

Citizen journalist or source of information: an exploratory study about the public's role in participatory journalism within leading Brazilian web portals

Prof. Dr. Elizabeth Saad Corrêa¹ and Francisco Madureira²

1. FROM WEB JOURNALISM TO PARTICIPATION

Throughout the whole world, the internet is already a communication channel for 1.58 billion of people³, whose voice has been replaced for decades by the predominance of television, radio or print media⁴. "For the first time in modern history", says the north American guru of the participatory journalism Dan Gillmore, "the user is really in the power"⁵. During this period, the Web turned into an open platform, the largest publication system humanity has ever known⁶, with more than 11.5 billion pages in 75 languages⁷. Information is beyond the boundaries of mass media, published by ordinary people, companies or government bodies, men or women, children or adults, sympathizers of the various religions and political ideologies. Leading online media companies and small content producers has seen their audience largely increase, while watching the decline of print media⁸.

It was in the whirlwind of this new model of communication that the blogs' phenomenon emerged. Small sites with automated publication systems

¹ Professor and research leader at Communications Graduate Program, School of Communications and Arts, University of São Paulo (PPGCOM – ECA/USP), Brasil. Email: bethsaad@gmail.com; URL: www.commais.info; Phone: +55 11 9973-9079; Address: Rua Simão Álvares, 555 apt 111 B – 05417030 – São Paulo – SP, Brasil.

² Graduated on Journalism at PPGCOM – ECA/USP, MS student at PPGCOM – ECA/USP on Digital Media, and professional journalist at UOL; URL: www.uol.com.br; E-mail: francisco.madureira@gmail.com; Phone: +55 11 8578-5655; Address: Rua Joaquim Norberto, 262 apt 71 – 02301100 – São Paulo – SP, Brasil.

³ Internet Usage Statistics, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, 28.03.2009

⁴ Cláudia QUADROS, *A participação do público no web journalism*, p. 14

⁵ Dan GILLMOR, *We The Media*, p. 137

⁶ Shayne BOWMAN e Chris WILLIS, *We Media*, p. 15

⁷ Antonio Gulli e Alessio Signorini, (2005) *The Indexable Web is more than 11.5 billion pages*, <http://www.cs.uiowa.edu/~asignori/web-size/size-indexable-web.pdf>

⁸ EUA: newspaper circulations falls 3.6% in competition with the web. Terra, Porto Alegre, 28 abr. 2008. Available in <<http://tecnologia.terra.com.br/interna/0,,OI2844061-EI4802,00-EUA+circulacao+de+jornais+cai+com+concorrenca+da+web.html>>. Accessed in Feb. 15 2009

and often free of costs, they went quickly from virtual personal journals into civic engagement tools⁹.

The phenomenon made possible for small teams — composed by journalists or not — to challenge communication empires and conquer their audiences. Something similar to what the MP3 digital music format, coupled with exchange files systems such as P2P¹⁰ (peer-to-peer), did to the music industry in the last decade. According to Shirky (2008):

“We are living in the middle of the largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race. More people can communicate more things to more people than has ever been possible in the past, and the size and speed of this increase, from under one million participants to over one billion is a generation, makes the change unprecedented, even considered against the background of previous revolutions in communications tools.”¹¹

Research conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project¹² revealed that 8% of American Internet users had a blog in 2006, the equivalent of 12 million people. Of these people, 34% considered their blog a way of journalism — 56% often spent time checking the veracity of the information they published, and 57% included links to the sources where the information was collected. But these are not the only reason why blogs became a threat to the current business model of the press. To 84% of bloggers, writing was a hobby, and 85% did not aim to make money with this activity.

Parallel to the popularization of blogs, another expression form emerged online, perhaps more threatening to the traditional press — participatory journalism, also called citizen journalism or "open source" journalism in reference to open source software, developed together by a community of programmers that exchange information over the Web¹³. This open source concept also affects other information industry areas, in particular the editorial —Wikipedia, for instance, is a collaborative encyclopedia that allows Internet users to create, update and correct collectively the contents of their entries.

Participatory journalism adopts the principle that every citizen is a potential journalist and may contribute to the construction of news. The phenomenon emerged at the beginning of the decade in the United States and

⁹ Dan GILLMOR, *We The Media*, p. 139

¹⁰ Peer-to-Peer, Wikipedia, 28.03.2009, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer-to-peer>

¹¹ Clay SHIRKY, *Here comes everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, p. 106

¹² Amanda LENHART e Susannah FOX, (2006) *Bloggers: A portrait of the internet's new storytellers*, <http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2006/PIP%20Bloggers%20Report%20July%2019%202006.pdf.pdf>

¹³ Ana Maria Brambilla, *Jornalismo open source: discussão e experimentação do OhMyNews International*, p. 57

Asia, and already has repercussions in Brazil. In 2005, the Overmundo¹⁴ website had come out with the support of Rouanet Act (a federal law to encourage the culture), coordinated by the anthropologist Hermano Vianna and the law professor and online activist Ronaldo Lemos. The website runs with content of Internet surfers, which can post news, photos and videos about culture. One needs to register before insert contents. The publication works with a punctuation system that automates the homepages' edition and allocates the most voted contents in prominent places. In the section "About Overmundo", the founders explain their reasons:

"No team of journalists, no matter its size or ability, can cover or filter the increasing amount of relevant things that happen across the country. On the other hand, victorious online projects, such as the proliferation of blogs and Wikipedia, suggest another way to deal with this huge amount of cultural information, with increased decentralization. Following these examples, we launched the challenge: here every Brazilian citizen can help to promote all aspects of our cultural production that interest him. Overmundo, as a matter of principle, will not work without the collaboration of many people. The more people, the better. "

At the beginnings of 2006, some major Brazilian Internet portals released channels with journalistic focus that allowed the reader's participation, with the transmission of texts, photos or videos.

Some examples are the VC Repórter¹⁵, from "Terra", the VC no G1¹⁶ from "Globo.com" and, the Minha Notícia¹⁷ from "IG".

Considering the initial stage of our academic study, still under development¹⁸, we present here preliminary data about the status of participatory journalism on initiatives undertaken by the mass media of information on the Brazilian web. The assumption, obtained with the qualitative analysis of data collected in this research, is that the leading portals in the country have not still been able to adopt the participatory journalism in the depth and breadth of experience reported by authors such as Brambilla¹⁹, Bruns²⁰ and Gillmor²¹.

