

# KNOWLEDGE OF JOURNALISM IN THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

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## ABSTRACT

In the letters written by Voltaire, Juan Luis Cebrián and Alberto Dines, I find a wisdom originating from experience which is transformed into knowledge for the practice of the profession. In this wisdom there are signs that journalism dialogues with the disciplines of the social sciences and of language, at the same time that their authors point out the issues which will be transformed into the subject for study according to the theories of journalism. From the wisdom of experience to scientific practice and from the latter to the practice of the profession there is a circulation of knowledge which, in this article, I place in the perspective of the hermeneutic circle indicated by Boaventura de Souza Santos.

**Key words:** Journalistic practice. Letters from journalists. Scientific knowledge. Hermeneutic circle.

## INTRODUÇÃO

In order to identify the nature of journalism knowledge, I consider it basic to begin with the simplest questions: where do the issues which motivate the theories of journalism come from? What is the position of the journalism study field within the Social Sciences?

The point of view which places the production of scientific knowledge in a hermeneutic circle seems appropriate for dealing with these questions. For three reasons: a) because it transforms science – strange and distant – into something familiar and close at hand, which, not speaking the everyday language, is capable of communicating to us its discoveries and its limits; b) because it considers the production of knowledge to be a social practice which is carried out through dialogue with the world; and c) because it teaches us that we cannot comprehend any of the parts (the “discoveries” of the different disciplines) unless we have some comprehension of how the whole “works” and vice versa, we cannot comprehend the entirety unless we have some comprehension of how its parts “work”.

The hermeneutic reflection, therefore, seeks to transform the

distant into the near, the strange into the familiar, by means of a rational discourse guided by the desire for dialogue with the subject of the reflection so that it could speak to us, and to the extent that it is relevant for us, enrich us and contribute to the deepening of the comprehension of the role of knowledge in society.

Bringing hermeneutic reflection to bear on journalism, we observe the importance of considering journalism studies as a social practice dialoguing with society, with performing journalism and with the disciplines which form the constellation of the Social and Human Sciences. Journalism theories as a part of this must know how the other parts “work” and how its part is “worked” by the whole.

We know that the Social Sciences are built based on a totality, the “social reality”, the “total social phenomenon”, and for this reason the distinction between the various disciplines can only come from the latter themselves, and cannot have another meaning other than what each one of these disciplines confronts, approaches and analyzes that same reality in a different way.

Disciplinary fragmentation, which thus results from processes that are internal in scientific-social knowledge, produces a double forgetfulness: that of the Social Sciences being a social practice among others; that of the differences that they build upon the social reality (their theoretical subjects) are no different from the differences which permit them to affirm their autonomy as social practices which constitute the “total social phenomenon” and in relation to other knowledge, scientific or not, that is built upon this latter. Hermeneutic reflection has, then, a double relevance here: making comprehensible what the Social Sciences are in society, and what they say about society (SANTOS, 1989, p. 14).

Journalism studies constitute a discipline because of the existing disciplinary fragmentation, with the mission of confronting, approaching, analyzing one aspect of the social reality – journalistic practices and languages – which, in turn, do not exist outside society and are not produced without language.

The hermeneutic reflection also contributes to the thinking about the relations between the practices and to know how to listen to what journalism has to say about itself and about society, following Bourdieu’s warning:

A scientific practice which forgets to question itself does not know, strictly speaking, what it does. A prisoner of the subject which it takes as the subject, it discovers anything of the subject, but is not truly objectified, since it is a question of the subject’s own principles.

It is appropriate, then, to question journalism studies as a

scientific practice, which in a very special way are very likely to commit the error of which Bourdieu mentions: it is easy for us to become entangled in the principles of journalism, as if they themselves were the subject for the study of journalism.

On the other hand, what is to be studied in journalism not based on its principles and its practices? This is perhaps the first dialogue in the circuit of knowledge or in the hermeneutic circle which the study of journalism stimulates.

What are the principles of journalism? How can one move from the principles of journalism to the study of the principles of journalism, and how, in this movement, are the different disciplines convoked? In the last instance, it is a question of observing how the relation between the part and the whole takes place.

Returning here to the first of the simple questions at the beginning of the text: where do the issues which motivate journalism studies come from, my answer: they come from the practice of the profession. The first movement towards knowledge of journalism goes from the wisdom acquired by the practice of the profession to a wisdom formulated as knowledge, prescription or guidance. With which we are familiar, for example, in the form of Writing Manuals, but which are also found in other manifestations.

