

COLLABORATIVE PHOTOJOURNALISM IN A TIME OF CONVERGENCE^I

JOSÉ AFONSO DA SILVA JR.

Universidade Federal de Pernambuco

EDUARDO QUEIROGA

Universidade Federal de Pernambuco

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ABSTRACT This article addresses the emergence of contemporary collective photographic practice linked to photojournalism. As a theoretical framework, intersections are made with the consolidation of a new image system, recovering the previous history of photography and its interaction with journalism. In this sense, it aims to work initially with a set of characteristics and constraints which act together to define the problem. In addition, it presents a case analysis, the *Cia. da Foto* (Photo Company), and shows how it represents the consolidation and/or the contradictions of the phenomenon.

Key words: Collective photography. Photojournalism. Convergence. Collaboration. *Cia. da Foto*.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses, under the concept of media convergence, the emergence of photographic collectives as a possibility of articulation in contemporary photojournalism. In the last decade we have seen more strongly the emergence and consolidation of photo collectives. These groups of photographers are differentiated from other models due to their production characteristics, and incorporate new practices into the photographic process. The collective way to do things in photography has inspired debates, some controversial, about the role of the photographer in the production process itself, and the links with visual synthesis of the news.

The debate regarding photographic collectives, however, is present in the history of photography, especially in the analysis of a classical photographic operation: individualization. Accordingly, there has been a classic dichotomy, since the first debates on photography (TALBOT, 1846, in FONTCUBERTA, 2003). Like a pendulum, photography was sometimes advocated as an objective technique, in which the

operator would play a minor role in the possibilities of the camera and the visual record would be the objective nature of the device, or attempts were made to enhance and highlight the importance of men in the production of photography. “Depending on the season, conditions, uses, or sectors of the professionals involved, it was one or another aspect that prevailed” (ROUILLER, 2009, p. 27). But even the recent general bibliography (SOUZA, 2000; KENNER, 2002; KOBRE, 2008; LANGTON, 2009) on photojournalism does not make references to collective activity. It is an almost sacred tradition that places the photographer as individual author of the picture. However, it is also a result of a construction which also involves a set of contradictions and ambiguities.

The System of viewing - Modernity, the emergence of the observer and press photography

The bases of individualization in the picture dates from the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The *camera obscura*, not yet a photographic one, assumed importance in delimiting and defining the relationships between the observer and the world while it produced an operation of individuality, defining the observer as “isolated, closed and self-contained in darkness, withdrawn from the world” (CRARY, 1990). Thus this apparatus played a crucial role in separating the act of seeing from the physical body of the observer, a disembodied vision.

The emergence of photography in modern times can be understood as an element in the historical vision, or more specifically, a possibility for observation of the world supported by technical devices which organize, systematize and generate the enlarging of the visible. Crary (1990) points out that the first half of the nineteenth century established a set of relationships between technology and visual discourse that redefined the place of the individual observer. The points of emergence of this new model for seeing the world were ruptures that took place not just in the pictures², but in scientific knowledge, in technology, in social practices, as well as in journalism, which increased the productive and cognitive capacity of the observer in the nineteenth century.

This movement coincided historically with the development of journalism. In cases dating back to even before the presence of technological images juxtaposed to the text, in the early 19th century, the separation between subject and object also took shape in journalism. The decline of partisan and pamphleteering journalism on behalf of a more universal approach, themes and positions; the rise of the reporting

format and the reporter himself as an agent between the event horizon and a later written report, are features from same background. If there is a direct causality of photography in the separation between subject and object, when the camera separated and distinguished necessarily the image of the object, it synchronized itself with the same movement of event representation that was taking form in print journalism. By representing the world, photography and the text created representations, technical images, text, of the things and facts themselves. However, in the case of a press photographer, this situation creates, due to his own role as a technical operator, the position of the observer-photographer as isolated in the act of creation.

Finally, we have the crucial role of separating the act of seeing from the physical body of the viewer-reader. It can be seeing a coronation, a battle, the finish of a horse race without having been there. It is a disembodiment of direct vision by a symbolic exchange, which in turn is adjusted by an agency utilizing a set of technological and visual devices combined with the printing, distribution, transportation, and mass consumption of newspapers.

This scenario creates some results. The first one: expanding the possibilities of textual description and argumentation from the moment that it is accompanied by the same opportunities in the visual field, added to the indexical factor, presence and witness values. The *was it* (BARTHES, 1984) is a trace of reality present in photography and, for journalism, is added as a key resource to create a visual dimension of events.

