

## **A NEW FORM OF PRECARIETY (OF PRACTICE)? PROFESSIONAL DESKILLING AT THE CENTRE OF THE HIJACKING OF QUALITY IN JOURNALISM**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article seeks to fill in one of the main identifiable gaps in the debate on professional deskilling in journalism. This gap consists of the difficulty in isolating this concept from other multiple meanings that is critical when interpreting the challenges imposed on journalism, which are multiple and range from the erosion of professional domination to crises of values, including the instability of business models with a marked impact on the reconfiguration of the division of journalistic labour.

To that end, the literature on professional deskilling was used as a resource and systematically analysed to produce a structured and maximalist definition of this concept in journalism. A definition that essentially results from the arrangement of multiple meanings within two main aspects: the destandardisation of journalistic work and the immediacy of journalistic production. It is concluded that a deskilling of the journalist profession constitutes a new type of precarity of practice, able to capture journalistic quality and which goes beyond the traditional and well-documented precarity of employment and labour.

Finally, we suggest future avenues to continue monitoring the pace of professional transformation and how it will continue to affect journalistic skills and the quality of professional practice, in particular the phenomenon of digital automation in journalism, which has the capacity to dictate a return to the debate on professional deskilling in journalism.

### **KEYWORDS**

journalism, profession, deskilling, quality of journalism

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## **UMA NOVA FORMA DE PRECARIEDADE (DA PRÁTICA)? A DESCOMPETENCIALIZAÇÃO PROFISSIONAL NO CENTRO DO SEQUESTRO DA QUALIDADE NO JORNALISMO**

### **RESUMO**

Este artigo procura responder a uma das principais lacunas identificáveis no debate sobre descompetencialização profissional no jornalismo. Esta lacuna consiste numa dificuldade em isolar da restante polissemia conceptual este conceito que é crítico na interpretação dos desafios impostos ao jornalismo, que são múltiplos e que vão da erosão da dominação profissional às crises de valores, passando pela instabilidade de modelos de negócio com impacto acentuado na reconfiguração da divisão do trabalho jornalístico.

Para tal, e com recurso a uma sistematização da literatura sobre descompetencialização profissional, chegamos a uma definição estruturada e maximalista deste conceito no jornalismo. Definição que resulta fundamentalmente da arrumação dos múltiplos significados em dois

indutores principais: a despadronização do trabalho jornalístico e o imediatismo na produção jornalística. Uma descompetencialização na profissão de jornalista que, conclui-se, constitui um novo tipo de precariedade da prática, capaz de capturar a qualidade jornalística e que vai além das tradicionais e muito documentadas precariedades do emprego e do trabalho.

Por fim, ensaiamos pistas futuras para continuar a acompanhar os ritmos de transformação profissional e a forma como estes continuarão a abalar competências jornalísticas e a qualidade da prática profissional, nomeadamente o fenómeno da automação digital no jornalismo com capacidade para ditar o regresso ao debate sobre descompetencialização profissional no jornalismo.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

jornalismo, profissão, descompetencialização, qualidade do jornalismo

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The new evolutionary process in the relations between media and society has inaugurated an arena of permanent disruption in post-industrial journalism (Deuze, 2017; Hirschhorn, 1988; Jenkins, 2006; Sonwalker, 2019). This disruption is fuelled by the acceleration of information flows and the hyperabundance of content, which have led to the liquidation of the classic media economy by reducing the economic value of news (Tandoc et al., 2019).

This process, aided by another disintermediation phenomenon in journalism caused by the strengthening (Manovich, 2020) of subjournalisms in networked architectures (Beckett, 2008; Benkler, 2006; Benson, 2019; Hjarvard, 2012; Steensen, 2016), has led journalism and journalists to permanently renegotiate their contract with society (Karlsen & Stavelin, 2014; Singer, 2010; Zelizer, 2015). This is happening at the same time as robust competitive disputes are taking place within a context of divestment by advertisers who are migrating to the major digital players, which have a greater capacity to lock in audiences, as a result of what Hindman (2018) would define as a “greater degree of online viscosity”.

This results in impoverished legacy media, struggling to raise revenue, and working to rationalise resources while desperately trying to produce informative content which has a market value (Carlson, 2014; Compton, 2010).

