

News Media Appropriation: strategical possibilities of pro-am on Twitter

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Abstract

This paper aims to characterize Pro-Am possibilities in a specific social network site, *Twitter* microblog, considering it as a journalistic strategy. The exploratory study is based on the observation of *Twitter's* use of two world leading newspapers, *El País*, from Spain, and *The Guardian*, from United Kingdom. We've perceived some practices that point to a collaboration between amateurs and professionals on the production and circulation of news, showing traces that *Twitter* can be integrated into the journalistic process as a whole. Among other things, we've noted two movements that indicate that Pro-Am may take place on *Twitter* or from *Twitter*. As we show in the article, this can be perceived a) by invitations to collaborate and the establishment of conversations with the public (specially in *The Guardian's Twitter* account) and b) by the use of hashtags that can be replicated by the users when posting or commenting on *Twitter* about news (on both *Twitter* accounts analyzed).

Keywords

Journalism; pro-am; media convergence; twitter.

Everyday, new tools and web services appear, with different proposals and for different purposes. Individuals, who use them with many interests, appropriate these spaces in different ways. Some of these spaces and appropriations may have implications for journalistic practice.

This is the case of *Twitter*, whose appropriation for news circulation made news media outlets to also seek to use the space for the extension of its contents (Jenkins, 2006), as well of its contexts of actions. However, because it is a relatively new tool, there isn't, yet, a precise set of rules and procedures to follow¹, which makes room for new and interesting appropriations to emerge, from the practices tested and observed.

Based on this scenario, this paper aims to discuss the Pro-Am movement, described by Anderson (2006) as the partnership between amateurs and professionals with the help of digital communication, as a process that is possible from the appropriation made by news media on *Twitter*. The study presents the results from an exploratory qualitative analysis of the practices observed in *Twitter*'s use of two world-leading newspapers, *El País*, from Spain, and *The Guardian*, from United Kingdom. As discussed throughout the paper, those outlets seem to use a launch and learn strategy (Saad, 2003) in their approach on the tool.

The article is divided into three parts, followed by conclusions. In part 1, we discuss Pro-Am and producers. In part 2, we talk about *Twitter* as a space where a new standard of information exchange can be observed. In part 3, we discuss the Pro-Am possibilities on *Twitter*, based on our empirical observations. Among other things, we've noted two movements that indicate that Pro-Am may take place on *Twitter* or from *Twitter*. As we show in the article, this can be perceived a) by invitations to collaborate and the establishment of conversations with the public and b) by the use of hashtags that can be replicated by the users when posting or commenting on *Twitter* about news. In the end, some points are raised for discussion in the form of preliminary conclusions, about the possible relationship between Pro-Am, journalism and *Twitter*.

Pro-am and producers: amateurs and professionals cooperation

Pro-Am is a process described by Anderson (2006) as the partnership work among amateurs and professionals using possibilities that are brought by the digital media. As the author says, the term was coined by Demos, a British think tank, to describe a scientific discovery about how the universe works that was confirmed thanks to the collaboration between amateurs from New Zealand, Australia and Chile and professionals from the United States and Japan. This experience was considered the key moment in the arrival of a "Pro-Am" era, "a time when professionals and amateurs work side by side" (Anderson, 2006, p.60).

¹ First steps towards this were taken by the end of June, 2011, when *Twitter* launched *Twitter for Newsrooms*, a guide for news organizations on the tool, available at <http://media.twitter.com/newsrooms/>

The dynamics of the exchanges established by the implantation of systems that support the participation of readers on digital news outlets show that this phenomenon may be taking place on journalism (Ruellan, 2007; Belochio, 2009; Bruns, 2010). It can be observed when digital newspapers request the user submission of texts, pictures and videos about certain events that they can't cover in a broad and instantaneous way by themselves. By this action, news outlets seek to expand quality and quantity of information and details about the events they work with, through the help received from the amateur public.

