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Journalists and bloggers. Professional identities and practices in food risk/benefits communication in Spain

Periodistas y bloggers. Identidades y prácticas profesionales en la comunicación de riesgos y beneficios alimentarios en España

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ABSTRACT: Roles and channels define professional identity in the web 2.0 environment and practices associated with topics and sources are constitutive of the roles and identities of traditional journalists. In our research, based on in-depth interviews with 12 professional journalists, expert bloggers and hobby bloggers, we describe the difficulties faced by the interviewees when communicating food risks and benefits and discuss their relationships with topics and sources. Differences among and between these actors create distrust, yet what they share offers them new opportunities to cooperate.

RESUMEN: *los canales y los roles son definitorios de la identidad profesional en el entorno 2.0, del mismo modo que las prácticas con los temas y las fuentes son distintivas de los roles y de la identidad de los periodistas clásicos. Este artículo describe las tensiones en la comunicación alimentaria a partir de las definiciones que 12 entrevistados hacen de sus roles (periodistas profesionales, expert bloggers y hobby bloggers). Se consideran sus relaciones con los temas y las fuentes, y se concluye que las diferencias entre los actores crean recelos y desconfianza, pero lo que comparten les ofrece nuevas oportunidades de colaboración.*

Keywords: Journalism, bloggers, roles, food, risk, communication.

Palabras clave: periodismo, bloggers, roles, alimentación, riesgo, comunicación

1. Food communication in the risk society

1.1. Introduction

Food communication has particular characteristics that make it strategically interesting from the perspective of research in communication of risks and benefits –two sides of the same coin. Risks are immediate, with a potential impact on consumer health and with sociocultural and economic implications for identity, sustainability, food sovereignty, etc. The complexity and uncertainty of the communication of risk is also reflected in the communication of benefits.

Communication is crucial for detecting the systemic risks emerging in technologically advanced societies. Risk is defined, perceived and amplified, or attenuated and concealed, in various ways in the discourses of different actors¹. From the perspective of a constitutive framework, risk communication should be considered a mechanism for constructing meaning from the mediations of several transmitters, who, in any given context or specific situation, compete to impose their message with the intention of winning public approval and support. As cornerstones of communication, topics, sources and channels are key components of this constitutive perspective².

1.2. Context

Ever since the consumer society became popularised through the mass media, the food industry has played a central role in television and advertising. Food communication has simultaneously become increasingly important, not only in how it affects consumer purchasing habits but also because food has acquired new attributes and has now become a lifestyle choice. Mass-manufactured foods, including industrially processed foods aimed at the consumer society, for example, inspired the pop art of Andy Warhol,

¹ Cfr. HORLICK-JONES, Tom and FARRÉ, Jordi, “On the communicative constitution of risk objects in mediated times”, *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, nº 2, 2010, pp. 131-143.

² Cfr. GONZALO, Juan Luis and FARRÉ, Jordi, *Teoría de la comunicación de riesgo*, Editorial UOC, Barcelona, September, 2011.

as Campbell's soup and Hershey's chocolate bars had personal meaning and were also cultural identification elements³.

The 1980s neoliberalism led to major changes in the food production. It was no longer a question of feeding a growing number of developing countries but of turning food into yet another moneymaking commodity, in the context of a global market, which came to be marked by frequent food crises. Food risk communication has, in the last two decades, assumed particular importance for regulators, industry and consumers. The watershed that led to the institutionalization of food risk communication was the egg salmonella scare in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s⁴.

Since the 1990s several further scares have generated social alarm and produced an impact in the media, among them, the Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease variant associated with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (1996), dioxin in poultry and eggs (1999), precooked chicken salmonella contamination (2005), *Escherichia coli* contamination of soybean sprouts (2011) and the Horsemeat Scandal (2013).

In the White Paper on Food Safety (2000), the European Union's strategy to overcome public distrust of regulators and rejection of food risk information was to prescribe three phases for risk analysis: risk assessment, risk management and risk communication. The creation, in 2001, of both the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) (General Food Law, EC Regulation 178/2002) and the Spanish Food Safety and Nutrition Agency (AESAN) (Law 11/2001, of 5 July 2001) and of a number of other state and national food safety agencies represented a step forward in food risk communication in Europe.

The 2002 EU General Food Law itself covers "the entire range of steps involved in food supply, from animal health issues and feed quality on the farm to the quality of the products that arrive to the consumer's table"⁵. This reframing of the food safety discourse involves all stakeholders and consumers, from the farm directly to the fork, and connects them as participants in the food chain: "The emergence of the food chain invoked a new sense of interconnectedness among actors, specifically consumer organizations, policy makers and members of the industry"⁶.

Communication involves all the phases of the food chain that links agents of all kinds – legislators, producers, processors, inspectorates, marketers, distributors, advertisers, journalists and bloggers– with each other and with the consumer. Once actors distance themselves from the change in the institutionalized discourse, the different meanings that the actors attribute to food safety –whether referring to standardized industrial fast-food production or zero-kilometre slow foods– tighten the links in the food chain. It would seem obvious that all food chain actors have an interest in participating actively in the communication process in both traditional channels and in the new media. It is against this dynamic, the ever-changing background, that research in risk communication and in journalism as a specialized communication form assumes particular importance.

Web 2.0 and the social media –as online communication channels geared toward end users creating, editing and sharing their own content– have become a major showcase

³ Cfr. SMALL, Sabrina, "What's Eating Andy Warhol? Food and identity in Pop Art", *Appetite*, vol. 47, nº 3, November, 2006, p. 400.

