

Non-Elitist Truth? The Epistemologies of Italian Journalists in the Hybrid Media System

Social Media + Society
July–September 2022: 1–11
© The Author(s) 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/20563051221118378
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms

Sergio Splendore¹ and Laura Iannelli²

Abstract

Epistemology in journalism is the criterion of validity that enables journalists to distinguish the false from the true. Questioning how journalists depict reality is important especially in an age of economic and technological uncertainty. A new group of media actors involved in the news cycles is increasingly able to “hack the attention economy”; non-elite actors by the algorithmic logics of platforms tend to be increasingly regarded as influential (if not authoritative) in journalists’ decisions to transform facts into news. This study explores how in the various phases of newsmaking (i.e., discovering, gathering, spreading, and verifying news) non-elite actors are shaping journalists’ everyday epistemology in the contemporary Italian hybrid media system. This study draws on an analysis of 147 semi-structured interviews conducted with Italian professional journalists from 2008 to 2020. The results of the analysis confirmed the most conventional view about Italian journalism, that is, that journalists present knowledge essentially by using elite actors’ subjective reconstructions of reality. The integration of non-elite sources in the various stages of news production is due to an attitude of journalists aimed not so much at increasing pluralism as at producing news by providing evidence. The low level of journalists’ reflexivity in the use of web platforms, while involving some non-elite actors, appears to favor platforms themselves and their requisites.

Keywords

journalism, epistemology, hybrid news cycle, newsmaking, participation

Introduction

Epistemology in journalism is the criterion of validity that enables journalists to distinguish the false from the true, the probable from the actual, as well as to legitimize the knowledge claims expressed (Ekström, 2002). To put it in Ettema and Glasser’s (1985) terms, epistemology is how journalists know what they know, but also how a truth claim is ultimately justified (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 377).

As Godler and Reich (2013b) underline, questioning how journalists depict reality is very important in an age of economic and technological uncertainty. The last-century boundaries that identified norms, practices, and professions in the process of newsmaking have become blurred (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; McNair, 2017). Understanding how journalists distinguish the false from the true, prove the truthfulness of the facts that they transform into news, and claim their jurisdiction in news production is particularly important when media systems reach high levels of hybridization between “older” and “newer” media logics.

A new group of media actors involved in the news cycles is increasingly able to “hack the attention economy” (Boyd, 2017). In the more inclusive news cycles of the 21st century (Chadwick, 2011, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015), non-elite actors—prospective sources that generally do not possess the authority to attract media attention (Manning, 2001, pp. 150–151)—are (often explicitly) challenging professional journalists’ practices of knowledge production and their epistemic authority (Carlson, 2020; Lewis, 2012). In recent years, journalists have had to adjust their knowledge-based practices to fit the diverse challenges raised by digital media platforms (Carlson, 2020; Godler

¹University of Milan, Italy

²University of Sassari, Italy

Corresponding Author:

Sergio Splendore, Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Via Conservatorio 7, 20122 Milano, Italy.
Email: sergio.splendore@unimi.it



& Reich, 2013a; Godler et al., 2020) and their functioning (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Poell et al., 2022).

Non-elite actors by the algorithmic logics of platforms (Jacobs, 2020) tend to be increasingly regarded as influential (if not authoritative) in journalists' decisions to transform facts into news. Non-elite actors are more and more involved in the gathering of facts (see Kleemans et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2011; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016) that may sometimes be false evidence (see Giglietto et al., 2019). Journalists tend to assign an increasingly central role in their editorial policies to the digital performances of their published news stories measured in terms of positive comments, likes, and shares by digital analytics, in line with the logic of "datafication" of the public interest (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Finally, journalists tend to rely on non-elite actors even in the verification of news items after their publication (Domingo & Heikkilä, 2012).

From an epistemological point of view, within the "Italian" media context, politicians' statements are highly influential in Italian news coverage (Cornia, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Tiffen et al., 2014), and journalism has been traditionally inclined to "subjectivism"—considering reality as a sum of (elites') subjective reconstructions—and to "analytical attitudes"—presenting convincing reasons of facts more than evidence (Splendore, 2017). In this study, we explore how in the various phases of newsmaking (i.e., discovering, gathering, spreading, and verifying news) non-elite actors are shaping journalists' everyday epistemology in the contemporary Italian hybrid media system. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies analyzing how journalists incorporate the role of non-elite sources in the various stages of newsmaking, and whether the involvement of such sources has changed Italian journalists' epistemological approach.

To deal with these issues, this study draws on an analysis of 147 semi-structured interviews conducted with Italian professional journalists from 2008 to 2020. For each interview, excerpts about journalists' conceptions of truth and reality and their uses of sources were identified. This methodological approach (that considered the journalists' discourse instead of analyzing the news content in itself) is in line with that adopted by a number of current studies working on the discursive constructions of journalists' epistemological role (e.g., Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Koliska et al., 2020).

The results of the analysis confirmed the most conventional view about Italian journalism, that is, that journalists present knowledge essentially by using elite actors' subjective reconstructions of reality. However, this study also reveals that journalists no longer rely exclusively on elite sources; they also consider some new and different sources. Moreover, in terms of news gathering, also "trending topics" defined by web platforms' algorithms are seen by journalists as sufficiently authoritative (or appealing). Finally, the interviewees' accounts assigned epistemic authority to the role of algorithms around news.

These findings place Italian journalists on the side of facts and evidence. However, this does not mean that they depict an unbiased reality. The fact that journalists rarely question the reliability of the newer sources consulted to gather news stories, jointly with their loss of epistemic authority to the benefit of online trends measured by platforms, increase the risks for journalists of participating in the spread of misinformation and disinformation. The integration of non-elite sources in the various stages of news production is instead due to an attitude of journalists aimed not so much at increasing pluralism as at producing news by providing evidence. The low level of journalists' reflexivity in the use of web platforms, while involving some non-elite actors, appears to favor platforms themselves and their requisites.

