“Reflections on the time online: the decisive impact on journalistic practice”

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Introduction
The convergence of telecommunications, computers and broadcasting has signaled the emergence of innovative communication technologies and, above all, the Internet. As a result, the practice of communication has acquired a major impetus. Mass media develop possibilities of stunning performance, while they are confronting increased challenges as far as their role and their economic viability are concerned.

Over the last decade, the rapid changes in communication technology and the rise of new media, such as the Internet, have stimulated an intense discussion about the role and the value of journalism in this emergent technological framework. Journalism is

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undergoing major changes due to the nature of the Internet, which allows interactivity, global reach and overcomes time and space barriers.

My current analysis is subsumed into the broad scientific discussion regarding the significance of the shift from traditional journalism (print and broadcasting) to online journalism (Internet). I distinguish the relation of time and space between pre-modernity and modernity. Moreover, in my current analysis I focus on two key dimensions of time, namely, timelessness and timeliness. Then, I critically go on to examine the relationship between time and journalistic selection, as it is influenced by the advent of new communication technologies, from the era of broadcasting until the emergence of the Internet. Finally, I explore the changing concept of the time online and I focus on its impact on the practice and the profession of journalism.

Time and space in premodern and modern societies

In the pre-modern societies, time was calculated in a strong connection with space. As Giddens proposes, “«when» was either connected almost entirely with «where» or determined by periodical natural incidents”. 2 Space was inseparable from time, which followed a linear route, with logical temporal sequences. The crucial turn point for the division between time and space was the introduction of the mechanical clock. 3 Invented by Benedictine monks, the mechanical clock made possible the idea of precise regularity, 4 without which capitalism would have been impossible. 5 Thus, the clock did not only determine the specific time zones of a day, but it also contributed to the pioneer uniformity in the social organization of time. Consequently, this regularity divided the day into specific time zones, such as working hours, free time, lunch / dinnertime, bedtime.

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5 Postman, ibid.
Giddens also proposes that coordination across time is the basis for the control of space.\textsuperscript{6} In premodern societies, space and place coincided to a large extent, since the spatial dimension of social life was determined by a presence in local activities. The advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between “absent” others, locationally distant from each other, so that face-to-face interaction becomes impossible. In conditions of modernity, place becomes phantasmagoric, meaning that locales are shaped by social influences that are distinct from each other.\textsuperscript{7} The exercise of control through the detachment of time and space is also pointed out by Frank Hellemans, who examines the geopolitical influence of the telegraph as a new medium of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century and especially, the use of the telegraph by Napoleon at the coordination of political power in the republican structure of modern France.\textsuperscript{8} By the invention of the telegraph the transportation of the message was separated from the messenger for the first time in history.

The need for a common time determination was imposed by the development of new means of transportation (e.g. the railway) and of communication (e.g. the telegraph and the telephone). Therefore, a global division of time was formulated, dividing the day into 24 hours and establishing an international time line.\textsuperscript{9} This standard determination of the global time set the framework of global time coordination, as well as the social organization of time.\textsuperscript{10} McLuhan considers this time duration and division as a characteristic of western societies. He argues that this application of visual, abstract and uniform units led to our western feeling for the duration of time.\textsuperscript{11}

Seen within this framework of modernity, the symbolic forms of communication are produced and distributed under the circumstances that are defined by the time-space distanciation,\textsuperscript{12} that is allowed by every communication medium.\textsuperscript{13} For example, a

\textsuperscript{6} Giddens, ibid., p. 34. [my translation from Greek]
\textsuperscript{7} Giddens, ibid., p. 34-35. [my translation from Greek]
\textsuperscript{8} Hellemans, F., “Napoleon and Internet. A historical and anthropological view on the culture of punctuality and instantaneity”, Telematics and Informatics 15 (1998), pp. 127-133.
\textsuperscript{10} Giddens, ibid, p. 34, Thompson, ibid, p. 65, McLuhan, ibid, p. 181.
\textsuperscript{11} McLuhan, ibid, p. 180.
message that is transmitted during a face-to-face discussion allows zero time-space
distanciation, while other technical means, such as paper or a tape recorder, can expand its availability in time and space. The invention of print gave a major push to the detachment of time from space. Written material could be copied and distributed at a mass scale, regardless of locality. Projecting this time-space distanciation on mass media communication and journalism, I approach the issue under the assumption that after the evolution of print journalism, the following communication technologies have further detached time from space and thus accelerated the time of the news circulation. The introduction of radio has shortened the time between the news about events and their broadcasting, threatening the power of the newspaper as a communicative and informative medium. Respectively, television and later satellite television have shortened the broadcasting time even more, and thus have forced radio and newspapers to keep up the pace in order to attract audience and advertisements.

