

PETROBRAS'S BLOG AND JOURNALISM:

what ethical issues are we talking about?

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ABSTRACT This article discusses the case of Petrobras's blog, called Facts and Data (*Fatos e Dados*), created to be a channel for direct communication with the society and a place for presenting the official version of information concerning this state-owned company. Taken as a parameter for questions relating to the ethical issues involved in this communication experience, it suggests some reflections beyond possible redefinitions of making communication as opposed to doing journalism. In presenting its version of events directly to the society, the company opted for a model of unmediated communication, which requires the redefinition of the speech platforms and visibility. It also proposes a reflection on discourse ethics, especially regarding the ideal of individual participation in the processes of debate concerning matters of public interest.

Key words: Journalism. Ethics. Blog. Visibility. Petrobras.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of the phenomenon: facts and data

In 2009, Petrobras¹ made the controversial decision to create the blog *Facts and Data*², with the intention of providing information about the company directly. The blog's creation followed growing tension between the company and the traditional print media. Among the main reasons for this venture is what the state-owned company classifies as an attempt to manipulate information about its nature, as a public company. This claim has to do with what was once called a "defamatory campaign", from the evocation of a 2006 investigation, in which Petrobras could be the source of funds which that same year would have been used by the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party – PT, currently in power) to buy a dossier against political opponents.

The triggering text was published by *O Globo* (2009a) on June 24, 2009, entitled "*Breach of confidentiality*". In the subtitle, the proposed

content is already evident: “Investigated link between Wilson Santarosa, Manager of Corporate Communications of Petrobras, with ‘nutty people’ (an allusion to PT members allegedly involved in the purchase of the dossier)”. Thus, according to Petrobras’s arguments, the 2006 case, even as speculation, is returning to disqualify the company’s activities.

Reacting with outrage at the ways in which it is treated by the mainstream media, on July 2, 2009 the company created a blog:

Developed by communication professionals of the company in a free online publishing platform, Facts and Data was created with the goal of being a communication channel quickly and directly with the public, devoted to presenting facts and recent data from Petrobras, anticipating the position of the Company on matters relating to the Congressional Inquiry (CPI) and clarifications requested by the press. Thus, it reaffirms the commitment to information and transparency, one of the organization’s values. (FACTS AND DATA, 2009a)

On November 16, 2009, the state-owned company made available on its blog the topic “CPI Petrobras: Letter to the newspapers”, presenting, in a tone of advocacy, information regarding the outcome of the CPI. The letters were sent to the following newspapers: *Jornal do Comércio*, *O Globo*, *Correio Brasiliense* and *Folha de S. Paulo*. Now as a company policy, all the material remains permanently on the Internet. The letter sent to the newspaper *O Globo* is an example of the direct form adopted by the state-owned company:

Regarding the article “Petrobras CPI turns to praise publicly”, published today (16/12) by this newspaper, Petrobras reaffirms that it did not make any “accounting maneuvers”, as the report alleges. The change in the tax system made by the Company is perfectly legal and was supported by Provisional Measure 2.158-35/2001. The legislation does not define in its text the moment of option for one of the systems. The Company did not stop paying taxes, but offset taxes previously overpaid. The net amount of income tax, payroll charges and other federal taxes offset by Petrobras was R\$ 1.14 billion, not “R\$ 4.3 billion”, as the paper reports. (O GLOBO, 2009a)

After repeated requests for the right to reply and apology, Petrobras decided to create its own space to divulge its information. Sometimes the news came out first on the blog, and later in traditional media. Alleging further that information was being distorted in interviews, the company decided to publish on the blog questions submitted by journalists and the answers given.

The position assumed by Petrobras has provoked polarization of opinions regarding the current role of journalism. On the part of the communication companies, it has been argued that there is disrespect for the place of journalism as a forum, an organizer of public space and the

issues that are inherent. By circumventing this, the state company would be offering raw information to society, without journalistic treatment, assuming determination and articulation of conflicting voices on behalf of the purported truth. From the perspective of journalists, this is an alleged breach of professional status and creates doubts regarding the copyright of the questions that are posted on the blog, eliminating the right to scoops previously reserved for media companies.

