Abstract
The online environment is altering journalism practices. “User-generated content”, “social media”, “blogs”… are only some of the phenomena framed as significant technological evolutions, and likely to upset the work of journalists – not to mention the market of news.

What is the nature and the importance of these changes for the workers of the so-called ‘traditional media’? How are these evolutions perceived by journalists, implemented in their daily routines and possibly integrated in the notion of journalistic standards?

This paper explores those questions through a qualitative enquiry of 11 in-depth interviews with journalists of the main Belgian media outlets. Using an actor-network theory frame of analysis, we try to identify the range of actors – human as well as non-human – involved, and to track down the links between them. By comparing their strategies and reactions with previous research, we attempt to underline which actors can be considered as enablers or constraints in the adoption of technological changes, and argue that those evolutions are better understood in terms of tensions between myth and pragmatism.

The large nebula composed of tools, principles, practices and trends (Depauw 2008) that has been coined web 2.0 is often presented as an evolution of paramount importance for news industries, if not as a revolution. Its impact on journalism might not have been clearly delineated thus far – yet, the certainty of its existence seems widespread. By investigating the adoption process of new technology in a social constructivist approach, this paper purports to examine the consequences of such developments for workers of ‘traditional’ media institutions – workers who are inevitably submerged in an online environment, while still pertaining to prior, more classic organization forms.
Objectives
As an increasing number of voices raises to question the legitimacy and the relevance of characterizing the web 2.0 as a radical novelty (Matheson 2004, p.34; Rebillard 2007), my first objective is to scrutinize the newsworthakers’ perception of change and to examine how the potential innovations are adopted, articulated and integrated within traditional newswork.

Methodology
This research is buttressed by 11 interviews with newsworthakers of French- and Dutch-speaking main Belgian media outlets. It includes newspapers, as well as radio and television broadcasters; privately- and publicly-funded; all of them sharing a common feature: belonging to the ‘traditional media’ category while being actively present on the Internet. As the degree of convergence – “an internal process of integration between online and print or broadcast newsrooms within the same organization” (Thurman & Lupton 2008, p.441) – strongly varies, I have chosen not to discriminate between ‘traditional’ and ‘online’ journalists. However, in order to avoid fruitless discussion with respondents unconcerned with the development of online challenges, I applied a purposive sampling strategy (Matheson 2004; Patton 1990), with the person in charge of online news as a starting point. I consequently used a “snowballing sampling” scheme (Boczkowski 2004b, p.202) within the different institutions and across them, by asking every person with whom the contact had been established if they knew someone that could have something interesting to say on the topic discussed. As this research intended to be fundamentally exploratory, with the emergence of various trends and theoretical trails as a main aspiration, no a priori rejection has been made regarding the respondents’ job profile (6 of them are part of the hierarchy and specifically in charge of online news, while the 5 others are ‘regular journalists’). In so doing, I attempted to achieve a “maximum variation sampling” with a small number of cases liable to express “significant diversity” (Boczkowski 2004b, p. 201).

Analytical framework
By adopting a social constructivist approach (Domingo 2008a, p.681; Paulussen & Ugille 2008, p.25; Paterson & Domingo 2008, pp.15-28) as focal analytical lens, my prime intention was to reject technological determinism, the simplistic idea that “journalism has

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1 I chose to use the neologism « newswork » (coined by Deuze in (Deuze 2008) and « newswarker » instead of “journalist” or “journalism”, in order to enlarge the scope of my research and to consider all the actors involved – and not only those granted with the status of “journalist”.
always been shaped by technology” (Boczkowski 2004b, p.198). In the tradition of actor-network theory, it involves discarding the reductionist point-of-view of the material patterning of the social, which posits a determinist relation between humans and machines, regarded as strictly separate heaps alternatively driving each other (Law n.d., p.3). Therefore, along with Rebillard (2007), I attempt to grasp all the ins and outs of the innovation process (“technical, social, conception, use”) without being theoretically deadlocked by “the ideology of the all-powerful user”, a “simplistic determinism” or by “neglecting the material constraints of the medium” (Rebillard 2007, p.126). Deploying the “constructivist toolkit” suggested by Domingo (2008, p.26), I try to detect the variety of relevant actors involved:

