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Social Media**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The aim of this work is to redefine the concept of 'parajournalism' in relation to the transformations that characterise contemporary information — in particular those generated by the progressive shift of information itself on social media. We will analyse the main meanings attributed to the term 'parajournalism', emphasising how this term generally refers to a type of journalism that is characterised by the marked intervention of subjective opinions and perceptions, as well as to a 'second-rate' journalism. We will then try to demonstrate how the more appropriate meaning of 'parajournalism' emerges from the analysis and comparison with the so-called 'paraliterature'. The main studies on paraliterature show that, starting in the 16th century, it also included the first forms of journalistic communication. These publications were characterised by content and stylistic forms similar to those of contemporary social media journalism. We will illustrate how the connections between today's parajournalism and paraliterature also relate to the role of these communicative forms for mass literacy. Just as paraliterature and the first forms of journalistic communication played a fundamental role in expanding the public sphere, parajournalism today plays a decisive role in rendering information on issues of public interest available to the masses.*

**Keywords:** *parajournalism, paraliterature, social media, public sphere, networked society*

## Introduction

The aim of this work is to redefine the concept of ‘parajournalism’ in relation to the transformations that characterise contemporary information—in particular those generated by the progressive shift of information itself on social media—and to highlight how this form of communication contributes effectively to the growth of participation in the public sphere. We will analyse the main meanings attributed to the term ‘parajournalism’, emphasising how this term generally refers to a type of journalism that is characterised by the marked intervention of subjective opinions and perceptions, as well as to a ‘second-rate’ journalism, practised by non-professionals, and substantially reduced to light information and infotainment. We will show how ‘parajournalism’ is likewise associated with so-called ‘postmodern journalism’, in which objective reporting fades into a form of communication on the edge between reality and fiction.

We will then try to demonstrate how the more appropriate meaning of ‘parajournalism’ emerges from the analysis and comparison with the so-called ‘paraliterature’, i.e., a complex of literary publications with commercial and consumerist—rather than cultural and artistic— purposes, aimed at the masses. The main studies on paraliterature show that, starting in the 16th century, it also included the first forms of journalistic communication such as gazettes and printed notices. These publications, like other expressions of paraliterature, were characterised by content and stylistic forms similar to those of contemporary social media journalism. They featured a loud style, reiteration in the headlines of the topics considered to have the greatest emotional impact, declamatory tones, the use of superlatives, and a propensity for clear oppositions and absolute truths to the detriment of counterbalanced propositions. There is also a commonality in the choice of topics between what was covered by paraliterature and what is considered ‘newsworthy’ in today’s journalism practised on social media platforms.

We will illustrate how the connections between today’s parajournalism and paraliterature also relate to the role of these communicative forms for mass literacy. Just as paraliterature and the first forms of journalistic communication played a fundamental role in expanding the public sphere, parajournalism today plays a decisive role in rendering information on issues of public interest available to the masses, although conveyed in a way that is typical of social media journalism. All these analogies will therefore lead us to redefine the concept of ‘parajournalism’ in relation to the emergence of social media and the new digital public arena. The term should not be understood in an exclusively derogatory sense and should be re-semanticised considering how contemporary forms of popular journalism— analogously to those of paraliterature—contribute to a widening of participation in the public sphere.

*What is 'Parajournalism': From Postmodernism to the Networked Society*

The term 'parajournalism' has taken on a number of different meanings over the years, particularly since the emergence of the networked society. Yet, all of them can be traced back to a general opposition to the 'canon' of traditional journalism. The latter has often been defined as the activity of selecting, writing, critically reporting and distributing news through professional organisations (Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 2004). Tonello (2005: 9) states that the proliferation of parajournalistic products 'should lead us to discuss various 'journalisms', many of which have a very vague relation to that industry of organised news gathering of general interest that we were accustomed to knowing'. Clearly, the changes engendered by the web have eroded the boundaries between professional and non-professional journalism. Indeed, mass self-communication (Castells, 2009) has inevitably undermined the monopoly of news production by journalism in the traditional sense. In this context, several scholars have spoken of the 'death of journalism' regarding typical web forms of communication, such as live blogging (Symes, 2011; Anderson 2011). More generally, the hybridisation between traditional and new media (Chadwick, 2013)—and the consequent contamination between broadcast and conversational communication models—make it increasingly complex to segregate professional from non-professional journalism. New technologies, for instance, are 'hybrid public spaces' (Bentivegna, 2015: 12) in which users themselves spread the news, turning from passive consumers into 'producers' (Burns, 2006) and participatory news consumers (Mazzoli, 2013). Thus, users are following the well-known characteristic shifts of citizen journalism.