It is primarily through the business and professional enterprise prism that Petrobras has been debated. And from the social point of view, what is its relevance? Immediately, allegations were made of a moral nature, because *Facts and Data* would be breaking with social conventions, and by “talking” directly to the society, it disqualified, at the same time, the media and its professionals. What was taken only as a communication strategy has become an ethical problem. But what can be said about the issue that provoked the blog, regarding its attempt to highlight the artifices of media companies?

According to this view, it is possible to organize the questions that motivate this article. Does the *Facts and Data* blog bring up an ethical question or does it represents a redefinition of the speech places? Is the broadening of voices and discourses a moral issue or renewal representing the moral, expanding the participation of members of society in discussions, according to the discursive ethics?

From the business point of view: objections - immorality and lack of ethics!

From the brief description of the fact, we can infer that two bases are constructed for articulating viewpoints and entrenchment: 1) abuse of the prestige enjoyed by Petrobras, and on that basis, it directly confronts the traditional media, b) the traditional media do not respect the conventions dealing with the nature of media practices, such as the right to reply and to obtain retraction of the party that considers itself prejudiced.

Each base constructed shows its own truths. Let us see how each of these bases can help to understand not only the experience of Petrobras’s blog, but also a new scenario that is opening up. First, however, it is necessary to explain that the differential in the case at hand is the digital media reality, which is capable of making communication ubiquitous and pervasive (COSTA, 2009, p. 16).

As one of the main features of interest to this discussion, we consider the ability to break with the traditional press, known to us since the eighteenth century, with the emergence of modern bourgeois

society. The so-called “press view” (GOMES, 2004, p. 46), has functioned as the core element of public opinion. The press has held since then a different place socially, offering the articulation of the various speeches and voices so that the public can be informed and take positions. The main contribution of the press is to make public issues of public interest that, generally, were treated privately.

That is the context in which considerations arise regarding, for example, freedom of press in contrast to censorship (MARX, 2001). The relevance achieved by journalism has prompted several attempts to limit press freedom (SILVA, 2006), and take control of information in accordance with the *status quo* of power groups formed.

The change brought about by the new digital environments subverts reality, bearing in mind that press freedom is being widely questioned, from the perspective of new modes of communication. The freedom to print, the prerogative of the press, not only is questioned, but is made available to ordinary people. It is the nature of journalism that still makes a difference, because any individual can make public information ranging from private concerns to issues of general interest. The paths are varied, from personal sites to the various ways offered by social networks like Facebook and Twitter and sites like YouTube.

Despite the diversity of publishing platforms nowadays, journalistic activity still safeguards its differential in the retention of some assignments that are typical, like the selection of subjects, forms of approach and treatment, commitment to public interest, etc. If in journalism as a professional field these assignments still compete in the same way, the prestige of newspaper companies rests on their ability to submit to certain audiences what is on the agenda.

Contrary to so-called news values³, we believe we are experiencing a profound social change, because if anything can be disclosed and if ordinary people can select and provide information, what would be the place of journalism? As noted previously, the place of journalism is its ability to be the great articulator of speeches and promote public debate, which accrues from the material provided by the journalism department which, in theory, stands in front of free events.

At this point, it is worth returning to the case of Petrobras's blog. Among the arguments against the creation of the blog, we consider its main characteristic, which is independence in the choice of what to say and how to say it. Contrary to the common citizen, who pioneered these innovations, or even groups in the civic area such as NGOs who have achieved a kind of seal granted by a gender activist, the initiative

of Petrobras is seen differently. While communication thrives freely on the network, leaving it up to the Internet users their adherence to new formats such as the creation of new resources, the same does not occur with the *Facts and Data* blog.

What is this differentiation? One possible limit to the communicational uses of the network is linked to human rights, for example. The case of this blog has shown us another. While the average citizen has managed to become a producer and disseminator of content⁴, other experiments have displayed different perspectives. Petrobras's blog places in the arena of discussion the new reality of the use of network communication capabilities. When Internet users already use the new environment as a platform for their ideas and ideals, for many the company Petrobras has the same right. What is the justification?

Contradictory to the libertarian process that characterizes digital communication, media companies began denouncing the government's initiative. To this end, they stressed the right to information and communication ethics. One example is the editorial "Assault on the Press", O Globo (2009b), published on July 9, 2009, seven days after the creation of the blog, in which the newspaper claims, among other things, that Petrobras violates the Constitution. "The state claims to practice 'transparency' but makes the mistake of not disclosing material property to professionals and media outlets [...]. Petrobras made a mistake, and is expected to reverse unethical procedures mentioned by the press."

