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Reading and writing news: Why consumption and production modes matter

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze two central features of newspaper consumption and production. Reading and writing concern both journalists and readerships and are closely interconnected. The modes of these practices require a systematizing framework of analysis grounded in theories from sociology, communication studies, and the humanities. At an operational level, we focus first on reading, positing that consumption of newspapers is not confined to browsing, or leafing through them, as traditionally has been maintained. In their practices of newspaper use, audiences apply two contrasting modes, which are distant reading and close reading. Second, we posit that corresponding categories can be applied to writing. The article reflects on a loss of capacity in writing by journalists and by new actors who for the most part have acquired, not so much the ability to write in accordance with accepted norms, but a new habit in and familiarity with casual, quotidian writing. The modes of reading and writing, and especially recent changes around them, are examined with the purpose of considering their implications for journalism and, by extension, for the wider society.

Keywords

Close reading, close writing, distant reading, distant writing, newspaper, print, produsage, reading news, screen, writing news

Introduction

This is a theory-building article around the reading and writing of news, focusing on their modes. We argue that such modes matter greatly in terms of their implications for the future evolution of print news as a media platform with developed production, content mix, physical form, and consumption characteristics (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001; Cole and Harcup, 2010) but that thus far they have received little consideration in journalism studies. More attention has been focused on comparison of the sensory categorizations of news consumption, such as watching, listening, and reading, as investigated, for example, by the Pew Internet Institute (Mitchell, 2016). Responding to the question of which conceptual frameworks may help us make sense of the practices of reading and writing news, the article aims to reframe discussions about these modes within wider theoretical debates around the affordances of print newspaper materiality (Boczkowski, 2015). To understand these modes, we propose to view them in their intricate relationships with the economy, culture, and practices of production and use of print newspapers.

A good starting point to explore these processes in the present media setting, with a view to proposing new ways to theorize them, is to consider the binomial reading-writing. As previously observed,

The properties of binomial – reading and writing – are apparently indissoluble: writing always brings with it coding (writing itself) and decoding (reading) since the writers are

also their first readers. But, while writers are obliged to read what they write, this is not true for the contrary, in the sense that people can read also texts written by others. (Fortunati and Vincent, 2014: 41)

Over time, with increasing division of labor, this conflation of reading and writing has weakened. Following the development of cultural institutions, media groups, and creative industries, the process of public writing has been taken hostage by cultural elites, intellectuals, and professionals, among whom have been journalists, dubbed writers with a capital W by Roland Barthes (1964 [1960]). The professionalization and institutionalization of news has meant that the main masses of people have been excluded as producers and limited instead for the most part in the public domain to reading, listening, or watching (Schudson, 1995), with the field of journalism as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu evolving within the wider rise of cultural intermediaries (see also Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2010).

However, as is widely recognized, 'new' digital media have begun to test this divergence. Now, 'the people formerly known as the audience', once on 'the receiving end' of a monolithic media system (Rosen, 2006) have taken advantage of the affordances of digital media to create new expressions in arrays of content and formats. Manovich (2001) argues that new media have developed into their current form by combining technological innovation with a new maturity of users and audiences, from whom they have incorporated immaterial labor. Beyond simply adding content, users have generated new forms of literacy, which have challenged afresh the boundaries between author and reader. Axel Bruns (2008) points out that users are no longer merely consumers (readers and listeners) but also producers (writers) of content, and he uses the neologism 'produsage' to express this intertwining of consumption and production practices online.

Following centuries in which most people had been limited to the role of receiver, whether reading or listening, we are now witnessing an explosion of writing and speaking using digital platforms.

For print newspapers, reading remains the key mode of the practices of use, although their versatility as objects makes them particularly adaptable to a variety of purposes, intended and otherwise. A study by Fortunati et al. (2015) showed how print editions were integrated in users' everyday lives through a range of material applications, used, for example, as protective covers for fragile items, floors or car seats, as pet bedding material, or as food wrapping. But if we consider the wider process of media use, these new 'readers with a lower-case r' have considerably changed their role and their identity, as they have experienced different modes of reading and writing and also have become writers online.