With reference to Italy, it should be noted that the monopoly in the selection and dissemination of news by professional media organisations had not undergone any significant upheavals at least until the 1970s. This decade also coincided with the birth of private and commercial television. In the first decades following the birth of this mass medium, the state monopoly and the dominance of the pedagogical framework made television a form of 'control of modernisation' (Colombo, 2017: 17). Max Weber argued that the rationalisation of modern societies was based, among other things, precisely on the formation of specialised and professional apparatuses. And yet, it has often been remarked that 'parajournalism' was an almost inevitable outcome for the profession of journalism, which is not well suited to the definition of 'profession', i.e., a work practice based on academic qualifications and licenses to practice (Weaver, Wilhoit, 1996: 125). This is because 'the apparatus of communication did not take the path of selecting scientific practices that were incontestable to the layman' (Tonello, 2005: 118-119). This happened for various reasons: the substitutability of one form of communication with another, production routines and, above all, the nature of journalistic knowledge compared to that of other professions (Tonello, 2005: 119-123). Journalism, therefore, was fundamentally exposed to hybridisation and to the rise of non-professional models such as parajournalism. Over time, it became hardly possible to distinguish between the former and the latter. Unsurprisingly, scholars who have focused on parajournalism have often

lamented the lack of ethical standards in the communication forms typical of the new media, which only professional journalism could guarantee (Heinderyckx, 2009).

The safeguarding of ethical and professional standards has always gone hand in hand with a strenuous defence of the scientific nature of journalistic work i.e., of journalism as an objective recounting of reality (Lippmann, 1920). For decades, characteristics such as the scrupulous verification of sources, independence, and above all, a narrative free from subjective contamination, identified professional journalism as an 'ideology of objectivity' (Fazakis, 2006; Schudson, 2001). For this very reason the term 'parajournalism' has been increasingly associated with the progressive rise of journalistic subjectivism. The most striking case was that of New Journalism. Tom Wolfe pioneered an accounting of reality on the verge between journalism and literature, opening the way for genres such as journalistic fiction and the non-fiction novel (Johnson, 1971; Weber, 1971; Dennis & Rivers, 1974). Consequently, New Journalism was accused of violating the professional canon and labelled as 'parajournalism', despite representing one of the highest forms of expression ever achieved by journalistic reporting (Macdonald, cited in Harvey, 1994).

In addition to violating the professional journalism's standards of objectivity, parajournalism has also been identified with entertainment journalism on soft topics, low-level journalism, and thus with a predominantly derogatory purpose. The two aspects are interconnected, which may be illustrated through the link between parajournalism and postmodernism. Due to the subjectivistic turn it gave to journalistic narrative, *New Journalism* was already considered to be a sort of 'forerunner of postmodernism' (Basu, 2010). The expression 'postmodern journalism' is generally understood to refer to a journalism in which opinions prevail over facts and the real tends to gradually disappear into the vortex of multimedia and the virtual. Some scholars go as far as to suggest a sort of equivalence between postmodern journalism and the concept of neo-journalism (Zangrilli, 2013). Many scholars, moreover, have argued that 'the digital revolution is a qualifying element of postmodernity' (Marchese, 1997: 24).

Some have argued that, while the print newspaper industry represented modernism, the birth of the online newspaper fully transports information into the realm of postmodernism. There, it is not so much the news that matters as its graphic presentation and the type of emotion it arouses in the reader-user (Tiel, 1998). Hence, in the postmodern scenario, as predicted by authors such as Baudrillard and Virilio, reality is in danger of being lost in 'hyperreality', in a virtual scenario devoid of objective consistency. Indeed, the relapse on journalistic communication itself involves the loss of the objective recounting of facts for the benefit of opinions, of subjectivism. Parajournalism, then, is inextricably linked to the shift into web-based information. However, given the link between the Internet and postmodernism, parajournalism, too, may qualify as a form of postmodern journalism.

