

Online Journalism: Reflections from a Political Economy of Communication Perspective

César Bolaño (UFS, Brazil).

Abstract

Digitalization is a new technical paradigm, restructuring media economics by a complex movement of convergence that destabilizes consolidated markets and guarantees the constitution of specific production patterns. It is the case of on line journalism, studied here from the perspective of the political economy of communication, information and culture.

Key words: journalism, digitalization, political economy.

Digitalization represents a new technical paradigm that reorganizes in a wide scale the Political Economy of Communication Information and Culture, as it allows a complex convergence that makes consolidated markets unstable, contesting hegemonic positions. It not necessarily means democratization of the big business media but on the contrary, it promotes an increasing multimedia centralization tendency. Competition¹ grows and becomes virulent in this stage of the capitalist development that establishes a fundamental media transition, where the internet has a central part. Some call it “the new economy”. On the worldwide computer network, newspapers compete against radio companies that compete against televisions, all of them competing against phone companies, etc. So, the economy of communication is put in a state of evidence until a new hegemonic structure is established.

What determines the specific forms assumed by that generalized competition is not the technologic convergence in abstract, but the development of new specific production standard for the internet in the area of music, video, on line services and etc., including journalism. This last one is understood as a transverse product, suitable for radio, press, TV or internet, assuming, in each case, particular versions that don't change its general definition. It has been analyzed by the so called “journalism studies” that put in evidence the appearance of specific production standards, as in the case of the on line journalism, but it that can only be completely decoded if we understand its economy and its political economy.

The Political Economy of Communication, Information and Culture has been studying for decades what the French call the “social logics”.² Four of them, in special, are evidenced in the international literature and can be considerate a paradigm: edition,

¹ Understood not as the orthodox economy, as the opposite of the monopoly, but as the permanent construction, defense and rupture of the barrier entries that constitutes the different ways of control that a few companies have over specific markets. That is, the general form of dynamics in the advanced capitalism.

² See Bolaño, 2000, cap. 4.

flow, press and club. This last one, best presented in Tremblay (1997), refers yet in a complex way to the theme of convergence in all levels and meanings, and its acceptance by different economics thought schools, from different perspectives,³ such as the idea of a “network economy”, demonstrates the growing relevance of the matter at this historical moment.

I developed, based on the analysis of the current crisis of capitalism (Bolaño, 2002), a classification of the convergence industries (Bolaño et al., 2003 chapter. 1), that complete the one presented in Bolaño (2000), which is more general than that of the French Economy of Communication and Culture.⁴ Danielle Souza regained the matter of the *on line journalism* in the same perspective and ended up making a classification exercise, adding a column to the very known Miège et alii (1986, p. 80) chart.⁵ In chart 1, there is a reproduction of the new column, proposed by the authoress.⁶

Chart 1: General Characteristics of the *on line* press economic model

General Characteristics	Multimedia. Homogeneous Public. Segmented Media. Variety of consumer goods. Technological convergence. Interactive media context.
Central Function	EDITOR: Accomplishes the same tasks as the writer: creates the agenda, writes and edits the texts. The only difference is that he is coordinating the team.
Economic Chain	Reduced production and diffusion costs. The production is integrated with other media, with real use of the already setup structure. Production in “real time”. Network distribution. Irregular work station. Non stable production and presentation techniques. Growing industry concentration.
Profession Concept	Journalists and web designers (professionals specialized in graphic design and editorial techniques for sites and web pages).
Sales/incomes	Indirect incomes from advertising. High investment in new technology with long term financial outcomes.
Market Characteristics	Mass market segmented. Interactivity. Faithfulness difficulty. Actuality dependence. Tendency to de-regulation. Fusion and synergy exploration.

Source: Souza, 2005.

With this chart the author clarifies the meaning of the journalist labor integration in this type of productive production. In a way, “on a daily basis there is no central function done by only one professional. There is the figure of the editor, that in some

³ See Herscovici, A. **Redes eletrônicas e acumulação capitalista: elementos de análise.** In BOLAÑO et alii. (2003).