While radical changes in the system of media relations also affect modes of news consumption and production, a significant thread in journalism studies has continued to focus especially on frequencies and durations of reading, with the key concern being the degree to which reading is considered hasty and fragmentary (Barthel, 2018; Mitchell, 2018). Even where such studies demonstrate longer attention in print, this focus on measured performance of casual news consumption leaves room for further analysis of the modes of both reading and writing news, the understanding of which is fundamental to consideration of the wider strategic and normative societal role of print newspapers.

In order to properly analyze these modes, we need to incorporate a specific group of studies and associated theories: the linguistic and sociological research on the

features, capabilities, and affordances that reading, and writing assume on screen and in print (i.e., Baron, 2015; Mangen et al., 2014; Neijens and Voorveld, 2018). This wave of studies tells us that screen and print each present cognitive and emotional advantages and disadvantages that affect how we engage with what we read, as well as what we write. Arguably, the last word here has been given by the network of 200 scholars, members of the European Union's Action IS140 'Evolution of Reading in the Age of Digitisation' (E-READ). They summarize their findings thus: reading on screen presents greater resistance than reading on paper to general comprehension and demanding tasks with long-form texts; screen readers are more likely to be overconfident about comprehension, especially under time pressure; screen inferiority effects have been increasing rather than decreasing over time; digital texts are equal if not better than paper texts only if an in-depth processing activity (e.g. writing keywords that recapitulate the text) is promoted in parallel; and the screen offers more support for struggling readers (Kovač and Van der Weel, 2018).

These results are confirmed by research on newspapers carried out in Britain by Thurman (2018). Here, his analysis extends beyond observation of the heavy comparative advantage for print in terms of time spent reading:

Compared with most of the screens used to consume news online, newsprint has the physical advantages of better resolution, absence of flicker, and a contrast ratio that improves in strong ambient light (try reading news on your smartphone outside on a bright day). (Thurman, 2018: 1425)

In addition, according to Mangen and Kuiken (2014) and Chyi and Tenenboim (2017) information conveyed on paper makes deeper impressions and is more easily recalled. Along with the structural affordances of paper (Taipale, 2014), another embedded advantage for reading in print lies in the cultural evolution of typography and layout in the press tradition (Waller, 2012). In particular, newspapers have spent centuries refining their visual design and providing readers with subtle clues in an established visual code for what and how to read and are further advantaged by the absence of screen features, from pop-up ads to multimedia (Shafer, 2016).

Another cluster of studies meriting consideration is that concerning the consequences of ICT (Information and communications technology) diffusion, which helps us appreciate that reading and writing have been enhanced differently by technology. Reading arguably has not benefited in transformative terms from its associated technologies. Instead, it has been improved incrementally by, for example, digitally enabled advances in typography and page design, both in print and on screen, and in the case of the former by new press equipment. In contrast, writing has been transformed by word processing, which has automated and accelerated it, as well as giving it new tools such as spelling and grammar checking and the electronic thesaurus, while editing processes also have been improved. Paradoxically, the use of the computer, which has facilitated writing so much, has at the same time made reading more difficult, given that reading on the screen is more tiring (Cull, 2011) and is a different experience because it requires specific skills, such as navigating and operating software and hardware (OECD, 2015).

In the newspaper world, the traditional division of labor has shaped the relationship between journalists, whose work was evaluated significantly on the basis of their writing, and readers, whose principal expected activity was confined to reading. This clear distinction meant that newspapers were repositories of written language and