In an unusual way, ethics is called upon by the press, not in relation to society, although the "social cause" is also mentioned, when trying to blame the state-owned company for a possible loss of information quality resulting from the misrepresentation of the process of construction and dissemination of news, as claimed by the National Association of Newspapers - ANJ (2009):

As if this practice did not suffice, contrary to the universal principles of freedom of the press, the responding e-mails from the company's press office include threats of legal action in case its information does not receive an "appropriate treatment". This intimidation, more than disrespect for media professionals, is a violation of the right of society to be freely informed, because it shows a communication policy aimed at protecting it from the public, refusing democratic scrutiny of its actions.

It is understood, based on such arguments, how the experience of Petrobras's blog is received. When trying to discredit *Facts and Data*, the idea of freedom that characterizes communication processes on the Internet is completely denied. From these strategies, the annoyance

displayed by the traditional media, generated by the fear of losing control of communication processes, is evident. The position of authority, historically constructed by the media, refers to the possibility of selecting what will be reported. The media has been placed as a mediator, standing between the world of facts and the world of readers / receivers.

Following the experience of ordinary people, with their personal pages, for example, Petrobras's blog raises the idea of an unmediated communication, because the source of information dialogues directly with the society, without the filter of traditional media. The campaign that was mounted against *Facts and Data* can be understood as an attempt to maintain a *modus operandi* that ensures communication companies a socially constructed platform for discourse. By moving from the role of source to that of diffuser of relevant information, Petrobras makes clear the possibility of changing the linear model of mediated communication.

However, it is still necessary to perceive distinctions in the nature of the phenomenon in question, taking into consideration the possibility of breaking the linearity of the communication process. Unmediated communication can bring in its wake a sense of libertarian communication, but it does not supplant journalistic practice, which calls for the articulation of different points of view. From the statement by Bucci (2000, p. 11) that "journalism is conflict", we can infer that unmediated communication means the diffusion of a specific viewpoint. Therefore, this practice does not replace journalism.

From the social point of view: redefinition - the new speech platform and discourse ethics

The innovations brought by the experience of Petrobras's blog are related to the redefinitions of the speech platform associated with traditional media that, due to limitations of space and time, are still forced to select, among the events, those which can be included in the category of news. Beyond the material capability of selection, the form of approach is also peculiar because the media speak of what is defined as public interest (KARAM, 2004). Changes in this regard have been observed, specifically when it is assumed that the new communication environments have led to a redefinition of the traditional roles of transmitter and receiver.

From the places of production and recognition, new devices of enunciation have emerged, reflecting both the potential and technological development of discursive strategies that trigger a new interpretation of the figure of the receiver as participant. If, in

the traditional design, the reader is someone who enunciates, the other, the participant, not only signifies the proper functioning of the communication enterprise, but is also an integral part of it. These developments may imply that new roles emerge and coexist with the old standards. As a hybridization process, the individual can either be part of a process of mass communication, like television, or act as a secondary interactive model, proposed by the new media.

The so-called public interest issues may also be repositioned in the current frame; as well as being listed on a public agenda, they may also be added to the topics of interest and discussion by individuals and organized groups, in a quest for visibility (GOMES, 2008). The innovation is with regard to the relation information-democracy, since, for some scholars, we should no longer talk about the Right to Information, but simply about the Right to Democracy, which only exists in conditions of free circulation of information (PAESANI, 2008, p. 8).

Petrobras's blog clarifies a fracture in a linear model of communication and at the same time, suggests the inclusion of citizens in discussions of public interest. It does not just theorize about the need for participation of the individual, but also ensures the latter's participation in the deliberative processes with reference to publicity and transparency. The new model for public discussion of matters of public interest is possible only if it ensures inclusion and equal opportunity for participation (HABERMAS, 2008).

Although the case of Petrobras's blog has been classified by many as an ethical problem, it makes us reflect positively on the ethics of communication (APEL, 1994) and about the call and discourse ethics (HABERMAS, 2003). Communicative action, "in which actors are oriented by validity claims" (HABERMAS, 2003, p. 63), has its basis in moral conscience, which varies according to different levels or stages of consciousness that an individual may or may not experience (APEL, 1994).