In addition to this, Pro-Am can also be perceived when exchanges between collaborative pages and media outlets take place, by the appropriation of those contents in order to enrich their coverage. Ruellan (2007, p.2) believes that actions such as the one aforementioned shed new light "on the relationship in the media and journalism between professional and amateur practices". To Bruns (2008), these initiatives demonstrate the collaborator's importance as a "produser". He coined the expression in order to refer to the individual that simultaneously uses and produces web contents. New participation models allow ordinary people to collaborate with the production of information, what then turns users into producers (Bruns, 2008). Besides news consumption, they also have and active part on the content production process.

The idea of a produsage opposes to traditional models of industrial production. On traditional production, there were three clear roles: producer, distributor and consumer. On the internet, a single individual can simultaneously play those three roles. To Bruns (2005), everyone has at least the potential to publish something. However,

What is much more important in the networked environment of the early 21st century is that today, anyone with access to the Web can be an editor, a contributor, a collaborator, a participant in the online news process – in short, a produser (Bruns, 2005, p.8).

In this sense, users' participation on news construction in digital environments is not limited to the possibility of autonomously publishing contents. Web users can collaborate in other forms to the production and distribution of information, as by suggesting topics, or commenting on traditional news sites. Bowman & Willis (2003) lists some of the roles that can be played by the audience on participative journalism: publishing, audio and video broadcast, editing, content creation (text, pictures, video, cartoon), comments and opinion, documentation, content management and publishing.

To Bruns (2008), in face to active audiences, news ceases to be a product to become a process, “never finished, always continuing, and (...) gradually evolving towards a better understanding of ‘the truth’” (Bruns, 2008, p.82). Thus, these producers can collaborate in many steps of the journalistic process, making clear a relationship among amateurs and professionals, the Pro-Am. Bruns (2010, p.11) believes that “given the challenging financial circumstances currently experienced by the journalism industry, such disruptive innovation at the pro/am interface – now visible in a few early projects – may be just what it needs” (Bruns, 2010, p.11). With Pro-Am initiatives, journalism can be reinvented and expanded into many ways.

Twitter as a support for a new pattern in the exchange of information

Twitter has been constantly appropriated and shaped by individuals, organizations and institutions as journalism. The microblog is gradually moving away from its original purpose of being a space to share personal information, originally in response to the question “What are you doing?”, to become a more complex medium, in which different actors – individuals, companies, news media outlets – can interact in different forms in real time. It is probably because of these changes that *Twitter* modified its main question, that since 2009 is “What’s happening?”.

Perhaps because of this particularity on the appropriation, news media outlets have the tendency to join the tool using a strategy described by Saad (2003) as “launch and learn”. Referring to the adaptation of traditional news organizations to the demands of the web at the beginning of the millennium, the researcher explains that media conglomerates would first launch their sites on the web to then later learn, in practice and with market reactions, what directions to take and which strategy to follow (Saad, 2003, p.123). We believe that this type of experience is taking place nowadays with *Twitter*. This idea is supported by the fact that reference newspapers are present on the tool, even though they don’t have a clear strategy of how to use it. Appropriation gradually takes shape, while learning to deal and interact with the new medium.

Thus, even though at first news outlets tended to use *Twitter* just as a means to share headlines and links (Zago, 2009), they are gradually promoting experimentations and creating new uses and appropriations to the tool (Silva & Christofolletti, 2010; Zago & Recuero, 2011). According to Silva & Christofolletti (2010), *Twitter* operates as an extra intermediate between senders and receivers of news, in a modern, portable, quick and free way.

Hermida (2010) believes that microblogging services such as *Twitter* allows individuals to exercise institutionalized functions of journalists. To the author, systems that allow collaborative exchanges constitutes an ambient journalism, in which citizens would be responsible for the production of small pieces of contents that could collectively be considered as journalism.

In this paper, we understand that the increasingly frequent manifestation of the traditional media on *Twitter* shows that the tool has become important among the strategies employed by digital news media. Therefore, we ask whether the microblog is considered as just one more resource in order to attract new readers, or more than that. What are the reasons to the delivering of journalistic contents on *Twitter*? Digital newspapers have clear objectives when creating an account and providing their content in *Twitter*?

