New Models of Representing Reality in Digital Journalism: The Case of News Games

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Abstract

In this paper we analyze a new model of journalistic reporting that aims to overcome the traditional dichotomy between the normative paradigm – centered on a narrative that is as neutral as possible, detached, and uncontaminated by subjective evaluations – and the increasingly emotional and interpretative journalism that has taken shape with the rise of digital technologies. Today, the affordances that guide the uses of digital platforms promote new mechanisms of collective consumption of information, within specific 'modes of feeling,' and new forms of sociality built largely by algorithmic logics. Moreover, the emotional nature of social media has led to an increasing disengagement with the problem of journalistic credibility, from a rational approach, starting with a reversal of the relationship between understanding and emotionality (Davies 2018). This does not imply, however, that the media representation of reality should be reduced to a postmodernist type of perspectivism, in which there are no longer parameters for establishing what is objective. Instead, we propose a new model of the "objectivity of empathy" based on Michael Schudson's concept of 'objectivity 3.0': this model seeks to merge the emotional involvement of the audience with an accurate and precise account of the facts. The model is particularly suitable for analyzing the journalistic account of reality carried out through immersive and interactive digital technologies. In this context, we will analyze a case study that fits into the "objectivity 3.0" model, that of news games, i.e. the use of interactive video games and virtual reality in factual journalistic reporting.

Keywords: News Games, Objectivity 3.0, Empathetic Journalism

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Introduction

In the platform society, technological infrastructures are not mere tools for conveying content, but acquire an increasingly editorial profile. By platform society, scholars van Dijck and Poell (2015) mean "a global conglomerate of all kinds of platforms, which interdependencies are structured by a common set of mechanisms" and whose influence in society goes far beyond the role of intermediaries and providers of related digital services (van Dijck and Poell, 2015, pp. 1-5).

The same methods of creation, distribution, and use of news are reformulated according to new criteria and objectives, as digital platforms do not perform the simple function of content producers, but offer an editorial mediation service which consists in hosting the contents of subscribers (individuals, stakeholders, organizations/companies, etc.), storing them, organizing them and promoting their circulation to other users (networked publics), according to logic controlled by the platform itself (Boccia Artieri and Marinelli, 2018). For this reason, as underlined by Mats Ekström and Oscar Westlund (2019), a crucial concept for understanding the fate of journalism today is that of "dislocation". By dislocation, the authors mean the weakening of the power of news producers, who have less and less control over what they publish, precisely because the news is now diffuse and conveyed in environments that are decontextualized from where they came from, such as, for example, on social platforms.

Furthermore, the affordances that guide the usage of digital platforms promote various mechanisms of collective information consumption, within new "modes of feeling" and forms of sociality built in large part by algorithmic logics.

It is above all social media that have redefined the methods of selecting the contents that reach users, in particular through the process of datafication and information personalization. By analyzing user data and offering what they want, social platforms have ensured that journalism is increasingly oriented towards a data-driven logic , in which the tastes and preferences of the audience acquire ever greater importance in news making activities. These platforms, created for sociability and interaction, cannot be used without providing for a particular involvement or participation on the part of users who use online information.

This process is even further reinforced by the same audience measurement services that companies such as Facebook, for example, offer editorial organizations to meticulously define the characteristics and needs of their readers (van Dijck et al., 2018).

The primary objective therefore becomes that of user engagement, as it is precisely the most engaging contents that collect greater visibility on social platforms.

But what is it that generates the most engagement? Some data analyzed by Facebook have highlighted how "moving, exciting, and motivational stories" and "provocative and passionate debates" generate double or triple the engagement compared to other stories (Osofsky, 2010; van Dijck et al., 2018) and it seems to apply in different cultural contexts and on other social platforms (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Chen and Sakamoto, 2014).

On social platforms the emotional sphere of readers therefore becomes an essential factor that the journalist cannot but take into consideration in the process of building news, as the same technological infrastructures and their business models are organized in such a way as to

arouse, capture, and monetize the feelings and emotions of users. Furthermore, the emotional thrust of social media means that the problem of "journalistic credibility" is increasingly detached from a rational approach, starting with a reversal of the relationship between understanding and emotionality (Davies, 2018).

