The ethical dilemmas of using social networks as information sources. Analysis of the opinion of journalists from three countries

JC Suárez Villegas [CV] [ORCID] [GS] – Full Professor of Journalism. School of Communication - Universidad de Sevilla (University of Seville), Spain - jcsuarez@us.es
J Cruz Álvarez [CV] [ORCID] – Researcher in Journalism ethics and deontology. School of Communication – Universidad de Sevilla, (University of Seville), Spain – jcruz12@us.es

Abstract
Introduction: Social networks are shaping a new information ecosystem that is characterised by the interaction of users with each other and with the media. **Methods**: This article is based on data obtained from more than 60 in-depth interviews with journalists from three European countries, namely Spain, Italy and Belgium, to examine how they value the use of social networks as communication channel between journalists and citizens and as a tool to carry out journalistic work. **Results and conclusions:** Although information is available online to be published instantly, it is necessary to first determine its authenticity and assess its suitability from different perspectives. Journalists themselves should assess the possibilities offered by tools such as social networks, and be aware of the risks and challenges associated to them in order to use them in a more effective way.

Keywords
Social networks; journalists; deontology; information sources; interactivity.

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos** (PhD in Communication from the University of London)

1. Introduction

The social scenario of communication has changed significantly in the last two decades with the development of digital platforms and the communicative uses associated to them, as well as the expansion of mobile and fixed internet access among increasingly larger percentages of the population. In an accelerated process of changes, there has been a migration of analogue news content from different media (newspapers, radio and television) towards an ever-expanding offer of digital products, which has altered not only the productive routines of the journalistic profession, but also citizens' social roles and information consumption habits.

The characteristics inherent to the process of digitalisation have influenced this phenomenon in a decisive way, favouring the acquisition of more active roles by users. Among these features, it is necessary to outline the importance of the interactive nature of digital products, their hypertext structure, their multimedia nature, and the constant updating of contents, in order to understand the relatively horizontal, decentralised and versatile nature that drives the new communicative environment. All of these features shape the convergence that has taken place in the spheres of technology, economics, media, politics and society, according to a logic of constant feedback between these spheres.

Digital communication dilutes the geographical boundaries and provides fast, low-cost and open access to an unlimited number of participants, which impacts the behaviour of audiences, giving them a capacity for action that transforms the traditional one-way, top-down communicative model, in which the media and other social agents send their messages to the rest, into a model where it is possible for users to interact with the producers of information and even to adopt a creative role with the use of self-publishing technologies, which enable the so-called citizen journalism and user generated content, as well as social networks.

The profile of the digital user cannot be equated with the profile of the traditional viewer, which is characterised by certain passivity and resignation. Digital users are characterised by a dynamism that urges them to participate, share and even create content. In this way, we can no longer talk about audiences in an abstract sense. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2003) advocate for the use of the term "user" to refer to this new subject that participates in digital communication, while Deuze (2004: 146) complements the term with the qualifying adjective *active* to try to refine the dynamic involvement of the public. For his part, Axel Bruns (2008) proposes the term *produser* to reflect the digital user's dual role of content creator and receiver. This is a result of a phenomenon that Manuel Castells (2009) has termed "mass self-communication", i.e., the individualisation of the consumption and production of communication in the digital environment.

In this regard, social networks have been the digital tools that are best adapted to the precepts posed by mass self-communication, since they incorporate the dual character of the prosumer in the context of an extensive community-network of permanently-connected individuals in interaction. This is why Alfred Hermida (2010) has suggested the concept of 'environmental journalism' to refer to social networks users' state of awareness of every public event.

It could be argued, therefore, that social networks are configuring a new information ecosystem, characterised by the interaction of users with each other and with public institutions, politicians, companies and the media, thus altering the traditional relations between the various social agents. According to the approximation of Harrison and Barthel, "the significance of social media lies in the ability of vastly more users to experiment with a wider and seemingly more varied range of collaborative creative activities" (2009: 174).

Among these collaborative activities, the dimension of journalism or the one directly related with the consumption and dissemination of information has a specific weight in the use of social networks that influences decisively the journalistic profession itself, even though its original function did not contemplate these activities. There are social networks that specialised in certain fields like music, in the case of Spotify, pictures, like Flickr and Instagram, videos, like the paradigmatic example of YouTube, professional relations, like LinkedIn, and even the university academic world, like Academia.edu, as well as a wide range of platforms dedicated to the general communication of users (Facebook, Google+ and Twitter). Despite their heterogeneity, the uses that can be made of these social networks from a journalistic point of view are innumerable and include not only the dissemination of information, but also the access to sources and the collecting and verification of material, all thanks to the collective action of users.

In this new scenario, the work of the information professional is often wrapped in confusion caused by the accumulation of discourses, data and information coming from different subjects that alter the classical dynamics of news production and raise many ethical questions for journalists. Thus, we can depart from the assumption that the relationship between social media and journalistic work involves different ethical dimensions that are worthy of analysis.