This is true not only in terms of the loss of objectivity and impartial reporting of facts, but also in view of the progressive affirmation of infotainment, of frivolous news, of the spectacularization of information. As is widely known,

postmodernism brings with it a re-evaluation of popular culture and of 'low' cultural forms. The web, on the other hand, establishes a democratization in the production and access to information. In this context, postmodern parajournalism is considered a sort of breeding ground for infotainment (Loporcaro, 2005: 20-26). This also applies to postmodern television, which made its entrance in Italy in the 1970s, decades before the web. At the time, the public monopoly came to an end, producing substandard programs (including informational ones) that consisted merely of entertainment (Zangrilli, 2013: 150). Television spectacularization is considered the 'quintessence of postmodern culture' (Collins, 1992: 327).

In fact, formats that are typically parajournalistic such as talk shows, are establishing themselves within postmodern neo-television. These formats include talk shows, which are halfway between information and entertainment (Munson, 1993). In the United States, parajournalistic formats centred on soft news, comments by 'opinion leaders' and on gossip, such as those of David Letterman or Jay Leno, have gradually entered competition with professionalized journalism. The latter has lost its *gatekeeping* role in the selection of news (Tonello, 2005: 76-77). The web, as mentioned, also due to its intrinsic link with postmodern culture, emphasises all these traits. Thus, hyperreality and spectacularization 'lead to the circulation of news having as its object 'factoids' rather than facts' (Panarari, 2014). In this sense, soft news prevails over hard news, and even when it comes to providing serious news such as political news, gossip and behind-the-scenes stories prevail (another facet of a subjective and often invented account of reality, in complete postmodern and parajournalistic fashion).

The example of talk shows also clarifies how parajournalism combines subjective storytelling with news spectacularization. It is in fact, in many cases, a form of 'opinionism' on light topics, in which the commentators' personalities, their histrionics or at least their popularity prevail over the news as such. These same commentators, then, often comment on facts of little public relevance. Parajournalism can therefore be defined as an emotive journalism filled with opinions (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012) on subjects that, before the birth of television and especially the web, were beyond the realm of journalism. Finally, it should be noted that the emergence of parajournalistic communication is often linked to changes in the ownership structures of newspapers and publishing companies. The formation of large conglomerates and mainly the fact that newspapers are incorporated into oligopolies—in which information is only an accessory branch of the overall business—create a mega-machinery of commercial information and entertainment. Thus, the civic vocation is lost at the expense of profit-seeking (Tonello, 2005: 59-60; Colombo, 2017; 261-264).

It is evident from what has been presented so far that the term 'parajournalism' has taken on an almost exclusively negative connotation over time. To summarise, this expression is used to indicate a corruption of the standards of the journalistic profession, both from a moral and practical point of view, with the journalistic profession being extended to non-professionals. Additionally, parajournalism indicates the predominance of opinions over facts. Finally, parajournalism is commonly described in relation to the rise of a 'playful' culture of news; of a spectacularization of information that leads to soft news prevailing over hard

news, changing the criteria of newsworthiness (for the worse). As we have seen, all these aspects are inextricably linked to the network society and postmodern culture.

### *Paraliterature*

As already mentioned, the prefix ‘para’ also refers, as far as journalism is concerned, to a form of mass communication; it implicitly refers to infotainment and the popularisation of both the contents and the styles of communication. The same can be said for the so-called ‘Paraliterature’ i.e., that set of literary genres that distinguish themselves from ‘high’ literature, with both artistic and cultural aims, as they have more of a consumer and commercial purpose. It is thus a fringe literature, which falls short of the aesthetic canons of the elites and is aimed at satisfying the mass cultural tastes (Arnaud, Lacassin & Tortel, 1977; Couégnas, 1997; Braida & Infelise, 2010). Paraliterature comprises heterogeneous types of writing such as romance, crime, science fiction, and serial novels, and is characterised by a lightness of content and aims at a disengaged reading experience (Sfardini, 2001: 51). Our main thesis is that the term ‘parajournalism’ should be re-semanticised and freed from exclusively negative and derogatory connotations. Furthermore, we argue that its most suitable meaning should emerge from the comparison with paraliterature.

