Professional knowledge,
beyond the opposition of theory and practice

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Abstract

The long-standing efforts to affirm journalism as an autonomous field with a minimally clear scientific basis, as well as the extended commitment of journalists themselves to build a real professional community, legitimized and recognized as such by society – according to the demands and challenges of professionalism –, implied the definition (not always very easy) of a body of knowledge and skills specific to the job, both in the theoretical and the practical levels. The issues concerning the education through practice and training, particularly by means of working in the real situation of a newsroom, have always been particularly prized by the journalists – actually, not few of them still argue that that is the only acceptable model for

their effective professional education –, but, on the other hand, they have always been somehow devaluated by the scientific community, which tends to associate the status of a real *profession* (instead of an *occupation,* as characterized by the Anglo-Saxon tradition) to the mastery of a theoretical, formal and abstract knowledge, properly developed and scholarly certified. In this paper, we argue for the advantage to re-locate the issue of the journalists' practical knowledge in a level that may grant it the due recognition and value, even in theoretical terms, following the supposition that "*knowing-in-action*" should be regarded as an essential element of the "*professional knowledge*" and can't be reduced neither to the routinely use of a set of techniques, nor to the mechanical resolution of some pre-defined problems; on the contrary, this "knowing-in-action", practiced and shared in the context of real and responsible work experiences, can play a very important role in the development of the professionals' reflexive abilities, which enables them to find by themselves, in the future, new answers to new problems. In this sense, then, it seems to be a central element of an adequate professional education, both theoretical and practical, contributing to put these two vectors in association and cooperation, rather than in opposition or mutual exclusion. The emphasis in a *competence model*, dialectically articulated with the more frequently mentioned *qualification model*, could help us to re-think this issue, approaching the academic and professional fields in the common effort to enhance the quality of journalism and to reinforce the autonomy of journalists as true professionals.

Key-words: journalism, profession, professionalism, professional knowledge, "knowing-in-action", qualification, competence.

1.   Introduction

An important issue in the process of the journalists' claim to a professional status has been, from the very beginning, their claim to the possession of a body of skilled knowledge, developed in the context of a very particular education scheme, where the actual work in a newsroom (education "on-the-job") would always play a major role. It doesn't wonder, when we know that the existence of "a body of relatively esoteric knowledge" (MacDonald, 1999: 134) – formal, rational knowledge, learnable in a scholar context – is usually considered an

essential criterion (on a "trait approach" logic) for a profession to be recognized and legitimized, as well as the scientific basis required for a valid professional practice.

MacDonald (*ibid*.: 157) points out that professions have emerged as specific organizational forms precisely when knowledge "emerged as a socio-cultural entity in its own right, independent of established social institutions", that being added to the creation and development of a free market where the offer (and sale) of knowledge-based services became possible. This innovation, typical of modernity, moves knowledge away from the 'boxes' of the moral and social world to which it was confined, and dissociates it from the birth or fortune status of small privileged groups to which its access was traditionally reserved, in a process that begins with Renaissance, goes on through Reform and Enlightenment, and seems to be consolidated in the early XIXth century. By that time, professions emerge and affirm themselves as new, specific forms of division and organization of specialized work:

> Professions are knowledge-based occupations and therefore the nature of their knowledge, the socio-cultural evaluation of their knowledge and the occupation's strategies in handling their knowledge base are of central importance (MacDonald, 1999: 160).

Once **knowledge** has been raised to one of the distinctive traits of professionalism, it's understandable why every profession, or occupation aiming to such a status, committed itself to define and proclaim its epistemological basis, its scientific, rational grounding, in order to grant it both a mark of legitimacy and a sign of confidence and value in the open market where it intended to occupy an autonomous place. And this process is, naturally, easier for some occupations than for others.

The course of different professional groups is distinct accordingly to the importance granted, on one side, to the existence of a body of theoretical and esoteric knowledge, acquired in a graduation school and certified by a university degree, and, on the other side, to the existence of a practical, concrete, skilled knowledge, acquired in real work situations and confirmed by a labour formal bond. Some professions tended traditionally to undervalue the side of the formal, scholar knowledge necessary to its practice, emphasizing instead either the personal qualities and talent of the candidates to the job, or a kind of practical "know-how-to-do" and relational "know-how-to-be" which allegedly was the true measure of an effective professional competence. This is particularly valid for the creative, artistic professions, and for the so-called "caring" professions – nursing, clergy, social work –, where decisions to be taken depend, more than anywhere else, on the ability to understand the specific context of the situations to deal with, as well as the real people involved and the proper interaction with

them. In these professions, there is a strong part of **indeterminacy** – opposing to others where there's a large component of **technicality**, linked to a general scientific knowledge that prescribes what to be "applied" in the particular situations (Rodrigues, 2002) –, which contributes to strengthen their power: the more an element of personal judgement is required to the concrete professional action, the less this action is susceptible of systematization, explicitation, routinization… and control. It helps to explain why these professions often have problems to clearly identify and publicize the kind of specific knowledge actually required for their activity, thus making more difficult the access of potential candidates – which helps to the building of a closed labour market (Paredeise, 1987) controlled by the group itself – and their own accountability *vis-à-vis* the society as a whole. It is, nevertheless, a two-edged knife: if the profession doesn't claim the possession of a minimally objective body of knowledge and reduces everything to the indeterminacy of concrete situations and decisions, it risks to be depreciated in comparison to the "established professions" and eventually to become accessible to everyone who possesses a simple common-sense knowledge, as far as he/she is able to overcome the administrative or legal barriers (because there are no scientific, scholar or even technical barriers) built up to protect the "corporation".