that print journalists were required to possess a qualified competence in writing. With the arrival of new media and especially the social platforms, new entrants such as bloggers, citizen journalists, intellectuals, and subject experts, although not having a specific competence in writing, have begun to author pieces of news, opinion and analysis, or investigative reporting. The old division of labor has been exploded, overloading the writing pole at the expense of the reading pole (Brandt, 2014). If the notion of a straightforwardly passive audience had been dispensed with before the Internet, through Stuart Hall's (2006 [1973]) theory of encoding and decoding of media message, as later reapplied to digital media (Shaw, 2017), it can still be observed that much news consumption remains incidental and confined to reading or browsing (Boczkowski et al., 2018), and so beyond the frame of discussion of the digitally active producer. But this is not to say that the old producer-audience boundaries have not been challenged. The new enthusiasts of the keyboard and the smartphone camera for the most part disregard the training, rules, and practices that characterize professional journalistic work. One of the effects wrought by the colossal output of user-generated content is that, overall, writing quality has deteriorated. At the same time, anecdotally lower barriers to entry to news media have seen increased criticism by readers of lax standards among professionals. This connects with the frequent focus of cutbacks, primarily imposed from managerial actors without the field of journalism, on copy editors (Keith, 2005a, 2005b), as part of the wider pressures of digitization on newsroom labor (Cohen, 2018; Örnebring, 2010). Thus, a convergence can be observed from both sides toward poorer writing quality. Later, we will analyze this phenomenon more precisely.

Given these theoretical premises, we posit first that the form of consumption of the newspaper is not confined to leafing through pages, as traditionally assumed, but that readerships engage in two different modes that converge in practices of use. Borrowing definitions from the humanities, we call them 'distant' and 'close' reading. Close reading means, according to Nancy Boyles (2013), the thorough interpretation of a text by uncovering layers of meaning. The concept is echoed by Maryanne Wolf (2018) in her account of the decline, due to the adoption of digital technologies, of 'deep' reading. In contrast, distant reading means perceiving global features of a single or of multiple text(s). Such a mode prevails when the interest in what we are reading is reduced. In the case of news, distant reading implies that the reader starts from the expectation that, given the high number of items and topics, they should read quickly until they find an article that draws their full attention. Applying this distinction to news enables us to capture the different practices of newspaper consumption, as they have emerged in recent studies.

Furthermore, we posit that the same categories can be extended to writing just as we recognize close and distant reading, close and distant writing can be adopted in parallel. By close writing we denote the mode of writing that includes a more-or-less long period of reflection and elaboration. It stops only when the writer is fully content with the outcome: the writer has control over the time taken. Applying this notion to news or journalistic production, close writing fits with investigative reporting or in-depth analysis, among other forms. By contrast, distant writing denotes the distinct journalistic skill of rapidly writing concise, relevant, and timely accounts. These two categories allow us to capture better the changes affecting the modes of writing news and their social consequences.

In the following sections, we will try to show the junctions that have contributed to forming the scenario described so far. In this framework, technologies intervene in

reshaping reading and writing, but, as we shall see, social dimensions are equally if not more important. In the next section we analyze how newspaper consumption traditionally has been conceptualized and investigated, and the role played instead by the modes, distant and close, of reading of print newspapers. Innovations in reading also will be explored. Then we will focus on the distant and close modes of writing. Here we will analyze a phenomenon that is concerning both for journalistic authority and for wider society: the departure from standards in writing. A discussion on the implications of the changes in modes of consumption and production of print newspapers closes our discourse.

Time, frequency, and modes of reading news

As observed in the 'Introduction' section, reading news generally has been studied in terms of frequency of reading news and time spent on the activity. The most salient change found in recent decades is one of decline. Nossek et al. (2015) summarize that research from the mid-20th century has registered a steady waning in time spent on print media, stemming from a fall in newspaper and book reading, even as magazine reading has increased globally. The European Social Survey (2015) also has recorded a pronounced decline in time spent reading print news. Geographically, trends diverge, as in some East Asian and South American countries newspaper reading is flourishing (WAN-IFRA, 2016). Another study focusing on frequency of reading across platforms found that, although aggregate reading of news increased, audience behavior was more volatile, with less loyalty to sources (Fortunati et al., 2013). Research has also recently confirmed that, albeit with significant country differences, men generally read more newspapers and women more books (e.g., Taipale, 2013).

Technology has not been able significantly to enhance reading, as we explain below. The act of reading remains largely at a pre-digital stage, thus far not having encountered a technology that can claim to transform it. Some programs used to teach basic literacy, such as Ekapeli and Graphogame (e.g., Lyytinen et al., 2009; Saine et al., 2011), and aids to speed up reading, such as Rapid Serial Visual Presentation (RSVP), a method based on flashing words, have been introduced. However, it can be argued that these come at the expense of comprehension, varying across types of screens (Chen and Lin, 2016). Google Glass, an iconic attempt to fuse reading with everyday tasks (Katz, 2014), failed to gain acceptance. Longer term strategies are being pursued to move beyond screens to project content into the eye (Weinberber, 2017), but what such innovations will mean for reading remains unclear for now.

