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The old-new epistemology of digital journalism: how algorithms and filter bubbles are (re)creating modern metanarratives

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In journalism studies, the advent of the World Wide Web and the rise of online journalism are generally associated with going beyond the objective, normative paradigm associated with the principles of philosophical and scientific modernity towards a postmodern paradigm centred on subjectivity and relativism. This article offers an alternative reading of the epistemology of online journalism: the fragmentation of audiences into homophilic networks, the formation of ideological bubbles, and the growing polarisation caused by algorithms make the contents circulating online a reintroduction of modernity's metanarratives. These metanarratives in no way correspond to the principles typical of postmodernism, such as the equivalence of interpretations and openness to dialogue. Journalistic content also comes under this charge: although it conveys narratives that are subjective, they are perceived as absolute truths inside the information bubbles in which they circulate. This phenomenon is caused by "information platformization" processes. Based on these premises, a new definition of online journalism is proposed: rather than "postmodern", it can be better understood as a fulfilment of the foundational principles of modernism, but in a subjective form.

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Introduction

Epistemology has proven to be a fertile field for journalism studies. Over the years, the discipline has developed in multiple directions and across varying levels of analysis. There have been studies on the epistemology of specific kinds of journalism, such as investigative journalism (Ettema and Glasser, 1985); and on the journalism conveyed by specific media, such as television (Ekström, 2002). With the advent of digital media, a new field defined as “Epistemologies of Digital Journalism” (Ekström and Westlund, 2019) emerged. A longitudinal study on digital journalism – that is, journalism in which editorial content is distributed and consumed through a digital medium – has shown how epistemology represents one of the most significant areas of research carried out in recent years (Steenen et al., 2019). Within this specific field of study, changes in the languages and practices of journalism brought about by the rise of digital media have been viewed by some scholars as the manifestation of a “postmodern turn” (Gade, 2011; Bogaerts and Carpenter, 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017). Underpinning this interpretation is a more general association between postmodernism and digital media that also applies to information when it is conveyed primarily by online media.

This article argues, however, that this interpretation is not entirely adequate to describe the mechanisms of online information production and consumption over the last 10 to 15 years. In this article, we will therefore attempt to define a new epistemological paradigm. We will do so by developing a conceptual argument, and not through the presentation of empirical findings. The aim is in fact to operate a terminological and conceptual redefinition of phenomena that, in theoretical studies on journalism, have so far mostly been framed within different paradigms. Starting from this theoretical and epistemological redefinition, the aim is for a path of enquiry to be opened for future empirical studies on journalism that frame the data collected within the new paradigm proposed here. In our current scenario, news narratives are increasingly conditioned by algorithm-driven processes of selective exposure and by a consequent formation of ideological and cultural bubbles. Within this framework, the thesis of this paper is that journalistic narratives increasingly take the form of metanarratives typical of the philosophical and scientific discourses of modernity, since they aim to provide their polarised audiences with a meaning that is absolute, complete, and impermeable to factual denial. This phenomenon is antithetical to some of the main assumptions of postmodernism: that all interpretations are equivalent, that there exists an openness to dialogue, and that texts and narratives possess a plurality of meanings. Consequently, in the algorithmic web of ideological bubbles, contemporary journalism can better be defined as a reintroduction and subjective form of fulfilment of the paradigm underpinning the modern normative model. Although subjectivism is the characteristic feature of online news narratives, this does not lead to the assumption that all interpretations are legitimate in the absence of an absolute truth; rather, it results in a clash between narratives, each of which seeks to prevail as an absolute truth within its respective information bubble. Due to information “platformization” mechanisms, journalism reinforces these tendencies, and it too is absorbed into the more generalised reintroduction of an epistemological model that is much closer to modernity than postmodernity.

The argument developed here refers to the way in which digital technologies have influenced journalistic practices in the global North, especially in Europe and the United States, and is thus limited to this social and geographical context. The clarification is important to avoid what Mabweazara (2014: 2) described as a tendency on the part of many scholars to “seek explanatory frameworks in the uneven distribution and use of technological

resources between the economically developed North and the poor South”. With regard to the countries of the global South and especially African countries, we will only mention some aspects related to the relationships between elements such as digital literacy, the frequently limited access of audiences to the products of digital journalism, and even the pre-digital polarisation of society with algorithmic news dissemination processes. It is hoped that these suggestions will enable future research focused, for example, on African countries to explore in more detail the links between the epistemological paradigm proposed here and what has already been termed an “African digital journalism epistemology” (Mabweazara, 2014).

