

PRODUCTION VS. RECEPTION

The viability of public journalism in local TV Newscasts

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ABSTRACT TV newscasts are the product of information with major impact on contemporary society. The objective of this study is to investigate the relationships between production and audience through a quantitative and qualitative comparative analysis, especially observing the communicatory strategies used by newscasters to engage their viewers, and how diverse, socially active individuals are represented in local TV newscasts in the State of Rio de Janeiro. The study also reflects upon the viability of professional practices more committed to social transformation, offering information that can contribute to improving the public's life quality, consolidating journalism as a source of knowledge. The study is supported by journalistic theories, cultural studies and social discourse semiology.

KEY-WORDS Cultural studies, social discourse, theories of journalism.

1 ■ INTRODUCTION

New technologies have modified the relationship between newscast production and reception, but we cannot presume that they alone contribute to the democratization of society and of knowledge. The digital revolution is dissolving the borders between the telephone, television and the computer (the Internet); and this technological convergence has promoted the incorporation of different languages in the production of audiovisual products, contributing to a reflection upon the diversity and multiplication of present discursive forms and introducing significant changes in the time and velocity of production, storage, distribution and consumption of televisual information.

Text-image association is the principal characteristic of televisional narrative; the simple objective messages promote ample interaction with the viewers. However, the major part of public broadcasters' programming is made up of debates, round tables, interviews, talk shows and programs anchored by TV newscasters. The maxim "a picture is worth a thousand words" is rather questionable; although images have greater descriptive force, words qualify actions or specific sequences of footage. Therefore, one notes a strong mark of orality, originating from radio, which served as a reference for the first TV programs. Their discursive forms are founded on dialog, which originated in ancient Greece, principally from the Socratic Method, suggesting that truth is constructed between individuals in the process of dialogical communication. As Machado¹ explains, narratives mediated by television give strategic importance to the dialog and participation of the viewer in its pronouncements while directing and limiting the participation of the audience, such as in debates between candidates for State Governor and/or for President of the Republic of Brazil. The public participates in the processes of communication, but generally in a quite asymmetrical relationship.

In a study on the contributions of Buber and Freire to the development of dialogical theories², Lima assumes that communication can be understood as the dialog necessary for giving meaning to and for naming the world, an instrument essential for promoting liberation in human relationships marked by domination. However, there still is a lack of clarity over the use and understanding of testimony as a form of public dialog and the applicability of dialog on an institutional level. It will be of interest to us to attempt to progress in this debate, reflecting upon one specific aspect of testimony in the narratives of local news telecasts: the use and value of depositions and the meanings produced by them. This is also Lima's proposal³ when he states that the manner of testifying varies depending upon the historical conditions, but that testimony is potentially a constituent element of revolutionary action.

First, we identify the ways in which audience references and invitations to participate in the narrative are constructed, and how the public is or is not represented or inserted in the enunciative strategies and production of this specific type of telecast. One of the problems with analyses of news telecasts is that they restrict themselves to criticism of content. However, the audience makes different interpretations when it watches a newscast. Understanding how a newscast produces meanings is one way of investigating how this type of narrative is structured. Not all socially active individuals involved in an event are represented – only those who could be filmed by one or

more teams of reporters and cameramen, or “heard” by producers in editorial departments, generally by means of phone calls. The event is always mediated by the interventions of the newscasters. Distinct voices and diverse sources of audiovisual material (such as charts and graphs) are used and they relate specific ways of seeing a social fact. For this reason, newscasts are not made up of singular discourses; news is narrated in various versions and interpreted in distinct manners.

Beginning with the study of newscasts’ discursive strategies to create empathy and ties with the audience, we will proceed to question the viability of public journalism on TV and to identify its characteristics. Public journalism is still not a specialty in Brazil and there is inadequate comprehension of this concept, associated with broadcasters or with services offered by the Brazilian federal, state and municipal governments. In summary, it is the practice of a professional exercise in the construction and distribution of information capable of making changes in the life quality of diverse social groups; it is more committed to social, economic and human advances, not profiting only from the misfortunes of day-to-day life. Therefore, public journalism should furnish society with instruction and procedures regarding everyone’s social responsibility in the attainment of methods for solving the problems represented by the events and their consequences.

