

## Local Broadcast Journalists and the Trap of Professional Heterogeneity

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### Abstract

The ideological tenets of the journalistic professions, historically grounded in the development of modern Western democracies, are increasingly shaken by the changes brought about by a series of technological, economic, and ideological processes challenging the foundations of professionalism. This article considers how these changes influence the way work is performed and experienced in Italy by local journalists, providing professional news coverage and programs to communities at the grassroots level, through both private and public outlets. The findings of qualitative research adopting a neo-institutional approach are presented and discussed following the analytical frame of the special issue, distinguishing three dimensions (*within, between, beyond*) related to the increased differentiation and the changing role of professionals in post-industrial societies. Conclusions point to the fact that the resulting heterogeneity if accepted without granting the necessary conditions to maintain professional standards, may bring into question the feasibility of a professional community.

### Keywords

Precarization, digitalization, media workers, democracy, neo-institutionalism

The ideological tenets of the journalistic professions, historically grounded in the development of modern Western democracies, are being challenged in the postmodern era by a series of endogenous and exogenous changes weakening the foundations of professional work (Leicht, 2015; Schnell, 2018). This article considers how these challenges influence the way work is performed and experienced by professional journalists of Italian local private and public television broadcasters offering news coverage and programs at the grassroots level. The literature on the Italian broadcasting system mainly focuses on the case of RAI (*Radiotelevisione Italiana*), the national broadcast company, and, after deregulation at the end of the 1970s, on the development and expansion Silvio Berlusconi's media company, Mediaset, paralleled by his successful but contested political career. The case of local broadcasting—where Berlusconi's Mediaset company blossomed—remains little explored in its original variety and subsequent evolution, an “invisibility” ascribable to the lack of attention received by local outlets from the state, mainly known in its vexatious and heavily bureaucratic aspects, to be avoided through strategies typical of the underground economy (Barca, 2007). Despite their weak positioning in the national media system, local television providers continue to produce news and local programs in areas often ignored by national and global broadcasting, representing a reference point for local institutions, organizations, and communities, in adherence to the public service ideal of journalism (Grasso, 2006). In the last few decades, however, their ability to endure has been further challenged by increased competition from an expanding global multimedia system following the widespread diffusion of digital technology (Giacomello, 2012; Padovani, 2010).

This article draws on document analysis, official statistics, and qualitative research to consider the case of journalists working in television outlets in Sardinia, the first Italian region to test the national shift from analogue to digital broadcasting. It starts by discussing the main advantages offered by the neo-institutional approach to the study of professions (section 1), leading to the adoption of a long-term view of the professionalization of journalism in Italy (section 2); it then proceeds by presenting the research project design and methodology (section 3) and its main findings, analysed following the tripartite frame proposed by this particular issue (section 4). The discussion identifies the organizational level as crucial in mediating change in the three dimensions analysed, and concludes pointing to the problematic nature of heterogeneity, if its acceptance disguises the primary need to grant journalists homogenous conditions allowing to actually perform work as professionals (section 5).

## **A neo-institutionalist view for the study of professions**

Neo-institutionalism has recently been acknowledged as one of the most fruitful theoretical approaches for the study of professions (Leicht & Fennel, 2008; Muzio, Brock & Suddaby, 2013; Saks, 2016; Scott, 2008). Among its advantages, with respect to other approaches, is the fact that it is particularly effective for addressing the interrelatedness between social actors and the organizational and societal context in which they are embedded (Powell &

DiMaggio, 1991), recognized as a crucial dimension for understanding the ways in which professions operate and vary in time and place (Abbott, 1988; Friedson, 1986). In addition, the study of professions is deeply intertwined with topics central to institutional theory (such as legitimation, symbolism, power, agency, and organizational fields) (Leicht & Fennel, 2008: 431). Furthermore, the wide theoretical breadth of neo-institutionalism allows its integration with complementary insights offered by other approaches (Benson, 2006; Saks, 2016), as the article will do by adopting in the analysis of research results the three dimensions discussed by the special issue editors in their opening essay (within, between, beyond).

