BRAZILIAN NEWS PORTALS CHARACTERISTICS

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ABSTRACT

A content analysis of four Brazilian news media portals found that economic news dominated the top headlines with little attention paid to education, the environment and welfare. Other trends included a focus on local events and national news sources, reliance on few sources, mostly official ones, and a low percentage of news that fitted the concept of newsworthiness (a combination of both social significance and deviance concepts). Other findings of a study of 432 top news stories published by UOL, Estadão, iG and Terra during a 15-day period between February and March 2008 indicate that the top portions of the portals' front pages carry news that lacks story depth, editorial branding, and multimedia applications. The results suggest that online news portals are in their infancy although Brazil has the largest online population of Latin America. This study hopes to shed light on the gatekeeping process in Brazilian news portals. Brazilian media portals have yet to become a significant editorial force able to provide knowledge about social issues and public affairs in a socially responsible fashione.

Key-words: journalism; news portals; gatekeeping, ownership, newsworthiness.

INTRODUCTION

This study's theoretical framework draws from a reframed form of the gatekeeping model adapted to online journalism. The gatekeeping theory has been around for almost 60 years since David Manning White (1950) first applied the original metaphor developed by psychologist Kurt Lewin in a journalism setting. The initial observations about "Mr. Gates", a wire editor who subjectively selected stories to be published by a newspaper, centered on the power of an individual to determine what is news. The concept evolved from a focus on the individual level of analysis to a hierarchical system based on five levels of news influence (individual, routines, organizational characteristics, *Extra*media and ideological) conceived by Shoemaker and Reese in the 1990s. Their theory stated that the influence on content increases from level to level, which

means that newsroom routines can overrule the individual level and the organization can overrule the routine level, for example. "The ultimate power lies in ownership" stated Shoemaker and Reese (1996:153).

At times, researchers have qualified gatekeeping as too simplistic, and many turned their attention to new theories that captured the field's imagination such as agenda-setting and framing. Good metaphors though are resilient. Several researchers have redefined gatekeeping by turning it into a more complex and sophisticated theory able to generate a number of new studies (Bass, 1969; Bleske, 1991; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Bissell, K. L., 2000; Bennett, 2004; Roberts, 2005).

The arrival of the Internet has shaken the gatekeeping foundation with its potential to turn users into personal gatekeepers, therefore threatening a long tradition of having journalists decide what is out there to know (Beam, 2007). Anyone can now search for and post unpolished and unfiltered information competing with media corporations and their gatekeepers (Breitenstein, 2007). Collaborative news networks, also known as gatewatchers, for example, aim to replace journalists with users as content providers (Mamadouh, 2004; Axel, 2004; 2005). At the same time, other practices such as the "Daily Me" devised by Negroponte (2005) have become a common feature in online journalism for those interested in news customization.

As technological innovations keep emerging and transforming people's relationship with the media, new theoretical frameworks have surfaced across various fields engendering refined variations of the gatekeeping theory. Sociologist Eszter Hargittai (2000), for example, has theorized about the interplay of information abundance and attention scarcity. "Due to limited user attention, there is a role for gatekeepers in the online content market", claims Hargittai. For her, portals are the gatekeepers between creators and consumers of content.

Another important theoretical advance is the network gatekeeping theory created by Karine Barzilai-Nahon (2005). She explores the politics of gatekeeping based on information control and power relations in the Internet in an attempt to explain information dissemination and users' behavior. For Barzilai-Nahon, the balance between gatekeepers and the gated (users) is more complex as the latter create and produce information independently. However, she admits that the gated significance is low "because of the limited exposure it receives, compared to information disseminated by the gatekeepers that control most of the audience attention" (2005:4).

New empirical and theoretical developments, especially Hargittai's

idea that portals are the gatekeepers between creators and consumers of content, suggest that there still is enough room for traditional gatekeeping in online journalism produced by news portals.

Portals are defined here as mainstream online news websites that offer editorial content similarly to the print media, including snippets on sports and traffic, as well as sections and links categorized by themes, area for chats, e-mails, tips, and a variety of other services and products. These portals perform an important gatekeeping function as they filter the surplus of information available on the Internet and give it some sense and direction to readers free of charge, while newspapers owned by the same companies charge for access.

Successful Brazilian portals tend to be affiliated with prestigious news organizations (print or broadcast), large non-media private companies and/or transnational companies that have enough resources and credibility to attract users. However, while portals guarantee a common platform for information acquisition and exchange, they may restrict diversity as well and work more as a corral than a portal, as pointed out by Brazilian researchers (Vaz, 2000; Lemos, 2000; Barbosa, 2002). Scholars have made similar observations worldwide. Kim and Shoemaker (2007: 4) questioned the social responsibility of portals compared to that of online newspapers. They argued that portal news media re-mediate news content rather than create it, and found that personal and entertainment news was more popular than other topics in their study about South Korean online news websites.