Avoiding news avoidance

For several years now, digital publishers have been studying new strategies for representing reality and journalistic reporting not only to survive, but to exploit the potential of the new logics of datafication and personalization of information imposed by social media. The world of journalism is thus reinventing itself in order to exploit the potential and mechanisms of the platforms and better respond to the new information habits of an increasingly interconnected audience of readers who are eager to engage.

From an "informative" use, which considers digital platforms as simple communication channels, it is necessary to move to a more dialogic, bidirectional, interactive, and engaging approach, capable of fostering reader engagement (Solito et al. 2019).

The world of information has thus tried to adapt to the new logic of visibility and virality of the social platforms. Many digital publishers have invested enormous resources in order to offer users a constant flow of information mixed with entertainment, focusing on the use of videos, live blogs, presentations, and quizzes. Parallel to the distribution of "lighter" content (infotainment), they have by no means given up on offering users even more detailed and articulated information, often attributable to investigative journalism.

In the platform society characterized by information overload, however, there is a large risk that the latter type of information does not reach the large majority of platform users, since, as already pointed out, it is precisely the entertainment contents and those with a greater emotional component that tend to travel and spread faster than the so-called hard news.

As Jonah Peretti, Founder of BuzzFeed argues, "in the future only a wealthy elite might have access to good journalism from newspapers like the Journal and the New York Times, leaving the vast majority of the public to contend with clickbait and fake news spread on social platforms." Furthermore, information overload is also generating that phenomenon called news avoidance, or the tendency of people to avoid the news. The extent of this phenomenon is significantly evidenced by the latest data from the "Digital news report 2022"[1] of the Reuters Institute at Oxford, the result of research conducted on 93,000 people from 46 different countries and which offers a worrying insight into the health of contemporary digital information.

According to the research, 38% of people partially or completely avoid the news. The percentage varies widely from country to country but is, generally, on the rise compared with data from previous years. It ranges from 54% of people in Brazil to 14% in Japan. Italy has an average percentage with 34% of respondents in 2022 saying they partially or completely avoid the news.

Scholars Antonis Kalogeropoulosi and Benjamin Toff argue that "in a fragmented digital media environment where news is increasingly encountered passively in social media feeds

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[1] https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022

and via automated mobile alerts, active avoidance of news, rather than deliberate consumption, takes on outsized importance in shaping what it means to be an informed citizen" (Toff & Kalogeropoulosi, 2020, p. 366).

The solution is to adopt a "constructive" journalism, that is, one that offers solutions, or at least seeks them out, rather than flooding the public with problems. Splitting the type of content on offer to the public doesn't seem to be a sufficient solution to "saving" quality information from the wave of emotion that travels across the web.

Instead it's necessary that the world of information ride this wave without being overwhelmed and without distorting itself, reflecting adequately on how to involve its users. As early as 2013 Mathew Ingram, communication expert and digital writer for the Columbia Journalism Review, at the journalism festival in Perugia, indicated that "being human" was among the most fundamental points for effective digital journalism. Multimedia, interactivity, and re-appropriation of the emotional sphere seem, therefore, to be crucial aspects that must necessarily be dealt with.

"Normative" journalism and the emotional web

It's evident how, in such a scenario, it's become increasingly complex to base the journalistic narratives of reality on the typical ideals of so-called "modern journalism." With this expression we refer to that model of journalism that established itself between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, in correspondence with the attempt to make journalism itself a professional activity in all respects, focused on specific routines, organizational structures, rules to be respected (Schudson, 1978).

The adjective "modern" refers to the fact that these norms were a direct application of the principles of the Enlightenment and scientific modernity to the field of journalism. With reference to the narratives, the object of this paper, this implied the idea that the narration of reality could be carried out on the basis of objective methods and rational procedures (Schudson, 2018). The paradigm of objectivity, in this historical phase, also established itself in the field of journalism in terms of a "defensive strategic ritual" (Tuchman, 1972): to identify themselves as a professional category, journalists needed to distinguish themselves from those who practiced public relations activities (Lippman, 1922), which also implied the need to avoid the influences of professional communicators and their persuasive narrative model, aimed at convincing and not informing. Therefore, according to the model of modern journalism, the journalistic account of reality must be objective, impartial, detached, and uncontaminated by subjective points of view or emotions (Peters, 2011).