As an example, I present three texts of journalists who, reflecting on the profession, synthesize the knowledge of it.

It is the wisdom of experience written in a very special way: the letter. In a letter someone addresses someone else to give the latter news, to recount things, to advise, ask questions. And even though it deals with rational topics, the letter carries the mark of the subjective text, of the colloquial treatment, of the availability for establishing a relation. In this case, they are letters from someone who presents himself as someone who is authorized to give advice: the journalist who knows, because he is a journalism professional, talks to someone who wants to become a journalist. The interlocutor of this letter wants to know what journalism is in order to practice it and to give continuity to the profession. It is a prescriptive wisdom which we find, in the most simplified form, in the Writing Manuals.

The letters were written at very different times and places: Voltaire in France, Juan Luis Cebrián in Spain and Alberto Dines in Brazil.

*Conselhos a um jornalista* (Advice for a journalist), published in 1765, is the second version of the text *Exortações a um jornalista* (Exhortations for a journalist), from 1737. It has 37 pages. Voltaire,

say his biographers, on approaching the most varied subjects, acted as an authentic journalist in the diffusion of his ideas regarding political, social or literary matters. He said: “my job is to say what I think”. The presenter of the letter says in the introduction to the book:

The Voltairian strategy makes an effort to mobilize public opinion. For this reason the work is divided into short chapters, intermingled with spirited sayings which in the end make an emotional appeal. This is journalism. This is the journalist’s vocation. Some of his pamphlets attained a circulation of 300 thousand copies, even the clergy read his writings.

*Cartas a un joven periodista e un epílogo para adolescentes* (Letters to a young journalist and an epilogue for adolescents), by Juan Luis Cebrián, published in 2003, had a first edition in 1977. It has 22 pages. Cebrián was born in Madrid in 1944, is the founder of the newspaper *El País*, ran the newspaper from 1976 to 1988 and later became an executive of the group. He has published many books. The most recent is *O Pianista no Bordel. Jornalismo, democracia e novas tecnologias* (The Pianist in the Brothel. Journalism, democracy and new technologies), published in Brazil in 2010. In the *Cartas* of 1977 his interlocutor is named Honório, “just a name, to whom to tell my experiences”, the author says, and adds:

So you can be a good pretext, perhaps nothing more than that, so that on writing you I write for myself and that we reflect together on this profession which took up all my existence, to which I devoted more time than to any other thing in this life, and which afforded me so many satisfactions that you cannot even imagine, in exchange only for devoting myself to it with the veneration of a faithful supporter and the resignation of a slave (CEBRIÁN, 2003, p. 3).

Alberto Dines published in September 2003 in the special edition on journalism in the *Revista da ESPM*, his *Carta a um jovem jornalista* (Letter to a young journalist). It has four pages. Alberto Dines has been active in journalism for 50 years. He created the first periodical for accompanying the media in Brazil by means of the site (*Observatório da Imprensa* (Press Observatory), with regular presence on the Internet since April 1996, and which currently has also versions on the radio and on TV. Dines has already published more than 15 books.

I am reproducing some fragments of each letter, chosen for what they say of love of the profession (always heroic) and of the disciplines which they select in order to explain journalism’s part in all the Social Sciences.

**Voltaire:**

You ask how one should act so that a newspaper pleases our century and posterity. I will answer with two words: Be impartial. You have science and taste; if, besides this, you are just, I predict a lasting success for you.

I advise you above all on including philosophical writings, to first offer the reader a kind of historical synthesis of the proposed opinions or of the established truths.

Mention on the proper occasion the inventors of all the new discoveries. Let your publication be a faithful record of the great men's glory. Above all, on offering opinions, supporting them or attacking them, avoid injurious words which irritate an author and frequently an entire nation, without clarifying them for anybody. Exclude animosity and irony.

Inspire, above all, in the youth, more taste for the history of recent times, which is for us a necessity, than for ancient history, which does not go beyond curiosity; let them think that modern history has the advantage of being more correct, by the very fact of being modern.

