RESEARCH ON PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM IN BRAZIL:

A survey of the state of the art

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ABSTRACT Worldwide interest in the study of participatory journalism has been growing in recent years and it is generally accepted that journalistic practices are undergoing considerable transformations as a result of this expanding conversational dimension (Gillmor, 2004; Bowman and Willis 2003; Brums, 2005; Deuze et al. 2006; Rutigliano, Hyun and Jeong, 2007) brought forwards by mechanisms that facilitate production and circulation of information through different participatory communication systems, such as forums, blogs, and sites of the open source type. In this study we produce a preliminary survey of thematic concentration and methodologies of research on blogs and other interactive models of journalistic publication in recent Brazilian contributions in this area.

Key-Words: journalism, participatory, blogs, open source

INTRODUCTION

It should be noted, however, that synonyms sometimes employed for participatory journalism (civic journalism, public journalism, open source journalism, community journalism and citizen journalism) are not always equivalent. This is the case of civic journalism, also known as public journalism (Traquina, 2002). Participatory journalism and civic journalism have some characteristics in common, such as the participation of the public as content producer and the importance given to the plurality of voices. Civic journalism arose at the end of the 1980s in the U.S.A. as a proposal to attract more readers, who were skeptical regarding the contents of the newspapers, but its implementation may or may not

include the formation of networks based on common interests. Civic journalism is an important a field of study in Brazilian communication studies, but it is not included in this survey. The works examining readers participation on mainstream online media – through the adoption of forums, readers comments and other participatory mechanisms - and were also left out of this survey.

Concerns with generalizations and with the need to refine definitions and delimitations (Mielniczuk, 2007) as well as attempts to establish the characteristics of the different experiments by penetrating the tenuous border of each one of them (Santos, 2007) have permeated many Brazilian studies on participatory journalism and there is a growing awareness by producers of participatory sites concerning the need to have an established and explicit position the matter. In the Brazilian site *Overmundo*, for example, participatory journalism is defined as means which include readers´ comments on the stories, and the collaborative form is related to the action of two or more people contributing to the preparation of journalistic contents. Open source journalism, on the other hand, would entail the possibility of any person altering a content of a page on the web (Foschini and Taddei, 2006).

The brief survey presented in this article has utilized the Thesis and Dissertation Database of CAPES (Coordination of Higher Level Personnel), a Research Board of the Brazilian Education Ministry. Articles on the subject – published in the most important Brazilian periodicals – have been included. The databases made available by *stricto senso* Postgraduate Programs in Communication in Brazilian universities were also consulted. Those sources constitute a reliable – although by no means exhaustive - universe for a first approach to the subject.

The Blog effect

After one a decade of existence, Blogs are considered to be a major phenomenon giving impulse to participatory journalism. According to data from the *Technoratti* report, many independent blogs are accessed more than the mainstream media (SIFRY, 2007). In the beginning, mainstream media either ignored or antagonized the blogs; since the middle of the year 2000, however, there has been a growing movement for their adoption by digital dailies from various countries, whether through blogs produced by journalists linked to the vehicle itself, or by providing space in their sites for the creation of "readers´ blogs".

The blog phenomenon has been discussed by Brazilian researchers from different perspectives. Blogs are seen as intimate diaries on the

network (Carvalho, 2001; Sibilia, 2003 and Schittine, 2004), a place for conversation of virtual communities (Recuero, 2003 a; Primo and Samaniotto, 2005), a system of communication which has transformed journalism (Recuero, 2003 b; Silva, 2003; Quadros et al., 2005; Quadros and Sponholz, 2006), a space for authorship and identity on the web (Adghirni, 2006), a possibility for online socialization of people with special needs (Passerino and Montardo, 2007), a dialogical and democratic potential (Aldé et al., 2007), a direct heir of webjournalism (Escobar,2007), a form which is beginning to gain credibility (Christofoletti and Laux, 2006 and Christofoletti, 2007) and a broadening of the journalism field (Palacios, 2007). In this study we have given priority to research which makes explicit the methodology utilized and discusses possible relations between blogs and journalism.

The main research works on this topic in Brazil date from 2003. In this period, Raquel Recuero proposed in her articles a classification for analyzing the diverse types of blogs and directly contributed to stir interest and foster the development of new research on the topic. Jan Alyne Barbosa Silva (2003) appears in the CAPES registry as the author of the first dissertation in Brazil analyzing the blog phenomenon with emphasis on journalism. Since her first articles on this topic, she has sought to systematize constituent elements of a blog (tools and pages) which result in the interaction between bloggers and readers. In order to observe the symbiotic relation between journalism and blogs (Hiller, 2002), new skills and challenges for the profession (Lasica in: P.M.M., 2003), Silva carried out research with bloggers to chart some of the uses and technical and social appropriations of tools and pages.

Paulo Munhoz (2005) sought to characterize, by means of an exploratory study and charting, new forms for structuring photographic messages and production models and circulation of images in blogs and in open agenda vehicles.