Despite multiple internal currents, a common core of neo-institutional theory can be identified in its focus on the mediating role of institutions in the impact of macro-level forces on micro-level actions, as well as on the positive feedback mechanisms linked to early patterns of institutions, sustaining their path dependency, and thus on the need to investigate their institutional history, from genesis to evolution, in order to identify within a long-term perspective periods of “punctuated equilibriums” and “critical junctures” opening “windows of opportunities” for change towards new orders (Ryfe, 2006, pp. 137-138). In this respect, neo-institutionalism is recognized as offering fundamental insights to the study of professions, both in contributing to the understanding of the specific regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements granting them stability and homogeneity (Sparrow, 2006), as well as in the investigation of the nature of the changes whose diversification and heterogeneity are increasing (Cook, 2006).

In the case of journalism, the literature shows how its genesis as a profession was deeply imbricated with the history of mass media development in Western capitalist democracies (Schnell, 2018). Beginning with the political and market forces driving the expansion of the newspaper industry (Chalaby, 1996) and continuing with the spreading of national broadcast services, journalism was built as an institution of the wider governmental structure of modern nation-states, enacting a powerful cultural consensus supporting the social and political order by assembling authoritative accounts of the news of the day and thus informing public opinion (Barnhust & Nerone, 2001). Among the ideological tenets of the profession – popularized in the image of journalism as the “watchdog of democracy” – the main principles relate to its public service orientation, speed in reporting news of greatest interest and concern for the public, striving for objectivity and accountability through specific techniques and a critical ethical autonomy, and the protection of sources when their confidential nature requires anonymity (Deuze, 2005). While for journalists the reality was often quite far from such “occupational myths” (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003), they did exert a sort of gravitational pull, holding journalists to a professional identity capable of defining a formal conception of its jurisdiction, despite their mobility in other jobs related to writing and information (Abbott, 1988). It also encouraged their adherence to normative behaviours (Nerone, 2002) that, when facing influences on its field of action by

heteronomous forces, such as politics or business (Bourdieu, 2005) or critical voices, could defend the profession by appealing to a collective sense of autonomy (Matthews, 2017) based on the defence of democratic values.

Those ideological tenets are being shaken by the wider challenges weakening the foundations of professional work in post-industrial societies, questioning “the commitments and values of the professions to universal conceptions of social progress, objectivity, and truth”, without offering citizens-clients alternative institutional patterns that would allow them to actively deal “with the culturally fragmented, information intensive, globalized, world where real-life important decisions need to be made” (Leicht, 2015, p. 11). While the digitalization of multimedia systems has led to an overload of daily accessible information for citizens, the expansion of commercialism in media production has fostered processes of precarization and de-professionalization of journalists’ work (Deuze, 2005; Örnebring, 2010; Walters, Warren & Dobbie 2006). In a time of an oversupply of information, we seem to be experiencing a shortage of professional journalism (Schnell, 2018), a paradox that asks for further investigation in order to be more carefully understood.

### ***The professionalization of journalism in Italy: genesis and critical junctures***

Given its embeddedness within the history of Western democracies, the professionalisation process of journalism took a variety of forms, particularly influenced by the regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive features of nation states (Benson, Blach-Ørsten, Powers, Willig & Zambrano, 2012, p. 23). In Italy journalism blossomed as an institution with a narrow economic and social base, a secondary occupation linked to the political realm, the clergy, and the literary and academic élite (Capra, Castronovo & Ricuperati, 1986). This began to change with the development of the commercial press in the last two decades of the 19th century, when distinctively journalistic ways of writing emerged, the number of people making journalism a full-time job increased and a sense of distinct professional identity developed (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In 1908, the Italian National Press Federation (FNSI) was created as single union for journalists, signing the first national collective labour agreement. The pathway towards professionalization was abruptly interrupted by the fascist dictatorship which disbanded the FNSI to create a fascist journalist trade union.

The FNSI was re-established after WW2 when the newly born Italian Republic included freedom of expression and press among the principles defining its democratic identity (Italian Constitution, 1948, art. 21). In the early 1960s, a national law established an Order of Journalists (*Ordine dei Giornalisti*), setting normative control over access to the profession. Although this achievement was seen as a sign of the closeness of journalism to the state (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 112), it contributed to formally defining the jurisdictional borders of the profession and its basic tenets, referring to the ideals of freedom of information and criticism, adherence to fact centred accountable reporting, respect for news sources, and a shared spirit of cooperation of journalists with colleagues

and editors and of mutual trust with their readers (Law n. 69, 03/02/1963, art. 2). The post-war decades also saw the reorganization of the RAI—which had offered radio services during fascism—after the “BBC model”, conceiving of public service broadcasting not only as a distributor but also as a producer of programs, able to certify their quality and to offer citizens information and education in addition to entertainment (Burns, 1976). The Italian version of the BBC model, however, was shaped by governmental control over the media, in continuity rather than rupture with the pedagogical setting of fascist propaganda. For the Christian Democratic governments leading the country in the post-war decades, the RAI was a tool for favouring the unification of society in terms of language and culture, as well as in adherence to the moral values of the Catholic socio-political model (Bianco, 1974).