One of the reasons that may lead reference newspapers to appropriate the microblog is the fact that it is becoming an important element in what Primo (2008) calls the “media information compound”, “a set of information technologically disseminated by the media that serve to the individual update on news” (Primo, 2008, p. 46). In other words, the compound is formed by the content broadcasted by news media with which a citizen has access day to day. A user consumes different information in many supports throughout a day. Based on that, they interpret those data and incorporate them into their routines, according to their needs.

Twitter is one of the means through which individuals can construct their impressions about facts and about reality. Because of that, it becomes an important place for the news media outlets to be present. Thus, these outlets perform a movement called by Jenkins (2006) as “extension”. According to the author, this is a convergence effect marked by the strategic expansion of journalistic content to different distribution systems. It is one more mark that the convergence process does not only refer to the mixture of images, sounds and texts in the composition of the information that appears on the network. As Jenkins states, it also involves

The flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want (Jenkins, 2006, p.2).

Extension is typical of journalistic convergence (Salaverría, 2003; 2008; Domingo et al., 2007). It represents a transformation in the processes of production, distribution and consumption of information from the gradual reorientation in the way a news media outlet

works and, also, from the new profile of their audiences. This is directed to the integration and to the collaboration among teams that work in distinct outlets (TV, radio, online, print) administrated by the same organization. According to Salaverría (2003; 2008), it involves changes in the business, technological, professional and communicational dimensions. Domingo et al. (2007) cites integrated production, multiskilled professionals, multiplatform delivery and active audience as emerging dimensions on these environments.

Multiplatform delivery, according to Domingo et al. (2007), refers to the circulation of news in multiple Web 2.0 spaces. Salaverría explains that this dynamics is marked by

procesos tecnológicos y editoriales que se orientan a la generación de contenidos para su posterior consumo a través de múltiples medios o dispositivos de contenidos para su posterior consumo a través de múltiples medios o dispositivos de recepción (Salaverría, 2008, p.53)

In a context of media convergence (Jensen, 2010), there is a complexification of strategies, models and news products by the extension of media contents (Jenkins, 2006). The manifestation of news media in spaces such as *Twitter* follows appropriation trends and models that are typical of the Web 2.0. By those actions, news media seek to expand its cyberspace strategies, by using systems that are only possible on this environment, due to the easiness of use provided by certain types of technologies. Among these systems we can highlight formats that are strengthened with public participation (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007), recognized as one of Web 2.0 principles and as traces of the strengthening of collective intelligence (O'Reilly, 2005; Romani & Kuklinski, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Lemos & Lévy, 2010).

Based on that, we believe that multiplatform delivery can be considered as a direct mark of the expansion movement described by Jenkins (2006). Among the most evident results of this extension, we highlight the modification of the presentation of journalistic content on the web. This movement obligates outlets to adapt its contents to the norms of other media to which it is being delivered. This happens when news are adapted in order to be showed up on social network sites such as Facebook or Google Plus, for example. At these spaces, news acquires distinct formats. This also takes place on *Twitter*. Only updates with up to 140 characters can be posted on the tool. Because of that, it is common to observe, on the microblog, the posting of short headlines followed by a link. But news media *Twitter* presence doesn't need to be limited to that. Other uses can be conceived, and even Pro-Am practices can take place on the tool, as we will discuss further on the next section.

Strategical Possibilities of Pro-Am on Twitter

Over time, news outlets came up with new possibilities of using *Twitter*. Thus, following the logics of launch and learned, as explained above, they experimented new strategies, capable of enhancing not only its popularity on the tool, but also the interaction with their own sources of information. Besides posting headlines using resources such as hashtags and retweets, languages created by users of the microblog, news media outlets started a process of information exchange with their readers/followers.

We related this initiative to the process called by Anderson (2006) as Pro-Am. We believe that the more intense exchange between journalists and amateurs, as described here, can also take place on *Twitter* or from *Twitter*.

In order to address this, we made an exploratory study based on the observation of *Twitter's* use of two world-leading newspapers, *El País*, from Spain, and *The Guardian*, from United Kingdom. Tweets from those two newspapers were observed daily for a period of one week in July, 2011.