¹⁴ Overmundo, <http://www.overmundo.com.br>

¹⁵ VC Repórter, <http://www.terra.com.br/vcreporter>

¹⁶ VC no G1, <http://g1.globo.com/VCnoG1/0,,8491,00.html>

¹⁷ Minha Notícia, <http://minhanoticia.ig.com.br>

¹⁸ This paper presents data and consists of the master's research in development by Francisco Madureira, along with the Program of Graduate School of Arts and Communication, University of São Paulo, under guidance of Prof. Dra. Elizabeth Saad Corrêa.

¹⁹ In his dissertation of master Journalism *Jornalismo open source: the discussion and experimentation OhMyNews International*, Ana Maria Brambilla focus on the site *OhMyNews International*, the largest site for Collaborative Web Journalism in South Korea.

²⁰ In *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*, Axel Bruns investigates the collaborative publishing models of key news Websites, ranging from the worldwide *Indymedia* network to the massively successful technology news site *Slashdot*

²¹ In *We The Media*, Dan Gillmor points cases of grassroots non-standard news initiatives and the blurring of the lines between producers and consumers of information

In order to attest it we began characterizing the Brazilian outlook of collaborative journalistic information within the net, and then present the concepts and methodological issues that support our observations. We end with the presentation and discussion of the pilot research conducted with the main Brazilian portals about their initiative in participatory journalism.

Obviously, the data presented here are not conclusive, considering the preliminary nature of the study, but it shows clear evidence of our research assumptions.

2. THE BRAZILIAN SCENERY

The provision of journalistic information on the Brazilian Web provides a peculiar overview. There is a strong concentration of information in digital environments originally destined to access the web — the so called portals, also ISPs (Internet Service Providers), which enrich the content from all sort of content partners to enrich their pages and keep a high audience. The news has functioned in these portals as a differential anchor of attraction and it is provided either by international news agencies; or by their own newsrooms; or by joint ventures with multimedia groups. Table 1 shows the ranking of the leading Brazilian portals:

TABLE 1
Top 10 Search Engines / Portals And Communities
Pageviews and Unique Audience, Feb. 2009²²

| Brand/Channel | Unique Audience(000) | Pageviews totals (000) |
|------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Google | 22,151 | 5,884,229 |
| MSN/Windows Live | 20,604 | 1,704,680 |
| Orkut | 17,446 | 16,105,346 |
| UOL | 15,637 | 1,613,627 |
| iG | 13,512 | 737,966 |
| Terra | 13,157 | 718,252 |
| Globo.com | 12,666 | 1,208,134 |
| Yahoo! | 10,937 | 847,609 |
| Blogger | 9,149 | 152,432 |
| Abril.com | 4,843 | 81,228 |

²² Ibope//Netratings, Standard Metrics, <http://www.nielsen-online.com>, accessed in 27/03/2009

Parallel to what we call "portal news" are the journalistic offerings tied to large traditional journalistic brands as "O Estado de S. Paulo", "Folha de S. Paulo", "O Globo", among others that have their own websites²³ — the Estadão.com, the Folha Online and Globo Online respectively.

The Brazilian web surfer behavior shows, as studies conducted by Ibope/NetRatings, that, first and foremost, users get information through portals, and usually reach purely journalistic websites through links within these huge content routers. That's the reason we've chosen to study participatory journalism initiatives in this media environment.

The assumption that the level of public participation in UGC (User Generated Content) channels of the major portals are not yet similar to international experience begins to be justified, firstly, by the low penetration of Internet in Brazil, especially in comparison to cases examined by the mentioned authors. The country is today ruled by television — 93.1% of households have at least one TV set, while only 16% of them have Internet access²⁴. According to the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), the country had in March of 2009 a population of 190.9 million. A month before, the Ibope Nilsen Online's panel showed that 62.3 million Brazilians have Internet access from different environments — home, work, school, lan-house, library and public access centers. As a result, we conclude that 32.6% of the Brazilian population have Internet access, a penetration rate greater than other countries in South and Central America, but well below the same rates recorded in North America, Oceania and Europe, as shown in Table 2.

²³ <http://www.estadao.com.br>; <http://www.folha.com.br>; e <http://www.oglobo.com.br>

²⁴ National Survey by Household Sample, http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/trabalhoerendimento/pnad2007/sintese_pnad2007.pdf, accessed in 31/03/2009

TABLE 2
Use of the Internet in the World and Population Statistics²⁵

| World region | Population (2008) | Net Surfers (Feb/2009) | Penetration (% Pop.) | Net surfers per Region |
|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| North America | 337,572,949 | 251,290,489 | 74.4 % | 15.7 % |
| Oceania/Australia | 34,384,384 | 20,783,419 | 60.4 % | 1.3 % |
| Europe | 803,903,540 | 393,373,398 | 48.9 % | 24.6 % |
| South and Central America | 581,249,892 | 173,619,140 | 29.9 % | 10.9 % |
| Middle East | 196,767,614 | 45,861,346 | 23.3 % | 2.9 % |
| Asia | 3,780,819,792 | 657,170,816 | 17.4 % | 41.2 % |
| Africa | 975,330,899 | 54,171,500 | 5.6 % | 3.4 % |
| WORLD TOTAL | 6,710,029,070 | 1,596,270,108 | 23.8 % | 100.0 % |

In addition to lower Internet access rates, another point that also distinguishes UGC initiatives within leading Brazilian portals from the international citizen journalism experiences examined by the mentioned authors above is the struggle in awakening reader's engagement with information production. This happens because the websites use material sent by internet surfers merely as a source of information, a simple spark for the usual verification process performed by professional journalists of these websites, a practice that tends to discourage the "old reader" to become a protagonist within the news process, turning it into a conversation²⁶.

The paradoxes of the Brazilian outlook, therefore, present instigating conditions for the current study.

3. BASIC CONCEPTS

To undertake our current, wider academic research and to support adequately the present paper, it is necessary to determine the theoretical guidelines that support our assumptions and methodological procedures. Considering the limitation of the presented format, we will summarize and outline the main concepts.

In the context of its general theme, the described phenomenon is linked to the reception field, which occurs in digital environments. It is also related to social media and practices of UGC (User Generated content) phenomena, as we can assume the user as a protagonist.

