

## Between facts and news: Journalism, common sense knowledge and public sphere

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**A**FTER the optimism which followed the falling of the Berlin Wall, one has found out that the alternative to Cold War wasn't the Global Peace. Regional conflicts have grown stronger, becoming more intense than ever. At several levels, some taken-for-granted evidences were shaken by new social, cultural, political and technological phenomena.

Risk, contingency, and entropy became major categories of contemporary theoretical approaches. The post-modern society appears now to contemporary thought as a new world shaped by social and cultural fragmentation, and the eruption of new identities. The emergence of a novel public sphere concerned, mainly, with emergent social and political rights of minorities; and the constant flow of people, either immigrants or refugees crossing cultural and geographic spaces, brought to light new and old identities, leading those ancient and secure borders to collapse. Some confluent phenomena such as environmental problems, contemporary hazards associated with nuclear power, chemical pollution, terrorism, changes on cultural attitudes, the "women's lib" and their subsequent arrival to labour market, the crisis of the old traditional mediation apparatus (Church, Family, Tradition), the decadence of ideologies, emerge as main features of a society where everything that was solid melted on air (Adam, Beck, e van Loom 2000: pp 6-7). Increasing reflexivity in face of answers once taken-for-granted challenged by those enormous changes, and anxiety in face of a changing world makes that concern with security and risk become a major problem of our societies. Insecurity is thus an existential context: we don't know anymore how to go on the basis of tradition. The implicit validity claims of taken-for-granted values and traditions become problematic and potentially questioned (Adam, Beck e van Loom, 2000:37)-

Throughout this text, one appeals to a theoretical approach where we can find elements from the phenomenology of *Lebenswelt*, from the theory of multiple realities, from the theory of social representations and also from the analysis of the didactic and safety functions of journalism. With this approach, we

achieve the conceptual framework adequate to perception and analysis of the media representation of a complex society, confronted with the insecurity of its taken-for-granted structures and with new enclaves of meaning. The appearance of new provinces of meaning is related with the emergence of a pluralistic public sphere and with the eruption of some expressions of identity and life-styles concerned with the so called post-modern changes.

### **Journalism and the social construction of reality: routines and typifications**

Thanks to theoretical approaches carried out by Systems Theory, Pragmatics of Human Communication and Phenomenology and by the so called risk theory, one tries, through interpretative approaches, to facilitate the understanding of how social and cultural intelligibility is achieved. The contributions of these theories to epistemology and sociology of knowledge have made widely known that, since long time ago, communication is a way of answering to a social environment, whose main features are entropy and complexity.

As Schutz has remarked (2003) in our daily life-world we adopt an attitude that consists in the suspension of doubt. This does not mean that people have no doubts concerning what they see their daily world. But they need some kind of logical conformism as a survival strategy. We get into our cars to go to work daily, without doubting the ontological reality of several obstacles that we must face during this journey. There is a kind of naïf trust about our perceptions: things are as they appear on their self-evidence. The cognitive style of the everyday world is natural attitude which evokes a merely pragmatic and utilitarian interest for the world (Schutz, 1976:72). The natural attitude works with the "certainty" of agents, operating pragmatically in the social world.

Such attitude assumes a reliable premise in the permanence of the structures of the world. One trusts that the world will remain as it is and has been known till now. So, experience will continue to preserve its basic validity (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:7). The familiarity with social reality implies an organized standard of routines (Schutz, 1976: 108) learned from the knowledge of "prescriptions" and typical behaviours (Schutz, 1975 b: 94-95). This perspective analyses the use of typifications as an *a priori* component of a social reality. The construction of typifications is a kind of crystallization of the experience that grants stability to social life. Typifications are a way of classification that preserves some basic characteristics, required for the solution of

practical tasks presented to social agents. In face of each new situation, the actor will look for similarity with other events, and so he will act in a similar way as before, following the principle that things will remain identical. Giddens, (2003), following the concerns of the phenomenology of social world, considers that daily routines play a central role in society. Routine, psychologically related with the minimization of the unconscious sources of anxiety, is the predominant form of social daily activity (Giddens, 2003, p.32).

Accordingly, an entire field of research began to analyse the role of media on the social construction of reality, enriching journalism studies with many concepts and researches carried on within the humanities and social sciences.