At this juncture, a techno-market supra-ideology of journalism is being established even more than in the past (den Bulck, 2018), which is entering into conflict with the values, objectives and positive function of the profession (Bruns, 2005; Deuze, 2005; Fenton, 2010; Hjarvard, 2012; Singer, 2010). At the same time, its professionals are immersed in a triadic system of doing more, quicker and with fewer resources, in a drift towards a kind of new professional Taylorism.

As a consequence, we are witnessing a consolidation of deskillling tendencies within journalism, with an impact on journalistic *doing* (practice) but also on journalistic *knowledge* (epistemology; Rottwilm, 2014). Deskillling tendencies that position themselves as antagonists to the journalist’s occupational ideology (Hermida, 2019).

This literature review seeks to recover this debate and deepen knowledge about a concept that is absolutely critical in understanding the challenges faced by journalism, journalists and the quality of their practice. This involves the concept of deskilling, so dear to some of the most celebrated authors in journalism studies (Chambers & Steiner, 2010; Cottle, 2000; Deuze, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2009; Deuze & Yeshua, 2001; Fenton, 2010; Örnebring, 2019; Rottwilm, 2014; Singer, 2004). A concept that is built up in layers, that is, according to the arrangement of other micro and meso concepts that broadly delimit much of the existing literature on the challenges imposed on journalism.

In addition, it is hoped that this article responds to possibly existing gaps in the knowledge already produced on this subject, particularly the link that can be established between understanding these deskilling phenomena in journalistic practice and the sociologies of work, employment and professions. These disciplinary fields focus on issues of decent work, remuneration for the work performed and identifying forms of precarity in the area of the casualisation of work, which are boosted by the global economy and informationalism as the material foundations of 21st century societies.

## 2. THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT

The inclusion of the concept of deskilling within journalism studies is difficult to pinpoint in time. However, this concept has been present in other scientific fields in a more established manner, such as the sociologies of work, employment and professions, in accompanying a more ideological debate on the transformations brought about by economic globalisation in its relationship with the employment market, particularly the exploitative aspect of labour in capitalist systems (Abel, 2001; Baba, 2015; Bowker & Star, 2015; Carroll & Mentis, 2008; Castells, 1996/2002; Downey, 2021; Ferris et al., 2010; Gamst, 2015; Kim et al., 2003; Man, 2004; Martinaitis et al., 2021; Saunders, 2001; Star, 2001; Wall & Parker, 2001).

One of these debates revolves around the figures of rationalisation and flexibility of resources, which in a certain way go hand in hand with Manuel Castells's rationale (1996/2002) in his work *A Sociedade em Rede* (The Network Society), when he talks about a set of opportunities that the process of globalisation and informationalism have brought to companies in capitalist countries. Opportunities in terms of reducing the permanent workforce to a strictly necessary number, contractual flexibility and, broadly speaking, the major changes the labour market has undergone towards its deregulation. Opportunities that point, above all, to objectives such as reducing contractual rigidity, easing labour market constraints by giving new meaning to workers' rights, and giving companies the ability to reorganise more effectively in scenarios of economic fluctuation through allowing greater freedom to hire and fire, which has been made possible by decreasing legislation within the labour market (Rodrigues, 2009).

The situation is no different in media and communication companies (Bastos, 2014; Cobos, 2017; Matos, 2017; von Rimscha, 2016). In general and across all sectors, what is at stake is that the workforce, including the permanent staff, consents to more

volatile work or pay circumstances as an *a priori* condition for continuity in employment, or as a prologue to achieving some kind of permanent worker status that is continually postponed by the organisational leadership, for example the case of recently graduated journalists, who are moving between different internships (Asahina, 2019; Örnebring, 2018).

For Castells (1996/2002), one of the consequences of these processes of weakening fundamental principles and rights that coexist in the transition to the information economy is precisely the internalisation of a permanent idea of maximising productivity and efficiency in all production processes. This is the case even when terms such as “rationalisation of resources” and “flexibility of contractual relations” seem to paradoxically work against the possibility of improving working conditions which are at the root of the information paradigm itself. An ideology that, by extension, implies that workers must apply their full productive capacity under any and all circumstances, to the detriment of the perfection and expertise associated with undertaking the trade. What Bourdieu (2001), would ideologically call the “methodical atomisation” of work. An atomisation resulting from the wider processes of the desocialisation of paid employment, which succumbs to skilful liberalism and the inflexible demands of the “leonine employment contract dressed in the robes of flexibility” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 7). Not least because, as Chen and Sonn (2019) describe, the flexible organisation on which employment contracts are often based is the ideal environment for conditions that are conducive to professional deskilling.