For many decades this remained the dominant paradigm in the self-representation of the journalistic profession. The elements already mentioned in the first section highlighted how the advent of digital media has determined, however, a reaffirmation of the emotional sphere within the public exchange of opinions and meanings.

This scenario inevitably leads to a redefinition of the concept of objectivity in the journalistic account of reality: the ideal of a journalist who acts as a disembodied agent, who observes reality in a detached manner and who limits himself to describing it in a cold way, excluding any element of an emotional nature, is too far from the concreteness of the production and above all of the consumption of information on digital platforms.

At the same time, the overcoming of the modern paradigm of objectivity and the re-evaluation of the emotional sphere shouldn't lead to a postmodern drift, for which interpretations, all equally legitimate, replace facts. The well-known aphorism of Nietzsche (1967, aphorism 481) "there are no facts, only interpretations," especially in its subsequent appropriations by philosophical currents like weak thought (Vattimo and Rovatti, 1983), represents a clear danger to journalism, especially in the fake news, infodemic (Rothkopf, 2003; WHO, 2020), and post-truth era.

It is therefore necessary to understand whether there are ways to redefine the concept of objectivity in the journalistic narrative of reality, by also including the emotions and aesthetic sphere that are absent in the normative paradigm by which journalism incorporated the principles of scientific modernity.

Objectivity and emotions

The journalistic narrative of reality certainly cannot abdicate its role in the construction of an informed democratic and public debate. It's clear that journalism will always needs parameters in order to offer an accurate account of the facts. And yet, the processes mentioned in the previous sections, and that digital technologies have brought to completion, require that this narrative be articulated in a way that no longer excludes emotions, without falling into sentimentality and / or postmodern perspectivism. In a context like the internet, in which the consumption of information takes place within filter bubbles more and more, there is a high risk of falling into sensationalism and hyper-emotionality that are functional only to feeding the dynamics of polarization and radicalization. For this reason, a journalistic narrative focused on the aesthetic-playful sphere within digital media must somehow hold the elements of objectivity and empathy together.

This "empathetic objectivity" cannot help but remove itself from the ideals of detachment, noninvolvement, and dispassion typical of "modern journalism." As already highlighted by some scholars, this paradigm shows evident limits precisely in its inability to arouse empathic involvement in its news consumers (Kors et al. 2016; Blank-Libra, 2017).

All these considerations refer, in our opinion, to the concept of "objectivity 3.0" developed by Michael Schudson, one of the leading scholars of contemporary journalism. Schudson configures this type of objectivity precisely in terms of an "empathetic objectivity," thus trying to hold together an accurate account of the facts with the presence of the emotional component.

In using this expression, Schudson distinguishes between three different types of objectivity that have marked the journalistic narrative in the 20th century (Schudson, 2018). First, there was objectivity 1.0, imposed in the first decades of the 20th century in conjunction with the professionalization of journalism. As already underlined, this objectivity was based on the principles of impartiality, on a neutral, cold description of facts, with journalists limiting themselves to reporting what was before their eyes. This model, Schudson explains, was dominant until the 1950s.

In the decade that followed a different model began to become established defined as "objectivity 2.0": in this phase news coverage became more analytical and more transgressive of the boundaries between public and private. There began a growth in contextual and

interpretative reporting. Journalists no longer focused only on events but also on their causes, they sought explanations, analyzed what was happening, and offered their interpretations.

In Schudson's opinion, however, not even this form of objectivity is any longer in step with the changes in the production and consumption of information on digital platforms. Thus, another step is needed towards "objectivity 3.0": an empathetic objectivity which starts from the assumption that it's also necessary to provoke an emotional involvement of the public through journalistic narratives. The premise is that in the digital public sphere the audience is constituted by "communities of feeling" mentioned in the first section. This emotional involvement should be combined with an accurate and precise account of the facts. Objectivity 3.0 must therefore be based on factual evidence like that of 1.0, it must be interpretative like that of 2.0, but it must add empathy to all this, configuring itself as an objectivity of empathy: "Journalism practiced with Objectivity 3.0 should accept that the job of journalism is to report stories about contemporary life. By reporting, journalists make a commitment to a factual and, to a large extent, verifiable world. By turning those reports into stories, journalists give their reporting a form that makes them understandable, even compelling. They are a combination of reportage and story that not only informs and instructs but may touch people, even move them" (Schudson, 2018, p. 66).

