

JOURNALISM AS A RESEARCH FIELD¹

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ABSTRACT This work deals with the emphasizing as necessary of the correlation between journalistic practice and total culture in its mutations stemming from the new information and communication technologies. One of the epistemological preliminary aspects is the critique of the informational conception which conceives communication as the mere transfer of contents from one point to another and which has been sustaining theoretically the majority of media studies. Mediatization, rhetoric and market. Narrativity and journalistic practice.

Key words: Journalism research. Mediatization. Narrativity.

INTRODUCTION

I am addressing an audience made up of researchers, more specifically, of journalism researchers. Accordingly, I see here the opportunity to bring up some critical aspects of research, instead of giving a more general talk on communication, which could widen the audience. Therefore, I am going to again take up points which have already been raised by me both in books as well as in articles on the specificity of communicational studies, now directed just at this old practice involving the technology of words called journalism.

My first point can be summarized in this way: there is no academic journalism research without correlating this practice with the surrounding culture and its transformations stemming from the new communication and information technologies. Now then, this correlation forces us to determine the nature of the communicational culture in which the journalistic practice takes place, in order for us to evaluate the appropriateness of the basic level which sustains our understanding of communication.

As we well know, the present studies are already developed on the level which sustains the **informational conception**. This conception tells us that communication is a process which transfers information from

one point to another. This model can be theoretically refined – for example, abandoning the functionalistic perspective of most of the sociological works originating in the United States for the semiotic or anthropological paths – without really departing from the ontological path traced by the common understanding of what could be communication.

In this model, communication is conceived as an instrument (the tongue, radio, newspaper, magazine, television, Internet and others) to be analyzed. And here a problem appears, already detected, moreover, by socio-anthropologists such as Jeudy, for whom “sociology continues to treat the media as a research field completely apart, avoiding consideration of the mediazation of the phenomena of society” (JEUDY, 1997, p. 151). In other words, on one hand the institutional modalities of the social phenomena are studied and on the other, the functioning of the media, ignoring that “the mediazation principle guides *a priori* the representation and the interpretation of the phenomena.”

Well now, this criticism of Sociology should be made of researchers of the communicational field when, for example, they reduce journalism to an instrument, trying to see in it only a neutral and technical transmission belt taking social events to a consumer audience. This evokes Lenin, who saw newspapers as the party’s transmission belt to the masses. But in Lenin’s time, there was no mediazation yet.

What is mediazation?

What is mediazation? It is certainly not the diffusion of events by communication media (as if the social event occurred first and later the media or journalistic occurrence). Mediazation is the functioning of the traditional social institutions articulated with the media. Mediazation does not tell us what communication is, and nevertheless it is the object *par excellence* of a reflection on contemporaneous social communication, precisely by sustaining the hypothesis of a socio-cultural mutation centered on the current functioning of the communication technologies.

Investigation of the communicational phenomenon leads us first to the ancient rhetoric as a political technique of language in the Greek *Polis*; afterwards, to mediazation as a technological practice of discourse under the aegis of the market, in contemporary times. The rhetorical dimension is immediate and visible because it relates to elocution, to language practices, in the discourses which circulate socially.

And we know that from rhetoric we arrive at hermeneutics, that is, the interpretation or explanation of the meaning of the discourses. In the same way as hermeneutics, the term communication designates two

processes: first, that of reconciling differences by means of the discourse, with or without the help of rhetoric (communicative process); second, that of interpreting the phenomena constituted by the technological amplification of rhetoric, that is, the media in contemporary society (communicational process). The techniques of journalism and of advertizing always were and are unmistakably rhetorical.

But why study or research journalism and not simply perform it? What is there besides the technical practice?

The questions which the scholar who studies communicational phenomena seeks to answer, since the first decade of the twentieth century, come mainly from the media companies – private organizations, therefore – such as newspapers, advertising agencies, strategists of necessities and consumer research institutes. The demands for sociological, anthropological and psychological knowledge come mainly from entities linked directly or indirectly to the State (bodies for planning, administration of territories, control of behavior and attitudes, etc.).