It is within this perspective of abandoning the time-consuming expertise of established professions in favour of consolidating flexible management (generally associated with downsizing), and which responds to the interconnected impact of economic globalisation and the spread of information technologies, that the concept of professional deskilling seems to find its strength.

In fact, Gamst (2015) states that professional deskilling occurs when there is a continuous loss of competences which, for Ferris et al. (2010), can also affect the cognitive dimension. A loss of skills that leads precisely to a proletariat dispossessed of expertise, reflecting the constraints, especially external ones (Chen & Sonn, 2019), imposed by capitalism and the deregulation of labour markets (Martinaitis et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2019).

Braverman (1974) had already pointed out that professional deskilling, which is a new historical phase of capitalism, results in a complete inversion of the quality of trade work, and is therefore a mechanism for the degradation or dequalification at work. Degradation of labour which, in the view of Cole and Cooper (2006), is associated with the same processes of the intensification of the productivity of labour.

In fact, in an article published by Liu (2006), the concepts of “deskilling of labour” and “degradation of labour” are presented as expressions with exactly the same meaning.

In turn, Gamst (2015) brought the meaning of professional deskilling, from a neo-Marxist teleological perspective, closer to the forms of the social control of workers achieved through the meticulous division of labour. Forms that project the organisation of that very same work into essentially simple and repetitive tasks, capable of calling into question the occupational ideology of professions, even those often marked by a monopoly of knowledge (journalism is one such profession).

For Wall and Parker (2001), Kim et al. (2003) and Downey (2021), the phenomenon of professional deskilling means, above all, that there is a process of labour simplification or a simplification of tasks (either in terms of autonomy in undertaking the task or in terms of the identity and significance of that same task). A process that contributes to a continuous trend towards the standardisation of work within dynamics that tend to become more acute over time (Kim et al., 2003) and that have found a major stimulus in the last great technological revolution and in its component information technology (Downey, 2021; McQuail, 2007).

For Abel (2001) and Carroll and Mentis (2008), such a fate began its course with 18th and 19th century relations of production and which, for Chen and Sonn (2019), is essentially the effect of a contingent proletarianisation of the labour market and the professions that comprise it. A premise that goes so far as to contradict the paradigms of linear transformation and transition from a manual economy to an economy based on creative labour (Chen & Sonn, 2019). This is something which, according to the authors, many academics failed to foresee and has helped to sustain the decades-long debate, with implications for society, that creative work was essentially immune to the principle of professional deskilling. Nowadays this is an extremely useful element in understanding the proletarianisation of that creative work.

Still in the field of the correspondence between professional deskilling and the consolidation of capitalist models, Cole and Cooper (2006), in studying this phenomenon systematically and over time in the Japanese railway sector, concluded that the privatisation processes of different industries also end up leading to the resurgence of pockets of professional deskilling. The authors thus position this phenomenon as a consequence of the denationalisation processes offered by economic liberalism.

In addition, a study carried out in Canada at the beginning of the millennium (Man, 2004), which involved Chinese immigrants in that country, concluded that the work of immigrant women is also more susceptible to the problem of professional deskilling, introducing this issue into the field of social, ethnic, gender, class and citizenship inequalities.

The problem of professional deskilling which, despite everything, is not static and which, in certain situations, generates a reverse reaction towards professional reskilling. Something that Agnew et al. (1997) found to occur in very specific sectors. This is the case in the computer and information technology sectors, which are more susceptible to ongoing updates in professional techniques, as is also the case in certain follow-up phases in the automotive industry (Forslin, 1990).

In addition, as Chen and Sonn (2019) point out, the debate on professional deskilling only later on assimilated the idea that often, and in many professional activities, the aggravation of this professional deskilling is paradoxically accompanied by an increase in the qualification levels of workers, not least because of the increase in the education levels of the working population. This belated debate is perhaps due to a certain tradition of Marxist thought that also attributes more complex tasks to the highest skill levels (Ertürk, 2019). A principle that Braverman (1974) rejected early on, pointing out, for example, that the phenomenon of professional deskilling was not limited to blue-collar or low-skilled workers, but also affected white-collar or so-called “highly skilled” workers.

