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## Journalists’ professional identity: new challenges to an old quest

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### ***Abstract***

The efforts made by journalists, in different countries and within different social and historical contexts, to have their ‘craft’ or ‘occupation’ recognized as a true ‘profession’, have always been somehow contradictory and ambiguous. The appeal of professionalism still divides opinions inside the professional group itself, with some voices claiming for a more demanding set of conditions to enter and work in this activity (for example, a University degree and stronger accountability mechanisms), and other voices insisting that it must be an ‘open’ job in order to guarantee the universal right to freedom of expression. Actually, the journalists’ professional group seems very often to claim the benefits and privileges of being legally treated as a ‘profession’, but doesn’t look equally demanding when it comes to the responsibilities and duties implied by such a status.

The activity of gathering and disseminating news and information in the public sphere – which was some kind of a monopoly in the journalists’ hands – has, in the meantime, become accessible to almost everyone, everywhere, thanks to the Internet and the digital technologies. Within this context, new questions seem to challenge the very definition of a journalist or, at least, the core elements that should differentiate his/her professional identity from a multiplicity of other practitioners in the open field of public communication. And that, as we try to discuss in this paper, could bring us back to a kind of reviewed professionalism.

### ***Keywords***

Journalism, journalists, professional identity, professionalism

## 1. Introduction

The journalists' professionalization process has been difficult, ambiguous and often contradictory in its own terms. It is a relatively recent process – it occurred basically in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and, as many voices argue, it is still fragile and incomplete.

In the beginning of the press, and particularly of the 'newspapers', there were no journalists, because there was no news<sup>1</sup>. Those printed sheets that increasingly developed during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, first on a monthly or weekly basis, were mostly devoted to literary creation and political debate. They were closer to books, although easier to print and to disseminate. During this phase of the so-called 'opinion journalism' (Charron & Bonville, 2004), newspapers were written by literary writers, by political actors and by literate amateurs who enjoyed the possibility of spreading their ideas or creations among a larger audience (although the bare ability to read wasn't actually so widespread). People who did this usually didn't do it for a living; it was not a profession, nor a craft, nor a specialized job, but just a kind of extension of an activity performed in other places and circumstances. What happened in the day-by-day life was not 'worthy' or 'noble' enough to come in the newspaper.

In order to write in a newspaper, a person didn't need to identify himself/herself as a journalist, or, if he/she did so, that wasn't in any case his/her primary condition. Such a person was, beforehand, a writer, a lawyer or a teacher (...). A person could normally write articles for a newspaper and have them published, and that circumstance didn't mean he/she had a job as journalist (Ferenczi, 1993: 21).

Things changed a lot when papers really turned to be *newspapers*. Roughly along the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the press became a real industry because news turned to be valued in the marketplace of goods and services, and so bought and sold almost just like any other merchandise. This new situation was due to political reasons (development of democracies, more freedom of speech), as well as economical (industrial and commercial development, growth of towns), technological (better and faster communications and transports) or cultural (more schooling, increasing alphabetization, new demands), in the context of the emerging modern social order, identified by Schudson as the "democratic market society" (Schudson, 1978: 30). The newspapers became more popular and cheaper (it's the American '*penny press*', or the French '*presse à un sou*'), were sold by millions almost everywhere on the streets, advertised all sort of commodities – and were mostly made of *news*, of reports about what happened in the people's and community's lives. The '*penny press*' actually 'invented the modern concept of «news»' (Schudson, 1978: 22). Literary pieces and political opinions were no longer the major content of the press in this phase of the 'information journalism' (Charron & Bonville, 2004). Now, for the first time in history, 'the newspaper reflected

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<sup>1</sup> A practical example of this situation: the tragic earthquake that destroyed most of Lisbon (Portugal) in 1755 and killed thousands of persons deserved only a seven-line 'news' in the leading newspaper of the time (a weekly newspaper, since the first Portuguese daily wouldn't appear until 1809).

not just commerce or politics but social life', and not only 'the affairs of an elite in a small trading society, but the activities of an increasingly varied, urban, and middle-class society of trade, transportation, and manufacturing' (Schudson, 1978: 22/23).

This new context requires the existence of a group of people entirely ('professionally') devoted to the task of making the new kind of newspapers: searching, gathering, processing and editing news, reporting about the events happening everywhere, interviewing persons about them, investigating public affairs, etc. An occupational group emerges, answering to the new (social, cultural and industrial) needs and, at the same time, trying to build an autonomous, skilled, specialized job. That's when journalists really appear:

Modern journalism was born with the 19<sup>th</sup> century dailies. While the newspapers saw their readers grow up to hundreds of thousands or millions, the journalists were established in a very particular social status, half-way between the authority of knowledge and the art of communication (Balle, 1987: 86).

The emergence of such a group of new workers, who write in newspapers on an exclusive and full-time basis, living from a salary they get from a press company (or changing from one company to another, since a specific market labour is also emerging for them), is something very different from the previous amateur situation of the press. It's no wonder that, in this new context, some kind of professional solidarity arises among these people, a kind of 'collective consciousness' of workers who share 'the feeling of having a specific craft' (Ruellan, 1997: 17). Now, there is for this group a *regular full-time* work (stable industrial companies), a *team* work (newsrooms begin to appear), and a *specialized* work (reporters, illustrators, editors), which helps to develop some kind of *esprit de corps*. The natural follow-up is the constitution of associations<sup>2</sup> to pursue, defend and protect the emerging group's specific interests – which is another of the typical elements of a professionalization project.

As a matter of fact, these new conditions led the journalists to try to turn their craft (or their now regular occupation) into a profession, on the grounds that only such a status would grant them both the social *acknowledgement* and the public *legitimization* of their new activity. The underlying idea was that journalistic information was a very sensitive and valuable public service to citizens in a democratic society, and so its role should be protected, cherished and enhanced, for its credibility sake. In order to accomplish that public legitimization, journalists committed themselves with the different characteristics commonly associated to a claim to professionalism, and synthesized by different authors (Larson, 1977; Singer, 2003) into these three dimensions: *evaluative* (autonomy and social prestige), *cognitive* (specific knowledge, know-how and skills) and *normative* (public service orientation, altruism, ethics and self-regulation). It wasn't, in general terms, an easy task for the

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<sup>2</sup> The very first associations, as it was the case in Portugal, used to put journalists together with writers, somehow emphasizing the fact that the literary 'mark of birth' allegedly gave journalism a higher social status. But soon it turned clear that writers and journalists had very different purposes, with the former trying to keep those associations as places for debate and conviviality, and the later trying to use them as places for labour claims and organized actions in defense of their new craft (as well as for mutual help in illness or unemployment, for instance). And they moved to their own associations, whether unions or some other type, according to the different countries.

journalists, up to a point where we could say, on a basis of the strict functionalist ‘trait approach’, that they never accomplished it entirely – and should be, according to some voices, more properly regarded as a ‘semi-profession’ or an ‘almost-profession’. On the other hand, it would be difficult for anyone to deny that journalism is actually a profession, and a rather powerful one in the contemporary societies<sup>3</sup>. The bare fact that a profession is unquestionably regarded as such helps to build and to strengthen its position in society. Besides that, if we look at journalism under the perspective of the neo-Weberian ‘power paradigm’ of the sociology of professions, it is clear that professional journalists actually obtained, in many countries, a kind of monopoly over their activity (in a closed or protected segment of the labour market), controlling access to it and self-regulating it among peers – establishing a professional ‘jurisdiction’, to recall Abbott (1988).