The impact of the speed of satellite delivery on the journalistic values of selection and analysis, was examined, among others, by Elihu Katz. Katz argued that the direct, uncut reporting that CNN transmitted during the Gulf War was the beginning of the end of critical journalism. The as-fast-as-possible distribution of the news through satellite television allows limited or no editing at all and thus bypasses the role of the editor. Katz concludes with a clear-sighted statement, reminding the old saying, that we are unable to see the wood for the trees: “Getting closer means seeing less. The combination of information management, instant news, empty analysis and the best of intentions threatens the future of critical journalism and our own.”

**Timelessness and timeliness**

Nowadays, Internet has introduced “instant” transmission, minimizing the time distance between news selection and news circulation. Internet has reached an “absolute limit”, where electronic time (eTime) invalidates time, as we have known it in the traditional media. In the words of Castells, “the [traditional] linear, irreversible, measurable, predictable time is being shattered in the network society, in a movement...”

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13 See Thompson, ibid, p. 49.
15 Katz, ibid, p. 12.
of extraordinary historical significance”.\textsuperscript{16} In addition to this “instant” time, the notion of timelessness is developed on the Internet. Currently, the concept of time changes online. This new dimension of time upsets the regularity, linearity, cohesion and continuity of the traditional time, namely the time that is represented by the mechanical clock. Thus we can speak of a “timeless time”, as Castells proposes, which is induced by the “space of flows”.\textsuperscript{17} This timeless time changes the availability of the media messages and contents: these can, theoretically, appear on the Internet forever, since they can remain saved on the Internet for infinite time without any additional cost, offering an all-time archive that can be accessed in minimum time and since the available space that they can take up is chaotic. I would like to underline the work “theoretically”, since this possible feature of the Internet is realizable only in theory. By this I refer to the fact that ever now and then, the content of many Internet sites changes or is updated, sites move to another web address or even stop functioning. It can often happen that a specific site or page cannot be found or retrieved. This is why it is so important, especially for researches, to mention always the date when they last accessed a particular site, in order to ensure the accuracy and the integrity of their sources. The notion of timelessness on the Internet is also founded on the fact that Internet can store masses of information and at the same time achieves 24/7 availability.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, timelessness is directly linked to the use of hypertext on the Internet. Hypertext disturbs time coherence, as it has no beginning, no end and no sequence.\textsuperscript{19} The user can access any hypertext and move forwards and backwards, be linked to other sites, read background information, related and similar texts. Hypertextuality offers also the possibility to link any text with other texts that have been created later, even weeks, months or years than the initial site. Overall, Internet enables a temporal transgression that alienates the sequence from past time through present to future time.

Time has a major impact on journalistic practice. We could suggest that time is one of the major forces that shape journalism, since time is not only a basic component of the

\textsuperscript{16} Castells, ibid, p. 433.
\textsuperscript{17} For a detailed analysis of Castells’ arguments regarding the “space of flows” and “timeless time”, see Castells, ibid, chapters 6 and 7 respectively.
\textsuperscript{18} Slevin, J. (2000). “Internet and Society”
\textsuperscript{19} Castells, ibid, p. 462.
definition of news, but it also exercises a huge impact on news selection.\textsuperscript{20} Since time immemorial the speed of news transmission has become increasingly important.\textsuperscript{21} Timeliness is considered as the main, prominent criteria that is taken into account during the news selection and hierarchy. Facts are only determined as news by the yardstick of their time dimension, namely timeliness. Their value is faded away progressively as long as they are removed from the moment they happened and as long they are no more recent. In other words, timeliness affects the news selection process, as well as the news evaluation and hierarchy. Every communication medium that was invented and development changed, in its turn, the relation to the time frame. The pace of the news has been accelerating progressively and thriftily. Broadcasting news travel faster than print news, satellite news outpace the speed of television and radio news even more, and finally, Internet overcomes all of them. The instant transmission that is only made possible by the Internet minimizes the time distance between newsgathering and news publication. This feature will be analyzed at the rest of the article.