Business structure and organization have a direct impact on the quality of news portals' content. Kim and Shoemaker state that "regardless of the medium, the ultimate power lies in ownership" (1996:153). Their statement applies to Latin American news organizations, whose news routines have been heavily influenced by ownership, especially during authoritarian regimes prevalent in the 20th century. Brazil's recent democratic consolidation associated with access to new technologies and the importation of foreign marketing and administration techniques have stimulated the formation of regional conglomerates inspired by the American media model. Brazilian journalism, originally influenced by the French journalism, has embraced the U.S. model since the 1950s (Herscovitz, 2005). In recent decades, Brazilian media organizations have advanced their own news model combining foreign influences (French and American) with local characteristics.

Following a global trend, media convergence operates at full-speed in Brazil. The nation's largest news organizations have a strong

online presence that helps to give visibility to their sister companies in broadcast and in print media. Traditional family-owned companies have replaced family members by professional management and in many cases have combined their businesses in one holding company with stock issuances.

Furthermore, family-owned media companies eager for cash infusion have contemplated foreign participation since 2002, when Brazil's media law was revised to allow foreigners to own up to 30 percent of local television, radio and print media businesses. In 2005, Portugal Telecom acquired 21.09 percent of the shares of *Grupo Folha*, owner of UOL, Brazil's largest Internet content provider along with *Folha de S. Paulo*, one of the nation's leading newspapers (Benson, 2005). One year later, Naspers, a South-African-based global corporation, acquired 30 percent of Abril S.A., Brazil's largest magazine publisher. *Veja*, April's flagship, is the fourth best-selling weekly globally. Naspers also own Brasigo, Abril's social network service. In 2008, the Brazilian government approved the merger of Brasil Telecom and Oi, allowing telephony groups to hold concessions in more than one region of the country (InvestNews Brazil, October 2008). Oi is now the country's largest telecommunication group controlling about 70 percent of Brazil's fixed phone market, 18.5 percent of the wireless market and about 40 percent of broadband Internet services (Reuters, July 22, 2008).

Hence, traditional Brazilian family-owned media businesses have turned into corporations with multiple interests. In this new context, stockholders tend to concentrate mainly on the corporations´ economic goals and less on journalism as a public service. Pressure for corporate profit on Internet portals has led to an increase in online advertising and in the space devoted to entertainment news and snippets following suggestions made by marketing strategists. Yet low revenues have forced these organizations to keep their costs down. Portals have small newsrooms, where reporters work on stories frequently based on official sources eager to offer their point of view. In addition, a great part of what is published comes from news agencies and sister companies.

As online journalism establishes itself as a successful medium, a debate is going on about how news portals can contribute to improve the public's knowledge of social issues and public affairs in a socially responsible fashion. To Michael Salwen (2005: 47), online journalism can be the source of exclusive news stories, investigative reports and original commentary, which, in his view, would contribute to the marketplace of ideas. Instead, it is "frequently seen as supplements or promotional

vehicles for their original outlets, satisfied to reproduce their offline content and carry wire service stories" (Salwen:47).

One major goal of this study was to estimate Brazilian news portals' potential to become a significant editorial force by providing original content and becoming a powerful source of information for the public. This evaluation was done through a content analysis of the portals´ top news stories and their newsworthiness characteristics by adapting two major newsworthiness indicators developed by Shoemaker (2006): deviance and social significance (political, economic, cultural and public). The theory of newsworthiness contends that people consider prominent news items those that break norms or threaten the *status quo* along with those that have social significance for their daily lives.

I adapted Shoemaker's concept of deviance by grouping together social change deviance, normative and statistical deviance. Therefore, deviance in this study involves news that reflects the curious, the unexpected, and the odd, such as civil demonstrations, corruption cases, crime news, major social trends, major violations of cultural traditions, individuals and ideas that challenge the status-quo. Social significance, as defined by Shoemaker and Cohen (2006), involves news that has the potential to impact society and affect people's lives such as elections, new laws, inflation, new revolutionary medicines or health treatments and the death of prominent people.

Theoretically, news - a product of a socially constructed reality - that is both deviant and socially significant would be the most newsworthy. If that is true, it would be safe to hypothesize that the most newsworthy news would be the most prominent, making the list of the top news stories on portals as well. Therefore, prominent news items would be the ones most frequently selected by the Brazilian gatekeepers if they were synchronized with their public's needs.