In this context it should be noted that from the sixteenth century onwards, paraliterature included the first forms of journalistic communication, such as gazettes and printed notices. These were the main means of information at the time, spreading various types of news from worldly chronicles to international events. Several studies place gazettes and notices in the paraliterary canon (Ricci, 2013), considering they disseminated content halfway between news and literary fiction. Analogies can therefore be traced from the outset between paraliterary and early journalistic reporting, both in terms of the themes covered and the linguistic codes. Analogies that, as we shall see, extend to the relationship between paraliterature and contemporary parajournalism.

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, paraliterature has consistently been characterised by the presence of stylistic forms (both verbal and graphic) aimed at attracting the widest possible audience. These included: bold titles, attractive frontispieces, reiteration of the formulas with the greatest impact, leaving an imprint on the readers minds, use of superlatives and simplified writing (Ricci, 2009: 101-102). In terms of themes, elements such as the fantastical, the unknown and the sensational stood out in the sixteenth century (Ricci, 2013: 14-17). Moving on to printed notices, we observe that they had characteristics resembling those of paraliterary texts: repeated and striking titles, emphatic language, repetition of terms considered to have greater impact (Ricci, 2009: 98-99). Moreover, these early forms of journalistic reporting were characterised not only by the coverage of mundane news (according to the model of ‘soft journalism’ that we know today), but also of prodigies, natural disasters, sensational events, even monster apparitions, with a very strong presence of crime reporting (Ricci 2013: 35-39). These reports were halfway between reality and fiction and had a strong literary

connotation (Natale, 2008: 8). Sensationalism constituted the main criterion of newsworthiness, so much so that 'The facts that came to the attention of the popular classes were selected for their sensational quality, chosen from the news (it is not particularly important here to establish whether it was true, fictitious, or imaginary) that aroused astonishment, that went beyond the everyday, beyond the sphere of the usual' (Natale, 2008: 19).

Already in the sixteenth century (and as will be discussed below, this will also extend to subsequent times) both paraliterature and these early forms of journalistic reporting made a key contribution to expanding the public sphere to the popular classes. In Italy, while the very high rate of illiteracy made reading a privilege for the few, the oral circulation of printed notices was a decisive factor in bringing the urban strata closer to the reception of news, including the working classes (Infelise, 2007: 51-52). Similarly, paraliterature was a fundamental medium of the Italian language, even before industrial development and the full establishment of mass media, representing for large strata of the population the only form of literacy in Italian (Ricci, 2013: 10-17).

This role of mass literacy and access to the Italian language can be seen both in the paraliterature of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and particularly in that which developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has indeed been pointed out how 19<sup>th</sup> century paraliterature which was understood as the first form of mass literature, played a decisive role in the democratisation of Italian culture. Through the circulation of paraliterary works, reading ceased to be a privilege reserved exclusively for the more educated classes (Sfardini, 2001: 51). Hence, historically, paraliterature and parajournalism were substantially intertwined. And it is precisely this interconnection that is decisive for the democratisation of cultural forms and the enlargement of the public sphere.

In its effort to appeal to a wide audience, paraliterature adopted themes and linguistic codes that were increasingly similar to those of journalistic communication. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, an increasing number of novels, seeking to reach the mass readership, began to use typically journalistic language (Zangrilli, 2009). This tendency grew stronger during the 20<sup>th</sup> century within postmodern literature. Here, the works of Italian authors such as Aldo Busi, Elsa Morante, Daniele Giudice, Roberto Pazzi and many others, produce 'a novel of medium consumption, packaged with modules of multimedia and communication'. For this, they use a 'double coding' aimed at both the intellectual and the layman and justifying itself by the very need to reach a wider circle of readers (Zangrilli, 2013: 11-17). The need to create a literary text that would reach the masses also led many writers to craft their pieces by means of 'strategies' and forms of expression typical of the popular press. Carolina Invernizio, a paraliterary writer of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, explained how in order to make her literary texts successful for the public, she tried to captivate readers through the title. In her words, the title 'exerts a kind of suggestiveness on readers' and is 'half the success of a popular novel'. Other strategies had to do with the identification of the audience's previous tastes, so much so that Invernizio's novels were filled with episodes of crime that took place in those years (Invernizio, 1904, reported in Colombo, 2017: 53-55). Over the years, the crime report in particular became the



main inspiration for the birth of a typically paraliterary genre such as the detective story (Bertoni, 2009: 30-31).

