

# LUISS



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## **An Actor Network Analysis in Media Selection and Production**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The thesis presented here aims at mapping out in detail the cycle of news making, starting from the source of a news-item and following the process it undertakes to end up as a published piece of information. In particular, I examine the actors involved in the process and how their role influences each other as well as the result received by the public. The research question I am pursuing is mainly twofold: What are the main actants that journalists feel have an active effect on them as they are writing an article? What elements determine the selection of information in the modern news making process? The two individual questions can be considered as two sides of the same coin, but it is important to keep them in mind distinctly, especially in the thesis section concerned with the field research, where each part required a slightly different approach.

The thesis is structured in five main parts (plus bibliography and appendix) and is based on interviews and field research as well as academic literature. The body of the thesis is articulated into two main chapters that propose to organize and explain the data itself. Chapter two concentrates on the field of sociology of journalism and lays down a theoretical groundwork, highlighting out of such a vast area of expertise the main points and variables of the news making process that I intend to concentrate on. The chapter is further divided into four key aspects, starting with an explanation of the workings of actor network theory and a more detailed section on the appliances of ANT to journalism, which functions as a theoretical basis for my research. The main points of the chapter are then the interactions between actors and the existing relationships of dependency, added to an analysis of the most prominent variables; the extent of personal autonomy with a mention of the new dimension of technology as a new, important element. Finally, the chapter closes with a renewed stating of what the interviews that follow strive to accomplish. In general, this chapter aims not only at presenting the factors in a separate manner one from the other but first and foremost at showing their influence and interactions with each other. What I try to prove is that what we tend to summarize as the field of information in everyday speech is actually a complex network where each actor plays a distinct but interconnected role and that this ecosystem evolves alongside the

advancement of modernity and technology. Between this chapter and the field evidence presented in chapter four, chapter three sets out to better present the methodology of the research and the way data has been collected, spanning from a snowballing sample of interviews to content analysis. This was especially relevant to make clear, as the following part of the thesis is then based on information obtained in first person by me from professional journalists with various types of competences.

The fourth chapter is centred around the interviews carried out with the aforementioned methodology and is able to explain and compare the findings. My sources in this case try to present various instances of reality and therefore show a picture from above of different situations that can exist (and coexist) in the field of journalism, flowing into a comparison of how the different variables play out in different settings. The aim is to find empirical evidence that may prove or disprove the theoretical framework identified beforehand. The interviews involve a traditionally employed journalist from an important Italian newspaper, a freelancer and an Italian journalist that works in television. Rather than expressing favour of one dimension over the others, the interviews collect a sample of real-life careers that provide direct experiences of journalism as a network.

The thesis ends with a conclusion that contains a final comparison between all the identified actors in the research and highlights the main values of each, followed by some general final remarks with particular emphasis on the aspects that have been found to be the most outstanding. Through the theory of network analysis applied both to the literature review and to the interviews, I plan to map out the process of news making in a way that can be both theoretically valid and empirically concrete.

## **Chapter 2: State of the art and an overview of actor network theory, in general and in journalism**

### ***ii.i: Actor Network Theory***

In traditional sociology, academics and researchers take for granted the existence of networks into which society organizes itself and its human components. Although valid on many points, this binary, oversimplified way of conceiving reality tends to focus on a pre-established explanation rather than on the process of explaining itself and condemns to invisibility a lot of active factors in any given field. Actor network theory (ANT) is a build-up from traditional sociology of which Bruno Latour is considered as the main expert and claims that networks are constructed by the active relationships between the actors involved (hence the name, actor network) (Bryson, Crosby 2009, pag. 179). ANT

is described by Latour (2005) as the “sociology of the social” (or the “sociology of associations”) (Bryson, Crosby 2009, pag. 177) to highlight how much these relationships are considered necessary to building a network. These interactions also give ANT a dynamic quality absent in other sociological sciences, as each course of action is constantly evolving and every “actant” may have the chance of “diverting, backtracking or changing a previous course of existence” (Bryson, Crosby 2009, pag. 179).

“Actant” is a term coined by Latour himself with which he identifies each and every element that may exert agency on a given network (Wessells 2007, pag. 351). One of the main differences between ANT and traditional sociology is that human agents are not the only ones taken into consideration here but non-humans also play a fundamental role, starting from natural entities, to plannings and documentation, up to the technological tools that we are so accustomed to in contemporary times (Wessells 2007, pag. 351). With ANT, these entities cease to be simple means used by the human agents to perpetrate their social context, rather they become an interlinked actor of the network which has an active influence on the creation of a whole. In a review of Bruno Latour’s book, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory* (Anne Taufen, 2007), the example used is that of a city government. When we think of the concept of city government we see it as a finite idea, a normative amalgamation of concepts with the purpose of stability. In a more objective analysis of reality, it’s easy to see that what we so carelessly define as city government is in actuality the “tangled, temporary knot of agencies, personalities, connotations, services, buildings, phone systems, offices, elected officials, meetings, websites, vehicles, programs, uni-forms, press releases, department heads . . . and so much more” (Wessells 2007, pag. 352).

Which brings us to another key aspect of ANT; associations and interactions. To follow the principles of ANT is to recognise that reality as a whole is made up by the interaction between the parts and therefore concentrate one’s efforts (in whatever field these may be) on recognising the relationship certain actants may have with one another. This includes also the mundane interactions that tend to be often overlooked in traditional research and a careful digging throughout the data that may take more time that could have originally been accounted for, especially when plans don’t go the way they were expected to (Wessells 2007, pag. 353-355). It may appear as more complicated but in reality, it is a

more pragmatic way of conceiving research and networks, as “empirically, common understanding only exists at the level of practice” (Wessells 2007, pag. 352). Associations correspond to an even more specific definition coined by Latour where “associations may also embody shared understandings, affective responses, identity-based or -forming linkages, agreements, commitments, resource flows, and a host of other possible connections, including causal connection” (Bryson, Crosby 2009, pag. 178). In a simpler manner, I could say that associations are a form of interactions where the elements considered are dependent on each other to make sense. Whether they be weak, ongoing or ending (Bryson, Crosby 2009, pag. 178), associations are the real protagonists of actor network theory as they form the path to follow through to get the big picture perspective ANT is truly after.

The implications of associations and of ANT in general, the main one being that human actors are not actually in control of social organization (Wessells 2007, pag. 356), can be considered almost unsettling, as they propose a new way of conducting research and interpreting reality with an entirely different focus. It is a vast area of study and somewhat difficult to define, but it offers a perspective that may in the future be necessary in any field of sociological interest. The difficulties that may be encountered when analysing the data and the relationship between variables is then repaid; the “task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves” (Bryson, Crosby 2009, pag. 178), making the researcher little more than someone trying to record a reality playing out in front of them. The parallels with reporting intended as journalism appear evident and plant questions regarding the journalist’s extent of action that are developed in the next sections.

This brings to the concept of power, the final element needed to have a clear understanding of ANT and its functioning. One of the main premises of ANT is that power is a process result and not an explanation (Bryson, Crosby 2009, pag. 179) so that the distribution of power on any issue can change along with its associations. This leads to the implication that power, something that dictates almost every aspect and field in human society, is just as artificial as any other network and not at all set in stone. Power relationships may change just as easily and fast as the interactions between actants, so much so that Fleck (1983) actually rejects anything as stable or absolute and defines facts

themselves as artificial, saying “facts are about the least primitive, the most complex, the most elaborated, and the most collective makeup there is” (Bryson, Crosby 2009, pag. 179).

What is therefore the real extent of power? Who or what truly holds it in the news selection? With the interviews contained in this thesis I attempt to provide an answer to these questions amongst the others.