« Every element (persons, institutions, material artifacts) related to a technological innovation is an actor in the process of defining it: while human actors propose definitions of a technology, material actors may limit the spectrum of possible definitions with their own material limitations. Actors are part of a network of relationships that shapes the innovation. Inventors of the technology embed some expectations in the design of the artifact » (Domingo 2008a, p.684)

An emphasis will be put on the translation, i.e. the “process of adapting the definitions (use, expectations) of a technology to the own needs of each actors” (Domingo 2008a, p.684), which I consider at the core of the adoption procedure. Within this translation process, I also try to identify the elements that could be labelled as enablers or constraints (or, along with Winston (1998), accelerators or brakes).

In parallel to this, the conceptual framework of adoption processes expounded by Boczkowski is put to a test. In his book, Digitizing the news (Boczkowski 2004a), this author argues that the adoption process of Internet-based innovations is triggered by technological development and generates editorial effects, but, above all, that it is shaped by production factors. In his in-depth study of three traditional newsrooms having put online news initiatives into service, he identifies three productions factors, the modalities of which can be diversely combined: the organization structures (namely the extensive, limited or null presence of print within the online newsroom), the work practices (revolving around gatekeeping or alternatives to it), and the representations of users (as technologically savvy or not). This framework seems relevant to this research, not only because “its train of thought is still topical” (Rebillard 2007, p. 122), but also because it offers a remarkable anchorage in the “1.0” online news (Boczkowski’s fieldwork started in 1998). Besides, it has been appropriated and expanded by other researchers (e.g. Paulussen & Ugille 2008) and therefore constitutes a fertile mould for comparison and subtle evolutions.
In a third complementary movement, I attempt to highlight latent gaps between ideal models of online news and daily routines (Domingo 2008b, p.26), and thus appraise the hypothesis according to which online journalism might be understood in terms of myth and discrepancy between it and the actual evolution of newswork. Namely, the myth of online journalism is “a program for creating a more transparent, comprehensive, dialogical reporting that would strengthen democratic participation in plural societies” (Domingo 2008a, p.683), ingrained in a double movement of techno-utopianism and of discontent with the performance of journalism by the established media (Domingo & Heinonen 2008, p.5). By underlining conflicts between ideal and pragmatism within the respondents’ discourses, this analysis will attempt to seize how myth and reality are articulated. In so doing, I intend to make up for Boczkowski’s disinterest for the actors’ own rationalization, as well as to take into account the fact that newsworkers are aware of and soaked in professional and scholarly discourses advocating “ideal-typical models for online journalism” (Paulussen & Ugille 2008, p.27)

Finally, all along the analysis, the respondents’ answers will be framed within what Mark Deuze calls the “occupational ideology of journalism” (Deuze 2008; Deuze 2005), i.e. the “collective knowledge journalists employ in their daily work”, embodied in 5 ideal-typical values (on the basis of which journalists feel that they possess legitimacy and credibility): public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics (Deuze 2008, p.16).

Findings

When the blank phrase “social media” is thrown to the wolves, the respondents overall agree on what to do with it. Within their description, they fill the empty concepts with the same concrete applications: social networking (e.g. Facebook, Linkedin), file-sharing platforms (Youtube, Daily Motion), RSS feeds, blogging and micro-blogging phenomena (Twitter), as well as various forms of user-generated content (users’ comments). In a word, they delve into the various tools, principles and practices constituting the web 2.0, that were expected to fit within the scope of this research.

If the list of issues I had in mind are effectively addressed, the respondents take a broader set of elements into consideration: they do not strictly discriminate between ‘web 2.0’ and previous web applications (e-mails, traditional web browsing and information retrieval), questioning indeed the assumed radical novelty of web 2.0. This maelstrom will hereafter be labelled “web practices”.

Generally speaking, contrasted point-of-views about web practices might be observed. They range from sheer enthusiasm to wary scepticism, which comes under the distinction made by Chung (2007) between innovators, cautious traditionalists and purists to the dominant paradigm.