While evolving eye-tracking technology has made it possible to study reading habits and outcomes more systematically (Holsanova et al., 2006; King et al., 2019), the debate on the pros and cons of screens and their associated affordances and practices, in opposition to print, is hampered by the highly specific focus and methodologies of many experiments that cannot capture not only the complexities of format and measurement, but also socio-cultural contexts. Some recent studies on newspaper reading (e.g., Neijens and Voorveld, 2018) have yielded mixed results, with minor, if any, advantage for print (Kruikemeier et al., 2018). There is little that points in generalizable terms to technologies concretely enhancing reading.

Given that writing represents a spatialization of language on a surface, the arrangement of content in media is of particular interest here. Studies on modes of reading have analyzed newspapers as semiotic spaces, in order to understand how the various elements are structured, as well as aiming to interpret the saliency of semantic units and the role of framing (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Here, we explore other

dimensions of the material practices of reading news, thus studying how distant and close reading form a predigital convergence within the same media object. Given that, traditionally, newspapers have been associated with hasty and fragmentary reading, distant reading implies browsing in the expectation that much content may be superficial or lacking relevance. We can observe that, while varying enormously in style and presentation, print newspapers, as texts not expected to be read in all their parts in a particularly disciplined way, have contributed historically to the diffusion of distant reading, as opposed to close reading.

This view has extended to the wider media world. Scholars have noted that this specific habit of reading, moving between articles and jumping between pages, has extended to books, novels, philosophical essays, and handbooks. This behavior has become 1 of the 10 rights of the reader put forward in his manifesto by Daniel Pennac (2006). He promotes reading which may be flexible, fragmented, incoherent, and incomplete, a strategy to cope with information overload. It appears that we have begun to apply the cognitive manner in which we had consumed print newspapers to every kind of text, including texts that we study.

Here, however, we argue that newspaper reading is not exclusively distant. Close reading, deep and time-consuming comes into play when an article draws special attention. The authors' own research on the materiality of practices of reading newspapers lends support to this idea (Fortunati et al., 2015). When asked, people often say that they cut out and keep print articles of particular interest, or underline or highlight parts. Thus, they apply all the techniques that close reading generates.

This complementarity of distant and close reading depends on the variety of articles offered. Close reading has been augmented by the development of newspapers' convergence with the classical, analog tools of high culture (Fortunati and O'Sullivan, 2019) and with magazine formats now incorporated as newspaper supplements. Along with the integration of more specialist coverage, these have encouraged readers to approach a closer reading mode, creating a 'dialogue between fact and fancy', as Peter Medawar terms it, 'between what could be true, and what is in fact the case' (cited in Moretti, 2000: 62). By contrast, Young (2001), citing the view of Nord, argues that reading in itself does not comprise simply the transmission of text, but invokes, through interpretive strategies, the codes and canons of culture. It is this cultural dimension that concerns Sillesen et al. (2015), who conclude that a shift from print puts at risk the ability of journalism to provoke responses to human narratives.

If an assessment of the intertwining of distant and close reading between print and online news now can be made at a remove of some years since the advent of the latter, it is that (1) there is a new sort of division of the binomial of close and distant news reading, according to which the traditional division of the modes of reading between the various products of the press (distant reading typifies newspapers and magazines while close reading typifies books) is changing. As we have demonstrated, print newspapers now are the locus of both distant and close reading, (2) print editions may better support close reading when compared with the digital, where distant reading now has become the prevailing practice of consuming news online.