As a response to the growing critical voices on the lack of pluralism and democracy in the management of national broadcasting, in the mid-1970s a reform shifts RAI’s control away from the government to the parliament and launches a third channel, originally intended for the production of regionally-focused programs—in line with the administrative decentralization provided for in the Constitution. At the end of the 1970s, a series of interventions by the Constitutional Court invalidates RAI’s monopoly, opening the way to private broadcasting companies with a local dimension, which acted for more than a decade within a regulatory vacuum. While exposing the system to a “savage deregulation” that led to a “commercial deluge” (Hall & Mancini, 2004, p. 125), this vacuum offered a window onto opportunities for change in the definition of contents more in line with the needs of generations or local areas with different subcultures. The moment is profitably exploited by Silvio Berlusconi, a businessman with a background in the real estate sector, adding two channels to his primary one, to be later included within the Mediaset Group (Ardizzoni & Ferrari, 2010). The Mammì Law, introduced in the early 1990s to regulate the national public and private broadcast systems, enhances the Rai/Mediaset duopoly and asks private radio and television providers to broadcast daily news, increasing the demand for journalists (Agcom, 2017).

The duopolistic balance of the Italian media system, shaken in the mid-1990s by the introduction of companies offering digital satellite pay-TV services (D’Arma, 2010), is soon restored by national policies regulating the shift from analogue to digital terrestrial technology (DTT) in the 2000s (Padovani, 2010). Those policies, however, fail to adequately safeguard the weakest players in the national media system, namely local outlets. In the case of RAI, in particular, the shift to the DTT platform was seized as an opportunity to rationalize its offer, meeting the requirements of a competitive dynamic based on television branding (Mattiacci & Militi, 2011) and justifying an increasingly questioned license fee for public broadcasting in ensuring greater pluralism and a richer variety of quality products. Local private television providers, conversely, did not have the necessary resources to reorganize their offer in order to compete with the big players, and their strategy in

adapting to the shift to DTT was mainly one of limiting damage, rather than investigating opportunities (Barca, 2007).

In the face of this, local journalism represents a particularly interesting case to investigate the effects of ongoing changes on the profession. The limited literature shows that local broadcasting remains a source for news and stories close to the interests and issues directly affecting local communities (Aeranti-Corallo, 2018). Focusing on the issues raised by this special issue, the article investigates if and how the profession of local journalists in Italy is challenged by the wider changes investing media systems in post-industrial societies.

## Research design and methodology

In Italy, journalists working in local television represent the third largest group among journalists overall and are the largest among journalists in the broadcasting sector<sup>1</sup>. Though they often work undeclared and under precarious working conditions, their relevance has significantly emerged after the recent signing of national collective labour agreements between FNSI and local radio and television editors (since 2000) and periodicals and online press outlets (since 2010) foreseeing reduced salaries *vis à vis* journalists under contracts signed with the association of editors of national newspapers, periodicals, and press agencies. The local media system of Sardinia, where the empirical research was carried out, comprises 48 radio stations, 7 television providers, and 2 daily newspapers (Agcom, 2018; Ucsi, 2017). Of the 257 professional journalists employed in the region, 25% work for daily newspapers, 21% for local broadcasters, 9% for the RAI, and 2% for other national broadcasters.

Sardinia offers specific features making it a particularly interesting case study compared with other local media systems in Italy. Television is the media most utilized by local residents in the region—with mass media usage rates higher than the national average—and, though national channels record the highest share, the highest rated outlets for regional news are the local television provider Videolina, followed by the RAI3 regional newscast, and the *Unione Sarda* daily newspaper (Agcom, 2018). Starting from the attention given by the neo-institutional approach to the organizational level in the interplay between agencies and institutions, the choice was made to focus on journalists working for the two most-followed local outlets in order to investigate the role of the public and private model in mediating ongoing change. Both Videolina and RAI3 Sardegna<sup>2</sup> were set up in Cagliari during the 1970s following the accountability crisis experienced by the national broadcasting service: the first outlet was created as a free television service challenging

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<sup>1</sup> In 2015, the number of registered journalists for each sector was: 6,175 for newspapers, 2,691 for periodicals, 2,285 for local radio and TV, 1,879 for public radio and TV (RAI), 1,796 for other companies, 1,084 for private national radio and TV (Aeranti-Corallo, 2018, p. 55).