From modern to postmodern journalism

The concept of “postmodern journalism” refers, by antithesis, to the “modern” paradigm that preceded it. In this sense, what happened in journalism is considered as a particular manifestation of a more general phenomenon, namely, the transition in the cultural and philosophical sphere from modernism to postmodernism. According to Jean-François Lyotard’s well-known thesis, postmodernism can be defined as scepticism toward the metanarratives that structured the modern philosophical discourse (Lyotard, 1984): the systems of thought that claimed to provide overarching explanations, such as the Enlightenment, Idealism, and Marxism. All these philosophical movements and systems contained unitary principles, the bases of which made it possible to encompass the meaning of reality (Reason, Spirit, the laws of materialism). Postmodernism signalled the winding down of these grand narratives and, simultaneously, of the emancipatory projects that philosophical systems, understood as universalising forms of knowledge, bear with them. For Lyotard, in the pre-industrial age the grand narratives that ensured the existence and preservation of a social order belonged to the realm of myth; with modernity, a new set of narratives arose, whose cornerstone was the scientific rationality professed by Enlightenment thinkers. As Isaiah Berlin (1980: 1–32) explains, the Enlightenment proclaimed the autonomy of reason and the natural sciences, while at the same time rejecting the authority and tradition of all forms of transcendental and nonrational knowledge. For Lyotard, with postmodernism the modernist faith in reason lost its self-evident character: many discourses that were modelled on the scientific rationality promoted by the Enlightenment went into crisis. These discourses had taken the form of metanarratives founded on objectivity, universality, and certain knowledge; they were rational and uncontaminated by anything subjective or transcendent to reality.

Journalism was among the discourses that entered into crisis with the postmodern turn. Between the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, its normative model had been forged from the Enlightenment spirit, the idea that objective methods and rational procedures could be used to describe reality (Schudson, 2018: 29). The paradigm of objectivity is thus generally viewed as a direct application of scientific modernism to journalism (Schudson, 1990; Durham, 1998). This model of objective journalism took shape in the United States during the 1830s and was developed more fully beginning in the 1920s, when, partly due to the need to make journalism a fully-fledged professional activity, it was codified through specific procedures and rules. As Walter Lippmann (1922) noted at the time, this need was motivated in part by a desire to distinguish journalism from the activities of public relations: the latter were focused on persuasion, while the former aimed at the objective reporting of facts. This need for distinction turned objective journalism into a defensive, strategic ritual (Tuchman, 1972), put into practice to

avoid the influence exerted by professional communicators. But, as Nerone (2013) points out, journalism is also an -ism, and as such shares the characteristics of a belief system. Consequently, objectivity was not embraced as a journalistic norm purely as a defensive paradigm but also as the expression of a metanarrative: from this perspective, journalism could and should report factual truths. Consensus regarding the rules of the profession was based on objectivity understood in terms of an ideology (Schudson, 2001: 151). Any challenge to journalism's claim to present itself as a "bearer of truth" was therefore seen as a challenge to its normative paradigm, and the concept of impartiality and modernist assumptions regarding the role of journalism as a bulwark of democracy fused into its professional mission (McNair, 2012; Schudson, 2008). For a long time, the principles of modern scientific rationality, which hinged on a description and study of reality uncontaminated by subjective opinions, ensured that emotions were excluded from the reporting of facts (Richard and Rees, 2011; Peters, 2011: 298). The paradigm of objectivity was thus borrowed from the principles of modern scientific rationality, because "objectivity relies on the modern perception of a textual message – one that is rigid and permanent – it rejects the idea that message reception is a dialogical site with varying possibilities of meaning" (Soffer, 2009: 474). But a monological conception of this sort "is therefore associated with a single world view that [...] sees the world as an object of deduction" (Soffer, 2009: 477); and this monological voice goes hand-in-hand with the modern scientific perception (Shotter, 1997: 26).

The fact that journalism's age of professionalisation, which took place in tandem with the rise of the normative paradigm of objectivity, was defined as "high modernism" in connection with the processes of the 1920s, and "high modernity" in connection with what occurred in the 1950s and 60s, when objectivity was identified by journalists as both an ideal and a daily practice (Hallin, 1994), is therefore not a terminological coincidence but rather the sign of a significant analogy.

Starting in the 1960s and 70s, however, something different took place: the normative paradigm of journalism came under increasing scrutiny. The historical period when this occurred is no coincidence: these were the years when the rationalist tradition inspired by Descartes was also being critiqued by philosophers, clearing the path to an "affective turn" that accompanied the progressive rise of postmodernism (La Caze and Lloyd, 2011). As in philosophical postmodernism, which rejects any scientific belief in the possibility of an objective account of reality, in journalism, too, a view began to gain ground that the normative model does nothing but reinforce "official" versions of reality propagated by power, a power that holds the means to impose its own symbolic representation of the facts (Jukes, 2020: 28). Postmodernism does indeed imply the notion that the symbols used to describe reality are nothing but symbols, expressions of subjective choice that, as such, are incapable of describing reality as it truly is (Baudrillard, 1984: 159–164; Rorty, 1989). This also applies, of course, to the linguistic symbols through which journalism reports on reality.

