

## 1 Redefining the Concept of ‘Parajournalism’ in the Age of Social 2 Media

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

23  
24 **Keywords:** *parajournalism, paraliterature, social media, public sphere,*  
25 *networked society*

### 26 27 28 **Introduction**

29  
30 The aim of this work is to redefine the concept of ‘parajournalism’ in  
31 relation to the transformations that characterise contemporary information—in  
32 particular those generated by the progressive shift of information itself on  
33 social media—and to highlight how this form of communication contributes  
34 effectively to the growth of participation in the public sphere. We will analyse  
35 the main meanings attributed to the term ‘parajournalism’, emphasising how  
36 this term generally refers to a type of journalism that is characterised by the  
37 marked intervention of subjective opinions and perceptions, as well as to a  
38 ‘second-rate’ journalism, practised by non-professionals, and substantially  
39 reduced to light information and infotainment. We will show how  
40 ‘parajournalism’ is likewise associated with so-called ‘postmodern journalism’,  
41 in which objective reporting fades into a form of communication on the edge  
42 between reality and fiction.

43 We will then try to demonstrate how the more appropriate meaning of  
44 ‘parajournalism’ emerges from the analysis and comparison with the so-called  
45 ‘paraliterature’, i.e., a complex of literary publications with commercial and  
46 consumerist—rather than cultural and artistic— purposes, aimed at the masses.  
47 The main studies on paraliterature show that, starting in the 16th century, it

1 also included the first forms of journalistic communication such as gazettes and  
 2 printed notices. These publications, like other expressions of paraliterature,  
 3 were characterised by content and stylistic forms similar to those of  
 4 contemporary social media journalism. They featured a loud style, reiteration  
 5 in the headlines of the topics considered to have the greatest emotional impact,  
 6 declamatory tones, the use of superlatives, and a propensity for clear  
 7 oppositions and absolute truths to the detriment of counterbalanced  
 8 propositions. There is also a commonality in the choice of topics between what  
 9 was covered by paraliterature and what is considered 'newsworthy' in today's  
 10 journalism practised on social media platforms.

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

23

24 *What is 'parajournalism': from postmodernism to the networked society*

25

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

1 'producers' (Burns, 2006) and participatory news consumers (Mazzoli, 2013).  
2 Thus, users are following the well-known characteristic shifts of citizen  
3 journalism.

4 With reference to Italy, it should be noted that the monopoly in the  
5 selection and dissemination of news by professional media organisations had  
6 not undergone any significant upheavals at least until the 1970s. This decade  
7 also coincided with the birth of private and commercial television. In the first  
8 decades following the birth of this mass medium, the state monopoly and the  
9 dominance of the pedagogical framework made television a form of 'control of  
10 modernisation' (Colombo, 2017: 17). Max Weber argued that the rationalisation of  
11 modern societies was based, among other things, precisely on the formation of  
12 specialised and professional apparatuses. And yet, it has often been remarked  
13 that 'parajournalism' was an almost inevitable outcome for the profession of  
14 journalism, which is not well suited to the definition of 'profession', i.e., a  
15 work practice based on academic qualifications and licenses to practice (Weaver,  
16 Wilhoit, 1996: 125). This is because 'the apparatus of communication did not take  
17 the path of selecting scientific practices that were incontestable to the layman'  
18 (Tonello, 2005: 118-119). This happened for various reasons: the  
19 substitutability of one form of communication with another, production  
20 routines and, above all, the nature of journalistic knowledge compared to that  
21 of other professions (Tonello, 2005: 119-123). Journalism, therefore, was  
22 fundamentally exposed to hybridisation and to the rise of non-professional  
23 models such as parajournalism. Over time, it became hardly possible to  
24 distinguish between the former and the latter. Unsurprisingly, scholars who  
25 have focused on parajournalism have often lamented the lack of ethical  
26 standards in the communication forms typical of the new media, which only  
27 professional journalism could guarantee (Heinderyckx, 2009).