Communicational knowhow tends to receive priority from the market. Exceptions have been noted, naturally, such as studies and evaluations of foreign propaganda in American territory during the Second World War and, as Wolton (2009, p. 49) emphasizes, “countless empirical studies, some of industrial vocation, others academic, furnished from 1950 to 1965 theoretical analytic pictures which are still quite valuable today of the positive and negative effects of the media, image building, theories of reception, two step flow, gatekeeper, ‘selective attention’, ‘theory of uses and gratifications’, the ‘spiral of silence’”.

A new temporality

Those concepts cover the traditional analyses of media and are guided by the “temporality of everyday living, which includes projections back to the past and projections into the future, the shifting forms of memory and of imaginary anticipation” (JEUDY, 1997, p. 152). It is the same temporality with which the social sciences, which were forged in the nineteenth century, operate.

It happens that the advanced communication technologies and the velocity of information circulation are producing another temporality, which has been called “real time”. Indeed, in a world placed on a technical network, the habitual experience of time has been profoundly modified: virtually connected to all the others, each individual can be reached without delay, without a set period, by any other one. This is precisely *real time*, that is, the abolition of periods by technical devices integrated

into our everyday environment.

With this new time – temporality condensed in the present, the eternal present – information tends to be punctuated by its own technical operative aspect (transmission speed) and by the characteristics of immediacy, limited space and low cost of the cybernetic network. Here time is no longer real, as Stiegler (1996, p. 147) has observed well, insofar as the unlimited production of events gives way to an immediacy which, making it impossible for consciousness to represent the phenomena within a period (therefore, within the temporal density), effectively abolishes time.

Events are always ahead of the possibility of their interpretation by individuals, just as the social hemorrhage of the communication technologies is ahead of their interpretation by individual and collective forms of consciousness. The future falls back technologically on the present, and the latter, by means of the digital treatment of images, seems to be equivalent to the past.

It suffices for us to reflect on the last election campaign for President of the Republic, in which the accelerated information and the rumors on the network prevented a more profound analysis of the events. On the network, there is no time for hesitation, no “density” for reflecting or speculating. This is the “reality” which Communication has to deal with, while the classical social sciences reserve for themselves a temporal statute, in which it is possible for consciousness to interpret and to know. The empirical attraction of the communicative phenomena under the aegis of advanced technology gives rise to the suspicion that a “science” of communication becomes impossible due to the dispersed or chaotic state of the probable subject.

From this resulted the tropism of some people, generally former press professionals who became professors, in the direction of journalism understood as a safer haven, as a cognitive anchorage capable of resisting the fluctuations of the digital tide. An attempt occurs then to make journalism a field apart. From this there arises a kind of “liberal dogmatism”, in which the entire critical apparatus appears contaminated by the dogmatic specter. And dogma, we all know, is an idea based directly on belief; it is an absolute principle that assumes the position of incontrovertible truth.

A universal narrativity

I am going to quote here a text of Professor Raquel Paiva, in which she calls attention to the fact that the first thing to be observed

is that journalism has assumed a definitive place as formulator of the universal narrative of the “present” in our civilization. In reality, all societies in all epochs have produced forms of narrating their presence – origin, present time and future – in the world. The traditional narratives included the myth of the intrinsic relation of the community with its everyday life and the surrounding world. They are narratives with an agglutinating, regulating and standardizing force.

For this reason, the observation is quite frequent that the thematic develops in the ambit of the pedagogy of the group’s customs, by means of which access to the structure of their day-to-day activities can also be achieved. These narratives are inscribed in the place of social mediation in many societies, transporting to mythical stories ordinary beings and ideas, terrible, monstrous and kind, always marked by plots which contain social projects and anxieties.