In a more specific view of photography, there is the possibility of establishing circulation of images out of the original context of space and time, a problem stressed by Benjamin (1935) in his famous essay "The work of art in the age of its mechanical reproduction". Coupled with its massive appearance, this factor contributes to the expansion of an idea of a visible world, a modern world. The profound changes indicated by Benjamin are precisely changes provided by the wider circulation of the technological reproducible image. An ambiguity arises: to innovate in production means to generate results also in the area of circulation, creation, and the assemblages between viewing and assimilating images.

In this context a specific competence emerges: that of the observer-photographer. He is the one who is capable of and responsible for the visual synthesis of events, the element that reflects the agency and objectivity of the event which happened within the field of the visible and juxtaposes with the report itself. In addition, he combines knowledge, techniques and practices relating to construction of the

image that contribute to the codification of objectivity in visual mode: focus, framing, descriptive approach to the scene and events, proximity to the action, testimony, identification of the characters, decisive moment (CARTIER-BRESSON, 2004), click.

Well, but being a photojournalist is not only dealing with the codes. The set of practices that we have today is also a result of construction in the course of photojournalism. We understand that: a) the location of the practice leads to the existence of spaces (the editorial staff including photographers) in news media; b) to produce this content, a professional staff with specific skills is necessary; c) there is a possibility of the combination and code generation of different photojournalism genres (SOJO, 1998); and d) what is already contemporary has quietly accepted the need for formal and specific training for the profession.

And how did this framework arise? It is possible to affirm that the scenario was not always like that. It is this consolidated position that represents both threats and crises in the sector, as portrayed by the assimilation of values and practices that once caused ruptures or made them possible in other contexts. That is, the developing of digital convergence in photojournalism implies clearly that this is a present context, the result of historical developments. However, it constitutes a very important process, a page of relevance in the course of photographic news, but it will not be the last by any means, even less is it fully consolidated nor does it constitute a complete break with established practices and models over time.

The scenario of convergence and photography

Reaching the new century, contemporary photographic collectives arise in a scenario entirely stimulated by the convergence culture. For Jenkins (2009), the convergence culture reshapes our relationship with the media, both in consumption and production, encouraging collective intelligence (LEVY, 1998) and enabling new forms of participation and collaboration.

A prototypical scene of the passage from subject to a collective position on Youtube:³. A father hands his two-year-old daughter a brand new recently released Ipad, the Apple multifunctional tablet, betting on the cognitive response of the child, who has no difficulty manipulating his Iphone. After 30 seconds of handling, the little girl asks: "Daddy, why does it not take photos?"

The scene above is actually the consolidation of a state of the media in which some notions adhere to the rules of the contemporary

visual system. The gap created in the child's mind recognizes the anachronism of a device that is mobile, multimedia, multitasking, wireless, but nevertheless does not have any image capture device. It is increasingly clear that taking pictures is now an action linked to mobility, the connection and linkage with other media and/or possibilities of discourse articulation. The absurdity arises from the fact that Ipad is a device designed for the consumption of content, not for its production.

There is an implicit set of values that involves media in the last fifteen years by offering an alternative to massive models based on a one-to-all logic which are juxtaposed to all-to-all models (PALACIOS, 1996), driven by the growth of the phenomenon of widespread access and connection, and by the reprogramming of resources and digital devices through appropriations by the society as a whole (LEMONS, 2005).

Twitter, Facebook, Second Life, Myspace, Blog, iPod, iPhone, YouTube, web 2.0 ... are words that appeared in the last decade and are symptomatic of a change within another change, the collectivization of production. Moving on, there are those who do not separate (RITCHIN, 2010) the specific field of photography from other formats in a more general visual horizon, such as 3D visual computing, simulators, games, animation, infographics and so on. We would be seeing, and obviously would be agents of the conformation of a new system of viewing the world, of its role in the construction of reality and the meaning articulated with in. Producing in multiplatform, multimedia, and with the versatility of operating different systems and shared and collectivized creation are elements that comprise the new articulations of the contemporary visual system.

From this point on, our perspective is based on the same assumptions already worked on, that is: a) photojournalism is a set of practices and codes in permanent change and dialogue with other cultural and technological, as well as social, forces, and, obviously, journalism itself in general; b) the current moment makes arrangements and puts pressure on the productive chain of photojournalism as a whole; c) the state of photojournalism assimilates aspects present in dynamics of access, circulation and assimilation of symbolic production, such as the collaborative and collective aspects, for instance.