⁴ Cfr. MCGLOIN, Aileen *et al.*, "The challenge of effective food risk communication", in *Symposium on Nutrition: getting the balance right in 2010. Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, vol. 70, 2011, pp. 19-25.

⁵ LOEBER, Anne, HAJER, Maarten, LEVIDOW, Les, "Agro-food crises: Institutional and discursive changes in the food scares era", *Science as Culture*, vol. 20, nº 2, 2011, pp. 147-155.

⁶ PAUL, Katharina T, "The Europeanization of food safety: a discourse-analytical approach", *Journal of European public policy*, vol. 19, nº 4, 2012, pp. 549-566.

for the food industry, but also for the public as consumers of both food and information. The communication interests at stake refer to how actors want to be perceived versus how they are actually perceived, in accordance with their credibility, the trust they inspire, influence and notoriety, ability to circulate messages, etc.

In the new media environment, legal, organizational and economic factors determine the role of each of the actors involved in the debate on food risk and benefits. Governments and public bodies have a responsibility to provide sufficient and accurate information – supported by scientific evidence– on food risks, crises and benefits. Nonetheless, it cannot be presupposed that the public will pay attention to their messages by the mere fact of being the official source, as authorities are not necessarily opinion leaders⁷.

For its part, the food industry has great potential for bringing influence to bear, given the large sums it invests in brand advertising campaigns and in R+D+I focused on developing profitable new products that promise better health and nutrition than other competing products.

The information and communication technologies have led to traditional media being displaced by direct communication with the public. To the challenge posed by the new technologies can be added that of the new voices, which have entered the media ecosystem; these too create and distribute content and participate in narrative processes and in discursive and meaning creation regarding information published, managed and shared in the social media. These voices adopt professional identities as defined by the web 2.0 channels and roles; they remain distinct from traditional journalists, even though they participate in practices that define the professional identity of journalists.

2. *The FoodRisC project*

Food communication research has traditionally been based on analyses of how messages are perceived, with trust and credibility as the main objects of study in various projects. Communication is crucial for health and food safety policies, given regulators' growing interest in promoting healthy habits and diets that reduce disease risks and healthcare costs. Responsible communication is essential for receivers not to be treated as mere consumers in a commoditized environment, but as responsible citizens capable of making well (in)formed consumption decisions.

To the approaches adopted from the psychological and sociological perspectives we can add recent communication research projects that integrate conflicting parties, levels of analysis and action spheres, whether politics, economics, science, the media, etc. Our object of study is not communication research as a tool of communication but as means for analysing how the discourses, meanings and professional identities of communicators are built.

2.1. *Objectives*

The FoodRisC project (*Food Risk Communication – Perceptions and Communications of Food Risks/Benefits Across Europe: Development of Effective Communications*

⁷ Cfr. VERBEKE, Wim, "Agriculture and the food industry in the information age", *European Review of Agricultural Economics*, vol. 32, n° 3, 2005, pp. 347-368.

Strategies; www.foodrisc.org) incorporates communication in an interdisciplinary study with these main goals: describing the links between food risks and benefits and the implications for communication; defining how the social media could be used in a better way to communicate food risks and benefits, both in normal and in risk and crisis scenarios; characterizing how consumers obtain, interpret and use nutrition information so as to be able to develop tailored messages targeted to specific publics; and proposing a strategy and communication toolkit for coherent dissemination of nutrition messages throughout the European Union⁸.

This article reports the results of Task 2.4 of the FoodRisC project –*Post-Event Evaluation of Barriers to Communication by Online Information Communities and Online and Traditional Journalists*– which, in addition to analysing barriers and opportunities for food communication in normal and crisis situations, defines new communication roles at play in the 2.0 environment.

Analysing the relationship between journalists and bloggers as a process allow us to approach the dilemmas between journalism and communication, information and opinion, identities and professional practices, with the aim of interpreting a changing reality in which it is confused where exactly the work of the journalist begins and ends.

2.2. Study sample

The criteria guiding the selection of the 12 respondents interviewed for this study were as follows:

Geographic diversity. Four out of the ten member countries of the FoodRisC consortium participated in the research: Spain, Germany, United Kingdom and Belgium. Note that results were not compared between countries, as the observed differences were not substantial. Instead, we analysed in depth one specific case based on the 12 interviews carried out in Spain.

Profile diversity. We included not only professional journalists but also other media professionals and amateurs from the food sector. Based on respondents' descriptions of their roles, we classified the respondents as professional journalists, expert bloggers or hobby bloggers.

Thematic diversity. We included respondents from general and specialist media covering various links in the food chain, such as food production, processing, regulation (government departments and public bodies), science, health, gastronomy, marketing and consumer rights.

Channel diversity. Participants with varying degrees of presence in the 2.0 environment were included, ranging from those with no presence (traditional press, radio and television journalists who do not participate in the online versions of their respective media) to individuals with a digital identity underpinned by several social media accounts.

Impact and influence. These indicators were determined by data obtained in an earlier phase of the FoodRisC project (*Report on New Media “Connectivity” Networks Showing Who is Communicating on Food, the Size of the Networks and Details of ‘Followers’ so Helping Establishing their Level of Influence and Value as Part of an*

⁸ Cfr. BARNETT, Julie *et al.*, “Development of strategies for effective Communications of food risks and benefits across Europe: Design and conceptual Framework of the FoodRisC project”, *BioMed Central Public Health*, vol. 11, n° 308, 2011.