²⁵ Internet World Stats, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed in 31/03/2009
²⁶ Dan GILLMOR, *We The Media*, p. 237

Such thematic association finds conceptual basis in the fields of Cultural Studies and the researchers at the University of Birmingham, Great Britain and the formal concept of the social media. If we accept that participatory journalism actions, regardless the platform, has a cultural practice character, based on the audience — here understood as a receiver, but also as a cultural producer —, then we can insert our research in the context of Cultural Studies.

Accordingly, we emphasize the multi-dimension and the analytical flexibility of the study, reinforcing its theoretical aspect. In the words of Ortiz (2004), "cultural studies are characterized by its multidisciplinary dimension and break down the traditional boundaries established in departments and universities."

Accepting the premise that not every study of culture is determined by concepts of Cultural Studies, we try in this paper to analyze a social action — the production of informative contents from digital networks users — and, thus, represents another concept of culture, as supported by Raymond Williams:

"(...) Is from Raymond Williams that another concept of culture takes body, independent of the national territory which is in question. This conception, it is' a comprehensive way of life 'or a' constitutive social process that creates specific and different ways of life 'says the inclusion of the scope of the ordinary, admitting it as a cultural expression with the extraordinary. "²⁷

We can also link this study to typical social media manifestations from the perspective of New Media Studies. The Participatory journalism phenomenon in the context of digital information world occurs along with a networked, connected society that favors the use of communication for social expression.

According to Fritjof Capra:

"(...) The network is a common pattern to all types of life. Wherever we face life, we find networks. It is important to understand that these live networks are not material structures such as a fishing net or spider web. They are functional networks, networks of relationships between various processes. [...] In a social network, the processes are processes of communication. In all cases the network is a standard non-material relationship. A more critical examination of these live networks showed that their basic characteristic is to be self-generated. "²⁸

It is also possible to infer that the events of participatory journalism are a very true expression of what is today in our networked society, which reproduces the needs of communication and information of its members through the resources offered by digital technologies of information and

²⁷ Ana Carolina D. ESCOSTEGUY, *Estudos culturais em debate*, p. 5
²⁸ Fritjof CAPRA, *A New Conception of Life*, pp. 7-9

communication (ICTs). Here, we find resonances in the studies of Bernard Miège —according to him, despite the innovations that ICTs and the digital world introduced in social relations, the contemporary scenario of the network continues to reflect simply the evolution of our society — that is, a society engaged in change that affect not only the communicative practices, but the configuration of the public sphere.

For Miège, these changes are occurring on three levels: the commercialization and industrialization of communicational products; the technical emphasis on communication and media; and the individualization of social practices, with the displacement of practices beyond the borders of collective spaces. Miège says:

"We emphasize that all these different movements do not relate primarily to equipment and technical tools of information / communication, they are in some way in the natural evolution of society. That is, in that technological innovations are in line with the social dynamics, the more chances they will have to consolidate, so we can consider that the more ICT is accompanying social change, less it constitutes as determinants in the process.

Because of that, the communication may not be practical only in the epistemological field, which characterizes at first technological innovation as part of the social field, we must support the idea (more than a hypothesis) that are emerging new standards of communicative action. "²⁹

Finally, our study is directly related to the concepts of journalism, participatory journalism, citizen journalism or other terms also used for the phenomenon identification. Previously we already mentioned them through propositions expressed by Brambilla, Bruns, Bowman & Willis, Gillmor among others. For methodological purposes, we outline some concepts that we adopted as starting points for the study:

Journalism

We assume that journalistic activity consists in the "collection, preparation, and distribution of news and related commentary and feature materials through such media as pamphlets, newsletters, newspapers, magazines, radio, motion pictures, television, and books. The word journalism was originally applied to the reportage of current events in printed form, specifically newspapers, but with the advent of radio and television in the 20th

²⁹

Bernard MIÈGE, *La société conquise par la communication*

century, the use of the term has broadened to include all printed and electronic communication dealing with current affairs"³⁰. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2004:31), this practice is to provide citizens with information they need to be free, and must conform to some principles for the survival of the free press — like the need of verifying information, independence and public commitment (2004:22). For the authors, the three concepts have a strong relation:

Verification

For Kovach and Rosenstiel, the discipline of verification is what separates journalism from entertainment, advertisement, literature or art. Trying to understand characteristics of reporter's work, most important character in a newsroom for Nilson Lage (2001: 49), the author says:

"Few journalistic issues rise up from direct observation. Most contain information provided by institutions or people who witness or participate in events of public interest. These are called sources. It is a common task for reporters selecting and questioning the sources, collect data and speeches, place them in some context and process them according to journalistic techniques."³¹

The author goes further and recommends to hear more than one specialist so that the material acquires more credibility, one of the assumptions of journalistic speech.

Independence

Other factor related to credibility is independence. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2004: 164), independence means a "way to be a journalist without denying personal experience, but also without becoming its hostage"³². At first, journalists should be independent from those who they cover. To conquer it, journalists must exercise an "engaged independence" — something that defines the role of the journalist as someone devoted to inform the public.

³⁰ JOURNALISM, Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/306742/journalism>

³¹ Nilson LAGE, *A reportagem*, p. 49

³² Bill KOVACH e Tom ROSENSTIEL, *The Elements of Journalism*, p. 164

Public commitment

For Kovach and Rosenstiel, journalism should provide a forum for public criticism and reconciliation, with minimum interference from speeches that evade truth, facts and verification. The challenge in a scenario of social media in which anyone became an information broadcaster through the Web is to distinguish the journalistic speech from private opinions hidden behind a journalistic format. They say:

"Technology is shaping a new economic organization of information companies, which is subsuming journalism inside it. The threat is no longer simply from government censorship. The new danger is that independent journalism may be dissolved in the solvent of commercial communication and synergistic self-promotion. The real meaning of the First Amendment — that a free press is an independent institution — is threatened for the first time in our history even without government meddling."³³

Participatory Journalism

We will assume during our study Bowman and Willis' concept, to whom participatory journalism is the action of a citizen or group of citizens who have an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysis and dissemination of news and information³⁴. The aim of this participation is to provide independent, accurate, comprehensive and relevant information, necessary for the path and the balance of democracy.

