

## Uses of Twitter in Catalan and Belgium Newsrooms

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### Abstract

This article presents the conclusions of an investigation into the use of Twitter, the main social network site, in newsrooms. The subjects of the study are journalists from two similar European regions: the French community of Belgium and Catalonia, one of Spain's regions. The study uses qualitative methods to analyse one online edition of a traditional newspaper and one digital native from each region, with data compiled from 25 in-depth interviews and non-participant observation, carried out over two years. The results demonstrate that despite having adapted this platform to their daily routines, they have done so in a uni-directional: principally as a means of dis-

tributing their own content. The newsrooms analysed have no clear policy on the interaction between the newspaper and its readership on social networks, generating conflict between the media corporate account and journalists' personal accounts. The idea of Twitter as a public sphere where professionals and the public exchange knowledge in order to improve journalistic discourse is currently considered utopian. Although communication 2.0 fosters equilibrium between journalists and the public, professionals have not yet found a way to get down from the pedestal that gives them access to official sources.

Keywords: journalism; Twitter; Web 2.0; social media; journalistic routines; participation.

### Introduction

**S**OCIAL MEDIA has intensified some features of the internet, especially the interaction between users and users and media organisations. In 2005, Tim O'Reilly defined the applications of web 2.0 as those that “make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users” (O'Reilly, 2005). In the same

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article, O'Reilly affirms that the most successful companies born in the era before web 2.0, companies such as Google or BitTorrent are those that "have embraced the power of the web to harness collective intelligence". The contributions of users are key to defining the current stage of the web.

Most approaches see the active involvement of users in the production of content as the main characteristic of web 2.0. Through interaction, social media makes it possible to create new relationships between users and between institutions and the citizenship. Some authors present the new communicative scene as an opportunity for democratic regeneration (Shirky, 2008; Papacharissi, 2010); while others observe new forms of censorship and an impoverished public discourse (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011; Allmer, 2014).

The changes introduced with web 2.0 has also altered the journalistic ecosystem. Internet intermediaries, public representation, editorial control and the establishment of the agenda are classic functions of journalism that derive from journalists' privileged access to information (McCombs y Shaw, 1972; Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1980; Gomis, 1991). The new media operate from different principles to the traditional ones: access, participation, reciprocity and communication between equals (Pavlik, 2001; Bruns, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Deuze, 2011). Journalism and the role of journalists need to be reassessed.

The mediation function of professionals, between the information and the public, is being diluted in a society in which people use technology to share or send what they need to, without recourse to traditional entities (Jenkins, 2006; Li and Bernoff, 2008; Castells, 2009). Some researchers point out that the role of gatekeeper held by journalists loses part of its meaning in a society in which the sources of information are accessible with no more than a click (Bruns, 2003; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Harrison, 2009). Others believe, for the same reason, that the filtering of information carried out by professionals is now more necessary than ever have been (Singer, 199).

## **1. Literatura review**

Journalists can use social media to search for issues, contact sources, share content and interact with their audience. Of these uses, the first two are traditional journalistic practices, pertaining to the information production process. While sharing content and interacting with audiences are tasks associated with the dissemination of the message and are skills that professionals have adopted in the digital era.

### **1.1. Journalistic uses of Twitter**

In research into both corporate and individual Twitter profiles, the academic literature has focused on the different uses journalists make of the social network, as much in the news production process as in that of broadcast. Research into the information production process has centred on the use of this microblogging network as a source of information (Broersma and Graham, 2013; Knight, 2012; Bruns and Burgess, 2011) or as a useful tool to cover sporadic and unexpected events in real time (Vis, 2013; Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012). Other studies found that journalists employ Twitter to find sources (Artwick, 2013; Gulays, 2013; Lasorsa; Lewis; Holton,

2012; Hermida, 2011). The users of this social network are seen by news organisations as active recipients, that is, as observers and sources who react to newsworthy events and initiate the news production process, and as commentators who share and discuss the published material.