Outreach Programme), with the most active bloggers, forums and groups, their sources and their spheres of influence identified using Google Alerts, Technorati and Radian6.

Gender. Equal number of men and women were interviewed.

2.3. Methodology

The research was designed to gather qualitative data through semi-structured interviews conducted during the winter of 2011 and spring of 2012 in Spain, Germany, Belgium and the United Kingdom. Each interview –mostly conducted face to face (7) and the rest by telephone (3), or online (2)– lasted approximately 50 minutes. The interviews were recorded for subsequent analysis and transcription and were also coded to preserve the anonymity of respondents and their media. Quotes from respondents reproduced verbatim are coded in brackets as follows: PJ (professional journalist), EB (expert blogger) and HB (hobby blogger).

The respondents provided information on how and why they choose their topics, the perspective and tone of their posts and articles, their definitions of food risks/crises and benefits, the challenges and barriers of communication in normal and crisis scenarios, their relationship with their publics, the sources they use, their digital literacy, the communication channels they use (and how and why), how they balance reporting speed and accuracy and the implications for the credibility of traditional and social media.

In an initial approximation to their responses it was found that the interviewees constructed their professional identities from their roles and their relationships with the topics, sources and channels. The information provided was thus analysed around these four constitutive dimensions:

Roles. As perceived in the media in general and in food communication in particular.

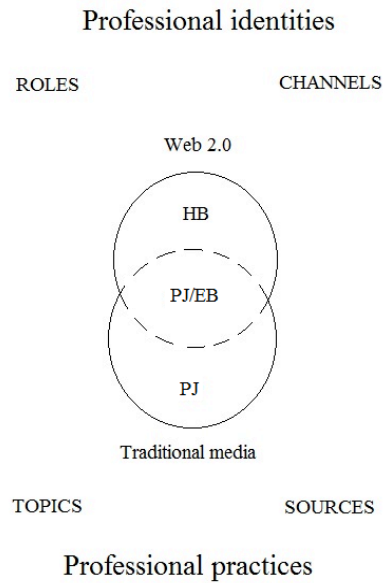
Channels. Use of and opinions regarding the social media and implications of transmission speed for information accuracy.

Topics. Reasons for choosing food-related topics and coverage of food risks/crises and benefits.

Sources. Choice, use and checking of sources and implications for media credibility and public trust.

Our discussion is based on the interplay of these elements in pairs. Thus, roles are linked to channels as defining dimensions for professional identities in the 2.0 environment, whereas topics and sources define the professional identities of journalists in the traditional media.

As core elements of journalism and communication, topics and sources are reflexive so they operate in parallel planes. They are therefore not only constitutive in the creation of discourse and meaning, but also in shaping roles and, therefore, the identities of the actors. This two-dimensional approach lends itself to the analysis of the 2.0 environment, where roles and channels are located at the level of professional identity and where topics and sources operate at the level of professional practices:



Our research questions considered the following conceptual issues:

- The extent to which professional identities are reformulated in the public digital sphere as a result of how channels define roles.
- The extent to which the selection and handling of topics and sources are practices of both actors who follow and who do not follow the normative model of professional journalism.

3. Professional identities in the digital age

Traditionally, journalism has been debated in terms of ideologies and values. The ideal model continues to be valid and exemplary but, in the current media environment, discussion becomes meaningless if it excludes other dimensions, such as professional roles –and not only of journalism but also of communication.

3.1. Roles

The respondents' definitions of their roles illustrate the tensions between the theory and practice of journalism; essentially, this traditional model continues to be valid in the 2.0 environment but it needs renewal in terms of form. Several respondents defined themselves as both professional journalists and bloggers:

Table 1. Respondents' roles

MEDIA	ROLES		
	Professional journalist	Expert Blogger	Hobby Blogger
TV	ENG		
TV	Agro-food news presenter		
TV	Gastronomy show director		

RADIO	Correspondent		
NEWSPAPER	Science reporter	Science blog	
PRESS AGENCY	Health reporter		
WEBSITE		Food information	
WEBSITE	Food information		
BLOG			Gastronomy
BLOG	General assignment reporter		Gastronomy
WEBLOG		Gastronomy	
WEBLOG		Gastronomy	

This kind of hybridization is indicative of the rapid changes taking place in the new media ecosystem, where professional identities are defined not only by roles, but also by the use of new communication channels and by the selection and handling of topics and sources, that are constitutive to the creation of discourses and meanings regarding food in an ever-expanding digital public sphere.

3.1.1. Professional journalists

Journalism, which has been studied and theorized from different perspectives and by different social sciences, can be considered as a profession, an institution, a text or a set of practices. It is also an economic activity subject to market dynamics, generating business by producing and disseminating current affairs information of public interest in the increasingly accessible formats designed for mobile devices⁹.

Journalism, which constantly readapts to the highly dynamic digital environment, has come to be regarded as “permanent and collective invention”¹⁰, since the identity of the reporter is constantly under construction and this same construction process is yet another component of professional identity:

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 the opening and closure of the group and 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 journalism¹¹.

Journalists are reaffirmed in the new media space through their identity, which distinguishes them from other actors in the same space, such as bloggers, public relations professionals, community managers, etc. Ultimately:

The journalism culture becomes manifest in the way journalists think and act; it can be defined as a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and

⁹ Cfr. DEUZE, Mark, “What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered”. *Journalism*, vol. 6, n° 4, 2005, pp. 442-464.

¹⁰ RINGOOT, Roselyne and RUELLAN, Denis, “Journalism as permanent and collective invention”, *Brazilian journalism research*, vol. 3, n° 2, 2007, pp. 67-74.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 74.

unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others¹².