### **Journalism as a place of safety: journalists as professionals of natural attitude**

With the help from the quoted theoretical approaches, media studies, sociology of journalism and news theory have been concerned with the fundamental role of the media in articulating public and private spheres, and in the social organization of space, time and community (Morley, 1992: 1). More than ever, the social construction of reality becomes a media business. The portrait of society drawn by mass media is the result of a professional activity of mediation carried on by strong social institutions whose main concern is to analyse and interpret social reality and to mediate the social actors of public spectacle. So, we share with Gomis (1991) the central idea according to which media do not confine their activities to the transmission of facts. They also represent reality according the social, cultural and epistemological rules of journalistic practice.

Suddenly, researchers felt the need of a social theory would launch the bridge between some of epistemological traits of the journalistic field (objectivity, truth, accuracy), and its social role as a place of security against increasing entropy and complexity. This angle of approach allowed an understanding of journalistic phenomena in the scope of a theory of knowledge.

Thus, we will have in account the way newsmakers present themselves as “professionals of natural attitude” and the way as that kind of attitude, related with the common sense knowledge of the everyday life-world, is reproduced in journalistic routines through typifications and other cognitive process.

One can watch as the natural attitude is vigorously trained in a way that allows journalism to proclaim his identification with the audience’s life-world. News organizations lacked a readymade “script” to tell their stories, a frame

to help them seize the seemingly incomprehensible (Zalizer e Allan, 2002). In journalism, this search for familiarity leads to a conventional vision associated to common sense. Everyday practice develops a set of procedures to assure the covering of a well-defined subject. This set of procedures implies the learning on accumulated experience, to allow for stability in what concerns the approach to similar events. The forms of construction of informative reality are defined as the outcome of professional routines and discursive practices that function as typifications of reality. The routines and typifications are established standards of behaviour, procedures that, without great risk or complications, assure that journalists, under the pressure of time, can rapidly transform the event into a news story (Traquina, 1993:32 - 33). Therefore, the set of typifications carried during its professional activity is what allows journalists to act “as always” in face of identical circumstances. As a columnist wrote in September 11th, the first moments after the perception of the tragedy have been dedicated to the search of comparisons: for some, it was the most horrible event since J.F Kennedy’s death, for others since the crisis of the hostages in the Olympic stadium of Munique in 1972, or since the explosion of the Challenger, or yet since the death of Diana or the shooting in the school of Columbine. However, everybody felt a strong need of understanding which was the role of journalists: helping to pass over the crisis into continuity. Under the effect of trauma, everybody must have felt that organizational and professional routines were still going on: so, the priorities of media organizations quickly have been reorganized to produce “convergence” (Zelizer and Allan, 2003:3, 8).

### **The rule of precedents: TV news as a security place**

Analysing precedents and models of reporting identical or similar events (Watergate preceded numerous cases of investigative journalism, namely Irangate), it is possible to detect a set of discursive, narrative and descriptive formulas and procedures, which seem, in a certain way, to be written before being, effectively, written. The narrative genre known as news can function, thus, in our differentiated societies, as a kind of substitute of the myth, a substitute through which the members of a modern culture learn values and definitions of good and evil (Bird and Dardenne, 1993: 266), providing credible information and ready answers for complex phenomena. It can be said that reports about

the same subject appear as a kind of continued narrative, carrying a world vision that remains identical.

At the reception level, this kind of approach means that newspapers are frequently used by readers and audiences in order to put some kind of order in the world, allowing for the surpassing of its contingencies. Often, the need of finding a frame that begets you the chance of understanding the meaning of fragmented events that suddenly arise in everyday reality is the favourite use given to news by audiences, as has been shown by researchers supporting the uses and gratifications theory. Gratificationists support an interpretative focus on the role of the reader in the decoding process. Cultural Studies, by their side, believe on the active interpretative role of publics and audiences but they don't agree with the neo-liberal rhetoric which identifies the audience pleasure with rational and enlightened choice (Morley, 1992-24-26). However, in spite of their differences, both emphasize that news consumption is a kind of daily ritual which adds regularity and meaning to a lot of events that bring more and more leaps to everyday life-world. Local, regional and national newscast contribute to tranquillise and to give a kind of security feeling to people in the daily life of complex societies. The very idea of the capacity developed by media on the construction of social reality, fighting the uncertainties of increasing fluid and flexible social environment, can and shall be logically articulated with the concept of hegemony developed by Raymond Williams. Despite strong political connotations related with the idea of civil society and ideological fight, the concept of hegemony helps to understand the social function of imagination in *lebenswelt*. Media representation uses resources of shared social knowledge and simultaneously strengthens them. Cultural Studies understand mass communication processes not as pure information transmission but as a set of textual practices demanding an active interpretation by audiences. This approach, especially when applied to TV News, supports the understanding of journalism as a phenomenon that can be called, in a social, cultural and epistemological point of view as a place of security. Acknowledging of TV role as an hegemonic medium is taken for granted. Newscasters are well known by their capacity of framing and agenda setting. Besides, iconic media have a strong skill of symbolic representation, being able to change people's beliefs and cognitions, narrowing or broadening their life-world borders.