<sup>2</sup> RAI3's regional services are formally part of the wider national public broadcasting company but are considered a local public outlet with reference to the regional content of its programs and newscast services.

state monopoly over broadcasting, while the second emerged after the RAI's reform aimed at offering a more pluralistic and decentralized public service. For the last 40 years, they have been operating within the same organizational field and were exposed to largely the same institutional pressures, including the national shift from analogue to digital broadcasting, which was first tested in Sardinia.

Document analysis, participant observation and interviews with informed actors allowed to widen our knowledge over the issues investigated, further explored in 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews with professional journalists and media workers employed in the two outlets. Interviewees were contacted via email or telephone through personal acquaintances and snowball sampling, in order to take into account the diversity of workers employed in the local outlets (in terms of type of occupation, gender, generation, role). All workers contacted gladly accepted to participate to the research and only a few planned interviews were not realized for time constraints. Given that the small size of the companies facilitates workers' identification, interviewees were granted anonymity and asked to choose their favoured location for the interview, in order to feel free to express their opinions and share information on more personal or sensitive topics. The author's brief experience as a free-lance journalist and knowledge of the local context offered a common language facilitating the interpretation of what was being said by the interviewees (Becker & Geer, 1957), while her research skills and aims allowed to grant an informed but unbiased approach to their accounts (della Porta, 2010). Semi-structured interviews, of the average duration of one hour and a half, were adapted to the specific career history of the worker, starting from family and educational background to the present time, also including information on managing careers with family life. Often interviews were followed up with messages, phone calls, or even a second meeting, when more information was needed.

Realized, audio-recorded, and transcribed *verbatim* by the author between summer 2019 and spring 2020, interviews were analysed following an inductive and comparative approach, identifying the main categories and thematic areas recurring in the transcripts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; della Porta, 2010). In a second step, a selection of those categories was associated to the three analytical dimensions discussed by the special issue editors in their opening essay (*within, between, beyond*), related to the increased differentiation and the changing role of professionals in post-industrial societies (Bellini & Maestripieri, 2018). The following paragraphs analyse the research results associated to each of the three dimensions: the increased flexibilization of the labour force, leading to distinguish *within* the journalistic profession a "mass precariat" and a professional élite, performing the same tasks but experiencing quite different employment security and socio-economic recognition; the impact of disruptive technological innovation on work organization in broadcast outlets, offering employers and employees windows of opportunities to redefine the borders *between* professional journalists and other media workers; the influence of a market oriented ideology in the management of broadcasting

companies, driving professional journalists *beyond* professionalism, towards a logic of increased productivity difficult to reconcile with working conditions granting local audiences reliable, in-depth information.

### ***Changes within journalism: flexibilization of labor and the growth of a mass precariat***

A major change occurring in the journalistic profession in Italy is the decline of its profitability, linked to the widened and protracted precarization of the labour force. The last few decades have registered a significant increase in the number of journalists within the lower income brackets: the percentage earning below 35,000 € per year rose from 56% in 2000 to 65% in 2015, when more than 40% of journalists earned less than 5,000 € per year from journalistic activity (Agcom, 2017, p. 12). This evidence tells us that, today, those living only partially and precariously from professional practice represent the majority of journalists in Italy, as confirmed by the growing percentage of contributors<sup>3</sup>. Younger generations are mostly exposed to the risk of unstable and persistently precarious work: almost 90% of journalists under the age of 30 earned less than 20,000 € per year in 2015, while this was true for only half of the journalists between 50 and 60 years of age (Agcom, 2017, p. 20). The decline in the viability and profitability of journalism leads younger generations to search for other occupations, while the profession rapidly ages: 17% of journalists were under 30 years of age in 2000, and only 8% in 2015 (Agcom, 2017, p. 10).