### *ii.i.i: Actor Network Theory: the application in journalism*

After having obtained a general overview on ANT and how to conduct sociological research using it as a method, it is now equally as important to see how ANT can be directly applied to the field of journalism for the purposes of this thesis.

As explained previously, a fundamental aspect of ANT is the presence of actants and how they do not simply correspond to the human participants in a given field but to any type of elements that can influence a study's results and that have interactions between them. In the same way, when applied to journalism, it is ANT's revolutionary stance to say that it is not simply made up of the human journalists, editors and sources but also of any non-human mean of communication, bringing up a harsh critique to the anthropocentric tradition of journalistic studies (Primo, Zago 2014, pag. 39).

When looking at it from this point of view, in contemporary times it is easy to see the impact of technology on journalism as one of the main non-human actants. I will be mentioning it only briefly in this paper, as it is not present in my main research question, but it is important to keep in mind how much the evolution of technology in the last decades has revolutionized the way information is divulged. It has changed society's very way of making journalists themselves, offering new platforms and ways to operate for anyone involved in the news making process and has influenced almost every aspect of a newsroom. There are four main areas that can be isolated in which technology has a strong influence: how journalists do their work, the content of news, the structure or organization of the newsroom, and the relationships among news organizations, journalists, and their many publics (Primo, Zago 2014, pag. 40). Therefore, technology is not only a novelty in the tools journalists use to write but also represents a new way of picturing journalism, obviously bringing with it new opinions and concerns from the academics involved in it. When we speak of the general coming together of computing, telecommunications, and



media in a digital environment we are talking about a specific phenomenon of convergence (Primo, Zago 2014, pag. 44) which different professors analyse in different manners. Convergence may actually enhance how journalistic understanding sees technology as an actant, actively shaping journalism itself, and not just a device to improve productivity according to Van Loon (Van Loon, 2011), very different from the opposing stance of Mico, Masip and Domingo (Mico, Masip, and Domingo (2013)). They identify technology as a multitasking dimension with a negative connotation for the involved professionals (Primo, Zago 2014, pag. 44). Domingo also went on to explain convergence as comprising four dimensions: integrated production, multi-skilled professionals, multiplatform delivery, and active audience (Domingo et al. (2007)) (Primo, Zago 2014, pag. 44). It is abundantly clear then how technology is a fundamental non-human actant in journalism and one which is very talked about as well. But what other non-human actants can be found? What is their weight in the field?

Heinrich (2011) proposes a model of network journalism to explain the complex relationship between different sources, producers, and news distributors in contemporary journalism, which is later further developed by Russell (2011, 1), who states that the concept should be understood as: “journalism that sees publics as creators, investigators, reactors, (re)makers, and (re)distributors of news and where all variety of media, amateurs, and professional, corporate and independent products and interests intersect at a new level” (Primo, Zago 2014, pag. 45). Network journalism can consequently be intended as a more specific version of ANT applied to the defined area of interest. Why is any definition correlated to it so vague though? Why is it so difficult to find any clear-cut mapping of journalism from a network perspective? The answer, other than that research from this viewpoint is still relatively new, is that there isn’t supposed to be a clear-cut mapping, at least not in the way it is intended by traditional academia.

Both traditional humanities and sociological research up to this point have made the same ontological mistake: “the supposition that journalism is a practice restricted to humans and not that journalism is the very thing that needs to be explained” (Primo, Zago 2014, pag. 46). There is nothing, no actant or element, that is journalism per se, “journalism exists just while it happens, and not as a transcendent essence, not in ostensive, marked definitions” (Primo, Zago 2014, pag. 48). Because of this, nothing can

be said of journalism in itself which liberates the researcher from a preconceived scheme and gives them the very different task of simply observing and recording. As Latour (2005) explains, an ANT observer may not identify how all actants are connected but knows that their associations have recordable consequences (Primo, Zago 2014, pag. 43) and that is the real centre of interest around which any study on journalism must focus. According to the principle of irreduction, one can't even differentiate the actants hierarchically (Primo, Zago 2014, pag. 44) so that any empirical difference between elements must be read as a unique contribution it may give to the field but not as a possible substitute for any other, more important characteristics in the news making industry.

Actor network theory argues that all fields of existence can be mapped out as so-called "networks". It is my belief however that journalism is particularly well inclined to this kind of analysis, given the multitude of actants necessarily must be involved to make the news as credible and reliable as possible. Being informed has always been a need of human society and the way this need is followed through with its ethics and inner workings will keep on changing to keep up with society's evolution. The role of a researcher is to observe and record, not unlike the role of a reporter. It was important to have a clear imagery of ANT and its relation to journalism before moving on to more complex observations.

### ***ii.ii: Actors and dependency relations in news production***

When the average person thinks about journalism, or about what journalism is, they will think of journalists and their job. They more than likely won't think about editors, or publicists, or the readers themselves and even fewer will think about things like technology, readability, credibility or grammar. In truth though, journalism is a complex machine made up of all these parts and more to satisfy one of man's primary needs - the need to be informed. Breaking down the news making chain into its parts is useful to show the controversies and contradictions that characterize a newspaper and are necessary for it to work successfully.

A good and understandable place to start an analysis, being one of the most recognised figures in a newsroom aside from the journalist, is with the editor. Despite the

perceived autonomy of journalists, editorial policies represent important constraints in journalistic activities and can impose a certain degree of corporate interest. Someone interested in the subject might take for granted the relevance of the editor's influence on the published result. Leo Boghart however, through a measuring experiment nicknamed the "read yesterday" measure (Meyer 2009, pag. 120), reached a somewhat surprising conclusion; in both successful and not-so-successful newspapers the values expressed by the editors tended to be the same, seeming to imply that it did not truly matter what the editor was doing or not doing (Meyer 209, pag. 124). Clearly this statement appears to be too simplistic, but it does beg the question of what really constitutes not only the job of the editor but the variables that determine the success of the role and, in turn, that of an article.

If one looks at the practical side, Meyer, who has summarized the model proposed by the Poynter Institute, says there are two kinds of capacity used to assess an editor; one is "based on the resources that an editor is provided by his or her publisher and can be measured by size of staff, newsroom budget, library resources, training effort, and the like" and the other "of neither financial nor physical capacity, but intellectual" (Meyer 2009, pag. 124). What is meant by this is to differentiate between the physical tasks that make up the editor's job, which apparently do not make a statistically significant difference in the newspaper's outcome, and the more elusive variable of the editor's own skill and intellect. Another conceptualization, this time by Thrift, finds that there are some specific elements that make up the quality of an editor: localism, controversy, argumentation and mobilizing information among these (Meyer 2009, pag. 130-131). What is possible to retain from all this is a middle way statement for the figure of the editor; they are in charge of indicating the path the newspaper might take and therefore it is possible for them to plant the seeds for cultural changes or set political agendas. The process though is a lot slower and quieter than expected (Meyer 2009, pag. 137) and should ideally be pursued with the aim not of immediate success but of editorial quality.

"To a publisher, time is money; to an editor, time is quality," said John T. Russial (Meyer 2009, pag. 147). These two perspectives may be more intertwined than they may seem at a first glance. In general, quality is considered to be the top aim of a newspaper, therefore being the defining characteristic of the ones which are more successful (namely

the ones making more money). If one focuses more on the surrounding context though, for example by investigating circulation and market size, quality becomes a question to approach in a more complex and nuanced manner. Quality is generally associated with better circulation performance (Meyer 2009, pag. 135) but even here the discourse is much broader and multi-faceted. Circulation and big market size may be automatically paired with good quality news making but I do not believe that to always be the case. If one looks at data, they will find that a strong negative correlation exists between market size and news's percentage - "Bigger markets have lower ratios of news space to ad space. As they take advantage of economies of scale, they use it to increase the amount of advertising more than the amount of news" (Meyer 2009, pag. 133). So bigger markets don't necessarily signify quality, and one may find it is better at times to say the "hard truth" rather than what is more palatable to the public, in order to maintain credibility.

