

## **Online news: Where is the promised context?**

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### **Abstract**

The online journalism industry is undergoing the challenge of not finding a solid business model and, simultaneously, of seeing part of its territory invaded by new actors, many of whom are unaware and / or contemptuous of the social and ethical rules of the profession. The elements of journalism, as Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001, 2007) rescued, are threatened. And one of those elements threatened is the duty to put the facts in context, a task facilitated by the Internet, as Pavlik (2001) stressed when he coined the concept of "contextualized journalism", but not always achieved.

The purpose of this paper is to measure the contextualization levels present in online journalism and understand what determines contextualization processes in online journalism.

The methodology we have used was the direct observation of a sample of news websites based on a grid of analysis of the different kinds of journalistic contextualization (the synchronic and diachronic contexts of the news reported, the producer's context and the consumer's context), complemented by an online survey and interviews.

Based on a series of findings from an analysis of 10 international news websites (five online-only and five from traditional media – newspapers, radio and TV), and surveys and interviews conducted with 60 online journalists and 20 researchers and authors (Pavlik included), we conclude that online journalism is still far from contributing to the contextualization of the news, despite the expectation that it has created with the digital tools available that could facilitate it. We have also found that news are more and better contextualized in news websites of professional journalism coming from traditional media (like Guardian, El País, The New York Times, CNN and BBC) than in the ones born in the Internet of citizen journalism (Wikinews), social share (Digg), aggregation (Google News) and combining professional and non professional journalism (The Huffington Post and Newsvine). Additionally, we conclude that

the most crucial factor hindering context in digital news is the lack of staff in online newsrooms.

**Keywords:** Online journalism; contextualization; news websites

## **The promise**

We all know that news without context is incomplete or even defective news. The people need to know the context of the facts reported and the context of all the actors (people involved, sources, journalists). And the journalists need to be aware of the context(s) of the audience.

Context is "the situation(s) in which a message is conveyed and received, or in which a text is produced and consumed" (Franklin *et al*, 2005: 48). The concept can be employed in three principal ways: to refer to the location in which a speaker and listener interact (the geographic context); as a synonym for "background" (what happened before); to refer to the social, political and historical circumstances that the reported event may be part of, or in which a story is made meaningful (the historic context) (Ibid.).

Already in the 1970s, Tuchman (1978: 192) warned of the importance of context in journalism, and of the risks of decontextualization, by omissions that can make the news incomplete and can distort the interpretation of events: "Despite the reflective reproduction of news, stories are frequently presented indexically - divorced from the context of their production. This aspect of news is captured in the objectification of facts. A reporter may quote a source

without indicating how a certain question prompted the source's answer (...). A reporter may identify a fact without explaining how that fact was produced as a nonproblematic detail or 'particular'. Tuchman adds that "indexicality of news is contained in both its ahistoricity and its logic of the concrete, the newswriters' insistent refusal to present stories in their ongoing situational context – to analyze the relationship among yesterday, today and tomorrow" (Ibid.).

On traditional media, journalists always had constraints (of space or time) to the complete contextualization of news. But on the Internet we don't have those constraints anymore. Pavlik (2001: 4–22) enhanced that we can have on the new media a "*contextualized journalism*", with five *basic dimensions* or aspects: (1) breadth of communication modalities; (2) hypermedia; (3) heightened audience involvement; (4) dynamic content; and (5) customization. "No longer is news constrained by the technical limitations of analog media, whether print, television, or radio. Instead, all modalities of human communication are available to telling stories in the most compelling, interactive, on-demand, and customized fashion possible", says Pavlik (Ibid: 17).

The concept of contextualized journalism to which Pavlik refers is basically the journalism that leverages the Internet's potential (hypertextuality, multimediality, interactivity, immediacy, ubiquity, memory and personalization). The breadth of communication modalities (text, audio, video, photography, graphics and animation) corresponds to multimediality; the hypermedia covers the possibilities of the hypertext, namely linking texts together, and text with different other media formats; heightened audience involvement refers to interactivity, understood as the human's relationship

between journalists and audience; dynamic content includes the Internet's faculties of immediacy, ubiquity, information retrieval at any time, and the (almost) infinite memory (in the double meaning of content's perennity and of inexhaustible capacity); and customization have direct correspondence with personalization, which underscores the fact that the new medium gives the user the possibility to set up how to access content.