As outlined by our interviewees, the precariat was a part of the professional path of journalists, typically associated with their apprenticeship period. Its length—often shortened by political support—widened for the so-called “Generation X”, entering a labour market asking for a more flexible labour force with higher educational credentials but later than previous generations. Those belonging to that generation relate having found stable jobs after investing most of their youth in work, often sacrificing a significant part of their personal life:

Well, I can say that it's not so much the journalistic profession, but the precariousness of work itself that has taken a lot of energy from me. For a long time I was focused on work, very, very much, because I wanted to achieve an independence I couldn't reach: dismissals, precarious work (...) I struggled a lot and this also affected my personal history. [journalist, public TV]

Since 2000, after the digitalization of the media sector, the precariat took on a different dimension, widening both in length and size to involve a non-marginal part of journalists

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<sup>3</sup> 3 The national law establishing the *Ordine dei Giornalisti* distinguishes two categories of journalists, enrolled in different registries to practice the profession: the professionals (*professionisti*), who work exclusively as journalists, and the contributors (*pubblicisti*), who have other jobs but are regularly paid for journalistic activities. In 2017, among the journalists registered as active in Sardinia there were 354 free-lance professionals, 408 contributors, 28 trainees, and only 224 employed professionals (UCSI, 2017, p. 8).



and to persists without offering a temporal horizon to its end. This led to the growth of protest movements to raise awareness of the issue of precarious and undeclared work of journalists in the different media sectors:

As temporary workers we protested all around Italy, a national protest of precarious journalists of the press, television and radio (...) [Before year 2000] you went through 5, 6, 7 years [of temporary work], then you were in, if you endured, if you were fit, after this exercise, the hard test of experience, they took you. For someone to become a journalist, the rule was: be good and have support. If you were only good, you would enter last, if good and backed by support, a little earlier. So, until the year 2000, more or less, you got in if you were resilient; after that, this crisis became so important that those options were not available anymore. Precarious people have become so many that there is a mass movement, not just a movement, of precarious workers! [journalist, private TV]

The response to those requests is quite different in the two outlets considered. In the private outlet the limited demand for journalists in the contexts of a restricted local media market hit by an economic crisis, allows the editor to exploit the work of journalists fearing to lose their job, kept in a state of insecurity over their occupational future:

The crisis is not only exogenous, they [editors] also widened it. Why? Because it's convenient. They tell you: "Well, I've got 10 people waiting for your job". It means you'll work for me twice as hard, because you are afraid of losing your job. [journalist, private TV]

In the public outlet the strong internal union in which RAI journalists converge (USIGRAI) engaged in a battle against the company, eventually leading to secure stabilization paths for colleagues with precarious contracts, offering them the guarantees needed to steadily proceed in their professional career and personal life:

I worked about 8 years [in RAI] as precarious (...) But, since I know the world of journalism, I can tell you that our precariat was a golden one. In those years I never thought of being fired, I was just paid a little less than my colleagues (...) I've never had doubts, barring unforeseen accidents, of this [stabilization] path. [journalist, public TV]

### ***Changes between journalists and other media workers: the impact of technological innovation on work organization***

Technological innovation fundamentally influences the organization of work in media systems. At RAI, television production—launched in the mid-1950s—initially followed the organization of the film industry, offering an already tested model, sharing conventions and a division of tasks over the use of specific equipment (Lari, 2012). The transition to the

video-magnetic tape, motivated by the costs of filming, led to the adoption of increasingly integrated and manageable video-cameras, allowing a simplified recording and editing process. As a consequence, several categories of workers become obsolete and are assigned new tasks not always consistent with their skills. Similarly, to what happened at the BBC in a time of analogous changes (Burns, 1979), the decoupling of workplace hierarchies from the logic of production competence and experience activates workers' corporate or individual strategies to gain horizontal or vertical mobility.

A case in point is offered by the movement of RAI video-operators, asking the company to be offered the favourable contract of professional journalists, in recognition of the creative—and not only technical—value of their skills. This possibility, normatively envisaged in the early 1970s, when television shooting was framed around the filming industry model, had been strenuously opposed by media companies (Menduni & Catolfi, 2001). The movement, however, unexpectedly received the support of the USIGRAI, interested in gaining new affiliations in the prospects of a possible diaspora of its members. At the end of 1980s, when the shift to video-magnetic tape had greatly simplified the production process, video-operators were formally credited by RAI as having the status of professional journalists. The new journalist figure, called *telecineoperatore* (tele-movie-operator), was authorized to autonomously organize his/her work without journalists' supervision. However, the increased costs of the contract under the new professional status led RAI to not renew it and to gradually contract out to formally freelance workers operating for the company on a regular basis.

