation company, and naturally with the group’s administration). By May 2008 the offline new site was already being consistently updated and on the last day of that month it went online (two days shy of JN’s 120th anniversary).

The new site would no longer publish all the content of the day’s newspaper and it would lose its forums. In terms of thematic distribution it would also not adopt the same structure as the newspaper, with the most striking difference being the inclusion of Porto’s metropolitan coverage⁶ under the broader ‘País’ (Country) heading. Three new user geared spaces would appear – ‘Comunidade’ (Community), ‘Blogues’ (Blogs) and ‘Cidadão Repórter’ (Citizen Reporter)⁷ – and a Multimedia area (video, photo-galleries, infographics, audio, and special features) would also be created.

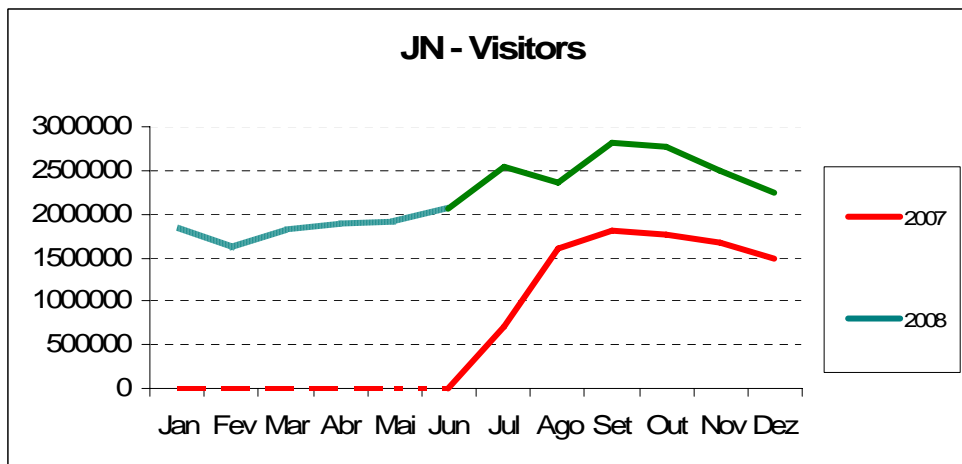
⁴ Global is a free daily newspaper held by *Controlinveste*, with contents partially provided for by three of the groups newspapers: JN, DN, and O Jogo. It started out in September 2007 and by the end of 2008 it was the highest circulation free daily in Portugal (around 200.000, according to the APCT), distributed in six major cities.

⁵ Interview at JN’s newsroom on 24-01-2008.

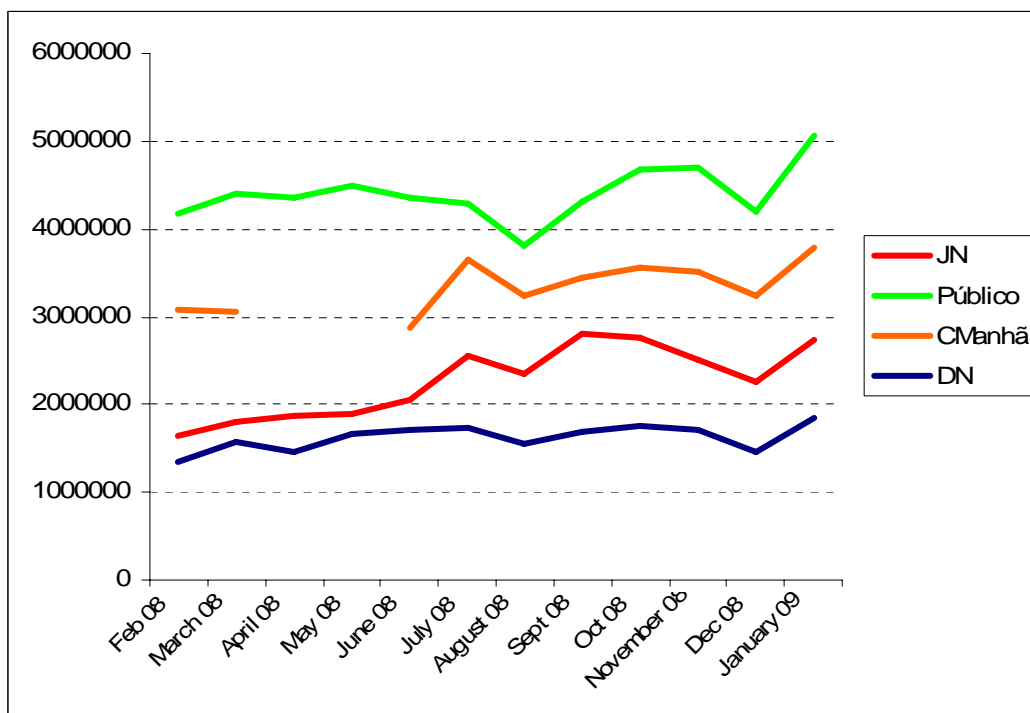
⁶ *Jornal de Notícias* is based in Porto and both the 1970’s substantial increase in popularity and its maintenance throughout the years hence has often been attributed to the investment in a distinctive coverage of metropolitan related issues (Sousa, 1989).

