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Rethinking Hard and Soft News Production: From Common Ground to Divergent Paths

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Abstract

The twin issues of recent changes in journalistic phenomena and how they afford theory development are addressed by depicting a key transformation in the former—the increase in the frequency and volume of content dissemination in online news—and using this depiction to examine the current heuristic value of the conceptual distinction between hard and soft news. An ethnographic study of online news production at the largest online newspaper in Argentina is used to show that a growing separation in the temporal patterns of hard and soft news production is intertwined with major differences in critical aspects of editorial practice in which the common ground between hard and soft news work has traditionally been assumed to be significant. This finding challenges a dominant strain in the literature that underscores a blurring of the differences between hard and soft news. Because central elements of this case resonate with developments identified in several other settings, this study suggests rethinking some notions about the distinction between hard and soft news.

Rethinking Hard and Soft News Production: From Common Ground to Divergent Paths

The field of news production has recently experienced major changes in relation to trends such as the acceleration of the news cycle, the increase in interpenetration across media, the growing reliance on digital technology, the globalization of content flows, and the rise of citizen journalism. These changes are only beginning to be analyzed, and most academic work on the news has continued to rely on a conceptual apparatus developed primarily at a time when the editorial experience, practice, and organization had a different character. Thus, Zelizer (2007) has urged scholars to develop “more responsive modes of inquiry” (p. 111) that can illuminate “new modes of journalistic practice, new circumstances in which journalism can and does operate, and new purposes for which journalism is called into action” (p. 112).

These twin issues of changes in journalistic phenomena and how they afford theory development are addressed by depicting a key transformation in the former—the increase in the frequency and volume of content dissemination in online news—and using this depiction to look at the current heuristic value of one of media scholarship’s quintessential analytical tools—the distinction between hard and soft news. The acceleration of the news cycle started with the 24-hour cable news channels and greatly intensified with the advent of online news. Practitioners have exploited the low cost of information production and distribution in digital networked environments in various ways, some making faster and more news than ever before. Divergent rhythms of news work have been considered a critical factor that distinguishes hard and soft news. Thus an examination of how online journalists realize the change in this phenomenon will permit to probe the applicability of this analytical tool in light of current practice.

An ethnography of news production conducted in 2005 at *Clarín.com*, the largest online newspaper in Argentina and one of the largest in the Spanish-speaking world, is used to show

that a growing separation in the temporal patterns of hard and soft news production was tied to major differences in critical aspects of journalistic practice in which the common ground between hard and soft news work has been assumed to be significant. This finding challenges a dominant strain in the literature that emphasizes a blurring of the differences between hard and soft news. Because central elements of this study resonate with developments identified in other settings, it suggests a rethinking of some notions about the hard and soft news distinction.

Theoretical Considerations

Media scholars and practitioners have regularly made distinctions about the production processes of various types of news content, their effects on the resulting products, and the subsequent social and political consequences. The distinction between hard and soft news is one of the foremost examples of this analytical strategy. It has been approached from a number of traditions of inquiry, including social history of the press (Curran, Douglas & Whannel, 1980; Hughes, 1981; Ponce de Leon, 2002; Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1978), sociology of news production (Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1978; Turow, 1983), studies of discourse and narrative (Bird & Dardenne, 1988; Gamson, 2001; Marley, 2007; White, 1997), and political communication (Baum, 2003; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Patterson, 2000; Plasser, 2005).

Although scholars have characterized the distinction in various ways (Baum, 2007; Bennett, 2003; Carroll, 1985; Fishman, 1980; Patterson, 2000; Tuchman 1978), a common denominator of most research has been the notion that what distinguishes hard and soft news is found not in the essence of the reported events but in the social factors that shape news making. As early as 1940, Hughes argued that the “human-interest story [often used as a synonym of soft news] is not one because of an intrinsic property of the news, but (...) depends... upon a relation between the reporter and the news” (1981, p. 80). Moreover, Zelizer concluded that in the initial

waves of news production studies, “hard and soft news... were distinguishable not because they reflected inherent attributes of news but because they made scheduling more predictable and manageable” (2004, p. 66). This socially constructed character of the distinction helps to shed light on the contemporary dynamics of news making and how to make sense of them. This study focuses on two themes often addressed in accounts of hard and soft news: the importance of the temporal dimension and the existence of commonalities between the two kinds of news.