Pursuing this empathetic objectivity means going beyond one's own specific point of view: the journalist, without giving in to sentimentality, must go deeper, managing to immerse themselves in the point of view of both the protagonists of the facts recounted as well as the audience to whom the specific news is addressed. It is not a question here of enhancing the subjectivity of the reporter, following a personalistic drift that transforms journalists into opinion leaders or even celebrities. Empathetic objectivity implies, to the contrary, the journalist's ability to put themselves in the shoes of others, and thus to articulate an engaging and accurate story, in which emotions can (and in a certain sense must) find space.

News games

A concrete application of the objectivity 3.0 model in the field of journalism can be found in news games, that is in the use of interactive video games and virtual reality in the journalistic story of the facts. News games represent the application of the logic of *serious games* to the field of journalism, that is video games that go beyond entertainment and that are created in order to combine the interactive, multimedia potential of the media with their ability to involve users on the one hand, and learning strategies on the other. The objective is, therefore, to convey serious content in the form of play (Sicart, 2008).

According to the definition offered by Plewe and Fürsich (2018, p. 2472), news games have the following characteristics: they are "created in response to actual events [...] easy to access in order to appeal to a wider audience," they have a "persuasive intention" carried out "through the artificial, modeled character of their game rules," and they are "supplementary to traditional news," since they use a procedural rhetoric of rules and text to convey information. News games thus share the treatment of current events with traditional journalism, but they do so through different narrative forms, which, although beginning from real data, direct the user experience towards an act of imagination. It is precisely for this reason that the narrative techniques of news games have been associated with those of literary journalism (Jacobson et al., 2016), as well as those of New Journalism, particularly in relation to the nonfiction novel (Dowling, 2021, p. 1). In fact, news games merge a simulated

reproduction of reality with typical game protocols which allow users to interact with that same reality (Bogost et al. 2010).

The application of videogames and virtual reality to the journalistic account of the facts has generated several concerns in the field of journalism studies: first of all, gamification implies a definitive abdication of the values of "modern journalism," that is of detachment, objectivity, and impartiality (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017; Jukes, 2020). Furthermore, there are those who have highlighted how, through news games, there is a risk of trivializing issues of the public interest (Ferrer Conill, 2016). Over the years, however, other studies have highlighted the positive potential of news games and the more general application of video games and virtual reality to news stories (Bogost et al., 2010; Dowling, 2021).

The basic idea is that immersive technologies, of which news games are an expression, are able to enrich journalistic storytelling, arousing high levels of empathy and identification with the stories being told (Milk, 2015). News games can be useful for putting the user in the shoes of others and soliciting an "emotional memory" (Zeman, 2017), something that an abstractly rational and detached account of the facts is unable to achieve. In fact, it has been pointed out that the human mind cannot be considered in terms of a fact storing machine, but must be conceived of as an "association-making entity" based on empathy (Shin & Biocca, 2018). In this way, the limits of the journalistic model of the five W's and the paradigm of a merely rational and cognitive objectivity to which it refers is overcome.

Not only that, but several news games are focused on a system of rewards and motivations that direct the gamer's emotions towards external reality, triggering reflexive processes. These are rewards that have nothing to do with the acquisition of points or badges, but with the achievement of a sense of proficiency and with an increased ability to relate to the environment configured by the specific game. Here we are at the polar opposite of clickbait sensationalism or other strategies by which newspapers attempt to grab the (scarce) attention of users.

An example of this motivation and reward system is represented by the video game *Walden: A Game*, an open world simulation of the life of American philosopher Henry David Thoreau during his experiment in self-reliance living at Walden Pond. As explained on the game's website, "Players follow in Thoreau's footsteps, surviving in the woods by finding food and fuel and maintaining their shelter and clothing. At the same time, players are surrounded by the beauty of the woods and the Pond, which holds a promise of a sublime life beyond these basic needs. The game follows the loose narrative of Thoreau's first year in the woods, with each season holding its own challenges for survival and possibilities for inspiration." All this has to do with a system of motivations centered around a form of "intellectual exploration" of the surrounding environment (Marsh, 2016). The goal of those who play *Walden: A Game* is not to acquire points or pass levels, but to get in touch with an increased awareness of the environment that the game represents, being able to explore it. The experience of the game becomes similar to that of a journey, in which one's perception of reality and nature can change. In this way the game also becomes an intellectual, spiritual experience: by coming into contact, through technology, with an unusual environment, the gamer can enrich their knowledge of the world and bring back what they have learned even in real life.