Credibility, another pillar in journalistic culture, is argued to have two components: "one is a solid inner core that doesn't change from day to day or even from year to year. The other is the variable outer shell that is subject to the shifting winds of public mood as the news changes" (Meyer 2009, pag. 71). Credibility is one of the aspects that feature in quality and in which the role of the public reader is most prominent and easy to notice, as by the very definition of the word a newspaper is credible if the public grants it trust and influence. I consequently interpreted that the reader of the newspaper is as much a part of the news making process as an editor or a journalist and has its own role to play in the market of information. Calder and Malthouse reach the conclusion that "credible newspapers get more readers, and the effect is strongest where competition makes the newspaper fight for its readers" (Meyer 2009, pag. 80). At the same time, a report by Christine Urban in 1989 "gave equal weight to factual errors and mistakes in spelling or grammar as sources of public mistrust" (Meyer 2009, pag. 138), bringing in the idea that readability and grammar correctness can effectively alter credibility. Considering PR relations and the big media giants currently operating in global society, I believe credibility to be one of the most relevant variables to keep in mind, at times as a double-edged sword.

There exists a balance between the realities that make up the journalistic ecosystem. When mapping them out, what becomes clear is the interdependent state of

nature in which they move. It is practically impossible to mention a variable or element without going on to explain how it affects or is affected in turn by others. One wouldn't even get a full, clear picture of any single variable without taking into account its multiple spheres of influence. Journalists, advertisers, audience, along with credibility, quality and readability all move in an interconnected dimension that grants them the possibility to participate in the news making process. It is an ever-changing process that defines the industry and will keep doing so in the upcoming decades.

***ii.iii: Journalism and its sources; a journalist's extent of action and operating alongside new technologies***

The work of a newsroom necessarily coexists with that of other agents inside society's reach, so that a journalist's actions are partly dictated by the limits imposed by professionals in other areas. To make this clear and understandable it is sufficient to think about how the news making agenda tends to be set by agents of political economy or how much interaction must exist between a reporter and a source for an article to be published. The power play between journalism and PR practitioners is a good starting point to investigate the net that must be built around a journalist for them to gather their sources. PR practitioners often live in a state of symbiosis with journalists, given that both depend on the other for their tasks to be successfully completed. PR practitioners send "packets" of information to journalists, acting as one of the main and most detailed sources in exchange for "favourable coverage of a client" (Jackson, Moloney, 2015 pag. 9). However, this mutually beneficial relationship is not at all linear and it is possible to find many different interpretations of it throughout the literature, especially moving in the framework of modern culture and society. As I have previously explained, journalism is based on values that dictate a very specific ethic and code of conduct (to cite a few, credibility, quality, etc...). Journalists therefore experience an overlapping between personal and professional identity that that can at times become an element of tension between them and their source; PR practitioners in fact, are often regarded negatively by journalists (and not only) as those who act out of personal interest and "low in source credibility" (Cameron, Shin 2003, pag. 256), not being in the position however to discredit the contributions of those same practitioners to their articles.

To have some numbers, one has but to look at some studies recorded in 1990, in which some researchers actually stated that an average of 25-50%, ranging up to 80%, of news content is initiated by sources of public relations (Lee and Solomon, 1990; Sallot, 1990) (Cameron, Shin 2003, pag. 255). These statistics make the condition of interdependence between the two fields undeniable but don't do justice to the fluctuating balance between trust and caution in which it exists (Cameron, Shin 2003, pag. 253). In this equilibrium, I think, lies a more accurate interpretation of how a reporter approaches a source and the many mistakes that can often compromise a story, either because of excessive or too little trust. The nature of the reporter-source relationship may be traced back to various roots that provide insights from multiple points of view.

As I have already hinted at, there seems to be an intrinsic aspect of how public relations are perceived that is deeply divided from the general conception of journalism. Despite their state of interdependence, PR experts are usually regarded in a negative manner by the general public; "whilst PRs want the best possible news coverage for their client, the occupational ideals of journalism are inter alia, 'focus on truth, social reporting and democratic education'" (L'Etang 2008: 130-1)" (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 3). To better understand the complex dynamic at play, it is useful to mention the so-called principle of "information subsidy" (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 3), which describes the exchange brought forward between the reporter and the PR practitioner and the favours that come to each. There is a hypocrisy of sorts to be observed here, in the way that journalism uses its core values to critique the aforementioned practitioners and yet more often than not needs them to bring forward those very same principles of work ethics. Recently, the information subsidy has evolved into what is known as "editorial subsidy," (Jackson, Moloney, 2015 pag. 3) which implies ready-made content provided to media outlets with positive coverage of the PR client (Jackson, Moloney, 2015 pag. 16). From an external viewpoint, when somewhat questionable codes of conduct are perpetrated, journalists gain as much of an advantage as their PR counterparts, yet only the latter pay the reputation price.

Not for the first time, it is easy to understand how agenda setting is one of the most intricate aspects that can be highlighted inside a newsroom and once again it becomes important to talk about power and the way the aforementioned

“interdependence” is constructed on multiple levels. The process of agenda setting itself can be considered as a manifestation of that power and a way to figuratively climb the way up the news making chain, well beyond the scope of the newsroom. A model developed by “Cameron and colleagues (1997)” states that “public relations influence the agenda-setting process through interaction with media. In the model, the news gathering and disseminating process is presented on three levels: the relational level (mutual assessments and power dynamics in source–reporter relations), the organizational level (ethics and professional values, routines and practices of sources, and news values and acceptance of source materials) and the societal level (information subsidy and marketing pressures)” (Cameron, Shin 2003, pag. 256). I think it is a useful scheme to gain perspective on how much media coverage is involved in day-to-day life and how much it can have an effect on the general opinion. Power, as many of the other variables at play, is neither static nor fixed and has to be looked at through the lens of an ever-evolving society.

In this regard, Daniel Jackson and Kevin Moloney have centred their article around the phenomenon of “Churnalism” (Jackson, Moloney, 2015) and grant an interesting perspective on how the changing power dynamic between journalists and PR practitioners is experienced by the actors themselves. With the term churnalism, the researchers refer to the publishing in the news of unfiltered copies of PR work, with little input from the journalists, favoured in part by the development of media and technology. What this leads to is an “apparent growing influence of PR professionals in the newsgathering and reporting process, and the consequent diminution of editorial independence and watchdog journalism” (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 15). Even though the logical conclusion would be that a power shift is being experienced in favour of PR practitioners, the testimonies given by the practitioners themselves vastly differ. It is widely believed that the “power relations remain in the balance” (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 11). So, rather than a shift up or down the chain of power, those who are directly involved believe in a methodology change that will bring new challenges but that will not fundamentally alter the existing dynamics. The PR industry is generally more present in the newsroom board (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 11) but at the same time, it gets harder and harder for those practitioners to earn the time of day of more important

editors and journalists. Finally, as argued by a Senior Counsellor at a financial PR firm, the power shift goes beyond PRs and journalists: “power is becoming much more diffuse, all stakeholders are more empowered with the Internet, they can look up the information, they don't need you and I to tell them what the information is” (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 12). Both PR practitioners and journalists actually seemed to express genuine concern in regards to churnalism: unchecked PR copies in the news, while apparently a note of merit to the practitioners, also raise doubts on the role of journalists as defenders of the right to accurate and credible information and grants less trusts from the readers to the reporters. With the change in times, differences will be inevitable, but it is important to keep in mind the end goal of all involved actors to guarantee the quality of the final product.

