

MARGINAL NOTES, ZEITGEIST AND MEMORY OF THE PRESENT TIME:

readers' comments in cyberjournalism

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ABSTRACT - This work proposes an application of the concept of Marginal Notes to journalistic texts, and more specifically, their utilization for the characterization of Readers' Comments in Cyberjournalism as an emerging form of Memory. The concept of Marginal Notes is discussed in its classical sense and then transposed to the situation of journalistic production. The idea of journalistic Marginal Notes is also associated with the topic of the War of the Memories, but what is basically distinguished is the value of the preservation of these comments as possible indicators of a Zeitgeist to be possibly recovered, from a specific historical distance. Some examples of Marginal Notes in journalism in online media are furnished. Attention is called to the need for understanding Marginal Notes as a "text", in the broad sense of the word, since all the (multi)media formats incorporated as readers' contributions should be included in the concept, and consequently efforts should be made for their preservation for future uses.

Keywords: Marginal Notes. Zeitgeist. Cyberjournalism. Readers' Comments. Participatory Journalism, Memory.

MARGINÁLIA, 'ZEITGEIST' E MEMÓRIA DO TEMPO PRESENTE os comentários de leitores no ciberjornalismo

RESUMO - Este ensaio propõe-se a uma aplicação do conceito de Marginália ao texto jornalístico e mais particularmente sua utilização para a caracterização de Comentários de Leitores no Ciberjornalismo, como uma forma emergente de Memória. O conceito de Marginália é discutido em sua acepção clássica e em seguida transposto para a situação de produção jornalística. A ideia de Marginália jornalística é também associada ao tema da Guerra das Memórias, mas assinala-se, fundamentalmente, o valor da preservação de tais comentários como possíveis indicadores de um *Zeitgeist* a ser eventualmente recuperado, a partir de uma determinada distância histórica. São fornecidos alguns exemplos de Marginália em jornalismo em veículos *on-line*. Chama-se a atenção para a necessidade de entendimento de Marginália como um "texto", no sentido amplo da palavra, pelo que todos os formatos (multi)mediáticos incorporados como contribuições de leitores devem ser englobados pelo conceito e, conseqüentemente, pelos esforços que se devem enviar para a sua preservação para usos futuros.

Palavras-chave: Marginália. Zeigeist. Ciberjornalismo. Comentários de Leitores. Jornalismo Participativo. Memória.

The Marginalia that we see and write today are in a direct line of descent from those of two thousand years ago. Indeed the custom may be as old as script itself, for readers have to interpret writing, and note follows text as thunder follows lightning”
(H. J. Jackson)

The readers’ comment sections can be considered today as the most utilized and most popular form of opening and stimulating participation in cyberjournalism (DÍAZ NOCI *et alii*, 2010). Works on the utilization of readers’ comments in cyberjournalism have concentrated, for the most part, on some issues which often appear in the studies performed:

a) the possible effects of participatory mechanisms in the amplification of the public sphere, by means of the creation or amplification of space for debate and deliberation (CORREIA, 2002; GILMOR, 2005; MAIA, 2008; GOMES; MAIA, 2008), as well as the creation of new dynamics between the media agenda and a “secondary political agenda and a posteriori directly derived from the media agenda, filtered and divulged rhizomatically by means of comments, sending of news by e-mail, postings of calls in blogs and social networks (SHOEMAKER *et alii.*, 2010);

b) the possible effects of these mechanisms on making viable “business models” in cyberjournalism, especially with respect to users’ faithfulness (PALACIOS, 2010; DÍAZ NOCI *et alii.*, 2009; THURMAN, 2008);

c) the possible effects of the increase in semantic resolution (FIDALGO, 2007) which these comments could contribute to journalistic information in the form of complements, rectifications and/or possible suggestions for development (BRUNS, 2005);

d) the ethical consequences resulting from the seal of authenticity and credibility which a platform and a journalistic logo could lend to comments which can be “incorrect, offensive and without factual support” (SINGER; ASHMAN, 2009; 12-13)¹.