⁴ For a critical presentation of the French school, see Bolaño (2000), chapter 4.

⁵ Reproduced in Bolaño (2000), p. 178.

⁶ Luis Albornoz (2005) did a similar exercise, that could be used here as an alternative or compared to the Souza's.

cases is called content manager, but his functions are the same as the writer's, with a single difference: He coordinates the team to have agility in the production of news and takes responsibility for the information that goes on the air" (Souza, 2005). The teams, on the other hand, are reduced, incorporating in large scale the work of trainees.

There's strong flexibility of the work and a tendency to wipe out the frontiers between the journalistic specialties, with the reporter exercising, for example, the function of a photographer. The activities related traditionally to the journalist, are in a general way, ending, being simplified, while others, previously linked to areas like information technology, gain relevance and become part of the intellectual tools that the journalist is obliged to master. The result of that is a wide process of de-qualification and re-qualification, in detriment of the critic instrumental, traditionally attached to these professionals education. The limits to the subsumption of the intellectual work (Bolaño, 2002) are in this way being transposed, which in this case, does not guarantee profits or competitiveness. Therefore,

The news production and diffusion costs are reduced, since there is no expenses with paper and no physical distribution, as it occurs with the press, nor expenses with an almost industrial structure, such as in the case of the flow sectors. In most cases, the production of the online media is integrated with other sectors, such as radio, TV or newspaper, because it has no immediate income related to the high investments. The offer of journalistic content in the web is not financially profitable... Those who earn money in the internet are the access providers and network companies. The provider's portals that maintain a team of journalists to dispose information for their customers have the objective to preserve the audience...The newspapers that dispose an online version, hardly will profit with the new edition, because the only possible profit on the web is through advertising sale. The announcers still are a bit fearful to advertise their products on the internet. It distances the online media from its objective of competing with the traditional media. What occur are fusions between the media companies, such as the corporations that absorb, at the same time, the editorial sectors, the press, the flow, and now the online. The companies that dispose information on the web make a new adaptation or a new interpretation of their cultural commodities. The result is a concentration of power in the hands of a small group of large companies (Souza, 2005).

As it is possible to assume, this refers to a hybrid social logic that represents, according to the author, no longer the approximation detected in the 80's "between the editorial and flow, facing the beginning of the segmented and paid TV. The presence of the internet as a medium of information circulation promotes a new approach, this time

between the press and flow, constituting a new paradigm” (Souza, 2005) related to the content production.

At this point, it is important to return to the concept of club from the Canadians. The idea appears in a great measure to explain the overuse of the flow logic, occurred from the advances of the digitalization that promotes a convergence between telecommunication, broadcasting and informatics, with a tendency to intensify the cultural production commoditization and industrialization process, eliminating the frontiers between the information fields, communication and culture, which demands an amplification of the Economy of Communication conceptual scope.

For Tremblay, the flow logic is typical of the beginning of the broadcasting industry, characterized by the direct diffusion. The development of the technologies that allow reproduction at accessible prices break progressively the thin imbrications between the production, programming and diffusion functions, promoting a progressive disarticulation of the flow logic, the opposite that occurs with the logic of edition sectors, that is reinsured by general digitalization. In the author’s words:

If the progress made by the capture and reproduction techniques in the audiovisual production caused the editorial logic to progress, the application of the distribution techniques, first, and afterwards, the bidirectional and interactive communication in the cultural products offer is not translated in the reinforcing of the flow logic, but in the establishment of a new logic, that we classified as the “club logic” (TREMBLAY, 1997).

This progressive erasing of the flow logic by the development of the converging technologies is evidenced in Tremblay’s and Lacroix’s first work about the subject, on the segmented TV. In the article, here discussed, Tremblay treats specially the telematic networks such as the internet. Chart 2 presents the characteristics of the three models.