Anyway, following the more recent trends in the study of the professions, it doesn’t seem very useful or stimulating to discuss if journalism is or isn’t a profession (or how much of a profession it is). Instead of that, it can be meaningful to look at the ways journalists somehow pursuit a ‘professional project’, because professionalism really was a strong appeal to them, as it was (and still is) to many occupations. This perspective, after all, is closer to the new trends of research in this area, focusing more and more on the ways ‘the discourse of professionalism is being used and relations of trust are being maintained or abandoned (...) as an instrument of occupational change (including resistance to change) and social control’ (Evetts, 2006: 529).

## 2. A process full of contradictions

The efforts made by the journalists to turn their craft into a profession (following more or less the ideal-typical model of the ‘established professions’) were from the very beginning involved in problematic contradictions, particularly in the cognitive and evaluative dimensions – that’s probably the reason why they always tried to stress the normative dimension of their specific work over all the others. We can say that journalists always were, and still are, ‘ambivalent about the professional project’ (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003: 547)

(1) The first contradiction opposes the journalist regarded as an *artist* to the journalist regarded as a skilled *worker*, as a technician, as an expert. Certainly because of the important literary tradition of newspapers, particularly in Europe, journalists initially tended to look at themselves more as creators, as authors, than as craftsmen involved in a technical occupation. This perspective isn’t without consequences: for an artist, the important thing is his/her talent, his/her ‘call’ to the activity, his/her creative freedom, rather than any specific education or school degree. So, why should we have journalism courses or journalism schools? As someone wrote with irony in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when

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<sup>3</sup> In an important book written by Spanish sociologists Ortega & Humanes (2000), under the title “Something more than journalists” [*Algo más que periodistas*], it is argued that it is a mistake ‘to think about journalism as merely another profession’. Recalling the importance (and power) of journalists in the social construction and interpretation of the reality surrounding us, the authors suggest they play much of the role usually played by intellectuals in the public sphere and, therefore, it is important to try to understand ‘the meaning of an activity that, being undoubtedly a profession, is much more than just a profession’ (Ortega & Humanes, 2000: 9).

these questions were coming to public debate, the idea of launching a journalism school would be ‘more or less as if you wanted to create a poetry school...’ (*apud* Delporte, 1999: 176).

On the other hand, no activity could be praised and socially recognized as a real, valuable profession if there were no specific education (and usually of a tertiary level) to qualify people for it. That’s way journalism courses slowly began to develop and eventually came to the university (as late as 1979, in what concerns Portugal), trying to raise journalism both to the status of a *profession* and of a scholarly *discipline*, that is to say, of a specific and autonomous field of knowledge, of study and of research. This effort is still evolving and remains somehow unfinished: in most countries (as it is the case for Portugal) you don’t need to have any school degree *at all* to become a journalist, because the prevailing idea is that your education to the profession will be achieved through training on the job and through internships, always in the context of a functioning newsroom<sup>4</sup>. This doesn’t necessarily mean that journalism doesn’t possess a body of specific knowledge and know-how<sup>5</sup>, as it is the use for any profession, but it clearly has weakened, over time, the journalists’ claim to a strong and unquestioned professional status.

(2) A second contradiction arises from the way journalism is actually performed: journalists are usually *workers in a media industry*, receiving orders from who owns the company and pays for their salary. The ideal-typical model of a professional *working autonomously*, serving his/her clients in the best (and free) possible way and being accountable to them (as well as to his/her peers, in the context of a professional association), is hardly recognizable in the context of a press industry, where routines must be followed, an hierarchical chain must be respected and the individual performance is often submitted to a lot of internal rules. This working context seems to be more typical of manual or

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<sup>4</sup> In some other countries, like Brazil for instance, you must have a university degree if you want to become a journalist. But this legal obligation is presently suffering some criticism and could be changed by the Supreme Court, after an appeal made by representatives of the media industry (FENAJ, 2008). In Italy, on the other hand, there is a professional ‘Order’ controlling the access to journalism through an examination and a subsequent registration. In Portugal there are no education pre-requisites to become a journalist, but in fact, for the last decade or so, almost all the new journalists have a university degree on journalism. Actually, there is presently in the country a very large ‘work force’ of young journalists-to-be who usually complement their university degree with a brief internship (three months) in a media outlet, and eventually gain a position in the staff. And as they are so numerous, in practical terms they fill all the hiring needs (which are more decreasing than increasing) in the media. Although the academic qualification is not a *legal* demand, it somehow turned to be, to use Aznar’s expression, a kind of ‘*social demand*’, or even ‘*ethical demand*’ (Aznar, 2005: 148, emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> In the early decades of their professionalization process, journalism developed a particular model for selecting, gathering, handling and presenting news which differed from the traditional narrative models. The so-called ‘news paradigm’ (Høyer & Pöttker, 2005) can be synthesized into five large items: the *event* as the primary raw material for news, a set of *newsworthiness criteria* (proximity, timeliness, relevance, etc.), the *interview* as the primary method for gathering and cross-checking information, the ‘*inverted pyramid*’ as a specific narrative structure (starting with the most important facts, condensed in a *news lead*) and the *journalistic objectivity* as an ideal way of trying to be (or to appear as) independent, fair, balanced and neutral in reporting. This last item is generally considered the central item of the news paradigm, although it has always raised very strong debates and controversies, even among journalists themselves. Another well-known article, by Jean Chalaby, originally published in 1996, argues that modern journalism was born precisely when ‘a specialized and autonomous field of discursive production’ was created (Chalaby, 2003: 30), with its own discursive standards, rules and values. This new kind of discursive practice, focused on news and reporting, emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the USA (where there wasn’t any literary tradition in newspapers, as was the case in France), and then was adopted all over the world. That’s way Chalaby [*ibidem*] refers to modern journalism as ‘an Anglo-American invention’.

technical occupations rather than of the intellectual labour commonly associated to the ‘professions’.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, being these media companies in most cases market-driven *private companies*, obviously they are mostly interested in getting as much profit as they can, therefore putting at risk the alleged commitment of professional journalists with the *public service* they allegedly offer to society – that is to say, the service of good, comprehensive, accurate, independent information about the world surrounding us. This contradiction (or, rather, this permanent tension on the journalists’ daily work) led Arthur Kaul (1986) to suggest that journalists shouldn’t be regarded exactly as ‘professionals’ nor exactly as ‘proletarians’, but as ‘professional proletarians’.

A practical consequence of this permanent dilemma can be found in the various ways journalists handled the question of their professional associations, often balancing between the Union model (prevailing in European countries like France or Portugal) and other kinds of associations (Press Institute, Professional Order, Press Club) more typical of the ‘established professions’.<sup>7</sup> And the option for one or another model (in the cases where they don’t coexist, has it also often happens) was frequently a motive for deep internal disputes concerning the different ways journalists regarded themselves: as more or less like ‘professionals’, or as more or less like ‘proletarians’ (Fidalgo, 2007).