I ask you to explain in a clear way that the modern histories written by contemporaries are more correct, in general, than all the ancient histories, which are more doubtful regarding details. Let me explain. Men differ among themselves with relation to state, party, religion. The warrior and the magistrate do not see the same events with the same eyes, which is the vice of all epochs. [...] We do not have ancient historians who have written one against the others about one same event; they would have sown doubt regarding things that today we consider uncontested. No matter how little credible they may be, let us respect them for two reasons: because they are ancient and because they have not been contradicted. We, contemporary historians, are a very different case.

In the exposition which you will make of these ingenious books, you will not fall into that severity of some critics. Never employ a new word, unless it has these three traits: necessary, intelligible and sonorous. New ideas, mainly in physics, require new expressions, but replacing a usual word with another word whose sole merit is novelty is not enriching the language, it is debasing it. Public documents and newspapers are continually infected by improper expressions which the public is forced to become accustomed to reading them again.

Accumulate profound and just ideas. In this way, the words come easily. Observe how men who thought better were also those who wrote better (VOLTAIRE, 2006, p. 3-37).

**Juan Luis Cebrián:**

In four letters, Cebrián approaches the vocation issue in professional training, freedom of expression and the difference between private life and intimacy when the journalist reports on public figures.

If you have a vocation or not? It would be better to ask if you are curious, impertinent, if you are interested in your surroundings, if you want to investigate the reason for things. Then, I don't know whether you have a vocation, but at least some of the necessary skills.

Because in reality, what does it mean to be a journalist?

One of the first requirements is curiosity. Philosophers called this the capability to be amazed, and it implies a certain ingenuousness of the spirit, a love for what is new, in being willing to allow oneself to be surprised every morning.

The good thing about the journalist, in summary, is that he is

interested in everything, he falls in love with everything, he is carried away by everything and for everything. His job is to eviscerate events in order to synthesize them. Look at the front page of a newspaper. It is an irregular mosaic in which the latest news of politics is mixed with the result of the soccer game and crimes of passion. Behind each one of these accounts is a journalist who writes them, and another who evaluates them and who has the sensitivity to suspend things so different and seek the motivations in common that lead him to deposit all those events on the front page: motivations that refer to the reader's interest. That is to say, a journalist needs to practice the prior desire to get to know, and in this respect he is similar to the philosophers, but he also has to feel the need to recount all these things, and in this, he seems to be a narrator (CEBRIÁN, 2003, p. 2-5).

In the second letter he simulates a question by Honório regarding whether one should enroll in a journalism faculty.

What I assure you is that journalism is anything but a science. Much has already been discussed concerning this and we will continue discussing. The discussion is important, since the quality of our press in the future will depend on how the preparation of our future journalists is resolved.

The journalist is by nature a generalist, but good quality journalism, demanding and rigorous in the description of the facts, needs a good number of specialists – in economics, in science, in health, in laws – capable of understanding what is happening and narrating it to the others. On the other hand there are some specific techniques and norms of the profession – how to obtain a news item, how to verify sources, how to draft a report, how to utilize the new technologies – whose knowledge is basic when practicing the profession. Study economy, or laws or political sciences, be a specialist in humanities and then learn how to inform. And let neither guts nor anger be lacking for you, and you are not in too much of a hurry, which is one of our youths' infirmities (*Ibid*, p. 6-9).

In the third letter he talks about the duty of informing which refers basically to those in power:

[...] and which in any case should not apply to defenseless citizens and much less the application of laws so little humanitarian and cynical such as those which sent Maria to prison for having an abortion. Supported by the great declarations on freedom of expression or about the right to information, sensationalist journalism practices are not infrequent, being employed with the sole objective of selling, winning a larger audience and achieving a triumph at the cost of some else's misfortune.

I consider that many of these journalists are good journalists, they have curiosity, perseverance, the passion and the skepticism needed to devote themselves to the profession. But they lack their conviction of citizens. Moral norms cannot be thought of in a different way than the rules of the profession (*Ibid*, p. 10-11).

Finally, extending the problem of the freedom to inform, Cebrián distinguishes between the concepts of private life and intimacy, frequently treated in a confused, haphazard way. He says:

The former refers to the social sphere in which the existence of the person and his family takes place; intimacy implies allusions

to his personality, his moral evaluation, his intellectual integrity. The public interest is something of the same essence as freedom of expression. If the latter is a social asset and not only a right of the individuals, it seems obvious to me that some of the personal freedoms can decline in their practice in the light of a higher interest, which is the public interest.

