

Recovered Media in Argentina: An Inclusive Digital Movement

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Abstract:- The basis for this paper is the recovered factories movement, which began in Argentina in 2001, and which has grown over the past decade to include media companies, transcending digital inequalities and turning them into opportunities for journalists and media outlets. Just like elsewhere, the situation for journalists in Argentina is precarious, with technological barriers increasing digital inequalities and a lack of respect for workers' rights, particularly when political processes such as changes in government lead to new economic plans and market instability. This situation of great uncertainty for the press has given rise to a movement on the increase in recent years, known as "recuperated or recovered media" or "workers' co-ops". Between 2016 and 2017, at least six media outlets were recuperated by their workers after being closed down or abandoned by their owners, including La Nueva Mañana, in Córdoba; El Ciudadano of Rosario; La Portada, of Esquel; and the Tiempo Argentino newspaper and online news site Infonews, both based in Buenos Aires. Tiempo Argentino is the only national newspaper supported by its readership, contributing 70% of revenue, which has made it one of the few independent voices of dissent in Argentina at a time of high media concentration and domination.

The Tiempo Argentino newspaper was one of the winners of the first Latin American Google News Initiative (GNI), illustrating how this movement has transcended politico-social difficulties and transformed digital inequalities into digital inclusion/opportunities. The GNI is an initiative that fosters innovation aiming to improve the sustainability of journalism in a digital era by developing open source software, so as to improve user experience on the Web and optimize internal management procedures for members. Once the software is finalized, the co-op will develop a prototype to be made available to other self-managed media outlets in order to strengthen their membership model.

Hence, this exploratory study seeks to analyze the phenomenon of the recovered media in Argentina, focusing on the experience of Tiempo Argentino as the newspaper and its workers face a new digital challenge. At the end of 2001, Argentina's political and economic crisis was the main theme in world news coverage. At this period and in response to the economic crisis, workers seized control of many abandoned factories. The rise of these "recuperated/recovered businesses", as

they came to be called, was the subject of the documentary *The Take* (Klein & Lewis, 2004).

Although these co-ops are currently on the rise, providing a new way to empower workers, we will ask ourselves what will happen in terms of digital inclusion and digital literacy when they share their experience through the GNI.

Consequently, we consider that the Tiempo Argentino newspaper is creating an unprecedented type of digital inclusion that merits in-depth research into its medium and long-term impact. As this South American country embraces a new paradigm for the labor market of journalists, following the Argentine Bankruptcy Law (1995, 2011) enabling workers to take over bankrupt companies, we consider it of interest to investigate the experiences of these media through that of their workers.

Keywords:- *Recovered Media; Media Co-Ops; Argentina; Recovered Factories; Resistance; Journalism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional media around the world are in crisis, leading to job insecurity for their workers and, as confirmed by Cagé this situation "has radically deepened over the past years. Traditional media are now threatened and desperate" (2016, p.14). Faced with this predicament, Argentinean journalists, as we shall advance in this investigation, just like journalists in other countries, decided to look for a new way of producing news in different spaces, more specifically spaces created by themselves and based on their experiences and perceptions of what it meant to produce news for a specific audience.

Nevertheless, it is not the same to create a media from scratch, in line with the values of journalists who decide to break away from large media or corporations, as it is to take over a known media, occupy it, resist from within – physically and emotionally – and from this stance of resistance, be productive. In order to pass through all these instances, a specific context is required and a coordinated group prepared to work towards collective and model actions, with an important precedent set by the Recovered Factories.

Economic crises not only close down spaces and limit possibilities for work, they bring an end to a belief system; yet in turn, the crisis of the media questions its workers from another perspective, in which various possibilities are at play, and where it is necessary to question, if it is ethical for a journalist to occupy an editorial office as a pay protest, how is the news written from a stance of resistance (occupation)? And if, in the long run, those journalists who took a chance to live all these experiences backtrack: is there a change in perception as to what it is to be and work as a journalist? In the end, many journalists have had to face no longer belonging to a large media in order to be part of a project that both represents a highly diverse mixture of values and norms. Through this investigation, we can observe that the move from a traditional media to creating a cooperative not only involves a change in the organization of groups and hierarchies, but also in the scale of the journalistic interactions and productions from within these spaces under construction.