(3) A third contradiction could be summarized as the choice to stress the pole of *individual freedom* in journalism or, alternatively, to put the emphasis on its *social responsibility*. This question has been long studied and discussed, in the context of the research on normative theories of the press, specially after the publication of the classic ‘*Four Theories of the Press*’ (originally in 1956), by Siebert, Peterson & Schramm (1963), where the more ‘libertarian’ or ‘authoritarian’ approaches were matched with the ‘socially responsible’ model for the press. According to the preference of journalists towards one or the other of the poles, a particular understanding of their work and role emerges, with consequences for example in what concerns the acceptance of some collective accountability mechanisms regarding ethical issues or, inversely, the insistence on the sole voice of the individual consciousness of the professional as the judge for what is right or wrong.

Although traditionally more inclined to an individualistic approach of the profession (once again, following its artistic, literary foundations), journalists soon realized that their intents towards professionalization asked for some collective responsibility. If they were to be granted some privileges or at least a particular statute in order to control the borders of their new (monopolistic) territory, they should offer the counterpart of a sort of moralization and self-regulation effort inside those same borders, in order to legitimize their condition – and their power. We shouldn’t forget that legitimacy is

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<sup>6</sup> In spite of this, and taking into consideration the creative part that also exists in journalistic activity, we can say that journalists keep some degree of discretion at work, even in a subordinate labour relationship with little autonomy. And authors as Evetts (2002) suggest that ‘discretion (rather than autonomy) perhaps better represents the more important aspects of professional judgment and decision making in professional work’ (Evetts, 2002: 351). Furthermore, in some countries journalists legally have the right to a ‘conscience clause’ which allows them to refuse to write anything that goes against their ethical duties, although in practical terms this clause has often only a rhetorical value.

<sup>7</sup> An eloquent example of the permanent hesitations of the journalists in what concerns their models for professional association can be found in the research made by Elsaka (2005) in the New Zealand context. Aldridge & Evetts (2003) also give us relevant insights about how the situation evolved in the Great Britain.

‘closely allied to the concepts of trust and confidence’ (Svensson, 2006: 580), and the need to be trusted was always a very sensitive issue for journalists. Actually, when the press industrialized and developed in a massive way, it was clear very soon that it had an enormous power of influence in society. Besides that, it was also evident that it could be used in the most negative ways, as a vehicle for propaganda (as it was dramatically seen during the first two world wars), as a means for large-scale manipulation, as an unacceptable intruder into private lives, as a profitable market instrument to serve vested interests, etc. The need for the press to be free, but *also* to be responsible and accountable, was more and more claimed in those early decades of the journalism professionalization process. It could be said that the efforts to *professionalize* the journalists ran in parallel with the intent to *moralize* their activity. That’s what can be found, for example, in the main objectives defined by the French Journalists Union back in 1924, when it was trying to get a specific law from the Parliament (a ‘Journalist Statute’):

The Union commits itself to organize the corporation taking these items into consideration: 1° To defend the corporation interests; 2° To defend the individual interests; 3° To exclude the non-professionals; 4° To institute a moral control over the profession. (*apud* Ruellan, 1997: 77).

Critics will say, and not without reason, that the three first items were fairly well accomplished, while the fourth one wasn’t so successfully pursued. In spite of that, it’s rather clear that the underlying purpose was to give control over the profession to the profession itself, thus avoiding some temptations of external control, namely by the political powers. And the commission created also in France, in 1935, to grant a Professional Card<sup>8</sup> that would differentiate the ‘legitimate’ journalists from all the others, had an important participation of journalists, together with representatives from the press industry and from government<sup>9</sup>.

There was a clear intent to protect the profession when this legal framework was put in place in France (to protect it from government, to protect it from the courts, to protect it from the media owners and managers), under the general argument that the flow of free information in the public

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<sup>8</sup> The institution of this Professional Card in France, back in 1935, is generally considered a very important step in the journalists’ efforts to professionalize themselves and their new activity. It came in the sequence of the approval, by the French Parliament, of a specific Journalist Statute, which defined by law who was and who wasn’t a ‘professional’ (that is to say, legitimate) journalist and who had the right to the corresponding credential. The French model had a strong influence in different European countries, as it was the case of Portugal – although with an important delay in time, since the country was governed by a dictatorship between 1926 and 1974, when democracy was recovered and journalism became, at last, free to organize. But in other countries professional journalists had already gained the right to a special credential, as it was the case in the United Kingdom, with a Royal Charter granted to the Chartered Institute of Journalists, in 1890, dedicated to the ‘elevation of the status and improvement of the qualifications of all members of the journalistic profession’ (*apud* Aldridge & Evetts, 2003: 549). Later, in 1907, a competing association of a different kind – a Journalists’ Union – was also created in the UK.

<sup>9</sup> In Portugal, until very recently, the Professional Card was granted (after a legal ‘concession’ from the Government) by the Journalists Union itself. It was a strange situation, because journalists were (and still are) free to join the Union. But they were obliged to ask for their Professional Cards in the Union, even if they were not members. The situation was revised in 1992, and a ‘Commission of the Journalists’ Professional Card’ was instituted, apart from the Union. Four journalists (elected by the professional group) and four journalists appointed by the media industry now compose this Commission, presided by a judge (co-opted by the others). The Government has no direct participation or interference in it (Fidalgo, 2008).

sphere was too valuable an asset to be put at risk. And the commitment of journalists themselves with the social responsibility of the press would help to keep those risks at a distance. The Professional Card symbolized all this, pretending to be, as Balle (1987:101) has written, “an official guarantee both of competence and of morality”.

But some counter-arguments can be raised (and actually have been), questioning if this ‘rhetoric’ construction, in the end, didn’t contribute more to *close* the journalistic labour market than to *protect* its public service activity. And, in fact, *social closure* is one of the most common outputs of the institutionalization of professions, as many scholars, following Max Weber’s legacy, tend to argue (see, among others, Dubar & Tripier [1998], Ruellan [1997] or Paredeise [1988] and her research on the professions as ‘closed labour markets’). By defining journalism according to the *category* of its practitioners, rather than according to the *activity* they really performed (in other words: by considering journalists those who had already a full-time job in a media outlet), this new legal framework excluded many other practitioners also dedicated to the information work, but in different bases or contexts<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, this option eluded the question of defining in more concrete terms what the profession actually is, which requirements does it imply, which skills does it demand, which basic knowledge, capacities and competences. Taking for granted that this definition wouldn’t be an easy task (so ambiguous, polyvalent and disputable the job is), the fact is that, according to some opinions (see Ruellan, 1997), this might have been a deliberate strategy by the professional group, in order to keep all the options open for the future. If the borders of a professional territory are not strictly marked, but instead are kept rather porous, they can be moved according to new circumstances, or to new menaces coming from other professional groups disputing the same territory.