The article is organized as follows. First, the next section discusses key perspectives that contribute to defining journalism epistemology; it then considers how non-elite actors are entrenched in the news production phases. The article will then detail the questions, method, and results of the research described. In the last sections, it will discuss the findings of the research and draw its main conclusions.

Literature Review

Journalism Epistemology

As Ekström (2002) states, epistemology refers "to the rules, routines and institutionalized procedures that operate within a social setting and decide the form of the knowledge produced and the knowledge claims expressed" (p. 260). Ekström's definition is particularly important for two reasons: first, because it focuses on the social approach of journalists' conceptions of epistemology, which cannot be regarded as simply "personal"; second, because it stresses also the importance of claims concerning epistemic authority (see also Abbott, 1991). Ekström (2002) considered that one manner in which journalists claim that news is knowledge is through the repetitious use of particular practices that come to signal authoritative news.

In his analysis of journalism culture, Hanitzsch (2007) identified two dimensions of journalism epistemology: objectivism and empiricism. The first dimension is related to how truth can be attained, and it is concerned with an "absolute sense of objectivity rather than with a procedural sense of objectivity as method" (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 375). It regards whether and to what extent there is a correspondence between *what is said* and *what really exists*. When journalists consider this correspondence to be non-existent, it means that they adhere to the view that news is selective and "that human beings perceive reality based on judgments" (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 376). The two poles are therefore *objectivity* (reality exists) and *subjectivity* (reality is a sum of subjective reconstructions). The second dimension, which Hanitzsch calls *empiricism*, "is concerned with the means by which a truth claim is ultimately justified by the

journalist” (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 377). Journalists can justify truth claims *empirically* (offering evidence, proof of what they are talking about) or *analytically* (presenting convincing arguments rather than evidence).

Ekström and Westlund (2019) offer a conceptualization of epistemologies distinctive in its discursive and sociological foundation. They focus also on the validation of news in social practices. They distinguish three domains: (1) the articulation of truth claims shaped by the discursive constructions of factuality and of out-there-ness and the discursive or visual provision of evidence; (2) the production of knowledge and the “contexts of justification” related to knowledge-producing practice; (3) the audience’s acceptance/rejection of knowledge claims. Points 1 and 2 are close to Hanitzsch’s (2007) conception, while the third one adds another element: that journalists may have an idea of what is acceptable or not for an audience, and those ideas may influence their work even epistemologically.

A renewed interest in epistemology has been fueled by digital transformation (Carlson, 2020) and the digital dislocation of news (Ekström & Westlund, 2019). The increase in journalists’ insecurity about shared epistemic facts due to the new digital environment relates to cultural and political shifts. News veracity depends on the digital infrastructure, which shapes also the veracity and reliability of sources (Carlson, 2020). The concern in this context is therefore with how the activities of journalists, from an epistemological perspective, are reconfigured when they integrate web platforms. How the rise of algorithms, data, and metrics—the core components of platformization—has affected the epistemological conceptions of journalists is still a neglected issue, although web platforms have become the “curators of public discourse” (Gillespie, 2014), altering practices and discourses. Carlson underlines the importance of actors involved in digital news circulation, which includes not only elite power actors (such as legacy news producers and political figures), but also the expansion of other voices, and positions in-between. Therefore, the dislocation of news means also a dislocation of sources and a dislocation of epistemological attitudes. The relations between journalists and sources, and consequently their epistemological attitudes, are now increasingly mediated by platforms, which shape the rules of engagement between them. Whenever, as we discuss in this article, the involvement of non-elite actors is eminently due to the *digital transformation*, one must be aware that the practices and logics that non-elite actors apply are adapted to the platform’s functioning. Consequently, those practices are taking place as a result of the widespread uptake of digital platforms on the Web and app ecosystems and their systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data (Van Dijck et al., 2018). In other words, even the potential empowerment of non-elite actors needs to be interpreted in light of the empowerment of the media companies which supervise the use of algorithms and platforms (see Beraldo & Milan, 2019; Milan, 2015).¹

Non-Elite Actors and Consequences on Journalism Epistemology

As Godler and Reich (2017, p. 1) point out, if a reporter regards as facts statements made by officials, the picture of the world that will emerge from his or her reportage may become simply a reflection of the views of those in power. By contrast, if reporters regard as fact only what they can verify, a different picture of the world may emerge. Official sources and experts connected to society’s central institutions have great bargaining power in their negotiations with journalists to gain coverage (Berkowitz & Liu, 2016; Carlson, 2009; Ericson, 1999). Reporters are dependent on the regular supply of information furnished by institutional sources. In this regard, as Oscar Gandy (1982) maintains, the ability of the most powerful sources to provide “information subsidies”—public relations material that fits the news—strengthens their influence. However, as said above, in the contemporary media system, the cluster of journalistic sources is growing larger (Godler & Reich, 2017).

In the contemporary media system, non-elite actors—that in the past did not possess the authority to attract media attention (Manning, 2001) and had little influence on public debate (Kleemans et al., 2017)—can take part in the creation, gathering, dissemination, and verification of news, with significant consequences on professional journalism epistemologies.

First, non-elite actors can act as *resources* (Canter, 2013) when journalists create news by offering them evidence and proof of that variant of the reality which can be selected as news by professionals. Participation in this case works as an “information subsidy” (Gandy, 1982). Examples of this form of participation range from individual reports to the trending topics displayed by web platforms’ algorithms on the basis of digital traces of participation left by users (Van Dijck et al., 2018); from Wikileaks (Chadwick, 2013) to highly coordinated “online events” such as hashtag or meme campaigns (Giglietto et al., 2020) wherein non-elite actors demonstrate their increasing power to hack (older) media attention (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). From an epistemological point of view, these forms of participation in newsmaking are likely to drive journalists toward “objectivism” (e.g., reality is what Wikileaks provides) and “empiricism” (a “trending topic” is a proof of the climate of opinion that helps to justify journalists’ agendas) (Iannelli & Splendore, 2017).

