

## **Journalistic (self)-criticism: Effect of convergence managerial strategies on journalistic representations**

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### **Abstract**

This article addresses the issue of convergence through the lens of journalistic views. How do journalists perceive the organizational innovations that they need on a daily basis? One of the objectives of this research is to evaluate the effect of various managerial strategies (integration, involvement, economic strategies) on journalist representations.

We present the results of an extensive ethnographic survey conducted between the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010, in 11 newsrooms of French-speaking Belgium. During this survey, 101 interviews with journalists were gathered. We applied a thematic analysis to this extensive empirical material (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2003) and descriptive counts by cross-tabulation with the Nvivo software.

This method shows that some strategic options have managed to improve the consideration of Web teams or weaken some resistance towards collaborative work with the Web. However, whether working online or offline, journalists appear particularly critical in regard to Webjournalism. All of them keep their distance from Web team work, which is overwhelmingly considered unrewarding.

This intense criticism by journalists is interpreted as one of the main drivers of the permanent reshaping of journalism, on two levels. Firstly, criticism is a possible fulcrum for editorial reorganization. It is by taking into account journalistic criticism that the management can establish convergence according to methods that will be judged more balanced by the journalists concerned. Secondly, criticism is a node that allows the issue of identity to be addressed. Once integrated and implemented in a dialog process, criticism indeed allows journalists to rethink and constantly reassess the reasons for their commitment to their profession.

**Keywords:** Biography, literary perceptive, Literary Journalism, genre, 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Following a comprehensive approach, this article focuses on the representations of journalists and their reactions to the methods of implementing online journalism and a convergent organisation method in newsrooms. We have decided to focus on this theme because from a large ethnographic survey conducted in 11 French-speaking Belgian newsrooms, between the end of 2009 and the start of 2010, we found that a great number of journalists were particularly disheartened, disillusioned over their work environment or changes in their profession. Given the virulence of certain views, it is hard not to wonder about the morale of the professionals, or even about their satisfaction in regard to the strategic manoeuvres of their leaders.

### State of the art

Literature tends to describe journalists as relatively satisfied with their professional activities. It nevertheless, paradoxically, paints the portrait of a disillusioned profession. In 1970 the Davey Report described Canadian newsrooms as "*bone yards of broken dreams*" (mentioned by Leclerc, 1991, p. 199). A little over ten years later, the Kent Report (1981) indicated that the situation has worsened: the bone yard has become a 'necropolis', while the quality of journalistic productions is decreasing. Despite these 'mortuary terms' used by some researchers, other studies (Pritchard and Sauvageau, 1999) describe local journalists as being mostly satisfied (39% said that they were very satisfied and 48% said that they were somewhat satisfied).

There is, to our knowledge, only one study dealing with our own field of inquiry, that of C. Fion (2008) regarding the morale of French-speaking Belgian journalists. It showed that 47% of journalists are satisfied with their work conditions. 80% of them also believe that working conditions are deteriorating over time. Compared to this 'reference' study for French-speaking Belgium, French journalists seem to be a little more satisfied with their working conditions (70% satisfied French journalists, against 53.3% satisfied Belgian journalists). It is, on the other hand, the representation of the ethics and the deontology of journalism that raises questions, in France, while only 68% of the journalists interviewed consider that they do their job 'well' (against 81% of Belgian respondents) (Barometer CSA, 2007). A study by the University of Ghent (De Keyser et al., 2008) depicts journalists who are somewhat satisfied with their profession. However, the structure of the study, which evaluates the satisfaction of journalists with some aspects of their trade only, rather than with their trade as a whole, makes it difficult to compare it with the two studies above. Another survey, slightly more recent, focuses on the morale of Australian journalists (Este et al., 2010, p. 18). It reveals that, after the great waves of dismissals in 2008, the morale of journalists has tended to lift slightly. Likewise, journalistic representations relating to career opportunities are mostly positive (48%).

Some studies postulate a link between the decline/improvement of journalist satisfaction with their profession and the organizational changes related to the emergence of new media. Stamm and Underwood (1993) showed that, though regulation changes within a newsroom affect the satisfaction of journalists with their work, this is primarily because they affect the quality of the journalism produced in the mentioned newsrooms. In other words, the more the quality of the journalism produced increases, the more the satisfaction with work also increases.

But what could these changes implemented in newsrooms, which would influence the quality of journalism and, by extension - if one believes Stamm and Underwood - the satisfaction of professionals with their job, be? Some courses of action must be sought in studies on convergence. Many researchers indeed revealed that the implementation of a convergence organisation - which creates synergies between the

representatives of the various supports in a multi-media newsroom – had an effect on the quality of the journalism produced.