Scholars have asserted that the difference between hard and soft news is partly one of temporality (Hughes, 1981; Jamieson & Campbell, 1983; Schudson, 1986; Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Smith, 1990). According to Tuchman (1978), “the structuring of time [in the newsroom] influences the assessment of occurrences as news events” (p. 51). Thus, researchers have shown that a distinctive trait of hard news is newsmakers’ understanding that they must communicate about a particular event within the news cycle they are working on or, in Tuchman’s words, the “urgency of dissemination.” In contrast, “soft news stories need not be timely” (Tuchman 1978, p. 51) because journalists see them as open to communication in various news cycles without detriment to their newsworthiness. These temporal patterns are the constructions of actors: whether and how to treat an event as hard or soft news depends somewhat on how actors frame their coverage in relation to the temporal rhythms of their work practices. In his study of a local television station, Turow (1983) found that coverage of an event can move from hard to soft, or vice-versa, partly as a result of temporality shifts: “A few staffers noted that sometimes soft news could be ‘turned’ into hard news by ‘the handling,’ that is, by making it seem urgent” (p. 117).

A second theme of hard and soft news scholarship is the existence of a certain set of shared practices and principles that cut across both kinds of content. This theme emerges from drawing together four ways in which scholars have blurred the boundaries that separate hard and

soft news: asserting the political and cultural significance of soft news, examining the extent to which soft news programming conveys hard news content, exploring the importance of narrative configurations in hard and soft news alike, and studying how “marginal” forms of content production utilize symbolic and behavioral repertoires of both hard and soft news making.

Some scholars have questioned the notion that whereas hard news has serious political and cultural import, soft news has not much more than entertainment value (Curran et al., 1980; Hughes, 1981; Turow, 1983). To Daniels (1981), “we must understand the importance of human interest stories in shaping what we generally think of as ‘hard’... news” (p. xv). Thus, in a study of soft news in the British press, Curran et al. (1980) concluded that “its apparently diverse and apolitical human-interest content represents reality in a form that powerfully reinforces and complements the dominant political consensus articulated in its current-affairs coverage” (p. 316). A corollary of this line of work is the idea that despite the differences between hard and soft news, their dissemination shares certain kinds of significant consequences for society.

Political communication analysts have addressed a turn away from hard news and a trend towards a softening in the reporting of hard news (Bennett, 2003; Gans, 2003; Hamilton, 2004; Patterson, 2000; Sparks, 2000; Zaller, 2003). Triggered by these issues, scholars have tried to establish the extent to which soft news outlets convey public affairs content—what some assume is at the heart of hard news—to consumers presumably uninterested in it (Baum, 2003; Brewer & Cao, 2006; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Prior, 2002; Young & Tisinger, 2006). In a media environment marked by high level of choice of outlets and content (Prior, 2007), people not interested in public affairs stories can easily avoid them. But since certain types of public affairs content, such as military conflicts or electoral campaigns, lend themselves well to certain soft news coverage, consumers of these stories are exposed to this content. Thus, Baum (2002) has

argued that “due to selective political coverage by the entertainment-oriented, soft news media, many otherwise politically inattentive individuals are exposed to information about high-profile political issues... as an incidental by-product of seeking entertainment” (p. 91). This research leads to the idea that both soft and hard news programs can convey similar kinds of content.

Some narrative studies have also highlighted commonalities between hard and soft news. To Bird and Dardenne (1988), the distinction “has hindered us from seeing news as a unified body that exhibits clear themes and patterns that have little to do with important / interesting splits” (p. 69), and “blind[ed] us to the way narrative devices are used in all news writing” (p. 69). Thus, Gamson (2001) has shown how mainstream media organizations often construct sex scandal stories that appear to be typical soft news in a way that turns them into hard news items by underscoring institutional causes and consequences: “the narrative push toward institutions is one strategy for ‘hardening’ and lengthening... a ‘soft’... and lower status story” (p. 199).

Finally, scholars have also challenged a stark break between hard and soft news—and, by implication, generated the image of a common ground between them—by looking at shared traits not just between them, but also with the fringes of mainstream media, such as talk shows and tabloid publications (Bird, 1992; Deuze, 2005; Ehrlich, 1996; Gamson, 1994; Grindstaff, 2002; Spragens, 1995). Studies have shown how “fringe” actors resort to repertoires of hard and soft news production in their work practices, and scholars have often analyzed these practices with concepts developed in the study of traditional news production. Bird (1992) compared tabloid and mainstream news media and concluded that “the process of creating ‘stories’ is structurally very similar in both kinds of publications” (p. 97). Furthermore, Grindstaff (2002) found that “the production of daytime talk [shows] is also systematically organized behind the scenes much like the production of news” (p. 82). She also applied the hard and soft news distinction in this

context: “If producers consistently handle the same type of topic, they will find themselves occupying niches much like journalists who cover beats. At [research site] the main distinction is between light and heavy, similar to Tuchman’s distinction between soft and hard news” (p. 86).

Taken together, these four lines of research create the impression that the difference between hard and soft news rests against a background of commonalities. One way of framing this issue, formulated independently by two scholars, has been that of “differences of degree but not of kind.” Discussing hard and soft news programs in the context of political communication research, Baum (2002) stated that “clearly, at least in some instances, the difference between soft and hard news is one of degree rather than kind” (p. 92). And to Zelizer (2004), narrative analyses of hard and soft news “showed how all kinds of journalism were part of the same family and that the differences between them were differences of degree rather than kind” (p. 131).