Second, when professional journalists gather information about a news event, non-elite actors can perform the role of *sources* (they are contacted by journalists for data, information, content, or comment on a story) and *collaborators* (they work alongside a journalist to provide complementary coverage of a story) (Canter, 2013; Chadwick, 2011, 2013). Participatory practices like publishing photos, videos, audio files, and texts related to a news event can furnish journalists with evidence on which to base a news story (Russell, 2016). Today, one of the most striking examples of participation in

news gathering by non-elite sources is provided by the “Black Lives Matter” movement, especially after the killing of George Floyd. As Richardson (2020) claims, black citizens have embraced the mobile phone as their storytelling tool of choice to produce raw reportage that challenges long-standing narratives of race, power, and privilege in America. During breaking news events and crises, such as a pandemic or a terrorist attack, journalists rely on various non-elite sources to acquire information or eyewitness footage shot with smartphones, or to embed posts from social media in live blogs (Van Leuven et al., 2018). From an epistemological perspective, relying on evidence provided by non-elite sources and collaborators again places journalists closer to the “empiricism” attitude (Hanitzsch, 2007).

Non-elite actors can take part in news cycles also after the publication of news stories. They do so by spreading and verifying what has been published. The legitimacy that news receives from its circulation is critical in the ecology of hybrid media (Carlson, 2018). Equally important are corrections and changes due to feedback from readers (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019).

Participation in the *spreading* of journalistic news is also important from an epistemological point of view. Digital participatory practices such as the adding of shares, retweets, positive comments, or likes to the published news are increasingly monitored in newsrooms through digital analytics (Tandoc, 2014). The interest expressed by users and readers is more and more considered as “measurable” consistent with the logic of “datafication” (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Digital analytics can change over time journalists’ conceptions about what is important to know and how to orient editorial policies (MacGregor, 2007).

Finally, participation during this phase, that is, verification after publication, has major epistemological consequences for professional journalism. Practices of participation and “dark participation” (Quandt, 2018) such as fact-checking, correction of mistakes, integrations, requests for clarification, and trolling are intended to dispute professional journalists’ jurisdiction on knowledge claims (Ekström & Westlund, 2019).

This study leverages upon the above-reviewed scholarship on the relations between participatory practices by non-elite actors and journalism epistemologies. It explores these relations in the Italian hybrid media system. In particular, it seeks to understand the ways in which participatory practices concerning all the phases of news production are challenging and changing journalistic epistemologies within the “Mediterranean” media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004); and especially the ways in which they are changing how Italian journalists know what a fact is, how their knowledge claims are expressed and justified, and how they decide what actors are sufficiently reliable among the plethora of non-elite actors. For this purpose, we need to consider the role played by the affordances of social media and search engine platforms (see Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Neiger, 2018).

Our research questions are therefore as follows: (1) How do journalists receive contributions from non-elite sources in the various stages of newsmaking? (2) How do they change their epistemological attitudes as a result of the contributions from non-elite sources?

Data and Method

In order to shed light on how participation in newsmaking is challenging the traditional trends of journalism epistemology in Italy, this study relies on analysis of 147 semi-structured interviews (see Ayres, 2008) conducted with journalists from 2008 to 2020.

The interviewees were professional Italian journalists registered in the “Ordine dei Giornalisti.” The interviews were carried out by the authors within the scope of a broader research program on innovative forms of journalism. Over time, several parts of the grid remained unchanged. Specifically, this study analyzes questions that asked whether the journalists could briefly summarize their career, from its earliest stages to the project(s) in which they were involved at that time; if they could describe the overall organization in which they were involved; if they could describe their typical day, if one existed; if they could discuss which sources they usually considered as reliable or not.

The questions recurring over time were as follows:

- 1.1. I would like to start our conversation by having you tell me, in general terms, about your career as a journalist.
- 1.2. Can you describe generally how the work is undertaken in your newsroom/organization?
- 1.3. What is your typical day, if any? What is your routine when you start work, collecting sources, writing, editing, etc.? How do you search for news?
- 1.4. Can you summarize the sources that you usually use?

According to the journalists’ answers, further questions were asked to explore interactions and explanations about relations between the interviewees and their sources.

The interviews were carried out entirely by one of the two authors of this article. Although a constant effort was made to apply the protocols with the utmost professionalism, because the interviews were conducted for over 10 years, it is impossible to guarantee that their rigor and tone were always the same. This aspect is a possible shortcoming of the research.

Two-thirds of the group of people interviewed over the years were journalists employed by a news organization; the rest were freelancers. The general characteristics of the interviewees are detailed at the end of each excerpt. We can assume that we reached a good representative sample of journalists in terms of age, gender, role, and media. At the same time, as the second limitation of this sample, they were generally journalists working within the innovative sector of the profession. Nevertheless, in regard to the topic of this

article, we can assume that we gathered various sets of discourses, saturating the range of perspectives (e.g., respondents in more recent years presented perspectives that we had already heard or which showed some coherence with assessments of certain aspects of the profession).

The interviews were entirely transcribed and then subjected to various analyses. However, for the purpose of this article, throughout 2021, the authors and an assistant researcher carefully re-read each interview. From each of them, we extracted excerpts in which the interviewee expressed his or her opinion on truth and reality and the use of sources. We then created a dataset in Excel with 622 lines: each line included interview paragraphs or sentences about the aforementioned topics. A quarter of those excerpts entirely consisted of a description of the role of what we called “non-elite actors.” Nevertheless, many others drew comparisons between institutional and non-institutional ones. We anonymized these excerpts and assigned them to the following categories: “legacy/new” (to denote whether the respondent worked for a brand linked to traditional media or digital-born ones); “current medium” (which medium the respondent mainly worked for); “current role” (we distinguished between reporters and editors, that is, journalists in job roles with some responsibility); “employment status” of the interviewee (full-time or freelance); age/year/gender of the interviewee; and year of the interview. The anonymized Excel file is available upon request.