Newspapers as vehicles of convergence in close and distant writing

Just as there are close and distant modes of reading, so we can talk also of close and distant writing. Traditionally, newspapers have been seen as a primary locus wherein what we call distant writing occurs, as part of the multifaceted mix or bundle of content and genres that also includes close writing (Bell, 1991; Franklin, 2008). The journalistic

skill of writing concise, relevant, and timely accounts, a highly structured form of writing termed 'hard news' has long been highly prized and even mythologized (Reinemann et al., 2012; Tuchman, 1973). Journalists' production routines have fostered the development of the specific competence of writing the optimal copy in the shortest time and in keeping with prescribed structures, most commonly that of the inverted pyramid, (Po¨ttker, 2003). However, newspapers, as variable bundles of content, also are home to forms of close writing. This forms part of the habitus of elite journalists engaged in longform investigative reporting or in-depth analysis and opinion, and of autonomous contributors such as literary writers, academics, and intellectuals. Close writing thus is writing in which the writer has full control. As Daniel Kahneman (2011) has pointed out, close writing calls for slow thinking that is deep and critical, with logical reflection based on evidence. Of course, this is to simplify the more complex realities of practice and content: any form of writing for news media ultimately is subject to deadlines, even if they are more distant and less routinized. There is a continuum between distant writing and close writing, in the sense that many feature articles exploring social and cultural topics are written (and presented) in a way that may be seen as more like close writing than distant.

If newspapers typically comprise many elements that are rendered through close writing, they also have long been a privileged locus of distant writing. In both modes, they have represented a repository of standard expression and have played a significant role, along with other media, in spreading, enhancing, and developing national languages. In spite of the common emphasis on speed, journalists, as defenders of standard writing, have needed to show an ability to write as an indispensable individual skill for career entry but also as a key part of editing processes. In such practices, 'distant' writing has incorporated many of the features and functions of 'close' writing, in the sense that journalists' distant writing traditionally has not neglected grammar, syntax, and orthography, has prized the mastery of lexicon, and has recognized the social function of maintaining communicative cohesion among readers and, ideally, citizens. Generally, one can argue that news language, beyond the performative contortions of tabloidese or specialist jargon, has offered itself as a standard of written communication to which are attached qualities such as authority, legitimation, and trust.

Absent an understanding of the social dimensions of the modes of writing practiced in newspapers, we are in turn unable to comprehend the profound change that is now taking place. We argue that what is happening in journalism's current phase is that in many cases – arguably including all but the best-resourced editorial departments – journalists' ability to write to conventional standards has been undermined. This loss of the mastery of writing on the part of newspapers, documented in print (Meyer, 2004) and continuing to the digital (Beede and Mulnix, 2017) relates, essentially, to three factors.

The first is the deterioration of writing as an outcome of the education system. The decline of recent generations' capability to write is problematic, since it is fundamental for studying (Ong, 1986: 27). Furthermore, it is an essential tool in economies structured by a high complexity of social relationships and hierarchies (Hagège, 1985: 66) and which require greater labor force involvement in the production of written material (OECD, 2018). Ong (1986: 27) contended that deficiencies in reading and writing impact on the ability to conduct abstract analysis, a basic competency of effective citizenship. Educational processes for journalism are unable to repair the damage created by the early education system, where teaching practices have changed

and where, more recently, along with wider domestication of new platforms, much attention has been focused on incorporating digital technologies, arguably without solid educational grounding, in classrooms. Less attention has been devoted to the learning of writing on the part of students, many of whom now have lost a firm command of the skill, as educators forget that, as Ong (1986: 27) argues, writing is the first communication technology. Anecdotes are legion among academics on the general decline in writing ability of many (though certainly not all) students evidenced in essays and theses, with a seam of studies adopting a remedial approach to fostering skills for scholarly or business ends (e.g., see Law and Baer, 2017) or, in the case of journalism students, in news texts (Lingwall, 2010).

While much attention here has focused on the new technologies as part of a digital salvation myth for diverse challenges in education, some blame technology alone. Thurlow (2006), who examined more than 100 media articles on this debate, found that the most shared conclusion was that texting was the biggest factor in damaging formal writing skills. Other scholars, such as Rosen et al. (2010) and Massey et al. (2005), point out that if texting has a negative impact, it does so only in formal writing, while in informal writing it is a positive. It is becoming clear that current students, in their use of new media, become habituated to writing and even write more than in the past. At least in this sense, one cannot simply talk of new media as damaging writing processes, tout-court, as at least informational writing is revitalized. It is too easy straightforwardly to attribute to new technologies the decreasing capacity of new generations to write and read well, instead of identifying the roots of this process within education, the family and wider society.