The study carried out by Jane B. Singer (2004), for example, showed that convergence complicates the work of journalists considerably. Nevertheless, none of them has gone so far as to claim that convergence leads to poor quality journalism. Edgar Huang and his colleagues (2004), following their investigation at the *The Tampa Tribune*, consider that the quality of journalism is deteriorating precisely because convergence is not the predominant organisation method. T. Bettels (2005) noted, in the newsrooms of the *Main Post* (Germany) and *Nordjyske Medier* (Denemark), that 60% of the journalists interviewed consider that the quality of their journalism has improved by implementing a convergent organisation. Work satisfaction also increased significantly. Josep Micó, Pere Masip and Suzana Barbossa (2009) indicate that, though convergence brings some advantages, it also involves a standardization of views, a loss of pluralism, a declining quality of journalism, the downsizing of newsroom staff and denial of the increase in additional workloads. M.-F. Bernier (2008) finally assumes that the convergent work method is not necessarily harmful to journalism, but that it is necessary to ensure the independence of the journalists and limit the financial appetites of press shareholders.

It seems, ultimately, that most studies simply assess the effects of a convergence process, designed as a single unit, on the quality of journalism. We would like to take this reasoning further, by dissecting the various strategies at work within the convergence process and their respective effect on the representations that professionals maintain in regard to Webjournalism.

### **Convergence analysed in three steps**

For our purposes, we have divided this convergence process into three main managerial strategies<sup>1</sup> (summarised in the left column of the table below), each of which has many concrete 'incarnations', observed in the French-speaking Belgian field (summarised in the right column of the table below).

<sup>1</sup> M. Palacios and J. Diaz-Noci also define convergence in terms of strategies: "*In the professional field, convergence results in different strategies for making the maximum use of news material, which then appears in different media. Such strategies range from forms of cooperation between the newsrooms of different media to the creation of integrated multimedia newsrooms ...*" (2009, p. 112).

<b>Integration model</b>	Separation <sup>2</sup> Merging (or integration) <sup>3</sup>
<b>Involvement model</b>	No request <sup>4</sup> Incitation <sup>5</sup> Effective and controlled request <sup>6</sup> Obligation <sup>7</sup>
<b>Economic model</b>	Advertising <sup>8</sup> Freemium <sup>9</sup>

This division will allow us to distinguish the various journalistic subgroups according to the appropriation methods of a convergent organisation method implemented in their company and to compare their views.

### The effect of convergence strategies on the representations

How is webjournalistic reasoning and that of Web journalists being integrated in French-speaking Belgian newsrooms? In a heuristic perspective, we have focused our analysis of interviews and observations in newsrooms on the influence of managerial strategies (integration, involvement and economic models) on the practices and representations of the journalists, whether they work for the Web, or whether they come from the so called 'traditional' media<sup>10</sup>. Let us summarise the main courses of action for responding to these questions, by structuring our proposal according to the various managerial strategies considered. Before presenting the results, we will perform a brief methodological detour.

### Methodological digression

This article is the result of a survey inspired both on ethnographic research on journalistic production (Domingo and Paterson, 2008) and on the *Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 2010). Between the end of 2009 and the start of 2010, we spent 56 days immersed in 11 newsrooms of French-speaking Belgium:

<sup>2</sup> We consider that traditional and Web newsrooms are separate when they are not gathered in a same space allowing visual contact.

<sup>3</sup> Here we are referring to the 'physical' integration of a newsroom (often the Web newsroom) into another (the historical newsroom of a media brand).

<sup>4</sup> In this case, management does not urge traditional journalists to work with the teams that feed the website.

<sup>5</sup> We consider that management merely encourages collaboration, since it does not control the efforts of each traditional journalist regarding the Web explicitly and in a general way. This does not prevent explicit and controlled requests from being issued occasionally, to some journalists, which was the case at the *Soir*, at *RTBF* or even at *Éditions de l'Avenir*, for example.

<sup>6</sup> We consider that the management conducts a 'controlled application' when all journalists of a traditional newsroom are expected to contribute to the Web. The system implemented assumes that all journalists should be involved with the Web. However, the most reluctant are still able to escape.

<sup>7</sup> We consider that the 'obligation' stage has been reached when the structure put in place within a media company is such, that no journalist can avoid his or her obligations to the Web anymore.

<sup>8</sup> Economic model in which Internet activities are mainly financed by advertising

<sup>9</sup> 'Mixed' economic model, or 'freemium' according to the term popularized by Chris Anderson (Couve and Kayser-Bril, 2010, p. 11), where Internet activities are financed both by the user (through paid subscription packages for example) and by advertisers. According to this model, part of the site is free to access. However, only subscribers have access to high reader-value items, such as exclusive or analytical papers that are 'locked'.

<sup>10</sup> We use the term 'traditional' to describe journalists who are still working primarily in routines associated with pre-internet media. This term is destined to become obsolete, since it is increasingly expected of journalists to work for the digital media associated with their brand, in addition to their first media. The terms are thus valid strictly within the framework of this survey, as a native category that reflects a partition made by actors in the field.

- *Le Soir* (quality paper)
- *La Libre Belge/La Dernière Heure* (quality/popular papers)
- *Les Éditions de l'Avenir* (local newspapers)
- *Sudpresse* (local newspapers)
- *Le Vif/L'Express* (weekly newspaper)
- *7sur7* (Web only)
- *L'Écho* (economic newspaper)
- *RTBF* (Public Radio Television)
- *RTL* (Private Radio Television)
- *Belga* (News agency)
- *BFM Today* (Ex-radio that became Web-only and that ceases its activity in 2010).