Of course every professional practice supposes some degree of indeterminacy, located basically in the "inference" operations, to use the typology proposed by Abbott (1988), who distinguishes between three different moments in that practice – **diagnosis**, **inference** and **treatment**. And if, as he says, diagnosis and treatment are "mediating acts" – diagnosis "takes information into the professional knowledge system" and treatment "brings instructions back out from it" (Abbott, 1988: 40) –, inference, "by contrast, is a purely professional act" (*ibidem*): based on the diagnosis information and on the range of possible treatments, the professional makes the **reflections** and takes the **decisions** judged more adequate to the particular situation. Here, actually, seems to lie the real professional knowledge, in a sense that goes beyond the traditional dichotomy separating theory and practice, opening itself (in a logic of complementarities between both) to the singularity of the concrete action and of the concrete people involved in it, mobilizing formal knowledge and experience, qualifications and competence, norms and values, objective and subjective data, every single part contributing to an effective **knowing-in-action** that goes very far away from just applying a technical pre-determined procedure or prescription.

Some parallel with this distinction can be found in the division proposed by Halliday (1987) between **scientific** professions – with a cognitive basis primarily **descriptive**, more

related to **facts** – and **normative** professions – with a cognitive basis primarily **prescriptive**, more related to **values**. For Halliday, clergy (the oldest profession ever, he says) is the top example of the second category, while engineering illustrates especially well the first one.

The process of journalism professionalization, in the very beginning, linked its demand for a social and legal acknowledgement specially to the relevant role of public service it fulfilled and to the allegedly altruistic, disinterested manner of fulfilling it, using no special skills and techniques besides those of "common sense", that is to say, essentially exercising the freedom of expression that is a fundamental right of every citizen but that journalists, in a kind of delegated power, assumed as their daily work. At that time, the emphasis was put more clearly on the **normative** pole rather than on the **scientific** one – and the subordination of this last one meant, among other things, the complete refusal of any specific scholar education for the job, since the personal talent and the idea of a "calling" were regarded as the only necessary pre-requisites for it (some minor items of "know-how" would be learned from peers in action and developed only in the context of a real newsroom). However, things turned to be more complicated, both because of the increasing needs for more definite and shared standards of procedure requested by an emerging industrialized press, and because of the increasing pressure towards a model of public legitimacy more in accordance to the usual demands of established professionalism. And so, journalists somehow made a kind of reverse way, departing from down stream (the practical knowledge) to upstream (the theoretical knowledge), trying to find and base in this last one the roots, the boundaries and the aims of that first one. They made what MacDonald detected in other professions he studied in detail (such as accountancy): that "professional practice came to entail an **esoteric collection of areas of knowledge**, rather than a basis in esoteric knowledge" (MacDonald, 1999: 201, emphasis from the author). And this means, according to him, that what is specific to the professional knowledge in these professions "is not so much theory, as practice raised to the level of a theory" (*ibid*.: 202).

Then, when journalism becomes a professional and industrialized activity, basically devoted to news and carried out by paid workers who do it for a living as a full-time job, the questions about the **specific knowledge** underlying and justifying it gain a new importance. One of the most sensitive presuppositions is that the ability for a profession to organize and control itself depends very much on its "capacity to draw a clear line separating the acknowledged professionals and the others, the 'sacred' and the 'laymen', in order to prevent – or not – the intrusion of these in their affairs" (Monjardet, 1987: 52). And the rationale for

this 'border definition' is supposedly the assumption that professionals, and only professionals, "monopolize (or aim to monopolize) a specific knowledge corresponding to a recognized social function" (*ibidem*). When such a monopoly is reached, and thereby neutralized the threat of external competition, it is "this knowledge, its nature, its acquisition, its partition and its control, that becomes the major principle of organization and operation" (*ibidem*) of the professional group. This item turns to be relevant not only in terms of action, but also in terms of discourse, in order to legitimate the profession. As said by Ruellan (1997: 150), "if the building of a profession requires an effort to elaborate a representation, competence plays there a major role". The idea, after all, is to develop "an argumentation that tends to consider each profession as the only trustee of technical competences and the only legitimate judge of the ways that lead to its acquisition" (*ibidem*), in a process that has some consequences to the building of a professional identity, particularly in terms of alterity – that is to say, the affirmation of oneself through the negation of the others.

2.   Beyond the theory/practice dichotomy

Talking about **knowledge** – or **professional knowledge** – means to talk about several things at the same time. The first tendency is to establish a dichotomy, often put in terms of opposition, between **theory** and **practice**[1]**,** between formal, systematized and scholarly certified knowledge (and, as such, specially valuated according to the prevailing logic), and, on the other hand, informal, disorderly, intuitive knowledge, linked to one's personal experience (and, as such, fairly disregarded, if not disdained). This traditional distinction was very present in the initial process of professional affirmation of journalism, a typically "practical" activity learnable through talent and practice. As we said before, things had to change to a more elaborate professional project, either because of the natural evolution of a specific area of production and diffusion of knowledge which was born almost as a sub-product of other area (literature) and took its time to build a proper domain, or because of the urge to grant this job its "independence chart" that would allow its practitioners to evolve, as Ruellan (1997) wrote, from a **state** to a **status,** with its inherent privileges, public recognition and legitimation, in order to conquer an autonomous professional space. The purpose was, after all, to establish a kind of monopoly – partly real, partly symbolic – over a closed segment of the labour market[2], where the professional group itself controls the access, defines the principles, prescribes the rules and ensures the social value of its role.