It is however in the process of news dissemination where the tool is used most by news organisations. Research indicates that the media use the microblogging network in the same way that they adopted the internet a couple of decades ago, that is, by replicating the paper content on the screen. Journalists and the media have encountered in Twitter a free and easy way to share the content they produce (Greer and Ferguson, 2011; Holcomb, Gross and Mitchell, 2011; Messner, Linke and Eford, 2012; Pérez Soler and Micó, 2015). The social networks are vehicles used to drive traffic to the website, translating into greater income from publicity. In short, it is a new tool for news organisations to achieve notoriety and build loyalty.

## **1.2. Twitter as a communication platform**

Founded by Jack Dorsey in 2006, Twitter defines itself as a microblogging platform that allows the sharing of short messages (up to 140 characters) with any internet user. Each user has a list of contacts who “follow” these messages. Murthy defines microblogging “as an internet-based service in which (1) users have a public profile in which they broadcast short public messages or updates [...], (2) messages become publicly aggregated together across users, and (3) users can decide whose messages they wish to receive, but not necessarily who can receive their messages” (Murthy, 2013). Following Kaplan and Haenlein’s (2010) classification, microblogs are half way between blogs and social networks, and are characterised by a high degree of self-representation and a low to medium level of interaction.

Twitter uses simple but effective methods to connect individual tweets to a “global conversation” (held on the platform at a given moment) or to certain people. This is done by the use of hashtags (represented by the symbol #) or mentions (that adopt the @ form). Any word preceded by the # symbol is indexed by Twitter as a theme, facilitating joining a debate or viewing comments generated by a hashtag (Boyd, Golder and Lotan, 2010; Bruns and Burgess, 2012). The most popular hashtags of the day are known as “trending topics”, that is, they are the topics that have generated the most interest among users of the platform. If previously media set the agenda, now a platform allows the public to do so.

Tweeting with the same hashtag is not, however, the same as two or more people holding a conversation in the traditional sense. For this, Twitter has created mentions, that is, directing content to others by means of @ sign in front of their Twitter’s username. This form of interaction permits public discourse that can be seen by those who are not participants in the conversation. This public visibility of the conversations and profiles of the user, in addition to the techniques for sharing information, are a significant distinction between Twitter and the main social networking site Facebook; making the microblogging platform especially attractive for information professionals (Murthy, 2013).

Alfred Hermida (2010) points out the protest that took place during the election in Iran in the summer of 2009 as the moment in which the traditional media started to use Twitter as a journalistic tool. The global news broadcaster CNN, among others, obtained information from social

networks about this event. Neither demonstrators in Iran, nor later revolutionaries in Tunisia and Egypt, used Twitter as a means of sharing information. They did not aspire to become journalists. They simply used the platform to communicate with each other and organise themselves, coordinating activities and arranging to meet on the streets. Among this communication was information that journalists had not previously access. Professionals discovered the value of the information that circulated on social networks.

A few months earlier, in January, an aeroplane crashed into the Hudson River in New York, news of which reached the whole world after being reported by members of the public who witnessed the accident. In concrete, Janis Krums tweeted the first photograph of the plane flown by Sally Sullenberger in the river. Some authors signal this as the moment when journalists discovered the potential of Twitter as a social network to broadcast relevant information in a viral way (Murthy, 2013). Since then, developing its journalistic potential has become one of Twitter's business strategies.

In November of the same year, the company changed the question on its page heading, with "What's happening?" replacing the question "What are you doing?" that had been used up until that point. That same month, Evan Williams, who was at the time CEO of Twitter, explained at a conference "we think of Twitter not as a social network, but an information network. It tells people what they care about as it is happening in the world". Twitter ceased to be a social network dedicated to posts about everyday situations and became a powerful communication tool. As Williams recognised in an interview, Twitter really liked the idea of millions of reporters around the world collecting information and reporting on what was going on around them (O'Reilly Media, 2009).

In the field of communication, the principal benefits of microblogging are (1) its highly viral nature and capacity to generate a digital word of mouth; (2) access to a large quantity of content at a glance; and (3) its immediacy in transmitting information (Murthy, 2013). The structure of the microblogs adapts to the needs of the information producers, which has encouraged their take up by the newspapers. Journalists primarily use them to broadcast their own content, and frequently use them to keep up to date on and document trends: the issues that people are talking. A feature that distinguishes it from all other social networks explains the viral nature of Twitter: that users can decide which messages they want to receive, but not necessarily who can receive their messages. The main distinction from other social networks lies therefore in the bi-directional nature of the platform.

