VIGILANT JOURNALISM

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Vigilant Journalism: ethical and deontological dilemmas.

In his book "Liquid surveillance: A conversation" co-authored with Zygmunt Bauman, professor David Lyon states: "One key problem with contemporary surveillance is its myopic focus on control, which quickly excludes any concern with care. Are responsible and even caring forms of digital surveillance possible?" (Bauman and Lyon 2013, pag.37).

Taking inspiration from this question, this paper investigates whether forms of caring surveillance exist in journalism alongside the better-known form of threatening surveillance. It explores which ethical and deontological approaches regulate them, and whether such approaches constitute a self-absolving approach against related issues and responsibilities. Journalists rightly fear surveillance technology when it is used to threaten their professional independency. Suddenly this technology turns might into a useful, even beneficial tool, when it's put into use by journalists themselves.

The stranded relationship between surveillance and journalism

Traditionally, surveillance in journalism has been depicted under an Orwellian aura that implies an inner negativity and malignity. Given the worrisome reports (Human Rights Council Special Report 2019), yearly produced from within (Sanches et al. 2020) and outside academia (Freedom of the Net 2018) on the mounting dangers and threats that journalism faces, especially in the digital realm, this scary depiction of surveillance is still dramatically true.

Still, forms of surveillance practices daily occur in the exercise of journalism. Journalists regularly use tools and equipment that hold immense intrusive capabilities. This surveillance capacity is bounded and regulated not just by the local and international laws in place (Findlay and McKinlay 2003), but by the deontological norms of the profession as well (Plaisance 2013).

These deontological norms may be weakened or entirely eluded by a number of factors, including processes described by Bauman as of adiaphorization, where moral obligations are defused in front of processes that detach and anesthetize the person "against the committing of immoral deeds and the sole use of criteria of instrumental efficiency in the choice of ways to proceed" (Bauman and Lyon 2013, pag.82).

Deontological considerations stem from the conceptualization of what is journalism, and what constitutes its mission. We might be tempted to take for granted that journalism acts as a watchdog on concentrations and misuse of power, ensuring the accountability of institutions in society (Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2017). But journalists are to be seen as part of their society, immersed in it, and therefore not entirely immune to bias, polarisation, partisanship.

Outside the Western journalistic tradition, the core mission of journalism may assume a different shape: to contribute to the nation-building processes by strengthening social unity and patriotism, while pluralism and freedom of the press are seen as secondary, or even damaging incumbencies (Stevenson 1994).

Other forms of journalism exist beyond its traditional role of power's watchdog, or reinterpreting this role in a different way: alternative journalism (Atton and Hamilton 2008), radical journalism (Atton 2002), citizen journalism (Roberts 2019) and solution journalism (McIntyre 2019) originated from new or partially new ideas of what constitutes good journalism, and what a good journalist is expected to do over the course of the job.

If new forms of journalism are internally regulated by a diverse mesh of cultural and professional norms exist, how do these norms relate to surveillance practices, both from a cultural and a technological perspective? Do journalists need to review their deontological guidelines for the use of surveillance technology in journalism? Is there an emerging "self-absolving" approach to its use? Should a debate within their community be stimulated through a bottom-up approach, and foster a new professional culture more aware of the opportunities, the dangers and the responsibilities connected to the use of such technology?

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, inductive approach through semi-structured interviews as a way to explore these questions and the journalists' experiences both as targets and agents of surveillance practices. Interviews have the advantage of being familiar to journalists, which facilitates the trust-building process. They also imply that the body of knowledge is co-produced by the interviewer and the interviewee together, thus simulating and stimulating the kind of debate that can happen between fellow journalists discussing the topic.
Journalists working in two countries (Italy and Turkey) were selected through a combination of targeted and snowball sampling techniques, two methodologies that reciprocally mitigate the foreseeable potential bias risks (Heckathorn 1997). In-depth investigation received preference over representativeness of the sample.

Collected data, after a rigorous anonymisation procedure, were analysed through discourse, content and thematic analysis.

Findings show that although logics of power and issues regarding fundamental rights are very present in the journalists' minds when dealing with threatening surveillance, the same issues tend to disappear from the discussion when it comes to the opportunistic and/or professional use of surveillance tools. A desirable deeper conceptualisation of these issues seems to be absent, or improvised only when asked about. For instance, a discourse around the right to be forgotten was not brought to the table unless explicit questions were made.

Journalists somehow tend to indulge in self-justification regarding the use of surveillance technology, primarily driven by the right to inform, and do not seem aware of the power-relations or lack of transparency that such technology implies.

Data archiving generally seems to lack standardised protocols of selection and retention. The main reasons are pure archive creation, since data can be useful for future investigations or teaching purposes, and especially protection against potential legal complaints.

Findings finally suggest common patterns on how journalists perceive the use of surveillance technology, outlining potential paths for self-regulatory deontological norms, produced from within the journalistic community itself. Further research and debate on the issue seems desirable and necessary.

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