New journalistic models of reporting on reality that emerged during this historical period were to some extent a sign of the times: New Journalism, for example, was defined, significantly, as a "signpost to the postmodern," because the subjective and narrative form it expressed hewed more closely to the demands of postmodern society (Basu, 2010). As Schudson (2018) points out, during the 1960s and 70s a more analytical and in many cases interpretive account of reality took hold among journalists – a model he defines as "objectivity 2.0", marking a first break with the modernist model of "objectivity 1.0". For all these reasons, the changes that started in the 1960s and 70s and developed more fully in the subsequent decades "could be seen to represent a

"postmodern turn" in journalism insofar as they challenge the conventional "grand narratives", certainties and rationalities that underpin the profession and its practices" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017: 98).

It is important to note that this questioning of the "grand narratives" and the concurrent "postmodern turn" are characterised above all by two processes: a shift from (presumed) objective reporting to subjective reporting; and, consequently, a shift from the disembodied rationality typical of the modern scientific paradigm to an increasingly greater presence of emotions in journalistic texts (Jukes, 2020). The postmodern turn of the 1960s and 70s, which, as we have seen, led to postmodern philosophical assumptions being applied to journalism as well, is generally summarised by Nietzsche's well-known aphorism (Nietzsche, 1967 [1885–1887], aphorism 481): "facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations". Nietzsche's aphorism became the emblem of the postmodern paradigm because it clarifies the shift that took place under it, from presumed objectivity to subjectivism. According to the prevailing view in journalism studies, the main components of the postmodern turn of the 1960s and 70s just described came about because of new technologies and the way they reshaped journalism. As Gade (2011: 126) remarks, "the digital age unleashed already present postmodern forces, creating a networked, interactive, and consumer-oriented era that destroyed the stability of the mass media".

This transition, which was already visible in the 1960s and 70s, was brought to maturity primarily by the hybrid media system, in which different types of older and newer media form a system that evolves through mutual interactions (Chadwick, 2013), and the affordances¹ of digital technologies. In line with postmodern assumptions on the loss of boundaries between high culture and pop culture, and the de-differentiation between cultural and social spheres (Lash, 1990), online journalism causes a contamination between traditional and digital media, between actors of information (created as much as by users as by professionals), between communicative models (broadcast and conversational), and, above all, between content types (with a progressive mingling of hard and soft news). The typically modern concept of boundary work (Gieryn, 1983), understood as what allows a clearly demarcated line to be drawn between what is and is not journalism (Carlson, 2015), has faded. The result is a genuine epistemological rupture, definable according to (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017: 106) as postmodern in all respects: "The changes occasioned by technological transformations could be understood as a postmodern form of journalism because they have destabilised conventional: (a) physical, stylistic and genre distinctions; (b) differentiations between amateur and professional content; and (c) distinctions around the truth value of objective versus emotional content".

These factors, often interconnected, have caused a slippage toward an increasingly subjective recounting of facts, leading journalism to gradually lose its self-representation as a bearer of truth and opening the way for perspectivism and relativism. As for the contamination between information actors, the rise of citizen journalism² – of the participatory news consumer (who not only consumes but also produces news) and a general "editorial society" (Hartley, 2000), in which citizens act as journalists and no longer trust in journalism as an open system – has led to news production that is increasingly contaminated by subjective points of view. The postmodern turn must therefore be understood as the rise of a biographical society, in which life stories are everywhere (Plummer, 2001: 78). As noted by Papacharissi (2015), the incorporation of user-generated content in the news means that it becomes simultaneously more subjective and more emotional: an affective news stream is generated, replete with

emotions, opinions, and subjective experiences. In social media especially, the news has become almost indistinguishable from conversation about the news.

Beckett and Deuze (2016) have found a trend towards an increasingly personalised and emotionalised journalism in the age of networked news, with growing use of the first-person in writing. Accelerated by digital media, definable in all respects as postmodern media, we are thus moving toward a confessional, subjective journalism (Coward, 2013). The crisis in the objective reporting of reality and the very concept of truth brought to light by postmodernism have caused, to use the words of Bogaerts and Carpenter (2013: 69-70), “a new truth-claim in journalism, turning from claims based on objectivity to those based on authenticity”. The concept of truth has thus become subjective on all counts, losing any reference to universality or to a shared certainty. All the convergence processes just mentioned, typically postmodern insofar as they supersede the (modern) division between professional, normative journalism and its “other”, have induced the rise of subjectivism, perspectivism, and relativism: if the confines of journalism have eroded and there is no more truth, then all that can be told are different stories from different perspectives. This process is seen on all counts as the expression of a postmodern turn: all opinions become legitimate, and references to facts become increasingly remote in this “cacophony of mediated voices” (Silverstone, 2007: 1–24). For all these reasons, the end of modern metanarratives in the network society means that journalism has also been transformed into a subjective, perspectival account of reality that some scholars define as “postmodern”.