⁷ The unclear distinction between the specific purposes of ‘Comunidade’ and ‘Cidadão Repórter’ would be addressed later in 2008 by the disappearance of ‘Comunidade’ (it’s contents having been merged with those of ‘Cidadão Repórter’).

Figures from Marktest's Netscope⁸ show a significant growth in visits from June 2008; whilst in 2007 and early 2008 the average was circa 1.5 million per month that figure increased by almost a million in the last semester of the year.



If we make a comparative observation between the four major national daily generalist newspapers it becomes clear that JN was the only one to register such a significant increase, although relative positions have not changed as a result (Público has reached 5 million visits in January 2009 and JN has recently announced that it reached 3 million in March 2009)⁹.



⁸ A site-centric audience measurement tool resulting from a partnership between Marktest and Weborama. The most relevant national media groups have gradually integrated the observed site listings; the inexistence of a Portuguese equivalent to the British ABCe makes this the most consensually used data by all those involved (available at: <http://www.netscope.marktest.pt/>).

⁹ http://jn.sapo.pt/paginainicial/interior.aspx?content_id=1187954

During the last semester of 2008 JN online produced 278 videos, 29 infographies, 305 photo-galleries, 59 audios, and 11 multimedia special features (one of them got the first prize in 'Multimedia reporting' at the national cyber-journalism awards)¹⁰. By the end of October more than one thousand user blogs had already been created.

From a business perspective, the late stages of the development of the site coincided with the growth of the group's e-business and multimedia division (from a two person unit into a 12 person one during 2008). Its cross-brand nature and the intention to broaden revenue sources beyond the bounds of the ongoing deal with sapo.pt became very explicit in at least three relevant operations: 1) in September 2008 *Controlinveste* entered a deal with the Swedish company PowerChallenge for the inclusion of two soccer related games on its sites (Power Soccer and Manager Zone, both with recorded numbers of users around the 20 thousand mark a month later and with two ingame advertising deals)¹¹; 2) in February 2009 *Controlinveste* entered a partnership with four other national media groups (MediaCapital, Cofina, Impresa, and SonaeCom) and Portugal Telecom (via Sapo) to use a shared contextual advertising platform in order to counter Google (the platform allows for personalisation according to the publisher and, according to the head of the e-business division, Nuno Ribeiro, it brings in a higher degree of transparency: "we never knew what were Google's revenues and how it shared them")¹²; 3) from March 2009 *Controlinveste* became the exclusive commercial representative of CBS Interactive for Portugal¹³.

As revealed by the head of the e-business division, JN online's second semester revenue represented an increase of 53 per cent over the first one. Furthermore, the PowerChallenge deal alone (with the ingaming sponsorships) represented more than the whole JN online revenue for 2008.

During an interview in December 2008, board of Administration member Gabino Oliveira would state: "a substantial part of our future endeavours will have to

¹⁰ The awards: <http://obciber.wordpress.com/premios/>. The prized work: http://jn.sapo.pt/Reportagens/Interior.aspx?content_id=963772.

¹¹ http://www.controlinveste.pt/Pt/Imprensa/PRInterior.aspx?content_id=1050167 (accessed on 07-04-2009)

¹² <http://www.meiosepublicidade.pt/2009/02/13/grupos-de-media-criam-rede-concorrente-ao-google/> (accessed on 13-02-2009)

¹³ http://www.controlinveste.pt/Pt/Imprensa/PRInterior.aspx?content_id=1158978 (accessed on 07-04-2009)

expand beyond core journalism activities”. During the same conversation he would estimated that a good e-business return in five years time would be “something like 15 per cent of total revenue”¹⁴.

The changing newsroom

At the end of 2007 the online newsroom had three journalists (one editor and one journalist at the main newsroom in Porto and one journalist in Lisbon); in January 2008 one journalist was transferred from the main newsroom metro section to the online edition and one other was hired to the sub-editor position. In June 2008 two other journalists (former interns) had joined the group which also included the increasingly closer cooperation of a recently hired multimedia trained photo-journalist. It should be noted that university students on curricular internships – at an approximate pace of two per trimester – also made a relevant contribution to the online newsroom output.