28 The safeguarding of ethical and professional standards has always gone  
29 hand in hand with a strenuous defence of the scientific nature of journalistic  
30 work i.e., of journalism as an objective recounting of reality (Lippmann, 1920).  
31 For decades, characteristics such as the scrupulous verification of sources,  
32 independence, and above all, a narrative free from subjective contamination,  
33 identified professional journalism as an 'ideology of objectivity' (Fazakis,  
34 2006; Schudson, 2001). For this very reason the term 'parajournalism' has been  
35 increasingly associated with the progressive rise of journalistic subjectivism.  
36 The most striking case was that of New Journalism. Tom Wolfe pioneered an  
37 accounting of reality on the verge between journalism and literature, opening  
38 the way for genres such as journalistic fiction and the non-fiction novel  
39 (Johnson, 1971; Weber, 1971; Dennis & Rivers, 1974). Consequently, New  
40 Journalism was accused of violating the professional canon and labelled as  
41 'parajournalism', despite representing one of the highest forms of expression  
42 ever achieved by journalistic reporting (Macdonald, cited in Harvey, 1994).

43 In addition to violating the professional journalism's standards of  
44 objectivity, parajournalism has also been identified with entertainment  
45 journalism on soft topics, low-level journalism, and thus with a predominantly  
46 derogatory purpose. The two aspects are interconnected, which may be

1 illustrated through the link between parajournalism and postmodernism. Due to  
2 the subjectivistic turn it gave to journalistic narrative, *New Journalism* was  
3 already considered to be a sort of ‘forerunner of postmodernism’ (Basu, 2010).  
4 The expression ‘postmodern journalism’ is generally understood to refer to a  
5 journalism in which opinions prevail over facts and the real tends to gradually  
6 disappear into the vortex of multimedia and the virtual. Some scholars go as far  
7 as to suggest a sort of equivalence between postmodern journalism and the  
8 concept of neo-journalism (Zangrilli, 2013). Many scholars, moreover, have  
9 argued that ‘the digital revolution is a qualifying element of postmodernity’  
10 (Marchese, 1997: 24).

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

23 This is true not only in terms of the loss of objectivity and impartial  
24 reporting of facts, but also in view of the progressive affirmation of  
25 infotainment, of frivolous news, of the spectacularization of information. As is  
26 widely known, postmodernism brings with it a re-evaluation of popular culture  
27 and of ‘low’ cultural forms. The web, on the other hand, establishes a  
28 democratization in the production and access to information. In this context,  
29 postmodern parajournalism is considered a sort of breeding ground for  
30 infotainment (Loporcaro, 2005: 20-26). This also applies to postmodern  
31 television, which made its entrance in Italy in the 1970s, decades before the  
32 web. At the time, the public monopoly came to an end, producing substandard  
33 programs (including informational ones) that consisted merely of entertainment  
34 (Zangrilli, 2013: 150). Television spectacularization is considered the  
35 ‘quintessence of postmodern culture’ (Collins, 1992: 327).

36 In fact, formats that are typically parajournalistic such as talk shows, are  
37 establishing themselves within postmodern neo-television. These formats  
38 include talk shows, which are halfway between information and entertainment  
39 (Munson, 1993). In the United States, parajournalistic formats centred on soft  
40 news, comments by ‘opinion leaders’ and on gossip, such as those of David  
41 Letterman or Jay Leno, have gradually entered competition with  
42 professionalized journalism. The latter has lost its *gatekeeping* role in the  
43 selection of news (Tonello, 2005: 76-77). The web, as mentioned, also due to  
44 its intrinsic link with postmodern culture, emphasises all these traits. Thus,  
45 hyperreality and spectacularization ‘lead to the circulation of news having as  
46 its object ‘factoids’ rather than facts’ (Panarari, 2014). In this sense, soft news

1 prevails over hard news, and even when it comes to providing serious news  
2 such as political news, gossip and behind-the-scenes stories prevail (another  
3 facet of a subjective and often invented account of reality, in complete  
4 postmodern and parajournalistic fashion).

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

21 It is evident from what has been presented so far that the term  
22 'parajournalism' has taken on an almost exclusively negative connotation over  
23 time. To summarise, this expression is used to indicate a corruption of the  
24 standards of the journalistic profession, both from a moral and practical point  
25 of view, with the journalistic profession being extended to non-professionals.  
26 Additionally, parajournalism indicates the predominance of opinions over  
27 facts. Finally, parajournalism is commonly described in relation to the rise of a  
28 'playful' culture of news; of a spectacularization of information that leads to  
29 soft news prevailing over hard news, changing the criteria of newsworthiness  
30 (for the worse). As we have seen, all these aspects are inextricably linked to the  
31 network society and postmodern culture.

