The citizen as producer of information: a case study in the Portuguese online newspapers

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Abstract

Considered by some authors (Gilmor, 2005; Rosen, 2008) as one of the traditional journalism greatest challenges, the so called "citizen journalism" is far from delivering its original promises. Regardless of their location and dimension, some of the most promising online media projects developed by citizens or created with this aim, lost their initial dynamic or closed down completely.
In Portugal, the online versions of the major daily newspapers also created sections for citizens participation, some of them using the word "journalism" or "reporter" in their denomination. But can we consider "journalism" the texts published on these spaces?
To answer this and other questions, an analysis of contents published by readers in the specific sections of four Portuguese daily newspapers was carried out. The main goal is to verify if there are characteristic elements in journalistic practice, i.e. if citizens do journalism in the spaces denominated as "citizen's journalism".

Keywords: participation, citizens, sources, online journalism

Introduction

Participation, collaboration and sharing are some of the characteristics that helped to redesign the communication flows in the media ecosystem. The concepts of *prosumer* (Jenkins, 2008) and *produser* (Bruns, 2008) illustrate the fusion between producer and consumer roles, which is a challenge for journalism and for the relationships established between journalists and readers (Heinonen, 2011, Domingo, 2008 and 2011, Chung, 2008). The input from readers in the journalistic field has created new challenges to the professionals since the people formerly known as audience (Rosen, 2006) have now the possibility to access to sources of information, to content distribution and to spaces intended for publication, not only on blogs with restricted visibility, but in publications exclusively dedicated to the citizens or even in the spaces created by the online newspapers specifically for this purpose.

Considering specifically the latter point, this paper analyses the contents posted by citizens in the spaces created by Portuguese online newspapers exclusively for this purpose. We want to know what are the prevalent themes, which types of source are the basis for the published contents and, more importantly, understand if the texts published by citizens can be considered journalism. The specifics of news

information, as well as the practices and rules that guide the profession will be considered to carried out this analysis.

Journalism and citizens

The media have sought to encourage citizens' participation through different practices, empowering the collaborative nature of the Web. Commenting news, participating in forums, answering enquiries, updating blogs, sharing content on social networks, upload photos, videos and texts to be published in the newspaper space itself, are some of the forms of participation that readers will find in most online media. This diversity of possibilities has led to a wide nomenclature that seeks to characterize the experiences that have emerged, "citizen journalism" (Gillmor, 2005; Meso, 2005; Rosen, 2008), "collaborative journalism" (Glaser, 2004), "Journalism 3.0 "(Varela, 2005) and" participatory journalism "(Bowman and Willis, 2003; Thurman and Hermida, 2010, Singer et al, 2011) are examples of denominations that seek to integrate the citizen's participation in the media ecosystem, i.e. the "act of a citizen or group of citizens who have an active role in the process of collection, analysis, production and distribution of news and information" (Bowman and Willis 2003:9).

For Rosen (2008), citizen journalism happens when the people formerly known as the audience employ the publishing tools they have at their disposal to inform each other. This simplification, based on the idea that every citizen can publish and disseminate information, playing an active role in content production, turns out to be a common element of the concepts mentioned above. Singer *et. al.* (2011) also add that participatory journalism "captures the idea of collaborative and collective – not simply parallel – action. People inside and outside the newsroom are engaged in communicating not only

to, but also with, one another" (p.2).

Different moments in recent history have shown the users motivation to share information about certain events: September 11th, the war in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina or the Arab Spring are recent examples. Despite the undoubted interest of the information distributed by citizens involved in these events, its effect depends on how it is elaborated and above all, the way it is distributed, i.e. the space where it is made public. In this regard, Hermida and Thurman (2010) draw attention to the need to distinguish between independent projects of citizen journalism and the forms provided by the media to readers participation. Our research focuses precisely on participation embodied in the space provided by the media.

The elements of journalism

The names "Cidadão Repórter[1]" (JN) and "Jornalismo de Cidadão"[2] (DN) seems to indicate the existence of information-oriented news in these spaces, raising some issues related to the characteristics of journalistic practice.

In their book "The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and The Public Should Expect", Kovach and Rosenstiel (2004) outline the basic ideas for journalism to ensure its place in society, as an overseer of the government or institutions and as guarantor of democratic life. Pursuit of truth, loyalty to citizens, discipline of verification, independence from those they cover, oversee power independently, space for public criticism and compromise, make it interesting and relevant to what is significant, ensure comprehensive and proportional news, and that journalists should be free to work according to their own conscience, are the principles enunciated by the authors. In a new edition of the book, published in 2007, Kovach and Rosenstiel added a tenth element related to the rights and responsibilities of citizens in relation to news information.