Brazilian Portals

The Internet arrived in Brazil in 1995, when the Internet Service Law opened the provider market to private companies. In that year, the prestigious *Jornal do Brasil* launched its online version while the Estado group, owner of *O Estado de S. Paulo*, another prestigious newspaper, started a timid online service in partnership with World News, from Washington. After that, most newspapers quickly migrated to the Internet, but lacking knowledge about the new medium, their content merely mimics their printed versions online (Barbosa, 2001).

Subsequently, major news portals, or supersites that provide news,

free e-mail, discussion groups, shopping, links to other sites and a variety of services, appeared in Brazil in 1996 (Barbosa, 2002) with a different strategy than that used then by online newspapers. Instead of delivering what some experts call the traditional model based on the transferring of content from print to digital form as many newspapers still do, portals would attempt to focus on what they called "genuine web journalism", based on a less linear, more interactive format, enhanced by multimedia resources and updated content.

At these news portals, journalism has become a major source of traffic and access, complemented by an array of services and entertainment options designed to keep the audience connected and give them a sense of belonging to an Internet community (Silva Jr, 2000). The format though is frequently criticized by scholars worldwide. Kim and Shoemaker (2007) argue that portal news media re-mediate news content rather than create it. General criticism of portals includes dissemination of information also available in their print or online sister companies; emphasis on news snippets (sports scores, stock quotations, weather and traffic reports); emphasis on news about crime and entertainment as opposed to political and economic news; lack of in-depth analysis and interpretation of the news, which are confined to blogs, and a disproportional trend toward hyper-localism.

The four portals analyzed in this study are UOL, Estadão, iG and Terra (their corporate profiles are provided at the end).2 They were selected for being among the largest and most prestigious portals and for representing three different examples of organizational structure and ownership. Estadão and UOL belong to well-established national media corporations with a long tradition in the print newspaper business. Brasil Telecom, a leading telecommunications company and web-hosting operator now merged with Oi, a former competitor and currently Brazil's largest telecommunication company, owns portal iG (Internet Group). Brasil Telecom operates fixed telephone lines in northern, central-western and southern Brazil; its main shareholders include the U.S. group Citicorp. Oi operates mostly in northern and southeastern Brazil, and local investors own its shares. The buyout was a strategy designed by Oi to compete in Brazil with Spain's Telefónica and Mexico's América Móvil. The Spanish group Telefónica operates in 18 countries, including Brazil.

Methodology

This empirical study analyzed the nature of news content in Brazilian Internet portals. A content analysis of 432 news stories published by the

four portals during a 15-day period between February and March 2008 investigated the most frequent topics selected by the portals' gatekeepers; levels of social significance and deviance, story depth (based on number of words per story, use of related links and use of archives); editorial branding (breadth of sources-- source number and source variety, use of bylines and direction of story links - internal or external); level of multimedia applications related to the news stories analyzed (photos, video/audio and interactive graphics such as maps, diagrams, tables); and interactivity with users (comments posted by readers, availability of reporter's e-mail address for contact and polls). In addition, it examined how these elements correlated to the type of portal ownership (national media corporation-owned, national telecommunications corporation-owned and multinational Internet corporation-owned).

Adapting and simplifying Shoemaker and Cohen's (2006) concepts of deviance and social significance to fit the Brazilian cultural journalistic environment as well as my own methodology were preconditions for measuring portals' level of newsworthiness. The several forms of deviance defined by Shoemaker (social change deviance, normative and statistical deviance) were grouped together. Therefore, deviance in this study involves news that reflects the curious, the unexpected, the odd, such as civil demonstrations, corruption cases, crime news, major social trends, major violations of cultural traditions, individuals and ideas that challenge the status-quo. In sum, everything that is above or below the usual level is grouped in the deviance domain. Social significance, as defined by Shoemaker (2006), involves news that has the potential to impact society. This study applied the four indicators used by Shoemaker (2006):

1. Political significance, which includes news from government or international governmental relations that involve internal political disputes, national programs related to social measures or disputes with other nations.

2. Economic significance, which involves news related to the economic environment such as inflation, currency rate, and economic measures announced by the government that have the potential to impact society.

3. Cultural significance, which involves news related to changes in the society's traditions, institutions and norms as well as news about the arts and education.

4. Public significance, which involves news related to the public's well-being such as major environmental disasters, major traffic accidents,

the discovery of new medicines, etc.

One of the challenges faced by this study referred to the transference of the American newsworthiness concept and its relative subjectivity to the Brazilian journalistic environment. What is deviant and/or socially significant in one society may be perceived differently in another. For example, when politicians are publicly accused of corruption in developed nations, it becomes major news with both deviant and socially significant components. In Brazil, such an event happens rather frequently and therefore it does not surprise the public. In a perverse mode, corruption has become current, daily news for Brazilians. Corruption is considered deviant news but appears to have a minor socially significant weight.