As far as the theory/practice dichotomy is concerned, this individual and collective process walked in two different but converging ways: in one way, there was an effort **to extend also to the theoretical level the elaboration and systematization of the knowledge** required for journalistic work, developing its epistemological groundings and making it an object of study with scientific purposes and methods; in another way, there was a commitment **to give added value to that kind of knowledge linked with practice**, overcoming the traditional views that tended to consider it a simple set of repetitive techniques, mechanically applied, disconnected from any reflexive capacity. This last trend was favoured, in more recent years, by some new research, especially in the areas of sociology and psychology, which has drawn attention to new forms of production, acquisition and transformation of knowledge, and has helped to review the traditional dichotomy:

> Old opposition whose relations have lastingly structured many individual and collective representations, and accompanied lasting social organizations as well, the distinction between theory and practice is, nowadays, probably evolving in what concerns both its content and its form, thanks to many converging transformations in what concerns work and production organization, education and research (Barbier, 1996: 1).

The underlying idea is that theoretical and practical knowledge are mutually coming nearer – and it is not by chance that this last one, following these new research trends, is increasingly referred to as **knowing-in-action**. Here, too, a double movement occurs. On one side, this knowing-in-action has its status, if we can say so, a bit raised:

> Traditionally assimilated only to practical skills, to that kind of hidden, informal knowledge, to the knowledge linked with experience, to the abilities acquired in action and through action, this knowing-in-action (or knowledge connected with real transformation) is increasingly giving place (…) to some formalization and enunciation, which tends to reinforce it in its status of actual knowledge and to bring it closer to theoretical knowledge (Barbier, 1996: 4).

On the other side, theoretical knowledge itself is devoting a new attention and consideration to practice:

> Traditionally assimilated to scholarly knowledge, whether in the research or in the teaching field, or even in the professional field, [theoretical knowledge] tends nowadays to extend to new objects and new fields which bring it closer to the action and its intelligibility, as can be seen in the development of research areas and scientific initiatives corresponding to the practice field (*ibidem*).

Following Barbier (*ibid*.: 6-8), the urge for this change can be better understood in the sequence of these four perceptions of his:

➤ The distinction between theoretical knowing and knowing-in-action remains conditioned by the more general mental paradigm built around the bipolarization theory/practice that acts as an intellectual "frame" in which social actors are invited to place their actions and even their identity. Theory (everything pertaining to the order

of the "high lands", the universal, the abstract, the deductive) is normally associated with theoretical knowing and with the disciplines that shape it, and can eventually be **transposed** to the practical world; on the other hand, practice (everything pertaining to the order of the "low lands", the contingent, the uncertain, the ephemeral, the inductive), is normally associated with knowing-in-action and can eventually **feed** the theory;

➢ In order to confront this dominant paradigm, there's a trend to relativize the status of knowledge in general, and of theoretical knowledge in particular, whether it is to re-locate its emergence and use amidst certain social practices, or to underscore the importance of links between knowledge and language. This relativization focuses on the production of knowledge as a result of research acts, on the analysis of transformation of knowledge in the process of its communication, and on the definition of theory as a "predicative form of knowledge" or as "shared representation" (ibid.: 7);

➢ Parallel to this, attempts have been made to explore the production of knowledge out of real practices, towards the practices and with the practices' authors, insisting on the analysis of real activities and on the consideration of the meanings granted to them by the authors themselves. These attempts can show either a scientific status, or a status of valuation of action itself, by "granting it precisely the same traditional attributes of the theoretical knowledge" (*ibid.*: 7). The essential aspect here lies in the fact that action and knowledge production are narrowly tied;

➢ As a result of all this, conceptual tools have been developed to reveal "an intelligence of the transits between action and knowledge" (*ibid.*: 8), which fosters the development of instruments that help us to deal with "the problem of the transitions between different realities: between knowledge and competence, between indicative knowledge and operative knowledge, between possessed knowledge and expressed knowledge, etc. (*ibidem*).

In its common use, the term "knowing" points out to different realities too. A distinction can be made between "knowing" as **statements** – "objectified" knowing, a reality "external to the individuals, susceptible of being communicated and transmitted" (Barbier, 1996: 9), as is the case of a certain technical procedure – , and "knowing" as an **identity component** – "possessed" knowing, a reality "indissociable from the individual and

collective agents that support it" (*ibidem*), and perceptible only through some kind of practice, of behaviour, of action, as is the case of some sort of "know-how". In the first meaning, its worth considering the three sub-components identified by the author which are always present (although in different degrees) when we talk about "knowing" ["*savoirs*"] in general terms: **knowledge** ["*connaissances*"] (similar to the "objectified" knowing, acquired through a process of internalization, by individuals, of realities that are external to them, which is made mostly in the context of socialization systems such as school and teaching), **capacities** ["*capacités*"] (knowing of a broader spectrum, since it already incorporates some operative elements, linked to concrete activity, and which is developed mostly in the context of socialization systems such as education, training and exercising) and finally **competences** ["*compétences*"] (a kind of knowing strictly linked with action, either in what concerns the achieved performance, or in what concerns the adopted behaviour, and which is developed mostly in the context of socialization systems such as the work systems, the integrated education in the workplace, the tutorial scheme, the research-action model, etc.). So, speaking of "knowing" is to speak of a composite reality, socially constructed, where these three components, mixed in different ways and in different degrees, are to be found.

3. Between "qualification" and "competence"

The term **competence** is one of the most used – although not always with the same meanings – when we talk about knowing-in-action, or more generally about professional knowing (knowing which grounds and justifies a legitimate claim to professionalism), often in opposition to the term **qualification**. This other dichotomy, which can partly be understood in the light of the historical evolution of the labour market and of the different models of its social regulation, somehow recalls the couple theory/practice, but brings some nuances that can help to clarify its relation and to ease its integration.