The advance of modernity must not forget what journalism stands for and what it represents. Journalism is a guarantor of information and, consequently, of democracy so that “the pattern of the source–reporter relationship is embedded in culture” (Cameron, Shin 2003, pag. 257). What appears as a secondary quality is easy to observe as a defining element as soon as one tries to read of a same event written in newspapers of different countries. Culture has a deep and lasting effect on the field, perhaps difficult to perceive clearly but ever-present. As ANT teaches, it is not right to remain static and culture may change along with the times. According to many practitioners in the study by Jackson and Moloney, “the days of the monolithic media release sent to all news desks are largely over. They are preparing page-ready content customized for each publication, which is carefully targeted” (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 16). This may not signify a necessarily negative change in industry, but it is important to maintain the roots on which the field stands.

A lot of what has been said so far necessarily has to do with the ascent of modern technology. To cite an elementary example, journalism greatly derived from the rise of emails as a tool of communication and the resulting increased distance between reporters and their sources: “more and more we’re finding that journalists don’t want to pick up the phone when we’re pitching a story to them, they just want us to email it to them” (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 7). With technology being a very broad term, one must remember



how many channels of communication this new aspect has opened and how deeply it has had an impact on society's collective mentality.

In an area such as information, the changes have been even more relevant because other than making the practical sides of the job easier and faster, technology has thinned out both physical and interpersonal borders that have until now dictated communication. Globalization is intertwined with the internet and "the borderless or global nature of internet communication suggests that cross-cultural relations between source and reporter will become more common and hence more relevant as a research topic" (Cameron, Shin 2003, pag. 253). In this case, it is perhaps too soon to talk about positive or negative outcomes. I believe it is more appropriate to look into the changes brought on by technology so far in a neutral manner, so as to assess as objectively as possible what is still to be considered a new area of study. If it is true that it has contributed in shifting well-established power relations and is currently a source of constant doubt with the rise of fake news and AI, on the other hand social media has the potential of becoming an innovative form of news outlet that allows for the development of a globalized culture. To cite an example, "SEO (Search Engine Optimization) holds huge promise for PR practitioners because of its ability to elevate key campaign messages mentioned inside editorial content. They predicted future partnerships between PR agencies and search engines" (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 16). The dimension in which journalists and PR practitioners move and relate to one another is gradually becoming twofold, separated into an online and an offline reality. Rather than the winning of one over the other, "the online relationship does not supplant the need of both practitioners and journalists for human contact" (Cameron, Shin 2003, pag. 254).

Just like geographical borders are being blurred and weakened, what I think will happen in the foreseeable future is a gradual disappearance of the lines that separate the various stages of the news making process. Already, the power relations are moving in all directions and all the different actors are involved. It becomes more important as a PR practitioner to possess "journalistic skills" as "a means to getting the key messages across to the public" (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 16) and even the reader public, as it gets accustomed to social media, becomes more critical. As an Account Director of a Consumer PR agency noted, "a few years ago they [the public] wouldn't have been aware

of it – I think they’re becoming more aware of it and becoming more cynical of the media and aware that there are PR machines behind quite a lot of the stuff that they read in newspapers” (Jackson, Moloney, 2015, pag. 14). The emerging variables in the contemporary social context will definitely influence journalism as a whole but the job of the journalist must maintain its strict definitions if it shall keep the role it has had until now.

#### ***iv: What am I looking for in my interviews?***

After having laid down my theoretical groundwork with chapter two, the remainder of my thesis will mainly focus on interviews done with professional journalists from various backgrounds and areas of expertise.

The task of collecting data in this more empirical manner presents challenges and difficulties, not the least of which is finding people with the appropriate qualifications, as well as the will and time to participate. However, I do strongly believe the benefits outweigh the costs. As I have argued in the previous chapter, journalism is complex and constantly changing through the interactions between its parts. The literature review has been vital in giving an overview on the already existing academia and defining my theoretical strategy (ANT), but I have needed other sources to define my own first-person position and opinion. Furthermore, a focal point for my research has been that of relationships (what ANT refers to as “associations”) between different actors in the news making process. Through a more accessible language in my questions, what I achieve with these interviews is a direct experience of how the different elements of news making work together for a newspaper to be published and how much the figure of the journalist actually retains its centrality. I aim to know the extent to which a journalist acts in autonomy and how and when they take into consideration other actants (human and non-humans).

As already stated, the interviews are conducted on a range of professionals, spanning from freelancers to more traditional journalists, so as to capture a spectrum of real-life scenarios and see how the difference in their career paths have affected their answers to my questions. I want to know how the values that have appeared in the form of variables in my research (e.g. credibility, accountability, etc...) translate to a real work

environment and if there are any particular such elements that stand out according to them or that they have seen in practical play. The interviewees are all going to be established professionals with years of experience and I expect to also gather information on how the journalism landscape has changed during their career. Especially with the ascent of technology, the influence of non-human actors on the way news are made and distributed in contemporary times has been a recurring theme in the literature; I observe how this has changed the job description from a more practical standpoint throughout the years and how it's foreseen to change it still.

Ultimately, I have consistently emphasized how journalists are not the sole protagonists in journalism and how it's a mistake to regard them as such. But what is the role of journalists then and how are the other actants perceived by them? What has been their own professional experience? Through their personal insight I hope to gather a broader understanding of what journalism looks like today and how it can be expected to evolve moving forward.

## **Chapter 3: The methodology**

### ***iii.i: Research Methodology***

My thesis is a sociological research in the field of journalism on the existing relations and spheres of influence that affect the distribution of news and information. The mapping of this phenomenon and my literature review have been conducted through a more general

use of actor network theory but the fundamental research question I will be pursuing moving forward with my field work is divided in two parts:

1. What are the main actants that journalists feel have an active effect on them as they are looking for a story and then writing an article?
2. What elements determine the selection of information in the modern news making process?

The data is collected through semi structured interviews on a small non-random sample of three professional journalists. The aim in selecting the participants was to have a sample that could range over multiple specializations amongst reporters, to have different experiences from where to gather a more complete perspective. This led me to contact an employed Italian journalist currently working as editor-in-chief of an Italian newspaper, a freelancer journalist based in Kosovo, formerly a war reporter, and the director of an Italian television news outlet. I had previously personally obtained these contacts throughout my academic career and had in the past already interviewed one of the participants for a different project. The interview is conducted in person when possible (with the Italian reporters, who are based in Rome) and through a phone call with the remaining participant (the freelancer). The questions are always the same four to five and, despite being very precise, are meant to give the interviewees freedom to steer the conversation based on their personal experience. Furthermore, the interview proper is always anticipated by a few brief questions on the reporter's own life and career that upon further analysis may grant an understanding on how a journalist's professional choices influence their experienced biases in the workplace. The themes dealt with in the questions span from the obstacles faced daily in the "office" to the perceived challenges that are most likely to arise in our contemporary times and in the near future.

### ***iii.ii: Interview Guide***

What follows is the guide I use for the semi structured interviews, with the questions divided into three main questions to get a general overview of the single interviewed journalist and a selection of backup questions that help keep the interviewees on track when and if they go off course. It must be kept in mind that, as the interview is semi

structured, the conversation may vary from the guide based on the direction taken with every individual participant. Two out of the three of the participants are Italian speakers and received a translated version of the questions below. The consent form and information sheet the participant will have received can be found in the appendix.

**(Main Questions)**

1. What type of journalist are you?
2. What does your job consist of and how would you describe an average day of yours? (Central Question)
3. What is the usual cycle of a news story of yours? Tell me about every detail from your first idea to the published piece.