Bruns, however, proposes a distinction between the terms "participatory journalism" and "citizen journalism." The participatory journalism is more deeply related, according to the author, to the process of *gatewatching* — or selecting relevant content for certain audiences — and how the Internet turned this process into a collective activity, formerly completely under the journalist's responsibility. However, the citizen journalism, according to Bruns:

"(...) aims to more accurately reflect a wider range of public views on specific issues through changes in the research and reporting approaches of journalists. The movement sees especially newspapers and their Websites as instrumental in developing a new form of 'civic commons' where solutions to existing problems are found through constructive debates that are orchestrated and led by editors and journalists on their pages."³⁵

The distinction matters to our theoretical framework to explain the findings the study suggests, when seeking to demonstrate that the activities of UGC within major media portals in Brazil, though orchestrated by editors and

³³ Bill KOVACH and Tom ROSENSTIEL, *The Elements of Journalism*, p. 24

³⁴ Shayne BOWMAN e Chris WILLIS, *We Media*, p. 9

³⁵ Axel BRUNS; *Gatewatching*, p. 23

journalists, do not engage the public in research activities and reporting, as we shall see forward.

4. THE STUDY AND ITS METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

We first structured an exploratory field study to put together the initial assumptions, and later expand our spectrum of research, considering the objective of presenting preliminary data on the status of participatory journalism practiced by the leading web portals in Brazil. We assume that the major portals in the country have failed to adopt participatory journalism in the depth and breadth of international experience reported by other authors.

Considering only the leading media websites, we started to organize the sample by the following combined criteria: audience (as previously presented on Table 1) and the provision of a specific area of UGC. From this first cut, it the following selection ascended: "Terra" portal, with the VC Repórter area, and "Globo.com" portal, with VC in G1 channel. We justify the exclusion, at this point of the research, of the portals UOL, iG and Abril, from the existence (or not) of areas of participatory journalism consistent with the definitions we've defined before.

Despite being the gateway to a wider audience in the country, UOL remained outside of the sample by not having a consolidated product of collaborative journalism, while adopting user participation sparsely. The iG portal, on the other hand, has a specific collaborative journalism website called "Minha Notícia". It originally was part of the sample, however, after a week of data collection, it was removed from the study by inconsistencies between the published materials, website's own policies and objectives of the study. Even with the slogan "What happens near you is what matters,"³⁶ the collaborative service often allows the publication of material without source identification, clearly reproduced from international websites, and without the correct author identification — ironically, items declared on their own set of rules. This way, during a week of analysis, it was possible to detect material clearly reproduced

³⁶

Site slogan <http://minhanoticia.ig.com.br/> (03/28/2009)

from other vehicles³⁷ (especially because of the distance between the author's city of residence and the place of some facts discussed in their materials); the use of the service for advertisement³⁸ (the fourth user in participation uses as avatar a logo from a cleaning products store, with a link for this website) or self-promotion for blogs (such as the users Super Pérolas³⁹, Denispd⁴⁰, TRETANDO⁴¹ and Planeta Tosco⁴², which complete the TOP 5 ranking in volume of publications); and disclosure press-releases (mainly within "Tourism" and "Culture and Fun" channels, where companies publish stories as citizen journalists, what brings us stories like "Itu receives the Yakissoba party" or "Villains shine on Vilas Hotel Cambridge in SP", clearly press-releases).

Abril.com, the latest Brazilian Internet portal to join the list of largest websites in audience in the country, also didn't have a consolidated service of collaborative journalism, at least until the completion of this survey.

Once the sample was chosen, the process of collecting data was based on the methodology of non-participant, semi-structured observation⁴³ of VC Repórter (Terra) and VC no G1 (Globo.com), with observation and collection of stories of participatory journalism from these portals during the period of March 1st, 2009 to March 15th, 2009, totalizing 163 published stories.

The analysis was undertaken based on journalism and citizen journalism concepts previously presented. The study classified the 163 stories firstly by their editorial area, in order to discover the predominant subjects in Brazilian collaborative news. Also identified whether the issue was related to the place of residence of the citizen reporter and his geographical surroundings, to assess the degree of hyperlocalism in the leading portals' collaborative content. Then, we examined whether the citizen reporter just witnessed an event, either in text, photo or video, or if he or she focused on additional information, either with official sources or other witnesses. In this case, how many sources had

³⁷ "Drunk tries to compel police to hold him and end up held", em <http://minhanoticia.ig.com.br/editoria/Inusitadas/2009/03/08/bebado+tenta+obrigar+policia+a+abraca+lo+e+acaba+delido+4588909.html> (10/03/2009)

³⁸ Profile of Armando Sales, from Fortaleza (CE), in http://minhanoticia.ig.com.br/perfil/perfilHome.action?user_id=334 (28/03/2009)

³⁹ Profile of Super Pérolas, from São Carlos (SP), in http://minhanoticia.ig.com.br/perfil/perfilHome.action?user_id=336 (28/03/2009)

⁴⁰ Profile of Denispd, from Belo Horizonte (MG), in http://minhanoticia.ig.com.br/perfil/perfilHome.action?user_id=2335 (28/03/2009)

⁴¹ Profile of Tretando, from São Carlos (SP), in http://minhanoticia.ig.com.br/perfil/perfilHome.action?user_id=329 (28/03/2009)

⁴² Profile of Planeta Tosco, from Rio de Janeiro (RJ), in http://minhanoticia.ig.com.br/perfil/perfilHome.action?user_id=333 (28/03/2009)

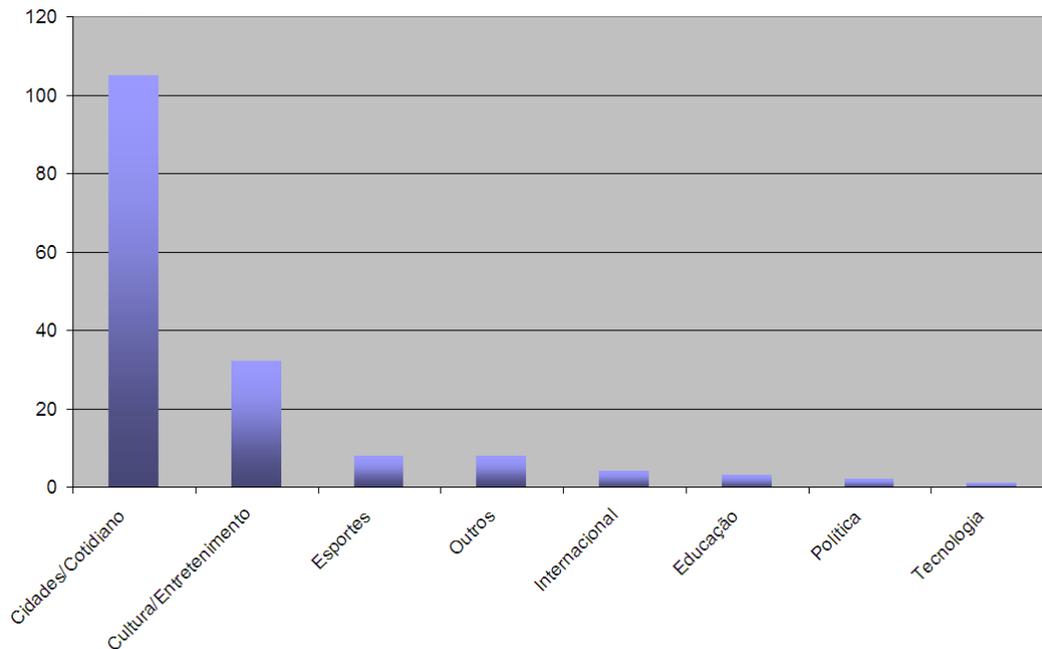
⁴³ The technique of non-participant observation allows the observation of the phenomenon investigated without the direct involvement of the researcher, exempting the work of any intentional or interactive motion by the same. In his proposal for semi-structured observation defines certain parameters for observation that lead to the data collection activity.

