

Teaching cyber journalism: a comparative study in the Journalism courses of Rio Grande do Norte and Mato Grosso do Sul

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative study about the research made on teaching cyber journalism in Rio Grande do Norte and Mato Grosso do Sul. The research made in 2007 with the objective of mapping the availability of the disciplines associated to Cyber Journalism in the universities and colleges in the city of Rio Grande do Norte. The text presents the importance in updating the curriculum, especially the tools used in the web. In Mato Grosso do Sul, the research was made in 2008-2009, adopted as research method was the interpretation of analysis data of the curriculum structures in the Journalism courses. The research showed, among other aspects, in both situations that the importance of teaching cyber journalism is very clear for the journalism studies. It was also observed that Cyber journalism is still an area in expansion; there are courses that still haven't, or just included the course in their curriculum structure.

Key-words: Cyber Journalism; Teaching Journalism; Journalism; Web Journalism; E-Journalism.

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1. Initial Considerations

Internet evolution is becoming faster and faster and demands new research that will assess the development of Cyber Journalism, as one of the models where journalistic production is processed in the internet and how the academic formation is treated.

In Journalism, the influence of new technologies is noticeable, which must be implemented into the academic formation of its professionals. The knowledge, domain and use of these new techniques require the adequacy in the theoretical/practical teaching in the curriculum structures in the Journalism courses.

Cyber Journalism, been one of the representing words in the practice of modern journalism is still a recent process, especially in our country, which needs to be investigated for better application and knowledge.

2. Theoretical Fundaments

With so many technical evolutions coming from military objectives, the Internet came-up in the United States as a means of safe communication in the form of a network that linked several computers to a central computer. In the 90's, the commercial exploration gained the world as a new market, also causing a new culture (cyber culture) and a new space (cyberspace).

The prefix cyber comes from the word cybernetic, which means:

“Ciencia o disciplina que estudia los mecanismos automáticos de comunicación y de control o técnica de funcionamiento de las conexiones de los seres vivos y de las máquinas autogobernadas, acepción femenina procedente del griego kybernetike (arte de pilotar o gobernar) y del francés cybernétique, acuñada por Norbet Wiener tras postular, en 1948, a la cibernética como una nueva disciplina científica tras sus investigaciones basadas sobre el cálculo de

probabilidades, el análisis y la teoría de la información” (Gómez y Méndez; 2002, p.2).

With the arrival of the internet in Brazil, around 1983 (way two computers adopted to exchange information), doing journalism had to adapt to the new resources and means offered by the web, simplified denomination of the virtual space, in which the information travel through the internet by the protocol WWW, especially in the flow and speed of information.

MIELNICZUK, in PALACIOS E MACHADO (2003) identify three phases for the history of Journalism in the Internet:

- first phase, called transpositive: the information came as a reproduction from the main editorial parts of printed news for the internet. This first phase can be also called E-journalism, since electronic equipments and resources were used.
- second phase, rhetoric: there were experiments in the attempt of exploring the characteristics offered by the web, the email starts to be used as a possibility of communication between the journalist and the reader, but everything still associated to the printed news. The sections of latest news, “hard news”, arrive as a form of organization. This phase is also called digital Journalism (multimedia), which applies digital technology, in every, and any procedure that implies in the treatment of data in bit-form.
- Third phase, web journalism (current): the modification starts with the arrival of corporate as well as editorial initiatives destined for the internet, enabling the faster transmission of sound and images. The journalistic sites extrapolate the idea of a simple Web version of a printed newspaper, and start to explore the potentialities offered by the web, such as the use of hypertext not only as a resource for organizing information, but also as a possibility of journalistic narrative of facts. The news have constant updates and they start to be produced with resources like texts, sounds, videos, infographics and hyperlinks, all in one so that the reader can choose their course of reading. For some authors, like

SOUSA (2006), also called online Journalism, digital or cyber Journalism, but with differences, “the online journalism consists in any type of journalism practiced on the internet while the term digital journalism refers to every technology that works with digits, the term web journalism refers only to the journalism practiced on the internet; and the term cyber journalism is related to cybernetics”.