In order to clarify this hypothesis, Silverstone and Morley try to analyze the interaction between television and society, forgetting the model of magic bullet and sketching a social scientific approach with contributions from Anth-

ropology, Psychology, Semiotics and so. An inquiry of Silverstone (1996) on television and everyday life offers interesting clues to understand the concept of TV journalism as a security place. Silverstone argues that television is a “place” where our social and cultural beliefs are, generally, reassured. TV news are seen as a reference of stability and safety. In spite of the variability of the relationship between linguistic form and ideological meaning, cultural studies say that ought to be possible to establish a structured set of relations among those levels. Daily contexts are important as context of reception and so the daily world is also the outcome of symbolic production (Cfr. Morley, 1992: 122). The uses of television may provide us with a starting-point for understanding how families develop and negotiate rules or principles governing areas of behaviour (Morley, 1992; 142). An audience is not viewed as an aggregate of viewers of a specific program. The operations of coding and decoding are embedded in social and symbolic practices which maintain and constitute social realities. For this kind of approach, meaning is the “real stuff” of which the word of everyday life is made of. On the other hand, the constitution of an audience only makes sense thanks to symbolic resources, most of them provided and reassured by mass media. The notion of trust is essential to reassure the feeling of ontological security, that is to say, the faith that most human beings have on the continuity of their own identity and on the stability of their social and cultural environments. In what concerns TV journalism, one can stand that newscasters try to give some order to the surrounding chaos.

Other authors of social theory have followed the same intuition. Dominique Wolton (2004) argues that social bonds related with family and neighbourhood are becoming thinner and distant thanks to the fragility of the relations between mass society and individuals. If television does not create social bonds, one must agree that in a period of deep social and cultural ruptures and lack of references, the television continues to accomplish a significant role in what concerns the strengthening of social and cultural bonds, allowing people to share horizons of common meaning. Verón (1983) sees the journalist as a pedagogical enunciator that configures the universe of speech, aiming the viewer, trying to guide and informing him, although keeping a distance of the viewer goals. Vilches (1989) observes that it cannot be forgotten that newscast establish with the viewers a didactic-pedagogical relation, trying to make the world most comprehensible for the public.

Accordingly, Television works as a kind of reference of stability in face of violence, insecurity and the complexity of everyday world. Newscast works

as a cultural device that performs an essential task: showing that the world outside keeps going on and it's not turning into a meaningless chaos. People who arrive home, and sit down on their sofas at the end of a working day, besides getting information about their social environment, want to feel that their world, despite conflicts, unemployment and insecurity, is still a predictable one. Trust, belief and safety are central elements to social survival.

Newscast work as a kind of safety operators, reassuring, through several strategies, this kind of naïf trust in the permanence of the world. As Gomis argues (1991), the concept of journalism as place of security is closely related to main features of the newscast. In complex societies the journalistic portrait of the world almost exhausts the general pattern of reference to the surrounding world.

If one agrees with the idea, according to which communication and language can be truly effective in making present to our minds a lot of realities far from the everyday life-world, one must not forget that this kind of presentation it is not of the same kind as the one that envisages media representation of reality as mirror. If during a crisis, news broadcast is disrupted, one feels a feeling of fear as result of the absence of information. Chaos would irrupt and probably the feeling of safety of daily life-world would only be restored with the coming back of newscast, explaining what happened. The lack of information leads to the lack of security. Newscast contribute to the organization of the surrounding world, working as an operator of security.

This particular approach, so related with the concept of social order, leads to a multiplicity of controversies within journalism around some epistemological matters. Some critics point to the impersonal reproduction of a language wanted similar to the average citizen speech. If, on the one side, the natural attitude is related with democratic potentialities of common sense and public spirit, on the other side it may spread a certain logical conformism in everyday life-world.

## **Functions of TV news**

Accordingly with this theoretical approach, journalists, besides safety function, generally perform three more kinds of functions: didactic function, function of familiarization, and exoteric function.