Prior to the May 2008 changes JN’s online newsroom was located in a cramped room adjacent to the executive editor’s office and for a period the space was shared with the main newsroom’s agenda service. During the summer of 2008 the newsroom changed to what used to be the editors meeting room, a glass walled space (at least twice the size of the previous one) at one of the ends of the main newsroom. This change had, as we shall discuss, functional and technical reasons but it undoubtedly had a symbolic value too. In his “Imagined Communities”, Benedict Anderson told us that the sense of belonging to a particular group is also reinforced by visions of geography – ‘where we are’ vs. ‘where the others are’ (1991). The online newsroom was, in this framework of an imagined collective awareness, where it had never been before; highly visible to all, transparent, and seemingly closer to the heart of the newsroom. This geographic ‘upgrade’ occurred within months of a significant change in the main newsroom which would cut across what Salaverría and Negredo would describe as one of the main traits of a century-old process (2008: 9): the division of the newsroom into sections corresponding to the thematic areas covered by the publication. A new section called ‘*Actualidade*’ was created in

¹⁴ Interview in 03-12-2008.

late May 2008, and it physically occupied the centre of the newsroom; comprising 14 journalists and three editors this section was to be bound to no particular subject – its purpose rather being to follow daily developing stories. Its internal organisation was also atypical – a longer active day (starting at 9h00) with three working shifts instead of the more traditional two lead by three shift editors in charge of organising production, liaising with the online edition and coordinating further work on developing issues with the other section editors. Being part of the broader transformation plan put forward by the executive editor this action was linked to a series of other developments: the main planning meeting started to take place at 18h30 on the day before printing (and it started to include the online editor), one senior editor would start to arrive earlier than before (at 10h00) to jointly prepare with this new newsdesk editor the 11h00 follow-up editorial meeting. The philosophy was quite clear to Alfredo Leite – “we need the necessary flexibility to be closer to unfolding events and to be able to prepare work for both the online and the paper editions”¹⁵.

The combined effect of all these changes contributed to the beginning of a shift in both the perception of time and the ‘deadline rationale’ although discourse might not have always been up to par with effective action. If, as one editor put it, the notion that the newsroom was now beginning to “edge away from the production flow of a newspaper into what I would personally identify as ‘closer to a news radio’ operation”, the fact remained that the idea of no longer having a single conveyer belt production line (as Singer would put it, 2008:64) no longer converging to a single point in time appeared – under the chosen strategy of incremental rather than swift and comprehensive change – to rely heavily on voluntary individual actions, and could thus be characterised as a succession of bursts rather than as a clear new impulse. In fairness it should be mentioned that ‘change initiatives’ in general are seldom welcomed by newsrooms as a whole (Gade, 2004) and, as Deuze puts it: “journalists tend to be cautious and sceptical towards changes in the institutional and organizational arrangements of their work” (often as the accumulated result of bad experiences with top-down management decisions) (2008: 8). Negative comments soon arose – like the naming of ‘*Actualidade*’ as the ‘mass grave’ (a

¹⁵ Interview on 13-06-2008.

clear allusion to an identity-less place where old and new, experienced and inexperienced are bundled together) which lead a senior editor to say: “it is impossible to please them all; for some there is always too much decision making going on. Just imagine what this would be like if we had opted for a complete transformation”. Data from a questionnaire distributed to all the journalists based at JN’s central building, in Porto, in late November 2007¹⁶ would tell us that, at that particular time (some six months prior to the above mentioned alterations), the newsroom was loosely divided into thirds as to the predisposition to work on a new shift basis: 30,76 per cent of respondents answered ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’, 29,22 per cent answered ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’, and 29,23 per cent choose ‘neither agree nor disagree’ (interestingly the two opposite ‘strong’s’ recorded very similar results: ‘disagree’ – 16,92 per cent; ‘agree’ – 15,38 per cent).

