

Convergence and memory: journalism, context and history¹

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Abstract

Never before was our society so wrapped and occupied in processes of production of memory; the stock of social memory was never before so easily and quickly available and never before has journalism – as a social practice - been so centrally located amid this accelerated process of production and preservation of memory. Starting from these ideas, and within the context of digital media, this essay explores recent transformations in the relationship between Memory and Journalism, both as it concerns Journalism as a repository of memory for the production of historical works, as in terms of changing patterns and effects of the work of memory operated in the production of journalistic texts.

Keywords: journalism, memory, history, convergence.

In these days which fly (some would say ‘slip’) by, it may appear paradoxical to propose issues relating to Memory, History and Context as the subject of an academic study; paradoxical in two senses.

On the one hand – and springing only from common sense and from *vox populi* – it is said, repeated and recognized, that journalism has no memory and that *yesterday’s newspaper is fit only for wrapping up fish*. On the other hand – and taking into account the tone which has populated and dominated academic debate recently – it is equally valid to suggest that we live in fluid times, that we are passing;

“...from a solid phase of modernity to a fluid one – or in other words, into a condition in which social organizations (...) can no longer maintain their structure for any great length of time (nor should they be expected to), as they decompose and dissolve more quickly than the time it takes to form them and, once reorganized, for them to become established (Bauman, 2007: 7).”

In other words, now, all that was stable and solid is no longer content to simply “fall apart in the air” (Marx, 1848: 29), but to liquefy and inescapably slip from between our fingers.

And, furthermore, even though it makes the purpose of this paper even more paradoxical, it is said that “speed, and not duration, is what is important [since] with the correct speed, one can consume the whole eternity of the present continuous of earthly life.” (Bauman, 2007:15) In fluid times, in which speed is of importance, not duration, where does ‘Memory’ fit in? In a contemporary scenario characterized by the present

¹ A preliminary version of this text was presented at the Ier. ‘Congreso de Ciberperiodismo y Web 2.0’, Bilbao, November, 2009. Available at <<http://ciberpebi.wordpress.com/ediciones-antiores-2/>>. Access on Aug. 5, 2010.

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continuous, is not journalism, more than ever, condemned to be the chronicle of a Present to which the past is of little or no importance, and for which the future, when it exists, comes to be an issue of making Happenings render results, transmuted into News? The issue is, therefore, until what point can public interest last and until what point can high levels of readership be maintained?

My aim with this paper is to search for, if not demonstrate, or at least suggest, that – *contrario sensu* – never before has our society been so involved with, or occupied by, the processes of the production of memory; the amount of stored social memory has never been so easily and quickly available, nor has journalism been so centrally located within all this.

With this in mind, I shall naturally seek the assistance of voices which have preceded me, and I shall appropriate from those in an attempt to find links which carry – if not wholly acceptable conclusions – at least useful differences.

To better organize the paper, it is structured into three parts: Antecedents, Incidences and Consequences.

Antecedents

“Human communication is an artificial process. It is based upon artifice, discoveries, tools and instruments, namely, symbols organized into codes. Men do not communicate with each other in a *natural* manner: no natural sounds are produced in speech, such as, for example, in birdsong, and the written word is not a natural gesture, such as is the dance of the bumble bee.” (Flusser, 2007: 89.)

Our memory has become equally artificial, from the moment when one of our ancestors, in a distant Neolithic age, scratched a stone and left the first solid signs that an animal species was active there and inhabiting the world, one which intended to leave marks of its existence which would outlive the craftsman who left them.

Successive techniques, from cave paintings to writing and the digital and convergent means of the present day, allowed the externalization of memory (Maldonado, 2007: 61-68), creating “sites of memory” (Nora, 1993: 13) far beyond the memories transmitted orally and filed by patriarchs and councils of the fathers. “At the

moment in which the hypothesis of a future that is different from the past is conceived, there is the separation from the world of tradition and immortalized order.” (Sodré, 2009: 22.)

Memory and History are far from being synonymous.

“History is the consistently problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what no longer exists [and] memory is an always current phenomena, a link lived in the eternal present; history, a representation of what has passed.” (Sodré, 2009: 9.)

“The *sites of memory* are born and live from the notion that there is no spontaneous memory, that it is necessary to create archives, that it is necessary to observe anniversaries, organize celebrations, deliver funereal eulogies, record minutes, because these operations are not natural.” (Nora, 1993: 13).