This implies that there is sometimes a clear mismatch between qualifications as a principle for controlling entry into professions (which is constantly increasing with the rise and diversification of tertiary education levels), and the complexity of the task that is carried out under this qualification label. Or, if we wish, a disconnect between the level of qualification required to enter a particular profession, such as journalism, as will be seen below, and the reduction, or a kind of withering away, of the skills and expertise historically necessary to carry out that practice. This is despite the fact that Chen and Sonn (2019) emphasise the need to consider the necessary interprofessional fluctuations within this approach, not least because of the phenomena of professional reskilling that occur in very specific professions that are not so susceptible to the phenomena of progressive deskilling (Agnew et al., 1997; Forslin, 1990).

### 3. THE CONCEPT IN JOURNALISM STUDIES AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCES

The application of the concept of deskilling in journalism studies forms part of a holistic approach that has a history in this disciplinary field and which concerns the multiple challenges posed to this activity, which has been so greatly impacted by the effects of post-industrialism and information technology, in renegotiating its contract with society. It is this holistic approach that determines that the concept is heavily immersed in discourses where a certain conceptual polysemy predominates.

However, since the use of the concept can be mainly traced back to key authors within the theoretical tradition of journalism studies, it is now possible to establish a rationale for the entry of this concept as a central element in the debate on seizing the quality of professional practice and on the obsolescence of the profession's occupational ideology.

At the beginning of the millennium, Simon Cottle (2000) signalled that journalistic practice had become susceptible to processes of professional dequalification as a result of forced procedures to diversify professional skills, which ended up having a perverse effect on the quality of practice. The author thus associated the issue of deskilling with pressure to intensify multiple professional skills in newsrooms.

However, this discussion was initially positioned in an ambivalent manner. At a time when these issues were coming to the fore in the debate on the major transformations brought about by information technology in the profession, authors such as Jane Singer (2004) tried to find out from professional journalists whether this pressure to increase skills and to abandon departmentalisation within journalistic work implied a loss of know-how and quality of practice. Or, on the other hand, if it meant a strengthening of competences. A discussion that, over time, has strengthened the weight of the former hypothesis and reduced that of the latter, mostly because of the amplification of issues related to the processes of simplifying the news story, with repercussions on its quality.

In fact, some 15 years after the first ideas put forward by Cottle (2000), Rottwilm's (2014) discourse was once again tuned to that same note, suggesting that journalistic activity, by demanding more and more versatility and multitasking, ended up fuelling mechanisms that incapacitated professional performance and different tasks in their entirety. A

situation that would lead to the idea of deskilling that Fenton (2010), a few years earlier, had also characterised as one of the serious causes of a wider mechanism for deregulating levels of professionalism in journalism.

This association of the term “deskilling”, as a concept, with multiskilling and multitasking has thus become more prevalent. This predominance can be identified, for example, in one of the most important works in journalism studies in recent years, *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, organised by Stuart Allan (2010). In one of the glossary entries, the concept of “deskilling” ends up referring precisely to the meanings and consequences of two other attributes that are heavily revisited in this field of study, that is, multiformats and multitasking.

On the other hand, another of the leading authors in this scientific field, Mark Deuze (2001, 2005, 2009), has over the years positioned the debate on deskilling in journalism within an essentially critical perspective of the revisited myth of the internet as a technological panacea. The author fully understands this challenge of deskilling imposed on the journalistic profession as a consequence of the transition to post-industrial online journalism (Deuze, 2005). A transition powerful enough to shape a dramatic conceptual change in journalistic practice (Deuze, 2009), which was effected by a sharp decline in the structures overseeing the flow of information and which has had to cumulatively deal with new ethical dilemmas that affect its credibility (Deuze & Yeshua, 2001). This changing nature of journalistic work ends up having an impact on the autonomy of journalists by affecting the roles they play, and in turn this affects the historical relationship of this craft with the quality of work structures (Witschge & Nygren, 2009).

