Introduction

Political journalism is among the journalistic practices most studied by academic research. At risk of over-simplifying a socio-historical approach (Kaciaf, 2013; Schudson, 1978), we might suggest that most of this research describes a two-stranded process of emancipation. On the one hand, journalists are less and less partisan or politically committed. In most democracies, political parallelism between media and parties, or heavy-handed political control over public media (Russia Today, CCTV), appear as remnants of the past or as challenges to fair reporting. Researchers have used a variety of labels, such as precision journalism (Meyer, 1973), interpretive journalism (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2011) and contextual journalism (Fink & Schudson, 2013), to highlight the growing analytical and objectifying dimensions of political journalism.

On the other hand (at least until the emergence of social media) the political space seemed to be increasingly organized by and around journalists. Gone were the times of Balzac and Dickens, when the parliamentary lobby or prime ministerial offices were the main sources of political news; politics has moved into radio and television studios. Campaign meetings, scheduled to provide images for evening news bulletins, might even emulate the style of TV studios, with politicians and their hosts quietly debating from armchairs.

Rather than seeking to challenge the existence of these already substantially documented trends, I aim to suggest that these changes do not prevent politicians from generally remaining, by virtue of the nature and weight of their resources, on the ‘right’ side of the balance of power. It is important to understand that political journalists are at once entangled in both a small world of insiders and their own semi-aware participation in the epistemic world of mainstream politics. Most of the time, they are in agreement as to the agenda of public problems worth being discussed that politicians have defined, as to their own intellectual superiority over the man-in-the-street, and as to what constitutes reasonable policy or dangerous politics (populism, euro-scepticism) within ruling parties. One peculiarity of the journalistic field is its structural dependence on the political field – that is, its low level of autonomous definition of agendas and public problems (Benson & Neveu, 2004). This unpleasant reminder also questions descriptions of the ‘mediatization’ of politics in which media professionals gained the upper hand over politicians. The second part of this chapter will suggest how the most critical (or most powerfully analytical) forms of political reporting often came either from contributors other than...
political journalists, or from political journalists whose positions or strategies were pushing them to challenge tribal routines.

Some structural contradictions of political journalism

 Facing high source-professionalization

Philip Schlesinger, (1990) coined the term ‘source-professionalization’ to describe the growing ability of news sources to produce a flow of media events, press-releases and friendly off-the-record messages targeting journalists. Professionalization means not only producing more data or messages, but that these should be more efficient. It also means anticipating press and media deadlines and templates, providing ‘ready to publish/broadcast’ material that will be welcomed by newsrooms filled with rising numbers of interns and freelances. Their jobs insecure, these people are caught in the ‘hamster wheel’ of producing more, for more different media, with a smaller workforce. Professionalization is also an ability to anticipate journalists’ interpretive categories and work habits. Bearing in mind that one of journalism’s dirty little secrets is the sheer volume of members defecting to public relations (aka ‘the enemy’), where jobs are safer and better paid, and work schedules less demanding, such capabilities are perhaps unsurprising.

One effect of these processes is the rise of a reverse gatekeeping process, giving sources growing power to filter and control journalists’ access to major actors and institutions. This is visible in both sport1 (Souanef, 2019) and showbusiness (Forde, 2001). In the world of finance, the power wielded by sources is expressed in a three-fold strategy: safeguarding high levels of secrecy; behaving as primary definer of issues and frames, and defining the core of good coverage of business news as functional ‘access’ journalism – that is, journalism supplying top-down, practical, useful information to stakeholders, as opposed to bottom-up or investigative ‘accountability’ journalism that questions business authorities’ behaviors (Davis, 2013; Starkman, 2014).