The relation between timelessness and timeliness is rather complex. The ephemeral and the eternal are two sides of the same coin, namely time. Castells suggests that Internet culture is a culture at the same time of the eternal and of the ephemeral.\textsuperscript{22} He argues that it is eternal because it reaches back and forth to the whole sequence of cultural expressions and it is simultaneously, ephemeral, because each arrangement and specific sequencing depends on the content and the purpose under which any given cultural construct is solicited.\textsuperscript{23} Ultimately, we are not in a culture of circularity, but in a universe of undifferentiated temporality of cultural expressions.\textsuperscript{24} Moving away from the analysis of Castells, I suggest that the ephemeral and the eternal cannot co-exist in the same framework. Timeliness is abolished in the regime of timelessness. It is no more possible for the timely, the temporary and the ephemeral to exist under timeless conditions. On the Internet, the ephemerals come the one after the other in a sequence, order and rotation that touch the endless character of eternity (timelessness). But we cannot suggest that in the light of the digital era time is a

\textsuperscript{21} Chalaby, 1998, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{22} Castells, p. 462.
\textsuperscript{23} Castells, p. 462.
\textsuperscript{24} Castells, p. 462.
dimension that can be folded away.\textsuperscript{25} Time patterning of information and other symbolic content made available on the Internet is always in some way the expression of the activities of real individual [and not virtual!] and real organizations.\textsuperscript{26} In other words, the temporal dimension of the informative and communicative messages, the symbolic forms in general, our actions and reactions is directly and integrally connected with our real, specific and everyday activities. So it is rather vague and obscure to speak of the time in general, since it is always interrelated to the implementation of actions. We should also not forget that time determination as a serial of sequent and specific units has been determined by man, who invented the mechanical clock and, thus, made possible, the feeling of the time as we experience it today.

The nature of the Internet allows maximum time-space distanciation. Simultaneously, Internet “inaugurates a one-time-system, namely global time, that prefigures a new form of tyranny”\textsuperscript{27}. This breakneck speed defines the revolutionary character of the Internet. This speed, that is only made possible because of this new communication technology, imposes a lightning pace, as far as selection, evaluation, action and reaction are concerned, that comes near to the limits of thoughtlessness. As a result, this acceleration of time dissuades reasoning and revokes the logical sequence and cohesion of thoughts and decisions.\textsuperscript{28} Ultimately, our actions are characterized not by how well, but by how fast we accomplish them.

**The shift to sensational journalism**

The shift between the traditional media, namely from print to broadcasting, indicates a first dimension of the problem raised in this paper: It demonstrates a much deeper shift from critical and analytical journalism to a more ear and eye grasping journalism that prefers superficial research and analysis and “easy-to-follow problems and short sound bites”\textsuperscript{29}.

\textsuperscript{25} Slevin, 2000, p. 71.  
\textsuperscript{26} Slevin, 2000, p. 71.  
Basically, there is an indissoluble relation between the temporal dimension of news and the news production cycle. Exclusive and breaking news take the first place on the news hierarchy and are distinguished due to their publication or broadcasting immediacy. Facts are more likely to become news if they overlap or synchronize with the news production cycle. Traditional media have specific news cycles: newspapers are daily, morning or evening. Radio and television have certain time zones, some with greater and some with poorer ratings (although they have a precedence over newspapers, because they can interrupt the radio or television program, in order to announce exclusively or breaking, news).

Currently, Internet alters the sequence of the traditional news production cycle and introduces the new concept of the 24-hours news production cycle. News can be made available and renewed at minimum time and cost, but at global reach. This affects the value of news greatly: they are no more valuable, as long as more recent information appears that abolishes their timeliness. Overall, Internet conquers time barriers at two dimensions: firstly, up-to-the minute news can be transmitted instantly, making possible “real-time” reporting. Secondly, the traditional news cycle, which includes the steps from information gathering until the final publication/broadcasting, is shortened. As a consequence, the intermediate steps of research, selection and editing are eliminated. This emergent “instant” reporting speeds up the journalist’s tempo of life and work. Consequentially, the essence of journalistic practice, namely research, critical analysis and interpretation, is annihilated because of time and speed. The crosschecking of facts, the verification of truth and the safeguarding of objectivity, as main journalistic values, loose their primacy. The newsworthiness of an event depends exclusively on the speed at which the information circulates. Meanwhile, “real-time” transmission becomes the main target and leads to instant, thoughtless and constrained reporting. The constant speeding up in order to decrease the time difference between the fact and its reporting discourages detailed research and in depth analysis of the news. These require time and on the Internet there is no time to spare. To put it in the words of Bardoel, “this whirling communication carousel of immediate action and reaction within the publicity process decreases rather than increases the scope for journalistic signification”.