2 ■ PUBLIC INTEREST AND PUBLIC OPINION

Informing society about relevant facts is the main point of journalistic activity. It presupposes respect for the public interest, that is, a commitment to divulging that which serves the common good and general welfare, or that which asserts itself as a collective necessity. Recognizing and divulging a fact of public interest is the journalist’s task. However, it is not fitting for the journalist, solely and exclusively, to define what is of public interest. An audience relatively unaccustomed to politics, with little time for reading, interested in a simple, objective approach to daily life and always seeking novelty and the unusual, is presupposed. This conception of an inexistent sole viewer is relatively abstract, derived from the subjective concepts of those who created it. However, most newscast products are directed precisely towards such an individual. Furthermore, journalistic content has suffered when its justification has been to serve the audience.

As such, in its entirety, journalism is no longer utilized as a form of getting to know regional realities in Brazil and in the world. It is clear that the relationships of communication companies with public

and private power centers, as well as the production conditions and financial resources available for investment in more elaborate news reports, limit changes in these activities. We cannot comprehend journalism as a philanthropic activity. News is a product; however, there is the possibility of working harder on journalistic content and improving it, guaranteeing profits, yet with more contextually oriented news. As Fairclough⁴ explains, the discursive practice can contribute to reproducing or transforming society. Journalistic discourses represent and constitute the public space. In it, individuals discuss ideas, gain representation and have their virtues recognized. Furthermore, the public sphere is the starting point for organization that allows people to unite politically. As such, based on the thinking of Habermas⁵, the term *public journalism* would be justified by the definition of a model of journalism that would allow individuals to participate, meeting in a public place exposed to the media, presumably open to discussing society, seeking representation and learning ways of exercising their citizenship rights. However, according to Habermas, public opinion is, in fact, a fiction, because it is subordinated to the exercise of social power and political domination; this researcher suggests that an empirical verification of public opinion, in the comparative sense, is today the most trustworthy way of arriving at secure, comparable assertions regarding the value of society's participation in a communication process.

The media act not only as the observers of an event, but also as active participants; this involves a public space in which interactions of diverse classes occur between various social actors that are more or less organized. In this context, TV and newscasts serve as tribunals and arbitrators of the access to social and political existence. At the same time as the media denounce, they have no absolute power or control over civil society, which also transforms itself, generating new behaviors and claims. In fact, television and newscasts are fundamental instruments for the broadening or limiting of public interests and expression. Even recognizing that many of the most important dimensions of contemporary politics are shown on television, TV also promotes knowledge of the social reality.

3 ■ PANORAMA OF PERFORMANCE IN POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMS

In media discourses as well as in network programming, news telecasts occupy strategic positions, sell credibility and attract investments.

In addition, they promote a collective daily experience of the nation. Representing social events, they create the social reality and intervene in the expression of national identity and in the relations between politics and society. As such, in this field of investigation, it is more interesting to perceive how these discourses are constructed and structured, and how they produce studies, since we consider discourses, including journalistic narratives, to be communication processes and social practices.