The concept of **qualification**, in the usual meaning, points out to a specific education and a set of aptitudes, legally acknowledged, which grant someone the right to work in a particular job. Usually bound to some kind of certification (a degree, a diploma) – and therefore underlining the value of scholarly, formal knowledge –, qualification traditionally acts as a warrant for a certain pay, for a certain position in the labour rank and for a certain social legitimacy (Demailly, 1987). The underlying idea is that a degree or certificate qualifies the worker, that is to say, it formally and legally ascertains that his/her abilities fit the demands of a specific job or work position. It's not difficult to see here some "ideological

configuration", since qualification seems to guarantee, by itself, the "good adaptation [of the worker] to the work position" (*ibid.*: 62) – a representation that, as we know, is nowadays regarded as not evident at all, and that is being challenged by other logics (particularly the logic of competence, which appeals also to some kinds of less formal knowledge, a surplus that makes qualification actually effective and that tries to mobilize "new professional capacities, not reglementary demanded but socially requested and institutionally valuated" (*ibidem*)).

Besides this common use, the term 'qualification' (which historically precedes the term 'competence' by two or three decades) has been regarded in different ways since the very beginning: some look at it as referring to the worker, some as referring to the workplace. This duality of meanings – which coexisted, although the prevalence of the first in the "taylorist" model of labour division, as well as in the regulation systems through labour collective conventions typical of the post-war "welfare state", has progressively drawn the attention to the second one – evokes another opposition, discussed during the years. On one side, a "**substantialist**" or "essentialist" tendency was committed in establishing objective criteria for the definition of qualification (either linked to the worker, or to the workplace), highlighting the qualities "by reference to the complexity of the job and to the technical evolution" (Terssac, 1996: 233). On the other side, a "**relativist**" tendency sustained that it was useless to try to find an absolute definition of qualification, since it is always dependent on particular conditions of *place* – "valid only for this or that sector, this or that company, according to the negotiation place" (Oiry & D'Iribarne, 2001: 52) – and of *time* – "it can be re-examined to give a fair account of the evolution of needs" of both parts in the negotiation (*ibidem*). This last trend suggests that qualification is above all a **social agreement** between the parts involved, the result of adjustments and negotiations (Paredeise, 1987: 2001) implying both the work use-value and exchange-value, and, being so, it would be wiser to study its concrete forms and evolutions rather than its supposed essence.

Once again, we face tendencies that aren't mutually exclusive and that coexist in some real situations (for instance in the labour collective conventions), with the "relativist" calling the attention to the respect due to concrete contexts – of a company, of a group of workers, of some particular personal situations –, and the "substantialist" supporting the need to stick to some general principles and definitions of qualification, as well as its translation in terms of work pay, so that not everything can be changed according only to subjective evaluations and casuistic considerations. Nevertheless, the increasing debate about this diversity of

approaches and meanings made some clarification advisable, until in the 1970's some authors suggested that the term **qualification** should be kept only to the persons, to the workers, and the alternative term **classification** should be adopted to refer to the work positions. The idea was to stress more clearly the social agreement underlying the concept of qualification. Although the suggestion wasn't apparently much successful at the time, it certainly helped to give birth to a new term which meant fairly the same thing and put the emphasis on the "complex social relationship" (Naville, *apud* Dubar, 1996: 181) associated to the term qualification. And so, two decades later, the term **competence** was being increasingly used.

> The use of qualification turned into competence. The notion of competence appears as a new attempt to clarify vocabulary in order to answer the original question: who or what is qualified? From now on, the notion of qualification refers to the qualifications assigned to a work position, while the notion of competence refers to the qualifications assigned to the person (Oiry & D'Iribarne, 2001: 55).

It's in this same perspective that Dubar (1996) understands the denomination of "**social qualification**" advanced by Alain Touraine, referring to a "qualification of a new kind", defined as "a recognized status in a social production system" associated with "a potential of participation in the technical life of the workplaces" (Touraine, *apud* Dubar, 1996: 182). Qualification regarded as such – that is, as competence – appeals not only to the technical qualities of the worker, but also considers that "management and relationship qualities are essential", the question being not any more just to have and keep a work position, but instead "to actively participate in the accomplishment of the company's goals, validated by the whole society" (*ibidem*).

As we see, these two concepts (qualification, first, and competence, later) have been used, specially during the second half of the XXth century, with different meanings, sometimes very much apart, sometimes almost overlapped, to such an extent that authors like Terssac suggest that "the opposition between the two notions doesn't play between themselves, but inside each of them" (Terssac, 1996: 233). According to Terssac, "two conceptions of qualification-competence" stand face to face: one that "privileges the instrumental dimension of qualification or competence, its functional value" and other that "privileges the political dimension, the conflictive and social aspect" (*ibidem*). In this last one, there's "an intent to re-link the potential and the social relations, the qualities possessed and its social evaluation, the qualities and its ranking, the explicitation of the competences and the use of that explicitation" (*ibidem*).

In order to get clear about the use we make of these terms, and accordingly to what has been said before, let's say that **competence** will be used with the second meaning – a sort

of "re-found qualification", to quote Terssac (1996: 231) –, leaving the term **qualification** to the first sense, the one of the instrumental and functional dimension, connected to a formal knowledge acquired in a system of formal and certified education, and applied in the context of a work position to which access was reglementary granted.