Then, a thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) was applied to the final corpus of 622 excerpts. After extensive discussion and comparison, we refined the coding protocol, independently coded the excerpts, and reached consensus on initial discrepancies. In a first step of the coding process, we examined each excerpt in order to identify whether it referred to journalistic practices involving non-elite actors as “resources in news creation,” “sources/collaborators in news gathering,” “participants in news spreading,” and “participants in news verification.” The content of the remaining excerpts was classified as generally referring to “older elite actors” (i.e., personal and official contacts with politicians, even if through social media, elite media actors, and press agencies). By means of further steps, we coded each excerpt, within each macro-theme, according to the frames that will be outlined in the next sections as the results of our research.

The purpose of our research was to outline the existing frames with respect to the themes under consideration. It dealt with journalists’ discourses, analyzing what they take for granted and what they question, in line with the increasing number of studies currently working on the discursive constructions of journalists’ epistemological role (Carlson, 2020; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Koliska et al., 2020; Robinson & Anderson, 2020).

Findings

As said, in the corpus of interviews analyzed, the involvement of non-elite media actors during the newsmaking

process was not predominant (most of the excerpts referred to elite political actors). Nevertheless, non-elite actors occupied an important role in the interviewees’ accounts: almost a quarter of the excerpts that we collected and analyzed dealt exclusively with non-elite actors. In order to answer our research question (in what ways journalists receive contributions from non-elite actors in the various stages of newsmaking), first we focused on excerpts talking about non-elites as triggers in the process of newsgathering, and then we considered all the stages of news production.

Discovering

We found three different areas of involvement of non-elite actors. We define them as follows: *individual reporting* (when journalists talk about news known by a single non-elite actor), *algorithmic trending* (when journalists consider online trends promoted and enhanced by the logic of web platforms), and *orchestrated trending topics* (when journalists select news driven by coordinated online trends).

When the interviewees referred to the use of non-elite actors as sources, they usually questioned their epistemic authority. To use those sources, journalists need to be more than certain about their reliability. Alternatively, their use depends on choices consolidated over time.

There are three main sources. The first is the vittimemafia.it blog. It has collected information on all mafia victims from the first decades of the twentieth century to today. But the most valuable thing about this blog is that for each victim it reports excerpts from the press. It does not enter a name and a date without being sure that it is an innocent victim. (Mixed, editor, freelance, 2015)

I started building my “own” list mainly composed of blog sources. Today, it is almost entirely in English, with a daily selection process. (Website, reporter, freelance, 2008)

In the same vein, the interviewees stressed the importance of making careful verification.

A social media account tweeted it, someone who writes a lot on Twitter. He had caught the photo of these three. The photo remained there for two days, I also saw it after a couple of days [. . .] It was evening, I reported it to the editor-in-chief, we worked on it, we called, and we discovered that there was certainly another person. We called a third person to check, a person I assumed was there. This person partially confirmed the news. We made two more phone calls and they confirmed everything, obviously two authoritative sources. Then we talked about it with a third politician, and then we retrieved the photo directly from that social media account. We got a scoop on a politically important issue at that time! (Newspaper, reporter, permanent, 2015)

By contrast, when the interviewees talked about journalists’ uses of (algorithmic or orchestrated) online trends as

resources to decide what news to create, they did not at all question the capacity of digital platforms to provide good information subsidies in news creation. These newer resources are taken for granted. What happens on social platforms is in fact considered *evidence* in itself. It is something that journalists can see and have *direct* experience of.

Social media can be useful . . . it is as if we have more eyes. According to me, social media provide a climate of opinion, because I can judge something as uninteresting, but if I see that social media accounts are highly commenting an issue, I understand that it makes sense to consider it. (Press agency, reporter, permanent, 2015)

We follow Google trends, of course, and trending topics on Twitter. We have a number of things to monitor, and now we do it in more detail. The volume of conversations or the most talked issues on Twitter can help you too. Twitter suggests to you a topic you don't give a damn about, but if at a certain point you see: “#alfanodimettiti” [Alfano—a former minister—resign], as a journalist you need to ask yourself what is happening. You click on this hashtag and you discover that it is a hashtag launched by the Lega [an Italian political party] and that a lot of people share it, and then you understand that beyond the judgment on this operation, it has a journalistic value. (Newspaper, reporter, permanent, 2015)

The evidence is also coupled with the interest that readers/followers display. Although it is not connected to the immediate production of news, also the use of social media as a proxy for public opinion (or at least as a proxy of own readers' opinion) is in itself an “epistemological fact.” Conversation via social media is considered by journalists to be sufficient proof, *a fact*, on which to make even editorial decisions (which topics to follow, or which frames to impose on the news).

That person [*a journalist*] grasps what the news streams are, what news is deemed most important, most enjoyable, most attention-grabbing. But it's different from finding the news. We know that the Paris bombing, of course, attracted enormous attention. We do understand what potential newspaper readers are interested in reading. (Newspaper, reporter, permanent, 2015)

Likewise, campaigns orchestrated through social media also become news to follow and report. Even when these campaigns are orchestrated top-down, they acquire value in a bottom-up way, involving voters, readers, actors who cannot be considered elites but who become effective actors of that news, particularly through the selection of some paradigmatic comments or tweets. From an epistemological point of view, this is one of the simplest approaches for journalists. In those cases, they have *evidence* to cling to (the number of comments, the duration of the campaign, whether or not they remain in the trend). In short, for a journalist, those campaigns are things that “objectively happened.”