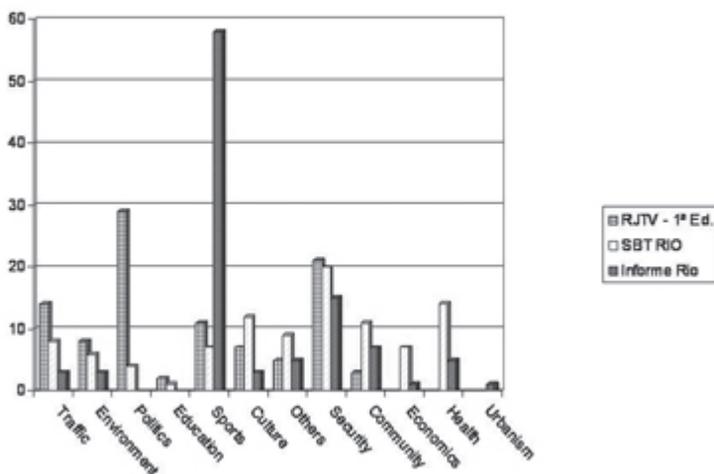
For example, local “lunchtime” newscasts follow editorial lines that permit divulging news reports that cover everything from domestic finances to a hole in the road in a certain neighborhood. These topics interest the target-public of these programs: homemakers, housekeepers, retired persons and children. The six o’clock newscasts follow a different editorial line, for they serve a different group of viewers. However, what are the parameters that orient journalists in their conception of the viewing audience of these newscasts? Vizeu⁶ establishes the thesis of the presumed audience and defends professionals that preconceive the profile of their public and seek to reach it through a series of discursive resources. He points out that, as a primary interpreter of reality, the journalist transmits a set of knowledge, converts the facts of world events into news, and informs his audience of relevant happenings, “but does not control the diversity of meanings that these broadcasts and knowledge acquire on the part of his interlocutors”. The professional culture, the organization of work and the rules of language influence the production of journalistic pronouncements. According to Maria José Sanches⁷, editor of *RJTV First Edition* (TV newscast in Rio de Janeiro), on the Rede Globo TV network, “the local TV newscast is an open channel between the public and government, a space for expressing problems and trying to get a more rapid response from the authorities ... we are merely a connecting channel”. Meanwhile, to Rafael Casé⁸, editor of the *SBT Rio* newscast, on the SBT TV network, journalists are not merely spokesmen for the people and thus should not invest in populist newscasts; “the newscast has to make people aware of the situation so that they can pressure the authorities through their own channels for complaint, whether by voting, popular demonstrations or direct grievances. Thinking that newscasts can solve everything is a historically paternalistic view, which is great for the professional’s ego, but it gives people a false impression of power, which the journalist does not have”. Penha Pinheiro⁹, head of reporting for *Informe Rio*, on the Rede Record TV network, points out that “the local newscast’s function is to give an impartial summary of the main events that occurred in the state, denouncing and demanding a position by public authorities”.

The contact that society has with journalists during the production of newscasts, however, is practically inexistent. During two months (between early May and late July 2006), one of the authors observed the relationship between production and audience, working as the editor of two Rede Globo TV network newscasts. The TV newscast presents itself as a public service to society and the audience is considered a protagonist of the daily stories in the construction of the narrative of all the news items, but rarely has any participation in elaborating the issues and choosing the interviewees. The producers are fed information from various press aides and public relations departments, especially those of municipal and state governments, in order to verify, question, or promote a public action, in response to a certain enunciated conflict, which is always divulged at the end of the news report, increasing the authority of the official spokesperson. Even the public's questions, recorded for answering by specialists in a certain news edition, are oriented by the producers. Nevertheless, further on we will see that the statements of representatives of public authorities are quantitatively less significant. Small interactions exist by way of virtual chat sessions and e-mails restricted to that part of society that has access to the web. TV viewers can use the phone to request a TV station's support to denounce a problem in a certain community, but these solicitations are not always acted upon, mainly because of production conditions – lack of a team, transportation or time for production and edition of the newscast. As with any other communication product or process, newscasts need to interact with their audience, and in the absence of popular participation, the selection of events and the composition of pronouncements are made based on the journalists' individual judgments regarding their target-public and its profile. As such, news professionals and TV broadcasting companies retain the power to organize daily social life; and newscasts are established as mediators and regulatory instruments of public experience.

In order to better understand the relationship between production and audience, we developed a quantitative and qualitative analysis of a few newscasts, inspired by the methodology developed for the critical viewing of news programs which is presented in the book *A Linguagem do Telejornal*¹⁰ (The Language of the TV Newscast) and is made up of ten categories and eleven principles of enunciation that assist in understanding the narrative structure of this type of journalism and in the critical viewing of newscasts. We analyzed how representatives of various communities appear in newscasts, seeking to identify the way in which producers relate to their audiences, not only through the characters of the