Artur Vasconcellos Araújo (2005) performed a case study of the Brazilian blogs *Observatório de Imprensa* and *No Mínimo* with the intention of verifying the uses which the two media organizations made of this system of communication. For this purpose, he identified and analyzed quantitative aspects (volume of material produced, by means of the analysis of files, frequency or rhythm of production of the stories, size of the news item and the nature of the topics covered) and qualitative ones (seeking to apply concepts deriving from the Theory of Enunciation to the analysis of the published texts).

Other research also dealt with the blogosphere´s influence on the

traditional media. For example, Quadros and Sponholz (2006) made a comparative study of the use of journalistic blogs in the mainstream media of Brazil and Germany. The research intended to try to answer three main questions: "What is news for these blogs? Why are they called blogs? What are the main trends of this system which has provoked transformations in journalism? (idem). Bolaño and Britos (2007) perceived that certain blogs, especially the journalistic ones, "are influential in the agenda-setting of the hegemonic media" (idem 2).

Josiany Fiedler Vieira (2007) recorded the blogs´ evolution based on the concept of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). For this purpose, he highlighted references which treat blogs as the personal diaries which reach the pages of the web, moving from private to public, and those which see blogs as a phenomenon which modifies the performance of journalism with the public´s participation. In the case study of Ricardo Noblat´s blog, he made an analysis of the contents of posts which show the communicational interaction between the blogger and the reader, the author´s opinion and the multimedia resources utilized. The study is supplemented by in-depth interviews with Ricardo Noblat and other bloggers. Previous studies already devoted attention to Noblat, considered the first Brazilian journalist to create a political blog. Inara Souza da Silva (2006) confirmed blogs as sources of information for journalists, utilizing various research methods: case study, systematic observation, in-depth interviews and content analysis of Noblat´s blog.

To the extent that the mainstream media´s interest in this system of communication increases, the number of Brazilian researchers interested in studying aspects related to the blogs´ credibility grows. Rogério Christofoletti and Ana Paula Laux (2006), based on survey studies performed in various countries, including Brazil, discuss blogs as a system of reputation and by means of case studies try to ascertain the communicational relation between bloggers and readers. In five Brazilian journalistic blogs analyzed (*Querido Leitor, No Mínimo, Reinaldo Azevedo´s Blog, Josias de Souza´s Blog and Noblat´s Blog*) the authors observe the bloggers´ posts, the daily average of postings, readers´ comments in the period analyzed, average of comments, comments/posts ratio and emphasis on the most commented posts.

The communicational relation is also studied in the research of Alessandra Aldé, Juliana Escobar and Viktor Chagas (2007), which classifies the twelve political blogs analyzed in three categories: those located on a large site, the independents – anonymous or signed, of journalists and authors without the same professional and social recognition. For Aldé

et al., the public´s participation can be considered more as a supplement of an opinion than as a debate. It is "a type of conversation, which if it is not civil in the sense of scrutinizing the most rational solutions for the public interests, is certainly the place for position-taking, passion, politics and expression of public opinion." (2007:37).

While Blood (2002) perceives blogs as a participatory media, Escobar (2007) disagrees. For her, most blogs are developed by a single individual, and therefore the blogger (primary agent) is the one who decides on the existence or not of a secondary agent, the readers. Escobar also proposes a classification (which ranges from 0 to 4 degrees) in order to understand the communicative relation of the owner of the journalistic blog and his secondary agents. The higher the degree of a blog, the more possibilities the secondary agent has for participating.

Raquel Recuero amplifies the typology of blogs created by her in a previous study on social interactions (2003a) in order to analyze the journalism carried out in warblogs of the war in Iraq (2003b). In this last study Recuero divided the blogs into five categories: electronic diaries (personal events), publications (information of an opinionative type), literary (fictitious stories), clippings (information published in other places) and mixed publications (information and personal events). Her typology has contributed to the development of a considerable number of research works and inspired other proposed classifications, such as the one created by Quadros et al (2005) with greater attention to specific characteristics of the journalistic practice. While the typology proposed by Recuero classifies the blogs according to narrative formats, Quadros et al. proposes a record of their evolution and of variations in journalistic practices associated with them.

Palacios (2007) took as his starting point ideas suggested by Sorrentino (2006) and sought to develop and apply them to Brazilian cases. Based originally on the concept of "field" (*campo*), developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Palacios sought to identify effects produced by the heterodoxy in the functioning of blogs, with relation to the *habitus* of the journalistic field. The work tests and illustrates the ideas first developed by Sorrentino with regard to the functioning of a series of Brazilian blogs.

Participative forms of webjournalism

Apart from blogs, other forms of participatory journalism have come under scrutiny in Brazilian academic research, with special interest regarding the model known as "open source journalism".

While the individual mark of the blogger preponderates in the blog[1], in the other forms of participative journalism the main characteristic is the collaboration between those involved. From the research work carried out for this study, we also noted the attention devoted to the interacting and communicational relations provided by these forms which incorporate tools and methods devoted to the perfecting, by means of the collaboration between the participants, of the information published.

