

# THE PATHS OF RECEPTION: an analysis of the Brazilian scientific production

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Brasileira de  
Pesquisadores em  
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**ABSTRACT** - The purpose of this paper is to reflect about the contours that the discussion about the audience on the webjournalism is gaining. Our search is for the perception of brazilian researchers regarding this topic. How is the experience of the audience in the world wide web observed, analyzed and reported by brazilian researchers? To answer this question, we seek scientific studies published from 2005 to 2011 in the seven top journals evaluated by Qualis, a system of the Brazilian institution Capes. A sample of 30 papers led us to conclude that most of the analyzed scientific productions were dedicated to effectively discuss the theme of the audience. Other aspects about journalism that could arouse interest are relegated to the background while the prevailing discussion is about the new scenery of audience, which, according to the authors studied, changed deeply with the advent of the Internet.

**Keywords:** Communication. Internet. Online Journalism. Audience.

## OS CAMINHOS DA RECEPÇÃO: uma análise da produção científica brasileira

**RESUMO** - A proposta deste artigo é refletir acerca dos contornos que o debate sobre a recepção na web vem ganhando. Nossa busca é pela percepção dos pesquisadores brasileiros com relação a este tema. Qual a experiência de recepção jornalística na rede mundial de computadores observada, analisada e comunicada pelos investigadores brasileiros? Para responder a essa questão, buscamos os artigos científicos publicados entre 2005 e 2011 nas sete revistas melhores avaliadas pelo sistema Qualis, da Capes. A amostra levou-nos a concluir que a maior parte dos estudos dedica-se efetivamente a discutir o tema da recepção. Outros aspectos do fazer jornalístico que poderiam despertar interesse são relegados ao segundo plano enquanto impera o debate sobre o novo cenário da recepção, que, conforme os autores, mudou profundamente com o advento da internet.

**Palavras-chaves:** Comunicação. Internet. Jornalismo On-line. Recepção.

## LOS CAMINOS DE LA RECEPCIÓN: un análisis de la producción científica brasileña

**RESUMEN** - El propósito de este artículo es reflexionar sobre los contornos que está adquiriendo el debate sobre la recepción en la Red informática. Nuestro interés es comprender la percepción de los investigadores brasileños con relación a este tema. ¿Cuáles son los aspectos del quehacer periodístico en la Red observados, analizados y comunicados por los investigadores brasileños? Para contestar a esta pregunta se buscaron artículos científicos publicados entre los años de 2005 y 2011 en las siete revistas mejor valoradas por el sistema de evaluación Qualis de la CAPES (Coordinación de Perfeccionamiento del Personal de Nivel Superior). La muestra nos llevó a concluir que la mayoría de los estudios están dedicados efectivamente a analizar el tema de la recepción. Otros aspectos del quehacer periodístico que podrían despertar interés son relegados a un segundo plano, mientras gana fuerza el debate sobre el nuevo escenario de la recepción que, según los autores, ha cambiado profundamente con el aparición de Internet.

**Palabras clave:** Comunicación. Internet. Periodismo en línea. Recepción.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the major issues regarding the Internet is its huge impact on the traditional mediated communication processes. From a one-for-all system, it has brought about a new production and reception scenario, which has, most likely, outperformed the classic stimulus-response model (LASSWELL, 1948). Indeed, the world network phenomenon has been the main target of investigators' curiosity in several areas, including Communication. Clear evidence of this recent interest are the adjustments made to the curricula of most undergraduate and graduate courses to accommodate this debate.

Regarding journalism, the debate over the Internet has also aroused interest. Has journalistic production changed because of the world wide web? Have the possibility of interaction and this probable new reception scenario shifted web-oriented journalistic production? Are we, therefore, living under the aegis of a more citizen-oriented media? This article aims at understanding how Brazilian investigators in the Communication field have been discussing the issue of reception within the journalistic area and its relation to the Internet. Could this new environment be beckoning with the promise of consolidating citizen journalism? Are we now living under the imperial rule of the recipient? Thus, we are interested in understanding how this debate is being built and analyzed by Brazilian researchers.