To sum up, we could say, after this quick overview, that journalists felt and followed the strong appeal to professionalism as soon as their activity became somehow autonomous, as well as socially valued, politically powerful and economically attractive. But, since journalism is ‘a social reality which has been developed historically’ and ‘is also an area for multiple interactions which are necessarily complex’ (Ringoot & Ruellan, 2007: 67), its professionalization process was (and still is) often ambiguous and contradictory. Furthermore, recent technological developments associated to the ‘digital age’ or to the ‘Internet era’ are bringing new important challenges to the ways journalism has been practiced, adding complex questions to the bare definition of the profession and of its ‘legitimate’ practitioners. The contradictions pointed above remain partly unsolved and new ones confront the job, as we shall try to demonstrate in the second part of this paper.

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<sup>10</sup> A legal framework which grants the category of journalists only to those who get a job as journalists seems to have a curious effect, as it is pointed out by Cornu (2002: 2/3): if the access to the professional title depends on having been hired by a media company, this means to ‘dislocate the journalist’s statute from the person who works on it to the company who gives him/her a job’. In other words, the definition of who is or isn’t a journalist is made in fact by the media industry, by the market, and not by the school, by the professional group, by the law, by the government or by any other entity.

### 3. New challenges to an old problem

We must keep in mind that the historical process outlined in the previous pages occurs in a very narrow media landscape, reduced to the written press: at that time, working in journalism meant working in a newspaper. The ones who were excluded from the 'legitimate' category of professional journalism were collaborators, local correspondents, stringers, illustrators, etc., people who actually worked for the newspaper but didn't have all the advantages of the journalists' special statute.

As time went by, the problem of who is and who isn't a 'true' journalist turned to be more and more complicated, first with the entrance of new competitors into the media field (radio and television), and then with the overwhelming dissemination of computers, online platforms, Internet, mobile phones, digital technologies, all of which multiplied the possibilities for timely communication and for self-edition. If, in the first stage, there have been only some changes in degree (radio and television industries were added to the existing press industry), in the second stage the changes were much deeper: in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, journalism jumped across the borders of the classical industrial media outlets and spread around a lot of new platforms (either industrial or domestic, either collective or individual, either permanent or casual) made possible by the new digital technologies:

Nowadays, when we ask whether someone is a journalist, we may need to refine the question. We should ask: Is this the kind of journalist who presents analysis, commentary, or political rants? Or, is this the kind of journalist who offers the fruits of reporting? Or some of both? The issue is not the job *title* but the *activity* (Daly, 2005, emphasis added).

If it was not very easy to define journalism and journalists at the very beginning of the activity (competing ideas about it were never totally solved), now it turns to be much more difficult: it's no longer about changes in degree, it's probably about changes in the journalistic traditional paradigm itself. To recall the words of Jane Singer, we now live in a media environment where 'virtually any bit of information, misinformation or disinformation is just a google search away for the online user' (Singer, 2006: 3) and where 'while all journalists still publish information, not all publishers of information are journalists' (*ibidem*). And she goes on, anticipating a first conclusion to her thoughts:

[T]he current media environment – one in which anyone can publish anything, instantly and to a potentially global audience – demands a rethinking of who might be considered a journalist and what expectations of such a person might be reasonable. Journalists no longer have special access to the mechanisms of widespread production or distribution of information. Nor do they have special access to information itself or to the sources of that information. These and other practical notions of what defined a journalist in the past no longer apply. Instead, the contemporary media environment demonstrates the need to emphasize normative constructs for journalists seeking to delineate themselves from other online information providers (Singer, 2006: 8)

In the contemporary media landscape, big changes occurred both inside the journalistic profession and, more broadly, around the journalistic field. In practical terms, journalists clearly lost the monopoly of gathering, handling and disseminating information about the actuality in the public space. Nowadays, anyone can, at almost no cost and with no particular technical skills, make a website

or a weblog (or ‘blog’) that instantaneously connects you with the whole world, allowing all sort of messages – including information about the actuality, as well as commentaries, opinions, critics, etc. – to be sent and received on a large scale. And many of the people using now these new devices and possibilities claim to be doing some sort of journalism, although not on a regular, professional basis (‘participatory journalism’ and ‘citizen journalism’ are nowadays rather common expressions to refer to this activity, as well as to the contributions brought by lay people, through laptop computers or through mobile phones, to traditional media outlets – the so-called ‘user-generated content’ or ‘crowdsourcing’<sup>11</sup>). And if, in some cases, these new trends are not welcomed by the professional group, who insists that journalism should be performed only by credentialed and trained journalists, in other cases (as it happened already with BBC, in the UK, or with the Society of Professional Journalists – and its recent creation of a ‘Citizen Journalism Academy’<sup>12</sup> – in the USA) the professional organizations themselves are offering training to average citizens, making them more acquainted with the standards of the profession, and so allowing them to better ‘do journalism’, whenever the situation occurs.

Furthermore, the development in technologies and telecommunications made it very easy for any institution to directly contact the public without the traditional mediation of journalists. More and more institutions and organizations of the most various areas (in politics, in business, in sports, in culture...) use their own sites, channels and staff to diffuse any sort of information they want to, instead of trying to submit it to a newspaper, a radio station or a television channel, as it was the rule in the recent past. And one of the classical roles of journalists (to uncover and to bring the ‘message’ from the primary sources of information to the public) loosens its importance, up to a point where more and more voices suggest journalism itself is quickly coming to an end. Those who argue that this is an overreacting perspective agree, anyway, that the journalists’ traditional roles are changing, and they will become ‘less the manufacturers of news than the moderators of conversations that get to the news’ (Jeff Jarvis, *apud* Beckett & Mansell, 2008: 97), since ‘networked journalism’ is increasingly taking the place of former top-down information processes. The traditional role of journalists as gatekeepers of the news that should or shouldn’t go public doesn’t make much sense either, in an information landscape where, so to say, there are almost no gates to keep; instead of that, their job is probably more and more, as Jane Singer suggests, about ‘vetting items for their veracity’ and ‘placing them within the broader context that is easily lost under the daily tidal wave of new «information»’ (Singer, 2006: 12). Not gatekeepers, but ‘sense-makers’; not agenda-setters, but ‘interpreters of what is both credible and valuable’ (*ibidem*), as Singer synthesizes:

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<sup>11</sup> Crowdsourcing is ‘the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call’ (Howe, 2008). When applied to journalism, it means ‘soliciting reporting, writing, editing, photographs – or all of the above – from amateur users, rather than traditionally trained journalists’ (Metzger, 2007: 2).

<sup>12</sup> See <[www.spj.org/cja.asp](http://www.spj.org/cja.asp)>.

The journalist no longer has much if any control over what citizens will see, read or hear, nor what items they will decide are important to think about. In such an open, frenetic and overcrowded media environment, the conceptualization of what a journalist does must turn from an emphasis on process – selecting and disseminating information, framing particular items in particular ways – to an emphasis on ethics (Singer, 2006: 12).