been heard? And these sources, if accessed, have been reported accurately in the course of the text in order to give it credibility? Finally, it was also important to identify if there was evidence of institutional diffusion, a practice that could expose collaborative journalism and journalism itself to speeches beyond the public interest borders⁴⁴.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

Here are the results of the analysis, considering the parameters previously defined.

Editorial Area



Out of the 163 stories analyzed, 105 were considered as local news. The most prominent subjects in this group were traffic accidents near the place of residence of citizen journalists and damage related to the rain season that marks Brazilian summer's end. In second place appear 32 issues related to culture and entertainment, with a higher incidence of material concerning concerts. Third are sports subjects, with records of local competitions or the

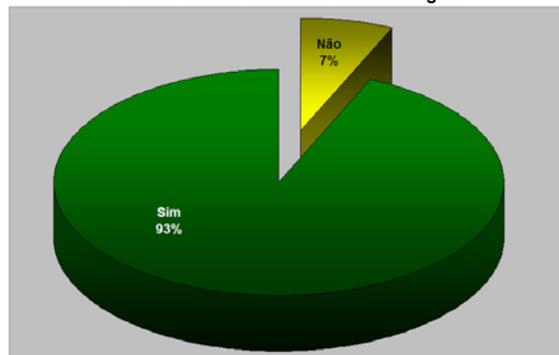
⁴⁴ Bill KOVACH and Tom ROSENSTIEL, *The Elements of Journalism*, p. 24

visit of famous national teams into little country towns, as the case of the game between Corinthians in Marília⁴⁵, in the expectation of the first game to be played by the celebrity-player Ronaldo. Then, the category "others" comprises service journalism or material considered by the research as press releases. Finally, international issues, or related to education, politics and technology together add only ten items, less than 10% of the sample. We can conclude that the main themes of participatory news within the Brazilian portals are local news, culture/entertainment and sports.

Hyper-localism

From observing editorial content by area we noticed a tendency to hyperlocalism in leading portal's collaborative sites. We decided therefore to include such results in our research parameters. In order to define the

Most material shows themes within the citizen's region



concept of hyperlocalism we borrow ideas from Mark Glaser (2007):

"Hyperlocal news is the information relevant to small communities or neighborhoods that has been overlooked by traditional news outlets. Thanks to cheap self-publishing and communication online, independent hyper-local news sites have sprung up to serve these communities, while traditional media has tried their own initiatives to cover what they've missed. In some cases, hyper-local sites let anyone submit stories, photos or videos of the community, with varying degrees of moderation and filtering."⁴⁶

Most of the evaluated stories (93%) covered events that took place in the physical surroundings of citizen reporters, as showed in the graphic above.

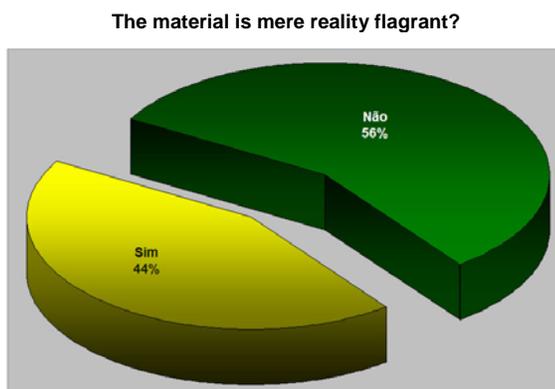
⁴⁵ "Torcida lota estádio de Marília para ver Ronaldo", in <http://g1.globo.com/VCnoG1/0..MUL1024177-8491.00.html> (10/03/2009)

⁴⁶ Mark GLASER, *Your Guide to Hyper-local News*, <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2007/12/your-guide-to-hyper-local-news347.html>

Witnessing vs. Verification

Returning to the concept of Bowman and Willis on the active role of the citizen reporter in the process of collaborative journalism, the study sought to differentiate the material published in Brazilian collaborative vehicles

in relation to the degree of investigation they showed. Out of the 163 stories evaluated, 56% (92 items) were not identified as reality witnessing. We considered here the reality witnessing as a simple record of an event in photo or video, without contextual information, or fact verification with official sources, case of 44% (71 items) of the published material.



However, through this assessment criterion emerged a significant difference between VC Repórter and VC no G1, when analyzed individually. In VC Repórter, only 35% of the stories (27 items) were considered a mere reality witnessing, against 75% of the material published by the participatory site of Globo.com (44 itens). The number brings two perceptions — the enrichment of information sent by citizen reporters by VC Repórter journalists; and how Globo.com collaborative service turns journalism into "instantaneism"⁴⁷, a concept coined by the French author Ignacio Ramonet. According to him, this process originated in the early 1990s, a golden age for satellite television, which turned the simple transmission of data from one point to another into "reporting", concept deeply different from merely reproducing a fact, whatever the media.