Anibal Ford raises the hypothesis, in *Navegações – comunicação, cultura e crise* (Navigations – communication, culture and crisis – 1999), that traditional societies are more “textualized” than “grammaticalized”. In the **textualized** communicative system, the fabled is given priority over the demonstrative, that is to say, the group’s values are expressed in myths and not in philosophical or scientific treatises. But look, this did not occur in a remote past, it is not anachronistic piece of data, because both verbal aspects as well as media based on images, like TV and the movies, are inclined to textualization.

Textualization favors the narrative form. Ford exemplifies this based on a record of the *mapuche* culture, an ethnic group which originated in the central valley of Chile. The mapuche idea is that “once written, words lose the value which the mouth gave them” and that “only a narrative of events (*nutran*) or a narrative of fiction, stories and fables (*epetu*) will not be lost” (FORD, 1999, p. 51). It is that merely written things are saved for the accounting file, but in some way are lost for living memory, for active listening. In the narrative, the word heard remains forever.

On the other hand, a communicative system is characteristically **grammaticalized** when it expresses its own rules and its own contents in the explicit form of discourses, codes, grammatical systems, rather than in paradigmatic systems. It is the system of scientific discourse, of demonstrative logic and of metaphysical rationality. This is what we come across right away in the introduction of a recent book, *A Narração do Fato – notas para uma teoria do acontecimento* (The Narration of the Event – notes for a theory of happenings – 2008),

declaring that in modernity, the mythical illusion gives way to the metaphysical illusion, which Karl Marx would call **ideology**. The myth – which during the reign of History, is no longer allowed to be narrated – gives up its place to ideology, initially understood not as an organized social representation, but rather as a rationalistic assembly of meanings, with objective and clear means of expression.

This is, at least, the meaning of the word, on being enthroned in the nineteenth century by Antoine Destutt de Tracy and Georges Cabanis, disciples of the sensualist philosopher Condillac, who considered ideas by themselves, as derivations of the sensations, but reserved for rational communication, without logical flaws. In practical terms, ideology was presented as a kind of **grammar of clarification**, at heart, a kind of return to the Mediterranean clarity of the Greek *nous*. The ideal of ideology is the grammaticalization of the communicative system.

But ideology is unable to give up narrative. The proof of this is journalism, which can make use of an argumentative rhetoric, but is made up in practice of a vast narrative of the present time. That narrative, composed daily, is woven according to paradigmatic criteria and postulates which try to define in a very broad way the profile of the present time. In this way, based on a detailed analysis of journalistic production, we can not only learn what is happening that is presumably important, but also why and how the historic event which occurs in our daily life attains this level.

But we also know that this superstructure produced by commercial/industrial journalism as a generator of the present society's narrative, and consequently a promoter and manager of a structure of current public thought, belongs to an exclusivist and concentrating order, correlated like a fulcrum with the consumerist objectives of the present time. There is an excessive emphasis on spectacularization, on low investment of the individuals' cognitive effort, on the fragile interpretative capability of society as a whole, in addition to the discarding of contextual and historical processes.

Research and experimentation

It is in this environment that research and experimentation are conceived as specifically necessary for advancing towards a relational journalism, interactive with present reality and favoring the aggregation of human value to the social order. There are records that on the occasions when attention turned to specific proposals, journalistic production succeeded in veering in the direction of something new.

Within these proposals, it is possible to highlight investigative journalism, hinge journalism, new journalism, civic journalism, based in the United States, mainly, but with reflections in the coverage throughout the world. Now, the movement is visibly towards a proposal of journalism concerned with the production of an inclusive model, of interactive and reflexive communication. It suffices to look at the increased space on the page which seeks to give voice to the reader.

But all these new experiments cannot fail to take into consideration the fact that the idea of narrative is viscerally associated with the temporal issue, with time which advances and which passes by. It is about this that we talk at length in *A Narração do Fato*, on asking ourselves what is news today. The reinforcing of this aspect possibly constitutes the greatest differential between traditional narratives and those produced currently and certainly will constitute the most outstanding characteristic in the configuration of journalistic narrative. The close link with time, if on one hand defines the narrative's existence, on the other, insofar as it confers strong priority on this aspect, surely creates new forms of narrating.