There are at least four reasons why elite political actors and institutions (alongside global companies and business interests) are among the most professionalized sources. The first (at least for those in ‘government’) is that, because they are in charge of issues and policies, they are primary definers (Schlesinger & Tumber, 1995). When the French Ministre de l’Intérieur reports to the press on Gilets Jaunes demonstrations, he is not just any old source: he is the main source, supplying official figures on demonstrators arrested and police-officers injured, and accounting for the logic of the policing strategies. As has been documented by a very sizeable scientific (and journalistic) literature over the past 30 years (Blumler, 2001; Esser & Pfetsch, 2009; Jones, 1995), politicians’ resources also result from the concentrated expertise they can mobilize. Spin-doctors, public relations officers (P.R.O.s), ghost-writers, media planners, pollsters, intellectuals and think-tanks, all producing notes or memos: a major peculiarity of modern politics is the growing importance of a complex web of professional advisers, ‘scientifically’ managing politicians’ communication. No doubt many mythologies (including those produced by the media,2 academics and journalists) overrate these battalions of advisers – yet they may mobilize real skills and know-how. A third advantage politicians have over journalists is the ‘sacredness’ of their elected position. Regardless of growing disrespect for politicians (Mastropaolo, 2012), being elected does confer specific, symbolic authority. And scarcely mentioning the resources available to non-democratic regimes (bribery, termination of employment, jailing, assassinations, etc.) it must be noted that, even in democracies (Neveu, 2004), political authorities can turn to a broad repertoire of pressures. These include the hardening of libel laws, the multiplication of legally secretive spaces (defence, business, taxes) as well as more-or-less
legal wiretapping, or indeed accessing records on incoming and outgoing journalists’ phone communications.

**The paradox of political competence**

Political journalists are not powerless in the face of these professionalized sources; they have agency and skills and have proactively stepped up in a symbolic arms race. Its most visible expressions include the rise of fact-checking and the art of unveiling media-savvy strategies. A new, yet classic, paper template is the fact (and figure) checking of politicians’ statements (in the French mediascape, we have Désintox in Libération and Arte TV, and Decodex on the Le Monde website). Another art of contemporary political journalism is the spoiling of overly clever media events; here, the aim is to decode the trick or unveil the hidden agenda behind a soundbite, visit or proposal. A political journalist from Libération, having had access to dress-code guidelines produced by Catholic and conservative groups demonstrating against a same-sex marriage law discussed in the French parliament, gave significant coverage to these texts. Demonstrators were invited to wear blue jeans and T-shirts – simple clothing and a clear move away from the long Loden coats and navy-blue pleated skirts visible in the first demonstrations and that most of the audience could identify as typically ‘bourgeois’ during TV reports. The article was indeed funny, but could it be true that politics ultimately boils down to little more than a set of communication struggles? It might also reveal a division within journalistic work in which the political newsbeat spends its time decoding soundbites, media strategies and tactical interactions between political actors, while the actual flesh of the issue (Why do homosexuals want the right to marry? Who is campaigning against gay marriage, and why? What has happened in other countries?) gets left for other newsbeats to cover. If the unveiling of parties’ and politicians’ communication strategies has both been a weapon for journalism and an interpretive resource for audiences, one may also question whether focusing on such coverage does not result in a dead-end: a double analytical impoverishment? If politics are made of words and often of gimmicks, words also express ‘programs of vision and di-vision of the world’ (Bourdieu); they define ‘us’ and ‘them’; and suggest reforms and changes – and all of this matters. Translated into actions and budgets, politics give birth to policies which have more practical effects on the layperson than the wittiest soundbite.