Addressing what would be the convergence culture linked to the practice of photography, Silva Jr. (2009), indicates in an embryonic manner which would be the more general elements. These are, briefly stated, four characteristics in the specific sphere of production:

Versatility. (the photographer's ability to acquire skills beyond the

specific mastery of photography, such as dealing with computers, digital networks, and organizational, transmission and workflow systems).

Multimedia/Hypermedia. (combining photography with other visual, sound, text, and graphics grammars and, in parallel establishing possibilities of hypermedia navigation. Multiplatform. (ability to distribute the same content in different articulations of support and access by the user).

Cooperation. (involves different sectors of the same productive core, in a complementary or interdependent way in each project developed).

Specifically regarding photography, a movement of interest in and adaptation to the environment allows the progressive formatting of practices around the term “photographic collective”. Something that would fit into the last characteristic, cooperation. Thinking about the collective, however, in the course of digital culture, encounters theoretical precedents. In general terms, would be three: Virtual Community (RHEINGOLD, 1996), Collective Intelligence (LEVY, 1998) and Participatory Culture. These three conceptual axes progressively define the ways in which a more general movement can be seen and the condition that currently operates the migration of photojournalism from an individual to a collective perspective can be understood. The gregarious associative model among photographers, through network action, allows, in theory, besides the establishment of situational ties through links of identification and belonging, the exchange or the construction of a collectivized type of action based on visual information.

The characteristics of the photographic collective

Ritchin (2010) points out that photography is assimilating, combining with other practices emerging in convergence culture. It would also be connected, multimedia, real-time, and omnipresent. This explains in a certain way the plethora of imaging devices in mobile phones, computers, public environments, feeding constantly a practice of image generation combined with devices and usage habits.

Would this context be responsible for new articulations in the image production group, among them, the photographic collectives? If so, the expansion of the system of visibility, for the collectives, dialogues with a more general situation, and it is able to indicate specific characteristics. More clearly, we would have the characteristic of cooperation as part of the production arrangements of photojournalism in convergence. Based on this situation, we can, at least in a propositional

way, indicate a set of characteristics derived from cooperation. Five characteristics are most evident:

a) A topological visibility. Given the increasing capillary presence of digital networks, there are in parallel two movements based on amplified observation. One of a centrifugal nature, to distribute in a pulverized way a certain set of images in a logic of availability and demand; the second one, of a centripetal nature, combining an ability to utilize the universe of images to create visual repertoires, and to be informed of what is being produced.

b) Visual detailing. Brought about by successive improvements in the technology for capturing and recording the image, as well as the ability to combine this factor with other types of discourse articulation, of uses with other devices and systems. Photography begins to have a systemic dimension, in terms of information science, acquiring abilities for combining and articulating with other systems⁴.

c) Speed of circulation. Seeing and photographing are currently connected to the idea of circulation of the image linked to immediacy. That is not new to the field of photojournalism, because, in the deontology of the profession, reducing the synchronization time between events and their publication offers elements for the very creation of the current status to which the profession is linked. Thus, on consolidating the same technological basic group (digitalization, computerization, networking technology) for the society, which was previously restricted to the professional field, expands and is consolidated, even reaching the weekend photographer and the domestic record.

d) Diversity. This is the typical transformation of quantities in qualities movement, derived from the topology of the network image. Dialectically, now that we have available on the network hundreds of thousands of experiments in photography, through the online virtual galleries, we also have, as a consequence, a number of innovations in the subjects, modes of approach and / or visual presentation. In a certain way, being able to make things available collectively leads to links between perceiving the horizon of the state of practice, of what is done, of comparing and establishing dynamics for approach, belonging, identification and criticism of the process itself while the proposed approach is being developed collectively.

e) Multivoicing. Certainly this is the most notable characteristic involved in photojournalistic production in combination with the convergence scenario. With the oblique positioning with regard to the components of virtual communities, social networks and collective

intelligence, the photographer's role undergoes a metamorphosis in the direction of collective action, a work done by peers. The complexity of this issue overlaps the already spiny debate about the role that the authorship function takes on for photography in the midst of its inclusion in the system of vision which is being formed⁵.