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), the success of this microblogging network is due to the following features: "(1) the creation of ambient awareness; (2) a unique form of *push-push-pull* communication; and (3) the ability to serve as a platform for virtual exhibitionism and voyeurism". By the term "ambient awareness", Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) are referring to a new form of social conscience that social network users experience on being, in some way, permanently in contact with their social circle.

Another advantage Twitter has over the other social networks is the *push-push-pull* system of communication. By this, the authors mean: (1) the exchange of public messages across the microblogging network, as opposed to Facebook's structure; (2) the possibility that the recipient of a message might find it sufficiently interesting to resend it, leading to an exponential growth in

the reach of the message (this is known on Twitter as a retweet, and is the basis of a Tweet going viral); and (3) the fact that, in some cases, the recipient of the message has to open a link (*pull*) to access the rest of the content of the tweet, as due to the limited space the social network allows for communications (140 characters) some users attach links to other web pages containing more information.

### 1.3. Is Twitter a many-to-many channel?

What about interaction on social media? Where is the dialogue between users and the media relegated? What happened to the promises that the microblogging network would be the new public sphere? Journalists have turned their back on the public for many years in order to concentrate on producing content that they considered of interest to their audience. However, they did not listen to them. They acted blindly, with, on many occasions, terrible results. Now, with web analytics, they have the opportunity to listen, to know what really interests the audience. Some authors consider that the survival of journalism depends on taking the leap from being “in the business of content” to an understanding of “journalism as a service” (Artwick, 2013).

The digital era has facilitated a change in traditional journalism. Today’s journalism has moved away from the idea that it is a “lecture by professional authorities” to move towards “a new way of knowing”, a way to provide a public service (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). The authors argue that the “next journalism” should distance itself from journalism as product and orientate itself towards journalism as a service that can respond to the public’s questions, and offer those tools and resources. According to Gillmor (2004), the professional should give the floor to the public, as surely among the public will be experts who know the material better than the journalists themselves do.

The Knight Media Center stated that Twitter was a platform and to report on the world [sic] new and unique ways (in Artwick, 2013). Boyd, Golder and Lotan (2011) argue that the microblogging network is a platform to establish a global conversation in real time that allows the whole world to be aware of it without having to form a part of it. For all of these authors, digital journalism needs to return to being a conversation in order to generate a community that shares information and debates the news. They hold that this is the only way in which journalism can be saved. The key word being *engagement*; a need to achieve a commitment between news organisations and their audience, at a time when the public are increasingly critical of the media and maintain a distance from official versions of events. It is a question of encouraging loyalty in the readership, something that marketing has been doing for years, but that journalism has hardly considered up to this point.

However, although 2.0 web tools permit real time interaction with users and allow a dialogue with the readership to be established, some authors warn that interactivity is a myth. Using ethnographic methods, Domingo (2008) studied the routines of journalists in four digital newsrooms and found that the lack of time, caused by tight production deadlines, as well as the mentality of the journalists and editors featured among the causes preventing dialogue with the readership in spite of the technological facilities available. Singer (2005) and Lasorsa, Seth and Avery (2012)

have similarly noted that journalists have adopted 2.0 tools, but that they adapt them to their own routines and mental models, stripping them of their interactive potential.

#### **1.4. Do users want dialogue with journalists?**

Journalists are not the only actors in the journalistic process. The users, previously recipients of the news, nowadays adopt a much more active role in the consumption of information. It can be said that more than consuming, they use information: recommend, share and comment on those news items that have benefit. The era of the consumer has reached its end. On the Internet, users are *prosumers*, that is, producers and consumers of news at the same time (Toffler, 1973). Among the reasons given by the public for participating in social media are the ability to relate to and converse with other people; share information; and comment on news items (Java, Song, Finin and Tseng, 2007). A previous study (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht and Swartz, 2004) focusing on what moves people to start a blog draws similar conclusions: the sharing of experiences, opinions and comments were given as the main motivating factors.