These are some of the important changes that can be traced inside the journalists' professional group. Their relationship with the public is a major chapter of these changes, since the traditional stereotype of journalists 'delivering' information to an allegedly passive audience, in a kind of linear, one-way process, is no longer accepted – or acceptable. Either because of the new possibilities of on-line communication that make interactivity with the audiences easier than ever in the past, or specially because of the new demands by the audience-as-citizens (rather than audience-as-consumers) to be also an active part in the information process, journalism is increasingly asked to work in a networked environment, where new opportunities 'to facilitate public debate' arise (Beckett & Mansell, 2008: 102).

But these changes go beyond the professional group itself, since the new possibilities offered by the digital context caused the traditional boundaries of journalism to be crossed, and, as we said before, more and more people began to involve themselves (on a part-time, self-editing, amateur basis) in an activity which many of them claim to be journalism as well, and as legitimate as its professional form, performed in the context of traditional media outlets. This claim can be partly associated to the old debate about the bare nature of journalism (a profession?, a craft?, a trade?, just a civic activity?), and about the bare definition of who is / who can be a journalist. Some theoretical controversies about this were present during all the journalists' professionalization process, but they faced new strong arguments in recent years.

#### **4. Freedom of speech vs. right to information**

The simple fact that professional journalists may need to have some sort of license, or school degree, or credential, in order to work as journalists (as it happens in many countries) raises strong opposition here and there. Those who criticize any kind of license or register for journalists ground their opposition in one single argument: it runs against *freedom of speech*. And freedom of speech, the argument adds, is a fundamental and universal right that cannot be menaced or disrespected in any circumstance. Furthermore, journalism is regarded as a direct emanation and the most widespread public expression of this freedom of speech. If it is so, it can't be subject to any previous authorization, requirement or licensing. The classic example of this opinion points to the example of the *First Amendment* to the Constitution of the USA<sup>13</sup>, which forbids the American Congress to make

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<sup>13</sup> 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances'. (Bill of Rights – First Amendment).

any law that could infringe freedom of speech and freedom of the press (the two ‘freedoms’ come together here and are, basically, identified with each other). According to this same argument, everybody may be a journalist – and everybody may exercise journalism wherever he/she wants, because it’s all about freedom of speech and nothing else. A journalist is regarded as a citizen, equal to any other citizen, and submitted to the general laws of the country, like any other citizen in any other activity<sup>14</sup>. Otherwise, if only a chosen number of persons could accede to journalism, that would mean the universal right of freedom of speech would be ‘captured’ by a minority of citizens – which would be unacceptable.

This ‘libertarian’ perspective has been discussed for a long time. Giroux (1991: 129/130) argues that journalists ‘tend generally to subordinate their social function to their freedom of speech’, and inscribes this tendency in what he calls the ‘founding myth’ of journalism. Accepting the rationale underlying this myth, the simple idea of making journalism a profession wouldn’t make sense, because professions usually are associated to a set of attributes (specific knowledge and know-how, school degree, professional code of ethics, restrictions in access) that put them somehow apart from the common citizen. For instance, what’s the point of talking about *journalism* ethics, if journalism is not a specific occupation, with its particular standards, rights and duties, but only the way of any citizen to exercise his/her freedom of speech through freedom of the press?<sup>15</sup>

Instead of this ‘founding myth’ of journalism, strictly based on the universal right to freedom of speech, Giroux (1990: 131) argues that ‘the paradigm which founds the practice of journalism is the right of the public to information’, another fundamental and universal right. Following this alternative point of view, the *social responsibility of the press* – and of journalism – must be considered too, since those who work to fulfil the fundamental and universal right to information in our society are supposed to do it in an adequate and competent way, for the public interest sake. And this means that they should be well prepared to do the job, that they should be granted some protection in order to work without restrictions, that they should have some specific rights and duties because of that; in return, they should assume a public commitment to follow some professional standards and to obey to specific ethical values and norms, accepting to be accountable for them. As we can see, this is roughly the rationale underlying the idea of giving the journalists a special statute (actually, a *professional* statute), presupposing their *right to freedom of speech* as a cornerstone of their activity – although not

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<sup>14</sup> In spite of this, even in countries (like the USA) where journalists are not licensed, some practical mechanisms distinguish professional journalists from those working on less formal contexts. As Powell (1998) argues, the granting of press credentials by public authorities to have access to an event, in order to cover it, is a form of licensing journalists, and of deciding who is (who gets the credential) and who is not (who doesn’t). And he concludes: “So who is a journalist? Whoever the government says is a journalist” (*ibidem*). Actually, as Glaser (2008) recalls, bloggers, for instance, still have trouble getting press credentials for events, ‘though established blogs are gaining more credibility with readers’ and, in many cases, they unquestionably ‘do journalism’.

<sup>15</sup> In spite of all this, it is not difficult to realize that, in practical terms, the identification of ‘freedom of speech’ with ‘press freedom’ is not actually true for many citizens – those who complain about the difficulty of having, directly or even indirectly, some voice in the media. All citizens are equal, in what regards freedom of speech/press freedom, but, as George Orwell would put it, ‘some are more equal than others’...

understood only in individual, personal terms – but adding to it their commitment with the *right of the public to information*. And a free, complete, comprehensive, accurate, fair, meaningful information, allowing citizens to be able to take their decisions and to actively participate in the public life.

This special statute has been, in various countries, translated into some kind of mandatory license, credential, chart or card. All of them mean some sort of restriction of access to the job (now clearly understood in professional terms), and, at the same time, they grant the journalists some special rights or privileges (right of access, right to professional secrecy regarding the protection of confidential sources, right to a ‘conscience clause’ in order to protect their individual freedom) which give them a particular status. Some special duties are also imposed to them (both in legal and in ethical terms), as a sort of counterpart for their privileged position and as an alleged guarantee that they will responsibly and accountably pursue their task of public service.

These are, generally, the grounds for the existence of a journalists’ professional group – that is to say, an organized group of persons sharing a set of common standards, norms and values, as well as a specific statute and a legal credential, working in journalism on a full-time, exclusive, paid basis, in the context of established media industries. But in recent years, as it was said above, these rather strict boundaries have been crossed in multiple senses, and more and more persons have been involving themselves in some form of journalism – now understood not as a *professional work* but as a *civic activity*, accomplished on an amateur (even regular) and independent basis, particularly through mechanisms of self-edition made possible by the digital technologies and the Internet. This raises questions about the bare definition of journalism, with some voices arguing that it can’t be regarded nowadays as it was in the past, when it was shaped very much according to the self-interests of the restricted community of professional journalists. Critics of a ‘single modelling’ for journalism, Ringoot & Ruellan (2007: 73/74), for example, argue: ‘Journalism is what the actors of the time say, and by actors we mean not just those we designate as professionals, but also those whose discourse transforms perceptions’. Insisting that there are many more actors, besides the professional journalists, who are today involved in producing and publicly disseminating information, these authors add, in a more conclusive way:

The constitutive lack of identity which characterizes the group of journalists and the dispersal which characterizes journalistic production enable us to take on a complex identity which is constantly being rebuilt. The tensions between discursive order and disorder are neither accidental nor occurring only from time to time. They appear to us more as an identity component of journalism (Ringoot & Ruellan, 2007: 74)

A similar approach is developed in another work, where Ringoot & Utard (2005) insist on the need to broaden the traditional definition of journalism, refusing to identify it exclusively with an alleged ‘essence’ associated to its professional model. Instead, they call the attention to different discursive practices, increasingly present in contemporary societies, which are also engaged in producing and disseminating information. And they add:

The absorption of these different practices by the legitimate sphere risks putting them in comparison with a unique model - the one that was built by the journalism professionalization. However, our conviction is that journalism is a social practice of discursive production before being a profession. In order to study it, we define it on a minimal basis as a socio-discursive practice which brings three stances into interaction: sources, practitioners and publics. (...) This conceptualization allows us to consider as discursive formations some practices that an exclusively normative perspective would dismiss as non-journalistic (Ringoot & Utard, 2005: 18-19)

These perspectives don't necessarily reject or devalue journalism in its professional, institutionalized form, but they suggest that other practices can deserve some attention in this process of permanent 'invention' of the activity.