The very process of gathering and processing information in post-industrial journalism is in itself a major symptom of the deskilling to which this profession is subject, resulting in a reconversion of work which ranges from writing news to rehearsing simple projections in replicating formats of trivialised, mechanised and undifferentiated information content. Content that is often an exact copy of news published by other brands — again, the aspect associated with processes simplifying labour and tasks.

In addition, the equally well-known author Henrik Örnebring (2009, 2010, 2019) points out that the process of deskilling in journalism is gaining traction and supports the idea discussed earlier that this deskilling stems from an almost institutionalised relationship in new journalistic practices. This relationship concerns the dichotomy of doing things faster and on different platforms (again, the meanings of multitasking and multiskilling are very present, to which the aspect of immediacy is added), which are a consequence of the seizing of time-consuming journalism formats (based on expertise and standardised work) through the intensification of technocratic management and organisational control of media companies.

This seizing takes place in parallel with the consolidation of a practice that is progressively oriented towards mass production, productivism and continuous cycles of fast content of debatable quality, speed-ups and permanent deadlines, which are reflected in the era of the hypercommercialisation of news. News that itself becomes a commodity like any other, dragging journalistic work into spheres of discussion that distance

it from the seminal practice associated with the craft. An idea that Örnebring (2010) emphasises as being the main reason why it is said that one of the clearest symptoms of deskilling in journalism is the notion sometimes conveyed that the dissemination of the most basic news in continuous production chains does not require specific or very in-depth training in journalism. Something that, incidentally, may even be of use to the managers and administrators of media groups themselves, for whom, in the tug of war of ideological struggles and recovering the almost prophetic words of Carr-Saunders (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933), not even journalists have a monopoly on the technique that is indispensable to the exercise of this profession.

Örnebring (2019) goes further and mentions that one of the basic problems in this debate on journalistic competences or their deskilling is precisely a historical difficulty in defining what can be understood as journalistic competence. This is a discussion that to a certain extent goes hand in hand with another on the non-consolidated definitions of what journalism is and the permanent conflict between the normative substance of journalism and its justificatory procedure (Anderson, 2019).

#### **4. TIDYING UP THE CONCEPT OR THE MULTIPLE LAYERS OF PROFESSIONAL DESKILLING IN JOURNALISM**

The methodological proposal of this article is not limited to systematising the existing literature on deskilling within journalistic activity. In fact, the main aim of this work is to advance the knowledge that has already been produced, that is, to find any gaps that may exist.

In order to achieve this, the following points propose the tidying up of the concept, through indicating the major meso and micro layers behind the macro meaning of professional deskilling. Somewhat ambitiously, a proposal that locates the practice of those which, in the literature, are the major indicators and inducers of deskilling in journalistic practice.

Given this, this discussion on deskilling in the journalistic profession will produce a framework in which the meanings of the destandardisation of journalistic practice and immediacy are positioned as essential elements of a more structured and maximalist consolidation of the concept.

Within a more meso level of analysis, the meaning of the destandardisation of journalistic work (Cohen, 2012) implies, in practice, an accelerated process of deregulation of journalistic work and of the levels of quality of its practice and, consequently and inherently, a reduction in levels of professionalism.

In this destandardisation of work, the often-seen micro aspects of multiskilling and multi-formats, which have the perverse effect of seizing the performance of tasks and formats in their full and optimal extent, and which are also a consequence of continuous reconfigurations of the division of labour aimed at rationalising costs, time and resources, consolidate scenarios involving the abandoning of the departmentalisation of work. This translates into the seizure of standardised work, expertise, speciality and



time-consuming work. The connection to this techno-mercantile and productivist journalism thus results in a more all-round professional, capable of responding to the accumulation of simplified tasks, as well as the multi-formats and multiskilling required by the vertiginous pace of news (with practically zero economic value). However, this also results in a type of journalism that is focused on lower levels of professionalism, since it is structured around a dequalified, simplified practice and marked by what Deuze (2009) has called a decline in the structure of the procedure with an impact on its credibility.