In VC in G1, an example of reality witnessing is the story "Storm with lightning scares Blumenal", published on March 13th, 2009. With only two short paragraphs and a picture, without consulting sources, the material is entitled by VC no G1 as a "report":

⁴⁷

Ignácio RAMONET, *A Tirania da Comunicação*, p. 34

13/03/2009 - 15h35

Tempestade com raios assusta Blumenau



JAIME BATISTA DA SILVA
Internauta, Blumenau, SC

As informações desta página foram enviadas por um leitor do G1.
Quer participar também? [Clique aqui e saiba como.](#)

Média geral: ★★★★★ Dê sua nota: ★★★★★

ALTERA O TAMANHO DA LETRA A- A+



Raios em Blumenau (Foto: Jaime Batista da Silva/VC no G1)

Uma forte tempestade típica do verão brasileiro, com raios e relâmpagos, atingiu a cidade de Blumenau (SC) nesta quinta-feira (12) às 19h.

As fotos desta reportagem foram tiradas do Bairro Vila Nova.

A strong storm, typical of Brazilian Summer, has hit the city of Blumenau (SC) this Thursday (12) at 7pm.

The pictures of this report was taken from Vila Nova district.

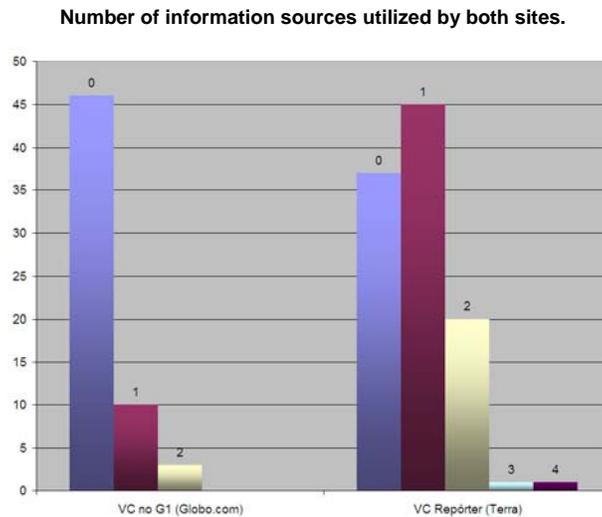
The flagrant also leads to cases such as "Men take 'ride' in back of truck in South of SP"⁴⁸, published on Mar 10th, 2009 by VC in G1. "Remember that attitudes like this can cause serious accidents, especially in cases of sudden brake," says the text, without crediting the information to any source or specialist. By publishing such general information, Globo.com collaborative service exposes its lack of journalistic criteria and, in consequence, puts in check their credibility.

The frequent use of the reality witnessing by collaborative services from major portals is also related to the low number of sources mentioned in the texts. In 51% of all the stories examined (83 items), there's no quotation of sources. In other 34% of the cases (55 items), only one source of information is mentioned — in some cases, the source is the citizen reporter himself, paradoxical practice considering the purposes of participatory journalism, as we will address forward. In 14% of the cases (23 items), two sources are mentioned, and in only two stories, or 1% of cases, three or more sources are

⁴⁸

<http://g1.globo.com/VcnoG1/0..MUL1036353-8491.00.html>, accessed in 20/03/2009

quoted. When analyzed individually, the participatory journalism websites of Terra and Globo.com also demonstrate different approaches.



The collaborative service from Terra combines in a more fluent way the work from the citizen reporter and the journalist. Besides the declared number of sources, this point could be deduced mainly by stories on the same topic published by the same author in both analyzed portals. In VC Repórter, the original data were checked and enriched, with inclusion of local sources, context and search for new sources. One example is the story "Technical problem delays trains and fill up stations in São Paulo"⁴⁹ from the VC Repórter, and "Trains delays fill up station in São Paulo", from VC no G1, both published on March 13th, 2009. The first story explains the delay causes, informs the period of unavailability and quotes clearly the CPTM (Paulistan Company of Metropolitan Trains) as source. The second story, in tone of reporting, is a mere description of the citizen reporter's experience. It has three photos, while the VC Repórter has only one — but do not illustrate better the problem that turned into news.

Another issue analyzed in the period of evaluation was "Car falls into crater in the East Zone of SP"⁵⁰, published by VC in G1 on March 09th, 2009, and "Car

⁴⁹ <http://noticias.terra.com.br/transito/interna/0..OI3632064-E111777.00.html>, accessed in 20/03/2009
⁵⁰ <http://g1.globo.com/VcnoG1/0..MUL1034505-8491.00.html>, accessed in 20/03/2009

falls into pit newly closed in SP", which was uploaded on March 11th, 2009 by VC Repórter. Without giving credit to the information, Globo.com gives the reader the impression that the text is just the story of the citizen journalist, without "hearing the other side" as preaches newsroom manuals like the one from well-known Brazilian newspaper Folha⁵¹. In addition to undermining credibility, the practice does not aggregate data to the news so that it can be better understood, as the information obtained by VC Repórter in touch with Sabesp: the company said that they would reimburse the owner of the affected vehicle. A simple information, which exposes the resolution of the conflict, makes the material more informative and tends to encourage in the community of citizens reporters as well as among the audience the discipline of verification, indispensable to journalism practice⁵².

Citizen reporter or Citizen source?

On the other hand, it can be deduced from data analysis that the Brazilian citizen reporter who acts inside the leading web portals' collaborative stage has no compromise or encouragement to verify information and conduct cross-source checking, common and necessary practices to the discipline of checking data. Which weaken the arising of audiences as a genuine force in journalism⁵³, at least within leading media portals in Brazil. And also turns the citizen reporter into citizen source in this scenery.

The first evidence the citizen reporter is merely a source within leading Brazilian web portals is the use of statements by the citizen journalist during the quotation marks in text, in parallel to quote from other sources, or even the only source of the text — which by itself implies loss of credibility, as previously discussed. The practice had higher incidence in VC Repórter stories, such as "Northern Brazil suffers from lack of water"⁵⁴, published on March 3rd, 2009. The text portrays resident Cristiano Gregório's drama, whose statements are mentioned in quotation marks, at the same he signs the material as author — generalizing his perceptions to all residents of the neighborhood, with no

⁵¹ FOLHA DE S.PAULO, *Novo Manual da Redação*, p. 46

⁵² BILL KOVACH and TOM ROSENSTIEL, *The Elements of Journalism*, p. 113

⁵³ DAN GILLMOR, *We The Media*, p. 136

⁵⁴ <http://noticias.terra.com.br/brasil/interna/0..OI3611091-EI8139.00.html>, accessed in 13/03/2009

investigation, nor by the "citizen reporter" or by the portal. The story does not inform its readers about the number of people affected, or an estimate of short-term solutions from the state's sanitation company.

