

MIQUEL RODRIGO ALSINA:

*Theorist on journalism, intercultural
communication and news
construction process*

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SBPjor / Sociedade
Brasileira de Pesquisa
em Jornalismo

ADRIANA SANTANA
Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Brasil
JOÃO CORREIA
Universidade de Covilhã, Portugal

ABSTRACT One of the main theorists of contemporary communication, the Catalan Miquel Rodrigo Alsina has a strong influence on the research carried out in scientific areas related to Journalism Theory, Communication Theory and Intercultural Communication, in Portugal and Brazil. Concerned with the theoretical questions raised by everyday journalistic practice, Rodrigo Alsina is also one of the most relevant researchers in the intercultural communication field, supporting the need for academic education in such matters in the training of future communicators. The author of six books, his thinking is one of the most frequently quoted in scientific works on journalism, in both countries.

Key-Words: Rodrigo Alsina, news making, intercultural communication, journalism

INFLUENCE ON BRAZILIAN RESEARCH

In a recent survey developed for the purpose of analyzing the state of the art of journalism research in Brazil, focusing on written and presented articles produced by researchers from the National Association of Postgraduate Programs in Communication (COMPÓS), between the years of 2000 and 2007, one of the names that was more in evidence on the list of thinkers of reference was that of the Catalan Miquel Rodrigo Alsina. Currently a Professor of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, Alsina appears as one of the most frequently quoted and referred to in the current scientific production on journalism in Brazil.

According to the same survey, Rodrigo Alsina, together with the Portuguese thinkers Nelson Traquina and Adriano Duarte Rodrigues, appear as the Iberians thinkers most heavily quoted in the research

performed in Brazil during recent years.

The dimension of the Catalan thinker's influence can also be understood by the thematic relevance and broadness of his research and, of course, by the theoretical depth and clarity with regard to the exposition of his concepts. Questions such as the definition of news, intercultural communication, prejudices in press discourse, violence and media, communication and emotion, and the construction of social reality by journalism, are some of the most frequent issues found in Rodrigo Alsina's studies.

In a talk given at the V National Meeting of the Brazilian Association of Journalism Researchers (SBPjor) held in November 2007 in Aracaju, State of Sergipe (in the north-eastern region of Brazil), he maintained that the contemporary communication *Zeitgeist* was marked by interdisciplinarity across scientific areas. Accordingly, he began his presentation by predicting that the ancient quarrel regarding the gap between quantitative and qualitative research was already a question which would be surpassed by the inquiries in the field.

"Each method can be adjusted to correspond to distinct objectives. We do not live any more under the umbrella of closed fields", he affirmed. Closing his lecture, he quoted Wittgenstein, stating that "the method must be subjugated to the subject studied". Particularly, the Catalan professor currently uses social-semiotics as the main theoretical matrix of his works concerning journalism.

Miquel Rodrigo Alsina and Portugal

In spite of the fact that he does not have a very active influence on Portuguese journalistic studies, Miquel Rodrigo is also a researcher with an influential and increasing presence in local bibliographies, having lately developed projects and post-PhD research works involving Portuguese investigators. His work is particularly influential in the case of authors writing on subjects related to journalistic discourse and/or the construction of identities, such as João Correia and Cristina Ponte. Alsina is also heavily quoted in many courses of News and Journalism Theory. He is a member of the International Scientific Board of the Journal *Estudos em Comunicação* (Communication Studies), in which he has already published one important article about the teaching of Communication Theory in the new conditions that result from the implementation of the Bolonha Agreement, the document that establishes the new rules for European Higher Studies.

Born in Barcelona in 1955, he is a Doctor in Journalism and Information

Sciences from the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona (1986). He also has Journalism (1979) and Law (1991) degrees from the same institution. The author of six books - *Los modelos de la comunicación* (1989), *Los medios de comunicación ante el terrorismo* (1991), *La construcción de la noticia* (1996), *Los modelos de comunicación* (1995), *La comunicación intercultural* (1999), *Identitats i comunicació intercultural* (2000) and *Teorías de la comunicación: ámbitos, métodos y perspectivas* (2001) - he has been a researcher at several institutions, such as the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies (University of Indiana), the Center for the Study of Communication and Culture (University of Saint Louis) and the Centre d'Études sur l'Actuel et le Quotidien (Université René Descartes, Paris V). From 1982 until 2006 he was also a professor at the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona.

Currently, Rodrigo Alsina is a lecturer on Intercultural Communication, in the Communication Sciences doctorate program at the University Pompeu Fabra, teaching also courses on Studies of Intercultural Communication and Communication Research Methodology, in the undergraduate programs of Advertising and Public Relations at the same institution. At the University of Sonorous, in Mexico City, he also teaches intercultural communication.