The subjective fulfilment of modernity: Heidegger and Nietzsche

As mentioned earlier, Nietzsche’s aphorism – “facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations” – is considered the emblem of the postmodern paradigm. Nevertheless, the epistemology of digital media, in the form it has taken for the last 10 to 15 years at least, can be viewed more appropriately as a fulfilment of the modern paradigm in a subjective form. This is also pertinent to online journalism, as we shall see in the last section. To understand what is meant by “a fulfilment of the modern paradigm in a subjective form”, we can turn to one of the better-known interpretations of Nietzsche’s thought, provided by Martin Heidegger in his courses between 1936 and 1946. In the third and fourth volumes of *Nietzsche* (Heidegger, 1991 [1961]), *The will to power as knowledge and as metaphysics* and *Nihilism*, Heidegger explains why Nietzschean philosophy should be understood as a fulfilment of metaphysical thought and scientific rationalism. Heidegger views Nietzsche as the thinker who carried out “the fulfilment of the metaphysics that began with Plato” (Heidegger, 1991 [1961]: 261). Nietzsche preserves the Platonic distinction between a true world and an apparent world but reverses it (the sensible world takes the place of the supersensible or transcendent world). Important to our enquiry is Heidegger’s idea that the fulfilment of metaphysical thought derives from Nietzsche’s assumption that being is will to power, which, as such, rests on nothing but itself: it has no foundation, precisely because the distinction between a true world and an apparent world has fallen into decline. As a result, there is no transcendent principle based on which one can establish what is true or false: being as will to power is a radical form of perspectivism and subjectivism. In Heidegger’s reading, however, this is what makes Nietzsche’s work a form of metaphysical thought that leads to the triumph of scientific rationality. Nietzsche does indeed conceive of the world as material available to the will to power, as that which can be forged by humans as they please. All this is summarised in

Nietzsche’s aphorism, recalled by Heidegger: “To ‘humanise’ the world, that is, to feel ourselves more and more masters within it” (Heidegger, 1991 [1961]: 614). Eliminating any transcendental foundation of truth opens the way to a different form of metaphysical thought: it is flipped over from an “objective” to a “subjective” metaphysics. Although subjective, it remains a form of metaphysics but one intended as a fulfilment of scientific rationality.

Taking Heidegger’s approach and applying it to the aphorism “facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations” casts a different light on Nietzsche’s words: no longer do they appear as the foundation of postmodernism but, rather, as expressive of the modern paradigm – a paradigm tied to scientific rationality and the search for truth but flipped over into subjectivity. The following sections explain why the epistemology of the online world is more in line with the modern paradigm than the postmodern one, and how this also affects online journalism.

The algorithmic web as a reintroduction of modern metanarratives

Several assumptions of the postmodern paradigm are not easily reconciled with the form that online public discussion has taken in recent years, also challenging the association between digital media and postmodernism. Selective content exposure and the consequent formation of homophilic networks caused by the functioning of algorithms on the leading platforms generate a communicative exchange whose foundations are quite different from those of postmodern thought.

The first assumption of postmodernism that is in strong contradiction with the phenomena just mentioned concerns the virtual equivalence of subjective points of view, which is a corollary of the collapse of all metaphysics and all modern rationalistic projects. The idea that the ending of metanarratives opens the way to a plurality of narratives, micronarratives, and differences in points of view appears both in philosophical currents belonging to “weak thought” (Vattimo, Rovatti 2013 [1983]), issuing directly from postmodernism, and in the work of Lyotard himself (1984). The basic assumption of this opening to difference is the acceptance of all diversity. Since no one discourse can set itself up as hegemonic and absolute (because any claim to truth is a manifestation of power and leads to authoritarianism), postmodern subjectivism takes the form of “charity”. No one can establish which point of view is true: as a result, public debate starts from an acceptance of all outlooks, leading to dialogue and, ultimately, mutual solidarity. In the linguistic games that Lyotard speaks of, no discourse is privileged over others: knowledge emerges as the acceptance of a plurality of discourses.

