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Meetings between frames: Negotiating worth between journalism and management

Elena Raviola

Management and Organization, School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, Vasagatan 1, 40530, Gothenburg, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores meetings between different frames, thus producing different overflows in an organizational context. Relying on Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) sociology of critique (also called the sociology of conventions) to analyze the relationship between different frames, this paper specifically investigates the encounter between journalism and management in practice in a digital news venture. It is based on an ethnographic study of Rue89, a French news organization, which was started in 2007 by former newspaper journalists and publishes an advertising-based generalist news website open for readers' participation in the production of news. The study shows how negotiations between different frames organizing work at Rue89 take place in different ways in different situations and lead to different results, in terms of what is worth doing and what is not, thus overflowing.

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1. Introduction

News organizations are pluralistic organizations. They are organizations in which multiple competing logics coexist (e.g., Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2007; Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen, Van de, & Andrew, 2009; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). The attention of scholars has, in fact, focused on the opposition between the logic of journalism, where legitimatization is gained through peer recognition, and the logic of market/business/management, where numbers measure legitimacy (e.g., Tunstall 1971; Tuchman, 1978; Bourdieu, 1996; Fagerling & Norbäck, 2005; Raviola, 2012). The widespread digital technologies have been found considerably changing the relationship between journalism and management (Boczkowski, 2005; Raviola & Norbäck, 2013). This relationship is particularly interesting to study now when an increasing number of newspaper organizations are economically in crisis, and digital technologies have been opening new possibilities for pursuing journalism in innovative ways.

In this paper, I investigate how journalism and management relate to each other as two frames for organizing newswork in a digital news venture. With established news organizations facing financial difficulties and restructuring their operations over the last decade, an increasing number of journalists have left more or less

voluntarily traditional media companies and started their own ventures. Many of these ventures are attempts to offer readers/users new information services and change the news field. This phenomenon is also called “entrepreneurial journalism,” referring to the merge of journalism and entrepreneurship and represents a new setting to investigate the relationship between journalism and management. How does the relationship between professional and management logics unfold in practice in organizations where there are not two distinct groups representing different logics? What happens to those frames traditionally understood and lived as competing when non-management professionals become entrepreneurs?

Here, I treat journalism and management, which act as different frames, as two different ways of understanding worth in news production, thus producing different kinds of overflows (Callon, 1998; Czarniawska & Löfgren, 2012, 2013). More specifically and simply, journalism relies on the principle of the “Truth” to frame what is worth doing, while management relies on the principle of “Efficiency” to establish worthiness (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). The setting of entrepreneurial journalism can be considered a case of controversial situations or, as Callon (1998) put it, “hot” situations where no agreement on frames and consequent overflows is easily reached. It is in investigating such hot situations that I find fruitful to bring in Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) framework to explore controversies around frames and overflows as disagreements on worth and non-worth.

E-mail address: elena.raviola@handels.gu.se.

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Relying on Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) sociology of critique (also called the sociology of conventions) to analyze the relationship between different frames, this paper aims at investigating the encounter of journalism and management in practice in a digital news venture. It is based on an ethnographic study of Rue89, a French news organization, which was started in 2007 by former newspaper journalists and publishes an advertising-based generalist news website open for readers' participation in the production of news. The study shows how negotiations between different frames organizing work at Rue89 take place in different ways in different situations and lead to different results, in terms of what is worth doing and what is not, thus overflowing.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, a conceptual framework is introduced to study frames as different orders of worth encountering each other. It builds primarily on Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) economies of conventions. The methods of the study are then presented, followed by a description of the story of Rue89. Next, different encounters between journalism and management at Rue89 are analyzed. A concluding discussion ends the paper.

2. Professions and management in pluralistic organizations: sociology of critique

The concepts used to depict plurality in pluralistic organizations have flourished over the last years: to mention a few, institutional pluralism (Kraatz & Block, 2008), institutional logics (e.g., Thornton et al., 2012), competing rationalities (Cloutier & Langely, 2007), and pluralistic contexts (Denis et al., 2007). The relationship between different logics, rationalities, and contexts is often portrayed as a tension between, for instance, profession and management: on the one side, the ambition of autonomy and public service, and on the other side, the struggle for control and commercial success (e.g., Engel & Hall, 1973; Sarfatti Larsson, 1977). The ample sociological literature on professions and professionalization (e.g., Sarfatti Larsson, 1977; Freidson, 1986; Abbott, 1988; Scott, 2008) describes how identities and ideologies define fields of expertise, provide their members with ethical norms, and prescribe what to do under various conditions. The relationship between professions and management is furthermore complicated by the professionalization of management (e.g., Reed & Anthony, 1992) and the transformation of professions in the audit society (Power, 1999).

Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) offered an original approach to the study of pluralistic organizations, making for a sociological analysis of critique rather than a critical sociology (Jagd, 2013). Rather than being the site of passively and unconsciously endured domination of a class or of a logic over another, Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) social world is "a space shot through by a multiplicity of disputes, critiques, disagreements and attempts to re-establish locally agreements that are always fragile" (Boltanski, 2011, p. 27). On the basis of previous studies, they identified six worlds with their corresponding orders of worth based on different modes of evaluating the higher common good (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999). In the inspired world, worth is evaluated on the principle of creativeness; in the domestic world—typically dominant in the family—reputation and friendship/family are the principles of worth; the civic world justice is constructed in relation to the collective interest; the fame world is based on opinion and recognition; the market world bases worth on price, and finally, the industrial world is the world of efficiency (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999; 2006). These different worlds have been investigated in organization studies in different contexts and with different focuses. The most recurrent focus has been the identification of the six worlds in justification practices emerging in controversies of different kinds and the exploration of the relationships, often

conflictual, between these worlds (e.g., Daigle & Rouleau, 2010; Fronda & Moriceau, 2008; Mesny & Mailhot, 2007; Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011). A similar focus has been maintained in the sociological work of Lamont and Thévenot (2000), comparing France and the USA in a variety of contexts based on informants' appeal to different orders of worth. Fewer works have explored the way in which tests and compromises between worlds are performed and shape the relationship between worlds, like in the work of Dansou and Langely (2012) on the role of tests in institutional work or the work of Daigle and Rouleau (2010) on the three-level structure of compromises in strategic plans of arts organizations or the work of Stark (2009) on the sense of dissonance in organizations governed according to multiple principles of worth, which he calls heterarchies.

This framework may look similar to institutional logics or rationalities such as those presented by Friedland and Alford (1991) and Thornton et al. (2012), and several attempts have been made to reflect on the relationship between the two perspectives (see, for instance, the special issue on French pragmatism and organizational institutionalism, edited by Brandl et al., in 2013 in *Journal of Management Inquiry*). Many of these attempts have, however, considered the point of departure in institutional theory, in the search for useful contributions to the development of what can be considered the dominant perspective in organization studies, and have thus overlooked two original aspects of Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) sociology of critique, which are especially relevant for this study.

The first one is the focus on the processes and practices of critique and justification for the formation of organizational order and change (Jagd, 2011). According to Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), people agree by justifying the worth of their actions and decisions with reference to a higher common good. Different common goods define different orders of worth or worlds. These worlds are, however, not a priori defined, as logics in institutional theory. As Wilkinson (1997: 318, in Dequech, 2005, p. 469) argued, in the economies of conventions framework, "rules are not prior to action nor are they elaborated from outside the action but emerge within the process of actor-coordination." In this process, thus, conventions, which are working on the basis of a tacit or implicit agreement among individuals to take part in them (e.g., Dupuy et al., 1989; Favereau, 1989: 296; Orléan, 2004: 43; Salais, 1989: 213; Reynaud, 1993), function both "as the result of individual actions and as a framework constraining the actors (Dupuy et al., 1989, 143; also Favereau, Biencourt, & Eymard Duvernay, 2001: 238)" (Dequech, 2005, p. 469).

The sociology of conventions, with its focus on processes and practices of critique and justification, might be seen as a sociology of the "actions à chaud" (hot actions—actions in the making), meaning that it analyzes the disputes when they happen and in practice and thus the emergence of regimes of worth and justice (Bessy & Favereau, 2003, p. 134). In the practice of coordination and agreement around a convention, in fact, disagreements represent occasions in which worth is tested; different orders of worth are questioned during tests, where "individual and collective actors' engagement with their context is the object of judgement in terms of correspondence with legitimate organizing principles" (Dansou & Langely, 2012, p. 6). Tests can be of two kinds: they might question the way in which a higher common good has been instantiated (test of state of worth) or they might question the very higher principle governing the situation at hand (test of order of worth). Tests can be temporarily resolved in compromises, where "people agree to come to terms, that is, to suspend a clash—a dispute involving more than one world—without settling it through recourse to a test in just one of the worlds. The situation remains composite, but a clash is averted" (Boltanski & Thévenot,

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