Traditional journalism is a professional practice based on five “ideal-typical values” of public service, objectivity (journalists should be impartial, neutral and fair in order to be credible), autonomy (journalists need to be free and independent in their work), immediacy (journalists should have a sense of the current moment and speed) and ethics (journalists should have a sense of validity and legitimacy), according to Kovach and Rosenstiel¹³. Traditionally these values have been associated with the roles of gatekeeper and watchdog.

In accordance with these universal values, traditional journalism provides worthwhile information of public interest. Members of the public are treated as citizens because traditional journalism is democratic and concerned with the public interest and “the truth”:

To discuss traditional journalism you have to be nearly in your 40s, it's old school, we were educated with a pen and we worked with a typewriter [...] although we are gradually learning new technologies we continue to enjoy the passion of Citizen Kane, for example, or Watergate, which thrill those of us who learned journalism in the traditional way. This is the kind of journalism that we miss because every time there is less and less investigative journalism [...] if you do not investigate, at the end you just become a collector of information (PJ).

Most of the interviewed journalists defined themselves as “professionals” and described their work as a public service consisting of the provision of accurate information, often educational in nature. In the case of food-related scientific information in particular, the role of the journalist is “to translate scientific information for people so they can understand it” (PJ).

But going beyond the romantic idea of journalism, “noble societal values of the profession sometimes collide with the more mundane individual interests of the professionals”¹⁴ and, moreover, result in constant changes in the 2.0 environment, with new actors emerging on the scene and occupying the communication space: “I'm entertainment [...] my role is to know about recipes and products and types of preparations and to encourage the people that find cooking very difficult”. (HB).

The 2.0 media “challenge one of the most fundamental ‘truths’ in journalism, namely that the professional journalist is the one who determines what publics see, hear and read about the world”¹⁵. This role was typically attributed to traditional journalists: “The capacity to analyse, to understand if something is sufficiently representative or important enough to be published, that's the work of the journalists... it's our job to know whether something is news or if it's not, and especially why it is news”. (PJ).

In practice, the possibilities offered by the new technologies and also by the new 2.0 communication rules and values challenge the established journalism. The new, revised model for a technological and social environment requires the five ideal-typical values

¹² HANITZSCH, Thomas, “Deconstructing journalism culture: toward a universal Theory”, *Communication Theory*, vol. 17, 2007, pp. 367-385.

¹³ Cfr. KOVACH, Bill and ROSENSTIEL, Tom, *The Elements of Journalism: What newspeople should know and the public should expect*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2011.

¹⁴ HEINONEN, Ari, “The Journalist's Relationships with Users: New Dimensions for Conventional Roles”, in SINGER, Jane B. et al., *Participatory Journalism. Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers*, Wiley-Blackwell, a John Wiley & Sons, United Kingdom, 2011, pp. 34-55.

¹⁵ DEUZE, Mark, *op. cit.* 451.

of journalism to be dissected, while advocating multimedia and multicultural journalism, which overcomes the dichotomies and formulas that reproduce and legitimate established power relationships in the new media environment¹⁶. In effect, the proximity of the mainstream media to the power structures has eroded the profession that is seeking to recover its lost prestige.

3.1.2. *Bloggers*

In the multimedia logic, communication models other than the normative journalism model enable expert bloggers and hobby bloggers to enter the media sphere, sharing, to a greater or lesser degree, journalism practices in a wide variety of forms (public journalism, citizen journalism, lifestyle journalism, etc.).

Hybridization between the traditional values of normative journalism/soft journalism and the new media highlights the limitations of binary classifications and suggests the need to break with pre-established models. It is therefore not surprising that bloggers describe their roles in a more varied way than professional journalists.

The expert bloggers see themselves, in their respective areas of expertise (whether it is science, food technology or consumption), as professional communicators providing expert information to specific target publics, like science journalists or general journalists who interpret science:

I would not define myself as a journalist in spite of handling information; mainly out of respect for journalists [...] I communicate the issues more as an engineer than as a journalist. I would define myself as a professional, who writes about the food sector or who wants to communicate aspects related to the sector, but based on my background as an engineer (EB).

The hobby bloggers, mostly gastronomists, define themselves as providers of food style information and entertainment, or 'eatertainment'; their blog is a showcase for their own opinions, issued as a substantive element in their discourse. In this sense they are unlike professional journalists:

There is a difference between opinion and information. Exercising the profession has to do with the medium and with what the medium wants and it has to do with professional commitments, which a journalist has and what the person who writes a blog, for personal or other reasons, doesn't have. This does not mean that what they do is not interesting, but they are very different worlds (PJ).

Moreover, the inclusion of journalists in the 2.0 environment has resulted in combined profiles:

Sure, anyone can be a blogger, but I'm a journalist, so I'm both at once [...]. It's not about detracting from the professionals, I think the citizen journalist from the outset has to be a journalist by profession [...] because they know how to deal with topics, but if your training and culture and knowledge allow it you too can be one [journalist] (PJ/HB).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 451.

A traditional view of the profession, far removed from the concept of multimedia journalism, prevails among traditional journalists, especially those working in public media:

Journalism has rules and I am not quite sure that these people [the bloggers] know them, nor that everyone knows them, there are rules, some determinants... also routines, but above all, the routines are constrained by the rules. And by ethics [...] codes of conduct, research, of all kinds that are etched into our DNA (PJ).