As such, if the opposition between History and Memory were to be accepted, the double site occupied by Journalism has been recognized since the dawn of modern times: it is a living space composed of the production of the Present, a site of the instant arrangement of dates, and equally a site of memory, a producer of repositories of systematic records of daily life, for later appropriation and historical (re)construction. In the same way, that which is published in newspapers and is spoken on the radio and TV can also be as important for historical (re)construction as that which isn't published, which isn't spoken: the *spoken* and the *forbidden*.

Contemporary journalism has its roots in the city, in the modern urban phenomena, represented by mass movements of people and things fostered by industrialism (Hobsbawn, 1995). The daily newspaper has come to occupy the place formerly held by the cockerel, church bells and the position of the sun in the arch of the heavens, in the marking of time in the life of those beings, who have, since then, been urbanized. “(...) is the idea of a here and now, or in other words, from crossed space and time, which guides the singling out of the fact.” (Sodré, 2009: 26.)

The city played a predominant role in the general restructuring of journalism. At its outset, journalism filled the majority of its publications with official statements and documents, which, towards the end of the century (XIX), came to discover the city as a source of news. The public world stopped being limited to just government or commercial issues, and it came to be widely recognize, in the vision of the journalists, that there was a collective interest in the midst of the community.” (Machado, 2000.)

And, at the dawn of the XX century,

“contemporary man, who saw in the growth of the cities a permanent reason for anguish exactly for the loss of control over the surrounding reality, heaped upon this professional [the journalist] (...) the mission of taking the facts to those who were

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absent (...) [the mission of] being the eye of that society, anxious about the speed of modernity, which prevented him from seeing what was happening around him.” (Enne, 2004: 112.)

Together with the decline of the rural world and the accelerated industrial urbanization, memory was increasingly externalized, to the extent that together they defined the last traces of an oral and rural past, and advanced universal literacy (Jackson, 2005), definitively delegating to text, photographic images and early cinema, the job of recording the daily lives of kings, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat on the personal and collective level, bequeathing a testament³ to posterity.

This being the case, we should concur (at least partially and in a provisional sense) with *vox populi*, when confirming that the journalism which we know in our contemporary world, with its historical origins in Modernity, *has no memory*. Looking at the issue from this perspective, journalism is memory in action, memory rooted in concrete, in space, in image, in the object, the singularized present, a present lived and transformed into a news piece which tomorrow will be a related past. A related past which, at first, is renewed every day, and with the advent of radio, television and the web, has become a continuous and uninterrupted report, through 24x7 journalistic coverage⁴.

And as the memory is, by nature, multiple, collective, plural and individualized, there will be as many pasts related as there were reports registered: convergent, conflicting, contradictory, despite any and all pretension to objectivity or impartiality by the current journalistic deontology. Like any past, there is nothing consensual about the past constructed by journalistic activity: on the contrary, it involves a universe of conflictingly disputed signifiers (Appadurai, 1981), and there does not therefore exist any sort of harmony of versions nor a definitive history or a final, sealed version of historical facts.

Transmuted, the following day, onto paper for wrapping up fish, the newspaper is also transformed, to the eye of the historian, into a site of memory, and will occupy a passive space beside many other documents, in libraries and archives, in the hope that

³ For an excellent and extremely up-to-date discussion of the notion of a testament in contemporary media-focused society, see Frosh & Pinchevski (orgs.) (2009).

⁴ 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

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someone there will – selectively – collect and organize footmarks and traces, in order to (re)present the past as history, thereby adding value to the academic values and parameters and current methodologies. Incorporated into the historical report, memory ceases to be memory and becomes a provisional truth: *historical truth*, which will last until the next appropriation, until the next interpretation.

But could it be that it is only as material for the historian that memory is present in journalism, only as this form of the “first scratching” (Zelizer, 2008: 81) of History, waiting for a professional eye to transform this scratch into a finished text, a final version, into history, in the disciplinary acceptance of a field of study within the Humanities? Could it not also be that journalism, within its very scope, in its very essence, undertakes a work of memory?

A look at the process of journalistic creation itself reveals that, on numerous occasions, the recourse to memory in the production of journalistic content is evident. The engagement of memory is a condition of production in journalistic works with a commemorative character (the anniversaries of events or people’s birthdays) and in those where the fact present is signaling the end of a trajectory, such as in obituaries, for example. This is always the case in journalistic works which mark the end of processes which extended, and which were (journalistically) followed, over a given period of time, be such processes the life and death of a *man of quality* (Musil, 1989) – a President, Pope or monster - or be they the discussion and approval of a new bill of law. Even more obvious is the recourse to memory in summary reports, in the retrospectives of the *events of the year*, the inevitable reports appearing every December, in the pages of newspapers, on TV screens and journalistic websites.