The increased importance given velocity in modern society is responsible for the existence of a social order based on the denial of idleness, of free time, which should be immediately and totally occupied. In this connection, investigation is appropriate with regard to the profile which current narrative structures could take on, mainly considering that besides the increased importance conferred on the temporal aspect (with an acceleration of the parts of the "story"), an unavailability – natural in traditional societies – for the hearing or reading of accounts is noted. In this way, temporal acceleration becomes the greatest and most influential characteristic of the narrative in the present time.

What is journalism's position amidst the mutations? For better or worse, says Raquel Paiva, the historical place achieved by journalism defines who we are – and not just for those who produce journalistic information, but basically for all the participants in that process, that is to say, its mere consumers.

The problem is that now those consumers are becoming virtually producers, in the ambit of the new informative practices current on the Internet, known as "instantaneous media", but also "personal media". The former "receiving audience" is now constituted as an issuing source or "media-man", due to the technical possibilities available to any and every individual equipped with a computer, modem, telephone line or broadband or even a mobile phone.

But an issuing source of what? Of his personal narrative, in which minute information of small social events is mixed with the revelation of the individual's trajectory itself. In Twitter, you simply follow the narrative of an individual about himself. It is an "umbilical" narrative – and the navel, as you well know, occupies the center, but is of no use for anything.

Nevertheless, the networks called "social" (blogs, Orkut, Facebook, Twitter) permit a personal intervention in the discourses circulating socially (although, in principle, limited to the space on the cybernetic networks) and end up influencing the professional journalistic agenda. In other words, the reader acquires the chance to determine the news, intervening directly in the technical competence of the specialist (the professional journalist) in order to give greater relevance to the amateur word technician, or in the opinion of many people, to the "citizen journalist".

There is something here significantly different regarding treatment of information. Not that these differences did not exist with respect to the traditional media. They were always obvious, in accordance with the nature of the information media (newspaper, magazine, etc.) and of their respective audiences, just as there always was a great difference in operation between print and electronic media, despite their well-known "short circuit": television is very frequently based on the written press, but at the same time is very much influenced by the televised images. What does not change in all this is the mass communication model, in which the power of diffusion remains basically in the hands of the journalist employed by the media organization, whose working logic cannot fail to be attuned to certain representations and expectations of the large receiving audience.

With the Internet, however, another kind of logic is emerging – and here is the significant difference – which dislocates to the receiver a large part of the power to set the agenda of the events. In reality, the new media transforms the formerly passive receiver (as well as the already active former receiver) into an active *user*, on making available to him an editorial "toolbox", which includes pages, portals, electronic mail, discussion lists (in the current terminology, blogs, podcasts, social softwares, wikis, etc.), enabling the programming of contents which, up to now, have been audiovisual transmission and conversations in real time by means of specific channels, in addition to instantaneous messaging.

It is true that, in the functioning of the access portals – on playing a growing role in the placing of information in a hierarchy, in the

way that American communicational analysis calls gatekeepers, that is, the “doormen” who select and filter the events – indications can be seen of the maintenance of traditional newsmaking in a new media. But with the accelerated decentralization of the information sources, the user’s active participation is an incontestable opening. One significant fact is that in November 2006, the issue of the American magazine *Time*, devoted to the personality of the year, chose the user of the electronic network as the most outstanding social subject.

To the extent that the new technologies reshape writing in the direction of a more active role on the part of the reader and change the code of reading – this is definitely a plural practice: visual, voiced and heard – the criteria of newsworthiness, conception and production of news also change. Indeed, in this world of ours today placed on a technical network, the habitual experience of time, of the successive temporal order, is being profoundly modified, giving way to simultaneousness and to hybridization. A new type of flow links the network structure of the modern urban organization to the new configurations of electronic information. In this new flow, we are beginning to read and hear in a different way. Journalistic research cannot ignore this transformation.

| NOTE

- 1 Opening talk at the 8th Encounter of the Brazilian Association of Journalism Researchers (SBPjor) in São Luis, State of Maranhão, on November 8, 2010.

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