In this work I will deal with another dimension to be taken into consideration in the light of the generalization of the comments as an integral part of cyberjournalistic production: their characterization as a new form of Marginal Notes and their possible effects on Memory, especially with respect to the relations between journalistic memory and History².

Marginal Notes in their historical perspective

In a paper (PALACIOS, 2009) presented at the II Congreso de Ciberperiodismo y Web 2.0 in 2009, I had the opportunity to present for

debate some topics on the relations between journalistic memory and History. This is not the place for going over these ideas, but it is timely to recall some of the points which were only mentioned then and which will be developed in more detail in this work.

It is important to emphasize once again, in the first place, that Memory and History are far from being synonyms. "History is the always questionable, incomplete reconstruction of what no longer exists [and] memory is a phenomenon which is always current, a vivid link in the eternal present; history is a representation of the past" (SODRÉ, 2009, p. 9).

It is equally important to recall our suggestion that

at the very least, readers' comments on the news (giving enormously more power to the old *Readers' Letters*), as well as opinions expressed in forums or sections created to display 'citizen journalists' contributions' have begun to function as a kind of Marginal Notes to the journalistic text, as the copyists of old manuscripts formerly used to note in the margin their opinions and observations. A new area of interest for the historian should open up, therefore, based on these inscriptions which added users' voices and recorded their reactions to texts originally produced by journalists (PALACIOS, 2009).

It is precisely this idea of **Readers' Comments** as a new form of **Marginal Notes** that I intend to delimit and develop in this work.

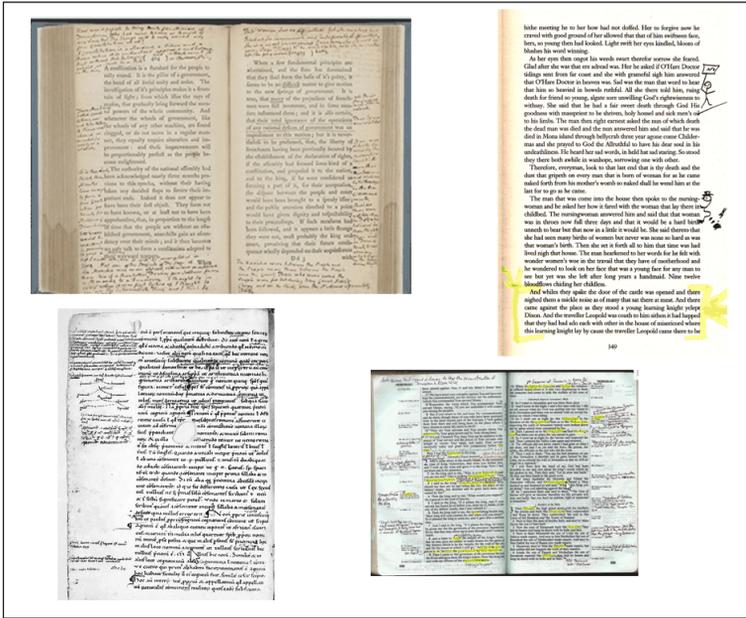
The possible characterization of the opinions expressed by readers as **Marginal Notes** should be initiated necessarily with a discussion of this idea and possible adjustments for its utilization with respect to this practice in the journalism area.

In a broad way, Marginal Notes can be characterized as any type of annotation made by a reader in a text.

A first element to point out is that Marginal Notes, as the production of a parallel text, should be understood in the full interpretation of "text", since they could be equally made up of symbols, graphs, drawings, etc. and not just text in the alphabetical meaning of the word.

A second aspect to be emphasized concerns the temporal dimension of the phenomenon. The annotations made in the margin of a text can have immediate utility for the one who created them, as for example to facilitate the presentation of the main ideas of an article in an academic seminar, but they can also survive this immediate temporality and even extrapolate by far their creator's original intention. A classic example of dual temporality of Marginal Notes is found in the famous *Glosas Emilianenses*³.