The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: Are top news items in Brazilian portals mostly focused on local and regional events?

RQ 2: What are the levels of interactivity and multimedia applications offered by Brazilian portals? Are there any variations based on ownership type?

RQ 3: What are the levels of story depth and editorial branding offered by Brazilian portals? Are there any variations based on ownership type?

RQ 4: Do news stories in Brazilian portals tend to be more deviant than socially significant (politically, economically, cultural and public)? Are there any variations based on ownership type?

RQ 5: What is the level of newsworthiness of the portals' top news?

Homepages of the four portals were downloaded once a day and printed. A total of 432 top stories were captured and coded during a two-week period. Frequency of updates was excluded from this study for technical and economical reasons. The analysis focused on the content and characteristics of the news located at the top of the screen in each portal. The coding scheme included a total of 19 variables divided into five categories. Every news story under the headlines located on the top portion of the main page was coded according to story depth (topic relevance, size in number of words, use of related links and use of archives); editorial branding (breadth of sources, use of bylines and direction of story links – internal or external); multimedia applications related to the news stories (photos, video/audio and interactive graphics such as maps, diagrams, tables); and interactivity related to the news stories (posted comments, ability to e-mail the author, take a poll).

The definition and organization of some of the variables were borrowed from The State of the News Media 2008, the Project for

Excellence in Journalism newest annual report on the status and health of American journalism (http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2008/previous.php). The definitions for the newsworthiness indicators were borrowed from Shoemaker and Cohen (2006).

Each variable was coded with 0 (absence) or 1 (presence) using SPSS; some variables included intensity and were coded accordingly. Intercoder reliability was .90 for about 40 news stories randomly selected from the sample of 432 items (a little below 10 percent) and coded by an assistant using the same guidelines.

Results

A content analysis of 432 stories published by four national portals between February and March 2008 indicated that more top stories focused on economy, followed by international and regional diplomatic conflicts; crime; terrorism and political kidnappings in Latin America; disasters; immigration; national politics; corruption; sports; national order; U.S. presidential campaign; and health, science and technology, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Top Stories in Brazilian Internet Portals

	Topics	Percentage
1	Economy	19.3
2	International & Regional Diplomatic Conflicts	11.5
3	Crime	8.5
4	Terrorism and kidnappings in Latin America	7.8
5	Disasters	6.9
6	Immigration	6.4
7	National Politics	6.0
8	Corruption	5.3
9	Sports	5.0
10	National Order	4.1
11	US 2008 Presidential Campaign	3.9
12	Health, Science, Technology	3.4
13	Other	11.9
	Total	100

Hyper-localism

Most top stories had proximity as a main news value. Top stories about economy centered on national economic problems. News about political disagreements among Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Brazil

dominated international and regional diplomatic conflicts during the period analyzed. Terrorism and political kidnappings referred mostly to the activities of the Colombian terrorist group FARC, which has a relationship with Brazilian political groups, drug traffickers and a possible operation base in the Amazon jungle, making news about it even more relevant in Brazilian portals. Likewise, immigration news involved mostly Brazilian citizens facing deportation from European countries or from the United States. In addition, news about corruption centered on Brazilian government officials engaged in scams and briberies. News stories on crime, disasters and national order had a regional/local core; and sports, obviously, were mostly about Brazilian soccer or about the performance of Brazilian teams in other sports. Cases of athletes involved in deviant events received major headlines as well.

International news had little space in portals during the period analyzed. News about conflicts in Latin America overshadowed news about the Iraq invasion and the conflict in the Middle East, which indicates a concern with proximity. However, little attention was paid to news about education, the environment, welfare and cultural or social trends. News about cultural events and the arts did not make the major headlines, partly because they have their designated space in portals along with news about celebrities.

The study registered a disproportional trend toward hyper-localism as related in previous research, coupled with a massive use of local news sources as shown in tables 2 and 3. The four portals employed mostly national news sources in most stories (between 61.2 percent and 71.7 percent) as opposed to international news sources (between 25.4 percent and 35.7 percent). Portals such as Estadão and UOL, owned by traditional national media organizations, used their own news agencies and sister companies (newspapers, in this case) as major content providers along with their own staff. Portals such as iG, owned by a non-media company, and Terra, owned by a multinational media company, relied on other national news agencies, frequently the ones owned by the competition, besides their own staff.