Thus this profession follows the routines and procedures that, in a simplified form, are the selection and interpretation of data, the context of the facts, the identification of the actors involved in the events, data verification seeking out multiple witnesses, and contrast sources, i.e., fulfilling the discipline of verification.

Sources and diversity

With the advent of the Internet, access to sources and information gathering has undergone significant transformations. The Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, microblogs and social networks, contributed to an increase in speed in these two stages of news production, but have also created new challenges, particularly in relation to the demands and the rigor in verifying the facts.

Sources are a key element in journalism and are essential to ensure the information's credibility. There are different types of sources which Pinto (2000) classified according to their nature as: origin, duration, geographic scope, degree of involvement in the facts, attitude towards journalists, identification, operational strategy. Crato (1992) divided sources into internal and external, placing in the first group journalists (research and direct observation), correspondents and archives, and classifying as external sources the news agencies, other media, authorities (Government , parliament, ministries, municipalities, police forces, etc.)., unofficial entities (companies, collectives, unions, cultural associations, sports clubs, etc.), personal contacts and the public.

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[1] *Citizen Reporter*
[2] *Citizen Journalism*

Regardless of the classification adopted, it seems clear that there is a huge variety of sources and hence the need to organize them according to their type. This fact causes the diversity of news published by newspapers, which are usually organized in sections in order to guide the reader: thus one of the distinguishing marks of a journalistic publication is its variety of themes, something Groth called universality (Fidalgo, 2004) and that should include not only news related to the physical world, but also to society and culture. Therefore, one of the hypotheses of this study is that *the texts published by citizens in online newspapers are poorly diversified and, being so little universal, moves away from the concept of journalistic.*

Sources and information production

Some researchers (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Domingo et al, 2008) have shown that the media continues to preserve the role of gatekeeping and participation control. The participation possibilities offered by media are varied, however this does not mean that there is indeed an engagement between journalists and readers, because in many cases the citizen participation works in separate channels of content and well separated from the professional. David Domingo (2011) analyses how users' contributions are received, filtered and published and distinguishes two main categories regarding the participatory strategies followed by online newsrooms: participatory journalism as playground and citizen journalism as source. Domingo considers *playground,* as spaces vaguely moderate, because they are concentrated in a specific section thus protecting the newspaper from possible interference caused by user-generated contents. Hermida (2011) notes some resistance from the media in letting the audience (usually seen as a source) to participate in the agenda and production of the newspaper. Although it is notorious a larger openness to dialogue with users, journalists still see themselves as actors that define the process of creating news (Heinonen, 2011).

In this sense, it may be interesting to mention the experience developed by the UK's Guardian, that since October 2011, has made public some of the journal's agenda topics, the "open newslist[3]", asking readers to contribute to the news. López García points out that there are different levels of intervention in news production at the level of citizen participation in the media space. "The management of all of them must always rest on the figure of the journalist, who as a professional mediator and interpreter of what happens, has to ensure the primary objective of information: i.e. that it is true and is at the service of society"[4] (2009, p. 145). Moretzsohn also stresses that there is a specificity in journalistic mediation and thus a journalist "is that professional authorised to be where the public can not be, and therefore is entitled access to sources through which it can ascertain the necessary information to society" (2006, p. 68).

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[3] http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/series/open-newslist
[4] All quotes were translated to English.

A study carried out by Zvi Reich (2008) compared professional journalists and citizens in the practices of news production. The author hypothesized that citizens are at a disadvantage in this task because they have more difficulties to access information sources. According to Reich, this problem can be minimized through the use of other mechanisms such as their own will to research stories. The author believes that there are some characteristics that restrict the work of citizen reporters: they are usually out of the routines and sources such as press conferences and press releases, are usually dependent on other ordinary citizens and not mainstream circles consisting of professional and institutional sources public relations, have few opportunities to cultivate relationships with sources, have a limited knowledge of journalism, and usually have other professional activities (Reich, 2008). This difficulty in accessing some types of sources, as well as the failure to develop journalism as a profession, can justify another of the hypotheses of this study: *in the texts produced by the citizens there is no contrast and variety of sources which are characteristic of journalistic texts.*

Besides the way sources are used, the recognition of journalistic practice can also be done by identifying a set of characteristics that, according to Otto Groth, (Fidalgo, 2004) define what is a newspaper: periodicity (published in regular spaces), universality (information on everything that relates to man and their social and cultural action), actuality (something that happens in the present time and is new) and advertising (newspaper accessibility to all).