Figure 1 - Marginal Notes can be comprehensible indications just for the one who created them



The *Glosas Emilienses* are annotations in Latin, Romance and Basque, written in the XI century, probably by a student, in a Latin text, in the library of the San Millan Monastery, in Spain, with the clear intention of resolving difficulties in the syntactic, morphological and lexical comprehension of that Latin text. However, in the midst of these annotations, “the oldest appearance (until now) of something that is not Latin and seems to be Castilian” was found, constituting “the first historical example of our language” (ALARCOS LLORACH, 1982, p. 10 and 17). That is to say, without any intention of this type, the Marginal Notes in the manuscript were creating the first record of a new language: Castilian.

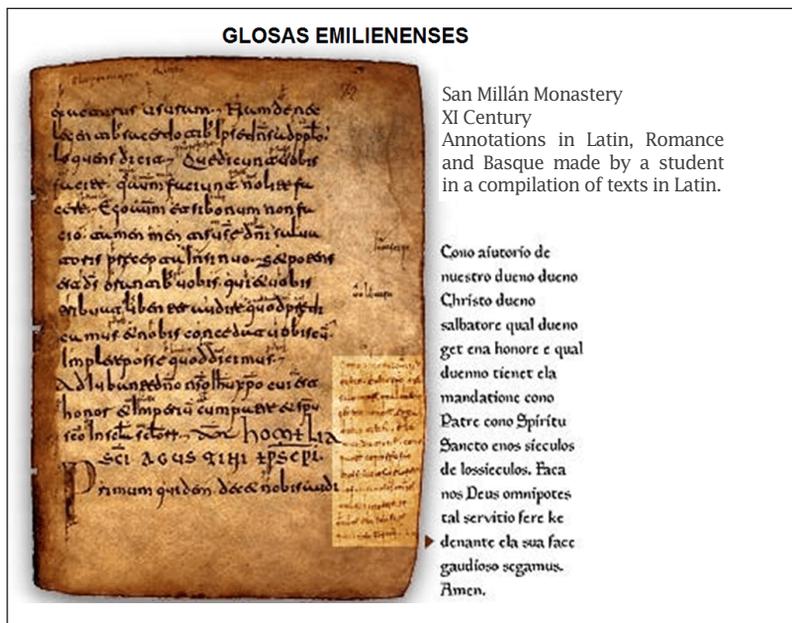
The text says:

«Cono aiutorio de nuestro dueno, dueno Christo, dueno Salbatore, qual dueno get ena honore, e qual duenno tienet ela mandatione cono Patre, cono Spiritu Sanc to, enos sieculos de losieculos. Faca nos Deus omnipotes tal serbitio fere ke denante ela sua face gaudioso segamus. Amen».

The *Glosas* were written in the XI century, but were only discovered and identified in terms of their linguistic value at the beginning of the XX century⁴. This interregnum of centuries places the Marginal Notes in the province of the historian, in the work involved in the reconstruction of that which, at a certain time past, was nothing

more than immediate and utilitarian memory, annotations in order not to forget a given present, in this case the Latin lesson on which the student was concentrating in that far-off XI century.

Figure 2 - The *Glosas Emilienses* illustrate the possibilities Of Margin Notes´ multiple temporalities



Obviously, in this case a clear dual temporality, but we could speak more appropriately of the Marginal Notes´ potential multiple temporalities. Let us consider an example: Byron, Shelley and other authors of their group of romantics used to share their books and note their impressions in the margins. It is clear that the annotations served an immediate purpose for the group, but on being preserved, they began to represent important elements for the study of those authors´ ideas, in a succession of interpretations, which will be altered to the extent that the literary criticism of the Romantic period will also be developed and modified, down through the decades. That is to say, many rereadings of the same Marginal Notes are always possible.

Marginal Notes and journalistic writing

The first controversial issue which comes up concerns the use of the term Marginal Notes, when we refer to the journalistic text. The current use of the term refers to annotations in books or manuscripts. Until what point, therefore, can one talk about Marginal Notes when

the subject under study is the newspaper, whether printed or the cybernewspaper of our days?