For this purpose, this article addresses the various ethical dilemmas that social networks can raise in journalism, when journalism uses social networks as sources, when journalism uses social networks as a scenario in which it inquires for information of the protagonists of the news, and when journalism uses social networks as a channel to keep in touch with citizens. Issues such as the privacy of people, the verification of facts and other circumstances that may compromise the professional ethics of journalists were examined based on the opinions of journalists from three countries (Spain, Italy and Belgium), within the framework of a research project on the ethical dilemmas in online journalism.

2. Methods

This article is based on data collected from more than 60 in-depth interviews with journalists from three European countries, namely Spain, Italy and Belgium, from July and October 2014. This qualitative approach has been developed to identify the perceptions of active journalists regarding the use of social networks in any of its functions as part of their production routines. The interview consists of open-ended questions that allowed interviewees to express their opinions and concerns about the suggested topics. Within the framework of these interviews we aimed to identify journalists' assessments of the different uses of social networks in their professional work: their use

as potential sources of information, their use to disseminate news and their use for the subsequent interactions with citizens.

Based on this comparative analysis of the use social networks by journalists from three countries we wanted to examine how social networks are valued by journalists as a communication channel with citizens and how can social networks be exploited as tools of journalistic work. Another objective was to verify whether there were different estimations about the ethical conflicts that could arise in the use of social networks across the different journalistic cultures.

3. Results
3.1. Use of social networks as information sources

As mentioned, the journalistic uses of the different social networks can be many and varied. However, it is necessary to emphasise the special relevance of breaking news content for the informative process. These contents are disseminated rapidly through social networks, taking advantage of the technological versatility and connectivity of users, especially in situations in which journalists cannot access the scene immediately. For example, in isolated geographical areas or with difficult access (due to different reasons) the media must cover the events based on the testimonies and contents sent by citizens themselves.

In this regard, some of the first cases in which social networks had a fundamental role in news coverage are the social unrest in Egypt when the presence of international journalists on the streets of Cairo was very limited, and the earthquake that struck Haiti on 12 January 2010. In this latter case, there were no correspondents in the area, and amid the general chaos resulting from the quake, agencies and international media did not have access to what was happening there. However, there were many anonymous people who began using Twitter and other networks to report the events just five minutes after the earthquake struck. These users carried out instant and first-hand coverage of the events for the rest of the world, either via tweets, photos, or videos.

The repetition of this practice in various events, both international and local, has resulted in a phenomenon known as *the Twitter effect,* although other social networks also play a fundamental role in this phenomenon (Bruno, 2010). This *Twitter effect* would be the digital equivalent of the 24-hour coverage carried out by the USA network CNN in the late 1980s, which gave rise to a journalistic phenomenon whereby television news no longer responded to a particular periodicity in terms of delivery and instead offered news continuously and instantly, which was known as the *CNN effect.*

This trend is also very present in hyper-local information, an area in which users of social networks have the ability to post instant pictures and information to digital platforms thanks to mobile devices with internet access. The themes of these contents can be very varied; ranging from a video of a hurricane to a testimony on the crime scene. A case of great relevance in this regard was the image uploaded to Twitter by a user who witnessed the landing of an US Airways aircraft in the Hudson River in 2009, which became a timely source of information for all the media in the country before ant of the news outlets had access to place of the events **[1]**.

In fact, a significant percentage of users are ceasing to use traditional media to learn more about breaking news while social networks are acquiring an increasingly relevant role in the diffusion of these type of news content. According to a study published by the American website *schools.com* in 2012, around 50% of the people surveyed had learned of breaking news through social networks instead of the traditional media **[2]**. So much so, that social networks are placed as the third source of information for the public, just behind television and radio.

Another dimension of the phenomenon that is pointed out by the same study refers to the authenticity of the news disseminated through social networks. The study points out that almost 50% of the Internet users surveyed had read on social networks news that turned out to be fake. Thus, the emergence of social networks has prompted a series of debates about their impact on journalism, questioning whether the content published on them can be considered journalism, the preponderance that social networks should have as sources of reference for journalists, the way in which the information extracted from them should be manged and the validity that should be granted to the news they disseminate. For example, in March 2012, the death of Pope Benedict XVI was announced via Twitter through an account falsely attributed to Tarcisio Bertone **[3]**. In addition to rapidly becoming a *trending topic* worldwide, several media outlets fell into the trap and repeated the news. Another relatively common act is the dissemination of images that do not correspond to the news content they accompany, misquoting of the words expressed by the news' protagonists, sensationalist breaking news that seek to raise alarm among citizens, and information that has not been verified by suitable sources.

Examples like this demand a deep reflection about the relationship that the journalistic profession must maintain with the new digital tools of social interaction in an attempt to preserve the professional values and proceedings while recognising the enormous possibilities of social networks.