In this study, the term cyber journalism was adopted for been the one that appears the most in the European studies in the area, and for been best fitted at the moment since it has the aid of technological possibilities offered by cybernetics, and applies the cyberspace to investigate, produce and specially divulge journalistic contents.

PEREIRA (2006) identifies and characterizes two specificities of cyber journalism: the language of the internet and journalism on the internet. The language is mainly regarding hypertextuality, enabling infinite connections, in which the information is linked in a multi-linear form. Journalism on the internet is characterized by the instantaneity, multi-mediation, hypertextuality and customization.

For BERTOCCHI (2006) the hypertextuality, multimedial and interactivity are potentials that the internet provides journalism, or triple demand, in which according to Salaverria (2005), the hypertextuality is the capacity to interconnect several digital texts among each other. The multimedial is the same message in different elements, such as: text, image and video. The interactivity is the possibility that the user has to interact with the information.

3. Blogs and Sites in teaching journalism

Blogs, as well as, emails, discussion forums, chats and sites are tools available on the internet as a resource of a much wider use. Their use can collaborate to insert the students in this new mean of journalistic production, providing the development of digital competencies required from a Journalism professional.

The blogs and sites are treated as means of communication that help in the teaching-learning between teacher and student, besides been a mean that instigate research and style perfecting.

The practice of Cyber Journalism in the classroom helps the student in their writing routine that is why the teaching institutions need to adapt to this mean with enough infra-structure to simulate an environment of an online newsroom. According to Melo (1986) “the implementation of experimental laboratories and equipments reduce the distancing from reality and provides the realization of projects that assimilate / confront the conventional standards of industrial communication”.

The students in the classroom must write stories as if they were writing for journalistic websites, only this way, there will be an approximation with journalistic reality. The news that the students write now stops been a mere exercise and becomes publishable news, it is a first professional experience.

Despite the ease to write a news piece nowadays, the students need a technical and theoretical preparation that the digital means require. According to MACHADO and PALÁCIOS (2007) to make the new journalism, enabled by the Internet, you have to know and dominate the principles, rules and practices of the old journalism. Some skills that can be cited as examples of the cyber journalist’s knowledge is: the use of HTML, flash, notions of web usability, Internet essay, use of content administration systems, creation of multimedia products, audio and video editing, etc.

The predominance of blogs and sites raise an important data regarding the need for the production of projects that will bring new forms of communicating. That is why, for MELO (1986) the laboratorial vehicle must be allied to systematized production, like in the professional day-to-day, and the ludic production that enables the experimentation and discovery of new practices. Therefore, teaching and research join forces strengthening the exchange of experiences between professors and students.

4. Inclusion of cyber journalism in curriculum structures

With the advances of the Internet and the arrival of Cyber Journalism we must question the journalist's formation and the type of teaching offered by Universities/Colleges that must update their curriculum matrixes to the new demands imposed by this technical order. For some Universities, the concern is still the formation of communications experts and not a specific formation of a journalist. Therefore, it is expected from a recently graduated student of Journalism a "multimedia" formation, new skills and competencies to work in cyber journalism.

Por eso, uno de los cambios principales consistirá probablemente en mudar del modelo tradicional de enseñanza, consistente en formar a los futuros periodistas en destrezas profesionales dirigidas a enfrentar la escasez de información, hacia otro modelo en el que se forme a los periodistas para enfrentarse a la superabundancia de la información. Con Internet, el problema ya no es encontrar información, sino distinguir entre lo significativo de lo irrelevante. (SALAVERRIA; 2005, p.3)

According to RIBAS and PALÁCIOS (2007), adequacies must be made in the teaching-learning process focusing on the formation of these new Journalism professionals.