In a study which certainly has the importance to become seminal, H.J. Jackson (2001, p. 14) explicitly excludes newspapers from the body of his study, in the understanding that “people do not make annotations in newspapers”. This negative idea seems to be associated with the interpretation that newspapers constitute short-lived things, therefore not being kept for later consultation, as is the case of books, in addition to being for the exclusive use of a reader, not circulating among other readers as happens more frequently with books.

The two notions, however, are questionable. On one hand, it is known that printed newspapers are read by multiple users, a fact which is taken into account when numbers of readers are calculated with relation to the circulation⁵. This multiple utilization of a single copy was even more accentuated in the XIX century and the keeping of newspapers or clippings from them has always been a common practice. H.J. Jackson himself, in a later work (JACKSON, 2005), talks of the circulation of newspaper copies among many people and, even more important, based on a study of the formation of audiences in England (KLANCHER, 1987), points to the fact that readers and authors in the case of newspapers were to a great extent interchangeable, since until 1839 newspapers depended strongly on readers’ contributions to the point that it is possible to speak of an “a communal interchange of writing and reading”. In a certain way “comments” entered into the following editions under the guise of “contributions” to matters previously dealt with. However, I am unaware of any study which revolves specifically around the survey of readers’ marks left in the body itself of printed newspapers, as **Marginal Notes**.

Cyberjournalism and Marginal Notes

With cyberjournalism the comments are now incorporated into the same space as the original journalistic text, so that we can talk of marginal notes in the physical sense of the word.

The novelty, on considering the readers’ comments in cyberjournalism as Marginal Notes, is their regression to an indefinite temporal dimension, withdrawing them from the field of the “hot” recording of the event and the reactions to the event and placing them in the perspective of a “first draft” (ZELIZER, 2008, p. 81) of History, awaiting a professional touch which would transform the “draft” into “finished text”, “final version”, into History, in the disciplinary meaning of a field of

studies of Humanities.

Figure 3 - The readers' comments are incorporated into the original text



On making this movement of temporal, programmatic/disciplinary dislocation of the place of the comments, classifying them as Marginal Notes, we are also declaring that – from the strictly historical point of view – issues which we listed at the beginning of this work and which are important in the approaches to studying these same comments lose importance. Thus, the issues of the “amplification or not of the public sphere”, of the mechanism’s efficiency in making communication companies economically viable, of the greater or lesser relevance or accuracy of the topics dealt with in the flow of the comments, of the greater or lesser total of immediate semantic load, or of the consequences of the utilization of tools in ethical and deontological terms. Aspects of all these issues can return to the agenda, being established as points of interest at the time of the historical analysis of the comments, but they will have so much value if they present positive as well as negative values. That is to say, in terms of historical analysis, the **pertinence** is as important as the **non-pertinence** of the comments on a specific matter; both the presence as well as the absence of ideological loads and marks; what was **said** is as important as what was **silenced**.

In addition, the simple quantification of the Marginal Notes, produced as spontaneous comments on published news, can constitute a

valid element for the comprehension of aspects of journalistic reception, as illustrated in the study by Shoemaker *et alii.* (2010).

Even so, and even in the disciplinary dimension of History, there will always be a “micro level” in which specific comments – by authors or anonymous – highly pertinent (“pearls”) will be able to be screened based on the existing groups, remaining in first place, in this case, the issue of the aggregation of semantic value (FIDALGO, 2007). It is certainly possible to anticipate that the prospecting of these comments with high potential for the aggregation of semantic value or with intrinsic interest for reasons of authorship, for example, will be a difficult task.

Many “pearls” in comments and Readers’ Letters were identified in printed newspapers as time passed. Authorship can confer enormous value on these documents. An exemplary case involve the letters sent to *The New York Times* which can be researched in its online file, and which contain outstanding signatures, such as those of Mark Twain or Albert Einstein. Searches of this type are being made easier to the extent that the collections are digitalized and highly specialized services for searches in newspapers are beginning to emerge⁶.