The simultaneous use of some of the principles enunciated by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2004) and of the characteristics that, according to Groth, define what a newspaper is, will function as analysis framework to identify if the texts published by the citizens in Portuguese newspapers online can be considered journalism.

Previous studies

In an exploratory study about the role of the public in participatory journalism, Saad and Madureira concluded that "the Brazilian citizen reporter who acts in major portals has no compromise or encouragement to ascertain information and to cross-reference sources, common and necessary practices for data verification" (2010, p. 176). The results observed in Portuguese publications are similar. Saad and Madureira also noted that in Brazil, the users participation is not synonymous of a greater involvement of readers with information production. Stating that the texts used the colaborator's own statements between quote marks, the authors report that "in the major Brazilian portals the citizen reporter is merely a citizen source" (Saad and Madureira, 2010, p. 177), someone who is actively involved in the spaces that are available for such use, but that is subject to professionals filter.

The study conducted by Zamith (2012) also concludes that the texts published by citizens in online newspapers show no signs of verification of information, compliance with the adversarial principle or the necessary independence from the topics discussed. The author stresses that citizens merely publish his version of events, "even if this means to omit information or to misrepresent facts." (Zamith, 2012, p. 329)

Whereas, on the one hand, "the process of gathering information became broader, richer and superiorly wider to the news production" (Gomes, 2009, p.106) on the other hand it seem to be in place all the conditions so that citizens can take an active part in online newspapers, this study sought to identify the existence of some distinctive elements of journalistic practice in the texts published by the citizens in these online spaces created by newspapers for this purpose.

The methodology used in this research is a content analysis of the texts published by the citizens in the sections devoted to their participation in Portuguese online newspapers. "Content analysis is a research technique for the objective systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1952, p. 18). According to Bardin this technique is "a set of techniques of communications analysis aiming to obtain, by systematic and objective procedures of the description of the contents of the messages of, indicators (quantitative or otherwise) that allow the inference of relative knowledge as to the production/reception conditions (inferred variables) of these messages" (1979, p.42). Igartua and Humanes consider it as "a research technique that allows to discover the" DNA of media messages, "given that this analysis allows us to reconstruct its architecture, to meet its structure, its basic components and its working procedures" (2010, p. 75).

Generalist Portuguese online newspapers that have a space dedicated to citizens, where they can publish texts, were selected to carry out this case study. Thus, the following sections will be analysed: "Correio do Leitor" (Correio da Manhã - CM), "Jornalismo de Cidadão" (Diário de Notícias - DN), "Cidadão Repórter" (Jornal de Noticias - JN), and "iRepórter" (newspaper I).

This work does not intent to compare the publications among each other, but to observe the particular characteristics of each section and its content looking at the characteristics theoretically defined as indicating the existence of a journalistic text.

Before any further comments it is necessary to mention the heterogeneity of the spaces analyzed, firstly due to the specificity of each publication. The "Correio do Leitor" is a section of the *Correio da Manhã* intended for user intervention. "We will give a voice to your grievances, complaints and news" is the message that can be read on the site. In this case, the readers contents are distributed through spaces like "The reader's photo and his legend" or "Box of complaints." In the latter, readers can voice their complaints (usually related to local issues or public institutions) which are then forwarded by the newspaper team to the appropriate entities: the answer is published together with the content sent by the reader. The "Correio

do Leitor" is part of the Section "Outros" with a link in the homepage header. Contents can be sent either by email or by post. *Correio do Manhã* does not directly publish rules or standards that must be followed by readers, leaving only a few suggestions on topics that may be published.

The section "Jornalismo de Cidadão", of *Diário de Notícias,* encourages the readers to publish articles, photos and videos. The contents can be sent to an e-mail made available for this purpose. You have a call on the final page of the newspaper and is included in the section "Opinião".

The "Cidadão Repórter", part of the *Jornal de Notícias*, is featured in the newspaper header, with all the other sections. It invites the readers to send their news and photographs through an e-mail. On specific occasions, the newspaper itself encourages the readers collaboration.