This article is, in fact, part of a more comprehensive study entitled "Analysis of scientific production and research in Communication in Brazil: an overview on the Internet", which has been undertaken to cast a light on Brazilian scientific production in the Communication field related to the Internet. In this study, more specifically, we aim at understanding how the relation between the Internet and reception is established.

We believe that reviewing the Brazilian scientific production is a basic undertaking to strengthen a particular area of study. Reading, discussing and analyzing our peers is, undoubtedly, a sensible task that should be taken up on a regular basis. Analyzing peer production is also a way to understand the network of influences, the paths traveled, the tendencies, limits and challenges of this knowledge area.

Within the Communication field, this task is even more important, bearing in mind that, despite the significant intensification of scientific production in the past decade – due to, among other reasons,

the increase in graduate courses – few researchers dedicate themselves to the task of reviewing this amassed scientific production. Authors such as Richard Romancini (2007, 2011), Alex Primo et al (2008) and Araújo (2005, 2006) are among the few names that stand out in this task of better understanding the scientific field of Communication in Brazil.

Especially regarding the Internet, which has increasingly been arousing academic interest<sup>1</sup>, we do not know of any researcher or study dedicated to a more accurate analysis of the scientific production in this area. This is obviously an important gap that needs to be filled, as the current buildup of scientific production on this issue is worthy of being reviewed and analyzed.

## 1 JOURNALISM AND THE INTERNET

It is common in journalism to use specific jargon related to the technical support in which it is developed. In Radio, for instance, it is called radio-journalism; in TV it is called TV journalism; and when the support is paper-based, print journalism. Journalism developed within the Internet, however, does not yet have a specific technical term, nor does it have a clear definition. Digital journalism, online journalism, web-journalism... there are several names, which shows, according to Pena (2008), a certain conceptual entanglement. That author, however, does not make an effort to clarify the terms, apparently considering them synonyms. The same holds true for Pereira and Jorge (2009), who regard the terms e-journalism, cyber-journalism, online journalism and internet journalism as being very similar, though they do recognize “slight differences in attributes” among them.

Pena (2008) highlights that the abovementioned terms are unanimous in one aspect: they all refer to journalistic practices linked to the Internet and its platforms. Some of the articles reviewed here follow the same line of thought, using the terms randomly, though favoring the words web-journalism and digital journalism to refer to publishing news in the virtual environment. While most authors use the terms randomly as synonyms, some of them – like João Canavilhas – draw slight distinctions. Even though this is not the main focus of our study, it is important to analyze such points of view in the quest for a better definition of concept.

João Canavilhas (2001) distinguishes online journalism from web-journalism based on the development phases of such practices on the Internet. Thus, the first term refers to the transposition from traditional

journalism (print, radio and TV) to a new medium, online – the so-called first stage in Internet journalism, when there was mere reproduction of content in journalistic sites. On the other hand, journalism on the web or web-journalism, according to the author, holds far more potential. “Journalism on the web can be much more than the current online journalism” (CANAVILHAS, 2001).

Thus web-journalism takes center stage when the digital medium starts to be perceived as another medium, with its own characteristics and potentialities, even though it still lacks a specific language for the medium and its resources. “The greatest challenge to web-journalism is the quest for a ‘friendly language’ that would turn the web news into news more adapted to the demands of an audience searching for more accuracy and objectivity” (CANAVILHAS, 2001).

Canavilhas (2001) and Benigno Neto (2008) link web-journalism to the second and third stages of world wide web journalism when there is the production of exclusive content in both journalistic sites and multimedia (text, audio and video) integrated within a single environment.

On the other hand, digital journalism, a frequent term in recent studies on this new media, is a wider concept, according to Benigno Neto (2008). The term digital relates to the conversion of information into binary combinations. Therefore, when a product is digitalized, there is a process of conversion into numeric codes so that its content can be visualized on computer screens. Hence, digital journalism is its conversion into computer language, independently of being available on the web or not. According to Benigno Neto (2008):

Digital journalism is the activity that encompasses the use of a computer to create or read the news; this information does not necessarily need to be generated on the Internet to be classified as such. It can be on a CD-ROM or any other computer file.