Another case was the story "Bug in the new U2 CD disappoints fans"⁵⁵, also published on March 11th, 2009 by VC Repórter. The text brings a complaint of a single collaborator: there was a problem in the insert of the album. In this case, the complaint was confirmed by the Irish band's record label in Brazil, Universal Music. OK — the verification of the complaint with the other party confirmed the credibility of the information. However, by using "citizen journalist" Everson Candido statements in quotation marks along the text, VC Repórter puts the user in the role of source, not author of the material.

The study identified in the sample at least seven other cases where "citizen journalists" were quoted as sources.

Another peculiar point of view — the comparison between same subject materials submitted by the same author to VC no G1 and VC Repórter — also made possible to deduce that the "citizen reporter" does not verify information, but acts usually like a bystander. While witnessing an event he or she considered relevant, he or she just captures it in pictures or videos and submit them to the portals analyzed, usually along with a short narration about it. The study, however, had also assessed clear indications that the citizen reporter himself contacted the sources, fact that occurred in only 2% of the cases (4 items). Among the sources, two stories mentioned friends of citizens reporters, one quotes a witness who preferred not to be identified and the last one quotes a technical source apparently approached by the author at the site of the event.

These figures lead us to believe that the participatory journalism currently practiced in major Brazilian web portals did not reach the status of media democratization tool, way to give the public real power over the news, phenomenon identified by Gillmor⁵⁶. Most of the times, it represents an additional channel for these newsrooms to receive information, as if the source was supposed to contact the journalist, or merely like a press office. In a second moment the information is verified and enriched by the portals'

⁵⁵
⁵⁶

<http://musica.terra.com.br/interna/0,013627901-EI1267,00.html>, accessed in 13/03/2009
Dan GILLMOR, *We The Media*, p. 137

professional journalists, who provide it journalistic format — according to the survey, 92% of the stories in the sample (150 items) had the shape of inverted pyramid, which comes along with the journalistic language at least since the nineteenth century⁵⁷. In VC Repórter, which had more editorial intervention in the stories sent by collaborators, this rate rises to 99,1% (103 items), against 75% (47 items) in VC in G1. This scenery portrays the distance of the audience regarding journalistic activity, and in our point of view, the need for a different approach by participatory journalism services in major Brazilian portals, in order to instigate audience's engagement in the discovery and critical, in-depth reporting of their own reality.

Research, Dissemination, Credibility

Beyond the mere source of information level, the major portals' citizen reporter has another challenge to overcome — credibility, according to the criteria of journalistic speech previously discussed⁵⁸. From this point of view, we concluded from a qualitative analysis over the data collected that the mere reporting on a personal experience is insufficient to turn a story credible, without an investigative work by journalists inside the portals' newsrooms. This sensation was reinforced by both the citizen reporter — who generally do not bother to look for sources of information or clarify his or her techniques of investigation, practices that at least would clarify the information limits — and the portals Terra and Globo.com, whose participatory sites do not have user profiles or scoring mechanisms so that the reader can evaluate how much credibility a citizen reporter has, or if the authors has sufficient distance from the subjects they write about, so that they can treat them with fairness.

According to data analysis, this credibility vacuum established between citizen reporter and portals opened a wide space for the presence of press releases and other materials disseminating private interests. An example are the stories "International Women's Day shakes the heart of São Paulo"⁵⁹, published on March 9th, 2009 by VC in G1, and "Women has free services in

⁵⁷ PENA, Felipe, *Teoria do Jornalismo*, p. 48

⁵⁸ Michael Brian SALWEN, Bruce GARRISON, Paul D. DRISCOLL, *Online news and the public*, p. 149

⁵⁹ <http://g1.globo.com/VCnoG1/0..MUL1034520-8491.00.html>, accessed in 13/03/2009

their day"⁶⁰, published in March 10th, 2009 by VC Repórter, both written by the same collaborator, Cristiano dos Santos. "According to organizers, about 8,000 people passed by during the event on Saturday. And the expectation was up to 15,000 visitors this Sunday," says the text, without clarifying whether the organizers were heard by Cristiano or by portals' journalists — or, in the worst scenery, whether Cristiano himself is part of the organization crew and used the collaborative services to spread their data. How involved with the reported fact is the author? If he is really part of the organization of the event, how should a collaborative journalism services deal with his stories? Can they prevent themselves from this kind of private-interest speeches? Would a simple check of information be enough? How much it affects the credibility of the text? All these questions are to be addressed in the wider, deeper study we intent to develop during the next year.

Another section of the text published by VC in G1 leaves the impression that the site may have been victim of a press release: "The attraction that drew most attention were two girls holding up a sign in the crowd, in which was written: 'Exchange dreams'. After telling their dreams to these girls, the attendants received as a gift a chocolate named "Sonho de Valsa" (Waltz's Dream)." By publishing mere personal report about an event, without clarifying that the information sources quoted were checked or discovered by the portal itself, and without knowing the author's profile and evaluating he or she does not work for the manufacturer of that brand of chocolates, it is impossible to exclude the hypothesis that Globo.com participatory journalism website has made spontaneous advertisement of a brand of chocolates.

Cases abound in which the portals analyzed published reports about a personal event or material full of press release's attributes, especially in areas like culture/entertainment. This applies to stories like "Larissa Costa was elected the new Miss RN"⁶¹ (March 12th, 2009, VC no G1), "Play shows the end of slavery in Porto Alegre"⁶² (March 10th, 2009, VC Repórter) and "Caribbean band Florida Memorial Steelband plays in Salvador"⁶³ (March 13th, 2009, VC no G1).

⁶⁰ <http://noticias.terra.com.br/brasil/interna/0,,OI3621075-E1306,00.html>, accessed in 13/03/2009

⁶¹ <http://g1.globo.com/VcnoG1/0,,MUL1040266-8491,00.html>, accessed in 13/03/2009

⁶² <http://diversao.terra.com.br/interna/0,,OI3626002-E11539,00.html>, accessed in 13/03/2009

⁶³ <http://g1.globo.com/VcnoG1/0,,MUL1041473-8491,00.html>, accessed in 20/03/2009

Mere factual description, along with photographic record, assigns the material characteristic of testimony, which again shakes its credibility by the lack of verification and quotation of other sources. However, in the context of collaborative journalism, this credibility surpasses the boundaries of the portal brand or even its own newsroom, and should be granted to the published material by the journalists whom moderate the service. Or by the reader himself, along with the citizen journalist, in a way that the first is able to assess the profile and credentials of the latter, unlinking author and fact in benefit of exemption, for only then decide if a published story is credible or not. In the websites tested, none of the two hypotheses is communicated clearly to the reader, what tends to undermine the credibility of participatory journalism of the leading Brazilian web portals.