**(Backup Questions)**

- What are the biggest obstacles you face when publishing a piece?
- What elements do you take into consideration the most when selecting a story for publishing?
- How do you interact with the sources of your stories?
- What are, in your opinion, the main challenges of modern journalism and how do you think there are specific ways in which journalism as a field will change in the foreseeable future?

## Chapter 4: Presentation of the Field Data

### *iv.i: Eduardo Di Blasi, editor in chief of Fatto Quotidiano ( Italian newspaper)*

Eduardo Di Blasi is currently the editor in chief of a well-known Italian newspaper, Il Fatto Quotidiano. Along with two other managing editors and the administrative directorate, he is one of the main people in charge of coordinating the news received every day and deciding what gets published and how to display it on the newspaper itself. Currently, his work is mainly behind a desk and he only writes on subjects he already has personal interest and knowledge in, but he spent a lot of his career as an active reporter, for example in internal politics, crime news and, for a very short time, as a quirinalist.

When asked about his day, Di Blasi states that it starts off by reading the headlines of newspapers other than his (the daily press roundup), before meeting with the other members of the administration to start defining the “flat plan” of the day. The flat plan is a term in journalism used to refer to the planned out visual representation of how the newspaper will look once published, therefore requiring thought on the spaces each article will occupy. It’s here that we find a first mention on Di Blasi’s part of technology, especially in the wake of covid. Even after almost five years from the pandemic restrictions, the number of employees working from home stayed relevant and it is no

longer necessary to be in the physical place to work in a newsroom. In particular, Di Blasi highlights the role of emails and how they revolutionized the industry of news making. In the early days of his career, Di Blasi would have to head to the rotary pressroom to print the articles and have a clear visual of the final product, all tasks that have now been more efficiently replaced by emails. It was also a recurring theme in the changes undergone in the relationship between the reporter and his sources, but I deal with that more in the following section. After that first planning meeting, di Blasi's day is structured around receiving and coordinating the news that arrive from the newspaper's staff and putting them together piece by piece until he can obtain a satisfying end result. As the last event of the day, another reunion is held with the staff and usually extends late into the evening, until the next day's issue is ready for publishing.

In Di Blasi's own words, one sudden piece of news during the day can change your newspaper ("Una notizia durante la giornata ti può cambiare il giornale") and when taking care of the coordination aspect there are a lot of things he must take into consideration. Every newspaper will give more space to different topics and depends on an intricate net of interests to decide what it can or cannot afford to publish. Trending topics, columns, editorial cuts; these all sound simply like journalistic terms but are much more. They are what shape the news and subconsciously determine the importance and interest that piece of information might spark in the public. They require thought and attention to detail to give any content its adequate form and Di Blasi's daily routine clarifies how that can be possible with the least number of mistakes.

#### *iv.i.ii: Following a story through a snowballing sample*

The relation between journalist and source, regarded in general as one of the pillars of journalism, is particularly relevant in Di Blasi's as he reflects on his reporting career. There are some rules that he believes are necessary to follow when operating the field, the golden one being "don't throw anything out, whether it be phone numbers, or names, or snippets of a story". The scheme he has developed throughout the years is

phone numbers → contacts → stories → news.

His operative framework is what Di Blasi believes has made the real difference in the quality of his articles and what he thinks will be most challenging for future journalists as the times change.

Currently, Di Blasi doesn't write as much as he used to and the pieces of his that do get published are the result of his own curiosity and an already existing knowledge of where to look for the story. When he was younger though, as he himself recalls, his methods of looking for potential news was a balance between waiting for a source to "choose him" and having the perseverance to confirm the information received despite the possible difficulties. He prefers human sources, that he gathers through a form of snowball sampling, moving through contacts he already possesses and keeping multiple paths open to get closer and closer to the centre of the story, ready to change course when one of his leads results in a dead end. The aim, he asserts, when writing an article that has the potential to be published and grab the public interest is to find something through your sources that no one else has and to be ready to grab it in case this appears unexpectedly. An episode he recounts, still with an air of surprise, is that of the death of south African singer Miriam Makeba. For different reasons he had found himself in Volturno before the anti-mafia concert where she would sing for the last time. He met her, interacted with her and even had the chance to record her singing privately. He did not attend the concert and was on his way soon after, but later that night his source in Volturno called him back. The source had, unlike him, been at the concert and had witnessed Makeba being carried away by the ambulance, already declared deceased. In this manner, Di Blasi found himself with the exclusive news of Makeba's death before any other newspaper headline in Italy.

It's in this relation with the sources and with the field work it requires that Di Blasi identifies the biggest difference between his generations and the newer ones, in particular, he thinks these changes will go to the young journalists' detriment. As already mentioned, technology has made a reporter's job easier in many aspects. Despite the undoubtable positive improvements, at the same time the younger generations are not given the same chances to actively look for their own stories as could have happened in the past and the rise of phones and emails has had somewhat contradictory effects on communication. If on the one hand it has become easier to contact almost anyone, a quick email will suffice in most cases, the relation with the source's has lost the personal quality



that Di Blasi deems necessary. The relationship between these two fundamental actants in the news making chain, source and reporter, can be thought of as a proper professional relation, one to which a good journalist must dedicate time and care in order to maintain. It is not enough to reach out when the opportunity for a story arises, because there won't be enough pre-existing trust to obtain any valuable information. The stories Di Blasi believe are worth being published are those that will grab the attention of the public with facts that won't easily be found on any other government site and the only way to get this type of story is through people who not only will answer your questions if asked but that will be ready to think of you in the case where a story unfolds in front of their eyes. One should also keep in mind the risk and implications of being a source of this kind and the elements that influence such a delicate process. In the news making and newspaper industry, what gets published is also the direct result of the political affiliations and behind-the-scenes plays of said newspapers themselves, so that often what one newspaper can afford to publish won't be the same in every one of them. In this complex ecosystem, reporters might end up being each other's sources if handed over a bit of news that they deem proper journalism but which they can't afford to sign themselves. It goes without saying the ethic and trust that sustain this kind of process, both in the receiving reporter's discretion and professionalism but also in the newspaper's name and reputation as well. Another anecdote Di Blasi tells me is centred around an Italian minister, Francesco Lollobrigida. A few years ago, the Fatto Quotidiano newsroom received a phone call from a loyal reader, stating that they had seen the politician disembark a train right in front of them, leaving Rome. After following through with the necessary confirmations and fact-checking the story (the minister had been coming into Rome and not leaving as the source had thought) the Fatto Quotidiano staff managed to put together an article about the minister's location movements that week. The real point of Di Blasi saying this, was to underline the trust that the reader put not just in a single reporter but in the newspaper itself.

What Di Blasi fears for the future, is a world where information becomes flat and superficial, like one might already see happening on a small scale navigating the news sites continuously popping up on the internet.

#### *iv.i.iii: Understanding what makes a news story*

Every story exists on different levels, which is what made the previous argument on sources so important, granting a human perspective that varies from that of the reporter. The main theme that ended up recurring again and again during the interview though, was a quality associated only with the journalist and no other active element in the news selection: the ability to recognise a news piece for what it is and to find the right ways to express those different levels previously mentioned, from the eyes of the source to those of the readers. That, according to Di Blasi, is what can shift a piece of information into news making.