Although interaction in social media is well viewed and relationships between users are the basis of web 2.0, the interaction between news organisations and the public is very different. The majority of research indicates a low use of interactive elements proposed by the media (Deuze, 2003; Larsson, 2011). Users are reluctant to participate in the media because they are not convinced by the formats proposed by the professionals. They are neither offered the possibility to relate to each other, in the way that social networks encourage; nor do journalists and the media make much effort to improve the interaction. Because of this, the public turn to social networks for debate and interaction. A more recent longitudinal study (Karlsson, Bergström, Clerwall and Fast, 2015), carried out in Sweden between 2007 and 2013, whose objective was to evaluate the long term viability of participatory journalism by means of data and content generated by users, concluded that although comments on news items and the creation of blogs increased between 2007 and 2010 (right at the peak of the explosion of social networks in news organisations) it reduced dramatically from 2011 onwards. The authors conclude that it is not simply a problem of reluctant producers, but more importantly still, that of a lack of interest on the part of the users.

## **2. Methodology**

In this complex scenario of transformation, the current research aims to contribute to clarifying the way in which Catalan and Belgian journalists use Twitter, as a journalistic tool, in news production and broadcast. Special attention is paid to the interaction between the media and users on social networks sites to clarify whether the main microblogging network is the public sphere of today.

The subjects of the investigation are journalists from Catalonia and the French Belgian community, with data drawn from one traditional media organisation and one digital native from each region. These regions have been chosen for the study as they share numerous characteristics: a limited market (a population of 7 million in Catalonia and 4.4 in the French Belgian community); institutional complexity (with different levels of power: municipal, provincial, regional and state

in the case of Catalonia; and regional communitarian and federal in the Belgian case); and linguistic and cultural permeability between, in the first case, Spain and Catalonia, and in the second, France and Belgium (and to a lesser degree, between Flemish and Belgians). All of these characteristics weaken both communicative systems, at a time when they are also faced with the challenge of assuming the processes of convergence and concentration of the market present in the media systems of western European and the United States (Castells, 2009), in a context conditioned by a severe economic crisis.

The Catalan newspaper chosen for the study is *Ara*, the leader in on-line circulation,<sup>1</sup> taking up a position half way between traditional and cyber media, as although it is published on paper, it began publishing on the internet in 2010 when the social networks started to consolidate. *Vilaweb* was chosen as the *pure player*, as it was the first on-line newspaper in Catalonia and the only one with a stable staff of professional journalists. In Belgium *Le Soir* was chosen as the object of the investigation, established 125 years ago, it is the French language newspaper with the highest readership in the country, The Belgian on-line newspaper analysed is *Apache*; the only French language newspaper with a staff of professional journalists that was created on the internet. In fact, *Apache*'s origins are in the Belgian Flemish community, where the *pure players* of the country are concentrated: *NewsMonkey*, *De Wereld Morgen*, *Stamp Media*, etc.<sup>2</sup>

This empirical research was carried out using qualitative methods. A non-participatory observation of two weeks duration was carried out at each of the newspapers: at *Le Soir*, from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> June 2013; *Apache*, from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> July 2013; *Ara*, from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> January 2014; and *Vilaweb*, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> February 2014. In addition, 25 semi-structured interviews were carried out with staff across the different editorial profiles, from editors-in-chief to sub-editors, social networks and/or on-line newspapers.

With the aim of updating information obtained between 2013 and 2014, some of those interviewed were consulted again at the end of 2016.

It is common to combine direct observation of the newsrooms and in-depth interviews in research undertaken into the productive routines of journalists (Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1980; Domingo, 2006). While interviews paint a picture of the opinions of the journalists and their perception of themselves, observation provides insights into the real routines and the context or factors influencing their work (Berger, 1998). Observation in the field plays a fundamental role in any approach to understanding productive routines, given that it allows a comparison between different entities, identifying their possible similarities and differences (Howard, 2002; Cottle, 2007; Anderson, C. W., 2011).