The paradox is simple: good political journalists are expected to be insiders, having in-depth knowledge of political history, actors and institutions. They need personal connections to leaders, and understanding of their characters, strengths and flaws. They also need a broad and varied network of contacts, and to be capable of mapping cliques and rivalries, as well as the influence of political leaders. They should have the flair to pick out promising newcomers. A good political journalist is like the skilled politician once defined by French senator Romani as he who ‘hears the grass growing’: someone who has a feel for, and can anticipate, events and actions. The histories of national political journalisms are filled with personalities who have managed to make an art of making sense of the least-noticed moves of strategic actors, of decoding both tactics and the most rough-and-tumble political battlefields. Yet such excellence has its limits, most visibly the implicit vision of politics as being comprised of elections, institutions and party leaders, while mobilized citizens, as lobbies and policies (and their impacts on ordinary people’s lives), remain under the radar (Bennett, 1996). ‘Going native’ may serve as an interpretive resource, but it often also means gradually losing personal distance: becoming imprisoned by the commonsense, the *epistéme* of professional politicians, their agendas and ways of thinking. It is also important to unflinchingly bear in mind the unpleasant truths of political sociology (Campbell & Converse, 1960; Gaxie, 1978): that politics (especially in its horse race
and insider framings) is more likely to trigger mistrust and indifference than enthusiasm among most working-class and less-educated citizens. The paradox should be clear: to most onlookers, the major achievements of political journalism (strategic analysis of political competition, investigation of the motivations and resources of its actors) are pointless narratives. The level of broadcast, and the taken-for-granted knowledge that structure political journalism, are beyond the reception abilities of most people. The more sophisticated the political journalism, the smaller (and more elitist) its actual audience. A qualitative research project (SPEL, 2016), based on repeated interviews among a panel of 70 voters during the French presidential campaign of 2012, showed that, among the less educated and the working classes, interest in politics was lowest, and the same groups were the lowest consumers of news (Goulet, 2010), especially in relation to politics – and regarded discussions of such topics as boring and pointless. As a technical school pupil might remark: ‘the guy who talks about it, we gone to make fun of him!’

But these ‘dead-ends’ also suggest significant paths for future research (Gans, 2003): are there other ways, other frames, in which to practice political reporting, that might emancipate it from the agenda of the political field? How might we invent patterns of political reporting which could redefine it, making it meaningful and interesting for those who dislike ‘politics as usual’?

Redefining and reinventing political reporting

Many limitations of political journalism arise out of the combined effects of its material and cognitive embeddedness with powerful sources, and its implicit definition of what matters in (or counts as) ‘politics’ – yet other avenues, leading to a more inventive reporting of politics, could be identified. These alternatives could be explored via distancing from sources and the shared epistémé of those fascinated by politics. They could also emerge out of challenging the templates, objects and routines of traditional politics news-section outputs. As a quick illustration, French political journalism was fairly deferential until the 1970s; it was almost impossible to write, for example, that politicians could be ridiculous or pompous. The trick was to colonize another news section dedicated to television – a medium long considered unworthy of serious intellectual investment. Columns dedicated to TV often addressed images of ministers and political leaders, but rarely dealt with soap operas or documentaries. Inspired par Barthes’ Mythologies’, Le Monde political journalist Daniel Schneidermann wrote innovative and devastating coverage of the politicians’ media-savvy tactics and remoteness from ordinary citizens’ lives (1987). At Libération, film critic Serge Daney (1988) developed a comparable hijacking of the TV newsbeat as cover for developing critical views on politicians.

Clear-sighted outsiders

Timothy Crouse’s reports for Rolling Stone during the 1972 presidential campaign represent something of a milestone in the renewal of political journalism in the United States. Precisely because he was not a political journalist, Crouse was immediately struck by the community life shared by ‘the boys in the bus’ (1972). In a micro-Copernican Revolution, he redefined the object of his reporting, moving beyond the Nixon campaign to include the uncanny interdependencies between Nixon and his team, and the pack of journalists on the buses. How does this interaction space allow candidates to control the agenda? How could journalists, trapped in this mobile, rumor-stuffed hothouse populated by a pack of ‘political junkies’, manage to achieve any distance from campaign events? Disconnected as they were from all contact with rank-and-file voters, how could they avoid falling into the trap that reduces politics to a mere
communication-oriented activity? By pushing the pack of journalists into the analytical frame, Crouse initiated a deeper, specular understanding of elections.

Politics has never been a central focus for those labeled ‘new’ (or later on, ‘new-new’) US journalists – which may explain why their contributions were so original. Other names and styles of reporting emerged in different eras: like Crouse, Hunter S. Thompson covered the 1972 presidential campaign. Much later (and already famous) Didion, (2001) experimented with political reporting later on in life, during the 1992 campaign. Financial reporter Michael Lewis, (1997) made a similar foray during the 1996 campaign. Despite huge differences in style, their reports share three common denominators. Firstly, they claimed, in Thompson’s words, not to be bound by tribal rules:

As far as I was concerned there was not such a thing as ‘off the record’. The most consistent and ultimately damaging failure of political journalism in America has its roots in the clubby/cocktail personal relationships that inevitably develop between politicians and journalists. (Thompson, 1973: 18)