I think that many people already think they are journalists just because they one day write about a subject [...] On one hand it is good because they can offer things, information with more freedom, but they can also confuse people because they are not asked for accuracy [...] despite the flaws the traditional media might have, it is rigorous (PJ).

This vision of journalism as an institution is generally shared by the bloggers, who, nonetheless, consciously distance themselves from the journalists, assuming that they have a function to fulfil that does not concern them:

I would prefer to view the journalists as more institutional spokespersons because the profession is about managing information, and the others more as simply interested, with knowledge of the sector but with a different role from spokespersons. We are not spokespersons; we are more on the other side (EB).

It seems clear that independent well-qualified professionals are expected to practice normative journalism and that journalistic skills are as necessary as ever –and possibly even more necessary– in the 2.0 environment.

The normative journalism, by the book, is still recognised as a reference both by people from the inside but also by externals. Although it is no longer only the mainstream media that are capable of facing the public and private structures of power given the new possibilities in the current communicative scenario.

3.2. Channels

The social media have radically altered the traditional linear, one-way communication model –in which the journalist mediates between the sender and the receiver– and have democratized information production and transmission so that now receivers are also issuers of content generated by themselves and by other users.

New media and channels generate new content and information transmission models; they also generate, using risk communication terminology, amplification, stigmatization¹⁷ and the echo-chamber effect¹⁸. The loss of authority of regulators and of journalists in the media sphere hinders concretion of the framework and impedes discussion of food safety in the farm-to-fork chain in the terms set by the dominant discourse.

¹⁷ Cfr. KASPERSON, Roger E. *et al.*, “The Social Amplification of Risk: A Conceptual Framework”, *Risk Analysis*, vol. 8, n° 2, 1988, pp. 177-187.

¹⁸ Cfr. GREGORY, Robin, FLYNN, James, SLOVIC, Paul, “Technological Stigma”, *American Scientist*, vol. 83, n° 3, 1995, pp. 220-223.

Compared to reporters and classic reporterism (interviews, telephone calls, research and follow-up), public relations professionals have gained power as sources, which means that they are better at placing topics on the media, political, economic and scientific agendas¹⁹. The traditional media have been de-professionalised and it is getting more common in institutional and corporate press offices to find journalists ejected from the traditional media system, which has been unquestioned until just a few years ago, before the economic crisis.

In addition, the 2.0 environment reinforces the importance of image in food communication with “implications for educationists, retailers and marketers and the consumer behaviour field”²⁰.

The Internet and the social media have not only brought in new actors to provide information coverage, they have also changed the process and have given voice to the public in the selection of topics, as information develops and after information is published. Networking is fundamental for journalism in the social media era and anyone who wants to quickly obtain the best information available also has to know how to use it²¹.

The need to be digitally literate in using the Internet and participating in the social media requires journalists to be adaptable. In fact many journalists working in the traditional media also frequently publish in 2.0 channels for their media or even in their own blogs, where they write on a range of topics not necessarily related to their professional role. Similarly, many bloggers take on journalism values and practices and turn their blogs into benchmark media for their audiences.

Disintermediation in content transmission and audience participation in content preparation are indicators of the importance of being acquired by web 2.0 channels: “You no longer need the media to tell you what’s going on, the people tell you directly and you draw your own conclusions based on different sources but directly, without intermediaries”. (HB).

Regarding channels, tensions emerge, firstly, due to differing degrees of digital literacy and, secondly, due to the distrust of the new media by professional journalists, who, while appreciating their speed, use them more as news agencies or as alert services: “For me the new technologies are a tool, nothing to do with the processing of information... they are more an instrument of intercommunication than an instrument for generating information” (PJ).

Although the journalists see the new technologies as mere tools, they are aware of the need to be present in the new media landscape: “If we do not get involved it will be, like –here’s an example– like falling into a black hole in the communication society –you’re there or you’re not” (PJ). Traditional journalists still tend to resist the social media, as they often do not quite understand how these can make them more efficient. Although some respondents assume social communication to be part of journalism, others consider interaction with the public as something excluded from their role.

For bloggers however, the social media define their professional identities: “I am multiplatform and ‘transmedia’, I do not only use different platforms to communicate but these are interrelated” (HB). Thus, specialist blogs and personal social media

¹⁹ Cfr. LEWIS, Justin, WILLIAMS, Andrew and FRANKLIN, Bob, “A compromised fourth estate?”, *Journalism Studies*, vol. 9, n° 1, 2008, pp 1-20.

²⁰ FISHER, Hennie, DU RAND, Gerrie and ERASMUS, Alet, “The power of food images to communicate important information to consumers”, *International Journal of consumer Studies*, vol. 36, 2012, pp. 440-450.

²¹ Cfr. BECKETT, Charlie, “The value of networked journalism”, *Polis. Journalism and Society*, June 2010, pp. 1-17.

accounts become hegemonic media on the Internet in the respective knowledge fields, and compete with online editions and audiovisual media sites to attract advertising and the attention of an increasingly fragmented audience.

4. *Approach to professional practices*

In our study of the professional practices of our respondents two broad doubts arose. In accordance with the normative model of journalism, should one expect certain professional practices to be associated with each of the roles? And to what extent should it be assumed that a role does not determine the practices of the actor, but the reverse? Although the answers are beyond the scope of this article, underlining these tensions and practices shared by the interviewees may shed light on opportunities regarding the selection and handling of topics and sources by journalists in the 2.0 environment.