That being said, it is clear that online journalism and web-journalism are types of digital journalism. With the new technologies available today, it is impossible to disregard the digital possibilities, which necessarily imply binary conversion. If we further consider that the reason for online journalism is to be connected to the world wide web and allow access at any time to any connected device, then web-journalism is online journalism, though the reverse does not apply, for web-journalism displays characteristics not seen on the “online” type.

Regardless of slight conceptual differences among the terms, their names or possible synonymy, it is mandatory to conceptualize

this type of journalism that emerged in the mid-1990s and has shaped new practices of creation and reception, as we are about to see. Pena (2008, p. 176) states that it is “making journalistic information available in a virtual environment, the cyberspace, organized as hypertext with multimedia and interactive potential”.

Palácios (2005) adds that journalism on the web is a space for experimentation, where the advent of faster connections and growing popularity are opening new possibilities towards a more effective use of network multimedia, as well as new ways to merge image and sound into the journalistic production.

Most of the analyzed authors, such as Soares (2009), point out that the current scenario, one of accelerated computer processes and technologies that make media networks more accessible to a greater number of people, offers a unique moment in which to reflect upon our journalism, especially Internet-based journalism, which offers “multiple points of view and collaborative tools for reading and writing”. From this point of view, we can see that production and consumption relations have changed. Our study will focus on the reception end of this process.

## 2 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

In order to carry out this study, we developed a qualitative analysis of articles collected in seven Brazilian Communication journals, the best ranked by the Qualis system, from the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). The journals that were chosen for our sampling were: E-compós, Famecos, Intercom, Galáxia, Matrizes, Contracampo and Comunicação Mídia e Consumo<sup>2</sup>.

We searched the electronic addresses of those periodicals which, particularly for the time frame of the research, from 2005 to 2011, display all the published material. The first search was carried out with key words related to the world wide web, such as: WWW, Internet, cyber culture, cyber socialization, online, Orkut, Facebook, Twitter, among others. This search identified more than 200 studies, to which we applied a second filter: scientific article format. As a result, we came up with the first sample of 178 articles with the topic Internet in Communication journals. With this material in hand, we have been carrying out several analyses, including a bibliometric one, aimed at understanding the influence network which is building up in the Communication field in Brazil.

Finally, to develop this article, first presented at the 8th Brazilian

Conference of Citizen Media, and later polished up for the Brazilian Journalism Research journal following the debate during that event, we applied a third filter, which searched our database for every journalism-related article. At the end of this process, we came up with a sample of 30 papers that would help us to understand the state of the art regarding the issue of reception.

Actually, this curiosity regarding the scientific debate over reception emerged while we were working on the same sample, with a view to understanding the scenario, the influence networks and the methodological procedures used in the research of online journalism and its relation to the Internet; we were surprised to find that the issue of reception was recurrent, encompassing other equally important debates, such as production routines, the journalistic undertaking, the journalist himself and others:

Generally speaking, the studies dealt with the changes that the Internet causes to journalism. The following issues stand out: reader participation; interaction mechanisms; influence of blogs; and the changes in production routines. In only one were working issues dealt with: the study entitled "Online journalism in Brazil: reflections on the profile of the multimedia professional", by Thaís de Mendonça Jorge and Fábio Henrique Pereira, published in 2009. Hence, most of the articles do not focus on the emitter, that is, neither the company nor the journalist were the subject of any study (SOUSA, 2012).

Therefore, with this information in hand, we were interested in understanding how Brazilian researchers design what has been qualified as "new" reception and what the role of this recipient is, considering the current scenario of web-oriented journalistic production.

### 3 PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Only 10% of the 30 analyzed articles did not mention the new reception models in digital media; one of them, the one by researchers Pereira and Jorge (2009), even justified the fact by stating that reception was not the focus of the study, only the news professionals and their production routines. 27% of the articles dealt mainly with the audience and their relation to the digital media, presenting an in-depth analysis. The remainder (63%) did not focus on the reception end, but mentioned the issue at some point.