Dan Gillmor (2010: 159) identifies the need for improve the tools of discovery and context, via aggregation and curation, as a priority for the next generation of credible news and information. Gillmor (ibid. 8) warns for the risks of errors caused by the shallowness with which many traditional media discusses the issues, and criticizes the online media for doing the same without needing to do so. "If Steven Spielberg and other Hollywood folks can create directors' cuts of their movies, why can't journalists do the same - and more? Why can't they keep updating and improving their own published works?", asks Gillmor (Ibid. 160), regretting that are being presented topics and guidelines rather than complete stories, timely and contextualized. Gillmor believes that journalists have not dropped the old models of media manufactured, when the publication of a newspaper or a tape recording was "the end of the process" (Ibid.).

The debate on the importance of journalistic contextualization has gained prominence and visibility in 2010 with the panel "The Future of Context: Getting the Bigger Picture Online", initiative to Matt Thompson, who then has created a "after the panel" site. In the presentation of the conference<sup>77</sup>, Thompson says that the "conventional wisdom" suggests that we are constantly looking for

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<sup>77</sup> <http://panelpicker.sxsw.com/ideas/view/3861> (04-06-2012)

the next piece of information, "but Google reveals our true desire: Context." The panel's organizer gives as examples of our "insatiable hunger for the bigger picture", like the numerous accesses to Wikipedia entries and to guides with explanations and comparative issues of topics like the financial crisis or smartphones. In the text of his opening speech at the panel<sup>78</sup>, Thompson points out that, "for the first time, we have a medium perfectly equipped to capture and deliver both episodic and systemic information" and asks "how will these two modes of information interact on the Web?" and "what sort of design and storytelling structures must we invent to impart context?". In advance of what he would say in the same panel<sup>79</sup>, Jay Rosen makes an interesting metaphor for what may be successive news without context: "Suppose your laptop continually received updates to software that was never installed on your laptop". Rosen points out several factors to explain the undervaluation of news in modern newsrooms, the first of which is, in his opinion, that productivity is measured and rewarded on the basis of daily breaking news. Rosen also states that journalists compete for beats and not for explain the issues more clearly to more people, even if they could win future "customers" for their updates. And, as Thompson also points out, the possibility of winning "customers" is certainly something that no news website should waste. Tristan Harris<sup>80</sup>, another participant in the SXSW panel, argues that the term "context" should play an important - "primary" and not "secondary" or "supplemental" - role to the "main" text, because, actually, we need context before we realize what lies ahead.

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<sup>78</sup> <http://newsless.org/2010/03/the-case-for-context-my-opening-statement-for-sxsw/> (04-06-2012)

<sup>79</sup> [http://archive.prssthink.org/2010/03/07/what\\_i\\_plan\\_to.html](http://archive.prssthink.org/2010/03/07/what_i_plan_to.html) (04-06-2012)

<sup>80</sup> <http://www.tristanharris.com/2010/03/context-the-future-of-the-web-inklings-of-sxsw/> (04-06-2012)

"Context is as important today as content. It may, in fact, be the new king on the throne. That's because the world is evolving into niche communities, organized around individual interests and passions. Keeping your audience deeply engaged in the journalism you do is necessary to induce loyalty to your brand", says Byrne (2008), arguing that, to induce brand loyalty, you need to keep the audience deeply committed to the journalism that is done under that brand. Vadim Lavrusik (2011), program manager of Facebook for journalists, highlights the context as the first of the five "most crucial elements of online storytelling" (the others are "social", "personalization", "mobile" and "participation"). Lavrusik (Ibid.) notes that nowadays "the overflow of information presents a different kind of challenge: presenting short stories in a way that still provides the consumer with context instead of just disparate pieces of information". In its proposal of the "tumbled pyramid", Canavilhas (n/d) also highlights the contextualization, giving to this task the third of the four levels for structuring online news.

We have seen in recent years both the growth in demand for news on the Internet and a growing use of the potentialities of the Internet, but apparently not so faster than expected. This may indicate that the holders of the news sites are little aware of (or interested in) the capabilities of the Internet, and / or the users of these sites are giving less value than expected to the benefits of this journalistic potential. As Rosen (2010) asks, "why are we serving people the news without the background narrative necessary to make sense of the news?".

In this research, we've tried to measure the levels of contextualization present in the online journalism and see if there is

any relationship between these levels and the different types of news websites.