A prototypical case of convergent collective photojournalism

In debates guided by the obviousness of the arguments, the appearance or configuration of photographic collectives related to journalistic practices is classified as a result of the crisis which the news publishing industry news is passing through on a transnational scale. This is a big mistake. In the media landscape, rather, what is increasingly anachronistic is the attempt to maintain a mass communication model, centralized on production and radial distribution. A formula that has been sustained since the 1960's, very tied to the model and conception of work that made sense in a media organized in the one-to-all model.

The collectives would be an approach to doing things more deeply and a resumption of responsibility for the information, against triteness and making everything a spectacle (CHIODETTO, 2007; PERSICHETTI, 2006; LANGTON, 2009), in a direct criticism of the assignment system that has been given to photographic coverage by agencies and communication media. Chiodetto argues that what is dying is a production model of a superficial, bureaucratic photography with no space left. For him, the solution goes through new creative organizations and group formation. "[...] and it will be through them that photography will again be, in the media, the language that runs the show, that sets the agenda, that excites, informs, humanizes" (BELÉM, 2009).

For Claudi Carreras, organizer of the Ibero-American Meeting of Photographic Collectives (*Encontro Ibero-Americano de Coletivos Fotográficos*), "a collective is different from an agency because there is a common ideological issue, a positioning around the photograph that moves the group as a whole" (ELIAS, 2009, p. 54). Brandão highlights a crucial difference for him: discussion and criticism are incorporated into the work during the production phase, while in the individual process, it usually starts to be present after the work is finished (BRANDÃO, 2008).

Cia. de Foto, a photographic collective based in São Paulo since 2002, consists of eight members, including photographers, image handlers, assistants and administration. It operates in the photojournalism, advertising and art markets. As has already be said, they sign collectively. "At first we were a coming together of different

viewpoints, but our synergy became so great that, nowadays, we get confused about who is the author of the photos. Everything is decided together, we spent the whole day together,” says Rafael Jacinto, photographer, founder of the collective Cia. de Foto (ELIAS, 2009, p. 53).

The newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, in the coverage of the 2008 mayoralty election, invited the Cia. de Foto collective to develop a special photo essay on the three major candidates for mayor of São Paulo: Geraldo Alckmin, Marta Suplicy and Gilberto Kassab. At the collective's suggestion, the work was published (FOLHA DE S.PAULO, 2008) as a series of three photographs of each candidate during the campaign (Figure 1). The group followed ordinary events such as visits to public markets or promenades. The way Cia. de Foto developed the photo essay, however, raised several issues. The pictures were produced from three different angles at the same moment of the same event and received the signature of the group, without referring to the photographer - a practice characteristic of this group. The photographers synchronized their cameras and set up the photo essay always showing a moment of the candidate from three points of view. These photo essays record also the work of the photographers themselves - both from the collective as well as from other press media - and question some common practices of photojournalism.

In the essay focusing on the candidate Marta Suplicy, you can see in the first image, the more usual coverage, produced by photojournalists present at the event: the candidate surrounded by children and voters, with banners, placards and flags, during a walk. In another picture, however, we see that this image is a pantomime, since this “crowd” was nothing more than vote canvassers. It is, simultaneously, a criticism of politicians, newspapers and photographers. It debunks a common practice in the area when the aesthetic and pre-formatted result overshadows news values. This essay is mentioned by Alejandro Castellote, Spanish curator and researcher, in his closing lecture at the Ibero-American Meeting of Photographic Collectives, as one of the most intelligent images as a proposal for a new photographic production (CASTELLOTE, 2008). It is interesting to check, in the work, the collective credit of the Cia. de Foto.



Figure 1: Cover reproduction of the 2008 special section “Elections 2008” of the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, where we can see the photo-essays by Cia. de Foto



Figure 2: Detail of the photo-essay with the candidate Marta Suplicy where we can observe different angles of a single moment of the campaign. Note that the image in the center is a counterpoint to the first photo, which seems to show a crowd around the candidate

Case Analysis

Observing the illustrated case of coverage, we have on encountering the characteristics of the collectives, some initial data for reflection and questioning.

a) Concerning the topological visibility. The emphasis remains more on the ability to acquire repertoires (the simultaneous action of several photographers faced with the same fact, as is common, for example, in sports coverage), transposing them to new horizons of the subject. In the case of distribution, it is important to emphasize that the experiment was published in a newspaper, a medium with a traditional print format and nature, discarding the possibilities of articulation in multimedia or multi-platform.