In this multiple field, we also collected some internal documents and carried out 101 semi-structured interviews, mainly with journalists (Web, printed press, radio and television) but also with some other actors of the professional press (community leaders, newsroom officials, etc.). All of this empirical material, whether written materials (books comments, internal documents), or sound materials (interviews), was processed with the qualitative analysis software Nvivo 8. We have applied a thematic analysis (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2003).

In addition to this extensive qualitative work, we also wanted to carry out further investigation through inter-group comparisons (Unrug, 1974, p. 12). These comparisons are aimed at evaluating the influence of variables (in this case, the three managerial strategies) on the views of professionals regarding the same theme (in this case, online journalism and its practice). These comparison operations were performed by matrix-encoded requests with the software Nvivo 8, from 94 individual interviews<sup>11</sup>. These requests make it possible to relate these codes to each other or, in this case, the variables associated with the interviewees to the themes that they address. This process allowed us to obtain quantitative information on our survey instrument.

Here, we are using the term 'quantitative' in a restricted sense, not a statistical sense, because we only performed descriptive counts. Indeed, the data gathered within the framework of this study was, in the beginning, gathered in a qualitative perspective (snowball sample, semi-structured interviews adapted to the profiles of players, etc.). However, the great number of interviews made have allowed, *in fine*, some quantified information on journalist representations to be contributed. We will therefore consider them as exploratory data. At first, we compared inter-groups using the speaking-time devoted to positive or negative aspects of Webjournalism as the unit of measure. Then, we performed additional analysis based

<sup>11</sup> We were unable to work on 101 interviews in this phase of the analysis, because they were contaminated. For example, because they were interviews with two voices, not individual interviews.

on the number of positive/negative arguments mentioned for each variable value (for example 'separation' and 'merging' values for the 'integration strategy' variable). This double exercise of descriptive counts must be considered as an operation intended to contribute a new point of view on a body of quantitative data.<sup>12</sup> Let us be content here with giving just the main results of our survey.

### Integration strategies

From the journalistic representations analysed, it seems that a physically integrated newsroom<sup>13</sup> will lead to a better chance of contacts and exchanges between the professionals from the various media supports. However, true collaborations do not naturally proliferate due to the physical proximity of newsrooms. On the contrary, resistance towards this multi-media or collaborative work method is proliferating. We revealed 23 concrete forms (Degand, 2012). Traditional journalists keep their distances from Webjournalism, because they perceive a menace from it, both for maintaining a quality journalistic production and also for their individual professional comfort.

Thus, relations between Web teams and 'traditional' teams are born from the physical integration of the newsrooms. These relationships are forged naturally, based on personal affinities. However, considering the overall situation, it appears that the old walls separating newsrooms may remain, symbolically. Most traditional journalists, though they may have sympathy for Web teams, do not want to be assimilated to these.

It appears that traditional journalists get a better picture of Web team activities through proximity. Reciprocal representations thus change thanks to proximity. According to some online journalists interviewed, merging allows traditional journalists to note that Web teams perform substantial and intense work, which leads to greater consideration for the work carried out. "*Being in the middle of the newsroom makes a lot of things easier because they [paper journalists] can now put a face on the names of [online] journalists. They take the full measure of the work we do. They realise that it's not that easy*" (Web Journalist, *Le Soir*, June 2009). However, traditional journalists note at the same time that Web journalists do not leave the newsroom, they just do desk work, which is unenviable. The lack of means allocated to the Web teams is obvious to everyone's eyes. The physical integration of the newsrooms will thus confront traditional journalists with a form of journalism that they do not want *a priori* to resemble: a precarious journalism deemed to be of 'less quality' due to being more focused on content recomposition than on their own writing, more focused on 'rehashing' than on field investigation.

<sup>12</sup> For more details on our methods, we can only refer to our doctoral thesis (Degand, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> In general, it is the web newsroom that is integrated into an existing newsroom.

This physical proximity will thus stir an isolationist reasoning in traditional journalists. These express their views using discursive strategies of sustainability and defending a strictly traditional journalistic identity, excluding any other emerging identity form, which is perceived as a menace.

Considering now the ratio between the positive and negative views regarding Webjournalism and its practice, we note that there is no significant difference between separate and integrated newsrooms.

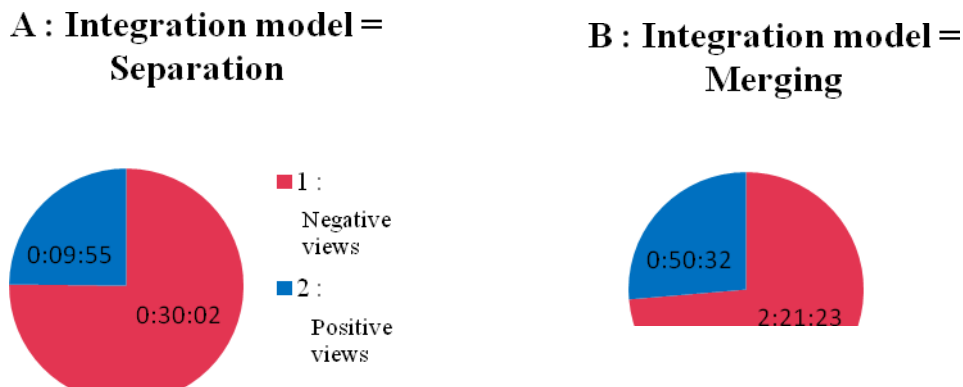


Figure 1: Amount of time (h:m:s) during which journalists speak in positive terms or negative terms in regard to Webjournalism and to the way in which their company undertakes it. Distributing the representations is proposed (n = 94) for each value of the 'Integration strategy' variable.