## Methodology

As explained above, the concept of contextualized journalism to which Pavlik refers is basically the journalism that leverages the Internet's potential (hypertextuality, multimediality, interactivity, immediacy, ubiquity, memory and personalization). For this research, we have used an updated version of the grid of analysis that we have created to measure how online media is using the potentialities of the Internet (Zamith, 2011: 88-120). Understanding the journalistic contextualization in the narrow sense, we built and applied a second grid (Figure 1) with items strictly related to the task of contextualizing. We took in account the context of the fact (the news itself) and also the context of the consumer and the context of the producer. The two grids were applied, in August and September 2010, to a sample of 10 international news websites (five online-only and five from traditional media – newspapers, radio and TV).

Figure 1 - Grid for measuring the online news contextualization (narrow sense)

CODE	ITENS	POINTS	TYPE
	<b>CONTEXTUALIZATION</b>	72	
	BY TYPE:		
	N – Context of the news / the fact	45	N

	S – Synchronic	30	S
	D – Diachronic	15	D
	C – Context of the consumer	17	C
	P – Context of the producer	10	P
12	Generic related hyperlink	1	S
13.1	Extra-textual hyperlink to related simultaneous article	1	S
13.2	Intra-textual hyperlink to related simultaneous article	2	S
14.1	Extra-textual hyperlink to related article archived	1	D
14.2	Intra-textual hyperlink to related article archived	2	D
15.1	Extra-textual hyperlink to document source	2	S
15.2	Intra-textual hyperlink to document source	3	S
16.1	Extra-textual hyperlink to chronology of the subject	1	D
16.2	Intra-textual hyperlink to chronology of the subject	2	D
17.1	Extra-textual hyperlink to related audio	1	S
17.2	Intra-textual hyperlink to related audio	2	S
18.1	Extra-textual hyperlink to related video	1	S
18.2	Intra-textual hyperlink to related video	2	S
19.1	Extra-textual hyperlink to related infographics	1	S
19.2	Intra-textual hyperlink to related infographics	2	S
20.1	Extra-textual hyperlink to related image gallery or slide-show	1	S
20.2	Intra-textual hyperlink to related image gallery or slide-show	2	S
22.1	Photo or drawing associated to an article	1	S
22.2	Image gallery or slideshow associated to an article	2	S
22.3	Recent audio slideshow	3	S



23.1	Infographics associated to an article	1	S
23.2	Dynamic infographics associated to an article	2	S
23.3	Recent dynamic infographics associated to an article	3	S
24.1	Audio associated to an article	1	S
24.2	Recent audio associated to an article	2	S
25.1	Separate video	1	S
25.2	Video associated to an article	2	S
25.3	Recent video associated to an article	3	S
26	Multimedia content combined	1	S
27	Content permanently updated	1	S
28.1	Article on update	1	S
28.2	Articles on update	2	S
29	Articles' date and time	1	S
34.1	Content in 2 languages	1	C
34.2	Content in 3 ou more languages	2	C
35	Content to 2 or more countries	1	C
36	Time zone	1	C
40.1	Tags associated to some articles	2	D
40.2	Tags associated to each articles	4	D
41.1	General updates sent to e-mail	1	C
41.2	Selected updates sent to e-mail	2	C
42.1	News adapted to a different platform	1	C
42.2	News adapted to some different platforms	2	C
43.1	General updates sent immediately to the desktop	1	C
43.2	Selected updates sent immediately to the desktop	2	C
44.1	General aggregation feeds (RSS or other)	1	C

44.2	Aggregation feeds (RSS or other) by topics	2	C
45.1	Customization of the homepage	1	C
45.2	Deep customization of the homepage	2	C
46.1	Channel or different format, internal or external	1	C
46.2	Channels or different formats, internals or externals	2	C
47	Accessibility alternatives	1	C
50.1	Names of some articles' authors	1	P
50.2	Names of all articles' authors and / or some CVs	2	P
50.3	CVs of all articles' authors	3	P
51	Other articles of the same author	1	P
52	Reference to an external (co-)author	1	P
53	Place of the articles' writing / production	1	P
54.1	Name of person responsible for the news site	1	P
54.2	CV of person responsible for the news site	2	P
55	Name(s) and contact(s) of the news site's owner(s)	1	P
56	Editorial statute and / or statment of purpose of the news site	1	P
57	Biography of a person referred to in the article	2	D
58	Other articles of a person referred to in the article	1	D
59	Historical, geographical and / or demographic information about the place of the event reported	2	D
60	Other articles about events at the same place	1	D
61	Hyperlink to news about the same subject at an external site	1	D
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>72</b>	