In most cases, the digital appears in the curriculum plans under a final discipline of the course (Digital Journalism, Multimedia Communication, etc). However, reality shows that there are not non-digital means of communication anymore: currently, communication professional work immersed in an environment of strong technological content, which influences the entire productive routine and not only the final product (press, radio, television, etc). In the same manner, the digital content must be distributed in the study plans of the communication courses, instead of been relegated to the last years of undergraduate school. (SCOLARI, 2006, p.7)

Higher learning institutions have the social commitment of generating new knowledge and qualifying the student for the current job market, which requires skills in Cyber Journalism, and especially offer subsidies for a conception capable of providing a true theoretical/practical teaching for the students, but this does not always happen. In some universities, the curricular matrixes are still not adapted to this technological evolution.

To DINES (1986), university teaching of journalism is important:

“... because it is in the classroom, exercising theory and evaluating practice that the student can see further. The reflection does not need to be converted into pompous doctrines, but it can be converted into concepts, and especially, ideals. There isn't a better place to make practice using theory than in university. (...) The classroom, conveniently and necessarily equipped – in material terms like humans – it is irreplaceable to merge ethics with technique, ideal with the real (...). We already noticed that journalism for been an essentially intellectual activity, it is assumed that in practice there must be a series of moral and ethical values. It is known that the process of informing is a forming process, therefore, the journalist, in a last analysis is an educator”. (DINES 1986, p. 22)

Therefore, it is worth mentioning that the professors should be aware of these transformations and formats, which will possibly be imposed into society, professionals and teaching journalism, so that the professionals coming from the courses can meet the demands of this new model of society.

It is necessary to alter the curriculum structure of a Journalism course to use the new potentialities of the Internet in the teaching and learning areas. To FIDALGO (2001) the school contents were kept, the students' access to scientific texts improved, and on the other hand, a better follow-up of the taught class was enabled, by the students and the way they assimilate the class, by the teachers.

To BERTOCCHI (2006) the academia must prepare the Journalism students for this new work market and society requirement, despite been a field of research and teaching that is in search for some answers. To re-think this new profile of the journalism professional “requires disposition in part of academia and the market that is always in the search to break eventual barriers, resistance; and think with a systemic and long term view, in order to embrace the continuously mutation of the environment”.

What happens nowadays, some Institutions that teach Journalism continue to reproduce the classic journalism, and forget the exploration of new technologies, like interactivity and multimedial. Sometimes, the lack of infra-structure gets in the way of the collaboration in perfecting and understanding the discipline, as in the case of some Federal Universities that added to that do not have the resources in the Journalism undergraduate courses for a discipline turned to Cyber Journalism.

Therefore, according to TORNERO in the prologue of CALVO (2007, 8), make the most of the new potentialities of web journalism (online) to increase and improve the quantity and quality of the information we process and transmit socially. And at the same time, use these potentialities to develop a more democratic and collaborative public sphere. We can also mention TORNERO (2007, 9) that the relation between cyberspace and journalism, there is a set of innovations and transformations that affect integrally all the dimensions of journalistic communication and that will end up changing its nature.

TORNERO in this same text, still makes a discouraging assessment, saying that the combined situation is disheartening, very few lessons and disciplines dedicate to cyber journalism, and when they do, in reality, they are optional courses that can be easily “forgotten” in the teaching programs of future journalists. This evaluation corresponds to the reality in many courses in Brazil, such as in the case of UFRN, after ceasing offering the discipline in 2008.

Another question posed frequently and also mentioned by CALVO (2007, 26) is about the digital literacy. Although this aspect represents to be irrelevant today, in the context of quantity of journalism students, is always present and in some moments, in some

groups, in a more relevant way, reaching from 30% to 40% of the group. According to the author, it is important to mention that digital literacy is not only about the basic domain of the computer, like opening and closing internet pages or a text editor, but it is also about using tools of digital technology and communication and websites to access, manage, integrate, create, analyze information to function in the society of knowledge. (TORNERO, 2004 apud CALVO, 2007, 29).