### 32 33 *Paraliterature*

34  
35 As already mentioned, the prefix 'para' also refers, as far as journalism is  
36 concerned, to a form of mass communication; it implicitly refers to  
37 infotainment and the popularisation of both the contents and the styles of  
38 communication. The same can be said for the so-called 'Paraliterature' i.e., that  
39 set of literary genres that distinguish themselves from 'high' literature, with  
40 both artistic and cultural aims, as they have more of a consumer and  
41 commercial purpose. It is thus a fringe literature, which falls short of the  
42 aesthetic canons of the elites and is aimed at satisfying the mass cultural tastes  
43 (Arnaud, Lacassin & Tortel, 1977; Couégnas, 1997; Braida & Infelise, 2010).  
44 Paraliterature comprises heterogeneous types of writing such as romance,  
45 crime, science fiction, and serial novels, and is characterised by a lightness of  
46 content and aims at a disengaged reading experience (Sfardini, 2001: 51). Our

1 main thesis is that the term ‘parajournalism’ should be re-semanticised and  
 2 freed from exclusively negative and derogatory connotations. Furthermore, we  
 3 argue that its most suitable meaning should emerge from the comparison with  
 4 paraliterature.

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

15 From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, paraliterature has consistently been  
 16 characterised by the presence of stylistic forms (both verbal and graphic) aimed  
 17 at attracting the widest possible audience. These included: bold titles, attractive  
 18 frontispieces, reiteration of the formulas with the greatest impact, leaving an  
 19 imprint on the readers minds, use of superlatives and simplified writing (Ricci,  
 20 2009: 101-102). In terms of themes, elements such as the fantastical, the  
 21 unknown and the sensational stood out in the sixteenth century (Ricci, 2013:  
 22 14-17). Moving on to printed notices, we observe that they had characteristics  
 23 resembling those of paraliterary texts: repeated and striking titles, emphatic  
 24 language, repetition of terms considered to have greater impact (Ricci, 2009:  
 25 98-99). Moreover, these early forms of journalistic reporting were  
 26 characterised not only by the coverage of mundane news (according to the  
 27 model of 'soft journalism' that we know today), but also of prodigies, natural  
 28 disasters, sensational events, even monster apparitions, with a very strong  
 29 presence of crime reporting (Ricci 2013: 35-39). These reports were halfway  
 30 between reality and fiction and had a strong literary connotation (Natale, 2008:  
 31 8). Sensationalism constituted the main criterion of newsworthiness, so much  
 32 so that ‘The facts that came to the attention of the popular classes were selected  
 33 for their sensational quality, chosen from the news (it is not particularly  
 34 important here to establish whether it was true, fictitious, or imaginary) that  
 35 aroused astonishment, that went beyond the everyday, beyond the sphere of the  
 36 usual’ (Natale, 2008: 19).

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

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

11 In its effort to appeal to a wide audience, paraliterature adopted themes  
12 and linguistic codes that were increasingly similar to those of journalistic  
13 communication. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, an increasing number of  
14 novels, seeking to reach the mass readership, began to use typically journalistic  
15 language (Zangrilli, 2009). This tendency grew stronger during the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
16 within postmodern literature. Here, the works of Italian authors such as Aldo  
17 Busi, Elsa Morante, Daniele Giudice, Roberto Pazzi and many others, produce  
18 'a novel of medium consumption, packaged with modules of multimedia and  
19 communication'. For this, they use a 'double coding' aimed at both the  
20 intellectual and the layman and justifying itself by the very need to reach a  
21 wider circle of readers (Zangrilli, 2013: 11-17). The need to create a literary  
22 text that would reach the masses also led many writers to craft their pieces by  
23 means of 'strategies' and forms of expression typical of the popular press.  
24 Carolina Invernizio, a paraliterary writer of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example,  
25 explained how in order to make her literary texts successful for the public, she  
26 tried to captivate readers through the title. In her words, the title 'exerts a kind  
27 of suggestiveness on readers' and is 'half the success of a popular novel'. Other  
28 strategies had to do with the identification of the audience's previous tastes, so  
29 much so that Invernizio's novels were filled with episodes of crime that took  
30 place in those years (Invernizio, 1904, reported in Colombo, 2017: 53-55).  
31 Over the years, the crime report in particular became the main inspiration for  
32 the birth of a typically paraliterary genre such as the detective story (Bertoni,  
33 2009: 30-31).

