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Andone, C.; Rocci, A.

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Argumentation in journalism: Professional practices and the public sphere

Corina Andone and Andrea Rocci

University of Amsterdam / University of Lugano

It has become almost self-evident that journalists commonly advance standpoints and arguments to support them. Many people would probably mention journalistic editorials or, generally, opinion pieces, as unequivocally argumentative. Because they are easily available, non-technical in nature and count as typical instances of argumentative discourse, editorials are nowadays often selected as data source by computational linguistics researchers for the purpose of annotating argumentation structures in order to create resources for the automatic mining of opinions and arguments (cf. Bal and Saint-Dizier 2009). It is these characteristics which might also induce us to believe that we also know *how* journalists argue, *where* they argue and *why*, and to assume that there is finally not much to add on the way in which their arguments shape our society. After all, journalism is firmly rooted in the old media and journalistic texts have been systematically dissected by public opinion researchers and content analysts at least since the 1940s (cf. Franzosi 2007), not to speak of the considerable degree of attention that journalistic texts received by discourse analysts at least since the 1980s (cf. van Dijk 1988). If this is indeed the case, one could, at best, only envisage the need of examining how Internet and the social media have changed the way journalists argue.

Yet journalistic argumentation remains an underexplored area of study, in which a precise and robust characterization of the way in which journalists argue, let alone why they argue, are still open for research. This special issue of the *Journal of Argumentation in Context* is firmly rooted in the old media of the printed press and broadcast news and yet contains a sufficient amount of exploration of uncharted territory to show that there is still much to learn about journalistic argumentation and there is even more to learn about the professional and societal dynamics of journalism by looking at argumentation through the analytical lens of current theories of argumentation in context (cf. van Eemeren 2010, in particular).

The essays collected in this special issue understand the fundamental role of the study of argumentative practices as a precondition for a better understanding

of the dynamics of journalism as a *profession* as well as for comprehending how journalism participates in the creation of the *public sphere* in contemporary societies, by creating a space where issues pertaining to different domains, such as politics, economy, justice or religion, emerge, are reconfigured and are played out publicly. In so doing, they pay attention also to another complementary distinction that is essential to understand how argumentation practices affect the news media, the distinction between newsmaking *process* and *product*. On the one hand, different kinds of attempts at rational persuasion and argumentative discussions play a role in the chain of collective and individual production choices that create journalistic products. On the other hand, the argumentative contribution of the products — not only editorials and opinion pieces but also interviews and mere news reporting — is shaped by the process, be it the selection and treatment of sources or the inherent conversational dynamics of a broadcast interview.

The contextual dimension of argumentation was already an integral element of the Aristotelian project, as testified first by the distinction between dialectic and rhetoric, and then by the distinction among the different rhetorical *genres*: judicial, deliberative and epideictic. The promise of a discipline capable of tackling non-reductively the use of reason in different arenas of social life is implicit, if not realized, in seminal works of modern argumentation theory, such as those of Toulmin (1958/2008) and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969). Over the last two decades, research on argumentative practices in different social contexts has developed considerably and has become increasingly explicit in dealing with *context* developing theoretical constructs for dealing with contextual factors in argumentative practices. This trend of research on *argumentation in context* has tackled different spheres of human activity examining, for instance, legal argumentation, political argumentation, religious argumentation, financial argumentation, argumentation in healthcare institutions.

A first step for looking at journalistic argumentation in context can be found in a recent conceptual contribution by López Pan (2015) looking at the newspaper as a whole as an “epideictic meeting point” which works to reinforce the adhesion of a largely self-selecting audience to “to shared values, attitudes and moral preferences” (2015:301), thereby creating a sense of identity. López Pan broadens the view by shifting attention from the arguments in individual opinion pieces to the newspaper as a whole as a rhetorical machine, and brings the traditional rhetorical notion of *epideictic genre* on a context of communication documented by the established results of communication studies about practices ranging from the selection of stories to linguistic choices in reporting. This fine contribution, however, does not provide a view of how the fine grained analysis of argumentation can contribute to sharpen the empirical results of communication studies with

respect to these choices. Moreover, the consideration of argumentation context in journalism can benefit from more finely grained argumentative activity types than those envisaged by the sole Aristotelian rhetorical genres.