Various studies have been carried out based on the experiences of media startups as new forms of entrepreneurial journalism (for US cases see Schaffer, 2010; Coates Nee, 2014; Cagé, 2016. For Europe see Bruno & Kleis Nielse, 2012; Borelli, 2019). Although certain media cooperatives were not viable such as L'Yonne Républicaine and Courier picard -closed due to economic difficulties- others have managed to continue, such as the magazine Alternatives économiques as, since 1984, its statutes have stipulated the reinversion of a considerable part of its profits, and hence it has been able to constitute its own funds (Cagé, 2016). In Germany there is Der Spiegel and Taz; in the United States, Inter-County Leader (Wisconsin) and The Gazette (Iowa). In the case of Argentina, the experience of media converted into cooperatives is still a new and flourishing sector, and while there is a great deal of experience in creating cooperatives, there are not many precedents in the media sector. There are currently nine newspapers which are cooperatives self-managed by their employees, and publications such as La Vaca and La Masa that are also part of the cooperative movement. All these media come together every year at the National Meeting of Recovered Media, which we will discuss further on.

When interviewing journalists from recovered media cooperatives, the question should be asked as to the place given to agency, resistance/resilience and new opportunities (also seen as a space of empowerment), as they are convinced of creating a practice of journalism, also aligned with a political/social stance, from which they resist, and at the same time their production puts them in a different place. A new place with new responsibilities, validated, consumed and supported in part by society that looks to listen to and read new voices in journalism.

II. STATE OF THE ART

To better understand the creation of media co-ops in Argentina, it is necessary to know the economic situation of the country, and that of its journalists. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Census, in 2019 there was 53.8% inflation in Argentina, the highest since 1991 when the country introduced parity with the dollar, and one of the highest rates of inflation in the world. This was reached after the cost of living had risen to 3.7% in December (INDEC, 2020).

In turn, the greatest cost increase last year was in health (+72.1%), followed by communication (+63.9%) and home equipment and maintenance (+63.7%), placing this South American country within the countries with the highest rate of inflation in the world and the highest in Latin America, with the exception of the hyperinflation in Venezuela. In 2018, Argentina had registered a consumer price index of 47.6%.

In such an economic context, the situation of the media and their employees does not seem encouraging either. Taking the survey carried out by the Buenos Aires Press Union (SiPreBA, in Spanish) as a reference, between 2018 and 2019 over 3,100 journalists lost their jobs in the City of Buenos Aires and over 4,500 in the entire country. This took place alongside the silencing of critical voices and an increase in the concentration of the media in ever increasingly powerful groups that disregard current laws. Moreover, the report by the SiPreBA on the situation for workers in the press states that since 2016 there have been 3,127 registered job losses, solely in the City of Buenos Aires. Of these, 990 took place in 2018 and 288 in the first months of 2019 (the survey was held until 31/5/2019). This tragic figure reaches over 4,500 across the country and implies the loss of approximately 30% of the jobs of employees working within the collective bargaining agreement. According to the report, business owners took advantage of the critical situation to make journalists' jobs more precarious, turning them into "collaborators" and freelancers and thereby "violating the Professional Journalist's Statute".

For all the aforementioned reasons, the occupation and recovery of factories and companies in Argentina are in response to a context of a volatile economy and jobs constantly at risk.

Although the first to move towards the occupation and self-management of recovered companies transformed into cooperatives were mainly factory workers, many employees of the press, after closely following these processes, have decided to join this movement. While the phenomenon of occupation and recovery of spaces and jobs by workers is still being investigated, it is widely broadcast and well-known by society (Rebón, Kasparian & Hernández, 2015) via the diverse experiences announced throughout the country. A space for the support and accompaniment of workers deciding to occupy and then self-manage, known as the Movement of Recovered Companies, was also

established. In this respect, Pérez de Sierra (2010) emphasizes that the movement of recovered companies contributes to processes of social emancipation through the analysis laid down within its proposal/plan.

III. RECOVERED FACTORIES (AND MEDIA) MOVEMENT

In Argentina, various strategies in the field of social and solidary economics set a precedent through socioproductive experiences and processes such as the country's cooperatives. In this way new production spaces were created and innovations made institutionally, aiming to increase and promote social power (Wright, 2010).

