

THE DESIRABLE AND THE POSSIBLE

The limits of freedom of the
press in the online coverage
of the flight 1907 crash

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Associação Brasileira
de Pesquisadores em
Jornalismo / **SBPJor**

ELEN GERALDES & JANARA SOUSA
Universidade Católica de Brasília, Brazil

ABSTRACT

The notion of freedom of the press is influenced by typical Modernity values and views of the world. Due to that origin one may identify as deprivers of freedom of the press the interests of news companies, censorship – explicit or concealed - and the existence of authoritarian States, which centralize or monopolize information. This article analyzes the online coverage of a massive event in the Brazilian news, the crash of flight 1907, which occurred on September 29, 2006. Medium Theory makes crystal clear the limitations imposed on freedom of the press regarding journalism that takes place on the Web, mainly due to three traits: the need for speed – despite this velocity clouding investigation of the facts; the shortness of news items, limiting the room for interpretation; and information fragmentation, enabling the reader to only acquire an isolated perception of the happenings. There is a clear difference between desirable information and possible news.

KEY-WORDS

Freedom of the press, Journalism, Medium Theory, Online Journalism.

Introduction

The origin of Journalism is not consensual. For some, cavemen, despite not dominating written language, had already recorded – in picture form – events, leaving them as warning signs for the group. Other authors leap a few millenniums forward and find the genesis of journalistic activity in the Greek city-states, in which one of the requirements for effective administration was efficient information. From whichever perspective, Modernity is considered a milestone in the development of the profession.

Modern men and women need Journalism. After all, both have to strive in this world of uncertainties, in which unquestionable truths are undermined as the religious monopoly established by the Roman Catholic Church falters. They are confronted by the existence of other cultures; revealing ethnical, climatic and geographical diversities. To be modern is to assess – along with sociologist Karl Marx - that “everything that is solid is dismantled in thin air”. The legacy of this historical period is transitivity. It is up to Journalism to witness those transformations and supply information to guide choices.

Journalism begins to formulate, while in Modernity, a series of values that will define its main characteristics and resonate in the techniques of the profession. One of those values is “freedom of the press”, that is, the freedom that news companies have to announce information, analyze and interpret events and express opinions.

There are three major impasses in connection with the freedom of the press concept. The first one of them is the “free information” imperative. To report any information, at any given time, regardless of any consequences, equals irresponsibility.

Imagine a police investigation about a serial killer. The divulging of the main police conclusions in the case – while it is still being solved – may keep the assassin from being identified. In this case, freedom of the press is respected, but the public welfare is prejudiced – the right to safety, the right to justice. Well-investigated information, without technical errors, socially responsible, and information that respects the public interest must be free. However, it has always been difficult to define what information is framed under those characteristics, which requires negotiations, analyses and society’s intermediation, and not only an exclusive evaluation carried out by the news media companies themselves.

Another impasse regarding the freedom of the press concept is to consider it synonymous of the right to information. Many times, through freedom of the press, it can only be assured that a journalistic company that has interests and values, counts on allies and probable nemeses, would be free to reproduce its own point of view. And the citizen may continue to uninformed or misinformed.

Lastly, sometimes the concept of freedom of the press overestimates censorship, mainly the kind used by the State. And, despite censorship having been a villain in the history of the press – with the highlight on countries that experienced long periods of dictatorship, such as the case of Brazil - there is also self-censorship. Sometimes the professional or the

news media prefer not to announce certain information due to fear of retaliation. Also, one cannot forget the limits intrinsic to the medium, or the conditions of news production, which hinder free information. In this article, we will try to understand how a medium – the Internet – which promotes quickness, agility, being almost instantaneous, may leave the reader empty-handed, without the right to information.

The advent of the Internet caused great impact on the Brazilian media, mainly within the fictional mind of journalists and news companies. It was believed that it would multiply job openings for those professionals, that it would compete with printed newspapers, that it would provide room for total independence (theoretically, it is more difficult to censor it), and that it would become a large forum for ideas. But Journalism on the Web is still under construction; in spare moments, it reproduces printed Journalism in a precarious manner, for it does not have room or time for good investigation.

What are the limits on freedom of the press encompassed in this medium so difficult to be influenced by censorship? After all, websites are not paper, they cannot be apprehended, torn or burnt. If they are removed from the air, they may reappear some minutes later, crafted anywhere in this vast planet. To understand those limits, let us analyze the crash of flight 1907 from Manaus to Rio de Janeiro.

Beyond the receivers and senders – understanding freedom of the press by mass media

Usually in Communication Theory, we used to study freedom of the press by focusing on big communication employers, Governments, gatekeepers, communication policies, receivers and others. But, despite of the importance of these topics, there is another one, as important as those, which is rarely mentioned: the medium. In this article we propose to investigate freedom of the press on the Internet through the use of Medium Theory as theoretical support, where it is believed that mass media have an enormous impact on social behavior. The changes that the media provoke are not only seen in the receivers, as may be expected, but also in the role society plays including journalists and advertising executives and the manner in which these professionals carry out their activities.