The latter not only draws on popular news reporting to construct an equally popular narrative text, but also employs those stylistic and linguistic codes (emphatic titles, repetition of high-impact terms, and so on) typical of the popular press and parajournalism. While paraliterature drew on the news to construct its fictional scenarios, late nineteenth-century parajournalism was prone to romanticising news events, particularly crime news, by merging reality and fiction. Journalism thus became 'quasi fiction' (Bertoni, 2009: 29). This was already the case in 16<sup>th</sup>-century printed notices and, more generally, adheres to the characteristics of parajournalism: imprinting the story on a subjectivism that violates the objective and aseptic canon of professional journalism—at times bordering on the downright invention of facts and circumstances. The case of 'La Domenica - Cronaca della settimana', a weekly published in Naples from 1866, is indicative in this regard. As a journalistic product that was fully in line with the phenomenon of the industrialisation of culture and the extension of the public sphere to the popular classes, 'La Domenica' was directed by Francesco Mastriani, one of the most important novelists and journalists of the time. Mastriani, as a good novelist-journalist, promised his readers 'to bring events to life deliberately' i.e., to invent news 'in case the real ones were missing' (Sfardini, 2001: 60). Here, we return to that model of parajournalism that becomes soft and popular by moving away from objective account of reality, crossing over into literary (and paraliterary) narrative.

As mentioned above, there is a substantial osmosis between parajournalism and paraliterature in terms of the communicative and linguistic codes adopted: both journalistic chronicles and paraliterary works made use of a series of expressive forms—from the headline to sensationalistic language, up to the use of 'eye-catching' iconographic material. The latter aimed at seducing and attracting readers, especially those from the lower and less educated classes. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and later centuries, this constituted a fundamental instrument to bring the masses closer to the Italian language and to information. It subsequently gave rise to an important shift, allowing to conceive of a public sphere that was truly enlarged, rather than limited to an elite of intellectuals and to those with greater intellectual means. As we shall see, contemporary parajournalism often assumes a similar function.

To get a complete picture on the relationship between paraliterature and parajournalism, it should be noted that from 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards the press itself was in fact the primary vehicle for disseminating literary writings. This was achieved primarily through publication, in newspapers headings, of appendix novels, novellas and short stories. And once again, it was precisely through the journalistic dissemination of literary material that vast sections of the working class and petit bourgeoisie became acquainted with books (Sfardini, 2001: 57). In Italy, this took longer than in other countries, due to the substantial reluctance of the intellectual classes to open up to forms of popular culture. This tendency was analysed and criticised, among others, by Antonio Gramsci. The author held writers in Italy responsible for lacking awareness on the role that intellectuals

ought to have in forming the moral conscience of the people, thus, in his view, resulting in a lack of identity of worldviews between writers and the public in Italy (Gramsci, 1950). Moreover, due to the strong humanistic tradition that has always characterised Italian culture (Del Monte, 1962: 6), appendix literature (but also cinema in its early days) were viewed with suspicion by Italian intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century. It was conceived as a yielding to an abject, vulgar culture (Colombo, 2017: 17). For this reason, mass literacy via newspapers took place mainly through imported material, in particular French *feuilletons*.

The aristocratic and snobbish attitude of the Italian intelligentsia towards paraliterature is also paralleled by the delay in the emergence of the popular press in Italy, compared to other countries. In the United States, the penny press made its appearance as early as the 1830ies, generating an immediate increase in newspaper circulation and a popularisation of the journalistic product (Mott, 1962; Schudson, 1978). In countries such as France and England the development of popular advertising occurred even earlier, while in Italy the press has long remained connoted in a strongly political and elitist sense. This was the case not only in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century—in conjunction with the historical events of the Risorgimento—but at least up until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, delegating to weeklies or newspaper supplements the task of addressing readers of lower-middle culture (Murialdi, 2014: 43-115). It was only the birth of commercial television that prompted newspapers, too, to experiment with forms of hybridisation between 'high' journalism and popular parajournalism. This led to a substantially snobbish conception of popular journalism, thus giving the term 'parajournalism' a negative and derogatory connotation. However, as will be discussed in the following section, historically the hybridisation of journalism and parajournalism is itself the main factor that suggests a redefinition of the term 'parajournalism' in today's era of web journalism. Furthermore, a redefinition will highlight the potential of parajournalism in terms of extending the public sphere to broader segments of the population.