4.   In favour of a competence logic

The emergence of the concept of **competence** in the labour field, during the 1970's, is bound to social and economic changes which intended to favour some deregulation of the market, some flexibility of companies and workers and some co-responsibilization of employers with the goals and results of their businesses. At the same time, getting and keeping a job became more and more difficult, while there was an increasing emphasis on the personal and relational qualities of each worker (beyond his/her technical skills), on the importance of team work, on the needed mobility, on the individual responsibility in a labour organization where autonomy was increasingly promoted. In face of these new realities, the reference to competence seems to be "an answer to the insufficiencies of the qualification system" (Dugué, 1999: 11), a system drawn to the "taylorist" stable production organizations, where, by means of a degree or a certificate, a direct correspondence was established between a fixed "know how", a work position and a certain pay.

Face to the new conditions, the work prescriptions evolve, increasingly appealing "to the psychological mobilization of workers, and not any more only to their knowledge", while, on the other hand, the demands of flexibility lead companies to "detach the pay exchange from a rigid tie to certain work positions or to pre-established knowledge" (*ibidem*). As Dugué explains:

> While degrees validate knowledge, competences point to a mixture of knowledge and behaviour which gives a major place to "know-how-to-be" and to psychological investment. While degrees are acquired once and remain for life, giving a stabilized dimension to the notion of qualification, competence, by nature "unqualifiable", belongs to the order of the contingent and can't be regarded as a final attribute (Dugué, 1999: 11).

It's advisable to distinguish between three different kinds of implications of this "competence logic", according to its association either to **(1)** a new logic of **business management** (and specifically work force management), or to **(2)** a new kind of **labour social regulation**, or finally to **(3)** a new understanding of **professionality**. This last one is the one that matters here, since it calls the attention, as far as professional knowledge is

concerned, to important issues up to now disregarded but useful to a desirable reconsideration of the opposition between "theoretical knowledge" and "practical knowledge".

One of the reasons why the qualifications system has been criticized concerned the fact that it "never solved the problem of the knowledge we acquire in the process of working" (Dugué, 1999: 10), as it tended to rigidly establish the relation between a qualified worker and the corresponding work position or role, in a kind of static perspective of just fulfilling the prescribed actions. In a competence logic, this is just one of the requirements of a good performance, as some others are requested as well, either because action mobilizes capacities beyond those certified by a degree or a diploma, or because in action we think, we learn and we create. This is why the notion of competence was increasingly associated not just to a practical knowledge, a "know-how", but to a "**knowing-of-action**" – which, besides "**know** [knowledge]" and "**know-how-to-do**", includes "**know-what-to-do**" and "**know-how-to-be**" – , a notion that challenges the old opposition theory/practice.

Competence is, in the words of Reynaud (2001: 9), "a combination of knowledge, know-how, experience and behaviour, carried out in a specific context". Its observation and validation is linked to practice, because it shows itself only when it is actually exercised in a professional situation, but even there it goes beyond a purely technical approach, as far as performance is concerned, and beyond a purely scholar or intellectual definition of the required knowledge. "*Rappelons à nos jeunes que même lorsqu'ils ont tout **appris**, ils sont loin d'avoir tout **compris**''*, wrote Lehmann (1996: 156, emphasis added), as a sort of an advice, after regretting how often he met "young engineers remarkable competent in the technical level" but "so ignorant regarding the real problems of managing people and regarding the reality of making the decisions they were supposed to". His conclusion follows:

> We miss a kind of *corpus* of action sciences that can grant a more structured basis to the preparation of young people in order to the assumption and exercise of their responsibilities and, finally, in order to the realities of life (*ibid.*: 157).

Competence, then, refers to "everything that is implied in the organized action" (Terssac, 1996: 235), which stresses an essential point: what matters here "is action and not the answer to a task"; what matters here is "the construction of the space of action, and not just the management of a pre-ordered space of action" (*ibidem*).

Speaking about competence, we permanently establish some kind of relationship with experience, with concrete work and with learning that (also) occurs in it and through it. "We acknowledge that work itself is educator", argues Terssac (1996: 236), thus overcoming

traditional dichotomies and creating bridges between knowledge and action, between possessed knowledge and context, between recognized knowledge and actually used knowledge. Learning in action occurs at several levels and mobilizes different types of knowledge besides those acquired in formal educational situations, establishing between them all a dialectical relationship:

> The relationship between possessed knowledge and knowledge-in-action is not a simple descending relationship, as if the fact of possessing some knowledge in a particular area were enough to solve the problems of that area; it isn't a simple ascending relationship either, as if it were enough to identify the proper context to reach the intended result. Putting "knowledge into action" and transforming "action into knowledge" are the two processes regulating this passage from knowledge to action and from action to knowledge. Competences (…) control the way of constructing knowledge towards action (preparation) and the way of constructing knowledge on action (return to action); the better or worse ability to deal with the difficulties of adaptation to new contexts depends precisely of the appropriateness of these competences (Terssac, 1996: 238).

Some caution must be taken, however, when we value experience as a source of knowledge. As well as we can find different levels under the notion of "practical knowledge" – from the simply automatic level to typically reflexive levels –, so it happens with experience, where it is possible to distinguish, according to the situations, between "sclerosing", "enriching" or "of scientific type" experience, to use the ranking suggested by Mialaret (1996: 168). The first one is nothing else but a reproduction or repetition of things exactly as they showed in the first time; in the second, there is already "some consciousness of successes and failures" that leads the actor "to ask questions, to put him/herself in question, to modify his/her practices and his/her kind of relation to the world", in a process "of phenomenological type" which contributes to his/her "psychological enrichment"; but only the third kind of experience actually contributes to generate knowledge, since it implies a reflection **in** action and **on** action, and the work of adaptation to the new context and of transformation is carried on "according to more objective modalities", with "some concern for the objective control of effects and for its evaluation" (*ibidem*). There is a double advantage in this last kind of experience: it generates knowledge, and it is more easily transmissible, because it tries to "make its judgement criteria explicit"; it leads, then, to a "praxeologic knowledge" (*ibidem*) that doesn't replace or exclude "scientific knowledge", but complements it and interacts with it.