But it is not only in obituaries and anniversaries that the direct work of memory is present in the production of journalistic texts. Memory comes into play in a recurring manner, in an almost natural way, in the production of the report of the present, be it as a *point of comparison* of the current event with past events (be they located in a recent past or one that is more distant), as opportunities for *analogies*, as invitations to nostalgia, or even through the presentation of the present as an element to *deconstruct and start to construct* the occurrences of the past, in the light of new facts (Zelizer, 2008: 82).

Contradicting common sense, a closer and more analytical look at the pages of a single edition of a newspaper shows that the work of memory is a reoccurrence in the construction of the picture of the present, produced daily through journalistic activity in our societies. To empirically show how this work of memory is processed in the interior of discursive journalistic constructions, is the job for the analysis of discourse and of semiotics; the mechanisms of enunciation and the indicators are more than evident and are widely available for whoever wishes to read them.

Incidences

Today's continuous flow of information has been with us since before the telematic networks. It was radio (Hobsbawn, 1995: 190-197) initially, but principally television – soon after – which broke down journalistic demarcation of temporality of a day-to-day nature, in its most literal sense. Suddenly and very abruptly, we moved from a situation in which (for more than one hundred years), a *daily ration of reality*, a selection of that which the 'information professionals' singled out from around us as *that which needed to be known*, was served up to us, formatted as a daily newspaper and placed on the breakfast table every 24 hours, to a situation in which this same *reality*, these "particular marks of factual moments" (Sodré, 2009: 26), journalistically selected and constructed, have come to flow almost continuously and without interruption.

With the telematic networks, - and the *Web* in particular – the continuity of the flow has been completed, definitively establishing the 'media experience' of *life in real time*.

"The technological convergence which is currently multiplying the combinations of formats, languages and aesthetics on the different networks, opens up new scenarios and possibilities which, in turn, contribute to the facilitating of other modes of communicative interaction to their audiences (...) [and] the audiences cease to become simply this; rather, they become users, producers and transmitters, since the interactivity which the new networks allow go beyond mere symbolic interaction between them, to situate the audiences (...) as possible creators of their own referents and not simply symbolic re-creators of signifiers or interpretations of the referents produced and transmitted by others through these networks." (Orozco Gómez, 2009: 183-184)

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We are, therefore, in terms of *Incidences*, standing before a fact of immense proportions, one which refers to the secular immobility of traditional polarities: transmitters and receivers. The networks – and the Web in particular – have inaugurated forms of post-mass communication (Lemos, 2007: 121-137), creating alternating poles out of the acts of consumption and production of information, and not, necessarily, permanent poles.

They have substantially altered the ways of perceiving and reading the world.

“(...) the cutting edge technology enabled coverage of the whole range of existing television channels in a matter of seconds, (...) a child can freeze photo images and repeat a sound or a sequence of images, whereas before they were only able to read texts second hand; (...) the theatrical illusion is nothing compared to what technology can do in television commercials, which can even tell dramatic stories in just thirty seconds.” (Hobsbawn, 1995: 485)

The world started to flow, not only in a continuous manner, but also in one which is multilinear and which can be personalized, through the many networks which make up our contemporary reality of convergent medias, multiple interfaces and plurality of voices.

Could this possibly signal the *end of journalism*? With so many and varied possibilities of information available with a simple click of a mouse, turning us not only into consumers but also producers of globalized and networked information, can we dispense with the intermediaries and determine our own agendas, with no need for those which Modernity has constructed as our principle suppliers of daily information?

Far from it. The illusion of the possibility of such a disposal of information has been clear for a decade now:

“...direct communication, without intermediaries, as a mere technical performance. This appeals to the dreams of individual freedom, but it is illusory. The Web may provide access to an enormous amount of information, but no one is a citizen of the world, wanting to know everything, about everything, everywhere in the world. The more information there is, the greater the need for intermediaries – journalists, archivists, editors, etc. – who filter, organize, prioritize. No one wants to assume the role of editor-in-chief every morning (Wolton, 1999)”.