Before we develop the changes, let us talk about what Medium Theory dictates. It was shaped by American Professor Joshua Meyrowitz, in the 1980's, who calls himself a follower of Marshall McLuhan. Meyrowitz,

just like McLuhan, argues that each medium that arises changes the entire social environment. It changes our perception of the world and of ourselves. It impacts politics and economics. In a way, mass media reshape the organization of our senses. "The medium theorists do not suggest that the means of communication wholly shape culture and personality, but they argue that changes in communication patterns are one very important contributant to social change and one that has generally been over looked" (MEYROWITZ, 1985: 18).

According to Meyrowitz, McLuhan and Innis¹ (and others like Elizabeth Eisenstein, Daniel Boorstin, Walter Ong, Jack Goody and Edmund Carpenter) are the representatives of the first generation of Medium Theory, and he is the representative of the second one. As Meyrowitz sees it, the first generation is marked by the focus on changes at the macro-social level, like the American educational system crisis (especially because of the electronic media like Television – McLuhan) and the impact of writing on the rise or fall of large empires, for example.

For a number of reasons, it has been very difficult to defend these arguments in favor of the first generation. Meyrowitz suggests that perhaps the most important reason was the absence of clear linear arguments, besides the lack of evidence. McLuhan, for example, presents his ideas in an almost intuitional manner. They were presented like aphorisms, insights of a great genius that had no need to be proven!

Undoubtedly McLuhan is the best-known Medium Theory theorist because his controversial arguments provoked love and hate feelings amongst the academic community. Love, because some of his ideas became almost a religion, such as: the media as extensions of our bodies and the media is the mass-a-age. And hate, probably because McLuhan had, in a way, a deterministic vision of social phenomena.

To solve the problems found in the first generation of Medium Theory, Meyrowitz proposed the study of the impact of mass media taking into account the "face to face" interaction as the basis. That is, Meyrowitz tried to diminish the level of abstraction of the first generation study, emphasizing the influence of each medium in everyday interaction between human beings.

The most important ideas of Meyrowitz regarding this theme are published in his book *No Sense of Place – the impact of electronic media on social behavior*, which is the result of his doctorate thesis. In this book the author discusses the impact of television. To Meyrowitz, the specific characteristics of TV exert great impact upon our sense of "us" versus "them", publicly or privately, a differentiation of physical presence

and social presence and different access to the flow of information. “By changing the boundaries of social situations, electronic media do not simply give us quicker or more thorough access to events and behaviors. They give us, instead, new events and new behavior” (MEYROWITZ, 1985: 43).

The introduction of a new medium changes the type of situations because each medium can change how we see the situations. For example, television can change the point of view of adults about childhood. This is because the group of children is shown on TV with high intensity and the groups of adults are able to learn more about them. At the same time, the group of children is able to learn more about how to behave like adults. In this case, situations can be merged and one group is able to know a lot about the other group.

Explaining clearly the impact of television, Meyrowitz chose three categories for analyses: groups of identities, socializations and hierarchal.

In everyday life, these three types of roles overlap. Most individuals function in all three categories at once: identified with a number of groups, at various stages of socialization into new roles, and at some particular rank or ranks within one or more hierarchies. Further, the categories themselves overlap and a specific role may not fit neatly into a single slot (...) Although the role categories are interrelated, each has its special characteristics. Unlike the other categories, group of identity allows for “separate but equal” status, where members of different groups may stand in no particular hierarchal or developmental relationship (MEYROWITZ, 1985: 52-53).

According to Meyrowitz the group of identity represents “separate but equal”, the socialization group is the stage that we endure to achieve our goals – in this case, it is necessary to have access to a continuous flow of information; and in the ranks of hierarchy are the “separate and unequal”; to be precise, it is the group in which people have different levels of information (SOUSA, 2003).

Meyrowitz argues that the visible effect of television, for example, is the exposing of behaviors that blurs the sense of “us” versus “them” inside of the groups. This allows people to learn perspectives from different situations. Indeed, electronic mass media can make people want to be recognized as equals:

One result of this shared perspective and more common set of situations is that members of formerly isolated and distinct groups begin to demand ‘equal’ rights and treatment. This analysis

therefore, offers one possible explanation for the recent sudden rise of 'minorities' as potent social and political forces (MEYROWITZ, 1985: 132).