34 The latter not only draws on popular news reporting to construct an  
35 equally popular narrative text, but also employs those stylistic and linguistic  
36 codes (emphatic titles, repetition of high-impact terms, and so on) typical of the  
37 popular press and parajournalism. While paraliterature drew on the news to  
38 construct its fictional scenarios, late nineteenth-century parajournalism was  
39 prone to romanticising news events, particularly crime news, by merging  
40 reality and fiction. Journalism thus became 'quasi fiction' (Bertoni, 2009: 29).  
41 This was already the case in 16<sup>th</sup>-century printed notices and, more generally,  
42 adheres to the characteristics of parajournalism: imprinting the story on a  
43 subjectivism that violates the objective and aseptic canon of professional  
44 journalism—at times bordering on the downright invention of facts and  
45 circumstances. The case of 'La Domenica - Cronaca della settimana', a weekly  
46 published in Naples from 1866, is indicative in this regard. As a journalistic

1 product that was fully in line with the phenomenon of the industrialisation of  
 2 culture and the extension of the public sphere to the popular classes, ‘La  
 3 Domenica’ was directed by Francesco Mastriani, one of the most important  
 4 novelists and journalists of the time. Mastriani, as a good novelist-journalist,  
 5 promised his readers ‘to bring events to life deliberately’ i.e., to invent news ‘in  
 6 case the real ones were missing’ (Sfardini, 2001: 60). Here, we return to that  
 7 model of parajournalism that becomes soft and popular by moving away from  
 8 objective account of reality, crossing over into literary (and paraliterary)  
 9 narrative.

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

22 To get a complete picture on the relationship between paraliterature and  
 23 parajournalism, it should be noted that from 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards the press  
 24 itself was in fact the primary vehicle for disseminating literary writings. This  
 25 was achieved primarily through publication, in newspapers headings, of  
 26 appendix novels, novellas and short stories. And once again, it was precisely  
 27 through the journalistic dissemination of literary material that vast sections of  
 28 the working class and petit bourgeoisie became acquainted with books  
 29 (Sfardini, 2001: 57). In Italy, this took longer than in other countries, due to the  
 30 substantial reluctance of the intellectual classes to open up to forms of popular  
 31 culture. This tendency was analysed and criticised, among others, by Antonio  
 32 Gramsci. The author held writers in Italy responsible for lacking awareness on  
 33 the role that intellectuals ought to have in forming the moral conscience of the  
 34 people, thus, in his view, resulting in a lack of identity of worldviews between  
 35 writers and the public in Italy (Gramsci, 1950). Moreover, due to the strong  
 36 humanistic tradition that has always characterised Italian culture (Del Monte,  
 37 1962: 6), appendix literature (but also cinema in its early days) were viewed  
 38 with suspicion by Italian intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century. It  
 39 was conceived as a yielding to an abject, vulgar culture (Colombo, 2017: 17).  
 40 For this reason, mass literacy via newspapers took place mainly through  
 41 imported material, in particular French *feuilletons*.

42 The aristocratic and snobbish attitude of the Italian intelligentsia towards  
 43 paraliterature is also paralleled by the delay in the emergence of the popular  
 44 press in Italy, compared to other countries. In the United States, the penny  
 45 press made its appearance as early as the 1830ies, generating an immediate  
 46 increase in newspaper circulation and a popularisation of the journalistic



1 product (Mott, 1962; Schudson, 1978). In countries such as France and  
2 England the development of popular advertising occurred even earlier, while in  
3 Italy the press has long remained connoted in a strongly political and elitist  
4 sense. This was the case not only in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century—in  
5 conjunction with the historical events of the Risorgimento— but at least up until  
6 the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, delegating to weeklies or newspaper  
7 supplements the task of addressing readers of lower-middle culture (Murialdi,  
8 2014: 43-115). It was only the birth of commercial television that prompted  
9 newspapers, too, to experiment with forms of hybridisation between 'high'  
10 journalism and popular parajournalism. This led to a substantially snobbish  
11 conception of popular journalism, thus giving the term 'parajournalism' a  
12 negative and derogatory connotation. However, as will be discussed in the  
13 following section, historically the hybridisation of journalism and  
14 parajournalism is itself the main factor that suggests a redefinition of the term  
15 'parajournalism' in today's era of web journalism. Furthermore, a redefinition  
16 will highlight the potential of parajournalism in terms of extending the public  
17 sphere to broader segments of the population.