Different from the Readers’ Letters of the printed newspaper, the comments of readers in cyberjournalism are to a great extent anonymous, although in many cases the right to make comments is only established if the reader agrees to make – previously – his registration and to furnish data regarding his identity⁷.

Spontaneous comment vs. Induced comment

Persisting in the search for parallels between Marginal Notes and readers’ comments on online news, a brief appraisal would be in order of the different types of Marginal Notes, in terms of their addressing. For whom are Marginal Notes produced?

With respect to classic Marginal Notes in books, a triple potential addressing can be identified:

a) notes for the use of the producer of Marginal Notes himself, either comments of a critical nature, addendums or simple reading marks highlighting important passages;

b) notes directed to other possible readers of the text, within whom the author himself could possibly be included, as pointed out by Jackson (2005), on dealing with the forms of reading and circulation of books (and therefore of Marginal Notes) throughout the XIX century.

In the case of Marginal Notes in cyberjournalistic products, we are obviously dealing with a use which is included in item **b** above, since

the notes for the writer's own use are replaced by clippings of the story, often in spaces of the journalistic site itself, open to the community of readers, and in which the users of the newspaper are invited to mount their own blogs and maintain their private clipping spaces⁸. Journalistic Marginal Notes in the form of comments have as addressees other readers of the news and its authors.

It is also important to emphasize that on being produced in the form of spontaneous comments on published news and not as "induced comments", as in the case of forums, in which the communication company decides on the topics for debate, the comments on the news have as a result the production of a public agenda of a secondary nature, filtered from the general media agenda proposed by the communication media. In this connection, it is once more pointed out that, regardless of the comments' intrinsic value, their very volume constitutes an element of interest and a subject for analysis. This quantitative utilization can be identified in a work by Shoemaker *et alii.* (2010) which discusses the formation of this secondary public agenda derived from the media agenda, through the identification and inter-cultural comparison of the "most commented" items in newspapers from the United States, Brazil and China. "When readers communicate with other readers, they increase the normal process of *gatekeeping*, but their choices may not reflect the news values of the journalists who developed the sites" (SHOEMAKER *et alii.*, 2010, p, 58).

The purely quantitative survey of Marginal Notes, in the form of spontaneous comments on the news, can perhaps be a utilizable element for understanding the forms of selection and importance of information in different cultures, regardless of the comments' intrinsic value in terms of the increase in "semantic value" (FIDALGO, 2007).

The quantitative treatment of Marginal Notes can thus constitute a tool of potential interest with respect to the study of some aspects of journalistic reception, especially regarding the comparative inter-cultural dimension of the increased importance of the material made available for consumption by the journalistic companies (media agenda). In fact, Shoemaker *et alii.* (2010, p. 61) conclude that "the characteristics of the most popular news items, as decided by audiences in China, in Brazil and in the United States" show that "these countries' readers have different criteria in mind when their actions place news items on the most popular list".

Journalistic Marginal Notes and War of Memories

"It is as if the past snowed on us". This expression used by

Régine Robin (2003), borrowed from Jean Christophe Bailly, illustrates, by use of the image, the situation of contemporary societies, “saturated with memory” in the author’s view. Saturated with memories that multiplied exponentially with the electronic media; polyphonic, contradictory memories that dispute a place for existence and hegemony governed by the “keep everything” phantasm which accompanies our immersion in the virtual world. With the emergence and consolidation of the Internet, a new, highly impacting element entered the scene with respect to the so-called “war of the memories”. The concept of war of the memories has been discussed by historians for some time, and for some, this factor became a founding element in the play of identities in the four corners of the world (BLANCHARD; VEYRAT-MASSON, 2008, p. 23).