Our second undertaking of descriptive counts, based on the number of negative and positive elements used to justify the appreciation or depreciation of Webjournalism, established that journalists in merged newsrooms attribute a greater number of appreciative elements to Webjournalism and to its practice, than do journalists in separate newsrooms<sup>14</sup>. However, at the same time, they also express a greater amount of criticism of Webjournalism<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> See the results in the last row of the first table. In merged newsrooms, people mention an average of 0.81 positive aspects of webjournalism, which is more than in separate newsrooms (0.37 positive aspects cited)  
<sup>15</sup> See the last row of the second table.

	<i>7sur7</i>	<i>La Libre</i>	<i>D H</i>	<i>Le Soir</i>	<i>RTB F</i>	<i>RTL</i>	<i>Le Vif</i>	<i>Ed. l' Avenir</i>	<i>Sud-presse</i>	<i>Belga</i>	<i>L'Écho</i>
TOTAL Webjournalism 'positive' aspects cited per newsroom	3	4	2	7	5	13	6	10	4	1	10
<b>Involvement strategy</b>	NO REQUEST $3 \div 3 = 1$	INCITATION $49 \div 61 = 0.80$							EFFECTIVE AND CONTROLLED REQUEST $5 \div 16 = 0.31$		OBLIGATION $10 \div 13 = 0.77$
<b>Economic model</b>	ADVERTISING $55 \div 74 = 0.74$										FREEMIUM $10 \div 11 = 0.91$
<b>Integration strategy</b>	SEPARATION $9 \div 24 = 0.37$			MERGING (or physical integration) $56 \div 69 = 0.81$							

Table 1: Calculation of the total number of positive aspects of Webjournalism cited in each newsroom and for each variable value. This total is then divided by the number of individuals coded into each value, in order to obtain a proportional total number of positive aspects cited *per capita* within each strategic option (n= 94).

	<i>7sur7</i>	<i>La Libre</i>	<i>D H</i>	<i>Le Soir</i>	<i>RTB F</i>	<i>RTL</i>	<i>Le Vif</i>	<i>Ed. l' Avenir</i>	<i>Sud-presse</i>	<i>Belga</i>	<i>L'Écho</i>
TOTAL Webjournalism 'negative' aspects cited per newsroom	3	14	5	12	22	15	7	25	8	3	16
<b>Involvement strategy</b>	NO REQUEST $3 \div 3 = 1$	INCITATION $100 \div 61 = 1.64$							EFFECTIVE AND CONTROLLED REQUEST $11 \div 16 = 0.69$		OBLIGATION $16 \div 13 = 1.23$
<b>Economic model</b>	ADVERTISING $103 \div 74 = 1.39$										FREEMIUM $16 \div 11 = 1.45$
<b>Integration strategy</b>	SEPARATION $22 \div 24 = 0.91$			MERGING (or physical integration) $108 \div 69 = 1.56$							

Table 2: Calculation of the total number of negative aspects of Webjournalism cited in each newsroom and for each variable value. This total is then divided by the number of individuals coded into each value, in order to obtain a proportional total number of negative aspects cited *per capita* within each strategic option (n = 94).

Again, it seems like the merging of Web newsrooms and traditional newsrooms does not necessarily lead to a greater satisfaction with the Web support, but rather to a better knowledge of the latter, both as regards its faults and its virtues. The critical eye on Webjournalism is becoming more piercing. However, this better knowledge does not necessarily lead to an increased willingness to collaborate, or to a more positive representation of Webjournalism.



Conversely, in the case of separate newsrooms, ignorance and distance prevail. They may eventually cause concern on the part of journalists, who feel that they are lagging behind in regard to the organisation methods established in competing media brand. For example, within *La Libre Belge*, traditional journalists have, following editorial conflicts with the Web, expressed the desire to integrate a Web support representative in the Society of Paper Editors. There was a desire not to 'lose the grip'<sup>16</sup> on the online media. Traditional journalists can thus, even in separate newsrooms, be more 'concerned' by the Web support.

### **Involvement strategies**

Our survey revealed that, in newsrooms where no collaborative work request between representatives of the various supports (or professional segments) is made, no collaboration is implemented spontaneously. Cross-media collaboration does not just arise from the will of journalists. In newsrooms where the involvement strategy consists in 'inciting', or making an 'effective and controlled request' collaborations are again slow to emerge. It seems like the actors are in a conventional crisis situation, that is, according to Pierre-Yves Gomez, "*a situation such, that actors [...] show uncertainty, the feeling that things are not what they should 'normally' be. This 'normally' assumes that there is a default rule about what is 'normal' and that it does not work very well*" (2003, p. 266).