stories reported on the screen, but also as active participants in the daily social life created by TV. The following local TV news programs that are on the air in the same time slot were chosen as study subjects among the three stations that dedicate the most time to journalism and local news in their weekly programming: *RJTV First Edition* (Rede Globo network), *Informe Rio* (Rede Record network) and *SBT Rio* (SBT network). In order to facilitate observation of the content and structure of each one of these TV newscasts, we chose to record 48 sequential editions from September 15 to October 4, 2006. 1,410 minutes were recorded, distributed as follows: 15 editions of *Informe Rio* (600 minutes), 15 of *SBT Rio* (450 minutes), and 18 editions of *RJTV First Edition* (360 minutes), the only one on the air on Saturday. It is worth emphasizing that the date chosen for beginning the recording coincided with the first day that free electoral propaganda was presented. This fact is of utmost importance, for it should be precisely during the election campaign period that the public could gain more space in the media with its complaints and doubts. Although in some cases this can be observed, there are situations in which these spaces simply do not exist. Initially, we observed the structure and profile of each one of these news programs. It was possible to perceive the relative importance of each editorial staff in these newscasts, as can be observed in the comparative graph below:

Next, we conducted a qualitative analysis. We investigated all of the editions to identify the various ways in which the newscasts sought to



approach their audiences, whether through discursive verbal and non-verbal (looks and gestures) strategies, or through the reporter's presence in different communities. By studying the testimonials, it was also possible to observe in which situations the local community appeared in newscasts and how it was represented.

4 ■ ENUNCIATIVE STRATEGIES

We noticed that local newscasts, in the attempt to obtain their audiences' sympathy, offered themselves as allies of the public in the defense of its rights and interests. They presented themselves as "trustworthy" mediators and guardians, dedicated to effectively contributing to the improvement of the public's life quality, and as a symbolic reference point in face of the urban chaos and problems of various communities. In developing this study, we also observed that newscasts fulfill five distinct yet complementary functions:

To inform – The main goal of the newscast is to inform. As such, it seeks to provide its audience with information that is useful for the audience's daily life and to offer a summary of the day's events.

To orient – Many times, the newscast orients the public regarding issues that affect the domestic budget, such as health, education and housing. Some news reports are constructed in a didactic manner.

To mediate – We have already highlighted the newscast's role as a mediator between society and public/private authorities. The stance adopted by the newscast as a public ally, denouncing community problems and demanding solutions on the part of public entities, is clearly perceived.

To provide public service – When televising employment opportunities, the newscast takes on the role of a public service. Offering tips on job hunting, on obtaining quality education, on watching spectacles and films, or even on receiving medical guidance are some of the constant functions of local newscast discourses.

To encourage citizenship – newscasts seek to promote social action, volunteering and the exercising of citizenship rights, especially through special series and news reports.

We verified that local newscasts sought to give more space to community issues, tending to the demands for the exercising of citizenship rights and social promotion. However, how can real community demands be satisfied without damaging the interests of businesses? One way to resolve this impasse is to conduct interviews. Depending

on the newscast, most of the time interviews are the only space open to the public's voice and are generally used to represent public opinion regarding a certain issue, as a witness of the event. Through interviews, the audience comes to know better the persons in the news stories; they collaborate in creating an atmosphere of "virtual" dialog where all testimonials apparently have the same value. We observed that all of the newscasts analyzed used a significant amount of interviews in their news reports. In order to investigate more profoundly how the audience was represented, we noted the credits of each interview and observed the spoken lines of the interviewees exhibited throughout the forty-eight editions of the three newscasts that were analyzed. In general, the chosen segments of the testimonials followed the direction of the reporter and of the newscast's editorial line. The voices that appeared served more to endorse the reporter's *off* than to elucidate the conflict or to bring forth new interpretations of a certain event. There were four basic types of testimonials: those of common citizens (54.87%); of members of civil organizations (14.7%); of representatives of public authorities (12.9%); and of specialists (7.38%). The number of popular testimonials was much higher than that of representatives of civil organizations and associations or of public authorities. Nevertheless, 55.5% of the interviews were testimonials used to endorse the reporter's *off*. Most of these testimonials were very brief and, for this reason, they did not even receive screen credits; the voices and likenesses of these interviewees had no name and they did not amount to a clarifying opinion. More than one-third (36.6%) of common citizens were represented as victims and 7.8% were chosen as examples to be followed, generally because they faced the difficulties of daily life with hope and courage regardless of government support.