These points are also pertinent to the more general association between postmodernism and new media, i.e., the mass media developed after the emergence of information technology and using digital technologies. In giving life to the network society, new media pluralise public discourse in such a way that, theoretically, it can no longer be subjected to any form of domination: it is freed, in other words, from all metanarratives. Nietzsche’s aphorism, the emblem of postmodernism, postulates reality’s reduction to interpretation. But as Maddalena and Gili (2020: 66) recently noted, “when there are no longer any criteria to evaluate the validity of different discourses [...] every idea and interpretation is equally legitimate”. The premise of modernism was a monological voice that described reality by objectifying it, in which a text had only one possible meaning. With postmodernism, the closed meaning of the modernist text is replaced by a dialogical reality, in which every message is open to a plurality of meanings and points of view on the world: this also applies to journalistic texts (Lähteenmäki, 1998; Soffer, 2009). The idea of a

plural dialogue, which assumes that all points of view are equivalent, is in blatant contradiction, however, with the fragmentation of online public debate, the selective content exposure caused by algorithms, and the ensuing polarisation and radicalisation of opinions. The concepts of filter bubbles – i.e., the customised information ecosystem created by algorithms in which users are exposed to information that supports what they already believe and like (Pariser, 2011), and echo chambers, closed and homogeneous virtual environments in which divergent views have no place and subjects always hear the echo of their own voice and opinions (Sunstein, 2001) – have found their way into academic discussion, entering into the lexicon of journalism and common speech. Naturally, these concepts are not accepted uncritically by the scholarly community. Over the years, some studies have objected to a lack of empirical evidence, arguing that the findings do not support the thesis of greater polarisation online than offline (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017; Bruns, 2019).

It must nevertheless be noted that recent empirical studies give greater credence to the idea that pre-existing opinions on the web are reinforced due to selective content exposure (especially the news), to such an extent that the plurality of public debate is put at risk, fostering the radicalisation of opinions (Claussen et al., 2019; Levy, 2021). In a comparative analysis of these and other studies, Aral (2020: 250) recently argued that, despite conflicting theses that have alternated over recent years, “evidence from multiple experimental studies shows that the machine’s recommendation algorithms create filter bubbles of polarised content consumption”.

This is why the narratives that form in online “tribes” (including journalistic ones, as we shall see in the final section of this article) are more and more similar to the *grand récits* of modernity than to the open narratives of postmodernity. In concrete terms, this refers to the fact that within homophilic networks, the complexity of reality is reduced to simple, all-encompassing schemas, in which every facet of reality serves to confirm pre-established opinions. These are the same principles that Lyotard identified as the basis of modernity’s metanarratives, such as Marxism, Idealism, and the Enlightenment, which sought to explain reality through unitary principles (Reason, Spirit, the laws of materialism). These were the principles that gave reality an absolute, overarching meaning, and were somehow able to explain every phenomenon. As Hannah Arendt (1951) observes, the concept of ideology should be understood etymologically as the “logic of the idea”: as an attitude that compresses the infinite variety of reality into an absolute logical schema and satisfies the desire for meaning. In a nutshell, precisely because of its ultrarational basis, the ideological attitude is impervious to factual denial. This is exactly what led to Karl Popper’s observation (2002 [1963]: 45–46) on the Marxist theory of history and Freudian psychoanalysis:

“I felt that these other three theories, though posing as sciences, had in fact more in common with primitive myths than with science [...]. These theories appeared to be able to explain practically everything that happened within the fields to which they referred. [...] the world was full of verifications of the theory. Whatever happened always confirmed it [...] and unbelievers were clearly people who did not want to see the manifest truth. [...] A Marxist could not open a newspaper without finding on every page confirming evidence for his interpretation of history”.

Like the philosophical systems developed from the principles of modern science (think of the Cartesian Method), the algorithmic epistemology works on a completely deductive and falsely empirical basis to make each successive piece of data confirm the initial thesis. This mechanism is one of the most studied and analysed dynamics belonging to the world of online communities,

and it relates to what media sociology defines as “confirmation bias” (Zhao et al., 2020) and the “backfire effect” (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Jarman, 2016). Through studies conducted on numerous Facebook pages and groups, Quattrocioni and Vicini (2016, 48–50), among others, have pointed out that communities of users who are grouped together and strongly polarised on a specific position tend to take as true news that is scarcely credible, provided it is consistent with their reference narrative. This process has to do with confirmation bias, namely, a mechanism that leads individuals to consider true only information that falls within their belief system. To make matters worse, empirical studies on Facebook groups show that debunking operations are not only unsuccessful, but they also tend to reinforce the very belief system they seek to discredit, thus causing a backfire effect. For users who are convinced, for instance, of the truthfulness of a conspiracy theory, the more they are exposed to information showing the fallacy of their position, the more they will strengthen their initial belief. They do this either by ignoring and discarding information that contradicts their theory, or by taking it as devious attempts to conceal the truth. The backfire effect thus consists in a paradoxical reinforcement of the polarisation of individuals and groups who are exposed to factual denials of the ideas they believe in: guided by the tribal emotionality produced in them by selective exposure to certain content, instead of reflecting on their ideas and reconsidering them, these individuals and groups will increasingly reinforce their identity and their sense of group belonging.