In other terms, traditional journalists know that they are supposed to collaborate with Web teams and transmit content to them, but these tasks are additional to those that they must perform for their first media. They are thus not always able to meet the demands of Web teams. Thus, two conventions coexist, without either of the two managing to take the place of the other and to establish itself as the only reference convention. On the one hand, some actors are involved in a convention B, where collaborations are regular. On the other hand, journalists continue to refer to a convention A, where cross-media collaborations do not exist. A feeling of uncertainty and injustice is arising. It is leading to inhibition. And to justify this reluctance, traditional journalists implement a rhetoric consisting of arguments of resistance to change. For instance, some journalists say that they would be willing to opt for convention B, to collaborate with online teams, but they don't because they are afraid of being assailed by requests if they volunteer too much. Others argue, for example, that they have no time to collaborate, that they don't have the technical competencies required or that the editorial line of the web is not clear enough (Degand, 2012, pp. 243-248). In this uncertain configuration, collaborations thus remain timid.

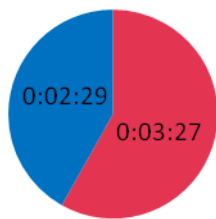
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<sup>16</sup> Today, the web manager takes part in the paper newsroom meeting on a daily basis.

However, we observed a newsroom where a specific organisation model managed to annihilate most of the resistance mentioned. This is the Web position rotation model implemented at *L'Écho*, which combines an integration-by-merging strategy, an involvement-by-obligation strategy and a freemium economic model. Because this model is essentially egalitarian, but also because it can retrieve content with high added value for the Web and thus provide quality online journalism, it was very well received by the journalists involved. Because this model reinstates the Web teams in the various newsroom services and by extension, in activity cycles symbolically valued by the journalistic profession (reporting, field work, analysis, article writing and signing, etc.) while placing all journalists on equal footing<sup>17</sup>, it pacifies the relations between professional segments. A form of justice seems to have been re-established, in the eyes of Web journalists. In addition to this specific case study, we identified a widely accepted representation within the population surveyed: the more a journalist collaborates with the Web teams, the more he or she will consider Web teams. Consideration thus goes hand in hand with an understanding of the reasoning behind the practice of Webjournalism. In addition, according to the journalistic views analysed, it is the actors who are 'obliged' to collaborate with the Web who will develop the best knowledge of the reasoning behind Webjournalism and the highest consideration for teams who work on the Internet.

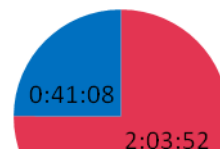
However, the descriptive counts that we have carried out in this regard have disrupted these qualitative conclusions. Journalists from media whose involvement strategy is that of obligation do not provide more positive views in regard to Webjournalism.

**1: Involvement model =  
No request**



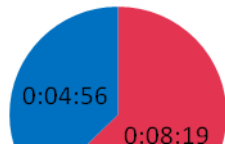
■ A :  
Negative views  
■ B :  
Positive views

**2: Involvement model =  
Incitation**



<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, it seems difficult to believe in a newsroom model where relationships would be 'purely egalitarian'. Such a model would, in addition, probably seem unjust in the eyes of the most deserving or most experienced journalists.

**3: Involvement model =  
Effective and controlled  
request**



**4: Involvement model =  
Obligation**

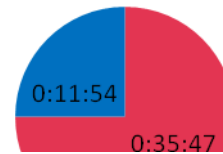


Figure 2: Amount of time (h:m:s) during which journalists speak in positive terms or negative terms in regard to Webjournalism and to the way in which their company undertakes it. Distributing the representations is proposed (n= 94) for each value of the 'Involvement strategy' attribute.

On the contrary, they even speak slightly more negatively than journalists from other values of the involvement strategy variable (see Table 1 and 2). This result thus does not confirm our empirical intuition, which assumed that the involvement-by-'obligation' strategy would be a way to increase their satisfaction regarding Webjournalism.

We finally consider that, though the involvement regarding Webjournalism becomes obligatory, there is no longer room for doubt. This allows uncertainty to be reduced and the conventional crisis to be prevented, as well as the inhibition that it entails. On the other hand, the representations themselves do not change positively as uncertainty is reduced. Satisfaction regarding Webjournalism is slow to grow. Finally, the link between the obligation strategy and the improvement of representations with respect to Webjournalism seems difficult to establish. This does not mean that it does not exist. Maybe it is a case of simply giving the representations time to change in the wake of involvement strategies. Maybe it is a case of also considering, as the views of journalists seemed to indicate, that it is the collaboration with the Web that improves the representation regarding Web, whatever the involvement strategy used. This question remains unanswered for now. It should be taken up again in a purely qualitative survey going beyond an exploratory objective.