This study brings together issues of temporality and commonality in a novel way by examining how an accentuation in temporal differences of hard and soft news work in one online newsroom were tied to the emergence of major differences in key elements of editorial practice assumed to be more common across both kinds of content. This had the consequence of turning the differences in the respective production routines from a matter of degree to one of kind.

Relying on a single case study to probe a generic analytical distinction requires both acknowledging local singularity and placing it within larger dynamics. Following ethnographies that show distinctive modes of information gathering and story authoring related to the context of news production (Bishara, 2006; Clausen, 2004; Hasty, 2006; Hughes, 2006; Stahlberg, 2006), the analysis will be attentive to relevant issues of local singularity. But it is also worth noticing dynamics of the contemporary journalism field identified in two recent streams of work that situate the present case study within somewhat more shared patterns of practice: studies of news

making in several countries have depicted phenomena convergent with those examined here (Baisnee & Marchetti, 2006; Garcia Aviles & Leon, 2004; Klinenberg, 2005; Reinemann, 2004; Rosenstiel, 2005; Sousa, 2006; Velthuis, 2006); and, comparative analyses have suggested a trend towards homogenization of news media systems and products (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006).

Methodology

The study draws from an ethnography of news production at *Clarín.com*. When the research took place in 2005, *Clarín.com* had an average daily traffic of over 400,000 unique visitors, about 50 full-time editorial staffers, and its newsroom operated mostly in an autonomous fashion from that its print counterpart, *Diario Clarín*—the country’s largest daily with an average weekly circulation above 400,000, an average Sunday circulation of over 800,000, and a 36% share of the national newspaper market (Instituto Verificador de Circulaciones, 2006). The online and print newspapers are part of Grupo Clarín, a conglomerate that is a leading player in all of Argentina’s media markets.

Clarín.com debuted in 1996. For its first few years of existence, it primarily reproduced its print counterpart’s content and production cycles. In 2001 it began publishing more news during the day, which generated growth in site usage. This led *Clarín.com* managers to gradually raise the frequency and volume of output. Monitoring usage changes, they realized that the peaks were during regular business hours—Monday to Friday, 9:00 am to 6:00 pm. To address a public that was believed to get the news at work, they launched a site redesign in May 2004 that was accompanied by an organizational restructuring. The homepage and the site’s content were divided into two parts, and the newsroom was reorganized in the two respective units: “Ultimo Momento” [Latest Moment], devoted to updated, breaking news coverage, and “Conexiones”

[Connections], aimed at creating attention-grabbing features that did not require urgent dissemination. This division of the site and organization of production followed the temporal dimension of the distinction between hard and soft news but greatly increased the difference in speed of both types of production. This provided a naturally occurring experiment into how alterations in temporal patterns can be tied to broader changes in hard and soft news making.

This study draws from a team ethnography (Buford & Patillo, 2000; Erickson & Stull, 1998; Fujisaka & Grayzel, 1978; Perlman, 1970). The members of the team, all proficient in Spanish, were the author—the project director—and three or four research assistants, depending on the project's period. The assistants were based in Buenos Aires, where *Clarín.com*'s offices are located. The director traveled to Buenos Aires repeatedly during the project and supervised the team via biweekly conference calls supplemented by electronic mail communication. Data collection combined observations and interviews, and the analysis mixed qualitative and quantitative methods. The director agreed with the general manager of *Clarín.com* at the time the study took place that the site would be identified in dissemination of research results and that informants would be given a choice about whether they wanted to be attributed to their quotes or not—hence, in what follows some people are identified with their real names and others are not.

Observations took place between April 2005 and June 2005 and were undertaken by three research assistants. During this period each assistant spent two, four-hour observation sessions per week, loosely following an observation guide developed before fieldwork began. This amounted to 85, four-hour sessions that yielded 200,000 words of field notes plus an array of sketches, photographs, and artifacts. In the initial sampling strategy, observations took place Monday through Friday between 9:00 am and 6:00 pm and focused on one newsroom employee for the entire session. When most employees had been observed at least once and the team had

reached a preliminary level of theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), subsequent sampling strategies included observations during early mornings, evenings, and weekends and simultaneous observations by the three assistants of different people in charge of key tasks.

Forty semi-structured interviews that addressed a list of topics developed at the end of the observation phase were conducted between July 2005 and December 2005. The director conducted fifteen interviews, and two research assistants the remaining twenty-five. Interviewees represented all hierarchical levels of newsroom full-time employees and all beats. The interviews each lasted an average of 45 minutes and were tape-recorded and transcribed in their entirety.