Not in vain, most interviewed journalists from the selected three countries agree that social networks have become an essential tool in their informative activities, both to trace evidence of the news and keep in touch with citizens. In addition to being used for the dissemination of news, social networks are used by journalists to established bonds with their target community, in which journalists can also participate as diffusers of other contents of interest or can express their views on current events, which adds a social dimension to the communicative process and can be beneficial for both instances.

In fact, in a study carried out in Belgium on the use of internet and social networks by journalists (*Le journaliste Belge in 2013: Un Autoportrait*) points out that 64% of the interviewed journalists agree that social networks are used as sources of information. It is important to note that this percentage increases to 74% when focusing on journalists under 35 years of age, which highlights the special consideration between the younger generations of journalists who are closer to readers.

 Moreover, in the case of Italy, the interviewed journalists recognise the potential of social networks for journalistic work, but also see them as a minefield in which it is necessary to keep a prudent distance and to clearly separate the contents submitted by citizens from the strictly journalistic contents.

In any case, all agree that social networks are public virtual streets transited by citizens and thus it is important to be there to hear the noise, the conversations and see what happens. In this regard, one of the interviewed journalists, says that social networks can be a container of information that can be used as a source but only after facts have been verified and the interest and relevance have been identified. "Information posted on the Internet is not always necessarily true just because it appears there, it has to be contrasted with the reality it allegedly describes".

Another type of information that is disseminated on social networks and has great value for the media is the information posted by public figures, companies and organisations, which increasingly use these platforms to express their opinions or make announcements of social transcendence. For example, the Spanish Royal House announced on 2 June, 2014 on its Twitter account that King Juan Carlos I had signed the bill on his abdication and the succession of his son Felipe [4]. On the other hand, on 22 March 2015, the leader of the Podemos Party, Pablo Iglesias, and the former militant of United Left Madrid, Tania Sánchez, announced through Facebook that they had terminated their relationship [5]. Both news stories quickly reached great informative relevance that was amplified by the rest of the media, both digital and traditional.

Numerous journalists mentioned that one of the virtues that journalists must show in the use of social networks is to confirm whether the information posted in an account comes from a real user, which requires making inquiries outside of the network, to establish whether the account is managed by the holder himself, a community manager that can post on his behalf, or by any other user who has usurped his name. Therefore, professional journalists require new skills to carry out their work, such as knowing how to determine whether content is real or fake, which involves constant recycling in their day-to-day relationship with digital technologies.

In the same line, the interviewed journalists tend to consider that the contents that may be found in social networks should be used rather as evidence or guides in the search for information, and not as closed products that can be used without prior verification, which reveals the professional scepticism towards the validity of these contents and their authenticity in a particularly volatile environment. In this regard, some journalists highlighted that social networks are a source but also that they need to be verified just as any other source by applying relevant journalistic criteria.

This view is also supported by Belgian journalists, who consider that information posted on social networks is just potential evidence on current events and thus should be verified in other ways. On the other hand, journalists also point out that more important than identifying information posted on the networks is knowing who is the issuer of the message and what are his positions on controversies of social interest. In this regard, Leonor Hubaut, a journalist working for Bruxelles2 and an international policy analyst with close ties to European institutions, recommends checking the profile and persona of the issuer through which we have obtained the information. In this same vein, Bárbara Quilez, editorial coordinator of the WEB communication department of the European Parliament, considers that the greatest enemy of digital journalism is its speediness, and thus that journalists have to keep their head cool to determine whether what they are seeing on social networks is a real news or a hoax promoted by an interested actor.

Mathieu Simonson, sociologist and editor of *La cité des Annes*, refers to social networks as the new gatekeepers, while Vaselin Zheler, a European correspondent of the Z Club, argues that "social

networks are a source of revolutionary information that not only connect the politician not only directly with the journalist but also with the public. It is an open source, it is more transparent, but it cannot replace journalism because journalists are responsible for contextualising and explaining the content of tweets or posts." Another Belgian journalist considered that today the media cannot ignore social networks and that they must be taken into account: "They are sources of information and should be treated as such, using the same methods of verification that are used with any source of information and should not be used as the only source to produce a story."

When it comes to this typology by which social networks are used as channels through which the protagonists of the current events and institutions release their statements, some of the Italian journalists indicate that there would be no drawback in assuming them as source, provided the precautions to verify their authenticity have been taken. In this regard, journalists should "try not to fall into the trap of becoming a reproducer or amplifier that uncritically spreads the messages of politicians or other social agents".

The same question is addressed by one the interviewed Spanish journalists when asked whether the statements released by politicians via social networks are considered news content in a manner similar as the statements made in a press conference. "The information professional should first listen and transmit the messages from his own perspective as a journalist, highlighting what he considers to be of interest to the public and not what a certain public figure wants to transmit."