The data revealed a new trend in journalistic research. While reception studies were somewhat neglected and the audience was barely

known or studied, more recently, things seem to have been changing. Whether they take a critical or an enthusiastic view, researchers agree on one thing: reception has changed. This change is due to the characteristics of a new medium: the Internet. With it, communication processes have overcome geographical and time barriers with relatively low investment (PRIMO, 2008).

But how did this change happen? Basically, it all started with the advent of the blogosphere, the blog environment, which raised the reader to the category of user (QUADROS, 2005), a term used to suggest that the audience is no longer framed within the function of passive receiver, but in the position of someone who uses, interacts, receives and sends information.

Bolaños and Britto (2010) explain that, with personal pages, a new environment for information flow was created, one which is different from the mainstream media flow. That is because the tool has an informal character that enables the creation of pages in a simple way, even for the computer illiterate, with text publishing and other productions. According to Quadros et al (2005), blogs show individual power within the web and, at the same time, as pointed out by Aldé et al (2007), great interactive potential, thus shaping a format for exchange. Those authors, however, highlight that “the fact that dialogue is possible does not necessarily mean that it will happen” (ALDÉ et al 2007, p. 29).

Initially oriented towards a teenage audience, this tool, which expanded dramatically after 1999, was gradually appropriated by people interested in exposing their points of view, often opposing that of the mass media. Thus, many journalists created virtual spaces to produce independent information, offering an alternative to the mediatic discourse. A huge part of them enjoyed instant recognition, attracting a sizeable audience and enabling interaction through the web. That was the beginning of journalistic blogs, influencing not only public debate, but also the mainstream media. “Blogs ended up having an unexpected relevance in Internet politics and economy, for they have become a tool for independent action of several renowned journalists” (BOLAÑO AND BRITO, 2010, p.8). The relevance of such pages and the competition for attention started to pose a threat to journalism itself, according to Schimitt and Son (2007).

With more and more qualified people producing relevant content with pluralizing content, blogs soon started to shake the routines of the mass media, according to Quadros et al (2005), who deemed it “a powerful communication tool”. The authors mention the first blog scoop

with international repercussion: the scandal between Bill Clinton and the intern Monica Lewinsky, in 1998, published in Matt Drudge's virtual diary (drudgereport.com).

Thus, from virtual diaries to newsletter blogs, the blogosphere gained prominence. Journalistic websites, still incipient and lacking resources and a differentiating language, started to integrate these exchange tools in their structure, as registered by Schmitt and Filho (2007).

The statement that the change in reception models was introduced by the blogosphere is strengthened when we understand blogs as pioneers of interaction mechanisms. "At the same time that they guide the reader in search of content, building cognitive paths, they also open up a space for interaction in which the opinion is formed with and for the readers", claim Aldé et al (2007, p. 12). Bolaños and Brito (2010) add that the blogosphere is a very specific and highly specialized kind of public domain, inasmuch as it oversees, denounces and, to a certain extent, guides the mainstream media, collaborating in building a social agenda.

It was then that the audience realized that they could be – or at least participate in – the emission end. This is a crucial issue for us to fully appreciate the complexity that reception has gained in studies on web journalism, in which the status quo and the role of the audience take on a new dimension (QUADROS, 2005), reconfiguring not only production practices but also the identity of the journalist himself.

Blogs were important in the process of "empowering" the audience, but they were not the only ones. Other media, such as the social ones (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) took the groundbreaking experience of reception within the virtual space to the next level. Sampaio and Dantas (2011, p. 4) discuss – with a very optimistic view – the potential of these new media to further the debate among citizens. With them,

[...] discussions were no longer determined by time and space restrictions, there would be the possibility of "many-to-many" communication (no need for established or authorized partnerships), there would be a decrease in the hierarchy of the power centers, which would facilitate the creation of voices that would call the attention of the world of politics, among other advantages.