Hashtag campaigns are often used to call followers, proselytes, supporters, [. . .] For example, the Democratic Party has started to campaign against the *Five Stars Movement* [two Italian political parties] releasing through Twitter a lot of items on Five Stars Movement's blunders, its mistakes, that have been released through Twitter. Democratic Party is waging a political battle and that is also relevant. The *Five Stars Movement* is doing the same against *La Repubblica* (an Italian newspaper) [. . .] on those occasions parties, as well as we as journalists, can measure how strong the support from their followers was. (Mixed, reporter, permanent, 2015)

As regards the news discovering phase, our excerpts exhibited an evident growth of interest in and consideration of reliability in regard to everything that is an algorithmic product (what we have termed “algorithmic trending” and “trending topics”). As far as “individual reporting” is concerned, no trends can be traced; at the same time, it is common for journalists who use non-elite actors taken individually to declare that they always verify that source, which becomes reliable only after having proving itself to be such after a certain period.

Gathering

So far, we have discussed how journalists talk about their use of what we termed “non-elite actors” during the news discovering phase. The next step is that of news gathering, when journalists directly look for those non-elite sources. In accordance with Canter (2013), we may affirm that the interviewees distinguished between “sources” (when journalists say they have contacted non-elite media actors for data, information, content, or comment on a story) and “collaborators” (when journalists say they have worked alongside newer media actors to obtain complementary coverage of a story). Here, journalists use those sources particularly to ask them for evidence, especially in radical situations such as catastrophes, accidents, and terrorist attacks.

Let's say that there are places that readers reach before us, tragic moments like the Tsunami, which is an example that will end up in the history books. Readers were there three days before reporters, before the rescue. This is also a social function of technology. Thank God, technology is not all bad. It's not all bad, it brings people together. (Website, editor, permanent, 2008)

Then, sometimes, I also get the news from people who post pictures of an accident, so even citizens often unintentionally provide the input, without realizing it. (Website, reporter, permanent, 2020)

The interviewees stressed the necessity for verification, especially when they collected evidence from non-elite actors. Nonetheless, in their evaluations of the work of colleagues, they made it clear how much the search for evidence may involve the risk of producing misinformation.

Another *genius* (in an ironic sense) is the person who sent to the *Corriere* (an Italian newspaper) a photo of an earthquake that happened in China while the *Corriere* was looking for photos from Abruzzo. In the end, they published it without checking. He bragged about it on his blog and many insulted him?, “ah, you’re speculating on the tragedy,” while in reality it was the newspaper that was speculating on the tragedy . . . If you want a video testimony you have to pay for it. (Newspaper, reporter, permanent, 2008)

The Internet now offers a myriad of sources of all kinds. It’s up to you to understand their reliability. A public institution site is obviously a reliable source; a gossip site maybe a little less so. The hierarchy of news is the important factor [e.g., having a clear agenda in mind]. News should only end up in a newspaper if the source is verified. If the source is not considered reliable, you have to verify it and when you have verified it, either you report the news or you don’t. Never publish news you’re not sure about. (Press agency, reporter, permanent, 2018)

There is no doubt that this double form of discourse is irreducible. On one hand, there are journalists who say that they are aware of the pitfalls of using certain sources and who apply precise criteria to avoid spreading inaccurate news. As Ekström (2002) states, epistemology refers “to the rules, routines and institutionalized procedures that operate within a social setting” (p. 260). On the other hand, journalists point to the multiplicity of mistakes that colleagues make. Not infrequently, they do this also by providing detailed evidence. “Evidence” is the key word here. What journalists do understand is that those mistakes are due to the race to prove the existence of a certain event. This is also apparent when journalists cite institutional sources. Also in this case, it is precisely the feverish search for new evidence that induces them to make mistakes and to produce misinformation.

Let’s say that in the early days we were all quite naive, especially my colleagues. And so we often fell for these fake accounts that seemed real but were not. They are still there but now we are more scrupulous and the system has also been refined. There is an official seal and so it is easier to distinguish between fake and genuine accounts. That said, if I regularly follow Gasparri’s (*Italian politician*) account and I know it’s his account, when he writes something I know he wrote it. It is evident that he sometimes writes such big things that I have to contact him [*for asking further explanations*]. I have to ask him to account for what he has written and also to better explain his thoughts so that I can understand why he has written it, bearing in mind that these accounts are often used in non-work situations, and therefore by people who write things that they would never say in Parliament. (Newspaper, reporter, permanent, 2015)

As regards the gathering phase, over the years, the emphasis on the use of non-elite sources to report catastrophes attenuated among our interviewees. The interpretation is not that this practice is no longer implemented; rather, it is now taken for granted, it has consolidated. If the speeches on fake news

and misinformation have grown greatly in the public and academic debate since 2016, the attention toward the collection of fake news from non-elite sources in our extracts was more lively in around 2010. One interpretation is that, recently, enthusiasm for adopting that practice has diminished, but also that there is more awareness of those errors, more “routinized” attention to not committing them.

Spreading

The spreading phase is the one in which journalists use non-elite actors to reach a higher number of readers. Interviewees focused on the importance attributed to analytics that measure shares, retweets, comments, and likes. It may be defined as “dependence on datafied public interest” (when journalists consider analytics as decisive in defining editorial policies and take them for granted).

As well as the general online trends in the first phase of news creation, big data analytics measuring the performance of news stories after their publication are conceived as new epistemic authorities. Data on shares, positive sentiments, and retweets are described as highly influential on journalists’ decisions about what is important to narrate in the future and how to orient editorial policies.

They go very well all those pieces that I consider dumb but which the readers like. So I decide to cover them not because I have to make fun of the readers but because readers enjoy them. But I don’t understand why they create so much traffic. (Website, reporter, permanent, 2020)

Google Analytics is the certainly the most intuitive system. We have it open all day for real-time content analysis, so we can see pretty much immediately if a news story is doing well, if a Facebook launch is working or not, and then change it. (Website, reporter, permanent, 2016)

What is significant here is that there are no excerpts in our interviews in which the journalists questioned this criterion for monitoring public opinion (or that of their readers). Those measures are facts. They are evidence that the news media take (and must take) into consideration. We find general agreement among journalists on this point.