From the point of view of another interviewee, social networks promote a kind of "self-centeredness" in the case of politicians who, in general, "do not let you comment and interact with them and sometimes even block you without an apparent reason… just because you disagree. There are also people who are hired by parties to distort the news online; they attack you if you disagree; they put up shows..." The most obvious consequence would be the drift towards a declarative journalism in which face-to-face personal contact is definitely relegated in favour of immediate accessibility on the Internet. "If until now journalism was already determined to be virtual journalism, as journalists were in the newsrooms and on the Internet, emails and phone for a good time; now with social networks it is not necessary to use the phone because the protagonists, politicians, the whole world, is now learning to communicate their news via Twitter".

3.2. Use of private pictures and data posted on social networks

One of the most controversial issues in the use of social networks is how the rights of people (privacy, honour and image) can be affected with the use of personal images and data as information resources, among other reasons because, as some of the interviewed journalists pointed out, much of the digital media lack clear, both legal and ethical, guidelines on the use of images coming from social networks, which hinders the exercise of journalism in a context marked by the immediacy of information. This is highlighted by the 2011 study carried out by a group of professors from the Carlos III University of Madrid to investigate how Spanish journalists are using Twitter [6] and whether the media have guidelines on the use of social networks. The study indicates that, at the time of the survey, 13% of the surveyed journalists had guidelines, while 54% lacked guides of this type

and the remaining 33% pointed out that the media they work for were working on the development of these guides.

The two great dilemmas that arise are related to the privacy of the individuals involved and the accuracy of such content. With respect to the first, there is one general rule unanimously recognised by all journalists: ask permission or consent to the owner to use the photograph, or ask his/her relatives in case the person concerned is dead or missing. Some interviewees have noted that there is an important contradiction between the provisions of the laws concerning the protection of privacy and the social dynamics imposed on the use of social networks. While the former aims to protect the privacy, in social networks there is almost an obsession with turning the private into public, almost as if what is not heard or known by others does not exist or lacks importance". This situation has led to the perversion of the categories of public and private, as the dark area has been extended to such an extreme that these categories seem to depend on the willingness of each individual.

In fact, despite the existence of this legal right, social networks have become so popular in recent years that much of the information that is protected by law, such as people's address and health information, is shared for free, so networks like Facebook are collecting information with great commercial value from millions of users. We are therefore witnessing a digression in which journalists face two contradictory forces: the subjection to the strict laws on privacy and the current fervour for the voluntary delivery of user data. In this situation, we can only accept one professional attitude that involves the respectful and balanced use of the data that can contribute to the configuration of news content.

According to André Linard, in *Le Conseil de déontologie journalistique*, *"*in the past we needed to have the negative of the photo, now it is very easy, in technical terms, to grab a picture off social networks and publish them, but what is posted on Facebook is not at the free disposal of the journalist and this needs to be taken into account". The speed required in the production and publication of news content encourages many behaviours that may affect the privacy of people. However, not everything that can be done should be done, so the fact that certain materials and images are available online should not mean they can be freely published. In fact, a high percentage of the complaints that are received by *Le Conseil de déontologie journalistique* and *De Raad voor de Journalistiek* are related to the protection of privacy and the right of image. Therefore, a minimum requirement to avoid this unnecessary damage is to ask for the consent of the owner of the material.

This attitude of respect would find its limit between the protection of privacy and the right to information of public interest. For example, the case of a private photograph which shows a politician accompanied by a businessman who has been accused of corruption and whom the politician had denied knowing. Moreover, any use of elements posted in social networks is not always justified by the public interest, since sometimes this interest is confused with a desire to delve into the private life of people, which is regrettable from an ethical point of view.

In this respect it is important to establish the difference between what is public in the context of a social network, in accordance with the terms and purposes established by users themselves, and what is "publishable", i.e. material that can be taken and published in other media without the consent of the person. These are different uses and purposes, so a person's right to privacy does not evaporate because the person posts something on social network among its network of contacts, and his/her

permission must be requested by those who want to use these materials for other purposes or for publication in any media. However, this is not common practice in the case of missing persons, victims of any crime, or people responsible for any criminal act, whose images posted on public social networks are used by the media to illustrate the news as a clear sensationalist element.

There is another requirement of common sense that is important to remember due to the excesses that can occur on social networks, namely, to avoid using an inappropriate or insulting language against any individual. In this respect, Bárbara Quilez remind us that the website of the European Parliament warns of the need to maintain an appropriate attitude in the use of social networks: "We are very happy to see all political views represented on this page - this reflects the very nature of a Parliament, which is about diversity of opinion. What we cannot accept are comments which are either offensive in themselves or clearly offensive to other users. We would like to ask you, therefore, to avoid obscenity and other insulting language, to show respect for fellow page users and the fundamental principles we all share (you know what we mean: no racism, xenophobia, call to violence, discrimination based on religion, ethnic origin, gender...). We also encourage you to post comments that stick to the subject of the status."