If the purists and the sceptics were expected to adopt a distrustful attitude towards online contents and practices (“Those are no information sources”, states a respondent, while another emphasizes that referring the Internet is “certainly no reflex”), a similar trend is also observed among the most eager interviewees. They indeed regularly discard web practices outside of their field of interest by repeatedly stating that social media belongs to the scope of other occupations, such as marketing, computer sciences or webdesign. This seems consistent with the findings of Paulussen et al., who note that the innovative projects in Belgian media outlets are not taking place within the span of journalism:

> “these initiatives try to increase public’s loyalty towards the broadcaster station rather than to involve citizens in the news process” (Paulussen et al. 2007, p.139).

Even when they acknowledge that web practices pertain to journalism, respondents tend to posit that they are of sole use for other specialists: social media is valuable for those in charge of soft news, sport, gossip, culture – implying that it does not carry any significance for what they do. In so doing, they expand on the idea that social media and user-generated content are valuable, but that their value is limited, complementary to journalism rather than directly useful, and therefore is considered as especially well-fitted for some niches such as local news and personal stories (Paulussen & Ugille 2008, p.37).

Interestingly enough, the limited field in which web practices are pigeonholed varies according to the respondents’ profile and their perception of their targeted audience: “Our audience has no interest for complex blogs about economics”, argues one interviewee from a ‘popular’ media outlet in order to explain his conception of user-generated content as low in quality, while another worker from a ‘quality’ newspaper typically reduced the success of a recent chat session held on his website to the nature of the guest with whom users were invited to converse (a footballer), “which has more to do with entertainment than news”.

**Investigating Boczkowski’s production factors**

If we are, along with Bozckowski, to consider the impact of organizational structure in terms of the null, limited or extensive presence of print, we may note that most respondents
highlight the common objectives and the editorial policy they share with their print or broadcast counterpart. Even if online newsworkers admit to be slightly isolated and concede that their relationship with their print (or member of the ‘traditional’ media) colleagues is unidirectional (“they rarely come toward us”), all of them champion a close collaboration between newsrooms. The ideal of convergence is a truism: whether they long for the implementation of a “central news desk”, an “internal news agency” or a “truly bi-media logic”, the respondents – and especially those in charge of online news – clearly delineate a future strongly linked, and almost merged, with the ‘traditional’ newsroom. Despite largely pertaining to wishful thinking, such allegations challenge the idea developed by Boczkowski, according to which the extensive presence of print reins in creativity and encourage thoughtless “repurposing” (Boczkowski 2004a, p.175) by imposing traditional work routines. A closer alliance with the ‘traditional’ newsworkers is on the contrary deemed as a solution to the persistent lack of resource of which online newsrooms suffer, and therefore as the key to quality online news.

Such craving for rapprochement is also expressed through concrete obstacles and the will to overcome them, materialized for instance in the walls separating different areas of the working space. One of the newsrooms I visited was in the middle of having work done in their office, in order to break down the walls and to build a large open space with no physical limit between the different desks (“it’s our Berlin wall”, emphasized one interlocutor). Another media outlet had known several changes of setting, with the online newsworkers being trailed around from one floor to another. And even when no such removal was planned, the importance of setting and space appears in the respondent’s discourse: “It is not impossible to get them to work in the same office”, states an interviewee while trying to figure out ways of improving cooperation between different departments.

When addressing work practices and journalistic standards, most respondents highlight their role as gatekeeper (“the idea of us selecting and processing information for readers certainly does not disappear”), as well as they repeatedly call on the main features of the occupational ideology of journalism: ethics, objectivity, credibility.

The status of the web newsworkers is notwithstanding hazy: they are not always explicitly granted the title of journalists (but are labelled as subeditors, writers), and all the interviewees agree on the fact that their work is different in nature from what journalists do. Online newwork mostly consists in desk work, in editing and “shovelware” (Matheson
2004b, p.444), while journalism’s most widespread representation is embodied in the field reporter. In addition to that distinction, respondents identified a set of jobs that are related to online news but situated outside the realm of journalism, such as the coordinator (in charge of supervising the workflow between different departments of the newsroom), the web marketer (who promotes different initiatives on the Internet), and the moderator (in charge of managing the community of users). Albeit acknowledging the importance of “engaging in the conversation” – with their colleagues as well as with the users – most respondents consider such tasks as unfit for journalists. Contradicting some authors’ prediction of journalism shifting towards a “filtering model” (Hermida & Thurman 2007, p.17) and taking part in a global conversation (Reese et al. 2007, p.237), they therefore reaffirm a restrictive depiction of the journalist as an unchallenged and isolated gatekeeper.