Bardoel, ibid, p. 286.
This affects seriously the quality of information, which is sacrificed for the quantity of news. Such information that is multiplied at frenzied rhythms and that is not controlled and checked, results inevitably to disinformation and disorientation. This is what Ramonet means by the term “democratic censorship”, which is not caused by the curtailment or prohibition of the free flow of information, but by the accumulation and excess of information.31 Under this constant flow of information, the journalist is surrounded by an ocean of data, which he cannot evaluate and scale. Sophia Kaitatzi-Whitlock underlines the causal link between “redundant messages” and exclusion: “[…] the existence of redundant messages, imperative though it is for investors, it is also a mechanism which disorients and suspends the critical ability of people to appreciate real conditions. Inertia and passivity dominate and hinder people from accessing valuable resources and from exploiting ICT intelligently and creatively”.32 All this useless “info-trash” leads, at the end, to a total glut. At the same time, the “investigative” reporting looses its value. Journalists may become lazier and unwilling to do his/her own research, as he/she can just sit back at his/her desk and access all the information he/she needs from his PC and through the modem. I recall the words of two journalists I met, admitting that there hasn’t been a greater thing than copying and pasting from the Internet. This is just an example of two major observations: a.) journalists become less critical and original by using ready-made material that can be found on the Internet, while b.) the infringement of copyright and intellectual property on the Internet remains an unsolved issue.

Moreover, the editorial hierarchy in the journalistic profession is disturbed. Since there is a growing lack for the need of selection, editing and correction process, the role of the editor and the editor-in-chief is put under question. This demerit of the editorial work has catalytic implications for the value and need of a major professional category. The precarious role of the editors in the near future is identified as a key problem here. At the same time, the journalist is transforming into nothing but a “news-bearer”. He does no longer act as a qualified mediator, filtering the news

before offering it to the public, but as a transparent glass.\textsuperscript{34} A strong link exists between the downgrading of the journalistic profession and the perception of news by the public. In this sense, the public does not have any more the luxury of time to elaborate the information, as it is constantly bombarded by up-to-minute news.

Additionally, the speed of news transmission plays a crucial role for the competitiveness between media organizations. Their endless and ruthless competition for markets and within markets leads them to a ceaseless “hunt” for the latest, most impressive and most sensational news. At the same time, entertainment becomes progressively the sole factor in determining the news value and, extensively, the market dominance of media organizations. In either format, entertainment has become highly strategic and it is the content that is privileged by newly established media organizations. Market dominance, or quite simply market survival, is no longer achieved through news, but through premium entertainment”.\textsuperscript{35}

**Conclusions**

Two important points have been made clear so far: a.) in the effort to respond to the constantly increasing market demands and in the framework of the ruthless competition, media organizations will continue to accelerate the procedures of news gathering in order to offer always more. As a consequence, the value of the news is quantified, b.) the ubiquitous nature of online news deprives any originality and diversity of their content.

The changes that the profession of journalism is undergoing do not have implications only for the journalists themselves, but for the audience as well. If journalists don’t have the margin of time to think, analyze and interpret, they will only offer inaccurate, superficial and trivial information to their audience. The opposite of this opinion is the belief that if people take over their information and adjust it according to their preferences and interests, it is likely to lead to a more substantial content. I have second thoughts about it.

\textsuperscript{34} Ramonet, ibid, p. 70.

\textsuperscript{35} Chalaby, J. (19??). “Journalism in History: From the Public Press to the Digital Age”. CMC-Symposium, Bornhom, Roskilde University.
The individualized choice and configuration of messages erodes the basis of democracy, which presupposes the common knowledge of public issues, in order to achieve common and coordinated action. If this basis is eroded, how can we speak of a substantial public sphere, as many envisage Internet?

Additionally, journalism operates within the context of serving democracy and the public interest. In democracy, journalism is supposed to serve society to take decisions, which require profound and detailed thought and knowledge. On the contrary, new communication technologies demand speed and, thus, they allow just superficial comprehension and thinking. This contradiction can only lead to the damage of the critical mind and of the democratic process.

This paper has focused on several key points regarding the role of the journalist in the dominant online media environment. I have examined the notion of time as it is being transformed on the Internet and I have argued that “instant” communication, introduced by the new media, weakens and jeopardizes the role of the journalistic practice as a main factor in the democratic political communication. Key implications for both the role and the profession of journalists have been identified, such as the limitation of the journalistic scope, the precarious role of the editor, as well as the discouragement of in depth research and critical analysis of the news. Finally, I conclude with addressing some questions for future speculation and research. How will the role of the journalist be evolved in the near future? If citizens choose different channels of information and communication, how will they be commonly orientated, ensuring the smooth function of democracy? Under which circumstances can the democratic mission of the media survive and be guaranteed?
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