Furthermore, all activity types are shaped at different levels by institutional realities which can be modelled with the conceptual tools of theories of argumentation in context, such as the notions of *sphere of human activity* (van Eemeren 2010) or *interaction field* (Rigotti and Rocci 2006, Greco Morasso 2011, Palmieri 2014). The institutional point, or *raison d'être* (van Eemeren 2010), of each sphere plays a fundamental role in generating the main issues with respect to which participants advance their standpoints. The institutionalized commitments, roles and procedural regulations that characterize each sphere as it articulates itself in terms of an institutional *interaction field* set the boundaries to admissible discussions and, at the same time, constrain the procedural starting point through procedural rules and “practical presumptions” which affect the burden of proof of the arguers (cf. Rescher 2006). The values and views coming to light within the organizational and professional cultures that characterize the sphere of activity acquire the status of *endoxa* in argumentative practices which consequently affects the material starting point of argumentative discussions. Organizational and professional *endoxa* assume, in addition, the role of “cognitive presumptions” which again influences the arguers’ burden of proof (cf. Rescher 2006). Finally, all fields of activity have their own material constraints which influence to a great extent the unfolding of the argumentative discussions at issue.

The contextual dimensions just outlined significantly shape journalism, a sphere of activity of its own, with its own *raison d'être* (which is, clearly, “informing the public”, however problematic and contested its realization might be), its institutionalized field of interaction (the media system, at a local and global level), its professional values (e.g. objectivity, the journalist as a *watchdog*) as well as specific professional *endoxa* guiding deliberation (e.g. the so-called *news values*). Yet because of its very *raison d'être*, the news media cannot be fully understood without reference to the *public sphere* to which it contributes if only by increasing the publicity of events belonging to a variety of spheres of human activity.

Recent research on the representation of controversies and confrontation in journalism (cf. Cramer 2011 and review in Rocci and Zampa 2013) has emphasized the extent to which the journalists’ reporting practices *create* controversies and confrontations in the public sphere, by creating dialogues between sources that “have neither shared physical proximity nor being involved in any direct written or spoken interaction, nor demonstrably engaged a common issue” (Cramer 2011:5). Other researchers discussing the broadcast news interview have pointed out how interviews can be often be said to create a newsworthy event (Clayman 2008) rather than simply report it, and have reconstructed how this manufactured

quality of the “media generated news” can be effaced in a broadcast news flow (Fitzgerald, Jaworsky and Housley 2008).

Yet notwithstanding their great power of agenda-setting, media organizations obviously do not create the issues and argumentative confrontations in the public sphere just on their own. The public sphere which journalists shape to such a great extent with their staged confrontations inherits much of its structure from underlying tighter contexts of decision-making about which the media ostensibly report. In other words, the argumentative practices in which the media engage in the public sphere must be understood in relation to issues and arguments that are rooted in other spheres of human activity. The authors of the present special issue chose to engage with *politics* and the *economy* as the most prominent among these spheres.

In contemporary democracies, the functioning of the political system is intimately connected with the functioning of the news media: representative democracy and direct democracy rest on the possibility of rational deliberation by the voters, and adequate information about the facts appears to be one necessary condition of rational deliberation together with the free circulation of ideas and values. The professional values, identity and self-representation of journalists have evolved together with the relationship with political sphere.

In market economies the role of the news media can be seen in connection with the circulation of information in the markets. This function is particularly highlighted in the case of the financial markets, given the critical role played by information in investment decisions. The demand of information by investors to inform their decisions and the need of listed companies to communicate their value to the investor and to influence their decisions creates a continuous communicative exchange where the news media act as “information intermediaries”. At the same time, the need to mitigate information asymmetries and avoid that privileged investors take advantage of selectively disclosed inside information gives rise to the regulatory requirements of publicity that characterize the financial markets, which have become increasingly strict over the years. Thus, the regulatory requirement of publicity leads to an even tighter integration between the news media and the financial market both at the level of the specialized press and of the generalist press.

The distinction between generalist and specialized press is a fuzzy and permeable one. It is an interesting fact that among the so-called “quality press” a prominent position is occupied by new organizations — such as the *Financial Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Economist* for the English speaking world — that build their reputation around reliable reporting on finance and business and have become at the same time very influential media in the political arena.

The contributions featured in the present special issue examine closely the role of journalists in mediating and reshaping discussions originating in the spheres of politics and of the economy through different activities, including interviews, the composition of editorial opinions and the reporting of argumentative sources. These analyses document situations in which journalists take the role of protagonists — sometimes highlighting this role, sometimes downplaying it — or, conversely, assume the role of critical antagonists of public figures on behalf of their audience, or simply adopt the stance of an argumentative “intermediary”, “mediator” or “argumentation gatekeeper”.