The perception of users as technologically savvy or not does not really emerge in the respondents’ answers. However, their perception of users as carriers of valuable knowledge seems to matter: while reluctantly admitting that some user-generated content is of good quality, most interviewees nevertheless underline the general poor level of users’ contributions, therefore subscribing to the idea that user-generated content has no long term, intrinsic value (Hermida & Thurman 2007, p.15).

Enablers and constraints

In addition to the different enablers and constraints sketched above, I would like to emphasize three main spots of tension. Firstly, all the respondents seem obsessed with the question of time, which appears as a main restriction:

“The problem with blogs is that they rely on a journalist’s spare time”

“If the whole newsroom must spend time to answer to 100 questions and then to answer to the reactions to those answers… There we are: it’s impossible”

This research therefore challenges previous explanations of the “sluggish adoption of user-generated content” in Belgium, essentially relying on the small size of the newsrooms and the lack of resources as explanatory factors (Paulussen et al. 2007). Such elements are indeed mobilized by the respondents, but are in no way comparable to the doggedness with which they call on the time factor – or rather the lack of time. This obsession furthermore
results in a discrepancy with an ideal-typical value of journalism (Deuze 2008): immediacy, which is presented as unavoidable, but also harshly criticized as jeopardizing the quality of newswork.

Secondly, the issue of incentives and forms of compensation also seems problematic. Consequence of the conception of tasks related to web practices as not concerning journalists, a tension within the respondents’ answers might be observed: some argue that those tasks should become part of the journalist’s natural daily work, while others claim that they are supplementary workload and therefore should come with (financial) remuneration. The former believe that some sort of contagion is possible – from the enthusiasts to the sceptics – and the latter demand a clear, proactive and concrete policy from the hierarchy, therefore insisting on the role played by the institution at large.

Finally, an important conflict exists within the interviewees’ discourse between what online journalism should be and what it actually is:

“I think that it should work like this. I think that they [the ‘traditional’ journalists] should come towards us. And I sincerely think that they will do it more and more. But this has not happened yet”

“Ideally, indeed yes, but I don’t think our public is interested” [about blogging]

“We should make sure that everyone thinks to every information channel, but that takes time, and it is not yet settled for the moment”.

“We cannot demand everything. I can’t demand you to go outside and at the same time to stay here in front of a computer”.

Respondents overtly underscore the gap between ideal and pragmatism, and we may observe that such tension between myth and reality is not unconscious or latent, but fully made explicit by the actors themselves: they are blatantly faced with their own inconsistencies, therefore being placed in a position where they will have to struggle to build sense and coherence.

**Conclusion and further research**

If Boczkowski’s production factors proved useful to grasp different aspects of what is at stake within newsrooms, this research shows that they may vary in unexpected directions –
the extensive presence of print, for instance, was perceived as a goal to achieve rather than as a burden – a patent demonstration that, between Boczkowski’s fieldwork and mine, the idea of convergence has gained ground.

Above all, the findings exposed here show that current online journalism might be understood in terms of tensions between ideal and pragmatic models: what should be included the scope of journalistic work and what should not? How to overcome the paradox between the will to imply the users in the news-making process and the overall disappointment towards the content they generate? How is it possible to ally immediacy as a journalistic value and the dangers associated with the lack of time and the unremitting rush? The fact that those conflicts are plainly articulated by the actors themselves, bearing extremely self-reflexive discourses, is interesting per se and could be further explored.

Another promising field somewhat exposed by this research concerns time and the different ways it preoccupies newsworkers: a shrewd, in-depth study of the different occasions in which they call on time – and the lack of it – to explain their own actions could also prove fruitful.
References