This research seeks to complement quantitative studies that focus on thousands of tweets compiled by means of content automation methods (Haewoon, Lee, Park and Moon, 2010; Casero Ripollés and Micó Sanz, 2017; García-Avilés *et al.*, 2016; Moya Sánchez and Herrera Damas, 2016) as well as those which focus on journalists, but only employ quantitative approaches (Weber, 2008), limiting the value of the research findings. Both direct non-participant observation

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1. According to data provided by the Oficina de Justificación y Difusión (Ofcom) July 2014. [www.ojdinteractiva.es/mitjans-digitalis-en-catala](http://www.ojdinteractiva.es/mitjans-digitalis-en-catala)

2. As reported in Antonie, F. and Heinderyckx, F. (2011) *État des lieux des médias d'information en Belgique francophone*. [http://egmedia.pcf.be/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/EGMI\\_EDL\\_fullv6\\_5.pdf](http://egmedia.pcf.be/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/EGMI_EDL_fullv6_5.pdf)

in newsrooms and in-depth interviews enable us to listen to journalists' reflexions, observe their dynamics and understand the motivations behind their use of Twitter.

The combination of different qualitative methods - direct non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews – reduces the possible gaps any of them might suffer individually (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011; Singer, 2016). Observing journalists' use of social networks during the news production process – news searches, fact checking and contact with sources – can only be done at their side in their place of work, or by means of interviews, although in reality these paint a picture of journalists' self-perception, which does not always reflect reality.

### 3. Results

This research leads us to conclude that social networks, specifically Twitter, have altered journalists' production routines. Journalists have adopted the microblogging network as a part of their daily tasks, principally as a tool for the broadcast of content. During the news production process, news professionals use the platform to (1) search for issues, document and fact check and; (2) contact sources.

#### 3.1. Searches for issues and contacting sources

The majority of journalists interviewed state that, together with the distribution of news, their main uses of Twitter include both searches for issues (informing themselves on what is of public interest) and fact checking. Twitter has a particularly useful structure for professional journalists, who use the microblogging network as a personalised news agency (Murthy, 2013). Joan Serra, editor in chief of the Society section of the newspaper *Ara* points out that journalists use it to stay alert to events.

Twitter provides us with an enormous visualisation capacity and at the same time a capacity to inform ourselves about things as they happen. Through social media, to give a recent example, we know that a public demonstration has been organised to protest against the rise in the price of public transport. We keep an eye on Twitter to search for issues. It is an invaluable source to get a feeling about what is going on.

The practice of contacting sources continues to be carried out at both the Catalan and the Belgian newsrooms. However, only a third of those interviewed have contacted sources through the microblogging network, with this always occurring during unplanned events (terrorist attacks, natural disasters, large demonstrations with unexpected outcomes, etc.). In such situations eye witnesses can be contacted in real time on Twitter, permitting the publication of news scoops that will be developed later, just as Josep Casulleras, chief editor of *Vilaweb* explains:

When a significant event occurs in real time, for example, a train accident, a demonstration, etc., people report from the location of the event about what is happening and journalists pick up on it. In this way we acquire first hand information that we research further (by calling the train company or someone participating in the demonstration, for example) and we publish, driving traffic to our website of people who want to know more about what is happening. It creates a virtuous cycle.

The journalists interviewed refer to contacting sources through the microblogging network as a sporadic practice that occurs during an unplanned event, more than as a routine daily occurrence. The possibility of following planned events (press conferences, political rallies etc.) through Twitter exists; the majority of those interviewed point out, although such usage is less frequent, as press agencies cover these events.

### **3.2. The broadcast of information**

In the process of broadcasting information, Twitter is mainly used to post journalists' own content, as just another channel of uni-directional communication. Editors and journalists state that it is used as a means of keeping the audience informed, serving the same purpose as the web page. Social networks in general, and Twitter in particular, "are vehicles to drive traffic to the newspaper website". This is one of the most frequently repeated phrases heard in newsrooms, as the metrics of their web page (mainly the number of sole users) determine the ability to capture advertising and negotiate income through publicity. Thus when newspapers post their own content on Twitter they reinforce their corporate brand, due to the impact it has on their followers.