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

At this level of the exploratory research, we observed that the participatory journalism in Brazil do not arouse reader's engagement with the production of information — the portals do not seem to show this concern also, as long as they use the material sent by collaborators as mere starting point for a process of investigation. With this, assigning the channels of UGC evaluated the label of "citizen journalism services" becomes untruthful, especially within the theoretical frame of reference outlined by Bruns. And assign the Brazilian net surfers that are involved in these services the title of "citizen reporter" is also fictitious, considering Bowman and Willis concepts, as the practice of citizen journalism turns the former "reader" into the protagonist of the news process, not only as actor in a supporting role.

Issues also emerged from the qualitative analysis of data — and they deserve a greater degree of debate over the research in progress — such as:

- the editorial intervention exercised by the portal, partially weakening the concept of citizen journalism;
- the effects over the portal brand credibility along with the collaborative content which it provides;

- the characterization of "news" within a space of participatory journalism and how this concept should reflect the characteristics of traditional news process, and
- differentiated characterization between citizen journalist and "citizen source", character that seems to have emerged from this study.

It should be emphasized that exist in the Brazilian web a diversity of independent initiatives — such as the Independent Media Center, an Indymedia branch in Brazil, Wikinews and other national websites, such as Brazil Wiki or Overmundo⁶⁴ — designed exclusively for citizen engagement as part of the news scenery. By their characteristics and editorial rules, they are much closer to the concept of participatory journalism than the leading portals' initiatives.

Finally, despite the evidence, but before the aspects already mentioned, is crucial to remember the non-conclusive, non-generalizing character of this research, leaving room for discussion of concepts like participatory journalism and its suitability to Brazilian online media operations.

Accessed in:

7. References

BOWMAN, Shayne e WILLIS, Chris. **We Media**: How audiences are shaping the future of news and information. Reston: Media Center at American Press Institute, 2003. Available at: <http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we_media.pdf>. Accessed in: 12 mar. 2009

BRAMBILLA, Ana Maria. **Jornalismo open source**: discussão e experimentação do OhMyNews International. 2006. 251 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Comunicação e Informação) – Faculdade de Biblioteconomia e Comunicação, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, 2006. Available at: <<http://www.lume.ufrgs.br/bitstream/handle/10183/8457/000576267.pdf>>. Accessed in: 15 ago. 2007

BRUNS, Axel. **Gatewatching**: Collaborative Online News Production. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2005.

⁶⁴

<http://www.midiaindependente.org>; <http://pt.wikinews.org>; <http://www.overmundo.com.br> e <http://www.brasilwiki.com.br/>

CHAPARRO, Manuel Carlos. **Pragmática do jornalismo**: Buscas práticas para uma teoria da ação jornalística. 2. ed. São Paulo: Summus, 1994.

FOLHA DE S. PAULO. **Novo Manual da Redação**. 8. ed. São Paulo: Folha de S. Paulo, 1992.

GILLMOR, Dan. **We The Media**: Grassroots journalism by the people, for the people. Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media, 2004.

GULLI, Antonio; SIGNORINI, Alessio. **The Indexable Web is more than 11,5 billion pages**. Chiba: University of Iowa, 2005. Available at: <<http://www.cs.uiowa.edu/~asignori/web-size/size-indexable-web.pdf>>. Accessed in: 15 fev. 2009

IBOPE. **Número de usuários de banda larga em residências cresceu 24%**. São Paulo: Ibope, 2009. Available at: <<http://www.ibope.com.br/calandraWeb/servlet/CalandraRedirect?temp=5&proj=PortalIBOPE&pub=T&db=caldb&comp=Noticias&docid=1478D4331D733E8C83257584004C7F8>>. Accessed in: 31 mar. 2009

INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA. **Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios**: Síntese de Indicadores 2007. Rio de Janeiro: IBGE, 2007. Available at: <<http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/trabalhoerendimento/pnad2007/sintese/pnad2007.pdf>>. Accessed in: 31 mar. 2009

INTERNET WORLD STATS. Disponível em: <<http://www.Internetworldstats.com>>. Accessed in: 31 mar. 2009

KOVACH, Bill & ROSENSTIEL, Tom. **Os elementos do jornalismo**: O que os jornalistas devem saber e o público exigir. São Paulo: Geração Editorial, 2004.

LAGE, Nilson. **A reportagem**: Teoria e técnica de entrevista e pesquisa jornalística. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2001.

LENHART, Amanda; FOX, Susannah. **Bloggers**: A portrait of the Internet's new storytellers. Washington: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006. Available at: <<http://www.pewInternet.org/~media//Files/Reports/2006/PIP%20Bloggers%20Report%20July%2019%202006.pdf.pdf>>. Accessed in: 28 fev. 2009

NIELSEN//NETRATINGS ONLINE. Disponível em: <<http://www.nielsen-online.com>>. Accessed in: 27 mar. 2009

PEER-TO-PEER. Wikipedia. Available at: <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer-to-peer>>. Acesso em 28 mar. 2009

PENA, Felipe. **Teoria do Jornalismo**. São Paulo: Editora Contexto, 2005

QUADROS, Claudia Irene de. A participação do público no webjornalismo. **Revista da Associação Nacional dos Programas de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação**, Florianópolis, 2005. Available at: <<http://www.compos.org.br/seer/index.php/e-compos/article/viewFile/56/56>>. Accessed in: 12 mar. 2009

RAMONET, Ignacio. **A Tirania da Comunicação**. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1999.

REUTERS. EUA: circulação de jornais cai 3,6% com concorrência da web. **Terra**, Porto Alegre, 28 abr. 2008. Available at: <<http://tecnologia.terra.com.br/interna/0,,O12844061-EI4802,00-EUA+circulacao+de+jornais+cai+com+concorrencia+da+web.html>>. Accessed in: 15 fev. 2009

SALWEN, Michael Brian; GARRISON, Bruce; DRISCOLL, Paul D. **Online news and the public**. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005.

SHIRKY, Clay. **Here comes everybody**: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations. New York: The Penguin Press, 2008.

SPYER, Juliano. **Conectado**: O que a Internet fez com você e você pode fazer com ela. São Paulo: Jorge Zahar Editor, 2007.