

ESSAY

# SOCIAL ACTIVISM, POLITICAL ACTIVISM, AND COMBAT JOURNALISM: contemporary thoughts



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For philosopher André Comte-Sponville, courage is the most universally admired virtue. In his book *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, Comte-Sponville claims that cowardice is despised everywhere while bravery is praised. Each civilization has its fears, and also has its expressions of courage and strength. Courage is a character trait, a virtue, or a desired quality often attributed to heroes. It can also be attributed to every day, unknown individuals. It can be found in men and women or children and the elderly, and

is expressed as an isolated gesture and a stubborn disposition. It is like the lightning that cuts through the night sky. Comte-Sponville reminds us to not be mistaken: courage is not the absence of fear, but the ability to overcome it through a stronger and greater will. It has always been welcome, yet particularly scarce these days. Perhaps this helps explain why this edition of Brazilian Journalism Research is so unique and highly rated, after all, it is governed by the essential sign of courage.

The ten articles that comprise the dossier “*Militant, Activist and Combat Journalism*” presented below are examples of distinct and complementary types of courage. Selected from dozens of submissions to the BJR call for papers, these texts are also extensions of the debates held at the International Journalism Research Meeting, in December 2022, at the Institut du Journalisme de Bordeaux Aquitaine, in France. This meeting focused on the binomial name journalism-combat, and was the result of the third Brazil-France-Belgium Colloquium on Journalism Research, the sixth Structural Changes in Journalism Colloquium (Mejor), and the second day of studies from young researchers in the area.

In our call to the scientific community, we stated that newsrooms often believe that journalists should not interfere in the events they report on; they should temporarily suspend their ideologies and feelings. This idea of non-interference helped shape several journalistic canons – exclusion and impartiality being two examples. The result of this collective effort is the creation of an artificial non-place for journalists, a place where they can observe life events and history without interfering, and interpret and narrate them without any filters, influence, or constraints. We highlighted these ideas in our call for papers, raising questions about the legitimacy of activism in journalism, the compatibility between reporting and taking sides in a story, and the technical and deontological challenges posed by these changes.

Our goal was to collect submissions that could fertilize the punished (and troubled) soil of journalism, and we were not disappointed with the harvest it yielded. The dossier includes seventeen authors from fourteen research institutions in three different countries: Brazil, Spain, and Portugal. Brazil offers the most perspectives on this topic, but also the most plurality: all articles from Brazil come from nine states covering all national regions.

The dossier opens with a question posed by Barsotti and Vieira (2023) that cannot be postponed any longer: is activist journalism possible? They argue that the recent emergence of new journalistic arrangements over the last couple of decades has shaped an environment that has put a strain on the professional ethos: as many of these new media organizations become committed to causes, the pillars of neutrality begin to show some cracks. After interviewing nine professionals in these new arrangements, Barsotti and Vieira concluded that taking a stance or a position is no longer a deontological transgression and has now become a value to be pursued. We could say it is the courage to challenge one's code of ethics.

The next article, by Moraes (2023), looks more towards the destabilization of the system. She poses the question: who are these activists and engaged people we are talking about? Her questioning makes us look outside independent or alternative media, which is usually labeled as activist. Moraes sheds light on the Brazilian mainstream media which also positions itself according to themes, interests, influences, and local conditions. She puts forth the idea that positioning can be influenced by politics in all types and sizes of newsrooms, and can even be concealed or not visibly declared. Reading her article might lead someone who is disconnected from the subject to ask: how much courage is there in secretly taking positions?

Loureiro, Pereira, and Figueira (2023) address the themes of the dossier from an international point of view. They analyze journalistic coverage of the war in Ukraine, particularly from Bruno Amaral de Carvalho, a correspondent for CNN Portugal who reported on the conflict from the Russian side. Focusing on the period from March to October 2022, the authors identify two types of combat that the reporter had to face: misinformation and the symbolic degradation to which he was subjected by politicians and professional colleagues. The only journalist to report on the conflict from within Russia for the Portuguese audience, Bruno Amaral de Carvalho was the target of moral attacks and questions about his editorial independence while working in the trenches to fight against rumors, state propaganda, and counter-information. As brave as being on the front line.

The next four articles in our dossier cover not only the daily conflicts of journalistic coverage but also the continual challenges to

its professional self-affirmation. It is quite common for environmental journalism to be confused with ecological activism.

Loose and Belmonte (2023) list four key moments that helped shape Brazilian environmental journalism as an engaged practice, at least since the last quarter of the 20th century. They highlight how the press' opposition to environmental injustices led to specialized coverage taking on causes, moving away from the expected objectivity and neutrality, which also generated some contempt in the sector. The article highlights a greater openness to defending the elements of nature, motivated by the increasing climate emergency and changes to journalism itself concerning the valorization of subjectivities, for example.