CALVO goes further, affirms that the cyber journalist must acquire digital literacy. Quoting the concept of KELLNER (2004, 38) that cites: “the true digital literacy of computers implies not only in technical knowledge and skills, but also a refined capacity in writing, reading, investigating and communicating. Supposedly we must intensify their abilities to access, analyze, interpret, process and store critically multimedia and also printed materials”. CALVO (2007, 32) highlights that the “cyber journalistic literacy, conveyed as an increase of the “digital literacy”, answers to a formation plan comprised of a double dimension: instrumental or pragmatic, for a humanistic or cultural view, for another”.

Like in the evaluations on teaching cyber journalism in Brazil, CALVO (2007, 34) reports that the inclusion of cyber journalism in the study plans in the Spanish Journalism courses are also in their initial phases of development. The “youth” of cyber journalism and the lack of a common theoretical reference mark contribute to that. According to the author, it can be affirmed that among the different Spanish universities offering journalism courses, there are important differences on the teaching of journalism on the internet. From the universities that do not have any disciplines related to the issue, to courses with several offers in different levels and shapes. It is still highlighted that cyber journalism requires a series of modifications that would update the study plans with the objective of incorporating the formative demands of this new way of making journalism. According to CALVO (2007, 35), “due to a singular scenario in which the messages are broadcasted, the online journalist require a specific formation”. Therefore, according to the author’s understanding, the journalism schools must form a professional characterized by knowing the informative structure; produce information in real time; take on several roles; dominate the web as source of

information; generate information; cyber journalistic writing – are professionals capable of generating informative messages adapted to the characteristics of the Web, and according to the production routines of the online mediums; using software tools; creative; team player; explore the interaction and continuous recycling of their formation.

5. Method

It is a qualitative/descriptive study, essential for the investigation of the Cyber Journalism issue and reaching the proposed objectives. For such, the research comprised the following stages: bibliographic revision; analysis of the curriculum structures in the Journalism courses in Rio Grande do Norte: UFRN, UnP and UERN and in Mato Grosso do Sul: UCDB, Estácio de Sá, UFMS, Uniderp and Unigran. We analyzed the syllabus that were closer to cyber journalism; a total of 188 students attending universities in Rio Grande do Norte answered the pre-formatted and private questionnaires. Of these, 69% were from UFRN, 21 % from UERN and 10% from UNP; interview with the application of the questionnaire to students and professors; in Mato Grosso do Sul, the sample was of 100 students, 20 from each institution, with students from the 3rd and 4th years; as for the professors, the also private questionnaires, were applied to the ones that taught the referenced discipline, that is, the one related to the issue cyber journalism, with five teachers; and lastly data analysis and interpretation.

6. Results and discussion

In Rio Grande do Norte, the interviewed students were asked to what means did they use the Internet, 84% answered that they used it to do academic activities. Firstly, we point out the incentive the universities give professors so that they use the internet and its potentialities. This aspect should be a hook so that the professors would use the internet more to their favor and aligning practice and theory.

Another important data is the familiarity that the students said they have with the internet as a mean of communication leaving behind vehicles until then consecrated like TV, radio and printed media. One of the factors that contribute for this familiarization is the media convergence, where in the same system the user can find audio, video and text devices.

Despite the importance given to the internet by the students the universities still place it as a second plain issue. From the three universities analyzed, only UNP offers the discipline of cyber journalism as mandatory, UFRN and UERN offer it as optional. This premise explain why the 28% of students heard do not feel pressured by technological advances, since the students do not have access to information regarding the development of these new technologies, the demands of the market in relation to this issue, the aptitudes that this new mean of communication require that the opportunities offered by this new mean, they do not have the knowledge of what the perspective of cyber journalism and its potentialities mean.

In the academic medium there are still some differences in relation to the accessibility of computers and their technologies. The technological area has a better laboratory structure compared to, for example, the humanities. Allies to this many journalism professionals diverge and refute on the use of new technologies, with special mention to cyber journalism and the real benefits it can bring to teaching. The professors at many times also show a lack of interest in relation to the subject due to little formation and qualification in new technologies, added to that the economic differences found among universities, for not having resources, they cannot provide their professionals the needed qualification, nor offer to the students a good basic teaching structure.