b) Visual detailing. The coverage in this case makes use of a systemic possibility for integration of photographic tools with information systems in order to increase the visibility of a fact, and subsequently provide descriptive and argumentative elements for inter-subjective construction between image and reader.

c) Speed of circulation. Reach the very limit imposed by the printing medium, that is, the daily circulation. Reduction of the times between the occurrence of the event and its publication was not accomplished in this case; the idea of consecutiveness prevailed over that of immediacy.

d) Diversity. In this characteristic there is a clear innovation: to propose and implement a photographic coverage somewhat unusual in political publishing. It is a language innovation tied to the set of technological possibilities and also the organization of production made possible by the network and convergence culture.

e) Multivoicing. Both the innovation of language, as well as the visual detail and the acquisition of repertoires are simultaneously conditioned and operated based on the activation of multivoicing. This is strengthened and assumed in the signature of the work, which is made explicit as *Cia. da Foto*, that is, a collective product.

Conclusion

Although the example mentioned here happens in an environment representative of the traditional logic of mass media, a printed newspaper, this by itself can be perceived as a contradiction. It should be noted, however, that network logic is something that passesthrough interpersonal relations and also production. The changes are outlined not only in distribution and dissemination, which in case analyzed, despite all the technological availability involving other media, follows the logic "one-to-all."

We cannot, solely from the subject analyzed, point to a generalization in the collective practice of photojournalism in regard

to aesthetic results or to specific procedures. The way the essay was developed, the utilization of the resort to multiple angles of the same fact should not be understood as the usual practice of the Cia. de Foto or even of other collectives.

Being composed of three images of the same moment, the essays make reference to questions of narrative and lead us back to the character of interconnection between languages as well. Multivoicing is perhaps the most straightforward aspect to be perceived in this work. Not only in the quantity of images, but also in the collective credit already mentioned. Criticism and discussion incorporated into the production process, consolidates an approach that allows questioning even the very manner of working. The photographers in the collective are included in the criticism made of photojournalistic work. In the series of candidate Marta Suplicy, even the way of carrying out an assignment was questioned. With this example the organization model of the chain of photojournalism shaped around the collective, shows unevenness.

This unevenness incorporates, in a certain way, some of the contradictions in its own set of innovations which the collectives implicitly present. The first one of these is that, despite its being a phenomenon possible in a culture of convergence and circulation proposed in the all-to-all model, the case demonstrates a further step in the direction of the one-to-all model, the printed newspaper, with mass circulation and traditional format. The other contradiction is that despite the speed of circulation and the multiple topology providing many of the possibilities of the contemporary visual and photographic system, these characteristics were left out of the exercise proposed by Cia. de Foto.

The advances and innovations of this case can be perceived, at least in photojournalistic practice, in applications and results juxtaposed around the group of characteristics guided by collective work. When we reflect on multivoicing, on the innovation of the language proposed and on the broadening of the field of visible information proposed in this work, we have the result of opening up a range of possibilities for photojournalism. This involves a set of innovating practices, of a possible codification. This situation, however, is not immune from the ambiguities, naturally existent in innovation processes.

The first one of these may have a simple formulation, but not so simple an answer: why are these processes not engendered definitively in the productive chain of photojournalism? Or at least why are so many similar examples not observed? We will work here with three main hypotheses that would form a possible answer to this resistance.

The first: a mistaken belief that the processes of photography, such as those of text, graphics, sound and video, for news media are a set of demands that, when combined with convergence, are more concerned with factors of internal workflow organization, rather than with the qualitative results that can be obtained from the process. The second is that the set of demands of convergence is a problem which is merely, or mainly, technological rather than conceptual. The third is to keep alive productive dynamics which comes from pre-convergence, pre-network society models and not realize that the cultural factors that generalize the convergence processes are accompanied by renovating perspectives of making, editing and circulating photojournalism.

The other set of ambiguities permeates the relationship between a model that purports to be innovative, but maintains relations (of production and finance) with traditional press and/or advertising media. Evidently, in the case analyzed, Cia. de Foto. does not ignore the importance of keeping links with agencies and established mechanisms of the cultural industry. This makes it possible to see the collectives' place of operation in the media landscape without denying the mass functions present, while incorporating organization elements closer to post-mass operations (LEMO, 2005), in this case, precisely the most innovative processes. In a certain sense, these ambiguities indicate the opening for not only creative models of photojournalism, but also of business and production arrangements. In other words, it is not naïve to swallow the poisoned candy, to be seduced only by the taste of the innovative opportunities without taking into account that the structures and the traditional media are also one of the cultural mediators of this change.