Several Brazilian studies explore the potential of the production of "Open Source", both in articles and monographs (Schwingel, 2004), (Silva Jr., 2004), (Antoun, 2004), (Holanda, 2004), (Quadros, 2005), (Brambilla, 2005), (Breier, 2004), (Evangelista, 2006), (Primo and Träsel, 2006), (Antoun and Pecini, 2007), (Beltrão, 2007), (Fonseca and Lindemann, 2007), as well as in dissertations (Rigitano, 2004), (Munhoz, 2005), (Brambilla, 2006), (Holanda, 2007) and (Träsel, 2007).

In most of the articles the exploratory character predominates and a great effort is made to conduct a conceptual search. It can be seen that "Open source journalism" has been gaining importance as a basic concept for comprehension of the phenomenon (Breier, 2004), (Quadros, 2005), (Brambilla, 2005 and 2006), etc. Synonyms frequently are used, such as Open Source Intelligence (OSI), Open Publication Journalism (Schwingel, 2004), (Holanda, 2004) or Open Agenda Journalism (Munhoz, 2005).

The most frequent translation to Portuguese is *Jornalismo de Código Aberto* (Open Code Journalism). However, in Silva Jr. (2004) we have the designation open source journalism, seeking, in addition to the relation with software, to emphasize the role played by the subject in question in a context of the opening of publication channels for entities and groups which are usually only primary sources of journalism. Holanda (2007) also adopts this perspective, based on the arguments of Silva Jr. as well as on the definition of Open Source Intelligence presented by Stalder (2005). Most researchers prefer to make explicit the fact that Opensource journalism is a species of the participatory journalism genus.

Inevitable conceptual divergences have arisen. For Brambilla (2006) *Wikinews* does not form part of open source journalism, since, according to the author, due to the lack of editorial authority, the news never goes beyond the beta version[2]. For the opposite reason, that is to say, the maintenance of editorial authority in *Ohmynews*, Holanda (2007) does not consider it to be an open source vehicle, accepting the wiki model as an extreme, albeit valid case. Marcelo Träsel (2007) prefers use a definition of participatory webjournalism, which encapsulates both

varieties (editorial and non-editorial), giving more importance to the strictly communicative aspects of participation.

There are constant mentions of instrumental concepts like those presented in the influential work of Anita Chan (2002), which frequently utilizes definitions such as collaborative publication or collaborative news network (Schwingel, 2004), (Beltrão, 2007), (Holanda, 2007). Another constant presence (Fonseca and Lindemann, 2007), (Holanda, 2007) and (Träsel, 2007) as operator of the analyses performed is the concept of gatewatching, as developed by Axel Bruns (2005).

Paulo Munhoz (2005) directs his investigation to the role played by photography in participatory journalism. This involves an effort at charting which, through bibliographic research and case studies, identifies "new formal aspects of photojournalism in the era of the networks" (Munhoz, 2005:18). For Ana Maria Bambrilla (2006), the focus of interest is the journalist´s role with respect to this new participating public. She has resource to bibliographic research, to participating observation and interviews with citizen-reporters of *Ohmynews* from different countries chosen at random, with researchers on the matter and with members of the Korean newspaper´s newsroom. Bambrilla is not interested in content analysis, but rather in the interaction between journalists and the public and its rules. For this purpose, she made a description of the site´s structure, of the procedures involved in the interaction of the user with the site. By not taking into consideration the content produced by this symbiotic relation between journalists and the public, Bambrilla limited her research to revealing the problem only by means of the subjects involved in open source journalism. However, she failed to take into consideration what was said in the subject´s messages.

André Holanda (2007) observes the relation of open source journalism with the public by means of case studies: *Indymedia, CMI, Slashdot, AgoraVox, Wikinotícias, and Wikinews*. Content analysis is adopted to accompany the news on the sites, recording all the issuers, topics, origin, sources of the information published, graphic interfaces and structuring of the editing tasks with the intention of ascertaining the powers and limits which the public possesses in the interaction with the teams that maintain the sites. Marcelo Träsel (2007) utilizes content analysis seeking to establish up to what point do the public´s contributions and interventions expand the journalistic aspects of the articles published in *Wikinews* and *KuroShin*, creating a really multi-perspective journalism, as established by Gans, apud (Bruns, 2005). The data was collected during seven days in seven alternating weeks, totaling ten articles valid as initial

texts and interventions related to them. The author considers as "initial text" the first version of a story published in *Wikinews*, on which the collaborators will work directly, as well as the proposed story sent to the editing waiting line in *KuroShin*, to which suggestions for changes and opinions about the events narrated will be added.

As a final note, it should be pointed out that one of the main difficulties in mapping out methodological trends in the work produced by Brazilian academics on participatory journalism is a lack of explicit methodological indications in many of them. The list presented in this article is certainly incomplete and tentative but it can be taken as a representative sample of Brazilian production on the subject and – we hope - as a starting point for an expanded and more comprehensive charting.

NOTES

1 It should be made that we are not ignoring the existence of collective blogs, but we keep in mind the most common use of this format. In addition, we point out that its individual mark is a preponderant value in the very relation between the blogger and his public.

2 A prototype version which antecedes the official launching of a program in the software industry. The program is distributed free of charge for tests performed by the users.

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