Table 2: Top News Sources Used by Portals (Percentages) N= 432

News Sources	Estadão	iG	Terra	Uol
Internal Staff	22.3	34.3	51.9	39.5
Sister Company Wire /Newspaper	36.4	-	-	27.4
Other National Wire Service	2.5	23.2	12.7	4.8

International Wire Services	35.7	30.6	25.4	25.7
Combo Staff International Wires	.8	.9	2.5	2.4
Journalist Blogger	-	6.5	-	-

Table 3: Use of National Sources vs. International Sources N= 432

News Sources	Estadão	iG	Terra	Uol
National News Sources	61.2	64	64.6	71.7
International News Sources	35.7	30.6	25.4	25.7
Combo	.8	.9	2.5	2.4
Unknown	1.7	.9	5.1	0

Reliance on international news agencies was low. Reuters (7.9 percent) was the number one international news agency used by Brazilian portals, especially among organizations owned by a multinational media company and by a non-media company; followed by EFE (5.8 percent), a leading Spanish-language news agency that currently has great penetration in Latin America; and *BBC*. In addition, most combos included Reuters. France Presse, a news agency that enjoyed great prestige in Brazil in the past, has been demoted along with Associated Press, whose presence was minimal.

Table 4: Use of International News Agencies by Portals (percentages)

Int'l News Agencies	Estadão	iG	Terra	Uol	Percentage of Total
AP	.8	0	1.3	0	.5
France Presse	0.0	5.6	3.8	2.4	2.8
BBC	5.0	6.5	1.3	5.6	4.8
EFE	9.9	.9	7.6	4.8	5.8
Reuters	7.4	10.2	10.1	4.8	7.9
Wire Combo	13.2	6.5	1.3	7.3	7.6
Total	36.3	29.7	25.4	24.9	29.4

Interactivity and multimedia aplications

Brazilian portals are far from offering users a vibrant multimedia, interactive online journalism. The four portals made poor use of interactivity and multimedia applications during the period studied, except for photos: about one third of the news stories had one or more pictures. The use of infographics (9.3 percent), diagrams (6.2 percent)

and maps (8.1 percent) is low and appeared only when borrowed from international agencies. The use of videos (10.6 percent) is still incipient. The data indicates that UOL made more use of videos than the other portals (16.9 percent) to illustrate top stories. Furthermore, UOL offers its TV UOL on its menu with inhouse-produced stories broadcast online. Terra and Estadão also have their own so-called online TV with videos supplied by international agencies or film production companies.

Less than a third of all news stories included posted comments from readers, with iG being the portal with the highest share (50 percent) and Terra, with the lowest share (5.1 percent). In addition, Brazilian portals made little use of polls (10.4 percent total) and rarely offered the readers the reporter's e-mail for contact (2.1 percent). Therefore, multimedia applications and interactivity were sparse in all portals. The use of infographics gained space in only two topics: the U.S. presidential campaign and a regional political conflict involving the activities of the Colombian terrorist group FARC.

Information entering the gates of Brazilian Internet portals follows the pattern of print media gates. Regular users – a small, educated, Internet-savvy segment of the Brazilian population --- complain in their blogs and e-mails to portals about the lack of media convergence in portals. Several blogs describe how portals operate with small teams formed by young professionals who hope their news organizations will invest in new technologies and let them combine infographics with videos (Jreige, Jan. 16. 2008).

Table 5: Indicators of Interactivity and Multimedia Applications (Percentages)

Portals	Polls	E-mail author	Posted Comments	Infographics	Maps	Videos	Photos	Diagrams
Estadão	11.6	.8	28.9	12.4	9.9	8.3	32.2	9.1
UOL	8.1	.8	15.3	10.5	7.3	16.9	31.5	5.6
iG	6.5	5.6	50.0	10.2	11.1	7.4	25.9	7.4
Terra	17.9	1.3	5.1	1.3	2.5	8.9	34.2	1.3
Total N=432	10.4	2.1	25.9	9.3	8.1	10.6	30.8	6.2

Story depth and editorial branding

Story depth and editorial branding are indicators that portals offer solid, trustworthy information, including source diversity and analysis,

especially the ones owned by media corporations with a long tradition of doing their job in the print media. Story depth included story size in number of words, use of related links and use of archives, while editorial branding included breadth of sources (number and variety), use of bylines and direction of story links (internal vs. external).

Table 6: Means of Story Depth Variables

Portals	N	Size (mean)	Links (mean)	Archives (mean)
Estadão	121	491.13	2.45	.23
iG	108	473.95	3.06	.32
Terra	79	346.46	2.25	.06
UOL	124	482.43	2.77	.29
Total	432	457.88	2.66	.24

Table 7: Story Depth Means according to Ownership Type

Type of Organization	Size mean (words)	Links mean	Archives mean	N
National Media Org.	487.04	2.62	.26	245
Multinational Org.	347.26	2.23	.06	79
Non-Media Org.	473.95	3.06	.32	108
Total	457.88	2.66	.24	432

The findings indicate that stories tended to be short with an average of 2.66 links; few of them included archives that would give the reader more information to contextualize the news. Terra, a portal owned by a multinational media company, had the worst performance regarding story depth. iG, the portal owned by a non-media organization, offered more links and archive materials to readers than the other three.