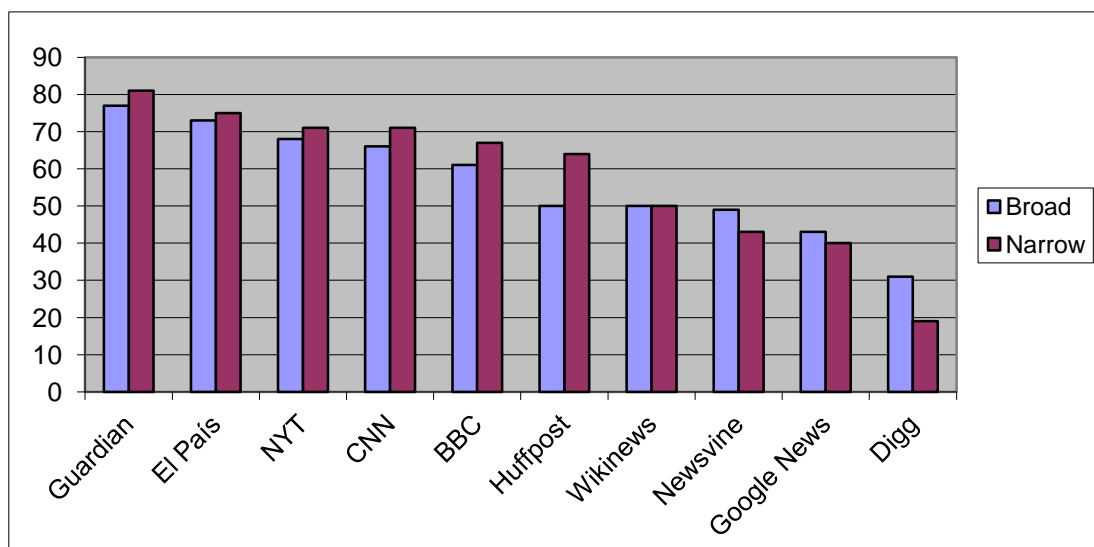
Source: Zamith, 2011: 114-120

In addition, we have interviewed 20 online journalism experts and researchers (Pavlik included), and we have published an online survey, trying to understand what has changed (or not, and why) in what concerns to contextualizing news in the online environment.

## Findings

Analyzing the results of the news websites' observation, we found that the average level of contextualization was below 60% (58.1% in narrow sense, and 56.8% in broad sense). We found also that the news websites of brands from traditional media (the press leading) are all in the first half of the list (Figure 2). This can mean that journalists working in brands from traditional media give greater importance to the news' contextualization.

Figure 2 – Levels of contextualization in broad and narrow sense (%)