On the use of blogs, discussed throughout the project as an option to use the internet in the formation of undergraduate students in communication, only 52 students commented having a virtual journal. For those, most of them answered using them for personal means. This is still a wide alterantive to be explored besides offering access facility, like free services.

Another difficulty found is the distancing between the pedagogical process and the execution of the in-class journalistic activities. According to PEREIRA (2004, 45) the dimensions of a pedagogical project for teaching journalism does not have to contemplate only the process of construction of the information, which involves only analogue theories to the journalistic genres. The author contemplates saying that:

“in teaching journalism there is a tendency to reduce the practices of pedagogical interaction to the production of information. This reflects two problems in the conduction of the political-pedagogical project in the classroom: 1) the epistemological rupture among the laboratorial disciplines; 2) the adoption of the writing manuals as a paradigm for the construction of the journalistic information”. (PEREIRA, 2004, p. 45)

All of the researched institutions have computer labs available for the students. This is an important step in the digitalization of teaching in universities, in which they have a double duty of forming qualified professionals and educate towards the exercise of full citizenship.

What can be observed with the research project is that in Rio Grande do Norte, UFRN, UERN and UNP fit the model proposed by MACHADO (2007, 16) on the models of incorporating digital contents. UFRN and UERN are institutions of traditionalist profiles that started to offer students the inclusion of theoretical and/or practical disciplines over digital themes. While UNP is a part of the new institutions in which the digital contents appear constantly in the teaching plans.

In Mato Grosso do Sul, of the three institutions that posted their syllabus in the website, UCDB, Estácio and Unigran the term used for the terminology of the discipline was the same, Online Journalism, with the exception of UCDB that used Communication of Web. UFMS is the only institution that does not present a discipline related to Cyber Journalism, only one called Computers in Communication. Regarding the distribution of the disciplines in the courses, 50% of the disciplines are given in the 3rd year, 25% in

the 2nd and the other 25% in the 4th year. This demonstrates that the students only have contact with the discipline after basic formation.

According to the interviews with the students, the focus of the disciplines was given differently. Most of them, 60% first theory then practice: Uniderp, UCDB and Unigran, while 20% only practice, at UFMS.

Analysis of the disciplines syllabus and the questionnaires applied to the students, the theory of Cyber Journalism given in class can be divided into thematic areas, made by readings, researches or assignments, with the areas like: Form analogical communication to digital; Internet History (Web); Introduction to On-line Journalism (Web, Internet or Cyberspace); Use of tools: text, image and sound edition, etc; Hypertextuality, interactivity, multimedial, memory and credibility; Online Journalism Vs. Printed Journalism; New Market technologies and Tendencies; Regional Reality of Online Journalism (Web); Legislation and Ethics in the web.

The laboratorial process of managing the disciplines was made by: Preparation of agendas; Reports and News Script; Production of the News Platform online. The news or reports produced by the students were posted in sites and blogs made available by the professor. The objective of the disciplines, in practice, was to simulate a newsroom environment, with agenda meetings, division between writers, reporters, photographers, etc; enabling the students' contact with the cyber journalistic universe during the undergraduate course.

All of the professors answered that they develop the disciplines theoretically first, then practice. The theory is made by means of reading texts, seminars, researches, debates about the issues raised, among others. The practice is developed by producing stories for the websites made available by the professors or the Institutions. At Uniderp, the stories are produced for the Laboratorial-Newspaper "Unifolha Online" (<http://www.unifolha.com.br/>), at UCDB for the website "Jornal Em Foco" Online (www.jornalemfoco.com.br/). At Estácio, according to the professor, the stories are

made available to a bog of the discipline, not mentioned by the professor in the research. At UFMS, the stories produced go to the website of the School of Practice (<http://www.webjornalismo.jor.br/>) available by the professor of the discipline.

Among the professors, 60% develop some kind of project focusing on cyber journalism, and 40% do not:

- UFMS: Teaching projects on cyber journalism in Brazil, Extension Project at School of Practice (laboratorial newspaper), research projects on journalistic convergence and approximations/distancing of the newsrooms of the printed newspaper and cyber journal;
- UCDB: Extension project “Jornal Em Foco” Online (laboratorial newspaper);
- Uniderp: Extension project “Unifolha” Online (laboratorial newspaper);
- Estácio: Extension course on audio, video editing and animation in flash.