4.1. *Topics*

Nutrition became newsworthy with columns and sections in the mass media in the 1950s and 1960s, coinciding with the development of a consumer culture that included lifestyle topics such as food and health. This type of journalism “primarily addresses its audiences as consumers, providing them with factual information and advice, often in entertaining ways, about goods and services they can use in their daily lives”²².

Coverage of food-related topics has evolved similarly to other lifestyle topics such as home and garden. Very like culinary bloggers nowadays, “in the 1960s and 1970s, articles focused on everyday life and everyday meals and instructed the housewife on how to create inexpensive, nice food”²³.

In the face of institutionalized discourse on the subject of food safety, food style journalism covers consumer content (price and quality debates), tips, practical information, expressions of taste and also food-related identity, culture and ethical issues:

“Everybody likes what is pleasant and everybody likes to eat well, so I’m going in that direction”. (PJ/HB).

“The information we broadcast regarding rural environment always set off emotions [...] these messages penetrate, they are very important to create society and generate a little optimism”. (PJ).

Furthermore, in the web 2.0 context content is often accompanied by numerous and various audiovisual and interactive resources aimed at enhancing the participatory and personal experience (sharing recipes is a classic example). With the enhanced focus on food and nutrition in general, new voices, discourses and meanings do the rounds in an ever-growing circuit:

²² HANUSCH, Folker, “Broadening the focus. The case for lifestyle journalism as a field of scholarly inquiry”, *Journalism practice*, vol. 6, n° 1, 2012, pp. 2-11.

²³ NØRGAARD, Nete and FROM, Unni, “Lifestyle journalism. Blurring boundaries”, *Journalism Practice*, vol. 6, n° 1, 2012, pp. 26-41.

To sum up, the content analysis documents structural changes in the press coverage of subjects such as living, fashion, everyday life, food and cars during the twentieth century (the “what”), while the qualitative examples point to discursive changes in this coverage (the “how”), indicating blurring and closely connected boundaries between lifestyle journalism, consumer journalism and cultural journalism²⁴.

These blurring limits can be observed when we apply traditional categories to analyses of the current media landscape. Academically, news is classified as hard or soft, depending on criteria such as time of publication; thus, hard news is published immediately while soft news can be postponed: “A story on the health effects of food would have less impact [...] it would be news but could probably wait until tomorrow or after tomorrow. Whereas if we knew that a tomato had poisoned someone we’d report it the same day”. (PJ).

Most journalists consider that writing about risks (hard news) compared to benefits (soft news) is more probable, because of media pressures and because risk is more newsworthy: “I don’t know why but there’s generally more news when it’s something outside the normal, when everything is going well there is less news than when there is some element that breaks with this”. (PJ). “In a crisis you have to publish every day, whereas in a positive scenario you don’t have this pressure”. (PJ/EB).

This distinction has been criticized by authors who also see focus and style as basic dimensions that, combined, make a story hard or soft. Thus, a thematic focus on the social level is indicative of hard news, whereas an episodic focusing on the individual level indicates soft news. As for style, this is more about how the content is presented than about what is published. A text-oriented style indicates hard news while a personalized and more visual style suggests soft news²⁵. Blogger style is closer to lifestyle journalism and is more immediate and informal than normative journalism: “Stylistically I feel much freer and in more direct contact with readers [...] It is not press style, I feel freer to write for the blog... of course I’m fully responsible, and if I’m wrong I’m wrong”. (PJ/EB).

In institutionalized media, what is ultimately published is the outcome of negotiations in the newsroom and, to a lesser extent, in professional weblogs; bloggers are not affected by such restrictions, however. In the traditional media, a particular focus or approach determines who writes the story and in which section it is published. Thus, the story angle is more important than the topic or subject. Journalists and editors implicitly indicate the issues that position their media; in other words, the choice of a specific topic is closely linked to the interaction between the brand image of the newspaper, the readers’ interest and the potential to attract advertisers. Furthermore, the boundaries between topics may be fuzzy and so interpreted very differently by different journalists and newspapers. Such different interpretations are related to newsroom organization and the newspaper’s editorial profile²⁶.

Without these constraints and with the new opportunities being constantly offered by the new media, the boundaries between normative journalism categories (hard news versus soft news) become irrelevant to issues such as: how much is hard-news coverage of a topic in a traditional medium limited by agenda setting; to what extent is blogged soft-news coverage of a topic capable of informing better without this agenda-setting limitation; to what extent can the more immediately personal style of blogs convey hard

²⁴ NØRGAARD, Nete and FROM, Unni, *op. cit.* p. 35.

²⁵ Cfr. REINEMANN, Carsten *et al.*, “Hard and soft news: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings”, *Journalism*, vol. 13, nº 2, 2011, pp. 221-239.

²⁶ NØRGAARD, Nete, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

news; and is the episodic approach of a daily publication enough to contextualize a topic, compared to a report published in a weekly newspaper supplement or a blog updated using a thematic approach?

In the choice of topic and how it is handled we cannot ignore the personal and professional qualities that define roles in the field of communication. As a matter of public interest, the knowledge areas covered by the interviewees (food, health, consumption, science, European Union and other general issues) are a reflection of traditional media columns and of the presence of key actors in the food chain discourse. But beyond the institutionalized message, food information merges with areas such as culture, gastronomy, travel, the environment, etc. Here we see the institutional endeavour to control messages and their flows and the inability to achieve that objective. Given the normative food safety discourse, dissenting voices question regulators and their concept of risk by pointing to silenced risk. The risks for these dissenters are a logical consequence of the food production system –of issues related more to food security than food safety:

I understand a food crisis to be a lack of food... the corn crisis in Mexico when the price of oil rose. [...] My way of communicating is closely related to my philosophy and my understanding of the food industry. The most important for me is that people cook to reduce their dependence of the modern industry" (HB).