In reality, evidence provided by scholars does not provide a clear view of the worsening of writing skills. Some argue that these are perennial complaints and that in every era there is a panic over literacy among the young. The Guardian's former production editor and style authority observes that, 'People have been wittering on like this for centuries. Conservatives long for a golden age, usually about 50 years in the past, when everyone knew their grammar and all was right with the world', and he cites the 14th-century figure William Langland berating the 'younger generation today' for their lack of grammar skills (Marsh, 2014). In 1975, Bowers et al. noted remedial action to counter poor writing standards in burgeoning journalism program intakes. But, beyond the so-called grammar wars, there are more structured accounts. Baron (2015) relates writing's decline to the general reduction in the volume of reading, including reading for academic purposes. This is linked to the expanded concept of New Literacies (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011) and is in tune with the rise especially of screen-based multimedia in which the digital generations are immersed.

In the debate on the disruption of writing, the role of the increased diffusion of automation and abstract work has been underplayed (Fortunati, 1995). These processes have brought with them a loss in skills similar to the ways in which workers previously lost industrial and craft skills. Writing is enhanced by computing, which supports grammar and syntax correction, translation, and other functions such as copy and paste. Skills lost by individuals are now within the domain of technology providers, with basic offerings free to use but also in advanced form at a premium, as in the case of Grammarly (see grammarly.com), which at the time of writing claimed more than 15 million users.

Second, the decline in educational outcomes has reverberated, as already noted, in the education of journalists, to the point that writing ability is no longer seen as a prerequisite for professional entry. In addition, even here much change in teaching

journalism has focused on digital demands at the expense of core skills, including writing (Doherty, 2012). A new generation of textbooks promote 'web writing' as a special competence, aimed at making the message more compelling and more digestible for the reader, but also more likely to be discovered through search engine optimization, and this has engendered some intense debate among journalists on its impact on quality (Brooker, 2008; Richmond, 2008).

The third factor in the decline in standards is the profound change driven by media groups' defense strategies (Deuze, 2007). These have consisted of deregulating the journalism field, restructuring newsrooms and reducing the number of regular journalists in favor of casualization, prioritizing efficiency and productivity rather than quality. Such changes, often associated with the rhetoric of digital innovation, have damaged the most central and cultural value-laden technology that print newspapers have, which is writing, affecting both print and online. In newsrooms, cost-saving measures imposed as part of the wider neoliberal restructuring of industry (Vaara et al., 2006) have, as seen above, tended to deem superfluous the editing inherent in evolved structures and processes. The plethora of accounts of newsroom reorganizations and staff cuts at the expense of content standards (e.g., Vultee, 2015), is situated by Schlesinger and Doyle (2015) within Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction. Such rationalizations are driven by a transformational shift from print to a declared 'digital-first' strategy, in which redundancies are legitimized as 'losing staff we no longer require and bringing in staff that have got the skills that we will need in the future' (Schlesinger and Doyle, 2015: 312–313). These developments are accompanied on the audience side with shallow metrics deployed in the battle for eyeballs, finding ultimate expression online in clickbait (Blom and Hansen, 2015). It is difficult not to conclude that the associated norms and practices originating in the ascendant digital realm's media logic transmit also to print-destined content in converged newsrooms.

Ultimately, the dynamics of general literacy, professional education and the change in publishers' willingness to underwrite content quality and, in particular, the processes of quality control, have wrought a situation in which spelling, grammatical and syntactical errors, along with poor style, are more prevalent. While the editorial blunder has long been the subject of in-house and even popular entertainment, the accretion of mistakes, most often mundane, and of lax language, has had the effect of undermining the authority of newspapers. This trend represents a loss for readers who continue to read print newspapers as a form of cultural participation (Aguado et al., 2018) or as a tool to improve second language skills and vocabulary (Latchem, 2018). To the extent that writing declines, then so in turn do audiences' access to and appreciation of social, political, and cultural themes (Lazzaro, 2014; Wright, 2006 and Scho¨nbach et al.; cited in Aguado et al., 2018). A paradoxical moment has arrived in which the analogue technology on which the digital is founded – the quality of journalistic writing – is in danger. This phenomenon has implications for the future role and functions of newspapers regarding not only the media system, but also wider society. Who, if anyone, will assume the mantle of depositary of standard language, with its implications for social cohesion? Who will take on the role, even if passive, of maintaining and defending wider standards in writing?