The narratives of online communities, which also absorb journalistic narratives, as we shall see, thus seem to draw on the grand narratives of modern thought. Instead of moving toward a postmodernist relativism and perspectivism, the web of algorithmic engineering leads toward a subjective fulfilment of modernity: just as the metanarratives of modernity claimed to provide an objective and truthful explanation of all aspects of reality, so in online metanarratives each individual group believes its own worldview to be true, absolute, and capable of explaining all things. Contrasting narratives are not accepted in the name of a fundamental relativism, as postmodernist assumptions would have it; instead, they are rejected as false and often bitterly opposed, in line with the dynamics of radicalisation and polarisation described earlier.

Although, as specified, the epistemological paradigm presented here refers to the global North countries, a few examples concerning the nations of the global South can be given to highlight some possible effects of algorithmic news dissemination processes on societies that already present strong levels of polarisation and, sometimes, low levels of digital literacy. In Myanmar, for example, Facebook has admitted to playing a role (described as “decisive” by a UN report) in fomenting hatred against the Rohingya Muslim minority. Low digital literacy, in Myanmar, meant that users lacked the tools to respond critically and reflectively to the proliferation of disparaging and inflammatory posts against the Rohingya, which Facebook soon made viral (Osno, 2018). In another low digitally literate country like the Philippines, on the other hand, Facebook-induced polarisation dynamics and the proliferation of fake news fostered Duterte’s legitimisation of his own autocratic and repressive power, as highlighted by a BuzzFeed investigation (Alba, 2018). And again, a BBC investigation highlighted how, in an already heavily “tribalised” nation marked by ethnic-religious conflicts like Nigeria, users’ hyper-emotional responses to content that went viral on social media (and often manipulated) contributed to massacres of Christians by Muslims and vice versa (Adegoke, 2018). This scenario of further balkanisation, in nations of the Global South, may thus be influenced by variables such as “digital literacy and competencies, limited access to information and exposure to various kinds of self-sorting online groups. Thus, not everyone shares fake news with the

intention to cause harm” (Mare et al., 2019: 6). It follows from what has been said so far that the subjectivism of the algorithmic web cannot be defined as postmodern but rather as a subjective reversal of modernity: it does not lead to dialogue between different but equally legitimate opinions but to an antagonism between narratives that are indeed subjective but at the same time claim to be true and absolute (like those of modernity, which founded this same claim on universality rather than subjectivity). Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche thus serves particularly well to explain the turn that subjectivism has taken in the algorithmic web. As regards Nietzsche’s aphorism that celebrates the end of facts and the triumph of interpretations, Heidegger’s idea allows us to locate it in a different paradigm than that of postmodernism, seeing it instead as a fulfilment of the metaphysics of subjectivity, and to clarify the idea that the universal assumptions of modernity’s metanarratives have been reversed into subjectivity.

As Gade (2011: 114) reminds us, “to postmodernists, science is but one discourse, and it includes all the biases of any discourse: it imposes a set of processes and rules on how to see and define the world, and these processes shape thinking in ways that obscure seeing the world as it actually is”. What happens in online communities through the cognitive dynamics of confirmation bias and the backfire effect represents a similar shutting out of reality, which is now encapsulated in a preconstructed narrative and system of meaning within a single group and constantly reinforced by selective exposure to content (including news content).

The equivalence of interpretations is not associated with the algorithmic web and the narratives formed there; similarly, the postmodern assumption of the plural and never-definitive meaning of a text also does not correspond to what is found online, particularly on social networking sites. To meet a social network’s need for meaning, the texts circulating on the web often present a full, absolute, easily and immediately comprehensible meaning capable of generating emotional reactions (in the form of likes, shares, and so on), thereby winning the battle for users’ attention. Taking as an example the headlines of news articles as they are conveyed on social media immediately calls up the phenomenon of “sharebaiting”, in which users are prompted to share content based on the headline alone, by clicking on an article without reading it through. This happens precisely because of the emotional charge and fullness of meaning expressed by the wording of online headlines, which are instrumental in making them go instantly viral. A study by Columbia University (reported in Dewey, 2016) showed that almost 60 per cent of the links shared on social media had never been opened by users, confirming the effectiveness of these strategies: the headlines express an immediate, complete sense of meaning for the social networks for whom the information content is intended.

Clearly, there is no plural meaning here, no polysemy, no multi-voice dialogue, as the principles of postmodernism would have it. Rather, the headlines on social media are constructed to be short and concise, with a suggestive character, to reduce the complexity of the narrative (and reality) and fit into a pre-established schema of meaning. In this case too, then, the web of algorithms, filter bubbles, and echo chambers draws on a paradigm that is much closer to the grand narratives of modernity than to the dialogic plurality of postmodernity. Subjectivism, as in Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche, should therefore be understood within a rationalist, Enlightenment epistemology, one that is modern in all respects, in which individual narratives maintain their pretension to express an absolute truth impervious to factual denial, and to convey it in online social networks. It remains to be seen how these observations on headlines also apply to journalistic narratives.