The ongoing construction of a discourse based on shared narratives, sources and channels is part of the new communicative dynamics: news is now a process, not a finished product²⁷. Thus, content is updated from ongoing reviews, exponential aggregation of information and the (re)signification of concepts in the constitutive discussion.

The same is true for the communication of food benefits, when respondents attribute different meanings to nutritional, healthy, pleasurable, personal satisfaction properties, etc. in a vain attempt to keep risk on the margins, because, inevitably, “both [risks and benefits] are related to each other”: “Any recommendation is risky because it can have consequences [...] there is no poison, is a matter of dose” (HB). “In the needed dose [...] the benefit is linked with health but sometimes also with beauty, well-being and with very instructive things regarding the dissemination point of view rather than the informative”. (PJ).

Communicative tension with institutions –which, according to several interviewees, is the result of the “bureaucratization of communication”– is evident both in journalists and in bloggers and regarding both risks and benefits.

“There is a constant struggle between policy makers and companies because of the consumer effect, any break in this mechanism of tension and safety is something outstanding to report”. (EB).

For journalists –who criticize the slowness and opacity of official sources– press offices and public relations departments intervene between the source and the reporter, especially in cases of risk or crisis: “These agencies are very late; in the case of a food crisis, when they send a press release the crisis is usually over”. (PJ/EB).

There is a lot of press department in the way and many people who hinder you so you cannot get to talk to who can really answer your questions [...] I think there are

²⁷ BECKETT, Charlie, *op. cit*, p. 3.

many obstacles in the way, between the journalist and sources many annoying things intervene. (PJ).

For both the interviewed journalists and bloggers, company press departments engage in propaganda and advertising regarding food benefits:

“Of course, what all food producers would like to do is to sell medicines through the grocery store, at the market stand, so you have to be very careful with the scale of proven or potential manipulations in the food area, it’s unbelievable”. (PJ/EB).

“Usually, there is a third part interested in the benefit, whereas I think that there is no one interested in the risk, because information about risks usually arrives via an official body”. (PJ).

“We’ve gone too far in terms of benefits, to the point of turning grandma’s advice into health claims”. (EB).

4.2. Sources

Professional journalists and expert bloggers follow a different path from hobby bloggers regarding sources and fact-checking. In the case of normative journalism –in very different terms from those for hobby bloggers– the relationship with sources is crucial. Professional journalists’ sources include academic articles, scientific institutions, European, national and regional regulatory bodies and heads of communication and public relations in the food industry.

In fact, despite the significant increase in the available information and the speed with which it circulates, professional journalists and expert bloggers agree that there has been no apparent change in the availability of sources and confirm that they continue to use the same sources. The proximity of institutionalized agents (established media and food safety regulators) is more than evident, despite the differences that they claim exist between them.

Hobby bloggers, however, rarely cite official sources, broadly referring to “the media” and the Internet as sources: “The main source is oneself but also followers of the site, blog or Facebook page. And also other bloggers”. (HB).

In line with observations by other authors, more traditional journalists prefer the classical methods of reporting, based on face-to-face interviews and telephone conversations²⁸, and emphasize the need to fact-check information before publishing. They cannot imagine their profession in any other way: “You have to find sources for and against. If you have two sources, good. If you have four sources –two pairs– even better” (PJ).

Traditional journalists express their fears about the reliability of information available online and in the social media and typically trust the press, radio and television more than the Internet. This is perhaps because “where non-expert non-official information sources dominate a communication forum, there is an increased likelihood of inaccurate information being spread. Credibility of online information therefore remains a major communication challenge”²⁹. But professional journalists and expert bloggers also occasionally use the social media as an information source and to promote their articles

²⁸ Cfr. O’SULLIVAN, John and HEINONEN, Ari, “Old values, new media. Journalism role perceptions in a changing world”, *Journalism Practice*, vol. 12, n° 3, 2008, pp. 357-371.

²⁹ RUTSAERT, Pieter, REGAN, Áine *et al.*, “The use of social media in food risk and benefit communication”, *Trends in food science and technology*, vol. 30, n° 1, March, 2013, pp. 84-91.

through links to their digital and online media accounts; in this way they are more like hobby bloggers.

The checking of sources produces a tension to maintain the balance between information accuracy and publishing speed, with the hobby bloggers of the opinion that being first is crucial in the 2.0 environment:

It's more important to get there first than to do it better because that positions you [...] First you say it on Twitter and then a few days later you go into the topic in more depth with an intro that's a little longer and more reflective, first make the point that this has happened and then reflect on it (HB).

"Sometimes I think it's almost more important to be fast than to be thorough [...] on the Internet it's a matter of speed, immediacy, therefore sometimes... it's from there, it is interesting, I think it's reliable and credible, so fire away". (HB).

Professional journalists and expert bloggers share time pressures with hobby bloggers, especially in a crisis, but without sacrificing thoroughness: "Well, it has to be done quickly and well, there's no other way, you cannot spend a week on polishing off an item, you have to do it fast and well". (EB/PJ). "Those who read a story, directly, not checking it, now they're fast, what do they do –who knows– a summary, a rehash, and it's published in five minutes with nothing checked. Now that's fast". (EB).