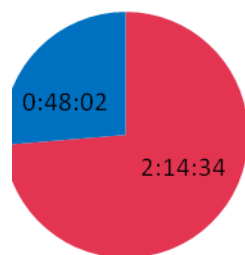
### Economic strategies

Within the framework of this research, we have mainly studied newsrooms whose online information sites were financed primarily by advertising and not by the Internet user. Certainly, many newsrooms within this category receive aid for the press or public subsidies. However, among the newsrooms studied, only *L'Écho* opted for a model known as 'mixed' or 'freemium', in which the user must pay for access to some contents of the website, set as 'locked'.

The journalistic views analysed reveal a widely shared representation: some resistance towards the cross-media work method is weakening, thanks to the implementation of a freemium model. For example, resistance consisting in refusing to deliver scoops or contents with high reader-value on a free support no longer persist if Internet users must pay to consult this information. The freemium model thus somehow announces the abolition of information-withholding by the 'traditional' newsroom. Competition between professional segments is decreasing.

As regards the vision of Webjournalism, it also seems to be improving, but in a very minimal way. Our first inter-group comparison, based on conversation times, showed a faint difference between the negative and positive views in regard to Webjournalism in the two attribute values 'freemium' and 'advertising'.

#### 1 : Economic model = Advertising



■ A :  
Negative  
views  
■ B:  
Positive  
views

#### 2 : Economic model = Freemium

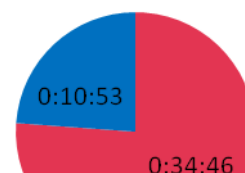


Figure 3: Amount of time (h:m:s) during which journalists speak in positive terms or negative terms in regard to Webjournalism and to the way in which their company undertakes it. For each value of the attribute 'Economic model', distributing the representations is proposed (n = 94).

The second analysis shows, on the other hand, that journalists whose media brand adopts a freemium model speak proportionally more of positive aspects of Webjournalism. However, they are also slightly more critical of it (see Tables 1 and 2).

We could conclude from this that the representations always change more slowly than their related practices and that it is thus normal that the change of economic model does not result directly in significant improvement of the representations regarding Webjournalism.

In reality, it was precisely at the time when *L'Écho* was implementing this freemium model that we observed and analysed the relations between professional segments and their reciprocal representations. An improvement of the representation regarding Webjournalism is thus not reflected (yet) in the views considered as a whole, through descriptive counts. To check the empirically based intuition according to which the freemium model induces an improvement of the representations regarding Webjournalism, maybe it would be appropriate to give the representations the time to change in the wake of the strategies. From this point of view, we envisage a survey, purely quantitative this time, which would allow the possible link between the implementation of a freemium model and the improvement of the representations regarding Webjournalism and its practice to be clarified.

### **Critical representations**

Finally, some policy options, such as integration, help to improve consideration for Web teams. Others, like involvement-by-requirement or the choice of the freemium model would eliminate some resistance towards requests for collaboration with Web teams. However, whatever the strategic option implemented, journalists maintain an extremely critical point of view in regard to Webjournalism.

From the pie charts, we can see that journalists speak proportionally longer in negative terms than in positive terms in regard to Webjournalism. We further noted 22 categories of positive arguments, against 30 categories of negative arguments. These positive and negative arguments also fit into a set of critical views, both endogenous and exogenous. Thus, from their point of view, which is external to the actual Web newsrooms, traditional journalists offer no less than 23 resistance arguments against requests for collaboration with the Web (Degand, 2012, pp. 243-248). We cannot develop all of these categories of arguments within the context of this article, but it is important to note how inventive journalists can be when it comes to justifying their reluctance to participate in Webjournalism.

In terms of endogenous critics, a set of critical views or attitudes displayed by the Web journalists themselves must be mentioned. From an empirical point of view we found, for example, that most of the journalists who work in Web teams found themselves in this position due to a combination of circumstances,

not because they truly wanted to work on the Web. From the outset, the Web is often presented as a 'second choice' support.

The way in which Web journalists define themselves is also indicative of their social representation of Webjournalism. Most of them define themselves as full journalists. They emphasise their information selection tasks *"I am not a headline paster like some may think a priori [...] There is journalistic work!"* (Web journalist, *Les Éditions de l'Avenir*, October 2009). At the same time, they are quick to denounce whatever does not match their professional ideals in their actual practices. One of them told us for example: *"I do small-time journalism [...] I must specify that I am not a great reporter. It's still a function that is a little ... even though I don't think that the online press is inferior to the printed press, this is not really a rewarding function. We put contents online..."* (Web journalist, *Le Vif L'Express*, March 2009).

Finally, journalists often adopt a posture of detachment from their own practices. When they select lighter or more enticing information, for example, they distance themselves, either justifying their choice with public interest, or by taking on a self-mocking attitude. In some newsrooms, the critical attitude has sometimes led to the resignation of Web journalists, who considered that the work requested did not match their expectations and abilities.

### **Journalist criticism in context**

This research, based on the French-speaking Belgian field, leads us to report disenchantment with online journalism. At a first glance, this seems to starkly contrast with the 'delighted' professional views extolling the virtues of the Web and its potential. Does this mean that the 'delighted' views seek to camouflage reality? It should rather be seen as a reflection of fragmented and contrasting reality.