Souza and Miguel (2023) focus on reports from the Amazônia Real portal to understand and problematize the proximity between environmental journalism and media activism. These authors use journalistic coverage analysis to highlight not only the premises of environmental journalism (contextualization, plurality of voices, assimilation of environmental knowledge) but also the discursive tactics of media activism – engagement and opinion.

Gould (2023) looks at an independent media outlet from the Amazon region and its activism in specialized coverage. This particular media outlet is called the Sumaúma portal and it criticizes the Jair Bolsonaro government and its attempts to commit genocide of the Yanomami people (2019-2022). With the interpretative contribution from the French discourse analysis, Gould's corpus is closer to a counter-hegemonic journalistic perspective based on subjectivity. Created by journalist Eliane Brum and the idea that the Amazon is the center of the world, its reality must be reported on by local media. The Sumaúma portal is also an example of courage included in the theme of this dossier. Creating a means of communication is already a challenging task, so founding a portal in the middle of the Amazon, far from metropolises and capital flows, seems both trivial and unrealistic.

Eliane Brum's journalism is not limited to the Sumaúma portal. In the seventh article of this dossier, Javorski and Alencar (2023) analyze her activism in nine reports on the Amazon published in the *El País Brasil* newspaper, between 2017 and 2020. Content analysis and narrative criticism are part of the methodology, and the results lead the authors to characterize Brum's activist

journalism based on personal journalistic identification with themes and sources.

For at least four decades environmental journalism has contradicted the rigid grammar of objectivism, yet more recently it is gender issues that have led to questions about the legitimacy and professional effectiveness of journalism. Social advances towards equity in the labor market and increased participation in decision-making processes have highlighted issues of justice between genders and increased coverage of specific issues facing the LGBTQIA+ populations. Along these same lines, this edition of BJR includes three articles that expand on the boundaries between engagement, journalism, activism, and the fight against inequalities.

Rodrigues and Aguiar (2023) look at the mode of journalistic production “anchored in historically exclusive premises of objectivity and newsworthiness”. To do this, they analyze the editorial principles and the profile of *AzMina* magazine, a publication that is engaged and specialized in feminist and intersectional causes. These authors conclude that the production, investigation, and writing routines of the aforementioned media outlet are legitimized by professional journalism, differing itself by how it selects its agendas and treats its information sources, which requires a high level of training and specialization for the journalists who cover these topics.

Silva Júnior (2023) shows how the activist nature of the homosexual movement and the journalism of some agents in the 1970s and 1980s were fundamental to the emergence of a unique event in the history of Brazilian journalism: the gay press. The author compares events and themes covered by the *Folha de S.Paulo* (a generalist journalism outlet) and *Lampião da Esquina* (a newspaper for gay audiences). He concludes that the activist press was ground-breaking and that its focus on activism helped take some issues regarding the homosexual populations and bring them to the public sphere.

The dossier concludes with an article by Paes and Colussi (2023) on the allegations of sexual violence that sustained the MeToo movement in the United States. They highlight contributions to combative journalism from reporters Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, from *The New York Times*. The rigor and professionalism of journalistic investigations are highlighted, supported by the legitimization of women’s speeches and the increased visibility of

victims of sexual harassment. These authors also point out the courageous commitment of journalists and their insistence on confronting the aggressors and revealing the facts that have long been silenced by powerful and influential male figures.

As we anticipated, the ten texts in this dossier echo the idea of courage and bring militancy, engagement, and activism closer to the most celebrated, demanding, and noble of journalistic practices. In the pages to follow you will find people who dare to denounce and call things as they are, the courage to face the powers that be and to change the actual grammar, the courage to reveal and go against expectations, and the courage to take sides and not seek comfort in impartiality. All forms of journalism that are willing to combat obscurantism, disinformation, and denialism constantly have to manage fear.

Some acts of courage involve personal sacrifices, detachment from personal benefits, and a commitment to collective needs. In these cases, this courage brings about remarkable moral legitimacy and widespread recognition and esteem. Having courage means calculating the risks, taking risks, and accepting the consequences. It requires a "firmness of soul", as the philosopher Baruch Spinoza said. All courage is made up of will, a small amount of reason, and a greater dose of passion.

This idea of adopting sides and taking up causes is still being fought in newsrooms today. The texts we have collected in this edition can help shake these convictions. When facing extreme situations, we must choose between fighting or fleeing. Courage can be about confronting the threat, facing one's fear, or questioning established truths. An agenda can be a cause and courage is a quality just as necessary for journalism as curiosity is.

Comte-Sponville's definition of courage included at the beginning of this text was so well elocuted, that we shall refer to it once again to finish off our conclusion. "Life teaches us that it takes courage to endure despair, and also that despair can sometimes give courage. When there is nothing left to hope, there is nothing left to fear: here is all the courage available, and against all hope, for a present fight, for a present suffering, for a present action!" (1999, p. 45).

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