In the case of local private television providers, which developed during the 1980s after the advancements in electronic technology, the most significant changes derive from digitalization. In Sardinia, where at the end of 2008 the national switch from analogue to digital television was first tested, local private outlets were exposed to the uncertainties of the experimental stage in the face of increasing competition from high-quality standard TV channels following the opening of new frequencies<sup>4</sup>. The sharp decline in audience ratings translated into a decrease in their revenues from sponsors, placing local outlets in a state of crisis worsened by the contemporary global recession (CORERAT, 2011). The crisis also hit the largest provider, Videolina, which—despite regional interventions supporting the sector—resorted to solidarity contracts in 2015, reducing the hours and pay of workers to avoid individual or collective dismissals. After this period, which lasted six months for journalists and one year for other categories, the editor reached an agreement based on workers' acceptance of “multifunctionality” contracts, declaring their availability to cover a series of tasks previously performed by different categories, with the same economic conditions. For journalists, this translated into the realization, all by themselves, of the

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4 When the process was launched in the region, the shift to digital television, offering 64 channels instead of the 15 offered by analogue tv, translated into a loss over a two-year period of nearly one-third of Videolina's 600,000 contacts registered in 2007 (Giacomello, 2012, pp. 158-159).

whole production process: text writing, image shooting, editing, and post-production. This increased tensions with technical workers who felt betrayed both by their colleagues and the company, downplaying their skilled competences as easily replaceable:

In this way journalists are killing us (...) I'm dead as a professional figure, because of them, who for 200 € extra started doing video and editing (...) They betrayed us (...) Oh, well, that's done! [operator, private TV]

As for the surveyed journalists, while few of them emphasize the new autonomy gained through multifunctionality in terms of wider freedom and control over the production chain, most acknowledge the downgrading linked to the reduction of the quality of production and the devaluation of some of the key features traditionally defining journalistic professionalism—such as verification, ethical accountability, and depth (Schnell, 2018):

[Now] I do everything, I love it, everyone [among journalists] loves it, among the youngest ones (...) Before we were going out in three and everyone did whatever he/she liked: now I do what I really want to! [journalist, private TV]

[Local] television providers found themselves with no money and high personnel costs (...) So they are reorganizing themselves. How? Now, with a little camera that weighs 1 kilo (...) you, the journalist, do the shooting and then edit it: I do everything, with the same contract. I used to be a journalist who wrote, elaborated, and thought and even had time to study: today there is no longer time (...) you write, you look for any image that looks like what you want to tell, you throw it in there and you air it [the TV report]. I get to do from 5 to 9 reports a day of two minutes each. You become a news factory; you are no longer a journalist. [journalist, private TV]

### ***Beyond professional journalism: the shifting ideology of local media outlets***

The literature on journalism in post-industrial societies has noted how the thriving of non-regulated communication sources linked to evolution of global digital multimedia systems challenges journalists' traditional role as gatekeepers of information (Schnell, 2018). In the case of our interviewees, the reduced control on sources is not perceived as a professional threat but normalized as part of the evolution of media systems. Journalists' main worries rather point to their increasing difficulties in maintaining those working conditions allowing them to develop and sustain professionalism, offering reliable, in-depth information and making a difference for their audience vis à vis the "fake journalism" created by laymen, often young precarious workers with strong digital skills, unexperienced and unaware of the deontological issues at stake in the production process, accepting to work voluntarily or for poor remuneration:

The problem is that [today] everyone can write. When you read an article online, do you know if it's written by a professional journalist or someone who has a degree in

science, for instance? You don't know! (...) How do they make information? Maybe collecting bits from other parts, copying and pasting, from here fake news [spreads]: it's hard to untangle this ball of yarn! [journalist, private TV]

It is especially the increase of daily workload, created by a series of concomitant factors (constant connection with updated digital information, new skills and tasks required by social media communication, reduction of staff size), that challenges journalists' possibility to operate in conditions granting the quality and accountability of their services to the public:

Look, we [journalists] may do a lot of things, but then at some point the quality declines as the quantity increases. The quality declines so much that, in the end, in my opinion, the audience says: "If I look at Facebook I have better information than the two lines written on the fly by a [journalist] who is doing a thousand things at a time!" [journalist, public TV]