Table 8: Editorial Branding Variables   N=432

Portals	One source Mean	More than one source Mean	Bylines Mean	Internal Links	External Links
Estadão	.545	.33	.48	.57	.01
iG	.462	.388	.19	.58	.14
Terra	.54	.20	.15	.48	.02
UOL	.564	.172	.43	.54	.02
Total	.555	.345	.33	.54	.05

About 55 percent of the top stories in all portals relied on only one source, while a little over one third of the stories had more than

one source. Estadão and iG used more sources than UOL and Terra. About half of the stories offered links, but they were mostly internal. As observed in past studies conducted of portals in other languages and cultures, Brazilian portals keep their links at the internal level possibly to avoid losing the readers who move away hypertexting information and do not come back.

In addition, one third of the stories had bylines, except for the stories published by the two portals owned by national media organizations, which fared a little better (48 percent of the stories published by Estadão and 43 percent of those published by UOL had bylines). Terra, owned by a multinational media company, had bylines in only 15 percent of its top stories.

Table 9: Ownership according to Source Type (Percentages)

Type of Ownership	Official Sources	Independent Sources	Citizens	Unknown Sources	Mixed Sources	Total
National Media	63.1	22.1	.8	5.3	8.6	100
Multinational Media	67.5	15.0	0	3.8	13.8	100
Non-Media Organization	54.6	19.4	6.5	7.4	12.0	100
Total	61.7	20.1	2.1	5.5	10.4	100

The majority of the stories published by the four portals relied mostly on official sources (government, police, judiciary and the military). Only one fifth of the stories included independent sources such as experts and other media. The incidence of citizens as sources was irrelevant (2.1 percent) as well as that of NGOs. Portal Terra, owned by a multinational media company, relied more on official sources and less on independent sources when compared to the other portals.

In general, there were no significant differences between portals owned by national media organizations and portals owned by other types of organizations regarding story depth and editorial branding. Portal iG, owned by a non-media organization, performed slightly better in story depth (more links and more archives) as well as in some aspects of editorial branding (more sources and more external links). One possible explanation for iG's higher performance is the fact the its newsroom employs well-known, experienced journalists who had worked before for the print outlets of the Estado group (Estadão) and the Folha group (UOL) and therefore are well-equipped gatekeepers. Terra portal, owned by a multinational organization, had an inferior

performance in story depth: it offered shorter news stories, with less story links and made poor use of archives compared to the others.

Social significance and deviance

The findings were somewhat puzzling. On one hand, about 50 percent of all top news stories were deviant (215 news stories) with a focus on: 1. regional diplomatic conflicts; 2. crime; 3. political kidnappings in Latin America; 4. disasters and fires; and 5. Brazilian immigrants being deported from European countries and the United States. Levels of deviance intensity were mostly moderate (64 percent), with only 14 percent of the deviant stories registering a major level of deviance.

On the other hand, 56 percent of all news stories were socially significant, mostly politically oriented, that is, news from governments that involved internal political disputes, national programs related to social measures or disputes with other nations (31 percent), and economically oriented, that is, news that involved inflation, currency rate and economic measures announced by the government that have an impact on society (17.3 percent). Percentages of public significance (news related to the public's well-being such as major environmental disasters, major traffic accidents, the discovery of new medicines, etc) and cultural significance (news related to changes in society's traditions, institutions and norms as well as news about the arts and education) were extremely low: 6 percent and 1.84 percent respectively.

The findings revealed a lack of correspondence between socially significant news and deviant news, which together, in theory, would result in substantial newsworthiness. Only 18 percent of the whole sample contained newsworthy stories combining both social significance and deviance levels. News stories that were both politically significant and deviant appeared more frequently than other combinations, but still at a low percentage: 14 percent of the whole sample.

Out of the 200 news stories with some level of political or economic significance, 135 (62.5 percent) were published by national media portals, 41 (20.5 percent) by a portal owned by a non-media company and 24 (12 percent) by a multinational media company. About 58 percent of all stories with some level of deviance were published by national media-owned companies, 22 percent by the non-media owned portal and 18.6 percent by the multinational media company.