News as construction

It was in *La construcción de la noticia*, reedited in an extended version in 2005, that the researcher treated journalistic material as a subject for study. This work has been an essential reference for those interested in investigating the process of news making. In this book, specifically, Rodrigo Alsina clarifies what he considers to be a key-question for research in the field of the journalism: the role of the news in the daily activity of social representation. "News is a social representation of the daily reality produced, which institutionally manifests itself in the construction of a possible world" (free translation from the Castilian original). (RODRIGO ALSINA, 1996, p.185).

On the nature of the news, Alsina clarifies the distinction between narration and perception of a fact. "The news is the narration of a fact or the re-writing of another narration, while the event is the perception of the fact in itself". Another question that remains unavoidably tied to the academic studies and quarrels in the professional sphere of journalism, objectivity, also has deserved prominence in the work carried out by the researcher. In a text called *On objectivity* originally published on the Argentine site False Nombre, Alsina suggests that the concept of

journalistic objectivity, even with all the criticisms that it receives, “continues to be one of the key elements in the comprehension of the ideology which supports the liberal model of the press.”

In this text, Alsina dialogues with several authors, delineating diverse, distinct lines of thought concerning the question of to be or not to be objective in journalistic activity. Common to a wide range of positions, the vision of objectivity still emerges as “an attainable asset, something desirable but of difficult access due to a series of reasons.” The theoretician does not take a position as researcher on the subject, concluding that it is more essential to take into consideration the social role of journalism in knowledge transmission. For Rodrigo Alsina, journalism is “the link between the knowledge of politicians, philosophers and scientists and the citizen. The journalist has an institutionalized and legitimated social role in the transmission of daily knowledge and as the translator of the specialists’ knowledge for the general public.”

Multiculturalism in communication

Alsina has devoted himself to diverse studies concerning the question of intercultural communication, particularly in lectures and papers. In a statement especially made for this article, the theoretician clarifies that intercultural communication is that which is produced among persons pertaining to distinct cultures, adding that in these circumstances, misunderstanding can often be more the rule than the exception. To demonstrate under which circumstances this type of communication is carried out in an efficient manner, he explains: “intercultural communication is efficient when the understanding is sufficient so that the inter-actors can carry out cooperative work.”

Quoting an article written in partnership with Medina (2005), he states that the question lies beyond Manichean points of view:

“We should not believe in a Utopian .concept of communication as maximum comprehension nor even as creation, necessarily, of positive affective links. Incomprehension and negative emotions are also part of communication”.

For Rodrigo Alsina, one of the main concepts for understanding intercultural communication is that of “attributed identity”. It is in the question of Otherness, therefore, that journalism performed a basic role. Journalistic activity, through its narratives, thus draws a dividing line between ‘we’ and the others. In the same statement Alsina explains that for journalists it is not always easy to construct a view of Otherness exempt from negative connotations, since they are constrained by social

representations. He justifies, “Let us think, in a more or less explicit way, on many occasions in the cultural imagination ‘the other’ is constructed as an incomplete being. At times, behind the adjective ‘ethnic’, one suspects that the ethnocentric dichotomy – normal versus ethnic – is being constructed.”

In an article presented in the Jornada sobre la Prensa i l’Ecola, he maintains, as well, the offer of specific disciplines in university undergraduate courses in communication to deal with the question (ALSINA, 2002). One of the opinions that must be underlined in an analysis of his production is that in which he maintains the need for not requiring from journalism the same accuracy and detail required from an academic work. This criticism is often found in some exponents of the academic world. For Rodrigo Alsina, we must recognize the limitations of the productive system in which the profession, practice and study of journalism participate. Therefore, it will be not an objective of journalism to use *modus operandi* similar to those used in scientific theses.

We cannot require from informative journalism the minute detail of a doctorate thesis, nor the latter’s extent in the case of opinionative material. That is to say that we cannot require from journalism what it cannot provide. We must know what its limits are. (RODRIGO ALSINA, 2002)

His balanced view of journalistic activity, never condescending or complacent, can also be observed in the same work with regard to the marks of ethnocentrism and xenophobia in the media, when he maintains that not only journalists, but the entire society can be constricted by an ethnocentric view.

I do not intend to undertake a reflection which is complacent with ethnocentric journalism. I would like start with a reasoned view which should denounce, however, some xenophobic images which journalism helps to create. But I also want to offer a self-criticism. Journalists are not the only ones responsible for the images of excluded alternatives; we university people should also be capable of criticizing our professional practice. (RODRIGO ALSINA, 2002)

The researcher, however, never limits his works to well-based analysis and criticism of news making. It is possible to observe diverse moments when the author considers, effectively, proposals to remedy many of the negative situations that he diagnoses.