The "iRepórter" was a section of the newspaper I (its final text was published on September 14, 2011 being subsequently suspended) which invited readers to submit contents (articles, photographs and videos) through registration with the following elements: e-mail, password, name, surname, date of birth (mandatory), genre, sector of activity. The user could add other data like his photo, his blog and respective address, etc. In order to have the contents published it was necessary to comply with some rules listed on the site, particularly in relation to photographs format. None of the other publications analyzed had any set of rules or standards that had to be followed by readers who wanted to publish their contents and all of them allowed comments.

With the exception of *Correio da Manhã*, all texts published daily in those spaces in the months of April, May and June 2010 were analyzed. In the case of CM, given the large number of contents published, and based on the arguments of Bauer (2000) and Herscovitz (2007), we constructed artificial weeks: in April we began by selecting the first Monday of the month, next week it was Tuesday and so on. In the specific case of this publication only one week per month was examined. This strategy allowed us to obtain a varied sample with an equal distribution, ensuring the representativeness of the study universe. During the stipulated time, and from all publications were collected and analyzed 139 texts.

Aiming to identify the main themes addressed by citizens within the newspapers the following categories were established: Politics (texts relating to national and local government, governors, political parties, political actors, political decisions, etc.). Society (texts related to citizens' lives, namely employment, unemployment, transport, security, religion, urbanism and environment), Economics (texts relating to the financial markets, interest rates, banks, taxes, stock exchange, state budget, inflation and the price of various products), Sport (texts related to different sport modalities), Health (texts related to health institutions, diseases, drugs and tracing actions) Technology (texts related to computer products, and industrial gadgets), Education and Science (texts relating to all levels of education, including research in higher education, teacher strikes and student demonstrations), Justice (texts relating to courts or related

with issues under the judicial system), Culture (texts relating to cinema, theatre, music, fashion, painting or any other form of artistic expression, shows, festivals, cultural associations and local traditions), and Other (texts that, for some reason, do not fall in neither of the above categories).

Regarding the sources, the types of sources defended by Ericson *et al* (1991) and also by Crato (1992) were considered, undertaking the necessary adjustments to the object of study. Thus, we included the following parameters for the sources used: "own testimony", "official sources" (government and public sector), "unofficial sources" (private companies, communities, etc.), "media" (in order to quantify the number of times the texts from citizens are based on other work already broad-casted in the media) and, finally, "other" (as we find that in many cases it was not possible to identify sources). Apart from the type of sources used, it was also observed the existence or not of source contrast and use of quotes in the texts.

Results and discusssion

Of the 139 texts analyzed, 92 were published in the "Correio do Leitor" (*Correio da Manhã - CM*), 26 in the "Cidadão Repórter" (*Jornal de Notícias* - JN), 11 on "Jornalismo de Cidadão" (*Diário de Notícias - DN)* and 10 in "iRepórter" (newspaper *I*). Knowing that the figures for *I,* and *JN DN,* refer to the totality of contents published during three months we can immediately see that the citizen participation in these spaces is reduced. This finding supports the conclusion that there is no periodicity in the sense defined by Groth (Fidalgo, 2004), showing a distance of these spaces in relation to journalism.

In 49 (53%) of the 92 texts published in CM, the author is not identified. The same happens in six (23%) texts of JN. Nevertheless, in this last case, the newspaper makes a reference as "Reader identified". The identification of the author is an important element for the accountability of the contents published. Only in the newspaper *I* is possible to contact the author via e-mail, through and e-mail address made available along with the text. Generally, there is a predominance of male authors: 70% CM 82% DN, in JN 75% and 100% at *I*.

Society is the prevailing theme in *Jornal de Noticias* (88%) and *Correio da Manhã* (55%). In *Jornal de Noticias* only other two themes appear: Sports (8%) and Education and Science (4%). Culture (25%) Education & Science (10%), Sports (7%), Health (2%) and finally, Politics (1%) follow in the *Correio da Manhã*. In *Diário de Noticias,* 73% of the stories are about politics, though contents on Society, Economy and Culture (9% each) have also been published. In newspaper *I*, 40% of the texts are about Culture, followed by Society (20%) and Economics (20%), and finally Education and Science (10%) and Other (10%). According to the data obtained, a predominance of the Theme Society (56% of total) and issues related to everyday experiences that ultimately are reflected in the interventions of the author published is

clearly visible. The variety of themes, which Groth defines as universality and Kovach and Rosenstiel as comprehensive news, is not verified, there is a clear preponderance of texts dealing with the daily lives of citizens, which removes these spaces from the newspapers, which maintain in relative balance the three or four most important themes.