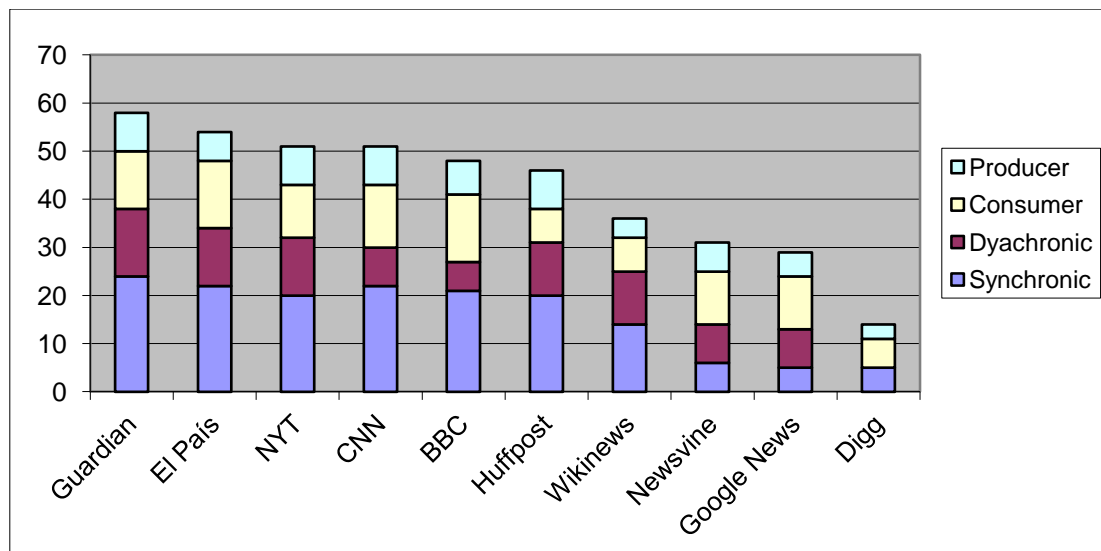
Source: Zamith, 2011: 137

The Guardian obtained the best result in both broad (77%) and narrow sense (81%), followed by El País (73% / 75%), The New York Times (68% / 71%), CNN (66% / 71%) and BBC (61% / 67%). The Huffington Post had the highest difference between contextualization observed in broad sense (50%) and narrow sense (64%), clearly distanced himself from the group of other online-only, and getting very close to the five mainstream. The HuffPost's presence in the leading group, far from surprising, reflects the positioning of the website created in 2005 by Ariana Huffington. In fact, despite the innovative wager in a mix of professional journalists, bloggers and rebroadcasting of news from other websites, the HuffPost has always followed the canons of traditional journalism, even in his writing, especially the team of editors, all of them senior journalists with extensive experience in journalism and bet in quality and accuracy. As we saw earlier, the action of journalistic contextualization well done is clearly an essential and integral part of quality journalism.

The others four online-only websites (all experiencing different forms of producing and / or transmitting news) never surpassed the 50%, what means that they are far from doing what the Internet permits in what concerns to context. Wikinews obtained 50% in both broad and narrow sense, followed by Newsvine (49% / 43%), Google News (43% / 40%) and Digg (31% / 19%).

Fragmenting the analysis by the different types of context (Figure 3), we see interesting peculiarities, with some websites giving attention to the context of the news and others more focused in the context of the consumer.

Figure 3 – Distribution of scores for the four types of context

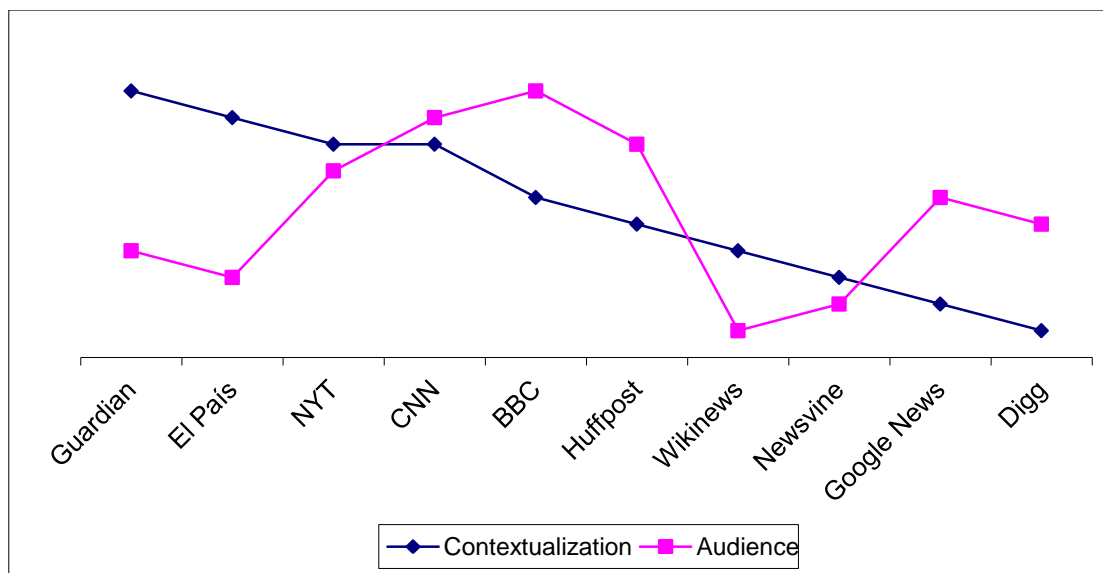


Source: Zamith, 2011: 138

Crossing the relative position of the 10 websites in the Alexa top news sites ranking<sup>81</sup> to the relative position obtained in the measurement of contextualization levels in narrow sense (Figure 4), we conclude that there is no relationship between them. Extrapolating to the online journalism in general, with due reservation considering that it's only a small sample, we could say that having a higher level of context does not mean to have wider audience, or vice versa.