Besides pure analysis, Rodrigo Alsina also suggests, as a strong feature

of his articles, a purposeful and participative criticism, demanding even the need for self-criticism by the academic world. Thus, for each defect he demonstrated, the author's method is to suggest measures to solve or at least to improve it. An elucidative example of this characteristic is the recurring support for the inclusion of Intercultural Communication disciplines in the Communication Departments. According to the researcher, that could help journalists not to fall into the ethnocentric fallacy, once they would be aware of cultural diversity - and of the need for recognizing and respecting it.

Examples of manifestations - intentional or not - of ethnocentrism, and even xenophobia, in the discourse of the Spanish press are highlighted by the researcher to strengthen the idea that training in intercultural communication is needed in university faculties and departments.

Rodrigo Alsina believes that the capability for intercultural discernment is essential not only for the professionals who act as foreign correspondents, but also for all journalists who work in their native countries. The training of future communication professionals, he emphasizes, "is one of the most important wagers on the future. The universities cannot withdraw from this democratic challenge." (RODRIGO ALSINA, 2003, p.4).

The journalist role

In partnership with professor Martínez Nicolás (Martínez y Rodrigo 1997), the Catalan researcher developed proposals to approach the question of multiculturalism in the university training of professionals. Both arrived at the conclusion that the starting point for the creation of an intercultural conscience is a greater "internationalization" of the bibliography usually proposed by the professors.

If we were to look closely at the bibliographies which we utilize in our teaching, we would see that there is a great European and American predominance, with some Latin American references. Implicitly this plainly shows that knowledge is restricted to certain countries. (RODRIGO ALSINA, 2002, p.4)

The researcher is referring of course to the reality of the Spanish academic world, but that reality does not differ in a significant way from the Portuguese and Brazilian academic worlds. In the same survey presented at the beginning of this article, it can be seen that usually Anglo-Saxon or French bibliographical references in the papers surveyed are still more frequent than Brazilian or Latin American ones.

As a second alternative, the two authors suggest that instruments of critical reflection be offered “which would allow students to see where the practical obstacles are which journalists can encounter when preparing material that avoids xenophobic prejudices.” (2002,p.4).

Alsina classifies interculturality as “one of the key-subjects of the XXI century” not only because of its transdisciplinary nature, but mainly because of what he calls “multiple research problems” that can emerge from intercultural communication. Thus, he considers the use of intercultural recipes to perform a re-reading of some subjects. More than just a discipline, intercultural communication will be changed into a perspective of analysis.

Alsina maintains the key role of journalism in the diffusion of respect for cultural diversity. One of the biggest challenges facing contemporary journalistic activity is exactly the predisposition to “having more respect for ethnic minorities or, simply, for other cultures”.

In times of diplomatic difficulties between Brazil and Spain because of rigid immigration controls, it is quite pertinent to know the scholar’s proposals so that journalists can contribute to the strengthening of multicultural discourses.

He points out at least two paths. In the first one, he suggests that journalists be more careful in order to avoid the stigmatization of “the other”.

He exemplifies, “If certain alternatives are almost always associated with negative elements, they will inevitably take on a negative character”. And he quotes a Spanish dictionary that uses the expression “illegal immigrant” to explain better the term “illegal”.

Journalism, he adds, despite the effort to prevent the use of the word, has not always achieved success. With the substantiation of the adjective “illegal”, there occurs the attribution of illegality to a specific identity, marking the essence of a collective group. “Or, more exactly, there is superimposed on its identity another identity which predominates, that of being the ‘illegal’ ones, in Alsina’s words.

The second path considered by Rodrigo Alsina for journalism to assist in the strengthening of intercultural communication is the inclusion, in the discourse of the press, of the principle that “all culture is formed with interculturality”. To bar mentalities that support the “purity and authenticity” of a culture, Alsina considers that it is essential for journalists to uphold “the evident fact of syncretism and miscegenation in most cultures”.

The idea is that journalism raises the intercultural flag as a constituent

of the cultural one, and not as a destination or threat to any culture. With this change in viewpoint, Alsina believes, it is possible that the bringing together of people with different cultural origins can be facilitated.

“Venimos de una sociedad intercultural, estamos en una sociedad intercultural y vamos hacia una sociedad intercultural” (we come from an intercultural society, we are in an intercultural society and we are going in the direction of an intercultural society), he says.

Finally, he maintains that journalism can help people to discover that miscegenation is part of any culture. “Accepting this as a fact, who is afraid of intercultural communication?” Journalists, therefore, already face a considerable challenge for an entire century.

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Adriana Santana, Journalist, is a PhD student at Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE), Brazil. E-mail: adriana.santana@superig.com.br

João Carlos Correia holds a PhD in Communication Sciences and is a Professor at Universidade de Beira do Interior, Portugal. E-mail: jcfcorreia@gmail.com

Miquel Rodrigo Alsina received his B.A. and Ph.D. from Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona. He was also a professor at the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona.(1982-2006). Currently, Alsina works at the Pompeu Fabra University in Spain.