## **5. Journalists as professionals and / or as citizens**

Who is, then, a journalist? – we might ask. Even among those who claim to actually perform some form of journalism, although on a non-professional basis<sup>16</sup>, there seem to be two different understandings of these new challenges. On the one hand, there are those who suggest that journalism can be performed in different ways and at different levels, both professional and non-professional, but with a different set of rights and duties; in these cases, those involved in the activity on a part-time, complementary basis, claim to have some specific place (and legitimacy) to do what they do as 'amateurs', but they admit that a professionalized form of doing the job brings particular demands regarding education, skills, know-how, knowledge and public responsibility – some form of credential, after all. On the other hand, there are those who, recalling the 'founding myth' of the freedom of speech as the sole and universal ground for the legitimization of journalism, clearly refuse any way of treating journalism as a profession (or a craft), in the sense that there should be no rules to accede to it, or any kind of license or credential to perform it; in these cases, journalism is understood as a civic activity, open to everyone in a democratic society, and with no particular rights or duties other than those of the general laws of the country. And if there are any specific rules to protect and defend the journalistic work (for example, access to public information or the right to keep confidential sources of information secret), then they must be applied to everyone claiming to do journalism, whether in a traditional media outlet (a newspaper, a radio or TV station) or on an on-line news site, a blog, etc. This would be about citizenship, not about professional work.

We stand for the first understanding of this question. Trying to deal with the complex media landscape of contemporary societies in a more positive way, we suggest it is useful to distinguish between different levels of journalistic practice (more complementary than mutually excluding), instead of just dismissing any form of information work that doesn't fit the traditional model. Then, in

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<sup>16</sup> It should be reminded that there are also an increasing number of persons (e.g. bloggers) who actually practice some form of journalism as an exclusive, full-time activity, sometimes individually and sometimes collectively, although not linked to any traditional media company – and, therefore, not recognized as professional journalists in legal terms. But this doesn't mean that they are not recognized in social terms.

a second step, we can try to outline their particularities and relative positions as far as the journalists' professional group is concerned.

At least four levels can be considered: (1) professional journalism performed as a full-time, paid, exclusive, specialized job in newsrooms in institutional media companies; (2) professional journalism performed as a full-time, specialized job in new media (online) outlets, such as news sites and blogs; (3) journalism performed as a regular part-time activity in individual or collective news sites and blogs, as well as in institutional media companies; (4) journalism performed as a 'citizenship practice', on an informal and casual basis, contributing to broaden and expand the sources of information used by old and new media (the so-called 'crowdsourcing').

It should be noticed that the first and the second levels are increasingly approaching, and even mixing, as is pointed by Glaser (2008):

'Mainstream media reporters have started blogging in droves, while larger blogs operations have hired seasoned reporters and focused on doing traditional journalism. (...) There are thousands of journalists who now blog, and there are lots of bloggers who are trained journalists'.

After a period of time when media mainstream organizations (and journalists themselves) regarded less formal news sites and blogs with some suspicion, things have been changing. Big traditional media now create their own blogs, blogs more committed with journalism are developing truly professional projects, and the blogosphere turned to be a useful source of information in many cases. Not all blogs are involved in journalism (many of them explicitly say they don't want to), not all blogs follow technical or ethical standards that would allow them to be trustful (neither do some of mainstream media), but an increasing number can claim to perform journalism in a serious, independent, reliable way.

An interesting point would be to discuss whether blogs turn to be more 'journalistic' insofar as they approach to the common standards and rules (and ethos) of mainstream media journalism, or whether they challenge some of those standards and rules, bringing new practices and new values (and a specific ethos?) to the job, thus broadening the traditional definition of journalism. This trend can probably be regarded in two ways. On one hand, there are bloggers who very closely commit themselves explicitly with the values, norms and standards traditionally associated to professional journalism: Dan Gillmor, for example, has created a 'Citizen Journalist Pledge' for the contributors of his blog 'Bayosphere', urging them to 'agree to be accurate, complete, fair and transparent' in their posts, and to 'report and produce news explaining the facts as fairly, thoroughly, accurately and openly' as they can (Gillmor, 2005). On the other hand, it is clear that blogging has, in many situations, a rather different way of dealing with news and information, and it also has a rather different way of dealing with the 'audience', stimulating continuous interaction between news producers and news consumers, up to a point where the simple difference between producers and consumers no longer makes sense. And this practice (which is more than just a practice, because it means a totally new way of understanding the media operation and media role in the society) is

strongly challenging traditional media practice and ethos, forcing them to face their responsibilities in rather new terms.

Besides these more or less hybrid professional forms of journalism, other forms of gathering and disseminating news and information in the public space, although somehow atypical (that is to say: not performed as a profession or as a job), increasing claim the right to be considered as 'journalism activities'. The generalized use of portable computers and mobile phones, for example, made it very easy for someone accidentally found in the middle of an event to report about it (through text, sound or picture), either through a personal blog or through an open news site or even through mainstream media (who now stimulate this sort of contributions). Recent dramatic situations, such as the attack to the World Trade Centre in New York, the Katrina hurricane in the USA or the Far East tsunami, just to mention a few, gave enormous evidence of how we can get more information and more varied points of view if we add all these contributions – with some inherent risks of misinformation and of lack of skills, of course – to the work performed by mainstream media. And these new opportunities, matching some new positive will of citizen participation in the public sphere, are open to anybody as they were never in the past:

I think it's a mistake to define journalism on the basis of who practices it. Some people may perform an act of journalism only once in their lifetime. Look, for instance, at someone who was caught in the tsunami and took a picture of what was going on. The journalist's role is changing. We now have more people doing journalism, which can be confusing; but there is a role for [professional] journalists, the role of editing, managing information, perhaps even educating people to help them to do better journalism. The idea that institutions own journalism is coming to an end, but journalism doesn't (Jarvis, 2008: 4).