We may still consider the public to be portrayed as a victim of day-to-day social reality, depending on newscasts to claim its rights as citizens. Its voices are not given importance, being conditioned on social position without due capability for authorship, because ordinary citizens do not appear for what they are or for what they know; they always reaffirm that which they are not or which they do not know. Through their choice of testimonials, newscasts encourage volunteers and the public to solve their own problems, with the support of the media, of course. Newscast narratives lend importance to the audience's dialog and interaction, but in an unequal relationship. The adoption of other ways of using testimonials would effectively imply political and social changes, as dialogical theories suggest, and a higher-quality local newscast.

5 ■ PUBLIC JOURNALISM

Based on this investigation, we will attempt to question the viability of public journalism according to our objectives. Journalism has the same important role today and, as a form of knowledge, is a fundamental field for life in society. However, the quality of journalism has been questioned by researchers, teachers and professionals in the electronic and printed press fields who point out the necessity of reviewing and improving journalistic content and the means of relating news. Reflecting upon this question is not an easy task. Ethical commitment in professional practice collides with the property structures and interests of media businesses. We perceive the following factors as direct causes of this crisis, which, alas, is not exclusively Brazilian: the end of the dividing line between journalists and press aides; the market fusion of news, entertainment and consumption; the growing manipulation of information by special interest groups; the concentration of monopolies; effects that are not always positive, stemming from the use of new technologies in editorial work; and mainly a mentality that emphasizes individualism and personal success. For these reasons, professional practice is not always in tune with the public interest, revealing what Karam¹¹ calls “cynicism of the Brazilian press”. Without a doubt, news and TV viewers are often undervalued because of political and market interests; thus, new proposals that are linked to higher quality journalism are already being developed to reformulate the practice of journalism.

There already is a consensus among researchers that the media's social responsibility must not limit itself to the traditional functions of information, entertainment and cultural diffusion; it must also seek to promote citizenship rights and social justice. One path would be the so-called *civic journalism* or “public journalism”, a concept that emerged in the US in 1990 to motivate citizens to turn out to vote and to choose candidates committed to community needs, supporting businesses interested in sponsoring activities related to the concepts of democracy and community. Public journalism still has not received a definitive translation in Brazil, or an exact understanding of that which it represents as a function, coverage area and professional field. Some Brazilian specialists define this concept as civic or citizen journalism. Today, some Brazilian press practices already offer new possibilities for dealing with journalistic information and for producing news, which can be presumed to be practices associated with *civic journalism*. It is worth emphasizing,

however, that in Brazil public journalism is not being adopted as a copy of the American version. The politics and organization of each country generate distinct social realities with singular developmental demands. Here in Brazil, public journalism is not viewed as a movement and does not enjoy abundant investments from institutions committed to social projects as in the US. According to Martins¹², “that which has characterized Brazilian public journalism has been the intent not only to take advantage of dramatic social events, but also to combine news values with traditional elements of analysis and of public orientation with regard to problem solving, organizations specialized in such problems and the referral of community services: useful addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers, e-mail addresses, web sites, etc.” After all, complete democracy requires freedom of expression and journalism more committed to the public interest and to social responsibility, capable of promoting the exercising of citizenship rights.

6 ■ PRODUCTION VS. RECEPTION

In systemizing the knowledge generated by this study, we still felt the need to conduct a study on viewer reception, to verify how the public sees itself in newscasts. We listened to fifty people from four of the most representative neighborhoods that form the metropolitan region of the City of Rio de Janeiro: Botafogo (south zone), Jacarepaguá (west zone), Ilha do Governador (north zone) and Nova Iguaçu (*Baixada Fluminense* suburban area). Interviewees were chosen randomly. The study demonstrated that only 4% watched all local TV newscasts at lunchtime and 8% did not know how to identify the characteristics of and differences between a local newscast and a network newscast. 58% of those interviewed stated that they watched *RJTV*; nearly 10% accompanied *SBT Rio*; and only 4% watched *Informe Rio* on the Record TV network.