In *Correio da Manhã,*, 33% of the contents published is based on "personal testimony" and in 52% of the texts it was not possible to identify the sources. This number is due to the predominance of information published without identification of the respective author or without any reference to the text source. In the texts published by citizens in this newspaper 13% of cases used official sources and 2% unofficial sources. In total, of the 139 texts studied, only 8 contrasted sources. This number is associated with "Caixa de Reclamações" of *Correio da Manhã,* where official institutions answer problems posed by readers, and it should be noted at this point the existence of journalistic mediation between the different actors.

In *Jornal de Notícias*, the percentage of texts based on "personal testimony" is 84%, followed by unofficial sources (8%), the media and "other" (4% each). In the *Diário de Notícias*, 55% of the texts are based on "personal testimony ", 36% in the media and 9% on official sources. In I, 90% of texts are based on "personal testimony" and 10% on unofficial sources. Overall we found that 48% of texts are based on the author's own testimony and 35% do not identify the source. Only 9% of authors quote official sources. The percentage of non-official sources and contents already broadcast in the media is 4% each.

In 133 texts, not a single quote is used, something that only happens in six texts (2 *Diário de Notícias*, 2 *Jornal de Notícias*, 1 *Correio da Manhã* 1 and 1 I). In total, 77% of the contents have a single source, the author, 18% have two sources of information and only 5% have three or more sources.

These data refer to issues related to the reliability of the transmitted information. The results indicate that most authors do not take into consideration these basic elements of journalism, such as the principle of contradiction into account, which is in agreement with previous studies undertaken in other countries (Carpenter, 2008; Saad and Madureira, 2010, Domingo, 2011; Zamith, 2012). The search for truth, the discipline of facts verification, independence and variety of sources, principles enunciated by Kovach and Rosenstiel, are completely ignored, being this fact the one which most distinguishes these texts from journalistic activity.

Conclusion

The Internet has redefined the relationship between journalists, public and sources, as well as the functions performed by each in the media ecosystem. The sources, who previously depended on journalists now have direct access to channels of information distribution. The audience, which was only the final consumer now

has access to some sources and to public space, thanks to blogs and social networks. The journalists, who served as intermediary between the two actors mentioned earlier have lost their exclusivity in the access to public space, and saw the birth of what some call "citizen journalism." But can we call "journalism" the texts published by the citizens in the spaces created by the online newspapers for this purpose?

The analysis of the contents published in the citizen's spaces created in online Portuguese newspapers confirms the results obtained in previous research (Carpenter, 2008; Saad and Madureira, 2010, Domingo, 2011; Zamith, 2012): the contents published by citizens are not journalism.

First of all, because in the majority of cases there is no periodicity, contradicting one of the conditions set out by Groth (Fidalgo, 2004). In the newspapers studied, the *Correio da Manhã* is the newspaper that has a larger number of updates, but most texts boils down to one paragraph, distinguishing them from the concept of news.

The themes approached in the citizens texts lack variety, with 75% of the texts belonging to only two categories. Also in this case there is a deviation from one of the conditions set out by Groth - universality - a situation that might be caused by the fact that some sources do not provide information to non-journalists.

Issues related to sources are once again reveal in the predominance of stories told in the first person, using the text only as the author's testimony and not identifying the sources used. By not contrasting sources, not presenting diverse points of view, or citations in the texts, clearly distinguishing facts from opinions, citizens demonstrate ignorance of some of the basic procedures of journalism. These data call into question the elements of journalism espoused by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2004), namely with regard to the rigor, discipline of verification, confirmation of facts, the existence of safe and contrasted sources, a set of fundamental practices paramount to foster the credibility of the information.

Finally, a graphical analysis of the placing of spaces dedicated citizens allows recognizing a clear distinction between contents produced by professionals and non-professionals, which brings us to the concept of *playground* defended by Domingo (2011). Strictly speaking, these differences are clearly visible in the contents generated, as mentioned before: to call "journalism" what is produced by readers in the spaces available in Portuguese online newspapers can only be bad faith or ignorance regarding the procedures and rules of journalistic activity.

This study is an exploratory analysis of the experiences that have come to fruition in Portugal regarding the participation of citizens in the newspapers space. In a broader investigation to be undertaken in the future we will try to analyze other factors such as the visibility of the citizens contents in the newspapers websites, the participation control, the existence of multimedia elements and editorial strategies that have been followed by the media.

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