Broadly speaking, while professional journalists are concerned with quality, sources, balance and fact-checking, bloggers are more concerned with speed, channel popularity and being the first to publish whatever content may become available at any given moment. This content in many cases may then be linked on to online editions of the traditional media. The "aggregators" do not aspire to becoming journalists; they prefer to accumulate content and pass on the responsibility for assessing information to the public: "I'm not very strict in this regard [...] people are adult enough [to give credibility to what they read]" (HB).

Hobby bloggers do not perceive source checking or the balancing of accuracy with speed to be their goal; they share, rather, more personal perspectives on the information. This interaction with the public means that websites, blogs and online communities are considered more credible and more reliable than traditional media and their online editions: "For people who move around in the digital environment, obviously digital relationships have more prestige, you know who it is, what they did before, what they are doing now, and the disparagement of the traditional media on the Internet is fierce" (HB).

5. Conclusions

In the new media scene, the broadening of topics and the hybridization of channels give rise to new roles that shape content and create new discourses and meanings regarding the risks and benefits of food. The creation of meanings regarding food, which goes far beyond safety and food quality, is a dynamic and ever changing process in which all components of the identity and professional practices of journalists and bloggers intervene. Some examples of innovative movements identified by food industry trend hunters include *Food Telling* (food with a message), *SuperSense* (multisensory experiences), *Slowcal* (food products consumed without haste), *Here and Now* (anywhere, anytime), *Eatertainment* (entertainment via food), *Made Simple* (culinary

solutions), *MyHealth* (health and wellness) and *Egofood* (food for the ego)³⁰.

The transformation of what is communicated and how it is communicated is fairly obvious but does not explain the multiplication of the logics associated with the creation of meanings for food. Exploring the identities of actors and their professional practices as a pathway open to change facilitates the understanding of these transformations from other perspectives.

The relationship between professional journalists and bloggers is ambivalent. A distance is maintained and distrust exists; yet they share roles and practices that draw them closer in the 2.0 environment:

Amateurs do not make a livelihood from the activity and have less time to spend on it than professionals. They are probably less specialist [...] amateurs and professionals are differentiated attitudinally, and by self-conception (amateurs see themselves as amateurs). Amateurs are rather marginal to both the professional world and to society because of the difficulty others have of understanding their depth of commitment to their pursuit. However, there are many similarities of values. Furthermore, the worlds of amateurs and professionals are strongly interconnected³¹.

For example, despite the differences detected between the distinct roles, there is a general consensus among respondents regarding the fact that official sources could benefit from a more active presence in the social media to transmit their messages more rapidly to a wider audience.

Compared to the traditional media, the social media offer more content, more thematic diversity, a greater range of viewpoints and more sources, not to mention new professional options. Nonetheless, the danger is that the perspective becomes blurred when the focus is broadened: it is more difficult to select content, we experience information overload ('infoxication') and we doubt the credibility and trust of the media and messages.

Creativity in terms of roles and innovation in practices are the key in the 2.0 environment. The journalist is still a gatekeeper and a watchdog, but the versatile journalist can also facilitate or moderate conversations online, uncover new topics in the social media, use audiences as sources and participate in new channels. "In the case of networked journalism, throughout the process of news production, the use of digital and online technologies is at the heart of the process of news gathering, processing and dissemination"³². This kind of journalism may well be the meeting point between the best of the new media and the best of the true journalistic tradition.

Professional journalism never denies their role as a gatekeeper and a watchdog and has now the 2.0 channels to come near the whole audiences rather than to hegemonic power structures. In this sense, professional, specialized, investigative journalism maintains a particularly important role to play facing the medicalization of food and health promoted by public institutions and the food industry. Both academics and journalists should ask themselves who benefits from the journalist's disappearance as an

³⁰ *EATrends. Food consumption in Europe towards 2012, in eight trends*. Azti-Tecnalia, Alimentaria Fair. Barcelona, 2012, <http://www.slideshare.net/aztitecnalia/eatrends-food-consumption-in-europe-towards-2020-in-eight-trends>.

³¹ COX, Andrew and BLAKE, Megan, "Information and food blogging as serious leisure", *Aslib proceedings*, vol. 63, n° 2, 2011, pp. 204-220.

³² BECKETT, Charlie and MANSELL, Robin, "Crossing boundaries: new media and networked journalism", *Communication, culture & critique*, vol. 1, n° 1, 2008, pp. 92-104.

intermediary; and what the consequences are of leaving the consumer with individual responsibilities in areas such as food and information, both of obvious public interest.

The challenge that journalism and journalists are facing is great and even traumatic in a context of downsizing, cutbacks and precariousness –yet, come what may, this challenge has to be faced. The 2.0 environment offers opportunities beyond journalism, in areas such as managing and interpreting big amount of data, safeguarding the digital reputation of individuals and organizations, strategic communication for corporations, businesses and public and private institutions, managing crisis communication, providing communication training and advice, creating new forms of entertainment, advertising, business, etc.

Compartmentalized classifications of roles are no longer relevant, given the permeability between professional journalists, expert bloggers and hobby bloggers. Structural changes in the profession and rapid changes in the 2.0 environment highlight the limitations of these three labels applied to professional identities. In this article they have been conveniently used to label roles for the purpose of discussion, but, as actors begin to occupy food communication niches, new categories and labels will be needed.

The plurality of channels hybridizes professional identities, whereas the exploration of new roles implies changes in topics and sources. Relationships develop in an ever-widening space where traditional rules are modified or rewritten and where shared spaces are created so all actors can explore for their mutual benefit. Both journalists and bloggers have their place in the new, permeable public media sphere.

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