<sup>81</sup> <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/category/Top/News> (data of July 29, 2011)

Figure 4 - Relative positions of the 10 websites  
on the measurement of levels of context and audience



Source: Zamith, 2011: 154

To know better how online journalists sees the issue of context, we conducted an online survey between April 13 and May 13, 2011. A comprehensive analysis of the results of this online survey (62 respondents, almost all from Portugal) allows us to conclude that, overall, online journalists greatly value the contextualization potential of the Internet and found that the size of the newsroom (reflected in the time of news production that online journalists have) is the determining factor in the processes of contextualization. Competition with other media, available technical resources, training, and user feedback are other factors, according to the respondents, which determine these processes. With some surprise, it was found that personal choice is just as binding as the editorial policies, which reveals some freedom of action that journalists still have in what concerns the processes of contextualization. Above this dichotomy

between personal choice / editorial policy, most respondents indicated that what most determines the processes of contextualization is the existence or otherwise of contextualization elements, especially on the (credible) Internet, but also in the archives of the news website. It seems significant also that a third of respondents say that there are no constraints on its website limiting the use of elements of context. Taking in account the above, the survey results show a noticeable gap to the results of the news websites study, in particular as regards the use of the hypertext in storytelling.

Between November 2010 and June 2011, we interviewed 20 online journalism experts, researchers and authors, the first nine personally and the others by email: David Domingo (Universitat Rovira i Virgili), Elias Machado (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina), Elvira García de Torres (Universidad CEU Cardenal Herrera), Eva Domínguez (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya / Universitat Pompeu Fabra), Helder Bastos (Universidade do Porto), Juan Miguel Aguado (Universidad de Murcia), Marcos Palacios (Universidade Federal da Bahia), Concha Edo (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), Xosé Pereira (Universidad de Santiago de Compostela), John Pavlik (Rutgers University), Mark Deuze (Indiana University / Universiteit Leiden), Amy Schmitz-Weiss (San Diego State University), Steve Yelvington (Morris Communications), Paul Bradshaw (City University London / Birmingham City University), Mario Tascón (Universidad de Navarra), Javier Díaz Noci (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), João Canavilhas (Universidade da Beira Interior), Alejandro Rost (Universidade Nacional del Comahue), Luís António Santos (Universidade do Minho) and Koldo Meso (Universidad del País Vasco).

Testimony absolutely crucial for this investigation was the one of John V. Pavlik. More importantly, perhaps, than what any other expert has to say about this matter, it was important to know what thinks the author of the concept of "contextualized journalism" 10 years after having described it. "Conceptually, I still define contextualized journalism in the same manner. Operationally, I would define contextualized journalism in a more expansive manner. I would incorporate developments in hyperlocal journalism and other emergent forms of journalism, including locative media and augmented reality that provide increasing capability to place stories in geographic or other context", says Pavlik. The author recognize that, ten years after, his statement or prediction of contextualized journalism "has only partially been confirmed": "Some journalists and some journalism organizations have utilized the tools of digital and networked media to place stories in heightened context, especially in online and digital reporting. However, in general, this potential remains unfulfilled". For Pavlik, "the greater contextualization when it occurs is largely because online audiences are increasingly responding to the depth and context available online". Pavlik argues that we need "institutional structures to facilitate the production of an organizational journalism form that routinely produces contextualized journalism": "Whether this is in the form of for-profit business models or non-profit, social media, journalism organizations or structures that can support the production of contextualized journalism is needed". And Pavlik believes that the new mobile devices "will enable a more engaged citizenry and journalist community that can create contextualized journalism through dialogue and discourse".

The other respondents, in general, were not so optimists. Briefly, we can say that the majority of the respondents see the expansion of the Internet as an excellent opportunity to develop more



and better contextualized journalism, but recognizes that there is still a long way to go, as also indicate the results of the news websites' analysis. We cannot, in this paper, transcribe all testimony<sup>82</sup>, so we will highlight a few that best sums up the general opinion.