Qualitative analysis of the data began after the first month of observation. It proceeded concurrently with the remaining months of data collection and concluded in the spring of 2006. All researchers participated in the analysis, which unfolded in a grounded theory fashion (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and inductively elicited a series of major differences between the hard and soft news units. The validity of the analysis was ascertained in part through member checks and triangulations. Member checks included talks with preliminary findings given by the director in the online newsroom, which helped to probe the main points of the analysis, generate alternative explanations, and identify factual errors. Triangulation was pursued by method and data source (Denzin, 1979). Methodological triangulation was possible by contrasting material gathered from observations and interviews. Triangulation by data source was achieved by: (a) having different people participate in data collection; (b) observing tasks undertaken on different days and times; and, (c) interviewing actors from multiple units and hierarchical levels.

Quantitative analyses of the field notes were performed to more precisely determine the frequency and magnitude (Lofland & Lofland, 1984) of some critical differences in four of the variables—defined in the next section—elicited through the qualitative analysis. The team

developed a coding instrument, and two of the research assistants undertook the analysis. Using a qualitative analysis software program, the assistants read the field notes and recorded every instance of a work practice that represented relevant options in one or more of the variables. Both assistants analyzed ten percent of the data with levels of intercoder agreement that ranged from 84% to 100% and averaged 93%, and then each analyzed the remaining half. Doubts that arose during the analysis were communicated to the director and were resolved consensually.

Findings

Material and Social Environments

At the time fieldwork took place, the online newsroom occupied most of the fifth floor of a building located in the working class neighborhood of San Cristóbal. The newsroom had a typical configuration of open spaces for the reporters and section editors and a few offices for the senior editors. Visitors entered the newsroom through a reception area; the *Ultimo Momento* unit was located to the right and the *Conexiones* one to the left. A hallway that was approximately twenty feet long separated these two units, but the distance that separated their respective material and social environments was far more significant.

The *Ultimo Momento* sector was materially dense and socially intense. People worked in a relatively small space that housed three rows of desks; each row had six workstations that were quite close to each other. Some desks had multiple screens, and in the sector's periphery, there were several television sets that were nearly always on. The space was cramped and tight but relationally open: people moved around constantly and often shared desks and machines. One person was on call between midnight and 5:00 am, but most personnel arrived in the morning. During the week, the sector was in full swing by 10:00 am, with about fifteen people working frantically. The number of personnel started to decrease around 6:00 pm, although a sizeable

group remained in the newsroom until midnight. Staffing levels were lower on the weekend, mirroring audience demand. This was a high energy work setting during peak hours; most people simultaneously focused on their workstations while talking—and many times, shouting—to each other. The mix of talking and shouting, the sound from the television sets, and the music coming from the speakers of some computers created a loud and amorphous sound that enveloped the space. There was a climate of tension and stress but also fun in this sector.

In contrast, the Conexiones sector was materially sparser and socially more relaxed. Most of its personnel worked in a more spacious subdivision that had two rows of workstations that were at a greater distance from each other than those at *Ultimo Momento*. A few of their peers worked in a contiguous subdivision that had a similar layout. In the entire sector there were few additional machines and only one television set that was rarely on. The space was more private than at *Ultimo Momento*, and people tended to remain at their desks and had a proprietary stance towards their machines. During weekdays, staffers arrived at midmorning, few were present after 6:00 pm, and proportionally fewer workstations were occupied than at *Ultimo Momento*. Even at peak hours, it was quite calm and silent; people worked individually at their desks, listening to music through headphones, and talking to each other far less often than their *Ultimo Momento* counterparts. A relatively relaxed and subdued work atmosphere prevailed in this sector.

Editorial Work Practices

The differences between the material and social environments of the two units were tied to differences in key aspects of their work practices. The following vignettes provide a brief, opening glimpse of the editorial routines of *Ultimo Momento* and *Conexiones*, respectively.

Editor tells reporter by instant messenger (IM) to update a story about [an airline company] pilots who will go on strike tomorrow. Reporter gets the existing *Clarín.com*

story from the homepage, copies and pastes it into a Word file.... Then he gets two more stories from the wires. He combines them and writes a few sentences to unify their texts, then writes the lead and the headline, and sends them by IM to the editor. While he waits for the editor's response, he reads the existing *Clarín.com* story again and looks for additional wires. A few minutes later, the editor sends a new headline and lead by IM, and the reporter changes them in his Word file. Then, he goes to the publishing system, looks for the existing story, and copies and pastes the new headline, lead, and body of the text. One minute later the editor sends him the following message by IM: "They just cancelled the strike. F...!" Reporter curses by IM, too, and asks, "What do we do now? Do I change this and write the text again?" Editor replies: "Just put that they cancelled tomorrow's strike." Reporter then modifies the headline and the lead in the publishing system. Then he goes back to the Word file and makes changes in only two paragraphs, mostly having to do with verb tense. This is now an old story, and the news is that the strike has been cancelled. The rest of the text remains the same. (Field note, June 5, 2005)