While interviewed journalists largely share the experience of an ongoing deterioration of working conditions, the degree of distress seems amplified by the organizational culture prevailing in the private outlet. Set up as a free radio and tv provider in 1975 by a university student challenging state monopoly on broadcasting with rudimentary equipment and a bunch of friends, the outlet maintained the organizational culture of a family firm— informality of relations, trust between workers, involvement in and strong commitment to the company (Vallejo, 2008)—also in later years when, under the charismatic leadership of its editor, it grew in size and professionalism, adding the ownership of the most popular newspaper in Sardinia to radio and television services. In 2000, due to financial difficulties, what had become the largest media company in the region is sold to a Sardinian entrepreneur operating at the national level in the real-estate sector and close to Berlusconi. In the attempt to modernize the company to reach the efficiency standards needed to survive in an increasingly competitive market, the editor reorganizes it according to a managerial model, applied through a "command and control" leadership (Seddon, 2005). Huge infrastructural investments are carried out: ten years later, the company's headquarters move into a residential centre newly built by the editor, including a planetarium, a multiplex cinema, shops and restaurants, a piazza with a fountain, next to a street officially renamed Journalists' Avenue. During those same years, in the face of the crisis brought to local private outlets by digitalization, the editor adopts measures to reduce personnel costs, offering older employees redundancy contributions, cutting external collaborations, and replacing their correspondent work with a flexible and extensive use of employees induced to sign the "multifunctionality" contracts described above.

Especially for the older employees, who had joined the company when it embraced an informal, family-firm organizational culture oriented towards the production of community services, the shift towards a managerialist market oriented culture is lived with discomfort

and conceived as a sort of betrayal of those workers who had devoted their lives to the company, now treated as a cost to be reduced:

Before, a [media] corporation had a political or moral objective too (...) now it's just a simple list of numbers, all that matters is the budget. How we get to that budget doesn't count, human resources are no longer valued as before (...) What is important is how and how often to use it (...) we are a cost! Maybe that mindset allowing them to consider human resources also from the point of view of, I don't know, seeing them as people who are there in the company, dedicating a lot of time to it, how can you define it in a word? Affective [point of view]? (...) this aspect (...) is lost. [technician, private TV]

Some interviewees note how the adoption of instrumental rationality criteria devoid of references to ethical standards, leads the editor to use the ongoing economic crisis as a ploy to further enhance his bargaining power in the labour market, weakening the position of journalists and other employed workers, in face of the risk of losing a job sought after by an increasing number of precarious younger colleagues. The setting of a "war of all against all" scenario, in fact, favours unconditioned compliance and the active endorsement of directions coming from above, in exchange, respectively, for job protection and career-making:

Do you see this? [pointing at the company's headquarters]. This is a medieval castle 2.0 or 4.0, as you prefer. This guy, our editor, like all powerful people, had the desire to build a castle: he made the towers, the water encircling it (...) it's the metaphor of the medieval castle! Those who are inside are all his vassals and vavasours and he commands, he's the baron, with the money (...) Just like in the Middle Ages: either you were under the protection of a powerful person inside the protective structure, but you were a slave in whatever stratum of the hierarchy you were placed; or you were outside, you were in the jungle, where there was everything, the bandit, you were at the mercy of everything, because outside you have no protection: no trade union protection, no rights, nothing! [journalist, private TV]

In the case of the local public outlet, changes linked to labour market flexibilization and the digitalization of media systems take place within a wider national bureaucratic and centralized structure, oriented to the public service and imbued within a union culture defended by the USIGRAI. Often criticized for its corporatist approach (Padovani, 2005), the USIGRAI managed to secure RAI journalists professional working conditions (from freedom of expression and autonomy to job protection and competitive salaries), beyond hierarchic relationships:

Once a colleague told me this axiom (...): "The RAI does not fire, the RAI does not punish". Given that you have a lack of sanctions, linked to professional protections –

which are thus a good thing – you can use them in two ways (...) you have the possibility of being more independent than others, because you are not subject to a master (...) or you can use it to not work and to mind your own business (...) From this point of view the public service offers [us journalists] pocket aces that you can occasionally play; namely, to know that, at the end of the day, if your boss dismisses you (...) there will be a period of *damnatio memoriae*, but in the meantime you have a chance to do your job, and this is a possibility that in my professional career I've seen [in RAI], both locally and nationally, more than for colleagues from private broadcasters. [journalist, public TV]

## **Conclusion: The trap of professional heterogeneity**

Journalism, as other professions, is currently challenged by a series of endogenous and exogenous changes, weakening the foundations of professional work. This article has considered how some of these changes influence the condition of professional journalists working in Italian local televisions, flourished at the end of the 1970s as a response to centralized state control over broadcasting and becoming a reference point for local institutions and communities. In the last decades, increased market competition deriving from an expanding global multimedia system, further enhanced by the diffusion of digital technology, brought significant changes both to the labour market and the organization of work in the media industry. The empirical evidence discussed in the article under the three analytical dimensions suggested by the special issue editors (within, between, beyond) offers concrete examples of the dilemmas faced by professionals, which can be interpreted through the conceptual tools and theoretical frame offered by the neo-institutional approach.