The Guardian

A recent appropriation from *The Guardian* on *Twitter* can be seen on Figure 1.



Figure 1: Hashtags appropriation from *The Guardian*.

As shown in the picture above, hashtags utilization (highlighted in red) on *The Guardian* demonstrates a signal of appropriation. The expressions “#NotW” and

“#jawdropping” refer to the closing of the News of the World, a British tabloid run by Rupert Murdoch. The publication had its activities closed in July 2011 due to a scandal related to phone hacking by members of its editorial staff. We can observe, in the tweet, Guardian’s staff opinion about the fact. Hashtags, in this case, serve as a label to identify the topic under discussion, which facilitates the later search and recuperation, and stimulates the conversation about the same topic. Besides, they also express the impressions of *The Guardian*’s staff about the fact, by using terms such as “jawdropping”. The use of hashtags by the newspaper demonstrates *The Guardian*’s adherence to the dynamical use possibilities of *Twitter*, by adapting the newspaper language to the tool’s language conventions and space constraints.

The next figure highlights *The Guardian Twitter*’s use to exchange ideas with users:



Figure 2: Conversation between *The Guardian* staff and a user on *Twitter*.

On Figure 2, the user @BobOHara talks about a new button implemented by *The Guardian* in its website in order to share contents from the newspaper on *Twitter*. The sentence “@BobOHara Yes. Isn’t it exciting?” appears as an answer from the staff to the previous user comment. It is interesting to note that the manifestation of the newspaper appears to have a friendly tone. We observe, in the example above, the possibility of effectively establishing informal public dialogues on particular topics between journalists and the public with the help of *Twitter*. We consider such practice a differential compared to what used to happen in journalism in its older formats. Conversation was not common, and the exposure of feedback from the public was often limited to areas such as letters from readers, for example. We believe

that the openness to dialogue is an important step in order to Pro-Am to take place in journalism.

The next picture shows a case of publication of a call for participation on *Twitter*. The participation could contribute to the enrichment of a coverage held by *The Guardian's* staff. This type of expression is considered an initiative that can trigger Pro-Am.



Figure 3: Call for participation from *The Guardian* on *Twitter*.

The call was published on *Twitter* on July 7, 2011. It invites the public to send questions to the astronaut Jeff Hoffman in a special live chat, promoted by *The Guardian* in its website. Users could access the chat by clicking on the short link before the hashtags “#shuttle” and “#nasa”. The debate about the launch of the space shuttle followed with the tweet “First impressions of the final space #shuttle launch? Leave your comments here: <http://bit.ly/pj2yBd> #sts135 #nasatweetup breathtaking, no?”, published on July 8, 2011. This other tweet has the same features of the one on Figure 3: it is a call for participation that seeks for the collaboration of the public. The intention is, probably, to guarantee the expansion of the development of the topic, with the assistance of amateurs willing to participate.

How *The Guardian* uses the returns from the public to this type of call? An example can be viewed on a news piece called “Space shuttle launch – live coverage”, published on the website on July 8, 2011. Figure 4 shows tweets from the public that appears on this news piece:



Figure 4: Tweets from the space shuttle launch on *The Guardian*.

A total of seven manifestations from the public on *Twitter* were added to the article. This act demonstrates that the microblog is not used solely with the intention to “be there”, as it might be the case for some other newspapers. *The Guardian* actually uses contents produced by their followers on their news, exploring, thus, its potential to make them more comprehensive or even more interesting. We believe that the example used as an illustration here brings traces of the Pro-Am movement, as it demonstrates one possible form of partnership between amateurs and professionals at (in the case of Figure 2) and from (as on Figure 3 and 4) *Twitter*

El País

After describing the findings related to *The Guardian*, we will now discuss the *Twitter* appropriation of *El País*. Our main focuses are the processes that demonstrate the experimentation of the languages of the tool, and, essentially, those that enable the practice of Pro-Am to emerge.