Most interviewees believed that the main function of a local newscast was to inform the public about the day's most important events in their city, to keep an eye on the activities of public authorities, to transmit knowledge to the public, and to make a certain effort in newscast production to deal with all the issues that intervene in the lives of the greatest number of people. Most interviewees stated that local newscasts contributed to improving life quality, increasing access to public and private services, offering services and covering the main issues that involved the daily life of their communities. They also related

that they perceived an attempt by newscasts to come closer to their audiences through neighborhood visits and through the installation of TV sub-stations outside of the large urban centers, such as is the case with the newscast *RJTV na Baixada*. Nevertheless, they thought that the time allocated to the public was insufficient to serve its real needs and that the selection of testimonials was guided by stereotyped criteria, offering a relatively undemocratic and non-interactive space for popular participation. The interviews conducted revealed discontent with the limitation and restrictive framing of aired information, limited to the structural problems of communities; and they suggested that newscasts should allocate more time to cultural issues and investigative journalism, digging deeper into the reported events and promoting critical reflection.

According to the three editors of the newscasts¹³ that were analyzed, the amount of events that occur in a city is so large that it is impossible to produce journalism aimed only at community issues. However in a certain way, all news reports are aimed at the public; there is no need to always interview viewers in order to discover those things that interfere with their lives. According to Sanches, “although we always think up new forms of direct public participation, newscasts have a limited time slot to show so many problems and events”. Faced with this situation, Casé suggests creating other types of TV programs that could increase the space of communities in the media; and Pinheiro believes that new ways of reporting news, which enlarge the public’s space in newscasts, could be developed based upon highly verified, quality news reports, which would offer focal points still unexplored by the media.

7 ■ FINAL COMMENTS

Analysis of the relationships established between the production and the viewing audience in newscast narratives indicates that public journalism’s viability depends upon greater interaction between the producers of journalistic information and the public. Through the quantitative and qualitative analysis of a few news programs, we sought to identify how the voice of the community appeared in newscasts, not only through the characters of the stories narrated on the screen, but also as active participants in the daily social reality created by television. The study resulted in critical reflection on journalism as an instrument of social development, discussing the values and ethical principles that rule the profession and construct the audience and, consequently, society, in the way that newscasts report present history.

We observed that newscasts sought increased proximity to the audience and functioned as allies of the needy populace by providing a channel for its grievances. On one hand, TV newscasts show the actual living conditions of the majority of the people from various communities in the state. On the other hand, it is necessary to highlight the fact that recognition of the value of civil society and of public opinion requires giving more importance to each individual (and his story) as an active member of society who is worthy of exercising his citizenship rights and, therefore, worthy of some form of authorship and/or intervention in the way he is or is not represented. Furthermore, lack of diversity restricts the viewer's interpretative possibilities, revealing that the composition of the day-to-day life stories of the populace of Rio de Janeiro is still not characterized by dialogs, free access and diverse interpretations. In addition, promoting the value of diversity is relevant to democratic media regulation and to the improvement of professional practices. It is necessary to give equal treatment to diverse issues and individuals and to alternative interpretations in news production. Civic organizations can seek ways to improve the plurality of perspectives available in the public sphere, besides creating conditions for improving public access to newscasts and other programs. We believe that the information discussed herein can collaborate toward reestablishing the concept of quality journalism, reaffirming journalism as a form of knowledge.

NOTES

- 1 MACHADO, 2003: 74
- 2 LIMA, 2004: 69-87
- 3 LIMA, 2004: 69-87
- 4 FAIRCLOUGH, 2001: 92
- 5 HABERMAS, 2003: 283-284
- 6 VIZEU, 2005: 44

- 7 Interview conducted by the authors on November 27, 2006, at the Rede Globo TV studios
- 8 Interview conducted by the authors on November 29, 2006, at the SBT TV studios
- 9 Interview conducted by the authors on December 4, 2006, at the Rede Record TV studios
- 10 BECKER, 2005.:74-106
- 11 KARAM, 2004:274
- 12 MARTINS, 2002: 86
- 13 Interviews conducted by the authors between November 27 and December 4, 2006

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