The fact that anybody can (and probably should) *do journalism*, in the sense explained above, doesn't necessarily mean everybody *is a journalist*, in the sense of a profession. When someone engages professionally in journalism, this means more than just being able to 'respond journalistically' in a casual situation. More than being *reactive* to events that may occur here and there, journalists are supposed to be also *proactive* in the permanent search (and investigation) of meaningful, comprehensive, socially relevant information, even when it is 'hidden' behind the events or when it must be searched far from their neighbourhood. Being able to do this implies having the proper means; acquiring and permanently developing the adequate knowledge, know-how and specialized skills; assuming the social responsibility of this work in order to serve the public interest; accepting (and being accountable for) a clear commitment with the ethical values and norms attached to such an important and sensitive job in the contemporary societies.

Should there be any difference between these different levels of performing journalism, for example in terms of credential, license or some other sort of public instrument of recognition of the particular duties involved in it? Probably yes. But this doesn't mean that one condition is *superior* or *inferior* to the other, one more or less 'legitimate' than the other; it just means that the demands and expectations attached to one or the other are *different*, both in kind and in degree. These different

forms of working with news and information are to be seen, as told before, as complimentary, rather than as mutually exclusive. They can cooperate in the joint efforts to provide society with better information. To involve citizens (and to involve them actively) in the *co-production* of news and reporting is something all the mass-media should consider as a duty, not just a kind of ‘good-will concession’ or a simple way of sparing some money (because these citizen contributions are usually much less expensive than the assignment of all the tasks to a professional reporter)<sup>17</sup>.

If *journalism as a citizen activity* doesn’t need (nor shouldn’t) any kind of license or credential, the same doesn’t necessarily apply, in the same terms, to *journalism as a professional activity* – which doesn’t exclude the ‘citizen’ condition, but goes beyond that. Although it may look sympathetic or popular for a journalist to claim to be no different from ‘an average citizen’, performing his/her job on the ground of just giving use to the universal *right to freedom of speech*, we know this is not the whole truth. In our societies, and in our media surrounding, journalists have special duties and responsibilities in order to adequately fulfil the *public’s right to information*. They also have special rights (more or less expanded in legal terms), but these mustn’t be regarded as elite privileges: they have been granted over time because they were considered as the necessary conditions for them to perform their tasks in the best possible way. When journalists insist they are not different from any other citizen, very often the assertion is invoked to refuse any particular professional responsibility and, subsequently, to escape any further obligation to be accountable for what they did (or did not). That’s way in these cases any criticism against specific journalistic practices is often disregarded, under the accusation that it is menacing freedom of speech – as if freedom of speech were an absolute, irresponsible and unaccountable right, somehow exclusively kept and exercised by the journalists alone.

## 6. Professionalism and ethics

A final question remains when we look at these different groups claiming to perform some form of journalism (either on a professional or on a non-professional basis) and realize that they all pledge to do it with *professionalism*. In the first number of a monthly newspaper launched last year by students at the University of Minho (Braga), this point was emphasized in the editorial mission statement: ‘*We don’t confuse the non-professional nature of this newspaper with lack of professionalism*’. This is one of many possible examples of people claiming to act ‘with professionalism’ even when they work in an activity on a non-professional, or clearly an amateur, basis.

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<sup>17</sup> The expansion of opportunities for citizens to perform some kind of journalistic work has a supplementary advantage that should be underlined: it certainly helps to expand and to deepen *media literacy*. The experience of producing news and of feeling directly all the benefits and constraints associated to it certainly helps people to better understand the logics underlying the media functioning, and, therefore, to develop a more critical way of consuming information. And media literacy is probably, in the long run, the best way to achieve an effective media regulation without putting freedom at risk: media that only offer low quality and bad practices will tend to disappear if nobody is interested enough to buy them.

This doesn't occur only in journalism. In a recent informal and quick research<sup>18</sup>, trying to know better the common use of the term 'professionalism', it was interesting for us to realize that the word is mostly used in the sports area. Why sports? Perhaps because it involves physical and psychological effort, hard competition, both individual and team work, strong emotional links to the fans. If we look at these references in more detail, it is interesting to notice that 'professionalism' is not directly or necessarily connected with the activity itself or with a good performance (in terms of achieving good results); rather, it concerns to the actors' *attitude* and *behaviour* when they are working – whether playing or just training –, to their 'commitment', to their 'dedication', to their 'seriousness', to their 'loyalty' to the club, to their 'humility', even to their 'punctuality'... In one word, it is just about *doing the right thing*, either publicly or in private. This means that the claims of professionalism clearly point to some kind of *moral value* or personal *virtue*, rather than to expertise or good achievement of a task. And if this is very evident in what regards the references of the sports area, quite the same happens when you are talking about business, musical shows, police work or health care.

Regardless of the activity you're involved in, the common-sense use of the term 'professionalism' is not linked to the actual performance of a profession, but to an attitude at work – or even an attitude in life<sup>19</sup>. Recalling the broad distinction between 'occupational professionalism' and 'organizational professionalism' developed by Evetts (2005; 2006), this common-sense meaning of the concept would be closer to the second category – it is used by managers of the most various kinds and positions, even in sport, to have disciplined, hard-working, devoted employees at their service – but it seems to go further than that, since it applies roughly to everybody, independently of one's job, profession, occupation, craft or trade<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, it seems to act mostly at an individual, micro level.

Going back to journalism, we could say that professionalism, understood as this kind of moral value, is expected to be assumed by anyone involved in the activity, either on a professional or on an amateur basis, either as a full-time specialized job or as a part-time casual citizen activity. And the initial question remains: what are, then, the differences (if any) between these levels of journalism practice?

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<sup>18</sup> During roughly two months (June and July 2008), all references to 'professionalism', in its Portuguese (and Brazilian) form – '*profissionalismo*' –, were collected through the news alert mechanism by Google. In that period, a total of 153 references to '*profissionalismo*' appeared in news and 85 of them (which mean 56 %) came from the *sports* area, particularly from football. The second category, with 25 references (16%), was that of *business*, and the third one, with 18 references (12%), was *show-business /entertainment*. Other areas where one or two references to '*profissionalismo*' also appeared in the Google alert during this period of time were those of *security* (policemen, military), *health* (doctors, hospital teams), *journalism*, *politics*, *education* and *law*.

<sup>19</sup> For example, a football player was criticized of lack of professionalism because he went out for a drink after dinner, and it was not his day off. And a fashion top model was criticized of lack of professionalism because she apparently didn't care about her food and seemed to have one or two extra pounds.

<sup>20</sup> In a recent inquiry made by a newspaper, a Portuguese politician was asked about the three qualities he most praised in any man or woman, in general terms. His answer: "The qualities I most praise are independent from gender: they are good character, *professionalism* and sense of humour" (PÚBLICO, 2008, emphasis added).

As suggested above, the public expectations regarding journalists-as-professionals are obviously higher than those regarding people who casually ‘do journalism’. These different expectations (which also have different duties attached) are more an issue of degree, rather than of substance, and concern mainly the areas of specialized knowledge, know-how, technical standards and expertise, as well as the understanding of what is needed to adequately fulfil the right of the public to information. This is, if we can say so, a matter of *professionalism* – the quality of service you legitimately expect from a professional<sup>21</sup>.