Chart 2: Institutional ways of trade and industrialization of culture, information and communication

EDITORIAL	FLOW	CLUB
Durable content	Ephemeral content	All kind of content
Non-continuous content	Continuous content (program)	Continuous and non-continuous
Individual copy	Diffuse prototype	Individual copy for consultation or reproduction
Reproduction	Diffusion	Distribution

Direct financing	Indirect financing	Direct and indirect financing
------------------	--------------------	-------------------------------

Source: TREMBLAY, 1997.

In the logic of the club, there are offered individualized products (like in the editorial model), as well as the continuous program (like in the flow model) to the club members (the ones who are connected, who have access), incorporating different financial forms. As in the editorial logic, it is allowed the materialization upon an individualized support, depending on the user, that does not have to go to the selling place, but pays the printing expenses (or the recording). The relations between the creation, production, distribution and consumption are restructured, diminishing the activity of the programmer and transferring the lead function to the server (human or electronic). He is responsible for negotiating the diffusion and distribution rights, for elaborating the marketing strategy and also for offering to the club members an ensemble of services (including navigation) and products.

I allow myself to re-establish Danielle Souza's contribution, based in this quick reading of Gaëtan Tremblay. For him the club competes with the editing – presenting itself as an alternative to material reproduction and distribution through selling places – and with the flow, in reducing its action space, integrating it. The social logic of the club integrates the (editing) direct and (flow) indirect commoditization, in a new technical apparatus to offer cultural commodity, exploring different financing forms. The author doesn't refer to the press, but it can be considerate on the editorial logic, as it happens various times in the bibliography of the Political Economy of Communication and Culture.

What Souza presents, as we have just seen, is a case of erasing boundaries between the flow and the press, when it is inserted in the new technical support, similar to the approach that is in the origin of the Canadian proposal, promoted by the segmented TV, which approaches the flow to the editorial. Therefore, it is a deeper approach of the same tendency, but it is not clear if it is the flow or the press logic that is going to predominate. In any case, the logic of the club is amplified and the price exclusion prevails, even though the advertising financing is one of the possibilities for the online journalism development.

Considering, on the other hand, that the logic of the club is hegemonic, encompassing all the others, on the perspective of the Political Economy of Communication and Culture (without considering the economy of telecommunications

and informatics),⁷ it is important to think, in its interior, the convergence and the social logic by layers. In a more general level, there is the traditional classification editorial/flow/press. Beneath, we can define the sectors like pay TV, online radio, or online press operators, in the practice of the convergence. All of them present a resemblance with the flow: They don't offer an individualized product, but a group of elements that we can classify, in third place, as parts of a programming, graphic design or something equivalent.

The "flux" – mentioned by Franciscato (2004), for example, referring to the online journalism production "in real time" – must be considered in this third (less abstract) level. It is important to make this clear because many times the idea of flow is incorrectly understood as flux. Although the idea is more meaningful in the online journalism than in broadcasting, it regards a discontinuous flux, in the perspective of production and of consumption, not constituting a particular commodity (good or service), but just a part of a programming which value is done only by the set.

The operation is similar to a news channel, such as CNN and other kinds of segmented TV, with a fundamental difference: In this case the flux is inserted in a structure of areas and formats, combining the characteristics of the internet (hyperlink, www pages format, etc.) and the press. The integration is guaranteed by the newspaper, site, portal, radio, web TV or other digital product, inserted itself in the internet platform, as it could have been in the digital TV platform, having also a resemblance, as noted above, with the conventional segmented TV, that can be seen itself as a technological platform that distances the TV from the flow model and approaches it to the editorial one.

Thereby in the channels specialized in journalism, in the segmented TV, the flux is distributed between the video and the parallel texts disposed in separated parts of the screen, establishing that monotonous circular dynamics that is only (partially) dissolved in exceptional occasions when the live transmission is emphasized. What the consumers purchases is not even the access to the channel, much less to the flux, but to a package of channels and other products (pay per view, music channels, access to the internet), planned as a global and differentiated offer according to the person's or family's acquisition capacity. The same rule is valid, with some adaptations, to the internet and all the digital platforms that adopt the club logic.

⁷ For a complete perspective, see BOLAÑO et al., 2003.