10:30: Reporter #1 is writing a story on umbilical cord blood banks. She has written about four pages already in a Word file. She types a new paragraph, stops, reads what she's written, and continues writing. She had conducted interviews at a pediatric hospital the previous day and had begun writing the story this morning at 9:00. (...) 11:00: She continues reading the text, adding information and making changes. (...) 11:35: She gives the story to reporter #2 for feedback. A physician whom she had interviewed calls to double-check the accuracy of technical information. "I'll publish it at 1:00 pm, so I'm sending it to you right away by email." She then approaches the graphic designer to see if

the story illustration is ready and sends the story to her editor. Then she does a Google search for “fecunditas,” “biocell,” and “bio cell.” (...) Reporter #2 gives her feedback and they discuss options for the headline. (...) Physician calls back to suggest changes, and they talk about them. When the conversation is over, she inputs some of the changes and sends the revised version to reporter #2 by IM. They work together on the final version. (Field note, June 13, 2005)

These vignettes illustrate major differences in four critical dimensions of editorial work at Ultimo Momento and Conexiones: the temporal patterns of content production, the provenance of information, the parts of the story worked on by staffers, and the tools used to communicate about work-in-progress. These four dimensions are examined in the following subsections.

Temporal patterns of content production. Journalists at Ultimo Momento and Conexiones worked at different speeds. On the one hand, Ultimo Momento personnel authored most stories in less than two hours, and each staffer was expected to produce six or seven new stories every eight-hour working day and update any of those stories when new relevant information surfaced, as illustrated in the vignette above. On the other hand, Conexiones journalists authored most stories in more than two hours, and each staffer was expected to produce two or three new stories every week. These stories were rarely updated. The research team identified each recorded instance in the field notes that provided information about the time it took for a story to get authored, from assignment to publication. Whereas 96% of the stories at Ultimo Momento were produced in less than two hours, only 6% of the Conexiones articles were authored so rapidly, which is a significant ($p < .01$) difference (Table 1). Even more striking, 85% of Ultimo Momento stories took less than thirty minutes to author, and 79% of Conexiones stories took more than one workday.

The differences in speed shaped the role and experience of time in editorial work. Ultimo Momento journalists believed that the public wanted constantly updated online news and would migrate to competitors' sites if they did not find complete and updated coverage on *Clarín.com*. Thus, they aimed to publish stories shortly after events took place, and also considered most stories to have a brief life cycle, reaching "maturity" in two hours and "retirement age" in four. All of this meant pressure to produce each story quickly, to update it as soon as new relevant events occurred, and to retire it—move it down on the homepage—if no major changes had taken place in three to four hours since its last update. An Ultimo Momento writer stated that "I look for what's new. ... It's what's happening now. ... It has this plus that you are not telling the news after it took place but at the same time the event is taking place (...). To the person who's leaving their office it won't matter if there was a train or bus accident two hours earlier; what matters to them is if they'll be able to go on the street and travel" (Personal communication, July 5, 2005). Facundo Quiroga, Ultimo Momento's sports editor, said that "here I have the chance to rotate, change, create a journalism of vertigo, movement, and give [the public the equivalent of] 15 newspapers at the same time. ... If you demonstrate cleverness, movement, and change, you gain the respect and the trust of the [users]" (Personal communication, December 15, 2005).

Timeliness did not shape newsworthiness or work schedules at Conexiones, and the stories were usually seen as largely "a-temporal." Editors and reporters believed that their public wanted appealing stories, regardless of their ties to that day's occurrences. Moreover, once a story was ready, it was not uncommon to change its planned publication date, depending on the story inventory. As the relevant vignette above exemplifies, all of this contributed to create an environment in which a staffer had time to do research, interview sources, and write a long story. Thus, someone who could produce a story in four hours was "very expeditious" (Conexiones

writer, personal communication, August 12, 2005), an article that took only two hours was “published in record time” (former Conexiones staffer, personal communication, October 13, 2005), and “what [Ultimo Momento staffers] can do in half an hour or 15 minutes, takes us a whole day” (Former Conexiones editor, personal communication, December 21, 2005).

The perceived temporal pressures and their corresponding editorial routines contributed to the generation of significant levels of stress at Ultimo Momento. To staffer Daniel Accornero, his job “wears you out mentally. ... At the print paper the only stressful moment is when you have to publish, which is once or twice a day. ... Here it is constant. Something happens and it has to be published as soon as possible” (Personal communication, September 12, 2005). An editor commented that it was difficult to slow down: “You are never well, because when there is nothing going on, you want something to happen” (Personal communication, December 15, 2005). In contrast, Conexiones personnel experienced a much higher degree of internal locus of temporal control—they had more control over when to author and publish—which contributed to lower levels of stress. For instance, a Conexiones writer said: “I would never like to work at Ultimo Momento. ... I don’t like to rush. ... They can’t move from their seats [during their shift], and we can. I manage my own time” (Personal communication, October 20, 2005).