Louise Merzeau (2008, p. 294) points out that “the Internet is much more than an inert support in which the war of memories would simply be projected or expressed. In addition to producing the traditional cleavages, the network also produces new conditions for the development, maintenance and confrontation of memory, which we are only beginning to comprehend”. Similarly for the author, a full evaluation of the new conditions for production of memory material requires us to free ourselves from the commonplaces of the “memory deficit” and of the “eternal present”, adopting a posture which reformulates the issue of the conflicts of memory in terms of strategies, of power and of territories. In our informational environments, more and more competitive, “the instituted places of memory seek more and more to maintain their monopoly, [...] threatened by the new devices of a distributed memory” (MERZEAU, p. 296).

The relation between Memory and History, in the academic field, is obviously affected by these new devices and by the proliferation of this distributed memory, produced exponentially and in constant flux. This work is not the place for a discussion of the positions which are being taken, in this respect, by various historians and by the various lines of historiography. We refer those interested to the work by Gilles Boëtsch (2005) which can serve as a productive starting point, especially with regard to the French university scene.

How would journalistic Marginal Notes, therefore, be situated in the context of this war of memories? Would this product of journalism’s conversational dimension inaugurated (or, to be more precise, given a high potential) by communication in digital networks, besides constituting one more addition in this sum of “memory snows”, have specific characteristics worthy of note? We believe it would.

In the first place, the previously mentioned nature of spontaneity which involves this type of contribution to journalistic sites should be emphasized. The follow-up of these poles of spontaneous interest can be made up, by itself alone, of “indicators of attention” for the historian with respect to the prevalence of public interest at certain times and in certain news constellations. And this is something of little importance in a society characterized by the “Attention Economy” (DAVENPORT, 2001; LANHAM, 2006).

My main suggestion here is that, thought of as Marginal Notes, and as material for passing from memory to History in a “macro sense”, as “mass of comments”, the *Zeitgeist* or *genius seculi* (Latin: *genius* – “guardian spirit” and *seculi* – “of the century”) to be recovered based on these situations involving readers’ participation in a certain period and on a certain matter will be more important than specificities from any of the debates in particular, except the above-mentioned possible “pearls”.

An illustrative example of how Readers’ Comments can constitute material indicative of broader panoramas than the specific subject of the news itself to which they relate can be appreciated in the recent debate established between Brazilians and Portuguese regarding a propaganda video of the European Union. The video was intended to stress the importance of merchandise produced by the European countries when faced with foreign competition, and was withdrawn from circulation due to its having xenophobic and racist connotations. The video represented Europe, disguised as a super-heroine attacked by super-villains, representing China, India and Brazil. In the case of Brazil, the villain was a *capoeira* (typical Brazilian form of leg-wrestling) dancer, also with the right to a little samba as the introductory music⁹. The information about the withdrawal of the video, published in the Portuguese newspaper *Diário de Notícias*, generated 46 comments¹⁰ which, as such, were little more than reciprocal rude insults exchanged between Portuguese and Brazilians. A more attentive reading, however, detects in the debate reflections of the relative change in position of Brazilians and Portuguese because of the economic crisis which has been established in Europe – and especially in Portugal – in recent years, inverting the positions involving the desirability of immigration between the two countries. From the exit country, that exported manpower with little specialization to Portugal at the end of the 1990’s and in the beginning of the following decade, Brazil – now in a phase of relative economic expansion – became a possible destination for victims of the growing Portuguese unemployment¹¹.

Figure 4 - A reading of Comments beyond reciprocal insults

The image shows a screenshot of a news article on the DN TV & MEDIA website. The article is titled "UE obrigada a retirar anúncio por acusações de racismo" (UE forced to withdraw announcement due to racism accusations) and is dated 06 March 2012. The article features a video player showing a group of people on a stage. The page includes navigation menus, social sharing tools, and tags like "media, União Europeia, TV & Me: Racismo".

Another aspect worthy of note is the nature of stability of these comments, in the sense that – once they are posted – they cannot be modified by their authors. This characteristic of stability makes journalistic Marginal Notes something that is different from other forms of production of content on the network which generally have an “open” nature regarding the possibility of future corrections, additions or pure and simple deletion. In other cases, such as *Wikipedia*, one can talk about a real war of memory-type positions, strongly marked by ideological colorations, involving articles on more polemic topics (MERZEAU, 2003, p. 295). Journalistic Marginal Notes, on the contrary, can be characterized as a form of “stabilized memory”.