7. Final Considerations

The possibilities provided by the internet are still little explored by the universities. It is observed in the institutions unbalance between new teaching methodologies and the incorporation of new technologies. The universities along with the professors need to find themselves in a process of constant updating to form new qualified professionals capable of meeting the market demands.

UFRN, according to the model described by MACHADO (2007, 16), fit into the updated courses, in which they have a traditional formation profile and they start to make available in their curriculum syllabus theoretical or practical disciplines on digital issues. The discipline “Online Journalism” provided the students the experience to work under real circumstances, to live like a newsroom, to deliver the texts in the established deadline and prepare the following piece. There is no need to alter the curriculum

structure of a Journalism course to use the new potentialities of the Internet in the teaching and learning areas, for that the universities need to use ideas adopted by other institutions. As examples, we can name the creation of sites, development of blogs etc. The stimulation given to the students so that they can write their stories and publish, make them reflect about their roles as opinion makers and their importance in the market.

The model plan for journalism studies made by UNESCO and published in 2007 reports regarding cyber journalism,

Los estudiantes adquirirán conocimientos sobre la evolución reciente de Internet como instrumento y medio periodísticos. Aprenderán el modo en que el relato periodístico puede verse transformado por la tecnología, cómo pueden utilizar los periodistas la tecnología para realizar mejor su labor y el grado en que las relaciones con el público pueden transformarse en una mayor interacción con los ciudadanos gracias a Internet y otros medios en red. Analizarán problemas éticos que pueden surgir con las nuevas tecnologías y la forma en que la tecnología puede modificar la estructura de las empresas y del sector de la comunicación y de la información. Aprenderán a escribir para sitios en línea y multimedia, lo que comprende, entre otros aspectos, la organización de enlaces y la utilización de bases de datos, la publicación de noticias en sitios Web y la actualización y la continuación de las mismas a medida que se desarrollan los acontecimientos. Adquirirán conocimientos sobre cómo crear páginas para sitios Web, cargarlas en un servidor y utilizar una cámara digital. Experimentarán con tecnología de audio y de vídeo a fin de dotar de interactividad a sus reportajes. Reflexionarán acerca de las consecuencias que se derivan de las tecnologías móviles.

Y aprenderán a adaptarse a las nuevas tecnologías. (UNESCO, 2007, 27)

These indications clearly show the perspectives for teaching cyber journalism and its complexity, given that the students must achieve cyber journalistic literacy, as previously pointed out by CALVO (2007, 30), referring to the domain of languages, software, hardware and extraordinary knowledge of humanities.

New technologies of information and communication (NTIC), cyber journalism and also the academic formation of Journalism professionals are issues that deserve attention in theoretical investigation. The curriculum structures must be updated to the transformations society goes through.

The Universities/Colleges, as well as Journalism professors need to be aware of these transformations in de mediums and teaching Journalism so that the professionals coming from these courses can meet the demands of this new model of society.

In relation to the disciplines tied to Cyber Journalism, we can consider the following issues:

- regarding the inclusion of Cyber Journalism: many authors like Tejedor (2006) and Bertocchi (2006) affirm that it is not possible to establish characteristics and applications with precision in Cyber Journalism, since it is an area in expansion. Therefore, there are schools that have just included in their curriculum structure, disciplines related to Cyber Journalism; and others, for example UFMS, do not have a specific discipline in the area.
- Regarding the consensus in terminology (nomenclature): according to the analysis of the syllabus in the disciplines it is possible to affirm that there is no consensus in the correct terminology on the issue, despite the term Cyber Journalism been the one used the most abroad.
- Regarding the inclusion of Cyber Journalism: for inclusion or improvement of the discipline focused on Cyber Journalism there is still advances, project

derivatives, investigations and experience in the area, so the necessities that still exist in the Institutions are met.

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