Provenance of story information. There were major differences in the provenance of story information at Ultimo Momento and Conexiones. Every field note that indicated that a piece of information was used for a story was analyzed for whether it came from a source, other media or *Diario Clarín*. Most information came from other media in both cases, but Ultimo Momento personnel used sources more than six times less often than their Conexiones peers—a significant 21% ($p < .01$) less (Table 1).

The uses of the information pool were also different in both sections. As the vignette on

the airline pilot strike illustrates, *Ultimo Momento* staffers relied mostly on wire copy and added content gathered through constant monitoring of television, radio, and online outlets. There was a position in the unit whose sole function was to comb all of these content suppliers and send links with possible stories by IM to the other staffers who also checked them repeatedly. This content was used to come up with ideas about what stories to write and how to do it. Sources were contacted sporadically and to confirm uncertain or contradictory evidence rather than to gather new data or generate a new angle. These information-gathering routines were tied to the temporal patterns described above: the coupling of high speed of publishing and updating with the high volume of stories left little time for the typical sourcing work of traditional journalism.

In contrast, as the second vignette shows, *Conexiones* staffers followed conventional sourcing practices. They had to have at least three sources per story, which were seen as key suppliers of new information in addition to having a confirmatory role. For other media, they mostly used online search engines to find out additional data about a specific issue rather than to collect copy or come up with story ideas. These other media were accessed based on authoring needs and not on a constant basis. *Ultimo Momento*'s Maria Arce summed things up by saying that in her unit "you always depend on a third party, because we are not on the street but [in the newsroom]. And the information comes to you from the television, the radio, the wires, the Web, the phone, but always from a third party." At *Conexiones*, "I generate the information. . . . I go out and search on a topic that I came up with" (Personal communication, November 2, 2005).

Because research to date has not identified major differences in how much and to what effect sources and other media are used in hard and soft news work—if they exist, they should have surfaced, given the centrality of sourcing in journalism—the differences reported in this subsection signal an erosion of the commonality between both types of news work.

Parts of the story. There was also variation in what parts of the story were the subject of work in both units. Whereas Ultimo Momento staffers focused mostly on the elements featured on the homepage, their Conexiones peers concentrated largely on the story's main corpus, which was accessed by clicking either on the homepage or on a referring link. The research team counted each mention in the field notes of whether a journalist was working on the headline, the lead, the supra head, or the main corpus of the story. The contrast is remarkable: when Ultimo Momento staffers worked on a story, they dealt with homepage material almost 9 out of 10 times, in contrast to slightly over 3 out of 10 for their Conexiones colleagues, a significant ($p < .01$) difference (Table 1).

Ultimo Momento personnel believed that the headline and the lead were the main vehicles to convey a distinct editorial message and make a difference vis-à-vis their competitors, in addition to keeping their coverage fresh and complete. Moreover, an important proportion of the work in the corpus of the story had to do with updates—changing content after new events had taken place without altering the rest. The focus of work in the airline pilots' story was on the headline and the lead, which were also the main foci of change when the strike was averted. The corpus of the story “stitched” previous stories on this subject with wire copy, and the main modification after the strike cancellation had to do with verb tense. In contrast, Conexiones staffers, like counterparts in traditional media, devoted most of their time to the main corpus of the story, as the umbilical cord vignette shows. They spent a smaller but important part of their effort on the headline, but for them, it was more important to find a phrase that would entice the site users to view the main corpus of the story than to condense the main editorial message into a few words. These differences were tied partly to different conceptions of the public: the Ultimo Momento personnel saw their user as a generalist who wanted to glance at an extensive spectrum

of headlines and leads, whereas the Conexiones staffers targeted a more specialized user whose aim was to read a well-produced story. For example, an Ultimo Momento editor said, “The reader of online news looks mostly at the headline and lead, and a much smaller percentage clicks on the story ... which is why [the headline and lead] are so important to us” (Personal communication, August 2, 2005). In contrast, Conexiones’ Mariana Nisebe said that e-mail exchanges with her “readers” convinced her that they read her pieces: “[They] follow my stories because they write to me about previous ones” (Personal communication, October 11, 2005).

The existing literature has not singled out major variance in the elements of stories that receive most attention in hard and soft production, respectively. There is also no reason to believe that hard news producers devote so little effort to the main corpus of the story or that the uses of the headlines differ as much as was identified above. This implies that the depiction above also suggest a decrease in common ground between hard and soft news in this setting.