### *The Role of Parajournalism in Expanding the Public Sphere in the Age of Social Networks*

For almost a decade now, the search for—and 'consumption' of— information has been taking place predominantly on the web, more specifically on social media. In some countries, including the United States, Facebook has for been the publics' main source of information for some years (Meloni, 2017: 81). In Italy, the primacy still belongs to television, however Facebook is positioned immediately after (Censis, 2020). Most studies in this field tend to associate the web with postmodern journalism and the proliferation of parajournalism (Gade, 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017). However, it is necessary to understand that the very changes that the web has introduced to the world of information make contemporary parajournalism a tool that is all the more important for guaranteeing citizens' access to information. This is analogous to popular journalism in its early days, and similar to the educational function assumed by paraliterature throughout history.

It is important to point out the main difference pertaining to popular journalism before the birth of the network society, versus the popular journalism today, which is linked to the possibilities made available by new technologies. While news as a form of entertainment has always existed, what is different today is the technical possibility of merging hard news and soft news within the same journalistic product. The Italian press, as analysed in the previous chapter, has traditionally tended to confine popular journalism to specialised newspapers or weeklies, which rarely achieved high circulations. It was only with the birth of the web, and in order to pursue a younger audience, that even mainstream newspapers such as *Corriere della Sera* and *Repubblica* began to adopt content and language generally associated with parajournalism (Murialdi, 2014: 288-304). In short, there has long been a lack of willingness to make soft news a vehicle for accessing more serious information. The Internet, however, has unified the journalistic field, bringing that convergent culture (Jenkins, 2006) typical of the multimedia scenario to fruition in the field of news as well. Web-based information falls within the framework of the post-medial condition (Eugeni, 2015), in which it is no longer possible to distinguish between medial and non-medial life situations, since every activity has to do with the world of media. In the field of journalism, this has been referred to as 'ambient journalism' (Hermida, 2010): a transition from content-oriented to connection-oriented communication, wherein the awareness of all users of being within a continuous and indistinct flow of news is what counts. In the context of convergent culture, ambient journalism also implies a constitutive co-presence, as inherent to the digital medium, of hard and soft news, and a consequent reconfiguration of the public sphere. While Habermas (1962) described the public sphere made up of episodic conversations to which social platforms could be associated today as 'ephemeral', numerous authors have instead highlighted how the new types of language on social media have now given rise to an aesthetic public sphere (Jones, 2007; Sassatelli, 2012). Hence, types of language that acknowledge the need to reach users with gamification tools and 'emotional' news.

Moreover, it is primarily the 'news market' that imposes a ludic turn as an insuperable necessity, making it compulsory even for hard news publications to adapt to a communication that differs from the past, even in terms of linguistic choices. Gamification (Robson et al, 2015), in the context of journalistic information, determines the use of impactful headlines and photos, emoticons (a typical mode of social communication between friends), and the replacement of linguistic codes typical of printed newspapers with simpler and more immediate language. Moreover, Facebook's algorithm, as is well known, rewards contents with the highest number of interactions (Pariser, 2011; Claussen et al., 2019; Levy, 2021). The latter are in most cases light or, in general, highly emotionally charged contents.

In other words, on social media, journalism gradually becomes a form of conversation, the language of headlines becomes more colloquial, direct, and captivating, according to the communicative codes of the respective 'host platforms' (Facebook in primis), and information comes to coincide with the concept of 'social and friendly relations' (Mezza, 2015: 12-13). Hence, the codes

of parajournalism and paraliterature recur in the context of online information: the use of emphatic terms, particularly in headlines, the reiteration of high-impact words, a tendency towards sensationalism, and sharp contrasts prevailing over multifaceted statements. As mentioned, this is what characterised popular communication on the verge between journalism and paraliterature, as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But the occurrence of 'convergent culture' means that today, in the age of the web, the employment of these communication codes is essentially the only way for users, especially those who are less cultured (also in terms of digital culture) to access information of public interest on issues such as politics, foreign affairs, economics.

The blending of 'high' and 'low' makes social media an 'extended public space' (Meyrowitz, 1985) that brings together the ephemeral with the more committed, defined by some scholars as a 'third place' (Wright, 2012), or a space for public discussion where people meet and discuss serious issues in a familiar and often informal atmosphere. In this light, the shift of journalistic information to these channels renders the need to bring the public closer to more serious and committed news unavoidable—through the tools and language traditionally associated with parajournalism. Without falling into clickbait and without necessarily having to 'shout' or distort the news with a purely sensationalist purpose, newspapers still must adapt their language. Impactful photos, headlines that can be easily and quickly decoded and are immediately catchy, ironic, and non-didactic Facebook posts are just some of the tools used to make communication more 'agile' even on the most serious and committed issues.