Table 10: Percentage of Socially Significant Stories according to Organization Type

Type of Organization	Political Significance	Economic Significance	Public Significance	Cultural Significance	Total stories
National Media	87	48	11	4	245
Non-media owned	26	15	3	4	108
Multinational	12	12	12	0	79
Total	31 n=125	17.3 n=75	6 n=26	1.84 n=8	433

The newswothiness dimension

Although the economy was the most frequent topic in the news, few of the stories on this subject could be considered newsworthy, that is, both deviant and economically significant (1.84 percent). Only 1.6 percent of the total sample included stories that attained public significance and deviance and less than 1 percent attained cultural significance and deviance, which indicate a very low level of newsworthiness in those areas. In addition, stories about the economy appeared to be more technical, specialized and directed to a very specific audience that needed them to take action regarding major investments, bank trANSActions, import and export business, mergers and acquisitions. On most days, the dollar exchange rate was the top headline. That is, stories on the economy were significant for the country's elite, which seems to comprise the portals' main audience.

Table 11: Newsworthiness Levels N= 433

Social Significance	Deviance	Total
Political Significance	61	134
Economic Significance	8	75
Public Significance	7	26
Cultural Significance	2	8
Total	78	243

Social significance and deviance, the two constructs that according to past research (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006) define what is news, seemed divorced in most news stories in all types of portals in this study, except for political news and only in those portals owned by prestigious national media organizations. Newsworthiness in political topics appeared sporadically, mostly in portals owned by the national media (UOL and Estadão) and by a non-media company (iG) as shown in Table 12.

Table 12: Newsworthiness of Political Topics according to Ownership

Type of Organization	Newsworthiness in Political Topics
National Media	18.8
Multinational Media	7.5
Non-Media Org.	8.3

Conclusion

Although Brazil has the largest online population in Latin America – 42.6 million and hasgrown economically at a steady rate along with other countries that form the Bric nations (Brazil, India, China and Russia), its online journalism model follows an irregular path at this point. Access to Internet news portals is unavailable to millions of uneducated Brazilians, the same ones that do not read daily newspapers and get most of their news from television. Findings suggest that news organizations, regardless of the type of ownership, offer low levels of interactivity and multimedia applications as well of story-depth and editorial branding. They may lack the technological capability and the financial resources to invest in news quality, as claimed before in independent blogs by teams of young professionals who work for these companies. Therefore, current users will read similar stories both in content and format based on the same sources.

The disproportional concentration on local news corroborates an international trend toward hyper-localism and reveals the development of a solid national pool of news agencies that operate at full speed. However, newsrooms made little use of local experts and independent sources.

In general, Estadão, UOL and iG fared better than Terra in most items measured by this study. Although the ultimate power may lie in ownership, the organizational level of the gatekeeping theory did not

correlate with online journalism's characteristics in Brazil as envisioned. A more plausible assumption is that newsroom routines may have a important role regardless of ownership type. Problems with content quality and lack of source diversity, low level of newsworthiness along with limited interactivity and multimedia applications may well be the result of newsroom routines.

Gatekeepers at the four portals analyzed here followed a similar path in selecting what moves through the gates. They picked information that was either deviant or socially significant, although in most cases both concepts appeared disconnected in the news they selected. Daily headlines on the dollar rate, for example, lacked deviance and social significance in general, but they were crucial to an elite formed by business executives, bankers and entrepreneurs – the portals´ main public - who need this information to make business-related decisions.

In addition to probably following marketing research indications to cater to users' interests, gatekeepers at Brazilian portals may have simply used whatever information was available such as news provided by official sources via e-mail or telephone that reached newsrooms without forcing reporters to leave their seats.

This exploratory study reveals that the quality of Brazilian online journalism parallels the nation's degree of digital inclusion. Both can be at the same time underdeveloped and compulsively modern. Ambiguities and inconsistencies pervade the nature of news content in Brazilian portals. Even simple statistical correlations seem more difficult to establish in environments plagued by social contradictions such as those of developing nations than the easy mathematical correspondence that flows from studies conducted in developed nations. Perhaps theoretical constructs developed to explain the characteristics of American journalism such as deviance and social significance are not suitable for explaining journalism in developing nations, where other variables may play a powerful role.

This study has several methodological limitations, including the attempt to replicate and adapt observations of theoretical constructs from one culture to another and the use of only one method (content analysis). In addition, news stories were collected during a two-week period marked by a political confrontation between Brazil and other Latin American countries regarding the actions of a Colombian terrorist group, which may have affected the results. Future studies should employ other research methods such as ethnographic observations of online newsrooms to clarify how gatekeepers select the news, what their

perception of editorial quality is and what notion of social responsibility they have developed in online news organizations.

| NOTES

1   "Thousands of neighborhoods in larger cities are also abandoned by the concessionaires due to market conditions, and have no access to broadband services. In those areas, as well as in every other municipality in poorer quarters of the whole country where it is crucial to install collective Internet access centers, there is no way to connect a local digital inclusion project, except via satellite. Those quarters or suburbs exist in all Brazilian cities, including those that are served by more advanced Internet services, like Rio de Janeiro, Brasília and São Paulo" (Brazilian Network Information Center- Cetic.Br, Survey on the Use of Information and Communication Technologies 2006).