News agencies, as this and other research demonstrates, understand this social network as a platform to publish their own content (Greer, Ferguson, 2011; Holcomb; Gross; Mitchell, 2011; Messner; Linke; Eford, 2012). They use it in such a way to attract more traffic to their own web site. In addition to producing a news item (writing the text, taking the photos, recording and editing the video) journalists are now also in charge of posting the item on social networks.

In the newspapers researched, the most extensive use of Twitter after the publication of original content is self-promotion on official Twitter accounts. The microblogging network is used to attract new subscribers and launch promotions. For this, the marketing department (as is the case with the newspaper *Ara*) or the newspaper's community manager creates the posts (as with *Apache*). Although in both cases the promotional message is posted on the corporate account, there is a clear line marking who is in charge of writing journalistic tweets (journalists) and who writes the promotional tweets (the marketing department or the community manager).

*Vilaweb* and *Le Soir* almost never post promotional tweets on their corporate *Twitter* profile, although for different reasons. *Vilaweb* has created a microblogging account solely to publish promotional content @EspaiVilaweb and this used mainly to inform readers about conferences, presentations and activities organised by the newspaper, that are held in the conference room next to the newsroom. *Le Soir* has a Facebook page (<https://fr-fr.facebook.com/lesoirbe>) for promotions. Both at *Vilaweb* and *Le Soir*, just as at *Ara* and *Apache*, the profiles that are concerned with promotion are not managed by journalists, but by marketing experts.

### **3.3. Interaction with the audience**

Interaction with the audience is considered secondary in all the cases investigated. Journalists scarcely use social networks to communicate with the readership. In some cases, the newspapers do encourage such participation for promotional purposes. It is common to see a post inviting users to send photographs, answer questionnaires, comment on a specific issue, send certain documents,

participate in a chat or attend an event, on the corporate Twitter accounts of the newspapers studied. However, these posts are secondary to the news items.

Interaction with the audience on social media was one of the most hotly debated issues raised during this research. Journalists interviewed express a willingness to interact more, but say that they have neither the time nor the resources to do so. They are also unsure about some things, for example, they have questions about what kind of conversations they should encourage, and in contrast, when it would be better to stay on the margins. Questions also arise about the tone they should employ with audiences. While this investigation was being conducted the newspaper *Ara* was holding meetings to address this type of questions, as the political editor Ferran Casas explains:

In the immediate future, we would like to be more interactive on Twitter and we are looking into this. We want to begin to answer readers, retweet, etc. So that it is obvious that there are people behind the paper, that we do not seem so much like a machine. However, this is very complicated. Both because of the immediacy and the issues being dealt with, etc. It is not simple. We have talked about what we should do and what we want to do. We tried to produce a document... But it is on stand-by. Even so, we are clear that we want to be more interactive.

One of the main concerns about interaction with the audience revolves around which issues should be proposed to stimulate a conversation, and on the other hand, when it is better to remain silent. The newspaper *Ara* responds when a reader asks about a bureaucratic procedure (for example, how to subscribe to the newspaper); however, if a reader detects an error in an article or raises a question, the editors spark off a debate that frequently concludes without offering the reader an answer, as Isaac Salvatierra, director of the digital version, points out:

Sometimes we don't respond, but other times we do. I think that we still need to clarify this. Other media channels who are more accustomed to participation (radio and television) have resolved things better. Also so have those who have a person solely dedicated to it, but in our case we are all involved. If they are technical questions of the type "my newspaper hasn't arrived" or "I have forgotten my password", the marketing department answers, as that is where we manage our customer service. But if someone asks you a question, for example "I don't understand this or that", we have to decide whether to enter a debate or not, and to what point we should break the barriers, or if we should maintain a journalistic tone. At times I think we should say thank you more. We often correct the error, but we do not answer.

The four cases studied signalled that currently the most interesting interaction with the audience is pointing out some kind of error in the article (an incorrect date, an incorrectly written name, etc.). Further than these contributions, the majority of those interviewed agree that other interaction doesn't usually contribute any added value. A division between the directors and the journalists is apparent. It is those further up the hierarchy, furthest from the routines of daily production, who seem to be more optimistic with respect to the contributions of the audience, which they consider "offer a new way of relating to the readership". Vicent Partal, director of Vilaweb, demonstrated this:

We have a tendency to think that the great change [in Journalism] happened around about 1995, with the differentiation between the traditional media and the pure players, but I do not agree: the great change came with the appearance of the social networks. It is the social networks that have broken the traditional model of Journalism, offering a new way to relate to the readership.