The positioning of the journalist with respect to these argumentative discussions remains one of the most critical question to be investigated, possibly one of the most revealing about the media. Different journalistic genres and “voices” (White 2012) allow different stances towards argumentation. Editorial and comment pieces allow journalists to take the role of protagonist and put forth *evaluative* as well as *practical* standpoints, analysts or correspondents are allowed to defend *explanatory* (cf. Freeman 2005) or *descriptive* standpoints on the basis of their expertise, their extensive first-hand observation or their own fact-finding investigation. Reporters, on the other hand, are supposed not to take the role of protagonists and confine themselves to reporting an argumentative discussion as a newsworthy event. Yet journalistic reporting practices clearly contribute to shape or reconfigure discussions in the public sphere (cf. Cramer 2011), assuming indirectly an argumentative role.

Two contributions of this collection, Palmieri & Miecznikowski, Rocci & Luciani, are devoted to economic-financial news, which represent an especially interesting of balancing reporting and argument. In these news texts the presentation of more or less definite predictions of future developments of the economy, of the financial markets, or individual’s earnings and stock price often occupies the center stage together with the evidence supporting the prediction and possibly its further practical implication in terms of investment decisions. Yet journalists rarely take the responsibility of a predictive or practical standpoints. They dilute their stance through modalization and construct their case by reporting, expounding and interpreting the views and arguments of experts, corporate insiders, and governmental institutions. All these sources produce their own argumentative discourse, which is re-used and transformed by the journalists and while they are ostensibly resolution-oriented and committed to rationality, they are all deeply involved in the issues — often with a vested interest in the outcome — and can be expected to maneuver strategically to the best of their ability.

A different case, where the positioning of the journalist with respect to the argumentative discussion is equally delicate is represented by the political interview, covered in Corina Andone’s contribution. The genre and interaction scheme of the

political interview constrains the journalist so that he/she cannot take the role of protagonist and advance a standpoint. Thus, in this genre the role of the journalist emerges from attempts to strike a delicate balance between two dimensions of the journalistic ethos of objectivity (or in Clayman and Heritage's terms *neutrality*, 2002), which forbids journalists from adopting a standpoint of their own, and the need to *balance* the views of their interlocutor by adopting a "devil's advocate" stance. Thus, interviewers often adopt the role of argumentative antagonists with respect to the standpoints put forth by the interviewed politicians. This antagonist role is not assumed as a reflection of personal doubts, but on behalf of "people", "the public", the "audience", "citizens". In her contribution, Andone examines how this "adversarial" stance in political interviews has become increasingly institutionalized as part of a culture of "political accountability".

The complex positioning of the journalist with respect to argumentative discussions in the public sphere is determined in part by professional values and norms, commercial goals, productive routines and material constraints of news media organizations. These professional dynamics cannot be fully appreciated without extending the scope of the analysis from the argumentative products of newsmaking, to the newsmaking process itself.

This is made possible by field studies of interaction and work practices in the newsroom and by the adoption of ethnographic and conversation analytic techniques, such as those pioneered by Clayman and Reisner (1994) and further developed by Jacobs (1999), van Hout (2010) and especially Perrin (2003). In the special issue, this trend of studies is represented by contributions issued from the research project *Argumentation in newsmaking process and product*¹, which provide a detailed view the construction of a political editorial and of an economic news item in an Italian-language Swiss newspaper. Once the newsroom opens up to this kind of investigation it emerges that the process that leads to the production of a news item are, to a large extent argumentative due to the deliberation taking place in editorial conferences and to a variety of backstage informal interactions (see, in particular, Burger & Delaloye's contribution) down to the inner dialogue underlying the writing choices of the individual journalist writer (see, in particular, in this respect the contribution of Zampa & Perrin, but also Rocci & Luciani).

The image emerging from the ethnographic observation of the backstage of newsmaking dispels the received image of newsmakers as creatures of habit following patterns of established routine or a hard to define gut feeling or professional instinct. The contributions issued from this project present interactional

1. The project was funded for the period 2012–2015 by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant: PDFMP1_137181/1), whom Andrea Rocci wishes to thank here, especially for the indispensable support to PhD students.

data as well as retrospective interviews where the journalists emerge as remarkably reflective about their own argumentative practices. Particularly telling in this respect is Zampa & Perrin's account of how a journalist reflects on endoxical implicit premises in a political editorial tying them to national cultural values. At the same time, as observed in the contribution of Rocci & Luciani, these natural and elicited data provide a novel empirical confirmation of the descriptive validity of the rational reconstruction of arguments according to the pragma-dialectical principles which require balancing pragmatic insights with the maximization of argumentative relevance (Cf. van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004).

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Authors' addresses

Corina Andone
 Spuistraat 134
 1012VB, Amsterdam
 The Netherlands
 C.Andone@uva.nl

Andrea Rocci
 Insitute of Argumentation, Linguistics
 and Semiotics
 Via G. Buffi 13
 6900 Lugano
 Switzerland
 andrea.rocci@usi.ch