This vista has become even more complex, because, as posited above, while in the past writing news was the prerogative of journalists, now writing news is performed by many social actors online. The enlargement through produsage has not had the effect of generally improving the quality of news writing. Journalists have lost their exclusive skill and authority, as they are joined online by citizen authors. But the new producers

have acquired not so much an ability to write as a new habit in and familiarity with writing, often, in a distant mode associated with blogging, posting comments and tweeting.

These considerations, starting with the conceptualization of the modes of distant and close writing and extending to the erosion in the standard of written communication, pose inescapable questions to the scientific and professional community. Are we content to speculate that such corrosion of a pillar of the news system can be coped with easily, and that communication and information technologies can develop solutions to compensate where the tool of writing is failing? If we are not, it is important to support the idea that there is a need to establish strategies to resolve this problem in both modes.

Discussion and final remarks

In this article, we have discussed how reading and writing news have changed in recent decades, in the light of theories from sociology, communication and journalism studies, and the humanities. Furthermore, we have analyzed news production and consumption, proposing two distinct modes: close and distant reading, as well as close and distant writing. The identification and highlighting of these modes have emerged as essential to understanding the practices of current readerships, but also to prefiguring possible changes in the format and even the basic concept of print newspapers. We have shown how in the wake of digital technologies readerships have changed much more than have newspapers. Actually, however, the relationship between newspapers and readers largely has remained unidirectional, in accordance with the classical media model. Change occurring in audiences is surely a challenge for newspapers, which must demonstrate their superiority in producing news and high-quality information. At the same time, digital developments open up new opportunities for them to engage with readers. While experiments in northern European countries to involve readers in news production (e.g., Seisto et al., 2012) have not been convincing enough for newsrooms to adopt inclusive strategies toward readers, it is clear that this relationship is at the core of the challenge facing print journalism. Moreover, when we consider that print newspapers also facilitate close reading, characteristic of books and cultural materials, this could suggest a far-reaching change in their identity, role, and functions. It opens many possibilities of their re-establishment in public roles, but also for an expansion of their identity as a consequence of the surmounting of boundaries not only between modes of reading and writing, but also between the various cultural products of the press and of the print sector in general. The recognition of these modes as at the heart of the procedures and values of journalism (Anderson, 2019) can assist in adapting newspapers to the evolving sensitivities, attitudes, and behaviors of readerships. While distant reading can be interpreted as having played a role in the emergence and diffusion of fake news, or, more generally, low quality information, the facilitation of close reading conversely can be looked to as a feature of newspapers that potentially will give readers tools to filter disinformation and to more deeply inform themselves as citizens. But perhaps what is most urgent is that we reflect on the widely accepted but relatively unexamined losses in the command of writing itself, as the core, culture-laden technology of print news. In the current climate, trust in news has become the subject of more intense focus (Newman et al., 2018), but there are encouraging signals that a new awareness of the need for sound journalism from 'traditional' press institutions – those which are most associated with the acts of reading and writing – has begun to emerge (Guess et al., 2018; Rubel, 2019).

The article additionally proposes a deeper discussion about the question of writing's decline and its social consequences. This implies, for example, that journalism education programs need to address the problem in more structured ways. A new wave of research is warranted on the factors contributing to the erosion of this skill: while journalists have begun to forfeit their special capacity for and status in writing, new writers for the most part have acquired not so much the ability to write to a high standard, but a new acquaintance with writing in the quotidian. These developments point to a need to address standards in specialized settings but also more generally.
For the future, it is crucial to recognize that the modes of consumption and production of news are fields of agency and important social change that should be studied accordingly. Furthermore, it is important to monitor how these modes function in terms of complementarity, competition, and contamination, to strengthen strategies for increasing readerships' attention and loyalty.

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