The importance of analytics is immediately evident to journalists. The possibility to measure the success of one’s news stories is a fact that immediately takes root in the practices and perceptions of journalists. Over the years, as the tools used for this monitoring have improved, this practice has increased.

Verification

Finally, we analyzed the excerpts that talked about the ways in which journalists involve non-elite actors as “participants in news verification.” In this regard, there is a growing body

of literature in which readers are considered to be fact-checkers and improvers of the content that journalism publishes (see Fengler et al., 2014). Soliciting readers to make corrections to the news items published is a widespread practice in Italian journalism. It is not surprising that in our interviews, these observations were more recurrent in the first interviews, which were collected at a time when Italian journalists were beginning to understand the potential of using the Internet for that particular task. We may define those excerpts as consisting of “individual fact-checking/criticism,” that is, when journalists refer to the correction of mistakes, requests for clarification, or general objections/criticisms made by individual actors. Our excerpts included many sentences like the following: “It has happened that some readers became fact-checkers” (website, reporter, permanent, 2013) or “It also happened that we discovered an error through comments” (website, editor, permanent, 2013). What is noteworthy is threefold: (1) corrections by users are taken for granted—they are common, established, and obvious; (2) it is also implied that this happens when the request to correct a mistake is well-founded and verified; (3) journalists, however, always defend their autonomy and authority.

Point 3 can also be demonstrated discursively by citing the numerous extracts that instead stigmatized inaccurate interventions by readers. Again, the key is the “facticity” of the report, the evidence of the mistakes. Journalists never question their interpretative frames, only facts.

In the morning, comments start coming in. When our TV show starts and already during the day we read comments, but when the TV show is live one of us is on the blog readings all the comments, and sometimes it's a mess because so many come in that you can't keep up with them. Then there are the graphomaniacs who do nothing but write pages of absurd things. (TV, reporter, freelance, 2008)

When someone reports an error, we change it after checking. But we do not change an opinion. When a news item is widely read, we don't remove it, we keep it or expand on it. This is also for trivial commercial purposes. Yesterday, the articles on Tarricone made 600,000 contacts, and it's clear that we kept them all day long. (Newspaper, editor, permanent, 2008)

Discussion

In this “Discussion” section, we focus on three points that emerge from the results presented so far.

First, Ekström and Westlund (2019) focus on the validation of news in social practices: concerning the role of sources they stress that sources' trustworthiness depends also on journalistic routines. According to the journalists' accounts that we collected, it appears clear that practices related to the use of analytics are now institutionalized in every phase of news production. Whenever a routine is established, journalists do not even dispute its validity. Even if those practices may somehow include different voices—non-elite actors—in the

public debate (e.g., hashtag campaigns in favor of the environment), at the same time those practices legitimize and somehow reinforce the position of global media companies, which are anything but “non-elite.” All the literature and research relating to the use of sources have a common assumption: studying the news that journalists gather is important because “they determine not only what information is presented to the public, but what image of society is presented” (Soloski, 1989, p. 864). The fact that official sources and experts connected to society's central institutions have ever greater bargaining power in their negotiations with journalists to gain coverage shows that those who already have positions of power in society strengthen them with access to news media. The type of legitimacy that platforms receive is not simply that of their use as a legitimate source, but as a device for producing knowledge that is believed to be trustworthy. Journalists by narrating and using what happens on the platforms further legitimize them as places of production of knowledge and places where things that are relevant “for society” happen.

Second, regardless of the reinforcement of non-elite or global media companies, the factors that induce journalists to give further visibility to those campaigns are essentially epistemological. That is, journalists take the importance of those events for granted precisely because it is easily verifiable and demonstrable (in epistemological terms, those events prove to be real, and it is easy to demonstrate their existence and importance). Significance—a typical journalistic selection criterion—is entirely due to those metrics and the possibility of epistemologically demonstrating that they exist. We believe this point is relevant and that further research is needed to understand if the significance of the metrics is common for journalists who work in different journalistic cultures.

Finally, in this article, we have discussed the epistemology of journalism. Nevertheless, we have unavoidably also discussed what kind of knowledge journalists are shaping. What do the journalists' practices related to analytics mean in terms of readers' knowledge? Are they producing knowledge or ignorance? When we mention an epistemology of ignorance, by “ignorance” we mean precisely a problem relating not only to justificatory practices but also to ontologies of truth (see Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). Does this state of affairs increase ignorance? We cannot speculate about readers' knowledge, but given digital platform functioning and how journalists incorporate it both discursively and practically, we suggest that journalists' work is contributing to an epistemology of ignorance of a special kind: ignorance about the functioning of the platforms themselves, about their dominance, and about how they make revenues and gather additional data in their daily work. What journalists produce is a combination of news that reveals a lack of explanation of the algorithms that might lead an event to be perceived as fact, but also a lack of explanation of how journalists use platforms. During the interviews, we received numerous

explanations of how journalists react to the algorithm's changes by the platforms. However, for our interviewees, it never seems relevant to reveal these mechanisms to readers. Not only that, in the reports they have made to us, they do not seem to consider relevant to explain to their users why some fact taken from the platforms are considered relevant. They essentially take this step for granted.

Conclusion

This article has dealt with Italian journalists' epistemological attitudes and their uses of non-elite actors. Interest in journalistic epistemology is being fueled by novel complexities of digital media (Carlson, 2020). The research presented in the previous sections provided valid proof that Italian journalists are not simply linked to institutional sources, nor to subjective reconstructions based only on reports from elites, as they are conventionally depicted (see Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In each of the phases of newsmaking considered (discovering, gathering, spreading, and verifying), Italian journalists welcome the contribution of non-elite actors. Nonetheless, there are two significant issues. First, the intertwining between newsmaking and non-elite sources takes place mainly on an epistemological level; it is not simply based on the reliability of those actors, but rather on their ability to demonstrate the "truth." Second, as regards the use of non-elite sources by Italian journalists, it occurs only when it is possible to identify those sources in what Hanitzsch (2007) would call an "empiricism" approach. They use those sources when they provide *evidence* and *facticity*.