A minority of the journalists interviewed (as recorded in two of the 25 interviews conducted) maintain that the function of journalism is to inform the public of the important event that occur daily, and not to enter into dialogue with them. These statements were taken from interviews held at the traditional newsroom of the Belgian French community and coincide with the results of research by Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2012), who affirm that those journalists who work in the principal media organisations are less predisposed to interact with audiences.

### **3.4. Opinions and exclusive information on personal accounts**

One of the main challenges when adopting social networks as a professional tool arises from the disappearance of boundaries between public and private spheres. Twitter, as a tool of bi-directional communication, is an excellent instrument to distribute the contents of a newspaper, and at the same time to publish the opinion of an individual professional. Journalists have never been so able to freely express their personal opinions, given that they are supposed to be impartial providers of information.

None of the newsrooms studied have a guide to the use of social networks, with any directions being given verbally. In the newsrooms analysed, journalists are advised to indicate what job they do (and in some cases in what media), but the link between the newspaper's corporate account and the journalists' personal accounts does not go any further than a few unwritten recommendations, resulting in the observation that tensions between the management of the newspaper's corporate account and the journalists' personal accounts is a source of conflict. Expressing personal opinions and offering some kind of exclusive information on personal accounts before professional ones have been the main causes of an unleashing of tensions.

The four newspapers analysed have had numerous debates about this question. In three of them (*Ara*, *Le Soir* and *Apache*), the directors have asked their writers to be prudent when expressing personal opinions on their own Twitter accounts, because they represent the paper for which they work. In addition to prudence, the second most common recommendation in the work place is the use of common sense. At *Ara* there have been cases of journalists positioning themselves openly in favour of a political policy to the point where it influences their work. Politics is the section in which there have been the most conflicts regarding this, as Ferran Casas, Political editor, explains:

There have been journalists who have commented on political news or posted opinions on their personal accounts that I considered inappropriate. I always tell them that the reason they have so many followers (thousands, many of them) is because they write for *Ara*, and therefore, they should behave as such. Their opinion is the papers' opinion, and that is what the readership understands. I am of the opinion that those who work for the liberty of expression sometimes, paradoxically, should limit themselves to protecting their credibility and that of the newspaper.

In the case of *Vilaweb*, a pure player that has been outspoken in favour of Catalan Independence, its journalists have not been warned to moderate their political stances. Quite the opposite, as the company understands that journalists have opinions and are able to express them openly without harming their work. *Vilaweb* journalists interviewed for this investigation affirm that they have no problem giving their opinions on their personal accounts as these coincide with the editorial line of the paper. When asked what might happen if this were not the case, they responded that in that case they would be more prudent and would avoid expressing their support for independence.

Conversations were also recorded in the Belgian newsrooms about the use of journalists' personal accounts. The case of the journalist Ricardo Gutiérrez is particularly relevant. In addition to being editor of *Le Soir* he serves as a member of the European Federation of Journalists union. In this case, Gutiérrez's personal opinions are frequently directly opposed to those of the editorial line of the paper, as it was faced with redundancies<sup>3</sup> during this investigation. This dual role generated some conflicts between Gutiérrez and the company, who on occasion reproached him for posting tweets expressing support for the profession.

Before Twitter, journalists could only publish news in the paper for which they worked. Now social media networks are an equally valid channel through which to reach the public. Some of those interviewed had doubts about where information should be published first; on their personal accounts or on the corporate one and during the observation practices were recorded that generated mistrust between the paper's digital department and the editors of the print edition.

## Conclusion

The main aim of this article is to clarify in what way Catalan and Belgian journalists, working for either traditional papers or pure players use Twitter, both to produce the news and to publish it, paying particular attention to the interaction between journalists and users. One of the more interesting findings of this study, carried out over two years, is that practices associated with opportunities for interaction (contacting sources, dialogue with audiences and a place for debate) are considered to be secondary.