The within dimension of analysis shows how the massive growth of atypical workers in Italian journalism marks the shift of precarity from a temporary phase initiating young apprentices to professional activity, to a prolonged unstable working condition without clear prospects for change, often leading journalists to involuntary freelance entrepreneurship, poor wages and self-exploitation. Collective mobilization of journalists claiming a solution to this problem found a quite different answer in the outlets considered: if the union of RAI journalists engaged in a battle eventually leading to define stabilization paths for precarious workers, in the private outlet journalists were left to individually bargain with the editor over their occupational future.

The second dimension of analysis shows how the introduction of ground-breaking technological innovation in media systems opened windows of opportunity to revise criteria distinguishing between professional journalists and other categories of media workers. Also, in this case organizational differences played a fundamental role in defining the room of manoeuvre for actors involved. In the public outlet, the successful internal battle of employed video-operators to be recognized as professional journalists brought as

unintended consequence the elimination of their figure from the company, given its increased costs under the journalistic contract and the widened offer of media services in the market. In the private outlet, the reduction of production costs linked to the introduction of digital equipment is seized by the editor to include within journalists' duties tasks previously assigned to other workers, redefining their professionalism as "multiskilled", rather than specialized.

The third dimension, investigating what lies beyond professionalism, shows the relevance of the organizational culture and ideology in maintaining professional work standards and public service orientation in media companies. Despite their reference to a different model of company (public vs. private), both the local outlets originally responded to the aim of promoting pluralism and democracy through the production of news and programs related to areas and communities often ignored by national broadcasting services. If the public outlet, oriented to the public service by definition, represented the peripheral branch of a large bureaucratic structure imbued within a union culture, the private one was organized as a small family firm, characterized by informal relations of trust and commitment to the company. In the last two decades, the growing influence of neoliberal ideology is resisted in the public outlet, but leads the private one to a market-oriented reorganization enhancing the commodification of workers, kept in a condition of insecurity to better control their productivity or acquiescence.

Considering jobs as instrumental, flexible, insecure, and variable, however, does not allow the thriving of the type of professionalism "that goes with belonging to a community with standards, ethical codes and mutual respect among its members based on competence and respect for long-established rules of behaviour" (Standing, 2011, p. 26). As well put by R.H. Tawney (1920, p. 92) a century ago: "A profession (...) is not simply a collection of individuals who get a living for themselves by the same kind of work (...) It is a body of men"—and women, we would certainly add today—"who carry on their work in accordance with rules designed to enforce certain standards both for the better protection of its members and for the better service of the public". And in dramatic moments of our lives – such as the ongoing global pandemic—we are placed in a better position to seize the importance of relying on the work of competent and accountable professionals<sup>5</sup>.

Overall our case confirms the picture drawn by the international literature on the increased professional heterogeneity of journalists, derived from changes occurring in post-industrial media systems: precarious and stabilized colleagues operate side by side, doing the same job but receiving quite different salaries, or rather getting the same pay for a considerably different amount of tasks, increasingly performed alone or in substantially degraded

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<sup>5</sup> An example is given by the role played by local outlets in offering local communities updated reliable information during the Covid-19 pandemic: since March 2020, when the emergency started, the monthly average audience of Videolina doubled (Auditel monthly reports 2020, <https://www.auditel.it/>).

working conditions. The considerations emerging from our analysis, however, point to the relevance of the meso level in mediating macro level change to safeguard professional work. As similarly noted in the debate over the new “creative class” (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011), celebrating heterogeneity as a symbol of the variety and richness that professional profiles can take in post-industrial societies may overshadow the preliminary issue of the homogeneity of standards needed to grant professionals’ rights and duties, given that it is hard to address questions of inequality—and thus of its reduction—among structurally heterogeneous groups (Castel, 1997).

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