In this same line, the journalist should also be sensitive to people's right to be forgotten, and thus to avoid carrying out inquiries that, away from the public interest, intend to draw attention to episodes of people's past life based on informative opportunism. Apart from the requests users can make to websites **[7]** to avoid their past can become a permanent hindrance in the timeless memory of the web, journalist should not be unscrupulous towards the rights of the people, including their right to put an end to a past stage of their live.

On the other hand, it is important to mention the problems of accuracy arising from the use of images and content in general coming from social networks without a relevant and thorough verification process in which the sources of origin are confirmed. The immediacy of information promoted by digital journalism, as a sort of race to be the first to publish a story to reach a greater number of readers, is one of the reasons why the news media, some of them of renowned prestige, periodically make mistakes in the use of images coming from social networks, as some of them turn out to be fake or unrelated to the story they accompany.

A recent example of this is the use by the TVE show *Amigas y Conocidas* ("Friends and Acquaintances"), on 18 February, 2015, of a fake picture showing Teresa Rodríguez, a Podemos candidate to the Presidency of the Government of Andalucía, naked on the beach. The image corresponded to an anonymous citizen and was obtained from a social network. Teresa Rodríguez filed a complaint in the Audiovisual Council of Andalusia against TVE's professional malpractice and sexist treatment **[8]**.

The work of media professionals is to verify the authenticity of the content they receive, even if they come from non-conventional sources. This is because the endless flow of images on the Internet enables de-contextualisation and the negligent use of photos to illustrate unrelated news. As examples, Pascual Serrano denounced the biased use on social networks of photographs that were associated with protests and riots in Venezuela but actually corresponded to conflicts in Brazil, Egypt and Chile **[9].** The website of the BBC also made a serious mistake when illustrating an article on the Syrian civil war with an image that was actually taken in Iraq **[10]**.

On other occasions, social networks themselves are responsible for alerting about the mistakes made by the media. Perhaps the most paradigmatic case of this circumstance is the front page published by *El País* newspaper of 24 January, 2013, which featured in prominent position a fake picture of the late President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, intubated over an operating table. Hours after its publication, the image was found to be fake and to correspond to a YouTube video of 2008 in which an anonymous patient was surgically intervened. In fact, just two minutes after the online version of the newspaper published the photograph social network users began to alert other users that the picture was fake. After a long process of analysis by the newspaper's editors, Twitter and Facebook revealed the mistake in two minutes, which demonstrates the crucial watchdog role adopted by Internet users. In fact, the image had been reported as fake the night before in Venezuelan television, while the 30-second long video had circulated on social networks already for a week. *El País* withdrew the picture and reprinted the paper, except in those Latin American countries where it had already been distributed (Suárez and Cruz, 2013).

3.3. Social networks and a new model of professional culture

Many of the interviewed journalists insist that next-generation digital journalism has established a new professional culture in which, among other trends, journalists are urged to establish a community with citizens; digital trust has moved from the news to the community management of the information in which journalists assume a role of leadership; the search for the truth has become more collective than ever before, and journalists, in addition to narrating and interpreting events, should help citizens to be part of it. In this way, journalism assumes a more complex role in the digital environment as it is urged to create networks of interaction through which it can demonstrate a real commitment to citizens. This position could be summed up with the words of one of the interviewed journalists:

> "Twitter is the main street of the digital world, and we must be aware of the conversation, just like in Facebook, a platform that allows us to disseminate contents in an orderly, planned and targeted way to reach our audience in an indirect way and obtain greater reach and impact in the form of results. In addition, social networks help us to expand the community of users that constitute our audience, which include the followers of our corporate channels (presence in the social web)".

For this reason, journalists should have a presence on social networks to act as observers or moderators of what happens there, and they must do so by creating communities of active citizens who share the desire of finding the truth about matters of social interest and interact with each other to achieve it. Hence the importance of the personal branding of the journalist on the internet.

In relation to this issue, we could also mention a new ethical dimension of journalism in relation to the public, which is the image of the journalist's credibility and professional solvency as an individualised reference for his/her audience, regardless of the medium for which he/she works. Increasingly, the credibility generated by journalistic content is based on relationships of trust between journalists and citizens, as an interactive community in which the information professional

acts as a guide and leader in terms of knowledge and debates on matters of public interest. In other words, journalists, in comparison to the media companies, are able to interact more directly with their readers, and therefore generate a greater confidence based on the quality of the content they provide and supported by the plurality of views, fact-checking and independence in their analysis, offering interpretations of the social reality that help citizens decipher its meaning.

In short, this is a process of constant feedback between the rigorous work of the journalist and the expectations and perceptions of citizens in relation to the social events and dynamics. From this perspective, the journalist must aim to give collective consistency to the information through social networks, but these should not be understood opportunistically as tools to achieve affinity with the audience or to achieve a series of commercial purposes, but as a different reality that forces the media and journalists to respond directly to the public. As one the interviewees points out, "the personal brand of the journalist" has emerged in the Internet "as a medium in itself and this puts the media in the dilemmas of how to manage the personal channels of their journalists, the content they publish, and even the ownership of their followers".