This movement of recovered factories began with the first recovered factory in Argentina, the former Gip-Metal S.R.L on August 22, 2000, in Buenos Aires Province. This was the day on which the workers received their dismissal telegrams as the factory's owners had themselves filed for bankruptcy. They realized something unusual was happening as they had been working normally until the previous day, and so they decided to enter the plant and remain there peacefully in order to safeguard the property and until the situation was clarified. Various attempts were made to evacuate the workers, who decided to stay and resist, and from this space make progress with the creation of the Cooperativa de Trabajo Unión y Fuerza Limitada. They rented out the machinery and succeeded in the first expropriation legislation being passed for a manufacturing factory (December 2000) (National Movement of Recovered Factories, MNFR).

Initially there were 54 workers, the 18 administrative employees and managers having decided not to continue. Currently there are 84 workers. "They carry out the production, sales, administration, commercialization and management of the factory. They received direct training and have demonstrated that workers can make an industrial factory productive (...) This was the example followed by other workers who have so far recovered around 130 factories around the country (MNFR).

Authors such as Briner & Cusmano (2003) define recovered companies as "all those companies which, having stopped production and undertaken a cessation of payments to their creditors (whether because they were in rehabilitation proceedings without a resolution guaranteeing the solvency of the business or because they had filed for bankruptcy), were reopened on the initiative of the workers in order to sustain the source of work, restarting production activities with the direct intervention of the workers in the administration". In addition, the initiatives or beginnings of pay protests by workers, such as in the case of Tiempo Argentino (T.A) and other companies, were faced with the challenge of continuing with production spaces that were not profitable and/or had been decapitalized. In these situations, the experience and advice of the MNFR is essential for the creation of a timeline of actions, and the

assessment of the various legal means and possibilities for productivity.

When taking the decision to move forward with a pay protest via the occupation of the work space, various issues arise including the values of the people involved. In this respect, Elster (1985) explains that the actions of many individuals are motivated by their moral values, which means that they do not expect anything in return, in other words their actions are not motivated by utilitarian intentions.

Several authors agree that what encouraged the collective action of workers looking for new alternatives in order to defend and keep their jobs was the economic crisis, characterized by a lack of response to work conflicts (Fajn, 2003; Ghilaudi, 2003; Rebón, 2004; Rofman et al., 2004; Martínez et al. 2004; Ruggeri, 2005; Fernández Álvarez, 2007).

Dávalos & Perelman (2003) observe that the first cases of recovered companies facilitated those that came after them with experience, coordination as well as available organizational and material resources (ranging from legal and accounting advice to subsistence means during conflicts, periods of occupation and resistance, amongst others).

From an economic perspective, Cincunegui (2006) observes a correlation between a fall in PIB and an increase in recovered companies, and explains the relation between the evolution of unemployment and the recovery of factories and companies.

Although it is not surprising that both the evolution and the number of recovered companies correspond to the performance of the economy, other issues arise, placing greater emphasis on social aspects and highlighting the interactions of workers with the economic context, while collective actions and collective identities are analyzed in the processes of occupation and recovery of these spaces (Fajn, 2003; Dávalos & Perelman, 2003; Rebón, 2004, 2005; Martínez et al, 2004, Ruggeri 2005, 2007; Fernandez Alvarez, 2012).

However, knowing that the media are not like other companies, the question must be asked as to whether they can also be cooperatives since, as explained by Ruggeri (2005), the main sectors with recovered companies are metallurgy, textile, graphics, food, hospitality, health, construction, ceramics and other sectors in manufacturing.

We start with the assumption that one of the main objectives of the media is to provide the public service of information –according to ethical and deontological norms allowing them to produce quality, free and independent information that also contributes to the democratic debate-, and not to maximize profits and dividends for shareholders. In this respect, the creation of a cooperative meets the needs of its workers, as explained by Palomino: the legal concept of the cooperative is adopted when out of the available

concepts it is the closest one to the characteristics of the process experienced by the workers (2003). Nevertheless, incidences occur during the transition from a media such as a newspaper into a cooperative that must be examined in greater depth: firstly, the journalists, although continuing to work, do so from a new space in which they are publicly exposed and recognized (they sign their articles and are identifiable by their audience), and which is part of a new self-managed space; as to how news is processed within self-managed spaces, questions arise that must be assessed when investigating media recovered by their own journalists. In other words, a worker of a recovered factory or company is not as exposed –to the public, an audience, society- as a journalist who communicates, expounds and shares their news from a self-managed space and this must be analyzed in depth in order to appreciate the degree of this exposure, and its impact on their work and daily lives.