It is sometimes perhaps taken for granted the extent to which the news are tailored to the needs and conveniences of a newspaper. Di Blasi has become particularly aware of this since his role has morphed into a more power-infused figure and he has had to take on the responsibility of what practically makes the newspaper's cut. Not only that, but he has part of the decisional power over the editorial cuts, a term used for the graphic layout of the articles. Thanks to this more mature aspect of his career, he has also been able to conclude that news making is made by the cuts (*"il taglio del giornale fa la cronaca"*). What he means by this is that a big part of an article's weight and importance is also defined by the form it assumes and how it is delivered to the public. A column will mostly attract niche readers on a specific topic, a first page usually aims at delivering a strong emotional impact, a radar doesn't have to be too detailed and so on. The news selection process therefore does not simply stop when a potential story is found and recorded but is also about selecting the best way for that information to be divulged so that it may reach the right public in the appropriate manner. To recognise the true nature of a story is what makes a reporter, and even though it is partly about a natural talent or propensity, the real progress comes from experience and tenacity even in the face of inevitable mistakes.

Eduardo Di Blasi is by now a respected and appreciated figure within *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and has relevant experience in the way news are selected and presented for publishing. Especially in the case of a newspaper name known to be somewhat harsh at times, Di Blasi states that one thing he appreciates about his paper is the willingness to put a story's "importance" over its "interest", therefore being ready to publish pieces that might not meet full appreciation but that the administration deems worthy of publishing. The

distinction between a piece that is of public interest and public importance is a characteristic I had not yet found in the literature but that raised interesting points in how much the perceived audience can condition a publication.

#### ***iv.ii: Marc Perry (freelancer)***

Despite having been all around the world, including conflict areas as a correspondent, Marc Perry is currently more focused on publishing on his Substack (an American publication platform) and writing books rather than articles. Throughout his life Perry has consistently been a freelancer, therefore offering a new perspective from the other professionals I have gathered. Based in Kosovo, on the social and political situation of which he has written two books<sup>1</sup>, he has a long standing interest not only in populations at risk but also in the role played by history in a country's present, a theme that can be perceived in most of his work and that is particularly evident in his current projects. As of now, Perry is writing a book on all the countries he's visited since 1990 while regularly publishing articles on his Substack, *The Transatlantic Times*<sup>2</sup>, at the moment mostly concentrated on the Trump tariffs.

His day-to-day routine is structured around research and writing but in a less punctuated manner than what was observable in the cases of traditionally employed journalists. Marc Perry's day is generally divided into two parts: the first half is mostly spent reading (mainly on history) and keeping updated on the news while the second half is dedicated to writing and publishing, since he actively works on both a book and articles at the same time. What immediately catches the eye is that, although with less defined schedules and different capacities, his routine is marked by the same rhythms as those in a traditional Italian media office, with reading representing a fundamental first step before tackling the day's work. The liberties allowed by Substack also makes the publishing process much quicker and the timings of the articles are generally at Perry's own discretion.

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<sup>1</sup> "A Place Beyond Belief (2013-2023)" and "War in their own Words, Selected Conversations between Senior Global Leaders 1998/99"

<sup>2</sup> <https://substack.com/@perryeyes>

#### *iv.ii.ii: Books and articles, two different creative processes*

With Marc Perry, another aspect that was interesting to delve into was the difference between the book publishing process and the requirements for an article's publication. An important premise, that will also come back in the next section, is that being a freelancer Perry writes for a specific category of people, mostly those who subscribe to his Substack account. Therefore, he mainly decides what to write from what personally interests him, with the faith that the audience he has built for himself during his career will more or less share in that curiosity. It's not the first time this has been a noticeable element during my research, already with Eduardo Di Blasi I had encountered a professional who currently signs an article only when the topic is already in his areas of expertise or personal interest. But whereas for Di Blasi this condition had been obtained only after a long professional process where it had not always been the case, Perry has always pursued a certain freedom in the themes he chose to talk about that has simply enhanced with the cementing of his reputation.

In the case of writing a book (obviously still staying in the field of journalism, Perry's books mostly cover his own investigative or biographical experiences) the process is longer and requires a different kind of research than that found in preparation for an article. While an article, depending on the target audience, usually must concentrate more on keeping the reader's attention and may have to offer a brief general introduction to the topic, a book has more space to go into depth on the subject's technicalities. Perry's current project has been a collection of the places he's visited since 1990, so that a useful source he's been going through has been his own personal notebooks. Other than the empirical research, a book of this type (especially if based on personal experience) leaves a lot of space for the journalist's own thoughts and opinions, as well as their first-person perspective on the subject at hand. For this reason, going through his own notebooks has given Perry the chance to jog his memory on what was going through his mind during that determined period of time, also taking into consideration that a lot of what his mentioned in the book, dating so far back, is not recent and fresh in the writer's perception.

With articles it's different, in light also of the fact that Perry publishes regularly for a determined category of people who therefore are not presumably in need of a full

background check. In general, the sources for these spans from internet research to books, which I've already established Perry spends a lot of time perusing. Additionally, Perry has a fil rouge question that he tries to apply to his work, given his specific context of interest tied to history. Since he speaks a lot on current affairs in the world, he tries to look at a situation and ask himself: "has this already happened before in some form?" "Is this part of an historical cycle?" What he believes is that almost every important current event can be traced back to a historical framework which repeats itself or who's roots can be explained in a cyclical way. By looking into this specific aspect, he characterizes his work in a manner that makes it unique and offers a particular perspective, strengthening his pool of targeted audience.

Publication, both for books and articles, has felt deeply the impact on new technologies and the consequent modern evolutions of how information is put out into the world. Having so much to do with history, Perry often uses emails to contact people directly involved in his stories and gather new quotes, even regarding facts of the past. This brought the conversation to the generally positive advantage that Perry's work has enjoyed due to the rise of technology, in particular by the platforms that have revolutionized the industry of freelancing journalism. Perry publishes on the American online platform called Substack, a relatively new service (it was founded in 2017) that allows for anyone to publish and for subscribers to navigate through any type of article. Along with emails and a general new ease in communications, platforms of this kind have meant a new beginning for freelancer who no longer need to take the gamble of investors to publish their work and can do so overall more quickly and efficiently. The news making process of a freelancer can greatly depend, "some stories are out fast while others are on the backburner for months", and in this way the reporter gets to dictate their own timeline. In that sense and in his own experience, Perry believes the future of freelancing journalism is all but facilitated by the comforts of modern technology, bringing me to the points of the following section.

#### *iv.ii.iii: The creative freedom of a freelancer*

The main aspect that differentiates Perry from the other reporters presented in this thesis is his being a freelancer rather than a traditionally employed journalist and all that it entails. In his eyes, freelancers decide to sacrifice a modicum of professional comfort in

exchange for freedom to not conform to another's agency. This is a big part of the reason why, when asked about the obstacles encountered when publishing a piece, Perry confidently stated that he couldn't think of any in particular. Especially now, after having established his own name and the media means that work for him, there are no major institutional obstacles that stop Perry from researching and putting online whatever topic he desires. The sacrificed comforts lie mostly in the difficulties encountered when moving around the world and finding and researching the stories on the field; one should remember that in Perry's past as a correspondent he sometimes travelled to areas which could be dangerous to his personal safety. However, he would never give up freelancing for a traditional employment and the picture that emerged seemed to imply that a lot of the matter depends on the preferences of the single reporter. All in all, Perry does not believe journalism is as much about impartiality as it is about remembering that a reporter does not have moral superiority. Finding a story that represents a helpful truth without passing judgement on it is what Perry identifies as an article-worthy story and the sign of a good reporter.

In a career marked by a certain creative freedom, Perry has been able to establish some personal values that have become the backbone of his professional life and his writing. The variables that I have identified during my chat with him correspond more to a personal ethical and moral identity than to the general appliances of a traditional journalist. The criteria of what is relevant or not to a story must come from him as much as the topic and, adding on the fact that he was active in places of relevant humanitarian crisis, must come from a place of moral rectitude. In the case of Marc Perry, transparency and freedom of expression are not simply variables in the field of journalism but a guide for personal professional conduct.