News games, therefore, use the element of play to stimulate a reflection on themselves and on reality. In this way, they can also facilitate the learning of unfamiliar topics and get users

interested in topics that are generally foreign to them. The gamer is often faced with a series of dilemmas, sometimes of a moral nature, that materialize within the experience of the game, thereby avoiding that they remain on a purely normative and abstract level.

The aesthetics of news games therefore have both a reflective and ethical implication, and approach the concept of "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" developed by authors like Scott Lash and John Urry in the late 90s. With this expression, they referred specifically to the possibility of developing an interest of an ethical nature towards people who are not part of one's own community, but with whom one enters increasingly in contact thanks to the filter of cultural artefacts and aesthetic signs conveyed by the media in the era of globalization, as well as by virtue of the increased mobility (real or simulated) typical of contemporary societies (Lash & Urry, 1994; Urry, 1995). Aesthetics does not lead here to unthinking immediacy, nor to an escape from reality, but rather becomes a tool for forms of reflective mediation, as well as for the development of interpretative skills.

Schudson's objectivity 3.0 model, as discussed, prescribes holding empathic engagement with an accurate and precise account of the facts together. In other words, it is essential that even in the context of digital and immersive technologies, journalism remains firmly anchored to the principles of a scrupulous verification of facts and their truthful representation. Video games and virtual reality, then, even in the context of an inevitable "playful deformation" of reality, must be built on the basis of the preliminary journalistic work of data and evidence collection, to later return in the experience of the game.

Even in this respect, examples can be given of news games that respect these principles. Among these is the news game *Uber: The Uncomfortable View From the Driving Seat*, developed by the Financial Times in 2017, a video game that critically analyzes the conditions of an Uber driver, allowing the user to experience that type of driving first hand. Before making the game, the Financial Times collected the testimonies of numerous Uber drivers, as well as researching the drivers' working conditions. Examples like these show that in news games a form of "factual empathy" can be promoted, that is an empathy not unconnected to a detailed and objective narration of reality, although transposed into the playful experience of a video game. The same thing happened in the news game *We Are Chicago*, made in 2013, in which users are transported to the neighborhoods of the US city and are confronted with the theme of youth gang violence. Before putting this product on the market, the group of independent programmers "Culture Shock Games" collected testimonials and data on the subject in question. For example, many residents of Chicago's most violent neighborhoods, such as Englewood, were interviewed. This preliminary work served to produce, in the news game, a realistic and faithful experience about the problem of youth gang violence: in other words, a genuine work of journalistic analysis and verification (Dowling, 2021, p. 85).

Conclusions

It can therefore be said that at least some of the news games put on the market over the years respect the two principles underlying Michael Schudson's objectivity 3.0 model, namely the need to stimulate emotional involvement on the part of users while operating, at the same time, a narrative of facts that is faithful and adherent to reality, as well as based on the journalistic work of examination, verification, and data collection.

Clearly the narration of real facts in the form of play also carries with it several risks. Among these, it should be mentioned that, in the context of the game, users may be less aware of any attempts by developers to provide an ideologically oriented image of reality, in line with their own personal beliefs. It is enough to imagine what could happen, in the current period of history, if someone decided to make a game about the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. In other words, no account of the facts can ever be completely neutral or objective, and this also applies to those conveyed by News games.

However, it is equally evident that on digital platforms, for the reasons set out in the theoretical part of this work above, journalism needs to rethink the tools by which to reach users. A (presumed) objectivity devoid of emotions, in fact, will probably be unlikely to cause real transformations in society, since it will most likely be unable to involve a sufficient number of people on issues of public interest.

The concept of "empathetic objectivity" developed by Schudson can therefore be a first important theoretical point of reference for reconfiguring the relationship between rationality and emotions in online journalism, and news games represent one of the concrete examples by which we can attempt to put this theoretical model into practice.

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