The most pessimistic, perhaps, is Steve Yelvington: "The unfortunate reality is that most of us who had the resources to take advantage of that opportunity have squandered it. Most of the journalism as practiced on the Internet fails to take advantage of any of those capabilities. The writing is not significantly different from what you might have seen in 1955 - plain text, little use of media assets. Linking is rare. Incremental developments are not placed in context. What little 'audience involvement' exists is limited to story comments left by angry, anonymous extremists. There is little actual interaction between journalist and audience, or with news sources. I am very concerned that people are detaching themselves from the civic conversation, attracted away by bright shiny entertainment, driven away by poor reporting. News is a continuing story. Developments do not make sense without backstory, without context. We are not, in general, providing that context. How did we get here? What does this mean? This is not a technology problem. It's entirely a problem with our performance as journalists. Technology gives us tools. I have, in my pocket, computing power that was unheard-of two decades ago, the equivalent of a TV studio, and a live connection to a global network. How do I use that to the advantage of people in my community? That is the question. Our answers, to date, are disappointing".

Paul Bradshaw thinks that is missing a "cultural change" and that the "commercial pressures" have to stop: "Journalists find it hard

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<sup>82</sup> You can read them in our PhD thesis - <http://repositorio-aberto.up.pt/handle/10216/57280>

to involve non-journalists in their production, or link to their sources and destroy the 'magic' of journalism. I think there's a conflict between wanting to be a journalist and wanting to help journalism happen. Commercial pressures are changing that though – journalists are being asked to be distributors, which means linking and sharing. There's a move towards engaged readers, too, which presents similar pressures".

For Luís António Santos, is missing a more demanding audience, a mindset of changing in news organizations, and rethinking the journalistic activity. João Canavilhas thinks also that the Pavliks' prediction "was not confirmed, because the journalism on the Web has not evolved as much as expected": "Although in the last 2/3 years there has been some progress, the promised contextualization enunciated by Pavlik remains a mirage. 1) The hypertextuality remains a mirage, summing up the occasional links to related news. 2) multimediality is used for accumulation and not for complementary. 3) The involvement of the audience summed up the publication of comments, rarely mediated, never answered, and never recovered as news update. 4) Personalization is only content syndication. That is, it's all still to be done".

## **The reality**

*"All the day-to-day rewards go to breaking news. Productivity is measured that way. Reporters on beats don't compete to explain things more clearly to more people, even though this would create future customers for their updates. They compete to break stories and grab buzz." (Rosen, 2010)*

This research allowed us to conclude that, 10 years after, the Pavlik's concept of "contextualized journalism" has only partial expression in online journalism current practice. The author admits that today would give greater scope to the concept, incorporating elements arising from the technological developments in the last decade, but the results of the news websites study and the testimonies collected in this research show us that the question should be focused not on the technological but in the human, social and business areas. The Internet has brought more immediacy to the journalism, and some use of their customization and storage capacities, but is unfulfilled in its fullness other "promises" of "contextualized journalism", including the involvement of the audience and the construction of hypermedia narratives. In parallel, the delay in finding a business model robust and durable is holding back the progresses in online journalism practices more contextualized. Except some more optimistic outlook, it was also clear that the migration (albeit partial and phased) for mobile devices is not to lead to a more contextualized journalism. On the contrary, the mobile has reinforced the tendency to bet on fast and short news, although we admit that the expansion of the Internet for an increasing variety of media and objects (the so-called "Internet of Things") can lead to improved context, in particular as regards to the context of the user.

Moreover, we note that news sites with higher levels of contextualization are the ones of professional production and selection, which leads us to the classic roots of journalism, of recovery of context information as a guarantee of greater accuracy and greater quality. Adding the analysis of statistical information about the audience, we found also that the professional news websites are both the most visited and those who give more context.

The need to provide a context in the scope of online news is a matter traversal to several areas ranging from online news to information theory and computer science. The capacity to provide a context for the news in the web is a problem simultaneously journalistic but also related to the technical and technological capacities to do so in a practical and non-intrusive way to the reader. The existent information resources must be leveraged in the proper media to convey the information they carry in the proper manner.

In the scientific community, more precisely in informatics and computer science, for long there has been a concern for event detection, for the understanding of the dissemination of information in communities and, recently for the detection of contexts, particularly in online journalism.

The Breadcrumbs project<sup>83</sup>, for example, aims to create a digital network of news that relate to each other through the sharing of common “entities”. In this case, persons, time periods and locations that co-occur in the built social network of news have a connection in a huge graph. This type of approach will probably allow narrowing the gap between the Semantic Web and the Natural Language Processing areas.

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<sup>83</sup> <http://breadcrumbs.up.pt/>

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