The changed perception of time was accompanied inside and outside the online newsroom’s glass walls by a change in the notion of what should constitute the ‘designated’ daily workload and what would be expected of a journalist on assignment. The job definition of online journalist prior to 2008 would entail the ability to adapt to two different publishing platforms, average writing skills (to adapt agency produced texts for the ‘breaking news’ area and in-house text production to the online platform), and sensible communication skills to manage users forums. Although journalists involved in such tasks at the time had a more accomplished set of personal skills those were not directly relevant to the online edition output. By comparison, an online journalist at JN online today still has to manage two different publishing platforms but he/she has to perform a number of additional tasks. According to an internal document¹⁷ the workflow demands vary depending on the specific shift but the main idea can be given by choosing the first of three¹⁸: press review (the morning printed press and a round up of Portuguese and foreign online editions; user produced content management (comments, e-mails, blog posts, ‘citizen reporter’ contributions; liaison with the newsroom agenda and with the editor of ‘*Actualidade*’; production/edition of

¹⁶ The universe was based on data available at JN’s site on 21-11-2007. From a universe of 86 contacted journalists 65 questionnaires were returned.

¹⁷ JN Online Workflow (09-05-2008)

¹⁸ In paper, JN online is updated from 9h00 until 24h00 although in a considerable number of occasions, during our observation periods, work went on until 2h00 or 3h00 the following day. In fact, regardless of the shift more often than not online journalists exceeded the pre-determined 7 hour daily work period.

new/ongoing multimedia works (from agency based photo-galleries to pre-determined autonomous work), and, naturally, breaking news (permanent attention to news agencies and to a few selected national and international online editions according to established thematic priorities: 1- Police, 2 - Sports, 3 – Country, 4 – People and Technology). The same journalist is expected to be able to handle voice and image recording equipment (including Nokia N95's which are normally used for breaking news), and to perform basic tasks with dedicated sound, photo, and video processing software.

Despite not having conducted ourselves action categorisation data collection we would still venture agreement with Quandt's observation that the average duration of each is significantly lower than in the paper newsroom¹⁹. "One of our problems is that we have so many windows open in our computer screens that sometimes processing gets much slower; other times the damn thing just crashes on us", commented one online journalist during an informal conversation precisely after his computer had crashed. For a particular breaking news story a journalist could be transferring the raw material from the agency into the text editor, checking what other sites might be saying, and discussing via MSN and/or mobile phone the relevance of the story, its possible homepage placement, and follow-up ideas with the editor in charge or – given the case – with a journalist on assignment (as has recently been the case with a story on a university lockdown by students). Although this description can also be applied to the work of a paper newsroom journalist we would venture the notion that those would be peak moments, which would happen momentarily during the normal workday. For an online journalist those tend to be more frequent occurrences and furthermore the result of ongoing endeavours is permanently on display to be scrutinised.

This leads us to the third relevant shift (after perception of time and daily workload) – the enhanced awareness of user's presence which is felt directly through UGC but also through instantaneous permanent access to detailed statistics.

In the former online presence user contact was mostly established through

¹⁹ In Paterson, C. and Domingo, D. (2008: 86) observed German online newsrooms and concluded that despite average 8,5 hours workdays journalists would spend no more than approximately 2 minutes on each action (in contrast with studies which have calculated an average of 4,8 minutes for radio journalism).

generalist moderated forums. With the new online venture dedicated spaces for both users self and moderated publication existed from the onset. Comments were, on the other hand, not conceived as a feature at the beginning but were gradually opened up on most news items (unlike other publications JN online opted for journalist moderation). Some three months after the start of the new project, accepted comments had passed 10 thousand and by the end of 2008 they were more than 22 thousand.

A recent study of UGC status in online newspapers of eight countries shows that despite the maintenance of a national poor record on interactivity, *Jornal de Notícias* is among those offering most '2.0 tools by paper' (Garcia de Torres, 2009: 24).

As mentioned, detailed statistics are the other main identifiable trait of the increased awareness of user's presence. We have been able to notice that the web-based interface Marktest offers to the Netscope listed publications – which contains not only instantaneous raw data (micro level) but also progressive time scale comparisons (macro level) – started to be used by the online editor but the practice soon spread to all other journalists. The browser window remained open and periodically someone would say aloud: "we have reached 300/350 thousand page views". This heightened sensibility and particularly the accumulated knowledge does naturally play a role in editorial decisions; not decisive, journalists would say, but still relevant.