Secondly, they refused neutrality, in the sense of questioning politics and its actors in search of their contribution to an idea of the common good and having a normative view of what constitutes healthy democratic debate – rather than supporting any candidate. Thirdly, they shared a disenchanted view of politics as a world of professionalized insiders focused on their own careers and esoteric stakes, and lacking any real empathy for ordinary citizens. In this realpolitik universe, those who believed in any idea of real social change, who really cared about their fellow citizens, were portrayed as either losers or snowflakes:

Truly serious politicians no longer occupy the old-fashioned political spectrum with a right wing and a left wing. They slide up and down a greasy pole with a top and a bottom […] Both men (Dole and Clinton) want to be President very, very much, which is to say that neither is willing to lose for a cause. They don’t mean any harm by their hollowness and so I try not to hold it against them. They just want to win and in this climate, hollowness is, apparently, an advantage. (Lewis, 1997: 18, 131)

As Marcel Proust wrote, “althoughs” are often “becauses” in disguise’ (1919: 93). It is precisely because they were outsiders, rather than although they were outsiders, that these new journalists were clear-sighted. Untainted by the insiders’ shared understanding of what was ‘self-evident’, these outsiders had been neither tamed by, nor socialized to, the microcosm of politics. This is why they were able to express a cold, though sociologically realistic, view of what politics had become (Hay, 2007). Their perception of politics was also much closer to that of most citizens than it was to those of Capitol Hill pundits.

Different, outsider views of politics can also come from the margins of journalism. Some of the most thought-provoking narratives of political life have been produced by humorous puppet shows such as Britain’s Spitting Image or the French Les Guignols de l’Info. Though commentators have often emphasized the inventiveness and comedy of such programs, they are also worthy of consideration as an invitation to an almost sociological understanding of the political game. Their sketches bring journalists back in, as political actors. They describe a self-referential microcosm of interdependencies in which management of one’s own media image is often more time-consuming than dealing with public problems (Collovald & Neveu, 1998).
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Redefining political news

Reading the ‘political pages’ (Neveu, 1993) of the newspapers or listening to political interviews or analysis usually means learning about three main topics: power struggles inside and among parties and institutions; elections and opinion polls; and decisions made by executive or legislative bodies. Conversely, the level of coverage is much more limited on issues such as the process of law- and policymaking or the practical impacts of policy choices, as well as on many forms of bottom-up political activity (social movements, voluntary sector, etc.). As Bennett (1996) argues, this vision of newsworthy politics is the result of institutionalized professional routines: follow the trail of power, mobilize official sources, index political newsworthiness on the magnitude of conflicts among key political actors. But alternative definitions of political newsworthiness remain possible. The political importance and interest of a given decision or statement can also be indexed in terms of its impact on ordinary lives; it could be analyzed by investigating who really produced the decision, and which interests it serves or challenges. Where such issues are covered thoroughly, it is often other newsbeats that do so.

An initial move to disrupt coverage of politics could thus involve pooling the resources of several newsbeats, including contributions from non-journalists (experts, activists, etc.). In his comparative study of immigration coverage by the US and French press and other media, Benson, (2013) shows that, if French journalists do, from the point of view of a ‘multi-perspectival’ understanding of events and policies, produce better coverage (Gans, 2011), then this is precisely through polyphony. Having a specific news section called; Fact of the Day (Le Parisien/Aujourd’hui) or ‘The Event’ (Liberation) allows a mosaic of papers and templates to be assembled, combining multiple readings and stakeholder expressions. At Le Monde a comparable result has been produced by a partial merging of political journalism into a broader news section entitled ‘Society’.