A disaster and many sources

Gol Airline commercial flight number 1907 en route from Manaus to Rio de Janeiro never reached its destination. On September 29, 2006, the Boeing 737-800 aircraft collided with the Legacy jet piloted by Americans Joseph Lepore and Jan Paul Paladino, and crashed into the northern part of the State of Mato Grosso, with 154 people on board. There were no survivors. As to the jet, it was able to make an emergency landing in the Serra do Cachimbo, in the State of Pará, and its seven passengers were not injured.

Many interests and conflicts were involved in the event. The investigations were carried out by the Brazilian Civil and Federal Police Forces, but the most burdensome responsibility to find out the causes of what had happened laid heavy on the shoulders of the National Civil Aviation Agency, linked to the Department of Defense. The Government and the private sector, Brazilians and Americans, the families of the victims and authorities, both civilian and military, all tried to make sense out of the tragedy which brought to the surface the crisis involving the flight controller sector in the country – badly compensated professionals and, in some cases, badly prepared - and consequently the entire Brazilian air traffic system was undermined. The people wanted to know. They needed to know. Comfort, safety and risk filled the minds of a middle class that had added airplane flights to their vacation plans and to their professional activities.

The Internet was a valuable source of information due to its speed and dynamism. But also, due to characteristics intrinsic to that medium, it was not able to go any farther.

News values

A plane from Gol Airline with 154 people –148 passengers and 6 crewmembers—disappeared this Friday. The vanishing occurred between the northern part of the State of Mato Grosso and the southern part of the State of Pará, approximately 200 km from the Serra do Cachimbo, in São Félix do Xingu (State of Pará). If the death of everyone who was on board is confirmed, it will be the worst air accident ever seen in Brazilian territory (FOLHA ONLINE, 09/30/2006, 1:08 a.m.).

Millions of shocked Brazilians stopped to monitor the plane crash that killed 154 people in September 2006. Despite the violence of this air collision, every week, in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, more and more people involved or not (like children, elderly persons and mothers) with drug trafficking, were dying in a war with the police and the newspapers did not give the same importance as they did in the case of the airplane crash. Why is a plane crash a noticeable event? Why is this more relevant than civil war (in a way, people are experiencing that in Rio and São Paulo)?

The key to this question is connected to news value. These are the guidelines of journalism. What will or will not become news is defined by the news values, which is something almost intuitive to a journalist who learns very fast what can or cannot be interesting to the public. Various news values are involved in an air crash. Let us take our example, Gol flight 1907. In this situation we have a combination of elements. Under the specific prism of news value, we have: an event that has a big national impact (several families were involved and probably will fight for their rights); besides, it is very easy to imagine that it could have happened to you (because it was a domestic flight, like many in Brazil); and the Legacy plane (an American flight) was the culprit in the crash. Because of those particularities, this event had an international impact. The United States and Brazil were in a very fragile situation. In Brazil, the newspapers emphasized the American arrogance in blaming the Brazilian air traffic control system, accusing it of not being monitored enough. In the United States, they were emphasizing the temporary detention of the Legacy pilots in Brazil and accusing the Brazilian people of transferring the responsibility for their problems regarding the flight controllers.

The difference between this airplane crash and the civil war happening in Rio and São Paulo is that the former combines more news values than the latter. Furthermore, the news involving drug trafficking is no longer shocking. Unfortunately, the news about the war between the *favelas* (hillside shanty towns) and the police is common in Brazil, but an airplane crash is much more uncommon.

News values are the selection criteria that are present from the choice of the noticeable events until the presentation of those events (what's their importance? How frequently do they happen?) (WOLF, 1995):

The noticeability is determined by news values, a group of elements and principles through which the happenings are evaluated by the

mass media and their professionals in its potentiality to produce results and new events, being made into a news piece (HOHFELDT, 2002: 208).

The Medium Problems

In an event such as the flight 1907 crash, speed may cause great hindrance. The management of information deriving from different sources with diverse and contrasting interests must be done. The news producer does not have immediate access to the place where the events took place; many times he does not know technically the circumstances, the motivations and the language intrinsic to air transportation; sometimes he does not have many specialists to affirm or to confront the official versions. And he needs to operate fast, very fast.

With the advent of Network Journalism, the utopia of “real time” journalism was created. That is, it is hoped that the distance between the event and the telling of the event would be conquered. That obvious impossibility is ignored, and a simultaneity/instantaneity myth is raised.

We may point out, in the Network coverage of the flight 1907 crash, three limits on the freedom of the press derived from the imperative of Internet speed:

a) the absence of investigation. The news outlets copy each other; the errors are committed over and over again; going to where the facts happened is replaced by the reproduction of the information brought by other news agencies. For example, a news piece was announced by the Brazil Agency of the Federal Government, *Search for survivors of the Gol flight causes commotion in the region of the accident*: “The Air Base of Cachimbo still has not confirmed the information, but (...) it is possible that there are three to five survivors.” (www.agenciabrasil.gov.br, 09/30/2006);

b) the repetition of sources. The news media work with what is available. The sources are many times the same, divulging the same things. There is no time to look for other sources and build new versions;

c) the large use of manipulation. The news piece goes on the air with gaps, contradictions, still under the construction process. The mere confirmation of the number of victims only occurs one day later: “According to the airline company, the number of victims is 154, and not 155.” (www.terra.com.br, 09/30/2006- updated at 3:28 p.m.).