It has been seen that, over time, workers develop an appreciation for self-management and relate their experience to the struggle for a wider social change with defending their jobs being the main goal at all times (Rebón, 2007; Rebón & Salgado, 2010).

IV. OCCUPY, RESIST AND PRODUCE

The asset stripping of daily newspaper T.A became increasingly obvious for its employees when the Balkbrug SA company, whose owners were Sergio Szpolski and Matías Garfunkel, did not pay half of the annual bonus. In addition, trips for special reports were cancelled and there was a lack of supplies for the printers as well as other supplies for the editorial office. All of which led to the first non-payment of the *Tiempo Argentino* employees in December 2015. “On that day, absolutely all of the group’s employees lost their jobs. Some of us decided to carry on, file complaints, continue to write despite not being paid, other colleagues couldn’t afford it and had to go and look for work” Feijoo, (2020, interview). Their wages for January and February were not paid either. On the night of 5th February 2016, when the workers had finished the newspaper’s edition, they found out about the lockout. They improvised an assembly and that very night decided to occupy the building in order to preserve the tools of their trade, organizing round-the-clock watches to make sure no-one came in.

A. Occupy

The Ministry of Labor decreed that the *Tiempo* employees were the custodians of the company’s property, clearly abandoned by management. On 24th March of the same year, on the 40th anniversary of the coup d’état, they published a four-page special edition telling their story. They went out to sell the copies, and to talk to people and ask them if they would be interested in lending support to a project of self-management. “The supplements sold out and we returned to the newspaper, where we were sleeping, with hundreds of emails and renewed energy” (Borelli, 2020).

B. Resistance and Resilience

In the midst of the asset stripping, the forsaking of employees, “and a State that looked the other way, there was a surge of solidarity: hundreds of readers came to the newspaper’s head office to bring us food, school supplies, nappies and clothes to fill the void”, recalled Stagnaro & Schurman (2016) a short time after.

During the occupation, they received more and more support: that of the professional association of journalists, of press employees from other media, friends, relatives, neighbors and readers who helped them to continue and set new goals: to continue with legal proceedings while starting out on the path towards self-management.

There are various means of obtaining the possession of rights/tenure rights in Argentina, such as the laws for the declaration of public utility and expropriation by the State, legal authorizations for operating within the framework of bankruptcy proceedings, renting from former owners or the direct purchase by workers via adjudication by the judicial branch, using work credits (Rebón, Kasparian, 2018).

For this reason, expropriation legislation has been the best-known way of making progress as to tenure. This implies that the State, in most cases, declares the assets, property, brands and buildings as public utilities and gives them gratuitously to the workers who have set up the cooperative.

During the time of occupation and resistance, the group of employees agreed on the continuous occupation of the editorial office and the production of news in order to continue informing their readers via a blog and the newspaper’s social media accounts. In this respect, as explained by Quijano, recovered companies are born out of the workers’ strategy to defend their jobs. They arise as alternatives to unemployment rather than to capital (2011). During this occupation began the process that would lead them to become a cooperative.

Nevertheless, and as in all process, challenges arise that make modifications necessary in the planning of actions already set out and evaluated by the group. Although the journalists took turns in order to continue occupying the T.A editorial office, on the night of 4th July 2016 a group of people entered and destroyed much of the office, intimidating three representatives of T.A (see images). The journalists decided “to do what we do best, write about and report on what happened” and hence the next day 30,000 copies were printed of a publication explaining what had happened in the offices that were still occupied as a “pay protest”. They sold all the copies. From this stance of resistance, the journalists moved on towards the organization of the cooperative. In this stage of resistance, we see resilience within the media, beginning with its meaning: from the Latin *resilio*, to jump back, jump again, bounce (Puig & Rubio, 2011, p.36) also observed as “community resilience” based on a heuristic model created as a result of social research, whose pillars are: solidarity practices; sense of belonging; cultural identity; social

humor; state honesty. As explained by Twigg (2007), community resilience corresponds to the capacity of the community (in this case, the T.A employees) to detect and foresee setbacks, the capacity to absorb a serious setback and the capacity to recover after suffering damage.

