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Chapter 1

Introductory Chapter: Some Notes on Journalism in the Age of Social Media

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1. Introduction

Social media are nowadays discussed quite widely and thoroughly, for a lot of different reasons and in many equally relevant contexts. They are perceived not only as an individualized social communication tool but also as a community building means and a way of implementing innovative corporate solutions and conducting effective marketing activities. Social media platforms thus have been reflected on by social and behavioral psychologists, renowned economists, business experts and marketing professionals, media and journalism theorists, professional journalists, lawyers, politicians, experts specializing in political sciences and so on. Obviously, the contemporary discourse related to social media does not result exclusively from interdisciplinary scholarly discussions and research inquiries; what we know and think about social media and social media journalism are often based on events and communication and cultural phenomena occurring on social media and/or popularized via social media.

Online social media are a dynamically expanding communication field filled with a plethora of social, economic, political and marketing activities and marked by diverse private and public agendas. Although we have stated that addressing the issues of social media and social media journalism is one of the essential topics of postmillennial media studies and related scholarly disciplines that even exceeds the vast boundaries of interdisciplinary academic discourses involving knowledge of multiple social sciences and humanities, we still believe that to understand social media's immense influence, possibilities and risks, up-to-date interdisciplinary reflections are still needed urgently. The spectrum of knowledge on social media and social media journalism certainly acknowledges the fragmented and globalized structure of today's media production—from the philosophical aspects of the Internet environment and its influence on the cognitive abilities of man [1], through the need to underline the importance of innovations within the media and entertainment industry [2] and the new demands and challenges

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associated with regulating the freedom of expression in terms of various media communication spheres [3], all the way to the opportunities and risks resulting from decreasing advertising sales that the "traditional" (especially print) media experience have to cope with [4].

The global scandal involving *Facebook* and *Cambridge Analytica Ltd.*, one of the most discussed recent public events, has quickly become an important part of wider international discussions on Internet privacy and social media's true influence. As we already know, the British consulting company *Cambridge Analytica Ltd.* has collected highly personal data on 87 million Facebook users in order to influence their electoral behavior. The quiz application named *This Is Your Digital Life*, which was seemingly able to collect data only on basis of the *Facebook* users' previous approval, apparently collected such data sets even without their consent. The scandal spread globally in March 2018 when *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Channel 4 News* published a statement given by Christopher Wylie, the whistleblower and former employee of *Cambridge Analytica.* Wylie's testimony clarified the complicated relationships between *Facebook*, the company he used to work for, and various politicians who had used its services in order to influence the 2016 American presidential election and the 2016 British "Brexit" referendum [5]. Even though *Facebook*'s CEO Mark Zuckerberg publicly apologized for the social network's misconduct and controversial business decisions, for instance, on *CNN* [6], the affair reminded us once more how important it is to address the questions of social media and their ethical standards, the existence of politically managed "consulting" organizations and the political aspects of media communication as such.

2. Social media journalism as a late-modern phenomenon

Social media may be rightfully seen as an immensely significant communication phenomenon of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Although both scholars and professionals have tried to provide the term "social media" with a proper theoretical framework and find its universal definition for years, it still seems that there is a lot of work left to be done. Harcup's *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism* claims that social media include *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *YouTube* and "countless other forums, and in just a few years they have become as important a way for journalists to find stories and sources as they are for news organizations to promote their brands" [7]. Social media are much more than just specialized social networking sites created to fulfill a certain set of purposes. They represent a broad spectrum of online communication platforms such as blogs, vlogs, chat rooms, social bookmarking services, etc. All these means of communication have diversified journalism and influenced journalistic production unprecedently.

As noted by McNair, the dominant model of journalism of the twentieth century, once embodied by the professional journalists producing objective and reliable information, is currently fragmented and widely questioned due to the influence of new media and technologies [8]. New online platforms—especially social media—have changed the ways we seek, select and process information sources and news, weakening the formerly hegemonic position of international media corporations and prominent mainstream media outlets. It is thus not surprising that the phenomenon of "alternative journalism" has gained increasing attention amongst both scholars and media professionals in recent years. Regardless of the connotations bound to this

term, some of them positive, others controversial or openly negative, we have to acknowledge that certain "alternative" forms of journalistic production *do* function as partly independent, participatory or even underground processes of information dissemination, offering a much needed counterbalance in relation to the globally operating mainstream media [9].

The emergence and dynamic expansion of new information and communication technologies based on Internet connection, digital technologies and miniaturized "intelligent" devices, especially smartphones and tablets, have given the rather passive media audiences (readers, watchers, listeners) many different opportunities to create and even publish journalistic contents. Many titles of scholarly literature, especially various valuable publications of the Anglo-Saxon provenience, tend to discuss "accidental journalism" or "witness journalism" as a specific kind of citizen journalism. The fact that "ordinary" people now can provide the general public with rare footage or even media coverage of important events, the moment they are occurring is nothing special anymore. Citizen journalism fulfills its important role in any democratic society, offering plurality of opinions. Its basic purpose is to contribute to the independent, responsible and relevant information dissemination in order to stimulate public discussions and form the public opinion [10]. However, such expectations are just heavily idealized versions of the current state of matters. That is why the vast possibilities of amateur journalistic forms and information dissemination via globalized social media walk hand in hand with the urgent need to reformulate the questions of local, regional, national and international questions of journalistic ethics, solve the issues of social (mis)recognition and articulate solidarity in the global communication environment overflowing with pieces of news of uncertain quality and highly questionable social relevance [11]. Media scholars, professional journalists and, above all, media audiences have to make a lot of effort to distinguish between reliable and unreliable information sources such as blogs, social media posts and commentaries, shared photographs and videos or news portals operated by professional or amateur journalists. However, despite all the effort, they often do not succeed since the boundaries between reliable and unreliable information sources have never been less clear and more questionable.