Journalism manuals and style books are always remembering the obligation of respecting the viewer and sending information in a correct and collo-

quial way. If the viewer turns off the TV set, it is a journalistic mistake. One must use words that are familiar to the viewer. Typifications and the instauration of routines and precedents assist the possibility of creation of common horizons of meaning, constructing society as a consensus, a consensus that admits a certain conflict since this does not jeopardize the central system of values. Media voices with higher range of influence and penetration institute a narrative web that seems destined to restrict meaning, to join untied wires of interpretation, to present a vision of our society in which institutionalised forms of conflict coexist, without basic contradictions. Journalists intend to create the belief that a particular way of seeing corresponds to the natural, “true” representation of society, raising social representation of reality to an universal level that surpasses the perception of difficulties, tensions and particularisations. Along this process, the journalist appeals to rhetorical devices, stereotypes expressed in narrative conventions (susceptible of being studied at the level of speech) and organizational practices that become visible in “news-value” and newsworthiness.

In everyday practice of news making, journalism seeks to show the world in a more familiar way, working as a kind of safety place in a world increasingly more insecure. This concern of showing the world more familiar occurs inside the journalistic field as a kind of didactic function (Vizeu, 2002). It can be told that journalism, at the level of a narrative knowledge, works with the previous knowledge about rule and deviance inside of a community. Narrative knowledge presupposes shared horizons of meaning and a reciprocity of expectations that allows for the intelligibility of speech. Journalism is deeply related to everyday lifeworld, and professionals try to achieve the maximum of synchronisation with cultural presupposes of social agents. The language of journalistic prose contains a special relation with the daily world, reconstituting it in a way that emphasizes some of its traces.

One of the main features of media speech is the fact that this kind of speech is not confined to a restrict domain of experience. Since Robert Park (1972), journalism researchers like to talk about two main kinds of knowledge: “knowledge of” and “knowledge about”. The former is acquired with the experience, the latter is formal and looks for a certain degree of precision and accuracy. Park (1972) supports the idea that news, as a way of knowledge, are focused on present time, orienting man and society in the real world. Based on a similar theoretical approach, Meditsch (1992) says that journalistic knowledge is different from scientific knowledge. While the first one follows

an agenda of subjects, scientific method works through hypothesis and logical deductions (Meditich, 1992). At the level of the agenda the analysis of independent variables is substituted by the idea of apprehend the facts from different perspectives. Scientific knowledge works with experiments (Santos, 1998) and with abstract cuts on reality to look for answers about certain phenomena, researching, analysing, systematizing and organizing data. It is an esoteric knowledge, because is shared by a group of experts which don't care about public visibility.

Contrarily to science, journalism knowledge has a strong concern on public visibility and works with subjects despised by sciences such as emotions, dramas and collective or individual behaviour. Its concern it is not some kind of essentialist knowledge, the isolation from original context. Journalism seeks for dimensions of reality that aren't interesting to traditional epistemology. Journalistic speech is exoteric, while scientific speech is of the esoteric kind, which means it is to be confined to experts and disciples of a school which does not share its knowledge with strangers (Abbagnamo, 2003).

While the extent of the legitimacy of other types of speech is limited to one of the specific domains of experience, the extent of the legitimacy of media speech crosses over all the domains of modern experience. The imperative of transparency and universal visibility of media speech is related with the exoteric nature of its symbolic production, while the relative opacity of the other modalities of speech is related with the esoteric nature of its symbolic production. We use the term esoteric to classify a speech destined only to members of an institution that becomes relatively cloudy to strangers and all foreigners that do not belong to the legitimate body of this institution. Exoteric is applied to discursive modalities that are not reserved to an institutional body in particular, but destined indiscriminately, to all. Thus, for example, medical speech tends to develop, not only a vocabulary and syntactic rules, but also esoteric manifestations of its expression and its diffusion, what turns it incomprehensible and cloudy to those who are not part of his legitimate body. The media speech tends to become transparent and universally understandable, in function of its exoteric nature.

## **Enunciative procedures**

One can find on this professional knowledge, a concept of presumed audience (Vizeu, 66), a concept that gives some hope to all theorists, since cultural

studies until movements such as the aesthetic of reception from Hans Robert Jauss, that believe in the interpretative skill of audiences. During the process of mediation between facts and news, journalists perform a lot of operations which allow building up social representations of daily world, showing daily life with its contradictions.

The first operators that a researcher can find are the procedures concerned with time and the concept of actuality. Journalists live under the tyranny of time. They must answer to the appeal of audiences that feel a strong need of getting the feeling of having *been there*.

The second level of procedures is associated to objectivity. The narrative of journalistic legitimacy is always concerned with journalists being seen as truly and reliable researchers of true facts. It's not enough to be fair. They must be seen as fair and capable of an objective reporting. So, the journalistic speech always tries to obliterate the marks of the author's subjectivity, erasing deictics and all pronouns that refer to the author of the text.