#### ***iv.iii: Frediano Finucci (television journalist)***

To conclude my big picture perspective on the field of journalism and its inner workings, the last of my interviewees is the news director of the Italian media La7, Frediano Finucci. His career has ranged from correspondent of foreign affairs in Brussels to reporter in the

famous “Mani Pulite”<sup>3</sup> investigation but is currently fixed on television. He is now director of the news program for foreign affairs and finance of La7 and conductor of the weekend portion of the political talk show Omnibus. At the time of this thesis, he coordinates fifteen people and most of his job revolves around their organization and the divvying up of their tasks. He’s been an Italian special correspondent in Asia and America and from 2009 to 2010 he was the news director of the La7 tv program Otto e Mezza<sup>4</sup>. His daily work routine immediately showed some similarities with that of Eduardo Di Blasi, although with some relevant differences to be accounted for as I move on to a more tv centred character in my analysis. As Di Blasi, his day sets off by reading the news from various headlines so as to have a first overview of what is going on in the world. Finucci’s official shift goes from 14:00-21:00 but he says that a true fixed work schedule doesn’t really exist for him or anyone else in the newsroom. Every shift’s timetable is strongly dependent on the singular events of the moment and there isn’t really a day identical to all the others, much like Di Blasi also reported when going through his average activities. Finucci then coordinates the shifts of everyone else under his responsibility and takes care of the bureaucratic side of the office, meanwhile keeping himself updated on what goes on in the news until the board meeting with the general director at 17:00. Together, they choose the news stories that are going to make it on air in the evening which requires a different process than that in paper news or even in different tv outlets. The space of La7 allows for less news to be shared and is calibrated for a specialized television program, meant more for selected insights rather than quantity. This calls for a stricter and more aimed news selection process, the criteria of which I will delve into better in the following sections.

#### *iv.iii.ii: Niche TV process of news selection*

For the purpose of understanding the interview with Finucci, it is important to clearly highlight the specific case study he represents. As a news program director in La7, Finucci operates in the dimension of television, separate from written articles, and in a tv network

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<sup>3</sup> Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) was a judicial investigation into political corruption in Italy. It happened in the early 1990s and is famously marked as the end of the Italian First Republic as well as a big part in the Tangentopoli corruption scandal (Bribesville).

<sup>4</sup> In-depth daily program

that is targeted to a specific audience. As previously mentioned, Finucci oversees the portion of the program that deals with foreign affairs and economy, in light of his lifelong expertise in the matters (La7 is also the only tv service where these two topic areas are merged into one). Additionally, his service goes on air at the end of the day, when most interested people will already have a general understanding of the day's events, and is more aimed at offering an in-depth look at the topic rather than merely going through the press roundup. With this framework clear in mind, it is easier to picture the variables moving within it that then determine what ends up appearing on the Italian screens.

With the type of television Finucci is involved with, it becomes immediately obvious how one of the main elements he must keep in mind when selecting the news for his programs is the type of public he is preparing for. In the case of La7, what he's dealing with are mainly "medium-highly educated people with a good income level". Factoring in the airing time as well, Finucci's job becomes less about giving the news and more about giving "an interpretative key" to the current events that hold major sway in his fields of expertise. Someone with an undergraduate degree will reasonably be aware of the general political workings of their time and don't require a full background explanation as could be the case in more general news outlets or articles. To help me understand his point, he compares the relation between his tv network and others to that between *Il Corriere della Sera* and *Il Foglio*, two big newspaper names in Italy. They both deal with news making, but one will delve much less into the details of a story and focus more on giving a wider range of news because that is the type of service they offer; neither is better than the other, but they will attract two different kinds of audiences. To refer to a theme that has appeared multiple times throughout my research and to which I will come back subsequently, Finucci states that it is important to recognise a piece of news when it appears and that this corresponds to anything that will have an impact on the people listening to the reportage. It is fundamental to know the type of public an outlet reports for so that the news selection can be tailored to the interest of who's watching.

Furthermore, there are differences in the ways the news are divulged when the means are paper or television that go beyond what might seem obvious. In Finucci's words, one might consider news making as made up of "bricks" ("mattoncini"), which are the various elements a reporter must consider. These building blocks that make up the



media consumed by the public vary greatly between newspaper and news program and are generally a lot more in the latter. Behind the screens that by now are common and widespread in almost all Italian homes, the person on air actually has to interact with a variety of actants, such as the cameraman, the filming crew and a public that is predisposed to listening rather than reading. What this entails is a new level of communication that has little to do with print and has to act in a much more limited time frame and with a different approach. An article usually has more space to make its point and in the case of target specific newspapers it can be allowed a more technical and elaborate language. In the case of television, especially with news programs, the allotted time is usually quite brief and, no matter how high class the intended audience is, a complicated speech is more likely to lose the attention than not. Generally speaking, a program is controlled by many other than the director himself, as is Frediano Finucci, and although the final goal of informing remains, I consider it naive to not make the proper distinctions in delivering news with these two kinds of journalism.

#### *iv.iii.iii: Cultural background: The Italian case VS the American case*

Frediano Finucci's career has allowed him to travel all around the world and experience the work of a journalist in different settings and societies all over. As someone who built most of his life in Italy, he did however state there are noticeable differences in the way journalism is studied and pursued based on what country one lives in and that Italy is not necessarily amongst the strongest competitors.

As I previously noted, Finucci has worked for a long time as a correspondent in Brussels and has been in charge of fields including foreign affairs, meaning he has had to greatly deal with journalistic actants far from his own culture. What emerged was a strong belief on his part that journalism is a result, amongst other things, of the cultural and historical background of the country or city in which a journalist may be working. If one looks at Italy for example, and the reporters who may have grown up and pursued careers there, the element of a long cultural and literary tradition appears immediately evident, not necessarily as an advantage. Italy is a very old country, despite its actual state unity going back only about 150 years, and has been famous throughout history for its writers as well as its artists in general, some of the most globally influential that have ever lived. Consequently, this love for beauty and form far predates the birth of journalism as a field

in Italy and is deeply embedded in the collective identity of its population. Finucci assesses this as having led to an appreciation of journalists who write very well and have a good way of putting stories down rather than those who may have a talent in finding the news themselves. The myth of the intellectual who writes in the newspaper as Finucci defines it (“il letterato che scrive sul giornale”) can actually be harmful to the articles that end up being published because a lot results in dull non-stories. As he puts it, writing properly is a skill that can be taught and that can always be improved, even though there’s obviously going to be people more adept at it than others. On the other hand, recognising when you have a news-worthy story in front of you and the ability to follow it through is something that, according to Finucci, a person can either be born with or simply hasn’t.

Europe is another case, with all its international differences to be considered as well, but during my talk with Finucci he preferred to focus on America and the comparison that can be made between its way of intending journalism and Italy’s. Right from the start, the cultural divide that separates the US from Italy is enough to imply that if a historical background is indeed an element of influence it can be measured through this comparison. America is a much younger country than Italy, or any other country in Europe for that matter, and the birth of journalism there brought to the almost immediate foundation of schools of journalism, letting it develop as its own art, well distinct from narrative or academic writing. The approach Americans have brought to journalism is more practical in nature, almost simplistic according to Italian standards, but has proven its validity as its model spread around the world over the last century. It’s to the American model of journalism that we owe some of the basics of the field itself and Finucci refers to “Melvin Mencher’s News Reporting and Writing” to further explain his point. It’s a handbook in common use in any school of journalism in America, which uses a very easy language and point by point explanations of concepts that might even appear superficial to mention at a first glance. This method of learning the job however has set some cornerstones of journalism that have spread all over, for example the general rule of an information to have been confirmed by three different sources for it to be verified. The main idea of my discussion with Finucci emerges clearly; the American system, in part due to its history

and mentality, focuses more on how to recognise a piece of news rather than how to put it down later.