Therefore the flux does not represent a new social logic, but an additional element offered, such as the links, photos, banners or the musical program in the supply constitution. Its definition is important for the study of the specific characteristics of the work and competition process, in the technological convergence sectors, that incorporate in some way, the journalistic work or similar. The idea of “information production in continuous flux” is one of the two notions of “real time”, in Meditsch’s (2001) perspective, referring to the “movement of constant news production and its fragmented distribution throughout the daily program (sometimes 24 hours a day), in radio, television or internet” (Franciscato, 2004, p. 27). The other one is the live transmission of the news.

Franciscato agrees with Ignácio Ramonet’s (1999), criticism to the “continuous information in real time ideology”, when affirms, for example, that “talking about image production and other content in real time ... means to accentuate a tension between the emotion that this image offers and the sensation of truth that seems to ‘naturally’ emanate from it as it is presented in real time” (Franciscato, 2004, p. 28). Thereby, he also recognizes the fetish character of the real time journalism, considered as “a discursive construction based in a mediation technologically operated in order to create the effect of absence of mediation, the effect of a direct contact between the public and the event” (idem, p. 39), but in fact “it does not overcome the mediation of the journalist and the organization, in the technical possibility of content production by the organizations as also in the interpretative character of the journalist when it selects the content, languages and establishes thematic delimitations” (idem, p. 30).

In this perspective, the author analyses the impact on the journalistic practices of the (utopic) online journalism search to “overcome, technically and concretely, the discrepancy between the time of the movement of things and the time of the journalistic production” (idem, p.29). He refers even, when he talks about the work edition, to a kind of tension in the work process:

The web page exceeds the journalism’s classic notion of time and space because it introduces the hypertext as a resource of organization and a connection between contents. As the online journalism is going towards a simplification of design..., its hypertext characteristic conducts the editing principles to a technical capacity to link a diversity of contents (texts, images, info graph, related sites etc.). Even though the online editing programs technically make this function easier and the online selection and hierarchy process are not pressured by time and space necessity, the online editing process can be more complex and demand a greater effort from the journalist in contents connection... This amount of work confronts with a

new time exiguity in the real time journalism attached to the production continuous flux and news transmission: If at every 90 seconds it is necessary fresh news, the editing time is drastically reduced, which make difficult more complex and richer contextualizations and connections (Franciscato, 2004, p. 33).

From this point it would be possible to regain Danielle Souza's conclusions about the impact of digitalization in labour exploitation, but the author doesn't consider at any moment the journalistic production process as a capitalist exploiting process of a specific intellectual work. The entire analysis is centered on the impact of the digitalization over the "journalism time characteristics" (periodicity, newness and public revelation), without considering the essential – the processes of time-space compression, using the expression that Harvey (1993) found in Marx –, centering strictly on the particularity of the product and not on the work and valorization processes and the specific macro social logic related to. Regarding this last ones, the author notices the coincidence of the notion of real time popularization, related to the financial globalization, as he points out

how fast the expression "in real time" became a common sense expression to designate a set of practices and knowledge related to the use of technology to reach instantaneity and simultaneity in different areas. For example, in the business management, "real time" became an efficiency symbol, qualification to operate with efficiency in a system that searches the maximum reduction of the time spent to achieve a production aim. (Franciscato, 2004, p. 25).

It is, obviously, the same fetish that Ramonet denounces when he talks about the journalism in real time ideology: The fetish of the technical efficiency expands in the precise moment of the capitalism structural crises, that can't, despite the technological development and the general digitalization, regain the productivity numbers characteristic from the post war expansive period. But the author's main reference to analyze the problem is Castells (1999), which fails in the analysis of productivity, as demonstrated by Garnham (2000).⁸ Thereby, instead of going deep in the clarification of the "real time" capitalist ideology, the author rehearsals a (shy) idealistic critic essay regarding the "extension this notion has been gaining in the social relations. In other words, we can question if the systemic model of real time, based on

⁸ See BOLAÑO et MATTOS (2004).

the immediate character of transmission, exchanges, calculus, action and result, that is, in a techno-economicist perspective of the society” (Franciscato, 2004, p. 25).