We have painted the portrait of a French-speaking Belgian Web journalist discredited within his professional area, where he performs tasks ranging from outright headline copy-pasting to further editing of journalistic content. To summarise the representation of Webjournalism such as it has been shown to us, we make the interpretative assumption of a journalism that is both excluded and exposed. It is 'excluded', first of all, from the tasks that are symbolically valued within the profession (field investigation, analysis, own writing, vedettisation or visibility granted by the microphone, the camera or signature, contact with personalities to be interviewed). Web journalists are also excluded from having some privileges, from some statuses (including salary) and from some places (editorial meetings for example). This protean exclusion generates a feeling of frustration in the journalists interviewed.

Web journalists are also particularly 'exposed'. Since they are not in the field and since they have imperatives of immediacy, they are at risk of error or inaccuracy. In addition, they are exposed to ridicule

by their colleagues when they select information based upon public interest, as shown by means of audience rating software. Finally, they are exposed to the virulence of Internet users' views when they moderate chats and other discussion venues. In brief, they are exposed to criticism in general.

However, this quick summary must not make us forget that there are various forms of online journalism, just as there are, in a general way, various forms of journalism.

### ***Online journalisms***

Various types of Web journalists coexist already in the French-speaking Belgian field. Some positions actually hinge on the edition of already existing articles and agency headlines. Others have, among their prerogatives, article enrichment and reader-value creation tasks, as well as making original productions for the site. Finally, Web reporting activities are growing slowly, although it is still rare, in the field studied, for Web journalists to be reporters exclusively. Positions specifically dedicated to community leadership are also added, increasingly often, to these profiles.

Live news coverage activities are being included among the tasks of these various Web journalist profiles, in an increasingly clear way, through tools such as *Cover it live*, *Twitter* or *Storify*. The practices of Web journalists are constantly changing. Telephone interviews conducted in January 2012 with the people in charge of the various newsrooms studied allowed us, in particular, to note a generalised increase in the original production of contents specifically intended for the Web. The teams themselves have changed between our 2009-2010 immersions and the data updating carried out in 2012: additional human resources were acquired in most Web newsrooms. Changes, both in mentalities and structures, are undeniable.

Nevertheless, the French-speaking Belgian field always seems to lag behind as regards advances in Webjournalism, as can be observed in neighbouring countries. In France for example, experiences with *datajournalism* (*OWNI*), participative journalism (*Rue 89*, *Citizenside*) or even Webdocumentaries are much more developed than in Belgium. They could well generate a much more positive global representation of Webjournalism.

We could then reinterpret our disillusioned description of the online press of French-speaking Belgium in a more encompassing framework, which would hinge various forms of journalism around an axis that contrasts, on the one hand, a prestigious side (A survey and analysis journalism carried out in public interest, essential for maintaining democracy and whose production is expensive) and, on the other hand, a devalued side (which at the same time encompasses the low-cost journalism carried out and more sensationalist forms of journalism). the Webjournalism experiences that we have been able to observe in French-speaking Belgium should undoubtedly be classified rather in this devalued side. It is an element that should be kept in mind to understand our analysis of the major role of criticism expressed by journalists.

### **The role of journalistic criticism**

Our spotlight on criticism recalls the work of L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello, who stressed the essential role of criticism in the gradual reshaping of capitalism. According to their analysis, criticism requires the proponents of capitalism to defend it in terms of common good – and thus incorporate the values for which it is criticized (1999, p. 73) – or to transform it, which has the effect of disarming the criticism. They find that, although capitalism has survived over many decades, it is because it has managed to integrate criticism. Capitalism would thus have an incredible ability to constantly be reshaped, in a mould better suited for a given period.

Journalism seems to share this malleability with capitalism. This perspective recalls the notion of the perpetual "*reinvention*" of journalism (Deuze, 2005; Ringoot and Utard, 2005) and, without any further doubt, the assumption of ductility of the journalistic field put forward by Benoît Grevisse: "*In geology, a rock is called ductile when it can be deformed without breaking. Breaking is possible. However, it only occurs when a defect, a crack, or a cavity become significant and spread. [...] Journalism is ductile because it is its nature to practice submerged in the tension between the established powers, economic constraints and responsibility as regards the public. Ontologically, it cannot even aspire to an established order*" (2010, pp. 47-48).

In this perspective, criticism appears as the discursive expression of this perpetual search for a balance that is never achieved. In this, criticism is also socially admitted within the journalistic profession. It would even be a 'conventionalised' practice that plays a constitutive role in the perpetual reshaping of journalism, at least on two levels: that of the work organisation and that of the identity per se of the journalists.

### ***Criticism as the basis for editorial reorganization***

Journalists, in their critical views, will help to shape journalism. Based on the criticism made by journalists, newsroom management can achieve a situation which will be judged to be fairer<sup>18</sup> by the journalists involved. This is the case of the strategy established at *L'Écho* which finally reinserted Web journalists into the various newsroom departments, thus integrating them into tasks that are symbolically valued within the profession, while creating an egalitarian collaboration framework<sup>19</sup> regarding the Web. Likewise, some newsrooms, such as *Les Éditions de l'Avenir*, have hired additional staff. Others, such as that of *RTL*, implemented a rotation between the various Web positions (editing, enrichment, community leadership), in such a way as to diversify the work of Web journalists. In these examples, the situation is deemed by journalists to be more balanced.