*iv.iii.iv: Understanding the story, a recurring theme*

From the way Frediano Finucci speaks, what emerges is the importance given to defining the piece of news itself. No matter where and how he found himself working throughout the years, what has stuck with him of good journalists he's met and what he has professionally strived for himself is an attention to the information received and the skill of seeing them for their news potential. It is not as clear cut as it may seem from an outside perspective; "a news piece is relative", not every story will have the same importance to the same audience but a good piece of news is anything that will have a real impact on the life of the people it's told to. One has to be able to recognise it, understand the potential it holds and the best way to deliver it. A good article won't appear out of thin air with the promise of being newspaper worthy, a source may be any conversation with anyone, without the source even truly realising. Finucci has found out stories worth publishing from casual chats with taxi drivers who were not even aware of the weight of what they were sharing. What a piece of news is, rather than how to write it down, is the trademark of a good journalist.

The directions taken by my interview with Finucci and the one with Eduardo Di Blasi (*section iv.i*) are remarkably similar. In both cases, despite them currently dealing in television and print respectively, the recognition of the news from the most mundane sources took a centre stage role and was one of the main themes they wished to leave me with. Finucci even remarks on something already seen with Di Blasi; the fact that with the rise of mass media it keeps getting easier to find the same prepackaged news everywhere and that the more the internet takes over our day-to-day life the more society is actually going to need journalists working on the field. Is it a generational concern then? A common denominator between everyone who's ever had to work within a larger media framework? Whatever the case, the importance of recognising the news as a variable in the field of journalism and publishing cannot be ignored and its implications set up an interesting comparison to be made in the conclusive chapter of this thesis.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### *v.i: Comparisons*

The data found with the interviews confirmed and added on to some of the variables the literature had already identified that affect the news selection process. In particular, it highlighted which ones held the most weight to the actual journalists. Amongst these:

Target Audience	Perry/Finucci
Type of Media Outlet	Finucci
Country Cultural Background	Finucci
Personal Interest	Di Blasi/Perry
Ethical Compass	Perry
Graphic Layout	Di Blasi
Trust of the Public	Di Blasi
Understanding What Makes the New Story	Di Blasi/Finucci

*The table shows the variables that appeared most relevant along with the journalist/s which gave them the most space in their experience. The highlighted slot (“Understanding What Makes the News Story”) is for what seemed to be a central point during the whole research and encompassed a lot of the other aspects.*

Some of these overlapped and appeared relevant to more than one of the professionals taken in consideration, despite the noticeable differences in their career paths and in the parts of the news making chain they are currently responsible for. When one applies ANT to these findings, the picture that emerges is immediately more nuanced. All the elements in the table are singular actants that build a network (journalism) and seem to confirm an interesting implication; journalists are not merely one amongst other actants but they are

first and foremost operating under the influence of the variables that make up the field. As much as the network around them is ever-changing, their responses are often similar one to the other and they result as being more static than the actants traditionally identified by ANT.

A difference that did emerge and which I had not accounted for, was the divide that separates the Italian field of journalism from other countries both in Europe and abroad. This was signalled both by Frediano Finucci and implied by comparison with the experiences of Marc Perry, although to properly map out that specific side of the research one would also require a non-Italian traditionally employed journalist or an Italian freelancer to make a more complete analysis. It is still significant how, although the average days of all interviewees held important similarities, a different cultural approach had such a measurable effect on the criteria they applied to news selection. The relationships that are deeply embedded in the human experience and that eventually compose cultural background intertwined with those necessary to report on news and added a new layer to the network I'd worked with thus far. Although I could have expected this aspect as far as geographical and political importance of a determined event, it was somewhat surprising to note the extent to which the news making chain was fundamentally altered because of nationality.

The most noteworthy similarities on the other hand, existed within the experiences of the two Italian traditionally employed reporters, despite them having different roles and tasks within their media outlets. Both were high-ranking in their respective organizations but everything else down to the tool used to deliver news (tv and print) was distinct, yet the very ideology they had developed was almost the same. What was the determining factor that affected this? Based on the conversations I had with all three interviewees and what I have stated, I believe that a relationship of mutual influence exists between journalists and their field, both smaller networks of their own. What is published on the news is the result of the chain of operation itself of which the reporters are simply a part; yet they are also the channel through which every other actant must put faith for the publication of the final product.

## ***v.ii: Final Remarks***

My aim with this thesis was to provide a mapping of the variables of influence in the news making process, by using network actor theory and the empirical evidence found through in-person interviews. The picture that came out is of a field that is much vaster and more complicated than simply a writer relating the news. Being aware of what is going on is a citizen's right in any modern-day democracy and it is embedded in more aspects of daily life than is sometimes realised. What influences a simple newspaper column goes far beyond the confines of a newsroom and the skills of a writer. It interests the current political and economic landscape, is set in far reaching historical roots and affects a reporter possibly more than how much the reporter affects their own piece. Humanity is made to inform and be informed and it is important not to underestimate the implications of job descriptions that can go as far as to define our freedom and rights inside any given modern society.

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## **Appendix**

*Down below, the consent form and information sheet the interview participants will have received. The interviews were conducted in person in two cases and on video call in one, all in a private setting and without the use of tape recorders or cameras. Two participants will have received a translated version of the following documents in Italian.*

### **Appendix 1: Consent Form**

Purpose of Study: sociological research in the elements of influence in the process of news making from the perspective of journalists themselves

**N.B.** Please initial each box where you agree with the statement.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet version dated \_\_\_\_\_ for the above research. I have had the chance to consider the information, to ask questions and have had these answers satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point (until **26/05/2025**), without giving any reason.

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from any publications or presentations.

Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):

- a) I do not wish to be quoted.
- b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable.
- c) I agree to the use of direct quotations, attributed to my name, in research outputs.

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

I agree to take part.

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Information sheet**

Dear participant,

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

My name is Gaia Zavaroni and I am a third year PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics) student at LUISS currently working on my BA thesis. I will be conducting research in the sociology of journalism, centred around the direct experiences of journalists and the main elements they feel influence their process in selecting news and stories. My aim is to recruit two or three journalists belonging to different career paths and with different working experiences, in order to obtain a sample of the field from which to put together a more complete picture.

Participation in the project is completely voluntary and you can withdraw yourself at any point, without giving any reason and without consequences. If that is the case, inform me of your decision before the 26/05/2025, date in which I will hand in my completed thesis. If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed with me (online or in person, according to what is more convenient to you) at a time and place we may decide together. I will ask some questions on your job and your professional experiences; keep in mind you are not obligated to answer anything you are not comfortable with. The interview will be singular, won't have a fixed time (but should not exceed a maximum of forty minutes) and if you wish to we may organize a separate meeting beforehand to get to know each other and run some of the questions by you. I will be taking notes during the interview that I will then transcript in my research in the months leading to my thesis due date.

The information I am after is mainly relevant to your personal career, although I may omit names or identifiable traits if you so wish. I do however ask for your permission to use direct quotations that may come out during the interview and I inform you that after I graduate my thesis will be made public on the LUISS university platform where other students may have access to it. My referent professor Kristina Stoeckl will also have access to the information and will read through it when I submit my research. If you have concerns or complaints at any point during the research you may contact me at my university email address, [gaia.zavaroni@studenti.luiss.it](mailto:gaia.zavaroni@studenti.luiss.it). For any questions I remain at your complete disposal.

Sincerely,

Gaia Zavaroni