We refer to **action**, then, but to **reflexive action,** the one that really grounds the "**knowledge-in-action**" – a central concept for the building of professional competence as we understand it –, an issue deeply analysed by Donald Schön (1983, 1996), an author who claimed for the need of "a new epistemology of practice", rooted not any more on a logic of

"technical rationality", but on a "reflexive practice", as is illustrated by the title of his seminal work: *"The reflexive practitioner – How professionals think in action"* (1983).

5. "Knowing-in-action" as the touchstone of professional knowledge

Schön's starting point is, precisely, the search of the "knowing hidden under the professional acting" (Schön, 1996: 205), that kind of "knowing more than we can say" (Schön, 1983: 51) often revealed by the skilful action. It shows how concrete professional situations mobilize different kinds of knowledge previously acquired in educational contexts, but it also shows that the usually singular and unique character of those situations, in unique space-time and relational contexts as well, appeals to other types of knowledge related either with the correct understanding of that particular action – which reminds us of the relevance of the so-called "common sense" knowledge[3] – , or with the amount of previous experiences in other equally singular and unique concrete actions. As Schön himself puts it, *intelligent* action is not necessarily definable in terms of *intellectual* action, nor is *knowing how* necessarily translatable in terms of *knowing that*.

In his perspective, two distinct models confront themselves in what concerns practice, or the articulation practice/theory: the **technical rationality** model – which has been dominant, specially among established professions, and which is associated with a logic of **problem solving**, by means of the application of theories and techniques previously identified as the most suitable –, and the **reflexive practice** model – which, on the contrary, is associated with a logic of **problem setting,** previously to the attempt of its resolution, under the presupposition that every situation has its own particular characteristics, hardly compatible with the sheer application of pre-designed solutions. At stake is, in this second model, the challenge to "convert a problematic situation to a problem", which implies a certain kind of work, a work intended to "make sense of an uncertain situation" (Schön, 1983: 40), a work **on** the action and **in** the action. And, after all, the correct identification of the problem doesn't lead by itself to a solution: it may "escape the categories of applied science because it presents itself as unique or unstable", and so the practitioner, in order to solve the problem "by the application of existing theory or technique", must "be able to map those categories onto features of the practice situation" (*ibid.*: 41).

The **technical rationality** model has its roots in what Schön calls the "positivist epistemology of practice" and rests on three dichotomies: it always tends to separate means from ends, knowing from doing, and research from practice. On the contrary, the **reflexive**

practice model, committed to find a new epistemology of practice – the one that is "implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict" (Schön, 1983: 49) –, tries to overcome those dichotomies, making clear that ends and means condition themselves mutually, that also in the process of doing some kind of knowing reveals and develops itself (we think "on" what we do, but we think "in" what we do while we do it), that research can arise from practice and be claimed by it. Which sends us back to action and to the way we deal with it.

"In the beginning there isn't the Word**,** and even less theory. In the beginning there is action", wrote Vergnaud (1996: 275), underscoring the importance of the first "adaptative activity of a being to his/her environment" as a way towards knowledge. If this way means an effort of representation and conceptualization, it doesn't mean less that "it is through action that thought begins" (*ibidem*), as it was made evident by research in psychology, especially after Piaget[4]. This is the background for Schön's proposal, which draws the attention to action simultaneously as arriving point of previous knowledge and starting point for new knowledge – or "old" knowledge revisited, reviewed and adapted to the real situation. He describes, and stands for, a process of "reflection-in-action" developed in three moments: there is, first, **knowing-in-action**, a kind of knowing that is "inherent in intelligent action" (Schön, 1983: 50) and that underlies to the competent performance, even if its actor isn't able to define it, to describe or to explain it, and even if he mobilizes it spontaneously, without thinking about it; there is, then, **reflecting-in-action**, which, unlike the previous one, is verifiable through the recognition that we think about what we are doing – the common sense recognizes this process of "learning by doing" –, this being not only thinking about what to do (*on action*), but also thinking actually about what we are doing while we do it (*in action*), which turns "knowing-in-action" into something more than a simple "know-how-to-do", that is to say, into a real "knowledge-in-action"; finally, there is **reflecting-in-practice***,* which inscribes the work of specific actions in the larger and more systematic context of the practical work as an essential and permanent constitutive element of the construction of "knowledge-in-action", something indispensable to "professional knowledge". And this is, as a whole, the solution to overcome the dichotomies referred behind:

> When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case. His inquiry is not limited to a deliberation about means which depends on a prior agreement about ends. He does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing (…). Thus reflection-in-action can

proceed, even in situations of uncertainty or uniqueness, because it is not bound by the dichotomies of Technical Rationality (Schön, 1983: 68-69)

That's precisely because, under this logic, each practitioner deals with his/her case as unique, that he/she "cannot deal with it by applying standard theories or techniques" (*ibid*.: 129). But, even if it is unique, each case – and each reflection **on** it and **in** it – gives a contribution for the practitioner to store up a "repertoire" of experiences that will be very useful for his/her future understanding of new cases. Here, too, the process doesn't mean just an automatic reproduction, but it still requires some reflection about the concrete situation:

> When a practitioner makes sense of a situation he perceives to be unique, he *sees* it *as* something already present in his repertoire. To see *this* site as *that* one is not to subsume the first under a familiar category or rule. It is, rather, to see the unfamiliar, unique situation as both similar to and different from the familiar one, without at first being able to say similar or different with respect to what. The familiar situation functions as a precedent, or a metaphor, or (…) an exemplar for the unfamiliar one (Schön, 1983: 138, emphasis by the author).