His reference to Lévy to speak about the “difference between the real time of the calculus and transmission and the time of human practices” does not solve the problem, because it relates precisely to a colonization process of the one over the other. The correct criticism procedure would be to look for the contradictory elements inherent to the process and the overcoming perspectives, related to the existence of non hegemonic social actors. In the case in exam, it would be necessary to explain the radical interest differences between the journalism (the journalists) and the press (the media, or more adequate, the capital invested in the journalism field).

Something that, in general, until now, the field of Journalism Studies, on the contrary of the Political Economy of Communication, has not had the capacity to understand, remaining in a great measure, trapped to the old bourgeois press idealistic concepts, even when its subject is so futurist and modern as it is supposed to be.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALBORNOZ, Luis. **Los diarios *online* de información general. El caso de los grandes periódicos en español.** Tesis de doctorado. Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Facultad de Ciencias de la Información. Departamento de Comunicación Audiovisual y Publicidad I Madrid, 2005

BOLAÑO, César. **Indústria Cultural, informação e capitalismo.** São Paulo: Hucitec/Polis, 2000.

_____. **Trabalho intelectual, comunicação e capitalismo – A reconfiguração do fator subjetivo na atual reestruturação produtiva.** Artigo publicado na Revista da sociedade Brasileira de Economia Política. RJ, 2002, p. 53-78.

BOLAÑO, César; HERSCOVICI, Alain. **Economia da Informação e Conhecimento: uma abordagem em termos de Economia Política.** CD-Rom do Congresso da Sociedade Brasileira-SEP, Campinas, 2005.

BOLAÑO, César; HERSCOVICI, Alain; CASTAÑEDA, Marcos e VASCONCELOS, Daniel. **Economia Política da Internet.** Universidade Federal de Sergipe. Aracaju: fevereiro de 2003.

BOLAÑO, César; MATTOS, Fernando. **Conhecimento e informação na atual reestruturação produtiva: para uma crítica das teorias da Gestão do Conhecimento.** In: Datagramazero. Revista de Ciência da Informação, vol. 5, n. 3, artigo 3 – junho de 2004. Rio de Janeiro. URL: www.dgz.org.br.

CASTELLS, Manuel. **A Sociedade em Rede - A era da informação: economia, sociedade e cultura,** vol. 1. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1999. 7ª ed.

FRANCISCATO, Carlos Eduardo (2004), As novas configurações do jornalismo no suporte on line. In Revista **Eptic On Line**, vol. VI, n. 3, set/dez, 2004. URL: www.eptic.com.br.

GARNHAM, N. (2000). **La Sociedad de la Información como ideología: una crítica**. In: Primer foro de las comunicaciones: desafíos de sociedad de la información en América Latina y em Europa”. UNICOM/Lom Ed. Santiago (Chile).

HARVEY, David. **A condição pós-moderna**. São Paulo, Loyola, 1993.

HERSCOVICI, Alain. **Redes eletrônicas e acumulação capitalista: elementos de análise**, in: BOLAÑO, César; HERSCOVICI, Alain; CASTAÑEDA, Marcos e VASCONCELOS, Daniel. **Economia Política da Internet**. Universidade Federal de Sergipe. Aracaju: fevereiro de 2003.

MEDITSCH, Eduardo. **O rádio na era da informação – Teoria e técnica do novo radiojornalismo**. Florianópolis, Insular/EDUFSC, 1993.

MIÈGE, B.; PAJON, P. e SALAÛN, J. **L’industrialisation de l’audiovisuel**. Paris: Res. Babel, 1986.

RAMONET, Ignácio (1999). **A tirania da comunicação**. Petrópolis, Vozes.

SOUZA, Danielle A. **A internet como suporte jornalístico em Aracaju: adaptação dos jornais impressos à nova realidade tecnológica e econômica da mídia**. Aracaju, mimeo, 2005.

TREMBLAY, Gaëtan (1997). **La théorie des industries culturelles face aux progrès de la numérisation**. Sciences de la société 40: 11-23.