2   **UOL:** Created in 1996, UOL (Online Universe) claims to be the leading online media portal and Internet company in Brazil based on the number of page views per month, time spent online per month and number of paying subscribers. The company pioneered the development of the Internet in Brazil and resulted from a partnership between two large and prestigious Brazilian family-owned media corporations: *Grupo Folha* and *Editora Abril*. Its interactive platform offers communications products, VoIP, Internet communities, security and search engine, among others. The Brazilian flagship portal is organized into 42 thematic stations with more than 1,000 channels of news, information, entertainment and services, representing more than seven million pages. It provides local Internet access in more than 3,000 cities throughout Brazil and 14,000 cities abroad. The Company has approximately 1.6 million content-paying subscribers. Since September 1999, UOL has also operated a portal and Internet Service provider in Argentina. According to IBOPE//NetRatings, UOL had an average of 8.9 million unique visitors in Brazil in 2006, thus ranking first among the largest content portals in Brazil and accounting for a 66% coverage in this market. This means that for each 100 people who accessed the Internet from home, 66 visited the company's portal. Also according to IBOPE//NetRatings, UOL had a monthly average of 1.3 billion page views domestically in Brazil in 2006. The average time spent online was one hour and 16 minutes, according to IBOPE//NetRatings. The company has its own teams of reporters in addition to partnerships with Folha Online, Reuters, France Presse and *BBC*.
    Estadão: Its first experiments took place in 1995, when *Agência Estado*, the company's news agency, set foot in the Internet. Shortly after that, the company's two newspapers inaugurated their websites, and the

portal was created in 2000. It belongs to *Grupo Estado*, a major family–owned media corporation and publishing group that includes a national news agency, two daily newspapers, a radio station and several other businesses. Estadão is the electronic version of the company's news agency (created in 1970) and the newspapers *O Estado de S. Paulo* (created in 1875) and *Jornal dA Tarde* (created in 1966).

iG: Created in 2000, the Internet Group claims to be the first free Internet access provider in Brazil and the largest internet access provider (ISP) in Latin America, reaching 28 percent of the Brazilian residences that have computers and access to the Internet. Apart from broadband access, it offers news, e-mail, hosting, multimedia content and Wi-fi, among others. Approximately one million subscribers pay for services, including broadband access and value-added services. In 2004, it was acquired by Brasil Telecom S/A, a Brazilian publicly-traded company and the third largest fixed line phone company operator in the Federal District and the states of Acre, Rondônia, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Tocantins, Goiás, Santa Catarina, Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul. The company provides local and intra-regional long distance voice and data services. Brasil Telecom's network covers 33 percent of the country and serves 23 percent of the population (approximately 40 million inhabitants). After months of negotiation, Brazil's largest phone operator Tele Norte Leste Participacoes SA (TNE), or Oi, bought Brazil Telecom, creating a major local operator to face regional giants such as Spain's Telefónica and Mexico's América Móvil. iG is present in more than 2,100 cities, with approximately 2.1 million active dial-up users in the last 30 days of 2006. In addition, iG has launched several collaborative tools like blogs, chat, photo album, video player and online dating service, and has developed new channels that promote the creation and distribution of the content. The portal also formed new partnerships in several areas such as entertainment, news, sports and education, and was able to enter an important agreement to bring the Internet game Second Life to Brazil.

Terra: Company associated with Terra Networks S.A, created in 2000 and owned by Telefónica of Spain with operations in 18 countries, mostly in Latin America and the United States. The company is the regional market leader with 4.7 million broadband and ISP subscribers and 60 million visitors a month. Terra operates some of the most popular websites in the United States, Latin America and Spain, with over 45 million monthly unique users worldwide. Terra is also the largest access/broadband provider in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking world market. It is specialized in Internet portals, Internet providers and search engines. During 2003 and 2004, Terra expanded aggressively into the paid content business, mainly in Spain, Brazil, and Chile, launching ventures with Disney and Spanish soccer clubs Real

Madrid and FC Barcelona. It also started several entertainment services, including an online multiplayer gaming platform (Terra Games) and a digital music service (Terra Música Premium) similar to iTunes. In January 2009, Terra announced a $10 million investment in a new multimedia collaboration and interaction project.

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