On another side, an important questioning arises concerning the survival of journalistic Marginal Notes as memory-type material and of possible historic interest. Up to what point – and despite the alleged “syndrome of keeping everything” (ROBIN, 2005) that marks our societies – will these contributions be really filed and left for posterity by those responsible for their keeping and continuing public availability? We know that unfortunately the processes of filing and indexing

journalistic material made available on the network are still far from an effective normalization which guarantees the survival of its products, in a complete way, easily recoverable. The preservation of comments/ Marginal Notes is one more concern to be taken seriously in the scenario of the strategies for consolidation of Cyberjournalism.

And recalling that Marginal Notes, as the production of a “parallel text”, should be understood in the full meaning of “text”, since they can be made up of symbols, graphs, drawings, etc. and not just text in the alphabetic sense of the word, the preservation of journalistic Marginal Notes should include, on equal terms, the image, sound, graphic etc. materials possibly attached to the original information under the guise of comments.

NOTES

- 1 Each one of these areas of questioning is covered by an ample bibliography. The authors indicated appear simply by way of illustration of these approaches.
- 2 A preliminary version of this text was presented at the II Congreso de Ciberperiodismo y Web 2.0 in 2010, with the title : “Marginália no Ciberjornalismo: Os Comentários de Leitores na Constituição da Memória do Tempo Presente” (“Marginal Notes in Cyberjournalism: Readers’ Comments in the Constitution of the Memory of the Present Time”).
- 3 Glosas from the Greek Koiné γλῶσσα, which means “tongue” – the organ – as well as “language”.
- 4 “The one who first perceived this transcendence was D. Manuel Gómez Moreno (1911), who transcribed all the *glosas* and sent them to Menéndez Pidal” (GARCÍA TURZA; ÁNGEL MURO, 1992).
- 5 In a study made in 2009 in the United States by Scarborough Research in partnership with the Newspaper National Network LP (NNN) revealed that in that country a copy of a printed newspaper is read on the average by 3.3 adults. See <<http://www.masteremjornalismo.org.br/categorias/3-alem-da-noticia/noticias/2361-numero-de-leitores-por-exemplar-de-jornal-aumenta-75-nos-eua>>.
- 6 See, for example: <<http://www.proquest.com/en-US/catalogs/databases/detail/pq-hist-news.shtml>>.

- 7 The comments' anonymous nature can be something that will not last long. The most radical example in the sense of trying to control the identity of those who comment comes from the American cybernewspaper *Sun Chronicle*, which began to charge a symbolic fee for registration of "commentators" with the objective of guaranteeing that readers' comments have a verifiable signature, through the use of credit cards. See: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/greenslade/2010/jul/13/paywalls-us-press-publishing>>.

- 8 As examples we mention *My Telegraph* of the British *Daily Telegraph* (<<http://my.telegraph.co.uk/>>) and *Archives et Classeurs* of the French *Le Monde* (<<http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/web/classeur/1,28-0,1-0,0.html>>). Both form part of the business models of the two newspapers, with the tool of the *Telegraph* being free while that of *Le Monde* requires a paid subscription.

- 9 The video withdrawn from circulation can be seen on YouTube: <<http://youtu.be/nc62SOMYExA>>.

- 10 *Diário de Notícias*, March 6, 2012. <http://www.dn.pt/inicio/tv/interior.aspx?content_id=2345612&seccao=Media&page=-1>.

- 11 A great discussion was caused, in December 2011, by the suggestion of the Portuguese Prime Minister (Pedro Passos Coelho) in the sense that Portuguese teachers should look toward the "market of the Portuguese language" as an alternative to the unemployment which was affecting the teachers in Portugal. See: <<http://www.ionline.pt/portugal/passos-coelho-sugere-professores-desempregados-emigrem-brasil-angola>>.

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