Thus, the authors argue that such possibilities are open due to the medium – the Internet – for it is the ideal environment for debate and offers, among other things, universal access, un-coerced communication, freedom of speech, participation beyond traditional institutions and

construction of a public opinion based on the discussion. Following the same line of thought, Mendes (2009) assigns the same status of citizen media to the Internet, for it enables certain democratization of public life, increasing, through journalism, the scope of people involved in the public debate. In this sense, according to that author, the technologies would help counterbalance the power of the major media businesses, as they facilitate access to a wide range of low cost information.

The frontier emitter-recipient is increasingly thinner in the digital realm. However, Schmitt and Filho (2007) estimate that the role of the gatekeeper, who decides what should or should not be published, will remain pivotal. Träsel (2007) explains that, despite the fact that web newspapers are increasingly relying upon reader participation, they usually keep control of what is going to be published through a group of journalists. "Participative web journalism is, therefore, complementary, and not a substitute for journalism" (TRÄSEL, 2007).

When comparing interaction in journalistic blogs and sites, Quadros et al (2005, p. 10) point out that interaction seems to be heightened in blogs, while some sites cut down participation to a few alternatives for the user to choose from. "In this case, instead of interaction, there is only a reaction."

Some authors highlight that caution is never enough when analyzing this "new" reception and reaffirm the need for unbiased observation. Träsel (2007) points out: "It's true that the participation of the 'former audience' is not necessarily good in itself and deserves careful consideration." Showing very sound critical skills, Dalmonte (2007) reflects upon the utopia of building a dialogical, inclusive society, "that would enable the individual to participate in the communication process, and not only be the main target of an unequal information flow". The author uses as framework for this discussion the MacBride report, from UNESCO, which deals with the gaps between developed and underdeveloped nations in the communication field: "The Internet helps keep utopian expectations; since its development, UNESCO has been questioning the unequal level of access and participation in the web".

Dalmonte (2007, p. 19) claims that, while much has been said about possibilities and potentialities, data showing participation in the Internet point to the persistence of an international hegemonic framework, seclusion in a general sense, and language as limiting factor in the scenario of content production, bearing in mind the predominance of English. Despite the criticism directed at more enthusiastic studies on the potential of this new media, the author raises questions that touch

on the subject:

The democratic/dialogic potential of mass media communication, as well as that of the interactive media is heatedly highlighted; however, we deplore the fact that they are not fully democratic. Hence the obvious question: How can means of communication be democratic in societies that have not yet reached real democracy? Or, how could means of communication be more democratic than the societies sheltering them?

Showing a more restrained point of view, Aldé et al (2007) questions this free participation in blogs, for example. Analyzing pages dealing with politics, he claims that the “stand” is open to all, but only a few more “outspoken” will truly debate and, to a certain extent, centralize the discussion. “In a place where the recipients are, indistinctly, potential emitters, the democratic party is also a rhetoric party” (ALDÉ et al, 2007, p. 9). Even though the production field is extensive and only a fraction of it has real repercussion and effectively starts a dialogic process, as many people point out, it is important to highlight that this is an available domain and that the commitment to it will depend, to a great extent, on the efforts of the interlocutor. Quadros et al (2005) reinforce that, with the web, it is no longer necessary to wait for the good will of the media; anyone can exercise citizenship in the spaces that are being created, such as blogs and social media.

Besides participating in the production, another striking characteristic of Internet users is hypertext reading, which has been considered a new consumer habit. “Even if they decide not to use the available tools to create content or to interact with journalists, the users are, nevertheless, having an interactive experience” (CASTRO, 2012, p. 12). This happens because “the individual can choose what he will see, read or listen, whenever and how” on the web. Thus, hypertextuality is non-linear reading, whereby the reader is offered several routes and the user can establish his own path, not stuck in a specific content. Establishing this kind of habit, the reception end builds meanings over the product, thus somehow participating in an interactive activity once again. The graphic interface, the publishing system defined by the media institution, and the information architecture are among the parameters that will influence user’s hypertext reading, according to Natansohn (2007). The interface, therefore, would be some sort of “interaction grammar” between humans and computers.