18

19 *The role of parajournalism in expanding the public sphere in the age of social*  
20 *networks*

21

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

35

36 It is important to point out the main difference pertaining to popular  
37 journalism before the birth of the network society, versus the popular  
38 journalism today, which is linked to the possibilities made available by new  
39 technologies. While news as a form of entertainment has always existed, what  
40 is different today is the technical possibility of merging hard news and soft  
41 news within the same journalistic product. The Italian press, as analysed in the  
42 previous chapter, has traditionally tended to confine popular journalism to  
43 specialised newspapers or weeklies, which rarely achieved high circulations. It  
44 was only with the birth of the web, and in order to pursue a younger audience,  
45 that even mainstream newspapers such as Corriere della Sera and Repubblica  
46 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

1 make soft news a vehicle for accessing more serious information. The Internet,  
2 however, has unified the journalistic field, bringing that convergent culture  
3 (Jenkins, 2006) typical of the multimedia scenario to fruition in the field of  
4 news as well. Web-based information falls within the framework of the post-  
5 medial condition (Eugeni, 2015), in which it is no longer possible to  
6 distinguish between medial and non-medial life situations, since every activity  
7 has to do with the world of media. In the field of journalism, this has been  
8 referred to as 'ambient journalism' (Hermida, 2010): a transition from content-  
9 oriented to connection-oriented communication, wherein the awareness of all  
10 users of being within a continuous and indistinct flow of news is what counts.  
11 In the context of convergent culture, ambient journalism also implies a  
12 constitutive co-presence, as inherent to the digital medium, of hard and soft  
13 news, and a consequent reconfiguration of the public sphere. While Habermas  
14 (1962) described the public sphere made up of episodic conversations to which  
15 social platforms could be associated today as 'ephemeral', numerous authors  
16 have instead highlighted how the new types of language on social media have  
17 now given rise to an aesthetic public sphere (Jones, 2007; Sassatelli, 2012).  
18 Hence, types of language that acknowledge the need to reach users with  
19 gamification tools and 'emotional' news.

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

31 In other words, on social media, journalism gradually becomes a form of  
32 conversation, the language of headlines becomes more colloquial, direct, and  
33 captivating, according to the communicative codes of the respective 'host  
34 platforms' (Facebook in primis), and information comes to coincide with the  
35 concept of 'social and friendly relations' (Mezza, 2015: 12-13). Hence, the  
36 codes of parajournalism and paraliterature recur in the context of online  
37 information: the use of emphatic terms, particularly in headlines, the reiteration  
38 of high-impact words, a tendency towards sensationalism, and sharp contrasts  
39 prevailing over multifaceted statements. As mentioned, this is what  
40 characterised popular communication on the verge between journalism and  
41 paraliterature, as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But the occurrence of 'convergent  
42 culture' means that today, in the age of the web, the employment of these  
43 communication codes is essentially the only way for users, especially those  
44 who are less cultured (also in terms of digital culture) to access information of  
45 public interest on issues such as politics, foreign affairs, economics.

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

15       In the age of fast and brief communication, the headlines of newspapers,  
16 for example, are often constructed on the model of sound bites, i.e., synthetic  
17 forms of communication with an evocative character, which offer the general  
18 coordinates to grasp the overall meaning of a piece of information (Bentivegna,  
19 2015). Recent research shows that on social media, the threshold of attention  
20 devoted by each user to a single piece of information content is very low, with  
21 most web pages viewed, on average, for about 10 seconds (Mello, 2019: 89).  
22 The need to focus on particularly emphatic terms and formulas of immediate  
23 appeal therefore responds to the necessity of winning this tight battle in gaining  
24 gain the attention of users. If this is not achieved, and if newspapers again  
25 separate hard and soft news, refusing to adopt the codes of gamification, the  
26 algorithms of Facebook and other social networks will only reward  
27 entertainment and gossip news. The latter will be the only content appearing  
28 before users, with the predictable (and harmful) consequences for the quality of  
29 public debate. Thus, parajournalism, its codes and stylistic forms, represent a  
30 necessary compromise to create a comprehensive information environment in  
31 the digital public arena.