C. Produce

In April 2016 the workers created the Cooperativa Por Más Tiempo (Cooperative for More Time), returning as a digital daily newspaper with a Sunday printed edition (as this is the day on which newspaper sales triple): *Tiempo Argentino*, *Dueños de nuestras palabras*. 30,000 copies of the first printed edition as a cooperative sold out, somewhat unusual as when the newspaper was not run by its workers, it sold ten times less copies. In this way, T.A became the biggest cooperative newspaper in the country. “We decided to create a non-profit work cooperative, where all members take part in decision-making and we rely on the financial support of our readers”, Borelli (2020, interview).

The media has subscribers (who receive the printed edition at home), members (who pay extra to support the construction of an independent journalistic project) and many more readers with free access to content. “We have chosen a solidary model: those who pay don’t do so in order to have exclusive information but so that more people have access and can read us”, explains Borelli (2020, interview).

V. DIGITAL DIVIDE AND DIGITAL INEQUALITIES

The production process for this group of journalists who took a chance in taking over and occupying their work space brought with it a new challenge – that of transcending the digital divide and digital inequalities. As summed up by Trappel:

Inequalities have been a feature of the media throughout their history: from exclusive publications for the novel and the clergy, to information agents for wealthy traders and to organs of the privileged classes. Only in the twentieth century did the media become mass products available to all, with low barriers to access and consumption - some of them even free of charge (commercial TV and radio, commuter press and online media) (2019, p.15).

Many of the journalists lacked in-depth knowledge of new technologies and the material at their disposal did not allow them to be radically innovative or to promote new ways to engage with their audience.

As Trappel suggests: “Knowledge gaps have transformed into digital divides, advertising revenues have migrated to social networking sites, which challenge traditional news journalism, and global corporate monopolies outperform media companies and nation state media regulation alike” (2019, p.9).

“Social inequalities are usually described as the unequal distribution of opportunities, rewards, goods, wealth, education, healthcare, and punishment for different

socially defined categories of persons within group or society” (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2016, p.24).

In addition, Argentines are more prone to go online to look for information while the French and Spaniards prefer the television. And whenever we talk of only online consumption, Argentines almost doubled the French and Spanish preference for social media as their primary source of news (Borelli, 2019).

VI. DIGITAL INCLUSION AND EMPOWERMENT

Having decided to move forward in different directions, the workers of the T.A co-op also had to assess the subject of costs and revenue, as well as keeping on the entire staff. In this respect, as Cagé explains: the media industry carries high fixed costs and therefore not only must it use economies of scale but also develop new strategies. In a period of three years, T.A succeeded in maintaining around 100 jobs, while the South American country’s traditional media dismissed some 3,000 journalists in Buenos Aires.

Nevertheless, faced with the challenges of the digital divide and inequalities, the cooperative decided to present a project for the Google News Initiative (GNI) that fosters innovation aiming to improve user experience on the Web and optimize internal management procedures for members.

In 2016, T.A created the first subscription business that relied on readers’ support and offered a free access digital newspaper with a Sunday printed edition. The printed edition allowed them to sell more advertising and to add printed newspaper sales revenue as well. At the same time, they retained the symbolic value of print media, that is still held in high esteem by politicians and readers alike.

The cooperative also decided to collaborate in the progress and experiences of other newspapers who were also recovered and became cooperatives. Hence in 2018, T.A organized the National Meeting of Recovered Newspapers, that brought together newspapers and publications from Argentina and where the experiences of these media turned into cooperatives was assessed, on an annual basis. Following the last meeting, held in 2019, the members presented a document titled “Self-managed Journalism: indispensable for strengthening democracy, Declaration of the II National Meeting of Recovered Media” in which their common objectives are laid down, in pursuit of the liberty of expression and quality of work (T.A, 2019).

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Tiempo Argentino started without any money and with a newsroom of 90 journalists (none of them administrative) that were initially part of a printed newspaper that had recently shut down. The cooperative they formed in order to publish their newspaper has succeeded in surviving for almost four years, increasing both their membership base and their income, with readers revenue accounting for 70% of their budget.

Today the cooperative is made up of over 100 people, maintains the substantial number of printed copies on Sundays, and has embarked on new digital projects in order to improve the quality of its service, image and connection with its readers.

Although this is an exploratory study, future research should focus on the common progress made by T.A and the other recovered media in Argentina where a more in-depth study can be made of the values and new visions that these cooperatives can provide in terms of the mediatization of information. Comparative studies and interviews of their members are needed to be able to understand how these cooperatives evolve in a context of crisis as pronounced as that in Argentina and to understand the social legitimacy of these companies of recovered media.

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