In the age of fast and brief communication, the headlines of newspapers, for example, are often constructed on the model of sound bites, i.e., synthetic forms of communication with an evocative character, which offer the general coordinates to grasp the overall meaning of a piece of information (Bentivegna, 2015). Recent research shows that on social media, the threshold of attention devoted by each user to a single piece of information content is very low, with most web pages viewed, on average, for about 10 seconds (Mello, 2019: 89). The need to focus on particularly emphatic terms and formulas of immediate appeal therefore responds to the necessity of winning this tight battle in gaining gain the attention of users. If this is not achieved, and if newspapers again separate hard and soft news, refusing to adopt the codes of gamification, the algorithms of Facebook and other social networks will only reward entertainment and gossip news. The latter will be the only content appearing before users, with the predictable (and harmful) consequences for the quality of public debate. Thus, parajournalism, its codes and stylistic forms, represent a necessary compromise to create a comprehensive information environment in the digital public arena.

As we have seen, these same communicative strategies already existed in popular journalism and paraliterature from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In contrast to the 16<sup>th</sup> century communicative strategies in popular journalism and paraliterature and up to the emergence of the networked society—where forms of mixing journalism and parajournalism (especially in Italy) were more occasional—parajournalism today can simply be defined as a different and necessary way of conveying journalistic information; one which accepts the context of convergence,

gamification, and the redefinition of the networked public sphere. In short, parajournalism should not be exclusively and disparagingly labelled as second rate, unprofessional journalism. Instead, it ought to be reinserted into the context of changing communication and information codes on the web. The comparison with early popular journalism and paraliterature clarifies this even further: just as paraliterature and early forms of journalistic communication played a fundamental role in expanding the public sphere, today parajournalism plays a decisive role in making information on issues of public interest available to the masses, albeit conveyed in a manner typical of social media journalism.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have illustrated how, in the age of networked communication and the shift of journalistic information to social media, a re-semantisation of the term ‘parajournalism’ is necessary, and how this can be done through a comparison between the concept of parajournalism itself and that of paraliterature. Moreover, we have highlighted the meanings commonly associated with the concept of ‘parajournalism’, showing that they all contain a negative or even derogatory judgment. In fact, parajournalism is mostly referred to as journalism practiced by non-professionals, in which the objective account of reality fades into a sort of trivial opinionism, of journalistic subjectivism. Moreover, parajournalism is generally associated with the treatment of ‘low’ topics such as gossip, shows, entertainment, or in any case with a less serious and infotainment-like treatment even of hard news. In the second chapter, we highlighted how certain typical modes of parajournalistic information can be traced back to the field of paraliterature as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These are stylistic forms and linguistic codes aimed at attracting the largest possible number of readers, including those from the less educated classes. We have presented the way in which all the hybrid forms of paraliterature and popular journalism over the centuries (from printed notices to serial novels, to novels constructed through media and journalistic language) have had this function of approaching a wider audience than that addressed by both elite journalism and high literature. We have therefore highlighted how the similarities between paraliterature and parajournalism concern not only the forms of language used but also their role as channels of access to literary product and information respectively for wider segments of the population. Especially in the era of the web, with the redefinition of the public sphere in the digital arena and the convergence that is taking place between communication tools and topics that were previously kept separate (in other words, with the convergence between ‘high’ and ‘low’ information made possible by new technologies), parajournalism in particular is becoming an essential tool to bring even the least cultured people closer to hard news and information of public interest. Gamification, the functioning of the algorithms of the main social networks and the shift of information to platforms such as Facebook and Twitter mean that it is no longer possible to separate professional journalism from non-professional parajournalism, which is second rate and relegated to infotainment.

While in the past the popular communication typical of paraliterature and parajournalism could be considered a choice, today it is a network-driven necessity. When a wise use is made of these communicative codes, they can be instrumental in informing a large number of users, thus rightfully including parajournalistic language and information within what gives substance to the public debate and widens the audience of those who participate in it.

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