A disruptive vision of politics can also mean paying more attention to what happens backstage (lobbying, recruitment logics, etc.) and, in terms of outputs (policies), thinking of it as being embedded in social life and having enormous effects on everyday lives. Examples of this might be Joseph Hallinan’s Pulitzer prize-winning report (2001) on the prison sector and its inmates in the United States or Eric Schlosser’s bestselling Fast-Food Nation (2001) on the fast-food and meat-packing industries. Other interesting examples come from two bestsellers (one French, one American) based on immersion among low-wage workers (waitresses and cleaners) by Ehrenreich, (2001) and Aubenas, (2010). Objections will immediately be made: this is not political journalism! Not a president, senator or constitutional court judge in sight – just waitresses, abattoir workers and cleaners! Very true. It is also true that these reports triggered important public debates on the (rarely mediatized) situation of poverty-wage workers. They connected the issues of junk food and public health. They gave faces and flesh to the ‘three strikes and you’re out’ policy and provided practical data with which to make sense of the effects of low-wage policies and of the shrinking of the welfare state. And, in many US states, they unveiled the power of the meat-packing and private jail lobbies, who are able to sponsor congressmen and thus gain de facto veto power on certain policies. All of this could be described as politics – alongside another (more critical) view of political newsworthiness. This is perceptible in these journalists’ connection to the spirit of muckraking. But is such framing more questionable, objectively, than brushing those issues under the carpet? Is it more objectionable than traditional political journalism, which shrinks politics to the size of Capitol Hill or the 7th and 8th arrondissements of Paris? Is politics, as the Italian political journalist Forcella famously said, esoteric for ‘mille cinquecento lettori’ (‘a readership of 1,500’, Mancini, 1994)– or does it impact the lives of every citizen?
Unchanged objects, new framings and methods

Copernican revolutions, or heretical views of the political, are not always necessary to triggering renewals in political journalism. Even on the most canonical objects of political journalism, innovations in perspective or interpreting tools can bring significant changes of tone.

Such innovation was visible in the early 1980s, when some French political journalists (mostly women) began developing a more ‘personal’ approach towards politicians, using sophisticated biographies and subtle psychological analysis. The idea was neither to re-activate the old ‘human interest’ approach, nor to push the limits of privacy. Rather, it was a matter of making sense of how a life-trajectory can produce, and root, beliefs and dispositions, giving shape to what sociologists would call a *habitus*. Catherine Nay’s biography of François Mitterrand, (1984) conferred legitimacy on this style of political journalism while boosting reinvestment in the long, full-page portrait as a serious template for political journalism. Such an approach is also visible in Ben Cramer’s mammoth narrative of the 1988 US presidential campaign (1993). Sometimes tracing right back to the childhood and youthful experiences of the main players, Cramer highlighted how these experiences forged the dispositions and skills that rendered these candidates capable of reaching the final stages of the fiercest of political competitions. Starting on the campaign trail very early on (before the primaries had even started), his story combined the surprises and thrills of a good TV series with shining a powerful interpretive light on what it means to be a professional politician. New light can also be shed on old subjects by combining data processing with social sciences. In June 2017, *Le Monde* published a collection of articles on the social profiles, professional and political trajectories of the MPs elected just a few weeks before. With the blossoming of big data and the power of infographics – transforming even the driest tables of a sociological case study into powerful images – the promise of data processing anticipated almost 50 years ago by Meyer, (1973) has now joined forces with precision journalism.

Regardless of how they are defined, the production of alternative reports of politics may also come from more investigative, pro-active methods, as the US muckrakers showed a hundred years ago. One recent French media success story is that of Mediapart: a website specializing in whistleblowing and investigative reporting. It has unveiled dirty tricks and political scandals involving a diverse range of figures including President Nicolas Sarkozy, Cahuzac a crooked minister who served under President Hollande, and Benalla, a member of President Macron’s inner entourage. Though political journalists have rarely been at its helm, the series of recent internal leak scandals (Panamaleaks, Luxleaks and Macronleaks) shows how a combination of investigative reporting, international cooperation and big data processing can open up new avenues for political reporting. And the adjective ‘political’ surely fits narratives that tell, for example, how a president of the European Commission had organized (back when he was Prime Minister of Luxembourg) a tax shelter that impoverished the other member-states. Use of the word ‘politics’ is not far-fetched when leaks reveal flaws in fiscal policies, the use of secret services by state leaders, or the weight of business interests in the funding of a presidential campaign.