32       As we have seen, these same communicative strategies already existed in  
33 popular journalism and paraliterature from the 16th century onwards. In  
34 contrast to the 16<sup>th</sup> century communicative strategies in popular journalism and  
35 paraliterature and up to the emergence of the networked society—where forms  
36 of mixing journalism and parajournalism (especially in Italy) were more  
37 occasional—parajournalism today can simply be defined as a different and  
38 necessary way of conveying journalistic information; one which accepts the  
39 context of convergence, gamification, and the redefinition of the networked  
40 public sphere. In short, parajournalism should not be exclusively and  
41 disparagingly labelled as second rate, unprofessional journalism. Instead, it  
42 ought to be reinserted into the context of changing communication and  
43 information codes on the web. The comparison with early popular journalism  
44 and paraliterature clarifies this even further: just as paraliterature and early  
45 forms of journalistic communication played a fundamental role in expanding  
46 the public sphere, today parajournalism plays a decisive role in making

1 information on issues of public interest available to the masses, albeit conveyed  
2 in a manner typical of social media journalism.

### 3 4 5 **Conclusion**

6  
7 In this paper, we have illustrated how, in the age of networked  
8 communication and the shift of journalistic information to social media, a re-  
9 semantisation of the term ‘parajournalism’ is necessary, and how this can be  
10 done through a comparison between the concept of parajournalism itself and  
11 that of paraliterature. Moreover, we have highlighted the meanings commonly  
12 associated with the concept of ‘parajournalism’, showing that they all contain a  
13 negative or even derogatory judgment. In fact, parajournalism is mostly  
14 referred to as journalism practiced by non-professionals, in which the objective  
15 account of reality fades into a sort of trivial opinionism, of journalistic  
16 subjectivism. Moreover, parajournalism is generally associated with the  
17 treatment of ‘low’ topics such as gossip, shows, entertainment, or in any case  
18 with a less serious and infotainment-like treatment even of hard news. In the  
19 second chapter, we highlighted how certain typical modes of parajournalistic  
20 information can be traced back to the field of paraliterature as early as the 16<sup>th</sup>  
21 century. These are stylistic forms and linguistic codes aimed at attracting the  
22 largest possible number of readers, including those from the less educated  
23 classes. We have presented the way in which all the hybrid forms of  
24 paraliterature and popular journalism over the centuries (from printed notices  
25 to serial novels, to novels constructed through media and journalistic language)  
26 have had this function of approaching a wider audience than that addressed by  
27 both elite journalism and high literature. We have therefore highlighted how  
28 the similarities between paraliterature and parajournalism concern not only the  
29 forms of language used but also their role as channels of access to literary  
30 product and information respectively for wider segments of the population.  
31 Especially in the era of the web, with the redefinition of the public sphere in  
32 the digital arena and the convergence that is taking place between  
33 communication tools and topics that were previously kept separate (in other  
34 words, with the convergence between 'high' and 'low' information made  
35 possible by new technologies), parajournalism in particular is becoming an  
36 essential tool to bring even the least cultured people closer to hard news and  
37 information of public interest. Gamification, the functioning of the algorithms  
38 of the main social networks and the shift of information to platforms such as  
39 Facebook and Twitter mean that it is no longer possible to separate  
40 professional journalism from non-professional parajournalism, which is second  
41 rate and relegated to infotainment. While in the past the popular  
42 communication typical of paraliterature and parajournalism could be  
43 considered a choice, today it is a network-driven necessity. When a wise use is  
44 made of these communicative codes, they can be instrumental in informing a  
45 large number of users, thus rightfully including parajournalistic language and

1 information within what gives substance to the public debate and widens the  
2 audience of those who participate in it.

3

4

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