Newsroom communication tools. As the airline pilots and the umbilical cord vignettes illustrate, exchanges among workers often took place using IM. This tool was utilized for editorial purposes—to exchange story content, links, and files—but also for social ones—to chat about noneditorial issues. Researchers counted each mention in the field notes of whether a journalist was using IM editorially, socially, or in a fashion that did not permit the analyst to distinguish between the two options. Ultimo Momento staffers used IM editorially significantly ($p < .01$) more often than their Conexiones peers, 70% versus 41% of the time, respectively (Table 1). Even if one assumes that all of the unclassifiable instances of IM use by Conexiones staffers were editorial uses—thus increasing the proportion of editorial IM use by those staffers to 56%, the sum of 41% and 15%—the contrast with the 70% editorial IM use by Ultimo Momento staffers is still significant ($p < .01$).

Within the editorial uses of IM, Ultimo Momento staffers mixed IM with oral exchanges more frequently than Conexiones journalists. This mixing at Ultimo Momento was so prevalent that at the beginning of fieldwork, the research assistants could not understand the meaning of many oral exchanges until it was determined that utterances were in reply to statements that had been made seconds earlier via IM. In addition to the convenience that IM affords to all kinds of journalism, Ultimo Momento personnel valued highly that it enables fast information sharing. As one writer in this unit put it: “[IM] is key, precisely because it brings a text simultaneously to five people without having them hover around a single computer or even to move around, which is critical to us because it means time savings” (Personal communication, July 28, 2005).

Again, there is no indication in the literature that journalists who create hard and soft news use tools to communicate with coworkers differently. This also reinforces the notion that at least some commonalities between the two types of news diminished in the case studied.

Actors' Representations of Their Differences

The members of the two units were well aware of the differences between them. They mentioned them in observations and interviews and in relation to the author's rendition of their situation during and after talks where preliminary findings were given in the newsroom. Some focused on content differences: “I always make a joke with the Conexiones people because to me, both parties have a serious problem: we have the topics and they have the time to deal with these topics” (Ultimo Momento staffer, personal communication, July 28, 2005). Others linked content to practice differences. For example, “There isn't much possibility of exchange because [Conexiones] is much softer [news] and Ultimo Momento is much harder [news]” (Clarín.com writer, personal communication, August 12, 2005); and, “There is little professional relationship [between the two units] because the topics are totally different” (Ultimo Momento staffer,

personal communication, October 18, 2005). Still others emphasized the practices: “[Ultimo Momento] has routines [*mecánica de laburo*] very different from the rest” (Clarín.com editor, personal communication, December 15, 2005); “There are two different kinds of journalism” (Ultimo Momento writer, personal communication, October 27, 2005); and “[The routines] are completely independent. We don’t send them a news budget nor they send one to us” (Former Conexiones staffer, personal communication, December 21, 2005).

These perceptions led to a situation in which most workers were quite comfortable with the two units remaining operationally separate. They led also to the emergence of different cultures that sometimes had an “us and them” flavor. As one Ultimo Momento staffer put it:

There is a difference in the work, but also a jealousy matter. ... [Some Ultimo Momento workers] go to play soccer with [some Conexiones staffers], but each one has an image of the other that it is not accurate. They might have their problems as much as we have ours, but... they see that we are a bunch of nervous wrecks [*histéricos*], highly anxious [*neurotizados*] by the immediacy of news, and we see that they are slugs [*un pachorraje*], that they make news whenever it pleases them. This is exaggerating, but these kinds of [opinions] exist. (Personal communication, August 2, 2005)

Discussion

This study of *Clarín.com* elicited major differences between the two units devoted to hard and soft news production: their respective work practices exhibited greater temporal differences and an erosion of commonality in such dimensions as the provenance of information, the parts of the story worked on, and the uses of newsroom communication tools. This combination of an accentuation of differences and a weakening of commonalities suggests the emergence of two kinds of journalism rather than different degrees of the same kind. This conclusion invites to

revisit some notions about the distinction between hard and soft news addressed above. To begin, the analysis underscores the continued value of conceptualizing the distinction as a construction of actors—instead of reflecting content characteristics of the events being reported—in which temporality plays a central role. Along these lines, the acceleration of breaking news coverage and the widening with the temporal rhythms of other kinds of editorial work might lead to greater dissimilarity in modes of journalistic practice. Moreover, this study also suggests potential divergence in the types of narrative work for hard and soft news undertaken in new media settings in which the temporal gap between their respective production processes reaches a certain threshold. In addition, although *Clarín.com* is a leading mainstream media site, the variance between hard and soft news production might also take place in “fringe” sites that mix types of content in their editorial offer which require very different production processes.