The recent scholarly discussions on social media journalism often mention the concept of "networked journalism" which involves crowdsourcing, wikis, social media and other forms of communication which "make the production of journalism a more fluid, interactive, and non-hierarchical process than it tended to be in the analogue age" ([7] pp. 194–195). It is only logical that along with these shifts in the production and distribution processes related to journalistic content, media audiences are changing as well. Today's media audiences are diverse, pluralized and fragmented, and that is why we have to reflect on their characteristic traits and typologies very carefully and thoroughly. Seeing the media audience members through the optics of marketing opportunities, economic statistics and numbers may be useful to fulfill the commercial imperatives of doing (media) business, but it tells us very little about the recipients' real preferences, taste patterns and future needs related to media consumption [12]. Moreover, the contemporary commercial imperative of placing the expectations of mainstream media audiences above anything else (including so-called good taste and moral values) tends to deepen the apparent—and appropriately commercially exploited—individualization of the media audience members. The emergence of new processes of media tabloidization, spectacular political communication and banalization of the public space are the most obvious, but not all consequences are considered here [13].

3. Increasing popularity: the rise of social networking

Social networking sites are amongst the most popular social media. Given the results of the *Global Digital Report 2018* published in January 2018, more than 4 billion people around the world are able to access the Internet. Moreover, 3.2 billion Internet users actively work with social networking sites [14]. The biggest increase of online social networks users was recorded in Saudi Arabia (32%), India (31%), and Indonesia (23%), with the worldwide increase reaching 13% [15]. The most popular social networks are *Facebook* (more than 2 billion users), *YouTube* (approx. 1.5 billion users) and *Instagram* (800 million users) [16]. Not only it is reasonable to presume that the numbers of active users visiting and spending time on online social networks will increase even further, we also have to presume that the more people will join social networks to have fun, socialize and seek information, the more importance social media journalism will gain.

The same can be said about effective marketing communication and advertising strategies adapted to the social network environment. Since the most popular social networks have millions or even billions of active users who communicate, comment on information they come into contact with, post statuses or share multimedia contents, "social network marketing" is on the rise. Čábyová characterizes the term as a type of online marketing strategy which is ideal to build brands or brand loyalties, as well as to combine the common goals of online marketing with social networking sites and their specific communication environment [17]. "Community marketing" has gained importance, too. Its aim is to build community platforms that would be interested in specific services, products or topics. It is therefore quite understandable that the academic discussions on community media deepen as well, having new communication and societal phenomena to analyze and reflect on [18].

The current issues and questions of social media journalism and new media platforms have even changed the ways we see media industry studies as a whole. According to Marshall, "the media industry is now a much more complex entity than its previous incarnations with print, popular music, radio, television, and film. (…) The media industry has both in an elaborate and sometimes uncertain way integrated an understanding of its audience as users." The media industry of the new Millennium is, and not only in terms of the journalistic production, dependent on the processes of cultural and media convergence. It is crucial to find new, untraditional ways of presenting media products which have only little or even nothing to do with the traditional forms of information dissemination: Media industry studies need to be adept at understanding the economic and cultural patterns and implications of this media-communication nexus [19]. The many faces of today's journalism result from cultural and media convergence [20], which is why we have to accept new perspectives to consider, new journalistic strategies to understand and new communication phenomena to reflect on.

4. Conclusion

As the previous notes have shown, journalism in the era of social media leads us to the need to question everything we know about theory and practice of disseminating news and opinions.

These numerous implications influence not only our cultural environment, i.e., the ways we live our lives and seek knowledge, but also the preferred forms of processing information, news gathering, presentation of media contents and distribution strategies. Innovated economic and marketing strategies and untraditional forms of managing human resources cannot be overlooked, either. The cultural situation resulting from the rise of social media journalism surprises even the most experienced media professionals and journalism scholars who have been active for decades and thus fully experienced both the era of "traditional" electronic media and the boom of online journalism and social media journalism [21]. For instance, it is necessary to take into account the numerous differences between news genres published in the traditional press [22], opinion genres of varied quality published in print newspapers and magazines [23] and emerging genres of online journalism aimed at Internet users who prefer to access news and opinions via their intelligent mobile devices [24].

Social media journalism may be always up to date and based on multimedia in its nature, but its recipients still need to select between various versions of the same information and subject them to serious critical evaluations. As mentioned by Harcup, "the future of journalism is both uncertain and unwritten, but the social role of journalists in informing citizens, and contributing toward the health of public sphere, means that journalists have an ethical responsibility to engage in a process of critical reflection on their practice. Despite the structural forces and constraints that bear down journalists, individuals and groups of journalists retain elements of choice in their work" [25]. This statement seems to be quite hard to argue against.

Since social media journalism is one of the causes and also consequences of the emerging worldwide (globalized) media culture, there are, as Lipovetsky points out, many specific and so far unseen cultural traits to get acquainted with. The boundaries detaching culture from advertising and marketing are long gone, and all media products—including news and opinions published on social media—are placed on the market by means of marketing techniques able to attract the audiences' attention through creating media events [26]. That is why we believe it is absolutely essential to discuss social media journalism in the international or even global academic environment, to confront our own opinions with experience and research inquiries offered by authors affiliated with different types of institutions, by scholars coming from different countries, cultural frameworks and academic circles. It is the only way to provide the interested readers with a set of more diverse, objective and multifaceted views on the most obvious traits and numerous positive features of social media journalism but also on its (often hidden) pitfalls, imperfections and faults. Some of them have manifested themselves years ago, and others may come to our attention in the near future.

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