At the third level of operations, appear the procedures of interpellation, which are devices that seek for the complicity of audiences. One of the most typical uses of this device is the attempt to turn the viewers into agents: "Here, we can see the house of the victim".

In another level, we find the framing procedures. Following the concept of typifications of Alfred Schutz, scholars such as Goffman, Gitlin (1980) and even Tuchman say that frames are basic cognitive structures which guide the perception and representation of reality. Frames are not consciously manufactured but are unconsciously adopted in the course of communicative processes. On a very banal level, frames structure which parts of reality become noticed. Todd Gitlin has summarized these frame elements most eloquently in his widely quoted elaboration of the frame concept: "Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters." (Gitlin 1980: 6)

In journalistic enunciation we also find didactic procedures: these procedures aim to explain environment in a didactical way. On didactical procedures we find that journalists have a kind of mental portrait of audience (Vizeu, 2005: 151). This hypothesis confirms the existence of a presumed audience. Journalists aim to bring information to the level of what they think to be its audience's life-world. They try very hardly to turn what is seen as strange and complex into something familiar and easy to understand. That concern is easy to find in the choice of the words and in a lot strategies that try to generalize the world

vision carried by the enunciate, almost as if journalists were saying that everybody (that's to say everybody belonging to average people) is worried with the same subjects and thinking the same about those subjects. The news narrative had become, thus, representative of a given culture, helping to understand its significant values and symbols. Spreads a feeling of security when promoting a certain social order and when establishing borders for the acceptable behaviour. Journalistic speech, in spite of the claim to objectivity, owns some features of narrative knowledge such as openness to life-world. Media communication carries with a kind of life of its own, synthesizing, in an original way, public and private experiences.

### **Journalism and multiple realities**

However, the didactic function of journalism cannot be understood in a scholastic way. Sure, journalism is connected to daily life-world and looks for a kind of empathy with real people that is particularly strong on TV news story. But, even agreeing with that point of view, we don't support a unilateral concept about the social function of journalism.

Social sciences and journalism theory must not confine journalistic practices to a simplistic kind of common sense knowledge, exempt of internal contradictions, whose main function would be to reinforce actual social relations (Genro, 1977). So, journalism will stay at a level of mediation between common sense and critical knowledge. In spite of this connection with narrative knowledge from community, journalism also stands up for one validity claim to truth which implies a discursive practice considered the most adequate to the objective reporting. Finally, journalism performs a social task of spreading knowledge and information that allows the chance of the average man to participate on collective deliberation and on public opinion building.

Media are surely the cause of contacts that exceed the standard-reality of everyday life-world, allowing experiments that surpass the more direct coordinates of space and time. They allow vast layers of hearers to access the report of events verified on provinces of meaning far from daily life. Television can introduce us to an economist that explains with adequate seriousness, the financial moment, to a scientist that introduces the eventuality of a new cure, to a writer that speaks of its creative experience or, even, to a prophet who speaks of the mystical experience. These moments originate the ruptures and the displacement of meaning that allows the transition from life-world to

other provinces of meaning transitions that Schutz recognizes to imply brusque changes of cognitive styles (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).

Media and, in particular, television are also responsible for the emergency of the “well informed citizen”, which is a social type that gains an enormous importance in modern democracies and in the contemporary public space. According to Alfred Schutz (1976- b), the common man has a pragmatic relation with the life-world and uses typical prescriptions in order to get identical results in typical situations. The well informed citizen identifies itself with the democratic public space, a concept that, although it is not explicitly present in the work of Schutz, must be looked at as a province of meaning, with its own cognitive style and his particular use of reason, certainly different from the cognitive style and from the uses of reason carried out on other provinces of meaning such as religion, art or everyday life world. The meaning of all the functions and procedures suffers a new reading at the light of Schutz’s thought: Journalism does not achieve the level of critical thought. It is concerned to explain the social world in a didactic way. However, journalism brings multiple realities, even the most complex, closer to everyday life-world. So, there’s a democratic potentiality in journalistic field, visible at three levels: a) allows us to understand the social reality; b) it breaks walls between strictly rational and cognitive ways of knowing reality and common sense knowledge; c) it allows the transition among several provinces of meaning, helping audiences to apprehend the subjects concerned with political and economical systems and public sphere. With journalism, people learn how to deal with strangeness and otherness: so, good journalism will find the right balance between communitarian roots and openness to the world.

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