Broadly speaking, journalists should maintain a coherent position between their work and their positioning in social networks. However, some professionals identify certain attitudes to avoid positions that may be controversial with the editorial line of the media they work for. On the other hand, interviewees consider that the presence of journalists on social networks should always be an auxiliary instrument to anticipate or promote their work in the medium and not a parallel publication that can compete with their professional work in the medium.

Practices contrary to these basic guidelines of prudence can lead to misunderstandings and controversies in the social networks with terrible consequences for journalists. For example, a sports journalist of the French radio station RTL, Pierre Salviac, was fired in 2012 after publishing an offensive message on Twitter about the First Lady [11]. That same year, another journalist from CNN, Roland Martin, was also fired after publishing a homophobic tweet during a football game [12].

This difficult balance between the professional and personal dimensions of journalists in social networks has led some media companies to establish concrete guidelines for the management of these accounts. *Associated Press* [13] was one of the first to establish guidelines, which included having just one account on social networks, while other media, such as *The Washington Post*, allow the use of personal accounts but highlights the social responsibility of journalists, even in private dimensions. In this way, journalists are urged not to express their political affiliations or visceral views on sensitive issues.

Surreptitious advertising on social networks

The open interaction with the public also allows knowing the level of interest generated by certain issues among users, through their comments, retweets or emails, which can guide subsequent informative treatments. On the other hand, users may express their views on the quality of news content, based on the plurality of sources, the rigour of the account of the events and even the linguistic expressions used in the writing of the news. Therefore, if journalists maintain a self-critical

spirit and a conversation with the public they can learn from the public's suggestions on their informative activity.

This is because listening to citizens is one of the virtues of journalists; an active and selected listening based on networks of contacts that may also provide different perspectives to interpret news events, as well as elements that can be part of the news, once they have been verified.

Faced with this optimistic vision of the role of journalists, we should keep in mind that social networks also respond to many other interests that seek to take advantage of citizens. An example of this type of practice is surreptitious advertising, of which an interviewed journalists tell us a case:

> "Lately there have been some cases of surreptitious advertising: Twitter users with many followers tweeted certain tags... in exchange for two packs of beer cans. A few years ago I got a proposal: I was offered $50 for writing in my blog a positive post about a few hotels, without mentioning that it was a paid post. I said no. A few days later I saw a positive post about those same hotels on the blog of a traveller on the website of a major national newspaper, without warning (of course they offered this blogger more than me; so I think that surreptitious advertising exists and I think it is a trap). In the case of the Twitter user it is not a strictly journalistic case, as some were journalists and others not, but all of them were users followed by thousands of people. The funny thing is that this deal was uncovered and the prestige of those Twitter users was affected, they were widely criticised: they sold out for a few beers..."

There are groups that are paid to hide behind private profiles to display support for certain political groups or commercial products. A paradigmatic case was the message that Oprah Winfrey, the American television personality, published on her personal Twitter profile to promote openly Microsoft Surface computer, but paradoxically did so from her iPad, the Apple-branded tablet [14]. This practice of surreptitious advertising disguised through social networks is increasingly common among people with great relevance in social media, who are seen by commercial brands as ideal channel to amplify the promotion of their products. However, surreptitious advertising is an illegal activity according to article 3 of the General Law on Advertising, in the Spanish case.

Another ethical dilemma arises when this type of advertising is carried out by journalists. As established in paragraph 15 of the Resolution 1003 on the Ethics of Journalism of the Council of Europe: "News organisations must treat information not as a commodity but as a fundamental right of the citizen. To that end, the media should exploit neither the quality nor the substance of the news or opinions for purposes of boosting readership or audience figures in order to increase advertising revenue."

As a result, the journalist must use social networks as a communication space to trace reality, but remaining aware that they do not constitute 'reality' itself. In other words, an opinion posted on Twitter should not be turned into news because it may be a strategy of the endogenous performance of groups want everybody talking about a specific topic that, for those who are not in social networks, lacks value other than the reaction it provokes in social networks, which is occasionally intoxicated and even false. There have been cases in which alleged news about non-existent events or

events that have not yet occurred have been spread through social networks, stimulated by the tendency to compete to become the first to deliver the news.

3.4. Proposals for the ethical use of social networks in news production

The significance of the new possibilities of digital technology opens up an interesting debate about the increasingly diffuse limits between professional journalism and the amalgamation of pseudo-journalistic citizen practices that proliferate in the network and, particularly, in social networks. The identity of journalists is, thus, blurred by the concurrence of new actors in the configuration of the media flows which, in turn, determines their work in the different stages of the production of news. The channels of citizen participation in informative discourse filter even the production process itself in order to build a public opinion among all in a technological context that allows us to treat news as 'processes' rather than as closed 'products'. The ethical dimensions of these practices are related with a confusion of roles which the information professionals have failed to overcome by using the tools they still have.