Information platformization and journalistic (meta)narratives

With the massive transfer of information onto the web, journalism has progressively absorbed the principles and imperatives that guide the functioning of online platforms. The shift toward a subjective form of modernism, rather than toward postmodernism, brought about by the algorithmic web can, therefore, also be applied to journalistic narratives, insofar as it is the online platforms and their algorithms that influence both the production of information by news organisations and the consumption of information by users. In other words, there is a “platformization” of information, which makes journalistic narratives subject to the same principles that govern the circulation of other content on the web. Information progressively loses its public value and is transformed into a “private value”, especially on the web and in social media, in line with the commercial rationale and monetisation of interactions that guide the functioning of platforms. As the consumption of information is increasingly influenced by selective exposure to content (due to algorithmic filters), “information bubbles” are generated that also influence how journalistic texts are composed: to maximise interactions and revenues, these too must attract interest within those same bubbles.

First, as is well known, for many years now the consumption of information via social media has increased disproportionately (Newman et al., 2022). Social media have become the new “infomediaries” (Rebillard and Smyrnaio, 2010), the true mediators of information. This implies, however, that information consumption is strongly conditioned by networks of individual users, who read what their contacts have shared on their walls. Social media have been referred to as “secondary gatekeepers” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009): also included within this category is “audience-based gatekeeping” (Nielsen, 2017: 90), that is, the contacts in a user’s social network that determine their information consumption. Clearly, the network rationale already steers information consumption to form “information bubbles”, since news consumption takes place within networks of users who share the same mindset, political orientation, and worldview. Moreover, in serving this type of audience, social media and platforms in general follow the rationale of spreadability (Jenkins et al., 2013): in other words, they have to offer information content that maximises interactions and generates actions such as likes, comments, and shares. These aspects in particular reinforce the tendency to form ideological bubbles (Klinger and Svensson, 2018), since the user network is offered content in line with the ideological orientation of its members (specifically with the goal of making it simpler to generate interactions and revenues).

Indeed, news organisations increasingly produce content based on its estimated potential circulation (Anderson, 2011). These estimates hinge on the datafication process (van Dijck 2014), whereby metrics on information consumption (such as trending topics) dictate the topics to be covered. However, if information consumption is already highly polarised and ideologised, news organisations will be obliged to produce content in line with their users’ attitudes. Given these conditions, journalistic narratives can hardly be constructed as narratives that are open to a plurality of meanings, dialogical, and designed to elicit reflective responses from users. Quite the opposite: there will be a tendency to propose content that is instantly understandable, has an immediate emotional impact, responds to the ideological orientation of the information bubble for which it is intended, and consequently satisfies the need (typical of any bubble) for an absolute meaning, defined once and for all.

As noted earlier, this is primarily due to the ‘platformization’ of information, that is, the result of news outlets absorbing the principles (and values) of online platforms, as well as the fact that these platforms are gradually taking over the role of information and news providers. A process of “disaggregation” (Carr, 2008:

153) is taking place, by which news organisations no longer act as news gateways and are replaced by search engines, news aggregators, and social networks. Within this framework, the audience is no longer an information audience: it is composed, rather, of platform users. These processes mean that “as platformization continues to penetrate more sectors of society, the distinction between private and public is increasingly glossed over as an irrelevant societal classification” (van Dijck et al., 2018: 30). Under these circumstances, journalism also tends to lose a great deal of its public values (its role in democratic systems, separation from power, comprehensive coverage so that everyone has a voice, and so on). A shift takes place “from a model that primarily revolves around editorial autonomy to one based on datafied user interests and activities.” But “user data are never a neutral reflection of user interests but always shaped by the techno-commercial strategies of platforms” (van Dijck et al., 2018: 57). The data, which forms a basis for setting the editorial line (dictating which news items are chosen and the language used to cover them), are influenced by the bubble-forming algorithms: consequently, they tend to produce news “for bubbles”, since this is what generates the most interactions and revenues. News organisations are pushed towards communicative models that privilege private, subjective, and often ideological meanings, specifically due to the commercial rationale of the platform to which they are subject.

The equivalence proposed in this article between the algorithmic web, ideological bubbles, and the *grand récits* of modernity is thus applicable to journalistic narratives as well: they absorb the guiding principles of the platforms, which drive the production process as much as they do news consumption. Here again, subjective, ‘private’ journalism directed toward a platform audience cannot be qualified as ‘postmodern’, since in both its choice of topics and language it is a journalism that aims to create antagonisms rather than dialogue, to provide absolute rather than open narratives, to satisfy the desire for meaning of online communities. Emotional, captivating headlines, the choice of highly divisive, polarising topics, all of this succeeds much better (due to the platform affordances) in capturing the interest of users, thus also catering to their desires and generating greater revenues.