Still on the meso level, the role of immediacy (Beckett, 2010; Fenton, 2010; Hass, 2011; Hjarvard, 2012; Karlsson, 2011; Waisbord, 2013) as an extension of the witnessed acceleration in post-industrial journalism — which, in a way, evokes the generalised acceleration of modern societies proposed by Harmut Rosa (2015) — is rooted in the notions of ubiquity and omnipresence of information and in the speed and anticipation of information as preponderant attributes in the salience of continuous information flows. Ultimately, it is a form of always doing something and in the shortest space of time, in 24-hour cycles and in pressurised times within a sped-up format, where the maxim “the value of information does not survive the moment in which it is new. It lives only at that moment” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 90), has never seemed so appropriate to the narrative of the problem.

This immediacy is thus one of the fundamental aspects of understanding how work routines and logics within newsrooms have changed and continue to change, and where the incessant search for new formats and innovative agendas have marked the path of an industry that is still trying to find a viable business model for news in the digital age (von Rimscha, 2016).

This immediacy, in the words of Beckett (2010), leads to a kind of melting pot of dubious news material and content that have become necessary to know how to avoid. A scenario in which investigative journalism, specialised and based on the expertise that results from performing the task to the fullest, is challenged by a type of journalism based on continuous information flows capable of responding to the monetisation strategies of media organisations. An immediacy that, apart from anything else, has already consolidated itself into a kind of procedural norm (Buhl et al., 2017).

And even though journalists still try to combine immediacy and accuracy in news production (Mir, 2014), it seems wise to bring up the words of Fenton (2010) and Karlsson (2011), when they point out that immediacy is nothing more than a kind of catalyst for a certain type of breakdown in the social function of journalism. This breakdown has a direct impact on the quality of news production, which is increasingly exposed to errors, inaccuracies and replications, which in turn are the most obvious reflection of a practice that contributes to a growing professional deskilling.

An attempt is thus made to systematise the concept of deskilling (Figure 1), taking into account the different micro and meso levels that allow this concept to be used as a critical point in interpreting the hijacking of the quality of journalism and the obsolescence of its occupational ideology.

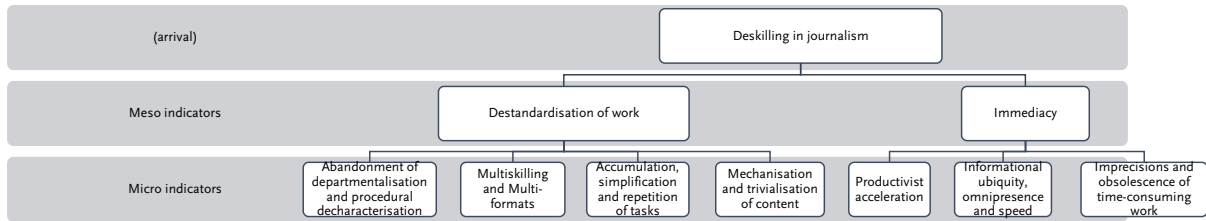


Figure 1. Systematising the concept of deskilling in the journalism profession

## 5. A NEW FORM OF PRECARIETY PROJECTED ON TO THE EFFECTS OF DESKILLING ON THE QUALITY OF JOURNALISM

The tradition of studies on professional precarity precedes, but also accompanies, the emergence of others that reflect on the historical transition to the information society and the global economy, as well as the way in which this transition is accompanied by the creation of precarious living and working conditions (Castells, 1996/2002).

A pivotal author in this field of study on professional precarity is Serge Paugam (2000; Paugam & Russell, 2000). This author is linked to an extension of Durkheimian thinking in the area of the degradation of employment and crises within social ties, and has devised a twofold typology of precarity: (a) work insecurity, associated with the instability of the employment relationship, which in the journalism profession is essentially associated with contingency links, piecework, and others not subject to the legal aspect of a salary, or issues such as the stagnation of professional careers, poor remunerative conditions, among others; and (b) the precarity of work, attributable to a process of domination/subordination through the acceptance of the exploitation of paid employment. This process normalises poor working conditions as a result of fragmented, flexible labour markets captured by generalised and permanent insecurity which, in journalism, is seen as an extension of the profession itself. A type of job insecurity that is reflected mostly in issues such as dissatisfaction and misalignment of work expectations, anguish and uncertainty (pathos), intense workloads that are often coercively extended and the consequent blurring of the boundaries between working hours and private life.