Discussion

As we have mentioned earlier, the ongoing debate on the demise of newspapers appears to be anchored on three interconnected main factors: the collapse of rigid business models, the breakdown of producer/user fidelity/trust, and the failings of a self-centred and entrenched professional (the journalist). As to the rigidity of business models, in a simple but powerful blog post entitled 'Wanted: Perspective' (12-03-2009) Mark Hamilton would say: "The crisis for big newspaper chains is much more related to the mountains of debt than it is the absence of advertising. If anything is failing, it is a business model based on aggregating titles by borrowing money. (...) All newspapers are dying, but they

are nowhere near dead. They will eventually die — as newsprint-based publications — and be replaced by something else that relies on journalists but that day is a long way off”. Robert G. Picard would further state the usefulness of a macro observation by indicating that there are still about 18 to 20 per cent more journalists in US newspapers than there were in 1977 and that numbers alone only tell part of the story; specific business models are at considerably greater risk than others simply because they have made disputable options: “(journalists) spend their time doing celebrity, food, automobile, and entertainment stories. (...) 20 percent or fewer of the journalists in newsrooms actually produce the kind of news that most people are concerned about losing”. Even the business reaction to the revenue crises deserves further inquiry: “According to ASNE statistics the number of newsroom supervisors has declined only seven tenths of one percent since 2000; copy editors 1 percent, photographers and artists 10 percent, and reporters 11 percent. There may be reasonable rationales for that, but the numbers seem unusually lopsided to me. If there are fewer reporters and photographers to be supervised and edited, one would expect that fewer editors and supervisors would be required and warranted”(18-03-2009).

Picard’s observations could be somewhat seasoned by the simple fact that he lives in Europe where the sense of a newspaper crises is quite widespread but where success examples exist (Pfanner, 28-03-2009) and where some countries actively engage in debates on how to mitigate its effects. For instance, the French Senate’s report on the press crisis would, in October 2007, clearly put forward a combined plan to support the newspapers web presence, to promote readership trust and fidelity, and significantly to enhance journalists legal guarantees (namely derived from ethical norms).

Our case study, *Jornal de Notícias*, presented us the combination of an incremental editorial convergence plan with a cross-brand group centred e-business strategy. Although some potential conflicts might arise out of these different approaches (episodes have been noted during our observations) they still project an image of flexibility. At the newsroom level plans are being devised to promote the refreshment of the site, the integration of new user geared functionalities, and the creation of semi-autonomous thematic micro-sites whilst at the e-business end efforts will be made to further promote cross-

product added value and to capture income from non-news related sites (the revitalisation of *Controlinveste's* small add web portal, for instance).

As to the breakdown of producer/user fidelity/trust we would tend to consider it more as an effect of the social appropriation of new technologies than as a newspaper (or even journalism) centred problem. Whether we consider this phenomenon a decisive catalyst for major changes in productive processes and social relationships (Castells, 2004; Weinberger, 2002) or we see it more as discursively hyper-valued continuity (Garnham, 1998) the fact remains that a sense of loss of rigidity is present – in processes, attitudes, and relative social positioning. As such we would tend to share Qvortrup's notion of social hyper-complexity, no longer organised around universal observation points but with a more polycentric and poly contextual nature (2003).

Newspapers and journalists, as many other businesses and activities, are part and parcel of that intricate (often perceived as chaotic) reality and must now live – as Singer puts it – in times where “no single message is discrete”. The role of gatekeeper remains viable though in a different form, “one that has more to do with sense-making – with helping people understand, interpret, and use information, rather than merely giving them access to it (2008: 62-65).

Our case – for all its limitations – provides us with an insight into this new developing relation between newsroom and user, whereby fidelity results from much more than just providing a news feed service: UGC spaces, the promotion of event or theme centred micro-sites, the production of sense-making materials (multimedia features, animated infographies), direct answer to e-mails, and the increased use of ‘conversation expansion’ tools like CoverItLive, constitute pieces of that very unsettled puzzle.

At the heart of all these transformations, the online journalist is far from being an entrenched professional. Returning to our specific case, he/she might still be unaccustomed to and to some degree uncomfortable with the demise of the ‘authenticator’ role, with the pressures of the ‘transparency’ that is part of this new environment and with the sheer volume of user activity but he/she grows more and more accustomed to producing medium-neutral information and to providing added accountability assurances (using hyperlinks, for instance).

As Boczkowski has suggested based on different examples, news production in the online newsroom takes into account inputs from not only editors and

reporters but also from hitherto less present areas: technical and design personnel, marketing personnel, users (both in providing for contents and by usage patterns), and main newsroom staff (with whom communication becomes more and more fluid). These new contributions naturally affect practices which in turn determined content and form. JN Online is still far from producing full blown 'audience-centred /part of the conversation' contents but the last semester of 2008 seems to have initiated a process with far reaching implications not only for the online newsroom but also for the whole newspaper. The fact that change is being lead by a group of journalists which until very recently were seen as almost external to the workings of the group (but also less bound by incentives to standardize work habits) (Bennett, quoted in Deuze: 2008) adds a porous quality to their present activities providing for a unusual degree of creative freedom.

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