This is not postmodern journalism, therefore: it is modern journalism reversed into a subjective form. Even the narratives conveyed by news organisations in information bubbles are in fact metanarratives, endowed (for that one particular bubble) with an absolute, all-inclusive meaning, capable of encompassing all facets of reality and “explaining everything”. From universal, objective metanarratives we pass to subjective metanarratives. It is indeed true that with the postmodern turn everything became interpretation; however, inside each ideological bubble, each person’s narrative is considered an absolute truth. Having lost its public function of providing information and dialogue, and having acquired the rationale of a platform aimed at maximising revenue (through the interactions of polarised audiences), journalism tends to reinforce this process.

As for the countries of the Global South, which have been hinted at during this work, it should be noted how the production and especially the consumption of news is often influenced by the cost of accessing information. Indeed, it has been noted how, especially in African countries, many media outlets lock their content behind paywalls: this limits access to information for substantial portions of the population (Mare et al., 2019). The consequence of this limited access to a multiplicity of information sources is that people often mistake “the popularity or virality of a shared piece of information as an indication of its veracity” (Chakrabarti et al., 2018: 44). Again, there are therefore mechanisms of news platformization that, in the absence of full

access to information by the population, can generate or exacerbate some of the effects described in relation to the context of Global North countries.

Conclusions

This article offers an alternative conceptual framework to the interpretation that views online journalism as a shift from a modern to a postmodern paradigm. It begins by reconstructing the main theories that explain the link between the modern paradigm of journalism and the assumptions of scientific modernity and shows how the journalistic ideal of objectivity is often equated with a metanarrative like those that structured the philosophical and scientific discourses of modernity. It then reconstructs theories showing how journalism has shifted, along with the gradual rise of the web, from the paradigm of objectivity to a form of marked subjectivism. This trend has been reinforced by platform affordances, the phenomena of media convergence, and a contamination between information actors, communication models, and types of content. This subjective stance is generally associated with the postmodern turn and with Nietzsche’s aphorism that “facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations”. It is argued, however, that Nietzsche’s aphorism and the postmodern paradigm, in general, are inadequate to define the turn taken in the production and consumption of online content (including information), which is strongly influenced by platform algorithms and the formation of ideological bubbles. The narratives that emerge within highly homogenous and polarised online social networks are actually the metanarratives of modernity: like the systems of thought that claimed to explain every aspect of reality, narratives that can “explain everything” are favoured within bubbles, because they provide an absolute meaning never contradicted by the data of reality. Confirmation bias and the backfire effect explain the imperviousness of these bubbles to evidence that refutes pre-constituted narratives. This clashes with several assumptions of postmodernism: the equivalence of interpretations, an openness to other people’s points of view, dialogue, and a plurality of textual meanings. On the contrary, online texts tend to assume a monolithic meaning, one that is absolute and defined once and for all.

All these factors lead to the hypothesis that the algorithmic web represents a fulfilment of the universal metanarratives of modernity but flipped over into a subjective form. For this reason, starting from Nietzsche’s aphorism, Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche is proposed as most suited to capture the characteristics of this subjective fulfilment of modernity. Heidegger saw Nietzsche’s thought as a reversal of an objective metaphysics into a subjective metaphysics, making it a fulfilment of scientific and Enlightenment rationalism (rather than the forerunner of postmodern thought, as Nietzsche would be considered from the 1970s on).

Lastly, this algorithmic, polarised logic, which revolves around the phenomena of filter bubbles and echo chambers and reintroduces the principles of modern metanarratives, also applies to journalistic narratives. Indeed, information makes up part of the content that is increasingly dependent on the operating mechanisms of online platforms, which, through their affordances, impose a highly “privatised”, subjectivist and ideological model of news production and consumption. Journalistic texts and narratives thus succumb to a fate similar to that of other content circulating on the web. For this reason, within the framework of algorithms and ideological information bubbles, journalism does indeed express an epistemological model that revolves around subjectivity, but it cannot be defined as “post-modern”: rather, it is a subjective reversal of the metanarratives typical of modern journalism.

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, the article's intention is to make a theoretical argument in order to propose a new epistemological paradigm for online journalism. As such, it makes a theoretical synthesis that cannot take into account all the practices of digital journalism. Secondly, the proposed epistemological paradigm is limited to the countries of the Global North. However, some elements referring to the countries of the Global South, particularly those in Africa, have been presented, which may allow for comparative reflection. This may lead future studies to analyse how the epistemological paradigm proposed here can be integrated with epistemological models more directly referring to journalism in the countries of the Global South.

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Notes

- 1 Affordances are the properties that a technological object possesses and which in fact already suggest a use for the object itself.
- 2 Journalism by non-professionals who disseminate information using social media, blogs and websites.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Additional information

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