However, and considering the limit of the scope of the type of double precarity proposed by Paugam (2000; Paugam & Russell, 2000), the substance of the topic dealt with in this article would imply from the outset the introduction of a third type of precarity, which goes beyond formal employment arrangements and is associated with this aspect of deskilling in a profession such as journalism, which has been continually challenged in terms of the quality of its practice.

A new type of precarity of practice is therefore proposed that differs from the precarity of employment and the discussion of the traditionally dominating bonds that are at play in the new global economic orders. A new type of precarity that also goes beyond work insecurity and the characteristics resulting from the subordination to these ties, which have a strong impact on the well-being and personal aspect of the worker (precarity of work).

This is the kind of precarity that best explains the drift in journalism towards a decline in the quality of its practice, the representation of which has been attempted by other authors, such as in the proposal for a definition of precarious professionalism within journalism (Matthews & Onyemaobi, 2020).

In this regard, authors such as Cohen (2017) point out that the plethora of challenges imposed on journalism, represented by precarious working conditions, have a marked influence on the quality of journalistic activity. This idea is shared by Morini et al. (2014), who state that the professionals themselves are aware that precarity affects the quality of their work and recognise that news quality models have deteriorated.

In other words, a melting pot of influences that has repercussions on a weakened practice that can also, in the view of Chadha and Steiner (2022), have a perverse effect on the historic umbilical relationship between journalism and democracy. A kind of precarity of practice that is normalised in the intricate complex that leads to the pauperisation of the classic economy of traditional media and which subsequently results in, (a), the advance in processes leading to professional dequalification (Chadha & Steiner, 2022; Wasserman, 2019) and, (b), the erosion of the functionalist ideal of journalism as legitimised by quality content and high levels of professionalism (Örnebring, 2018). It is also a type of precarity that is little discussed, but which influences journalists' own ways of thinking (Örnebring, 2018). Indeed, according to Gutiérrez-Cuesta et al. (2022), the precarious contexts of practice are the largest factor affecting professional routines and, ultimately, the quality of the texts published by different brands.

And even if the set of concepts used to justify this precarity of practice does not have a consolidated format like that proposed in this article, authors such as Cohen (2017) have already alluded to a precarity of practice associated with a process of de-standardisation of journalistic work, which will come to rely on trivialised information generated by software and on the writing of unoriginal content. Processes that Banet-Weiser (2017) describes as being primarily explainable in the light of an organisational transformation, where journalists, in order to respond to the hypercompetitive impetus of the profession, transfer their subjectivity as workers to the languages and practices of journalistic entrepreneurship.

One of the main examples is the new procedural dictatorships imposed on journalists, such as metrics, which override the historical normative substance of journalism. Or, in other words, procedural dictatorships that nowadays have more economic value than the quality of the news content itself (Murdock, 2018), thus subverting the idea of journalism as a profession based on an ideology that assumes a commitment to the quality of the work rather than the principle of the economic efficiency of that work (Witschge & Nygren, 2009). The result is a superimposition of the desires of technocratic media management and market imperatives on the quality of journalism and the news content produced, resulting in a precarity of know-how, which implies assuming as a hypothesis the negative correlation between levels of precarity of practice, as a consequence of the disruptive environments imposed on journalism and the quality of journalism itself.

In essence, a growing precarity of practice (Figure 2), which appears to be associated with the conditions of permanent, diffuse and chaotic change that are plaguing journalistic practice in the post-industrial era of news, and which entails a disabling of know-how that is thus becoming increasingly precarious in its historical relationship with the quality of practice, and which may put journalists themselves, as Morini et al. (2014) point out, in a permanent conflict between their professional calling and disillusionment.