Official sources continue to set the agenda. Only when an unexpected event occurs do journalists resort to social networks to obtain information. It could be said that planned newsworthy events have official sources, while sporadic events rely on Twitter and other networks. The main reason behind this position is that journalists who work in the media have well identified organised sources, and it is difficult for the spontaneous or unorganised sources to access these professionals and, above all, to influence the media organisations they work. The only context in which social networks prove a good tool to connect journalists with sources is when an unplanned event occurs, for example, a natural disaster or a demonstration that results in injuries inflicted by the police.

Journalists' work no longer ends with the publication of the piece. This is one of the main changes that professionals have experienced in their productive routines as a result of digitalisa-

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3. Ricardo Gutiérrez points out that 15 journalists and a total of 37 staff were affected. This is 10% of the workforce, if we take into account that the company employed 350 people. At the time of writing this article, Gutiérrez no longer is the editor of *Le Soir*. He currently is the general secretary of the European Federation of Journalists.

tion. For the first time journalists have to follow the evolution of the news item once, it has been published. In the majority of cases, they are responsible for posting such items of news on social networks, a very widespread practice across most of the media. The microblogging network is a distribution channel where the content of the web page is replicated.

As for dialogue with the audience on social networks, the idea of Twitter as a public sphere where professionals and the public exchange knowledge in order to improve journalistic discourse is currently considered utopian. Catalan journalists still submerged in a cyclical economic crisis and a structural sectoral crisis, claim they lack the time and resources to enable them to pay more attention to the evolution of news items once they have been posted on social networks. Belgian journalists, on the other hand, with a perception of themselves as intellectuals, feel that establishing a process of dialogue with social media users falls outside the scope of their functions. This research invites a qualification to the euphoria that exists around the myth of the digital conversation. This myth emerged from very isolated cases that, despite being gratifying, are far from the daily task of journalism, as evidenced by the study of the day-to-day experience of newsrooms. For several reasons, encouraging and moderating conversations between the media and the audience on social networks is not, for the moment, a priority for the newsrooms studied. Although communication 2.0 fosters equilibrium between journalists and the public, professionals have not yet found a way to get down from the pedestal that gives them access to official sources. In the newsrooms analysed there is no clear policy on the interaction between the media and social networks users. This generates conflicts between journalists' personal accounts and corporate media accounts, and between executive profiles and those of subordinates. The two main triggers of tensions in the newsrooms studied are: expressing personal opinions and offering some kind of exclusive information on personal accounts before they are published on professional accounts.

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## Appendix. Interviews

Interviews carried out for the study were as follows:

### *Ara*:

- Carles Capdevila, director of *Ara*
- Sílvia Barroso, director of the digital version of *Ara*
- Ferran Casas, chief political editor of *Ara*
- Marc Colomer, political editor of *Ara*
- Sara González, political editor of *Ara*
- Isaac Salvatierra, editor of the digital versión of *Ara*
- Jordi Nopca, editor of the culture section of *Ara*
- Joan Serra, chief editor of the society section of *Ara*
- Toni Padilla, chief sports editor of *Ara*

### *Vilaweb*:

- Vicent Partal, director of *Vilaweb*
- Assumpció Maresma, editor of *Vilaweb*
- Josep Casulleras, chief editor of *Vilaweb*
- Roger Cassany, chief editor of *Vilaweb*

### *Le Soir*:

- Philippe Laloux, director of the digital version of *Le Soir*
- Gaetano Alemanni, director of digital marketing of *Le Soir*
- Alexandre Colleau, *community manager* and creator of the technological sections *Belgium\_iPhone* and *Geeko* of *Le Soir*
- Cedric Petit, editor of the digital version of *Le Soir*
- Ricardo Guitierrez, of the society section of *Le Soir*
- Noemie Lescal, *community manager* of *Le Soir* (in charge of the Facebook page)
- Michel De Muelenaere, specialist environment editor of *Le Soir*

*Apache:*

- Silvayn Malcorps, editor of the official Twitter account in French at *Apache*
- Bram Souffreau, cofounder of *Apache*
- Damien Spleeters, collaborative journalist at *Apache*
- Nico Kennes, marketing chief at *Apache*