And it's this capacity of "seeing unfamiliar situations as familiar", a capacity we can develop through reflective practice, that enables us to mobilize our past experience to bear on "problems that do not fit existing rules" (*ibid*.: 140), that is to say, to handle the unique case and the characteristics it usually has: uncertainty, instability, singularity, possible value conflict (Schön, 1996: 203). Reflecting-in-action on a unique case can, so, be generalized to other cases, "not by giving rise to general principles, but by contributing to the practitioner's repertoire of exemplary themes from which, in the subsequent cases of his practice, he may compose new variations" (Schön, 1983: 140)[5].

In this sense, we are faced to a specially suitable approach for the "managing of complexity" (Lehmann, 1996: 154), something very typical of the professional knowledge – and "knowing-of-action" is, in itself, "intrinsically complex" (*ibid*.: 151). It seems especially useful to those professions that have a strong relational component and a less codified body of technical-formal knowledge – as journalism –, but that, nevertheless, shouldn't ignore the positive highlights of a competence model.

Schön himself agrees that "reflection-in-action is an extraordinary process", although "not a rare event", and for some reflective practitioners "the core of practice" (Schön, 1983: 69). In spite of that, he realizes what seems rather evident: that professionalism is still mainly identified with technical expertise and, because of it, reflection-in-action "is not generally accepted" – even by those who do it, but often can't explain it or 'scientifically' support it – "as a legitimate form of professional knowing" (*ibidem*).

6.   The alternative of "reflective practice"

To sum up, we could say that Schön's proposal of a "reflective practice" appears to be a stimulating alternative to the traditional "positivist epistemology" of practice, assuming itself, in his own words, as an "**epistemology of professional action**" (Schön, 1996: 205), with a set of advantages:

➢ it enables mobilization, integration and valuation of a vast amount of "knowing", now less hierarchized or constrained by dichotomies (theory/practice, thinking/doing) that simplify and impoverish it, both individually and socially;

➢ it emphasizes the dynamic nature of professional competences, which are the result of a long-term construction, carried out in multiple contexts of learning, of education and of interaction;

➢ it establishes a partnership between research and practice which surpasses the distance between conception and execution (and, once again, between theory and practice), making every practitioner a researcher in a context of action;

➢ it points to new orientations as far as professionals' education is concerned, calling the attention to the importance of learning in contexts of responsibility which may favour the development of autonomous decision-making capacities for real situations[6];

➢ it assigns a new place to the professional-client relationship, forcing that one to establish with this one a reflective conversation and an interaction intending to adapt previous knowing to the concrete situation – and therefore increasing the professional's accountability

➢ it stresses the importance of the professional's behaviour and attitude, beyond the possession of skilled scientific and technical knowledge or the ability to apply them;

➢ and, last but not least, it helps to re-locate professions in a more appropriate place in society, making professionals "neither the heroic avant-garde of the Technological Program nor a villainous elite who prevent the people from taking control of their lives", but, on the contrary, "participants in a larger societal conversation" (Schön, 1983: 346). By correctly assuming this role, that makes us "agents-experient" (*ibid*.: 347) – or "at once the subjects and the objects of action" –, professionals make that conversation to turn reflective too, which means that it makes them "agents of society's reflective conversation with its situation" (*ibid*.: 353), with all the potential for social transformation it brings.

It is in this scenario that we inscribe the "competence model" (by contrast with the "qualification model") as a challenge, both stimulating and demanding, to professional work – to work by professionals. Competences can be measured and evaluated in different dimensions (Heijden & Barbier, 1999): a **knowing** dimension (including "declarative knowing" but also "operative knowing" and "conditional knowing", linked to a specific space and time), a **meta-cognitive** dimension (implying to know what we know and what we don't know), an **aptitude** dimension (bound to the actual quality of the work done), a **development** dimension (pointing to the ability to broaden the competence fields, fighting against the risks of obsolescence and turning *expertise* more and more a '*flexpertise*' [7]), and a **social** dimension (the one we could associate with Schön's "reflective conversation" and which is, in the end, also a source of professional recognition).

Going beyond the separation between formal activity and real activity, the competence model draws the attention to the "subjective implication of the subject in his knowledge, whatever the labour organization models are" (Roche, 1999: 49), which supposes a new logic:

> Exchanging the concept of experimental qualification by the concept of competence, the individual evolves from a logic of *having* (having a qualification, having knowledge) to a logic of *being* (being competent, being qualified). (…) Moving from a logic of having to a logic of being, the individual evolves from a logic of certainty to a logic of uncertainty, from a logic of stability to a logic of instability, from a logic of permanence to a logic of transformation. (…) This logic of being leads to a dynamic, to an attitude of constant adaptation, to a vision of transformation, which is absent from the conceptions of qualification and certification (Roche, 1999: 50, emphasis by the author).