The notion that “media innovation” results from “interrelated mutations in technology, in communication, and in organization... much like a triangle in which the function and meaning of any one side can be understood only in connection to the other two” (Boczkowski, 2004, p. 11), helps to tease out material, editorial and work dynamics shaping divergent hard and soft news at *Clarín.com* and that might also be at play elsewhere. Restructuring the newsroom in two units with differing strategic drivers provided a fertile organizational terrain for the emergence of differences in kinds of news production. But these patterns would not have unfolded without technological and editorial factors such as the tools that enable fast and multilateral information exchange in the newsroom, the low cost of news production and dissemination afforded by the Web, and the evolution of differing journalistic criteria and practices of information gathering and story authoring. This combination of factors partly accounts for the emergence of two kinds of journalism at *Clarín.com*. The presence of related factors in contemporary media—such as the

acceleration of production cycles for breaking news, the rise in the volume and diversity of features content, the availability of sophisticated newsroom tools, the decrease in conventional sourcing and increase in reliance on “third party” content suppliers, and the exploration of novel formats—suggests that the conclusions of this study might be relevant in other settings.

It is also important to notice some distinctive traits of *Clarín.com* that might restrict the broader heuristic value of these conclusions. First, *Clarín.com* had a higher level of resources than other online news sites, which might contribute to developing a robust soft news production unit and thus multiple kinds of journalisms. Second, it operated in a more competitive environment than other news organizations, which might intensify the hard news production patterns observed. Third, because the kind of hard news production described here conflicts with traditional journalism’s organizational routines and professional values, it could be that sites more integrated with traditional counterparts might enact less differentiated hard and soft news making. Fourth, *Clarín.com* conceived a significant portion of its public as highly interested in up-to-the-minute and comprehensive hard news coverage; other media that represent their publics differently might engage in less divergent hard and soft news practices. Further research is needed to ascertain whether any of these traits have the hypothesized effects.

The coexistence of divergent kinds of journalism also point to the changing character of editorial work. Although *Ultimo Momento* routines run against canonical notions about sourcing and authoring, they are editorial work in practice and in their consequences, thus signaling the need to broaden our definitions of what counts as journalism in some contemporary settings. To begin, the practices of *Ultimo Momento* personnel influenced story selection and framing, two critical elements of the editorial enterprise. These practices were also consequential for their peers, their public, and the media landscape. Interviews with journalists working for a number of

print and online newsrooms in Argentina have revealed that their work was affected by stories published in *Ultimo Momento* (Boczkowski, 2008a). In addition, a complementary ethnography of news consumption in Argentina has shown that users saw stories published in *Ultimo Momento* as legitimate news, even when they realized that competitors often carried comparable content (Boczkowski, 2008b). Finally, a study of online and print newspapers in Argentina concluded that key features of *Ultimo Momento*'s routine such as speed, high volume, and commoditized content have led to increase news homogeneity across the larger media landscape (Boczkowski & de Santos, 2007)—a trend which resonates with findings from a recent study indicating that “the new paradox of [American] journalism is more outlets covering fewer stories” (Journalism.org, 2006).

This last issue points to the implications of this study for understanding potential changes in one of media's major social roles. In liberal democracies, a news organization plays a critical role in controlling other powerful actors through its ability to gather information about possible wrongdoing by these actors—information that by its very nature requires considerable effort to obtain—and communicate it to the general public. Analysts have argued that carrying out this role has been one of media's most significant contributions to the wave of democratization that has marked Latin America since the 1980s, against a history of less aggressive information gathering (Alves, 2005; de Albuquerque, 2005; Hughes, 2006; Lawson, 2002; Waisbord, 2000). The kind of production regime represented by *Ultimo Momento*, if shared across competitors and sustained over time, could hinder media's ability to play this role: the more journalists relied on commoditized information, the less they could maintain their position as one of society's watchdogs. The potential political consequences of this scenario are worrisome in general, and for emerging democracies, such as those of most Latin American nations, in particular.

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Table 1

Summary of Main Quantitative Differences in Editorial Work Practices.

	Ultimo Momento	Conexiones
Temporal patterns of content production: Amount of time utilized for story completion		
Less than 2 hours*	96% (118)	6% (3)
More than 2 hours*	4% (5)	94% (49)
Total	100% (123)	100% (52)
Provenance of story information: Origin of the content used for authoring tasks		
Sources*	4% (17)	25% (49)
Other media*	88% (340)	70% (138)
Diario Clarín	8% (30)	6% (11)
Total	100% (387)	101% (198)
Parts of the story: Elements of the story that journalists work on during the production process		
Headline, lead and supra-head*	88% (365)	32% (32)
Main corpus of the story*	12% (49)	68% (70)
Total	100% (414)	100% (102)
Newsroom communication tools: Different ways journalists utilize Instant Messenger		
Editorial use*	70% (281)	41% (46)
Social use*	28% (114)	44% (50)
Analyst cannot distinguish	2% (7)	15% (17)
Total	100% (402)	101% (113)

Note. Rows marked with an asterisk (*) indicate significant ($p < .01$) differences between the two units.