Faced with this situation, the use of ethical texts that clarify the position of journalists and their relationship with social networks and other participatory platforms seems to be fundamental. However, the updating of these texts is not occurring at the same pace than of the changes that are taking place. For example, el only Belgian text that makes references to social networks as a source of information is De Code van de Raad voor de Journalistiek [15], in its latest edition published in December 2013. It is relevant to briefly examine this document since it is a novelty in the European scene, given the insufficient adaptation of the traditional codes to the new situations generated by digital journalism. In particular, article 22 on the use of information and images from personal websites and social networks, of *The Code van de Raad voor de Journalistiek,* establishes that personal websites and social networks can be used by journalists as sources of information, but that this information cannot be published without due verification. On the other hand, the journalist must be prudent in the use of the information and material he/she can find there for dissemination through the media, given that the person that posted these resources has the right to decide on the use that third parties make of them to respond to other purposes.

For these reasons, the journalist should follow the ethical criteria that legitimise the use of images and data posted on social networks, especially: the informational context, and the public interest. With regards to the former, the journalist should take into account the nature and purpose of the website, even when it is a public page. A website targeting a specific group or area should be considered and treated differently from a site containing information clearly intended for the general public. Secondly, the journalist must demonstrate that there is a considerable social importance to justify the use of the information. Finally, special caution is required when the information or material that is used in a completely different context or for a purpose that is totally different to the original purpose for what it was posted on the network.

Concerning the "social interest", journalists shall follow the following criteria: 1) the unauthorised use of recognisable images can only be justified in light of the social importance of the news, which the journalist should be able to demonstrate. 2) Special caution is required to disclose information

and images that allow the identification of people in a situation of social vulnerability, such as minors, victims of crime, accidents and disasters and their families. 3) In any case, journalists must verify the accuracy of the information and images.

While it is true that the good sense of the people concerned would prevent ethical absurdities in relation to the protection of the rights of personality, the culture of "media advertising" has been transferred to anonymous citizens, who found a way out of their social invisibility through the display of their privacy. However, these practices should be restricted to the field of interaction between citizens and should not be adopted in the professional practice of journalism, to maintain the respect for people's privacy and image. However, we found a large group of journalists who understand that if the person concerned has published something on social networks or the internet this person has already expressed his/her willingness to make it public, and therefore, cannot claim protection from the subsequent use that is made of these images or information that he did not protect in the first place. Under the terms of Italian journalists. "il diritto alla privacy *non esiste più, nel momento in cui condividi si perde la proprietà"*. In this sense, it seems that in Italy and Spain journalists maintain a more open position on the use of images and information that people has freely decided to publish and is, thus, allowing their subsequence use by third party if there is an informational interest that justifies the use. On the other hand, in Belgium, most journalists agree with the criterion of seeking the consent from those concerned to use their images and data for journalistic purposes.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In recent years, the expansion of social networks among digital users has made it obligatory for journalists not only to understand their use, but also to incorporate them as tools that to detect social trends that are reproduced in time real, in order to facilitate interaction with citizens and be able to obtain different benefits.

One of these advantages is the possibility of relying on the witnesses and protagonists of the news with ease thanks to the relentless technological development in the field of information. The use of social networks as sources of information is increasing in the newsrooms, since it facilitates the process of news gathering in the shortest time possible. However, one thing is a piece of information that arrives to the newsroom as evidence of an event (e.g. the statement of a participating actor or illustrative content of the events in the form of image or video), and quite another is proving its informational value. Social networks are vast grounds of information coming from multiple instances, however, the journalist is in charge of investigating and verifying to add journalistic value to such evidence.

Therefore, journalists must carry an additional work of verification which must comply with the internal codes of the journalistic profession without falling into the mere reproduction of facts whose sources are unknown and whose informative value cannot be explained. Otherwise the journalist would be contributing to the impoverishment of the profession, which would be undifferentiated from the multitude of amateur information nodes that populate the Internet with information that is unverified and out of context.

Most interviewed journalists agree that they should remain cautions towards the content accessible on social networks, which should be filtered to be able to produce quality, well-crafted and socially-relevant news products. All this is based on the assumption that the Internet and social networks are excellent tools for the development of the professional work.

It is also important to note that the environment is complex and the ethical recommendations are not always easy to implement. Informative immediacy that drives the Internet tends to prompt the emergence of ethical conflicts and phenomena such as the proliferation of sensationalism that has its raison d'être in the fast consumption of "chaud" news, as they are called in Belgium, or infotainment, which is the general label used to refer to the publication of frivolous issues of little informative significance. Therefore, journalists are urged to assume a new professional role that distinguishes them from the rest of the actors involved in the environment and with whom they compete to reach audiences, enhancing the inherent values of the profession which generate trust and credibility. In other words, journalists should act as a filter for the information of actual interest for society, and as reliable references for the interpretation and contextualisation of events in a turbulent and confusing information stage.