It can be argued that even in a qualification model the professional work doesn't necessarily reduce to a logic of "technical rationality" and, on the contrary, one can appeal to other qualities. But it seems that only when (and because) attention was called to **competences**, in a broad sense, were these "new capacities" really valued – social-affective capacities, relational, organizational and ethical capacities, and not any more cognitive capacities alone. These are capacities which point to a necessary "**reprofessionalization**", rather than just "**requalification**", to refer to a study made by Demailly (1987) among teachers but that fits specially well with other similar professions, as is the case of journalists. What is new in her approach is the fact that those new qualities required by a competence model – relational, organizational, ethical qualities – are not any more regarded, as they used to be in terms of professional practice, as just a "soul supplement", in order to possibly improve individual performance in a voluntaristic manner, but as "a vital need" (Demailly, 1987: 67), linked to the proper professional construction and affirmation, that is to say, "a component of professionality" (*ibidem*). New is also the fact that those qualities, previously

regarded as "natural characteristics" associated to supposed personal "gifts", are now regarded as "collective capacities, to the development of which institutions can urge and form their agents" (*ibidem*). And these two aspects make all the difference.

In conclusion, we are faced to a kind of work that may be considered, in the expression of Caria (2005: 198), an "intellectual-technical" work, beyond the simpler logic of an "instrumental-technical" work. And this is so because of three particular reasons: (1) this kind of professional action also implies "moral values and orientations" that oblige to specially valuate the criteria of interaction with "the other" (in the journalists' case, information sources and information receivers); (2) knowledge mobilized to action doesn't confine to a sheer application of 'science' acquired in previous formal educational contexts but, on the contrary, it obliges to "social-cognitive operations of professional knowledge recontextualization" (*ibidem*); and (3) the requested autonomy in work context implies "the development of a particular professional reflexivity" (*ibidem*) able to deal with the uncertainty and singularity of real situations.

Such an approach seems to be particularly useful and appropriate to explain and to frame journalists' **professional knowing**, as well as the modalities of its acquisition and development. As a matter of fact, the specific competence they are expected to show (along all their professional career, and not just in the access 'tests'), although it clearly benefits from a cultural and technical preparation acquired in an educational context, is largely dependent on the subsequent experience on the job (both in individual and collectively shared terms) and on the openness to an attitude of permanent **reflective practice** that enables them to find the right new answers demanded by contexts of action – which are also singular and always new.

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NOTES

[1] Let us remember, in this context, that some authors strictly reject the presentation of this dichotomy in terms of an opposition, as is the case of Bruno Latour (1996: 133), to whom "practice is a term *without a contrary*, designating the whole of human activity", and as such it shouldn't be opposed to anything else – namely, to theory. "Theoretically, theories exist; practically, they don't", he wrote (*ibid*.: 131), adding that "without the overwhelming difference between these two worlds, privileges of theory would be gone" (*ibid*.: 145). Similarly, Tochon (1996: 262) also rejects the "dualistic perspective" of theory and practice, proposing an "integrative perspective" of knowledge, the one that assures the "integration of knowledge by the actor" and allows, after all, the exchange from a logic of "*represent-action*" to a logic of "*transform-action*" (ibid.: 256)

[2] The "closure of a segment of labour market" can be defined as "its monopolization by a collective of workers to whom socially is recognized the possession of knowledge and know-how considered indispensable to the rendering of a good or a service" (Paredeise, 1987: 41).

[3] Schön (1983: 52), invoking Polanyi, gives a concrete example of this kind of "tacit knowing", which is real, effective, but which can hardly be explained: we all are able to recognize a familiar face among thousands of similar faces, but we are unable to say why, to detail the concrete elements of this recognition. On the other hand, we have seen how research on computers makes them capable of incorporating and applying incredible amounts of information, if compared with the possibilities of human mind, but nevertheless they can't "create anything close to the 'good sense' of a five year old child" (Meditsch, 2002: 13) or defeat the creative unpredictability of a good chess player.

[4] Precisely in the sequence of the work on genetic psychology developed by Piaget and his School, Grize (1996: 120) emphasizes that "knowing is not given", that "the child doesn't receive it as an ended food", but, on the contrary, he/she "progressively elaborates it through the exercise of his/her actions on the world" and "on the others". So, Grize claims, "theoretical knowing comes from action knowing, by means of a double abstraction procedure, the one starting from the objects (simple or physical abstraction), and the one supported in actions themselves (reflective abstraction)" (*ibid*.: 121). That is to say: "Action knowing is in the starting point of knowledge" (*ibid*.: 120).

[5] The "reproduction" of approaches or solutions referred here comes from a specific process of generalization named by Schön (1996: 218-219) as "*reflective transfer*", because it doesn't point to the formulation of a new "general rule", but to the development of a set of similar principles, "each of it adapted to a particular situation in which it is tested". This *transfer* is regarded by him as very important to innovation diffusion, once again

through a mechanism that doesn't resume to a sheer reproduction: "Diffusion of an innovative approach of a problematic situation is not the reproduction, but the *re-invention* of then original practice" (*ibidem*, emphasis by the author).

[6] Decomps & Malglaive (1996) refer, in this context, to the "professional university" as a "responsibility university", and to its need, in order to ensure professional efficiency, to add "practical knowing" to the theoretical, technological and methodological knowledge it grants, because that's the only real way to turn "knowing by the book" to "operative knowing". But it must do it somehow in a context of actual "responsibility", and not in a simple simulation of reality, since only in that context can it act at the "know-how-to-do" and the "behaviour" levels. Which, in these authors' opinion, implies necessarily that the university establishes long-lasting partnerships with the real work and companies' world, along with tutorial models in both fields.

[7] Heijden & Barbier define this "*flexpertise*" as the "capacity to keep a good level of competence in evolutive conditions and different situations", which presupposes a valuation of "adaptative" competence face to a "routinely" competence and, on the other side, the good mastery of a "continuous learning strategy" able to correspond to the growing demands of flexibility at work (Heijden & Barbier, 1999: 134).

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