<sup>18</sup> "*Criticism reveals what transgresses the law in these events. This consists particularly in revealing the hidden forces that interfere with the event ...*" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999, p. 656).

<sup>19</sup> It must nevertheless be noted that, in the situation described at the beginning of 2012, the entire newsroom is theoretically on an equal footing due to the implementation of the Web position rotation. However, in fact, some people will be more involved than others.



Other less fortunate paths, could however be taken. It would be possible for journalistic criticism to not be integrated and not be heard, but rather diverted<sup>20</sup>. Faced with journalist criticisms, media owners could, for example, be tempted to hire low-skilled staff to perform Web journalist tasks, so that this staff can no longer claim a greater distancing from market values or an increase in symbolically valued tasks (reporting, investigation, writing, etc.), which represent a greater investment than the processing of headlines and recomposition of news gathered from the Web. This is certainly a possibility that - on a small competitive market like that of French-speaking Belgium - cannot be neglected if it is to consider future courses of action.

### ***Criticism as an identity node***

Criticism seems, in addition, to affect the identity reshaping of the Web journalist group. We could forward the following interpretative hypothesis: it is through criticism that journalists distance themselves from 'what they are not' or 'what they do not want to be'. They point at alterity to assert what they 'want to be', since, in the words of C. Dubar (2000, p. 3), there is no identity without alterity. By criticising, journalists thus reject some practices at the margins of the profession that are collectively devalued, such as 'rehashed' journalism or the selection of light information.

In response to this gradual exclusion, Web journalists have no choice but to justify themselves and begin a new identity based on new values, such as humility. *"One is no longer out in the field and one loses one's signature [...] it's hard at the beginning to lose some of the identity that you believed to be in your signature [...] The relation with the information changes, because it isn't information that you found directly, it isn't information that comes from you. So, again, it's a humbling experience. It is a person who is out in the field and who is transmitting it. Thus, I think we must respect these sources"* (Web journalist, *Le Soir*, June 2009). This citation illustrates a typical example of identity reshaping. It also reminds the journalist explicitly of the 'loss' of identity that he or she lived when going from paper to the Web. In addition, it shows the integration of criticism (the criticism relating to the lack of field work, in this case) and responds to it.

Likewise, we saw Web journalists respond to criticism regarding their work, sloppy or sensationalistic, sometimes offering practical arguments (*"We have no time"*, *"they do not realise"*), sometimes value adjustments (they will, for example, insist on the importance of selecting information according to the effective interest of the reader, rather than to public interest or the 'presumed' interest of the reader). These discursive justifications are consistent with a position explicitly distanced from their own practices.

<sup>20</sup> "The greater the tension of the events becomes under the effect of criticism, the greater the temptation to circumvent them will be" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999, p. 661)

An assertion of identity, or an "*identity per se*" can be perceived through these representations (Dubar, 2000, p. 4) made by journalists as they justify their views. This assertion of identity is a strategy as defined by A. Strauss (1992), in regard to views, intended to reduce the gap between identity traits that are attributed (by others) and those that are incorporated (by the individual). In this case, we have identified two goals, almost antagonistic, that Web journalists pursue when responding to the criticism that they may receive. On the one hand, they defend themselves from the criticism attempting to justify their practices and to legitimise, quite simply, their place in the journalistic profession. On the other hand, they criticise themselves, calling implicitly for the refinancing and improvement of Webjournalism production conditions. These discursive strategies reflect a webjournalistic identity and, more widely, a journalistic identity, continually being reinterpreted, in a dialog process (Le Cam, 2010, p. 13) where the views respond to each other. Criticism thus allows journalists to rethink, to reaffirm and constantly reassess the reasons for their involvement in the journalistic profession.

### **Conclusion**

In our analysis of the impact of the various strategic options related to convergence, we did not expect to find, regardless of the strategic option considered, such a powerful critical activity and self-criticism from the journalists. To think more closely about it, this criticism is actually very consistent with the professional mission of journalists who often, in the exercise of their functions, must criticise works, cultural events, dominant views, sources or political decisions.

It thus seems logical, and even beneficial, that journalists transfer this sharp eye onto their own activity. The role of this criticism seems to be to establish a more balanced sharing of power within newsrooms. It also allows individuals to think and accept themselves as journalists even though, in their practice, they distance themselves from their professional ideal.

It would be good to question the presence of this (self)-criticism activity in various journalistic contexts. Within the framework of this research, we are mainly interested in the criticism made of Belgian Webjournalism which, at this stage, would belong to the devalued side of the profession. In this context, criticism is expressed by this side regarding itself (self-criticism) but also by a more prestigious side (criticism of Web teams by traditional journalists). However, does this prestigious side direct the same type of criticism towards its own work? Is criticism expressed with equal force in all journalistic circles? There are promising research perspectives here to enlighten the issue of the professional identity of journalists.

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