However, according to Palácios (2005), hypertext reading is not a new thing in Internet journalism. He says that, embedded in the

newspaper itself, there was some kind of pre-digital hypertext:

The reader of a printed newspaper was already used to reading hypertextually, long before the very existence of the hypertext. Nobody reads a newspaper as one reads a novel, from the first to the last line. [...] The printed newspaper is not designed and developed to be read line-by-line, from the first to the last page (PALACIOS, 2005, p11).

The same author reckons that non-linear paths are still being explored and enhanced in web-journalism, favoring the establishment of a multimedia language. The reader community will then become more and more familiar with this language and with web browsing. In addition to being consumers, they are now creators, of both meaning (reading) and content (participation).

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Internet journalism has gradually implemented changes in the way content is displayed, information is produced, and material is distributed; also, in the way we apprehend and relate to reception. As a result, the journalist's identity has shifted and is now facing a crisis. That is how we can sum up the statements about the issue after having read the 30 selected articles, which show different views on the subject.

In a short time, the Internet, through its pioneering blogs, has become a platform where you can tap personal statements that had been inhibited by the mainstream media for quite a while (LEMONS, 2002). One of its main characteristics, interactivity, will find repercussion in the journalistic performance, thus creating a demand for interaction with the audience. The means of communication on the web, despite some initial reluctance, is starting to build this interactive channel as a strategy to profit and to keep the audience. Nowadays, there are web newspapers that set aside an editor's space for reader content, such as *Painel do Leitor* (Reader Panel), in the *Folha de São Paulo*. As for traditional media, such as the printed one, they do not always allow for reader participation.

This illustrates the fact that the Internet border was, to a certain extent, breached by web journalism, which prompts the authors we have studied to make statements that level or at least bring closer the role of reception to the one of the emitter. Therefore, because he can produce information and update content, this hybrid recipient-emitter exercises a role analogous to that of a journalist.

The growing concentration of individuals in sites that focus on

sociability, such as social media sites, grants them strong participation over the meaning of the information circulating on the web, thus spawning this public domain which somehow “empowers” the recipients, called “patrol readers”, who are quick to get together and take a stand regarding some media action, creating a kind of “buzz” and even establishing the agenda for the media entities (MALINI, 2007). Being in these environments, therefore, has become commonplace for news media, showing the intention to establish a horizontal communication, potentially dialogic and personal. It is this – together with the other arguments mentioned above – that point to the emergence of a new communication flow, different from the traditional (one-to-all), and which follows a participation-based communication model, where readers are increasingly used to creating, sharing and commenting in the virtual space.

In that light, is it possible to state that the digital domain has brought democracy with it? Some researchers point out that the appropriation by users, as well as the doors opened by the news media, validates the plurality of discourse practices, suggesting that we are on the right path. Others consider that the improvements are still not so meaningful if we think of a global scale, including the processes of digital exclusion and socio-economic barriers. However, everyone agrees that there is democratic potential in this domain. According to Quadros (2005), collective efforts might be essential to enable the establishment of communication free from the control of hegemonic actors.

Despite the disagreement among authors – which is quite positive in pushing forward the debate in the area – the fact remains that cultural practices applied to the world wide web have allowed for the so-called simple reception end to increasingly participate in the spatial organization of web content, in weaving the narratives and the meanings in journalistic writing. Even the authors who do not view the current scenario from a more optimistic standpoint agree that there have been advancements in deeper levels.

## NOTES

- 1 As evidence, we can mention the establishment of work groups, both at Compós and in the Internet, aimed at the world wide web, and the launching of journals such as 404 Not Found and Ciberlegenda, dedicated to digital technologies. Besides, we also have the Brazilian Association of Researchers in Cyberculture (ABCiber, in Portuguese), founded in 2006, which brings together researchers in the Communication field to research topics related to the world wide web.

- 2 According to data gathered by Qualis/Capes, 2010 and 2011, these seven journals were the only Brazilian ones qualified as Qualis B1 in the Communication area. However, Capes released, in August 2012, the results of a new data collection, 2012 and 2013, and the scenario has changed a bit. Some of the analyzed journals climbed up to Qualis A2 and others remained B1. For this project, the sample was chosen at the beginning of 2012, so we are considering the results from the years 2010-2011.

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