Nevertheless, the most important consideration concerns the relation between journalists, on one hand, and conceptions of algorithms, data, and metrics on the other. Journalists do not seem to question the authoritativeness of digital platforms. They take them for granted and assume that they provide reliable information subsidies. What happens within social media is regarded as a fact. Here the epistemology issue concerns also the conception that journalists have of the public interest. This article has shown that the ramification of platforms is intertwined not only with practices but also with the journalists' professional role conception, even challenging—as in the case of Italian journalists—the most consolidated attitudes of Italian professional journalism. *The platformization of society* (Van Dijck et al., 2018) means also influencing the attitudes and conceptions of professions like journalism. In this environment, where platforms become taken for granted, journalists appear not to reflect sufficiently on their work, assigning to platforms an epistemological role that first and foremost legitimizes them and reinforces their power in society. This is also in line with the findings of the most established research on journalistic organizations: journalists cite organizational and procedural influences rather than others. In many studies, journalists have stated that they are influenced more by procedural aspects (accessing the sources, for instance) than by political influences. Similarly,

the platforms help them to be more efficacious and faster in composing and selecting news stories, whatever it takes in terms of reinforcing and enriching media global companies. Much research has already been done on these issues (see Poell et al., 2022); nevertheless, there has been no specific in-depth study concerning the journalistic field. This article has tried to make a contribution with respect to a profession that has not been adequately investigated, but also solicits a new line of research linked to the reflexivity journalists keep about their use of platforms and transparency journalists provide to their readers/publics/audiences.

The analysis conducted in this article has limitations, which are explicitly stated in the method section, but due to the amount of research done in terms of the number of interviews and the period in which they were carried out, it is able to depict a complex, sophisticated, and accurate scenario.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Italian Ministry of Research and University under the PRIN research program ("National Projects of Relevant Interest," 2017) (Grant Number: 20175HFEB3); by the University of Sassari under the "University Fund for Research 2020."

ORCID iDs

Sergio Splendore  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5324-4496>

Laura Iannelli  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1679-0647>

Note

1. Stefania Milan's study is paradigmatic because it shows how even antagonistic collective action—what we define here as non-elite actor—is shaped by algorithm and it is eminently datafied (see Beraldo & Milan, 2019).

References

- Abbott, A. (1991). The order of professionalization: An empirical analysis. *Work and Occupations*, 18(4), 355–384. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888491018004001>
- Ayres, L. (2008). Semi-structured interviews. In L. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 810–811). SAGE.
- Beraldo, D., & Milan, S. (2019). From data politics to the contentious politics of data. *Big Data & Society*, 6(2), 205395171988596. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719885967>
- Berkowitz, D., & Liu, Z. M. (2016). Media errors and the "nutty professor": Riding the journalistic boundaries of the Sandy Hook shootings. *Journalism*, 17(2), 155–172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884914552266>
- Boyd, D. (2017). *Hacking the attention economy*. Data & Society. <https://points.datasociety.net/hacking-the-attention-economy-9fa1daca7a37>

- Canter, L. (2013). The source, the resource and the collaborator: The role of citizen journalism in local UK newspapers. *Journalism*, 14(8), 1091–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884912474203>
- Carlson, M. (2009). Dueling, dancing, or dominating? Journalists and their sources. *Sociology Compass*, 3(4), 526–542. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00219.x>
- Carlson, M. (2018). Confronting measurable journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 6(4), 406–417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1445003>
- Carlson, M. (2020). Journalistic epistemology and digital news circulation: Infrastructure, circulation practices, and epistemic contests. *New Media & Society*, 22(2), 230–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819856921>
- Carlson, M., & Lewis, S. (Eds.). (2015). *Boundaries of journalism. Professionalism, practices and participation*. Routledge.
- Chadwick, A. (2011). The political information cycle in a hybrid news system: The British Prime Minister and the “Bullygate” affair. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 16(1), 3–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161210384730>
- Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media system. Politics and power*. Oxford University Press.
- Chadwick, A., & Vaccari, C. (2019). *News sharing on UK social media: Misinformation, disinformation, and correction* (Report). Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/37720>
- Cornia, A. (2014). Will Italian political journalism ever change? In R. Kuhn & R. K. Nielsen (Eds.), *Political journalism in transition. Western Europe in a comparative perspective* (pp. 47–73). I.B. Tauris.
- Domingo, D., & Heikkilä, H. (2012). Media accountability practices in online news media. *The handbook of global online journalism*, 272–289.
- Ekström, M. (2002). Epistemologies of TV journalism: A theoretical framework. *Journalism*, 3(3), 259–282. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146488490200300301>
- Ekström, M., & Westlund, O. (2019). The dislocation of news journalism: A conceptual framework for the study of epistemologies of digital journalism. *Media and Communication*, 7(1), 259–270. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i1.1763>
- Ericson, R. V. (1999). How journalists visualize fact. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 56(1), 293–297. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716298560001007>
- Ettema, J. S., & Glasser, T. L. (1985). On the epistemology of investigative journalism. *Communication*, 8, 183–206. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED247585>
- Fengler, S., Eberwein, T., Mazzoleni, G., Porlezza, C., & Russ-Mohl, S. (Eds.). (2014). *Journalists and media accountability: An international study of news people in the digital age*. Peter Lang.
- Gandy, O. H. (1982). *Beyond agenda setting: Information subsidies and public policy*. Ablex Publishing.
- Giglietto, F., Iannelli, L., Valeriani, A., & Rossi, L. (2019). “Fake news” is the invention of a liar: How false information circulates within the hybrid news system. *Current Sociology*, 67(4), 625–642. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392119837536>
- Giglietto, F., Righetti, N., Rossi, L., & Marino, G. (2020). It takes a village to manipulate the media: Coordinated link sharing behavior during 2018 and 2019 Italian elections. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(6), 867–891. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1739732>
- Gillespie, T. (2014). The relevance of algorithms. In T. Gillespie, P. J. Boczkowski, & K. A. Foot (Eds.), *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society* (pp. 167–193). MIT Press.
- Godler, Y., & Reich, Z. (2013a). How journalists “realize” facts: Epistemology in practice at press conferences. *Journalism Practice*, 7(6), 674–689. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2013.791067>
- Godler, Y., & Reich, Z. (2013b). How journalists think about facts: Theorizing the social conditions behind epistemological beliefs. *Journalism Studies*, 14(1), 94–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.689489>
- Godler, Y., & Reich, Z. (2017). Journalistic evidence: Cross-verification as a constituent of mediated knowledge. *Journalism*, 18(5), 558–574. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884915620268>
- Godler, Y., Reich, Z., & Miller, B. (2020). Social epistemology as a new paradigm for journalism and media studies. *New Media & Society*, 22(2), 213–229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819856922>
- Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2012). *Applied thematic analysis*. SAGE.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems. Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hanitzsch, T. (2007). Deconstructing journalism culture: Toward a universal theory. *Communication Theory*, 17(4), 367–385. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00303.x>
- Hanitzsch, T., & Vos, T. (2017). Journalistic roles and the struggle over institutional identity: The discursive constitution of journalism. *Communication Theory*, 27(2), 115–135. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12112>
- Hermida, A., & Thurman, N. (2008). Clash of cultures: The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites. *Journalism Practice*, 2(3), 343–335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512780802054538>
- Iannelli, L., & Splendore, S. (2017). Participation in the hybrid political newsmaking and its consequences on journalism epistemology. *Comunicazioni Sociali*, 3, 436–447.
- Jacobs, R. N. (2020). Virality, algorithms, and illiberal attacks on the press: Legitimation strategies for a new world. *Sociologica*, 14(2), 217–233. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/11190>
- Kleemans, M., Schaap, G., & Hermans, L. (2017). Citizen sources in the news: Above and beyond the vox pop? *Journalism*, 18(4), 464–481.
- Koliska, M., Chadha, K., & Burns, A. (2020). Talking back: Journalists defending attacks against their profession in the Trump era. *Journalism Studies*, 21, 1496–1513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1763190>
- Lewis, S. C. (2012). The tension between professional control and open participation: Journalism and its boundaries. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(6), 836–866. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.674150>
- MacGregor, P. (2007). Tracking the online audience: Metric data start a subtle revolution. *Journalism Studies*, 8(2), 280–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700601148879>
- Manning, P. (2001). *News and news sources: A critical introduction*. SAGE.
- Marwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017). *Media manipulation and disinformation online* (Report). Data & Society. <https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>