Another characteristic of the medium which is strongly present in the coverage of the flight 1907 crash was shortness. Writing manuals teach that the Internet reader does not tolerate long essays; the news piece has to be close to the size of a note, a report, considering the news size. Well, that shortness apparently developed to stimulate reading and to respond to the lack of time that the contemporaneous reader has ends up prejudicing the freedom of the press on at least two points:

- a) The minimum is sought. The interpretative perspective, fundamental so that the reader may understand the events, is minimized or discarded;
- b) All the different coverage versions look alike. It is difficult to find differences amongst the news outlets, amongst the journalists' performances. The news seems formatted from the same mold.

Lastly, there is information fragmentation. While the printed media still sees value in the six lead questions (what, who, when, where, how, why), the Internet seems to make an isolated news piece out of each one of those aspects, which maintains little dialogue with the precedents and the successors. The event is not encompassed in its entirety, but only partially, disjointedly.

Freedom of the press suffers the consequences of that fragmentation. The explanation possibilities and the comprehension possibilities and even the press transforming possibilities cannot be carried forward. The reader is not given full ammunition to formulate his/her own judgments, he/she is not able to make his/her own decisions, embrace his/her own choices. In this speedy and risky contemporaneous stride, the reader is not able to even decide if he/she should go by plane, car or if he/she should postpone the vacation all together. He/she only possesses empty information, full of gaps.

The Redemption of the Medium

The Medium Theory reaffirms the vocation of each medium to announce, in any and every way, a given issue. But if the medium guides the editorial options, it does not close the doors on transformation possibilities. An example of that is news blogs. Originated in the 90's as a space for a more experimental type of journalism, they have taken on a well-rooted stance based on quality, despite the present irregularity of the material made available.

Some changes introduced by blogs seem to respond to journalism challenges in this agile and fragmented medium. One of them is the recovery of the journalist role. And this does not mean bringing back to life the journalism of the New Journalism's author, but it means granting journalists their deserved protagonist role: the right to defend ideas and points of view in a more explicit manner, the right to appear and stand out in the midst of the text. And when objectivity is questioned, the right to take up the more subjective side, the human side.

With this professional a bit more present, one is able to get differentiated information without pre-defined patterns. And hybrid genres become options: opinion, information and interpretation subsist conjointly, amicably. Journalism does not refrain from probing deeper, from questioning, from sharing with the reader its doubts and anguishes, from pointing out tendencies and trends.

Deadline

The Internet medium may impose boundaries on freedom of the press. But those limits are not definite, unquestionable impositions. There are alternatives, such as news blogs. Uniting agility and shortness, but at the same time allowing the reader to build a more complex view of happenings is one of the challenges posed for this medium. To meet it is to defend freedom of the press and the right to information in a networked world and on the Net.

Final comments

This article shows that concrete conditions of production have a direct influence on freedom of the press, such as: lack of access to the information, lack of sources or of sources that are willing to give interviews, little time and little space. The Internet, as a new medium, demands new languages. The challenge is to conjugate good journalistic news and real time requirements.

The Medium Theory, as it was presented, is capable of helping us to understand that other variables, beyond the pressures from various fields (such as the political and the economic ones), interfere with freedom of the press. The media are not neutral elements in the communication process. Their characteristics also determine the form of production of journalistic news and can, without a doubt, be decisive in the question of freedom of the press.

The coverage of the flight 1907 crash was an example of that: the specific characteristics of journalistic production, especially for the Internet, were determinative for the routes that the coverage took. The medium places limitations on the coverage, but, on the other hand, as we have already commented, it provides alternatives for the guaranteeing of the right to information, as is the case of blogs.

NOTE

- 1 Harold Innis is a Canadian researcher who is noted for the publication of two books *Empire and Communications* and *The Bias of Communication*. In these books, Innis investigates the impact of writing on old civilizations.

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Elen Gerales – journalist, with Master’s degree in Communication (USP – University of São Paulo) and Doctorate degree in Sociology (UnB – University of Brasília). Director of the Social Communication Program of the Catholic University of Brasília, Brazil.

E-mail: elen@ucb.br

Janara Sousa – journalist, with Master’s degree in Communication (UnB), Doctorate degree in Sociology (UnB). Professor of the Social Communication Program of the Catholic University of Brasília, Brazil.

E-mail: janara.sousa@gmail.com