Adherence to a moral model depends on levels of cognitive⁵ ability and interest. For a rational choice, the individual may choose to participate in a plan that is independent of models imposed by morality - religious, cultural, etc. In this sense, morality becomes dependent upon the call for ethical discourse that, through discussion, socially desirable moral standards should be reached.

In the same way, the relevance of discourse ethics, as recommended in the first place, involves adherence to a rational model, which allows the individual to move between different truths to reach a

final one, the result of a discussion. As important as the outcome of the discussion is the process that should ensure wide participation and equal access. The participant, in turn, is required to use real arguments and not contradiction (HABERMAS, 2003).

The experience of the blog *Facts and Data* allows us to reflect on a new moral argument, which presupposes the participation of the individual and ensures the existence of channels, or media. According to Costa (2009, p. 226),

The difference with the emergence of new media is that the four interests began feuding on an equal footing. [1] The journalist no longer has the final word. [2] The source has gained more power over the information held by it, because it can publish, and is released from the task of *only* manipulating the journalist. [3] And the media company, which decides to research or not, has its own interests, private or public. [4] And the public wins a forum to express itself without the filter of publication (Emphasis added).

Instead of a polarization of views between positive and negative, *Facts and Data* points out current issues in what concerns the ideal of participation of the individual in the process of discussing matters of public interest. In addition to products derived from closed media communication processes, there is the emergence of new modalities that enable the citizen, even with counterfactual anticipation (APEL, 1994; HABERMAS, 2003), to participate in communication processes.

We conclude that it is premature to conclude

The *Facts and Data* blog, as a communication experience, marks a topic on our agenda about the reality of communication. While attempts have been made to reduce the case purely to its strength (right answer) or weakness (unethical), the relevance of this experience is clear. The importance attributed to it is due to its status as a state-owned corporate blog, which is an important source for journalism. Changing its status from source to information provider and space to question journalistic activity, the blog situates Petrobras as an agent interested in participating in public debate and discussion. This participation takes place mainly in its role as a concerned party, or as a participant directly involved with or affected by the direction of the discussion (HABERMAS, 2003).

New areas of visibility have been established which now depend no longer only on traditional media to make public certain matters, because there are no filters. Instead of being shown, the individual or group shows and chooses how to be framed. In addition to visibility, now there is competition for the modes used for showing, or the arrangements

of visibility, which reinforces the nature of new communication processes that are not mediated. Petrobras's project is not restricted to the blog, but was reinforced, for example, with the use of social networks when it went to Twitter, also in 2009.

The perception of journalism as a field of conflict is reevaluated, because the new devices make it possible to broadcast plural voices and the individuals' participation in the discussion of ideas. Following this line of reasoning proposed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (2008) about the traditions in the process of invention, the tradition of journalism is probably being reinvented in response to new technological possibilities and social demands.

| NOTAS

- 1 Petrobras is a publicly traded company whose majority shareholder is the government of Brazil. It operates in the following sectors: exploration and production, refining, marketing and transportation of oil and natural gas, petrochemicals, distribution of oil, electricity, biofuels and other renewable energy sources. It is the leader of the Brazilian oil sector. According to data released by the company, based on the recent major launching of its shares, it is expected to be among the five largest integrated energy companies in the world by 2020. It is currently present in 28 countries. Its Business Plan 2010-2014 foresees investments of US\$ 224 billion. Some data: 4th largest energy company in the world. Source: PFC Energy (January/2010), 8th largest global company by market value and the largest in Brazil: US\$ 164.8 billion. Source: Ernst & Young Consulting (July/2009), 4th among the most respected companies in the world. Source: Reputation Institute (May/2009). More information: <<http://www.petrobras.com.br>>
- 2 <http://petrobrasfatosedados.wordpress.com>.
- 3 The criteria of newsworthiness establish a productive routine that equates to a range of actual treatment. Accordingly, the crystallization of some expectations provides the basis of news production. It is this sense that the news values appear to respond to what facts are really important enough to be processed into news (CFWOLF, 1995, p. 175).
- 4 For purposes of this article, it is fundamental to consider a distinction between the material circulating on the network, here defined as the contents (all material from the strictly personal, such as pictures on personal pages, to blogs), and information which, on a journalistic

scale, maintains a close relationship with what is considered to be of public interest.

- 5 Reflections that Apel (1994) provides by reference to the contributions of Kohlberg (1981) about the stages of moral consciousness.

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