Crowdsourcing techniques also use new methods to produce other narratives. The French Gilets Jaunes movement was ‘managed’ by resorting to high levels of police violence. In the six months between autumn 2018 and spring 2019, more than 200 demonstrators were seriously injured. Up to 30 people lost an eye and five had a hand amputated. This violence continued for weeks, sneaking under the radar of almost all political journalists and columnists – who were using police sources more concerned with monitoring the demonstrators’ violence. They also shared an attitude that was close to contemptuous of a ‘mob’ of rural, poorly educated working-class demonstrators. One freelance journalist, David Dufresne, used social networks to collect video footage, local press cuttings and
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medical reports on injured demonstrators. With the support of social movement organisations, he was soon able to demonstrate the magnitude of police violence, becoming a reliable source. His reports forced the issue onto the media agenda; a year after the movement’s apex he published a non-fiction novel (2019) on the policing of the movement, triggering a fresh peak of media attention.

Traditional political journalism will always be useful in making sense of political battles, in deciphering politicians’ strategies and cunning. Consumption of such stories will bring both pleasure and a more sophisticated vision of politics to those citizens deeply interested in politics. But if, parodying Tocqueville, we were to think of a journalism for a new world, be it the low-passion, low-energy world of John Keane’s monitorial democracy or the more exciting vision of an active and informed citizenry, modern democracy requires alternatives and complements to political journalism ‘as usual’. Such a project would demand new framings of what politics is, broader angles and multi-perspectival approaches. It would combine the warmth of experience and first-hand testimony with the distance of data mining and social sciences.

In sum, political reporting is too important to be left to political journalists.

Notes

1 Debating on BBC 4 about the 2016 resignation of the England’s football team’s manager Sam Allardyce, political journalist Michael Crick suggested (optimistically?) that ‘sports journalists are in the position that political journalists were in 40 years ago… far too close to their sources’ https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b07w5y3n.
2 CJ Craig’s skilful management of the pack of journalists in The West Wing provides a good illustration of this. Herbert Gans (2003) suggests however that even with its myths, The West Wing is often more realistic than the press in depicting politics as it really works.
3 See Bourdieu « La distinction » (1979:22–225, 358: on the social uses and hierarchies of clothing in France.
4 Alain Duhamel or Jean-Marie Colombani in France, Terry Coleman in the UK, Rudolf Augstein or Gunter Gaüss in Germany, Meg Greenfield in the US, Enzo Biagi or Lilli Gruber in Italy.
5 In his reporting, Crouse was following in the footsteps of Joe McGinnies – then a sportswriter, who soon left journalism to write crime novels – who published ‘The Selling of the President’ in 1970. McGinnies dedicated unprecedented attention to the growing role in the campaign played by advertisement and communication professionals. Like Crouse, he redefined who the meaningful actors in politics were. Roger Ailes, then adviser to Nixon, and later chairman of Fox News, told Politico.com in 2014 that McGinnies had ‘changed political writing forever’.
6 Mainstream political journalists can be conscious of belonging to a microcosm. But saying it too loudly may mean transgressing the rules of the insiders’ club. Meg Greenfield, of the Washington Post and Newsweek, wrote critical memoirs (2011) on US politics, though these were published posthumously. The Newsweek political columnist Joe Klein produced an unaccomodating narrative of a primary campaign (Primary Colours, 1996), yet he did so as the anonymous author of a non-fiction novel. After quitting journalism, Daniel Carton (2003) of Le Monde, painted a critical portrait of connivance between politicians and political journalists. But then, coming from a working-class family and having long worked in the regional press, he was himself an offbeat insider.
7 This evolution could be explained by more than the quest for a more reader-friendly approach. On the one hand, weakening the political newsbeat was a tactic aimed at curtailing the influence of a too powerful ‘feudality’, from the point of view of new management. On the other hand, this newsbeat was considered less attractive by a growing number of young journalists, who were developing a disenchanted relationship to politics and politicians (Saitta, 2005).
8 Common knowledge among the political journalist elite, the existence of Mazarine, Président Mitterrand’s adulterine daughter, remained secret until photographs of her with her father were published by Paris-Match in 1994. She was then 20 years old.
9 20,000 e-mails from Macron’s campaign staff were hacked before the second round of the 2017 presidential election.
10 See his website http://www.davduf.net
Erik Neveu

References

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