There is a right to know on the part of the citizenry which should be matched by an effort to provide veracity on the part of the journalists (*Ibid*, p. 16-18).

### **Alberto Dines:**

Calling his letter a *mega-twitter* addressed to the journalist who considers himself the member of the last romantic profession, Dines says that in order to qualify to be his addressee, a strong dose of devotion to the profession suffices.

After saying that journalism is a profession plus a state of the mind, he says that a kind of syncretic activity which soon is converted into a nature and, immediately afterwards, into a vital effort, disposed to change the world.

What is indispensable to change the world based on journalism? A small toolbox and in it an essential item of equipment: the knowledge of history. I am not referring to the history of humanity, which is a mandatory discipline for all those who participate in it. The history with which you should obligatorily be familiar is the history of journalism. Or better: how journalism has been changing the world even before it was called journalism.

Gutenberg is the hero of a legion of thinkers, authors, visionaries, translators, artists, engravers, stationers, printers, booksellers, all direct beneficiaries of his innovations.

Who knew how to record, organize, update, place in a hierarchy and in a time sequence the formidable mass of information produced since then was a category – or a band – of madmen: the journalists. You, a young or old journalist, you are a craftsman of history, or, if you prefer, a historian with his foot on the accelerator.

Therefore, question, shake up, excavate the past of your profession. Then, duly equipped and aware, enjoy fully all the delights of Steve Jobs' gadgets (DINES, 2010, p. 22-25);

The three letters have much in common although each one speaks from its time and place. The three journalists dialogue with history. They declare the journalist to be a historian, a contemporary historian, a historian with his foot on the accelerator, a craftsman of history. Narrators of the events lived, witnessed, observed, the three letter-writers prescribe how the journalist should act. They show admiration for the profession and extol the professionals. What are the skills they must have and what is the knowledge they must seek in order to communicate with their readers – basic aspects of the three letters.

In order to achieve the feat of being a journalist, these

professionals need to learn from history: as a concept for discerning what the present time is; and from historiography in order to become familiar with the past – what already happened illuminates the present just as the history of journalism clarifies its position in the world.

The letters express learning from experience with the intention of continuing the profession, recognizing as necessary History, Sociology, Philosophy and the disciplines for the mastery of writing with the mission of narrating the present.

They also stimulate scientific practice which taking up the principles of journalism (these are expressed in the letters) must disengage itself from them in order to transform them into a subject for study. The interesting dialogue of being observed and worked on is among these two instances: from the practice of the profession to scientific practice and from the latter, to return to the practice of the profession. It is a *continuum* between practices and accomplishments. It is a hermeneutic circle initiated in professional experience and returning to the latter after passing through scientific practice.

The intention based on the letters was to recognize in the journalist's text issues stimulated by the profession and the disciplines which the authors declare necessary for the practice of the profession. And, then, to take a step in the direction of academic practice, which begins from this base to construct its subjects for study.

They are dialogic instances for the production of knowledge: to get to know in order to afford continuity to the profession. The letters do this. And to get to know, disengaging from the principles of journalism, in order to criticize the existing journalism and project another, incorporating new disciplines – and which can lead us to other dialogues, such as that between research and teaching. Is what we learn as researchers expressed in teaching which contributes to the practice of the profession?

I close with a quotation from Cebrián in which the same topics are discussed

Journalism is a special literary style of an incontestably different nature, but with a creative law similar to that of essays, of novels or of works based on thought. A style replete with rules (rigor, hierarchy of the facts and quality of reflection) which impose restrictions of responsibility different from those which regulate other styles and transform it into a discipline which is not only that of making known, but rather that of knowledge itself (CEBRIÁN, 2010, p.33).

To make known is journalism, the wisdom of journalism is the



responsibility of a discipline, whose scientific practice is based on issues formulated in the practice of the profession combined with the wisdom of other disciplines or, in another formulation, it is the responsibility of the disciplines which help us to understand ourselves in contemporary society and which are divided more to coincide with the internal structure of the science than a requirement for knowledge of the reality in which journalism participates.

The hermeneutic reflection aims to deepen the dialogue of scientific practice with the other practices of knowledge with which society and the world are woven. Deepening the dialogue between journalistic practice and knowledge of journalism is to seek ways to establish less truncated and less dissonant dialogues between knowledge and accomplishment in the hope that journalism, on informing about reality, can contribute to the clarification of the world.

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