These professional tasks of diligence also include those related to the respect for the rights inherent to every person, to seek balance between informative interest and the intimacy and privacy of the protagonists in a digital environment marked by the marketing and publication of personal data that compromise these rights.

Perhaps journalistic ethics had never been so fundamental to the vindication of the profession at a historic moment in which, paradoxically, the greatest volume of information is accessible to hundreds of millions of citizens. It is a fact that journalists are no longer essential to break the news, sound out the latest trends and access data of interest, however, their social value is now even greater insofar as they must present a coherent, useful, balanced and comprehensive portrait of reality, a product that not only informs but also educates citizens to interact with others and serves as connexion with social institutions.

To do so, journalist must fully respect the traditional ethical demands of the profession and adapt new ethical principles to the new practices that have been prompted by the emergence of the Internet. In this regard, as some of the interviewed journalists point out, it is fundamental to update these ethical codes and produce explicit guidelines for journalists with regards to the use of new digital platforms of great importance, such as social networks, as sources of information and as channels of interaction with users. This, undoubtedly, is one of the greatest challenges for the future of journalism and a transcendental area that needs to be addressed from different perspectives in communication studies.

Social networks have had a great impact in the practice of journalism in at least two large areas; on the one hand, in the access and collection of information, and on the other, in the relationship with readers and users based on new forms of dissemination of news, and interaction tools that end the traditional one-way dynamic. Journalists face many challenges on both areas, starting with the difficulties inherent to the verification of the information obtained through these channels, to the respect for the rights of privacy, honour and image of protagonists and users. One of the great lessons learned throughout this study is that, although information is available to be published

immediately, it is necessary to previously verify its authenticity and evaluate its suitability from different perspectives.

Many of these recommendations are made in the old ethical codes of the profession of journalism, however, the constant changes occurring in the information environment, which has migrated in large part to the Internet, forces journalists to carry out a permanent recycling in the use of these codes, which leads them to adopt new routines and even roles in relation to citizens to highlight the importance of their social function in comparison to other actors.

Therefore, it is essential for journalists to reflect on the infinite possibilities provided by tools such as social networks, but also being aware of their risks and challenges in order to exploit them in a more effective manner.

5. Notes

[1] Lajas Portillo, J. (2009): Twitter publishes the first news about the accident over the Hudson River. 16 January, 2009. Available at: http://www.periodismociudadano.com/2009/01/16/twitter-difunde-las-primeras-informaciones-sobre-el-accidente-de-aviacion-en-el-rio-hudson/

[2] Kristin Marino (2012); *Social media: The new news source.* 66 April, 2012. Available at:

http://www.schools.com/visuals/social-media-news.html

[3] News article available at:

http://www.elperiodico.com/es/noticias/sociedad/falso-tuit-anuncia-muerte-benedicto-xvi-1515843

[4] News article available at:

http://www.libertaddigital.com/espana/2014-06-02/casa-real-anuncia-en-twitter-la-abdicacion-de-don-juan-carlos-1276520262/

[5] News article available at:

http://www.lavanguardia.com/gente/20150322/54428364406/pablo-iglesias-tania-sanchez-rompen-relacion.html

[6] Labápart; *Join the conversation: cómo están usando Twitter los periodistas españoles.* 2010. Available at: http://www.pilarcarrera.es/imgs/jointheconversation.pdf

[7] Due to the digitisation of information, currently many personal data remain in the network for a long time. The Supreme Court of Justice of the European Union ruled on 13 May, 2014, that Google had to eliminate the personal information and links of the citizens who request so. The announcement is available at:
https://support.google.com/legal/contact/lr_eudpa?product=websearch&hl=en

[8] News article available at: http://www.andalucesdiario.es/ciudadanxs/rodriguez-denuncia-a-tve-ante-el-consejo-audiovisual-por-la-difusion-de-una-foto-falsa/

[9] News article available at: http://www.eldiario.es/zonacritica/Venezuela-Twitter-orgia-desinformativa_6_229987023.html

[10] News article available at: http://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/view/45679-Foto-de-Irak-para-ilustrar-una-masacre-en-Siria-error-o-propaganda

[11] News article available at:
http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2012/05/09/comunicacion/1336589702.html

[12] News article available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/post/cnns-roland-martin-suspended-for-homophobic-tweets/2012/02/08/gIQA3F8OzQ_blog.html

[13] http://www.ap.org/Images/SocialMediaGuidelinesforAPEmployees-RevisedJanuary2012_tcm28-4699.pdf

[14] News article available at: http://edition.cnn.com/2012/11/20/tech/social-media/oprah-surface-tweet/

[15] Text available at: http://www.rvdj.be/sites/default/files/pdf/journalistieke-code.pdf

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