But the demand to act with *professionalism* – in the moral sense just mentioned – is not supposed to vary in degree according to whether you practice journalism as a professional or as an amateur. You are supposed to ‘do the right thing’, in ethical terms, whatever the condition or status you are working in: there is no such thing as being ‘a little less’ or ‘a little more’ ethical according to the circumstances. To act ‘with professionalism’, respecting the basic ethical values of the relationship among persons in society and the specific moral standards associated to the journalistic work, is a responsibility for everybody, professional or amateur, full-time or part-time worker, regular journalist or casual activist.

In spite of this, if no substantial difference between these journalistic practices can be pointed on an *individual* level, the same is not true on a *collective* level – on the level of the *professional group*, actually. Or on the level of *journalism as a profession*<sup>22</sup>.

At this point, we return to the concept of professionalism, but now understood in terms of ‘occupational professionalism’ (a specific system of values and responsibilities attached to a specific profession), and not just as a common-sense attitude of always doing the right thing at work. That concept of professionalism has one central point – Freidson (2004) even calls it its ‘soul’ – which is decisive if we want to distinguish professions from just well-paid technical experts. And that point is, in one word, *ethics*.

As Freidson explains, professional ethics is mainly about assuring that the good intentions of rendering a good and trustworthy service in the public interest, with competence, independence and altruism, ‘are translated into action in the various professions’ (Freidson, 2004: 214). But professional ethics itself must be regarded, still according to Freidson (*ibidem*), at two different levels: the individual level of ‘*practice ethics*’ and the level of ‘*institutional ethics*’. For the argument we are developing here, this is a fundamental distinction: it helps us to understand that even in journalism (a

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<sup>21</sup> We use the term ‘professionalism’, following Evans (2008), as related to ‘those elements of the job that constitute the knowledge, skills and procedures’ used in a professional’s work (this would be the ‘service’ component of professionalization, while professionalism would be its ‘institutional’, status-related component). Still according to this author, professionalism can be regarded as a position in a continuum between two extreme models or poles: the pole of ‘restricted’ professionalism (essentially reliant upon experience and intuition) and the pole of ‘extended’ professionalism (reflecting a much wider vision, adopting an intellectual and rationally-based approach to the job). This continuum is, Evans argues, ‘applicable to all professions’ (*ibidem*).

<sup>22</sup> ‘Many journalists now regard themselves not merely as ‘being professional’ but as being a member of a profession’, say Aldridge & Evetts (2003: 560) in a comment to the more recent efforts of journalists to approach to the structures (and not only to the discourse) of professionalism, such as journalism university degrees, thus trying to achieve higher social respectability.

profession which, unlike many other professions, can be also partially practiced by ‘laypersons’ and on a totally non-professional basis) there is an ethical responsibility that can’t be reduced to the individual level of one’s consciousness. And since journalism has an unquestionable social value and relevance, because it deals with two fundamental rights of citizenship in a democratic society (the right to information and the right to free speech), then it should not disregard its efforts in order to be practiced *also* on a *professional* level – and with *professionalism*.

‘Practice ethics’ are only a part of professional ethics; they ‘deal with the problems of work that are faced by individual practitioners, addressing ethical issues familiar to everyone but which have assumed exotic guises that need sorting out and recognizing’ (Freidson, 2004: 216). Although important, they are perhaps not so important, in Freidson’s opinion, as the ‘institutional ethics’, which more broadly ‘deal with the economic, political, social, and ideological circumstances which *create* many of the moral problems of work’ (*ibidem*, emphasis by the author). In this sense, they are ‘animated by moral concern for the ultimate purpose’ of professions (*ibidem*), and, so, demand that the professional groups somehow take the responsibility for it at an institutional level too:

The proponents of professionalism must necessarily exercise a strong, principled voice both in broad policy-making forums and in the communities where practice takes place. This voice cannot be left to individuals, however, for the most influential source of evaluation and protest comes from a collegial body which provides authoritative support to individuals and expresses forcefully the collective opinion of the discipline (Freidson, 2004: 217).

This perspective on professional ethics helps us to understand the *collective* responsibility of a profession<sup>23</sup> in order to gain and maintain its social credibility, as well as the trust of the public it aims to serve. In the case of journalism, and of the different levels of its practice, it may not be an important issue to those who ‘do journalism’ on a casual, informal basis (and to whom the ‘practice ethics’ would be enough), but it surely is important for the professional journalists, who, regarded as a professional group, are expected to defend and preserve the ultimate purposes of the discipline. And these purposes are grounded on ethics (also understood at an institutional level), which constitute, according to Freidson, the very ‘soul of professionalism’:

The functional value of a body of specialized knowledge and skill is less central to the professional ideology than its attachment to a transcendent value that gives it meaning and justifies its independence. By virtue of that independence members of the profession claim the right to judge the demands of employers or patrons and the laws of the state, and to criticize or refuse to obey them. That refusal is based not on personal grounds of individual conscience or desire but on the *professional* grounds that the basic value or purpose of a discipline is being perverted (Freidson, 220-221, emphasis by the author).

That’s why, following this perspective, professionals should claim ‘the moral as well as the technical right to control the uses of their discipline’ (Freidson, 2004: 222), but with one major

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<sup>23</sup> Evans (2008) also stresses ‘commonality’ as a ‘key element’ of professionalism: ‘Though I accept that in everyday parlance it is acceptable to talk of an individual’s professionalism, the majority of definitions (...) suggest a general conception of professionalism, like professional culture, as a collective notion: as a plurality, shared by many’ (Evans, 2008: n/p). And not only shared by many, we would add, but also somehow organized and committed at an institutional level.

difference: while they ‘should have no right to be the proprietors of the knowledge and technique’ of that discipline, they ‘are obliged to be [its] moral custodians’ (*ibidem*). And this implies, along with the public defense of the necessary conditions for an independent and competent work, also the surveillance and (self-regulated) control of the good ethical practices inside the professional group itself: ‘If professionalism is to be reasserted and regain some of its influence, it must not only elaborate and refine its codes of ethics but also strengthen its methods of adjudicating and correcting their violation’ (*ibid.*: 216).

## 7. Conclusion

Journalists always faced some problems and ambiguities in the process of defining, shaping and legitimizing their profession. The decisions about who should be included and who should be excluded from the professional group were difficult because of the characteristics of their activity (frequently balancing between the right to freedom of speech and the right to information), which contributed to a permanent blurring of the borders of their professional territory. In recent years, with the multiplication of mechanisms of self-edition which make it very easy for anyone to produce and disseminate timely information in the public sphere, the idea of journalism-as-a-citizen-practice has been more and more emphasized, somehow challenging the specialized field of journalism-as-a-professional-activity – or the bare definition of who is a journalist. The various levels of practice of journalism draw a rather heterogeneous professional group, with some differences in what concerns their attachment to the normative system of values of professionalism, and particularly in what concerns professional ethics. If everyone dealing with journalism in any form is expected to know and respect the ‘practice ethics’ of the activity, only the organized profession can (and is supposed to) be committed with an ‘institutional ethics’ that engages in guaranteeing the political, social, economical and cultural conditions necessary for journalism to fulfil its valuable role in a democratic society. In return, the profession must accept to be responsible and accountable for its work, developing the means of transparency and self-control which may give concrete substance to their alleged dedication to the public service.

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