The following image depicts the appropriation of everyday practices from *Twitter* users, such as the use of hashtags and Follow Friday (#ff):



Figure 5: Follow Friday thanks and the use of hashtags on *El País*.

As it can be seen on Figure 5, the adoption of practices first created by *Twitter* users, such as Follow Friday (A), and the use of hashtags (B), also takes place in *El País Twitter* initiatives. In A, the newspaper is thanking all the users that mentioned *El País's Twitter* account on a Follow Friday. The tweet appears as a collective response to the users. In B, the hashtag “#lomasvisto” refers to a category in *El País* website, *Lo Más Visto*² (or, “Most viewed”). The hashtag is used to identify the article as a part of this series. The tweet links to an article on sports written by Ramon Besa and published on July 7, 2011. As we saw previously when discussing *The Guardian's* use of *Twitter*, *El País* also seeks to employ the microblog tool language in order to draw the public’s attention to its own pages and content. Other users may see that hashtag and also employ it in order to discuss about the same category of news.

The next picture brings an example of a mobilization that can allow exchanges that resembles Pro-Am practices.

² Available at <http://www.elpais.com/lomas/>



Figure 6: Call for participation from *El País*.

Figure 6 highlights a call for participation. This time, the journalistic staff is requesting the public to send their pictures from the San Fermín party³. Held in July, this party honors the patron saint of Pamplona, Spain. Pictures are shown in a specific gallery for the event on *El País.com*. They appear to be inserted in the publication as a complement to the whole coverage of the festival. We see it as a trace that the newspaper seeks, on the microblog, more than merely mark their presence. We identify, in this type of initiative, the intention to seek for useful contributions to the enrichment of the publication, allowing users to show different points of views about certain events. In many cases, news media professional reporters are unable to register everything about news events, since it is impossible to be everywhere every time. With the help from the public, it is possible to enhance the news, by receiving contributions from *Twitter*, and other social network sites. In a broader sense, Pro-Am can take place on *El País* from *Twitter*, especially by call for participations on the website.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to characterize Pro-Am possibilities in a specific social network site, *Twitter* microblog, considering it as a journalistic strategy. For that, we made an exploratory study based on the observation of *Twitter's* uses of *The Guardian* and *El País*. We've perceived some practices that point to a collaboration between amateurs and professionals on the production and circulation of news, showing traces that *Twitter* can be integrated into the journalistic process as a whole

³ In this event, it takes place the “encierro”, marked by people dressed in red chasing bulls through the streets of Pamplona. In the end, animals are sacrificed.

Among other things, we've noted two movements that indicate that Pro-Am may take place on *Twitter* or from *Twitter*. As we show in the article, this can be perceived a) by invitations to collaborate and the establishment of conversations with the public (in both cases, but especially on *The Guardian's Twitter* account) and b) by the use of hashtags that can be replicated by the users when posting or commenting on *Twitter* about news (on both *Twitter* accounts analyzed).

Based on those observations, we believe that the exchanges between journalists and amateurs verified on the microblog tool (such as those observed on the empirical analysis, presented above) show that the way the tool is being explored by news media is widening and becoming more audacious, if compared to the initial appropriation of the tool. From the mere display of headlines followed by links to the news (Zago, 2009) to the use of the tool for conversation (Hermida, 2010), the appropriation of *Twitter* by news media has been improving and becoming more complex every day. Thus, the coverage of certain facts and the finding of new topics to develop can gain strength from the complements provided with the help of amateurs on the tool - as noted by Asur et al (2011), *Twitter* Trending Topics can influence news media. Also, news circulation (Thorn & Pfeil, 1987) can be significantly enhanced by the intervention of the public, since links to news can be tweeted and retweeted by users, expanding the reach of news.

Although Pro-Am doesn't necessarily take place on *Twitter* or from every tweet posted by news organizations, it is interesting to note that the use of the tool can be incorporated into the journalistic process as a whole. Sometimes, a call for participation can be posted on *Twitter*. Other times, a response to a user can be posted there. Amateurs can also suggest by *Twitter* topics for consideration, and their reactions on *Twitter* to a news event could enrich traditional news coverage.

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