In contrast, nevertheless, it is important to mention the opening for an innovative experiment, from the perspective of the production chain, precisely of a mass media and on a traditional platform. The ambiguities unfold.

This represents both a movement of adjustment as well as an updating of the course and of the gregarious models present in photojournalism history, and which at other times generated associative experiences, clubs, cooperatives and agencies. Not overlooking the market as a way of sustaining the business model is one of those permanent aspects.

However, it is necessary to realize that the changes do not always unfold simultaneously in the various levels of production, publication and circulation. In the case examined, there is a predominance of innovating

aspects in the production stage, more than in distribution. Having this unevenness in the case analyzed helps to understand how the influences of convergence are organized at the level of articulation of the production, adapting to the possible demands of circulation. We must not lose sight of the fact that the characteristics of analysis raised here, in a certain way guide to the same extent the perception of the collectives, that very probably, in future cases, not all the products of this production model can assimilate the total number and fullness of these characteristics.

Continuing, this repositioning is able to produce its own topologies of action. As stated by Entler (2010), there is a clear direct link between the collective and the principles relating to the convergence culture. “The collective is in itself a network, a sort of microcosm analogous to the Internet cosmos, which in its turn is analogous to the macrocosm that we call culture” (ENTLER, 2010).

In that sense, perhaps, the collectives may not be an attempt to subvert the machine and production routines of journalism. To recall Flusser (2002), they are perhaps the exercise of inserting new functions not programmed in the machine. However, it is clear that this belongs to the warehouse which photojournalism represents as a history of syntheses occurred between news, technology, society and practices. And the context of the collectives is one of the updates that are underway in this movement.

| NOTAS

- 1 This paper forms part of the research in progress “Models of production configuration of photojournalism in times of digital convergence”, registered in the National Research Council (CNPq), and the master’s research project “Collaborative Practice in photojournalism: collective photographic contemporaries such as binders of ideas and models of network articulation” currently underway in PPGCOM-UFPE. In addition, the discussions assimilate concepts, literature and authors employed by students and teachers in the 2010 seminar “Visual media and culture of convergence”, in the postgraduate program mentioned above.
- 2 We understand that within the visual systems supported by technical solutions presented in the nascent modernity (thaumatrope, phenakistioscope, Zootrope, kaleidoscope, stereoscope, kinetoscope, fisionodraw, etc.), the *camera obscura* is located on the same level as its counterparts: they are images made possible by a specific production context, based on machinery, conceptual and operational mastery applied to images.

- 3 Check at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pT4EbM7dCMs>>. Accessed July 14, 2010.
- 4 A clear example of this is the last World Soccer Cup. For each game, more than 30 video cameras and a countless number of photographic cameras scrutinized every centimeter of the field and every second of the game, consolidating a more than perfect view and record of the game. The result of this, for example, is the crisis generated for the football referees who worked in the World Cup: with both the referees and the games vigilantly watched, the proof of their mistakes came from hundreds of images, megabytes, replays, super slow-motion, and paraphernalia of combinations with other types of visual discourse. The crisis occurs, in this case, not due to the credibility of the representation, but rather to the growing gap between the information view and the referee's view. The soccer referee is a poor devil, limited and defeated by the belief and performance of an ultra-equipped view which is opposed to him. One of the worst jobs in the world.
- 5 Obviously, without intending to go more deeply into the issue here, due to the limited space, however we are mindful that the model which is being shaped by a repositioning of the author does not necessarily imply the renunciation of individual authorship, but rather the collectivization or multivoicing of the act of authorship.

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José Afonso da Silva Jr. is PhD in Communication and Contemporary Culture from the Communication Faculty of the Federal University of Bahia (FACOM-UFBA, 2006). Postdoctoral course as visiting scholar at Universidad Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain (2010-2011). CAPES (University Level Specialization Grant) Researcher and Professor in the Postgraduate Program in Communication at the Federal University of Pernambuco (PPGCOM-UFPE.). E-mail: zeafonsojr@gmail.com

Eduardo Queiroga is Master student in Communication in PPGCOM-UFPE. Scholarship from FACEPE. 20-year career as Photographer. E-mail: queiroga.eduardo@gmail.com