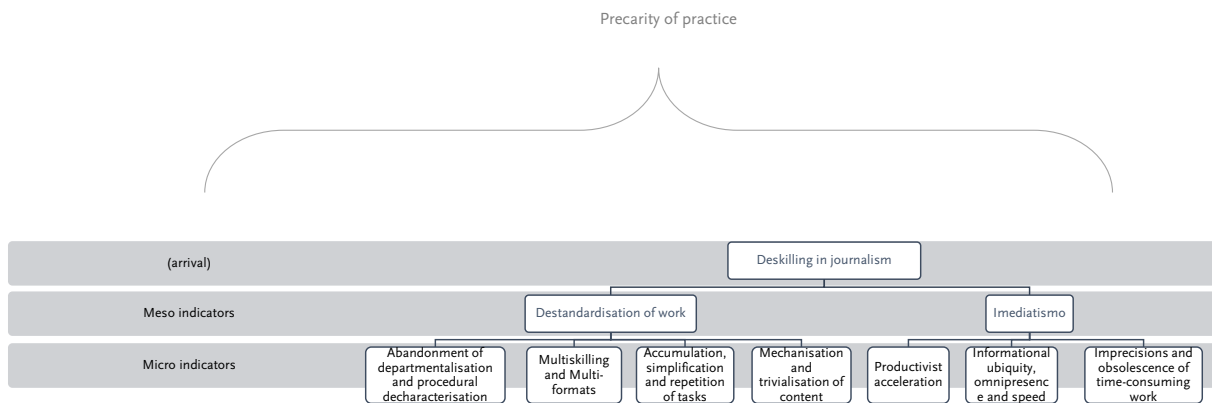


Figure 2. Deskilling in the journalism profession as a new form of precarious practice?

## 6. CONCLUSION

This article began by situating the issue of professional deskilling in journalism as an object of study that can mainly be found in the theoretical heritage of studies by leading authors in the field of communication sciences.

Contrary to that which happens in other areas, where the discussion on professional deskilling seems more consolidated, the conceptual polysemy that permeates the ecosystem of the challenges imposed on post-industrial journalism means that it has not yet been possible to work on the concept, and its different compositional layers, in a more structured way.

Given this, the added value of this work, which aims to fill in the gaps identified in the knowledge produced, consisted of proposing a systematisation of the concept of deskilling within the journalism profession, relating the product of this systematisation to the aspect of quality in journalism.

It was concluded that the meanings of the abandonment of departmentalisation and procedural decharacterisation; the accumulation of formats and tasks; labour simplification and repetition; the mechanisation and trivialisation of the work product; productivist and ubiquitous acceleration; and the upsurge of imprecision resulting from the obsolescence of time-consuming activity, can help consolidate a maximalist definition of what deskilling within the profession truly consists of. This deskilling is subsumed within the two key words capable of bringing together its different meanings. These are the concepts of “destandardisation of work” and “immediacy”, which together consolidate

the deskilling tendencies of the profession and help position this debate within a new type of precarity of practice. A kind of precarity of practice that characterises one of the professions most susceptible to the disruptive rhythms of information technology, as is the case with journalism, and which has implications for the quality of journalism and the deterioration of the journalistic product.

## **7. FUTURE PATHS OR THE AMBIGUOUS IMPACT OF AUTOMATION ON THE DESKILLING OF JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE**

As was seen earlier, the literature tells us that professional deskilling became more acute with the last major phase of the technological revolution, as well as with the standardisation and simplification of tasks supported by the information infrastructure, with documented consequences for the quality of journalism. However, some of this same, more recent literature also concludes that one of the main positive points enhanced by the integration of “industry 4.0” and automation in professional occupations, particularly in journalism, is the ability to free up the human factor in newsrooms from the simplest most tedious tasks in order to embrace more complex ones, such as investigative journalism (Lindén, 2017; Thurman et al., 2017; van Dalen, 2012). This brighter side of what the technological infrastructure offers to journalism and journalists makes it necessary to consider the idea of professional reskilling and the rescuing of quality journalism supported by an infrastructure that takes care of the trivialised tasks of the profession.

However, this is an idea that does not meet with consensus, as other hypotheses such as the reinforcement of the continuous and progressive withering away of skills (Carlson, 2014) — more deskilling — and the neoliberal hypothesis projected in professional redundancy (Conboy, 2019), are also being put forward.

In this sense, it is felt that it is important to continue to monitor the dynamics of transformation in journalism and how these impact the professional skills of journalists and the quality of journalism. Therefore, the issue of automation in journalism is one of the new topics that will arouse the most interest, on the one hand, in monitoring the possible strengthening of the dynamics of deskilling, or on the other hand, in its corresponding antipodes of reshaping contexts involving professional reskilling. At the end of the day, the automation applied to journalism may be a mere reinforcement of rationalisation mechanisms: rationalisation of resources in the form of laying off workers and through the release of many other operational costs by the organisational top management, which are umbilically linked to a practice historically associated with the image of a time-consuming craft. To be followed.

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