- McNair, B. (2017). After objectivity?: Schudson's sociology of journalism in the era of post-factuality. *Journalism Studies*, 18(10), 1318–1333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1347893>
- Milan, S. (2015). When algorithms shape collective action: Social media and the dynamics of cloud protesting. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 2056305115622481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115622481>
- Nielsen, R. K., & Ganter, S. A. (2022). *The power of platforms: Shaping media and society*. Oxford University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). Toward new journalism(s): Affective news, hybridity, and liminal spaces. *Journalism Studies*, 16(1), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.890328>
- Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & Duffy, B. E. (2022). *Platforms and cultural production*. Polity.
- Quandt, T. (2018). Dark participation. *Media and Communication*, 6(4), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1519>
- Richardson, A. (2020). *Bearing witness while Black: African Americans, smartphones, and the new protest #Journalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, S., & Anderson, C. W. (2020). Network ethnography in journalism studies: A mixed-method approach to studying media ecologies. *Journalism Studies*, 21(7), 984–1001. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1720519>
- Russell, A. (2016). *Journalism as activism. Recording media power*. Polity Press.
- Singer, J. B., Hermida, A., Domingo, D., Hermida, A., Paulussen, S., Quandt, T., Reich, Z., & Vujnovic, M. (2011). *Participatory journalism: Guarding open gates at online newspapers*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Soloski, J. (1989). Sources and channels of local news. *Journalism Quarterly*, 66, 864–870.
- Splendore, S. (2017). The dominance of institutional sources and the establishment of non-elite ones: The case of Italian online local journalism. *Journalism*, 21(7), 990–1006. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917722896>
- Sullivan, S., & Tuana, N. (eds.) (2007). *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*. State University of New York Press.
- Tandoc, E. J. (2014). Journalism is twerking? How web analytics is changing the process of gatekeeping. *New Media & Society*, 16(4), 559–575. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814530541>
- Tenenboim-Weinblatt, K., & Neiger, M. (2018). Temporal affordances in the news. *Journalism*, 19(1), 37–55.
- Thorbjørnsrud, K., & Figenschou, T. U. (2016). Do marginalized sources matter? *Journalism Studies*, 17(3), 337–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.987549>
- Tiffen, R., Jones, P. K., Rowe, D., Aalberg, T., Coen, S., Curran, J., Hayashi, K., Iyengar, S., Mazzoleni, G., Papatthanassopoulos, S., Rojas, H., & Soroka, S. (2014). Sources in the News: A comparative study. *Journalism Studies*, 15(4), 374–391. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2013.831239>
- Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & De Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press.
- Van Leuven, S., Kruikemeier, S., Lecheler, S., & Hermans, L. (2018). Online and newsworthy: Have online sources changed journalism? *Digital Journalism*, 6(7), 798–806. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1498747>

Author Biographies

Sergio Splendore (PhD) is an Associate Professor of media sociology at the University of Milan. His research interests include epistemology in journalism, digital journalism, and media trust.

Laura Iannelli (PhD, Sapienza University of Rome) is Associate Professor of sociology of culture and communication at the University of Sassari. Her research interests include the relations between political communication, participation, and civic cultures in contemporary media ecosystems.