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Contemporary economy's new forms of operation, which, through the *attention* (Goldhaber, 1997) make the product truly rare amidst the superabundance of information, make the powers which lie with those who filter it even more indispensable. And it is on new ground that the activity of journalistic filtering in this world of *real time* is processed.

In the first place, and as a more important media related fact, on the Web (at least for practical purposes), the limits of space and/or time that the journalist has available to him for the presentation of the news material that he produces, have been dissolved.

Working with databanks housed in machines with increasing storage capacities and counting upon the possibility of unsynchronised access on the part of the user, as well as the power of not only the producer but also the user (Interactivity) to add to these data banks (Continuous Updating), as well as the ever possible resource of Hyperlinking and other databanks (Hypertextuality and Multimediality), Online Journalism, for all practical purposes, provides virtually unlimited space⁵, as far as the amount of information which can be produced, recuperated, associated and made available to the target public is concerned.

It is essential to stress that this is the first time that this has happened in the history of journalism, since, in all previous mediums, (printed press, radio, TV), the journalist was obliged to obey strict limitations of space (in terms of time in the cases of radio and TV). Such limitations were evidently always an essential conditioning factor in the processes of journalistic production in all media forms" (Palacios, 2003: 24).

The possibility of making unlimited space available for the presentation of news material is a major break, resulting from the advent of the Web as a medium for journalism.

Within these Incidences, we therefore return to the question of memory. If it is a fact that not all information is journalism and that journalistic activity is not confused (through its specific technical attributes and by the forms of its insertion into the world of work and production) as a simple witness statement, it is just as much a fact that the underlying communication and the liberation of the broadcaster have infinitely multiplied the spaces for networked memory, making every user a potential producer of memories, of testimony.

⁵It is obvious that, physically (limitations of hardware/potential users' capacity to use them), the limits continue to exist, but for practical effects of journalistic production, they disappear, such is the magnitude of the amount of space made available to the producer or person making the information available.

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It is obvious that at least part of these records will survive their producers, just as the marks carved into rocks or cave paintings outlived their Neolithic communicators.

It is also evident that a portion of these records and testimonies that are made public every day - made available on the Web by innumerable writers, anonymous or not – find their way into contemporary journalistic products, to the extent that journalism becomes more open to a multiplicity of voices, to a certain conversational content. And it is of no importance here that it may be a purely commercial motivation or a focus upon winning and maintaining audiences that bring about these openings, which allow the increase of user participation in the area of products created by large communication companies (Palacios, 2009a).

As far as memory is concerned, it is also possible to recognize a situation involving the continuity of network journalism in relation to previous mediums. The printed press, has, for a long time, kept physical records of its past editions which are open to the public and are used by their editors and journalists in the production process of news. In modern printed journalism, the publication of research has always been common, such research being based upon archive information that compliments, expands upon or illustrates the flow of news. The same takes place in relation to radio and TV broadcasters, which keep sound and image archives, possibly to be used in the production of journalistic or documentary news material. In journalistic production on the Web however, the space used for this documentation and memory, which as complementary information, is shifted to a position of a direct news source (Machado, 2002: 63).

With digital technologies, the data bases (Barbosa & Mielniczuk, 2005) and the availability of information on the Web, the files available for the enacting of memory, at the very moment that the journalistic discourse is constructed, become not only accessible and easily researched, but they also become multiple. Prior to the Web, some newspapers had better archives (more complete, better indexed) and therefore they had better conditions to dig into their memory in the production of texts in the present; now, more and more archives have been digitalized, indexed and made open to the public, providing a level playing field for the conditions of the use of memory, not only in

production, but also in reception. The final user can also turn to the archived past in order to quickly and easily locate and contextualize the present which is presented to him through the flow of media.

Consequences

The effects of the digitalization of information, of the multiplication and sophistication of the databases, as far as memory is concerned, manifest themselves:

a) In the productive channels of editorial rooms, with the increasing availability of consultation and appropriation of information in both the internal and external databases of the vehicle, expanding the opportunities for incorporation of information from memory as an element in the creation of context and more in depth investigation for journalistic coverage;

b) In the *business models*, with the possible incorporation of elements of memory as part of the business established for on-line newspapers, not only in the simpler models of selective access, which may already have been overtaken, and which are in debt to earlier information, but principally with the creation of new products with positive repercussions in the area of attraction and loyalty of audiences;

c) In the *production of differentiated narrative forms*, with distinct modes of memory incorporation (background, context, contraposition, etc.), in its different formats (audio, video, film, texts, fax-similes, etc.).

d) In the *forms of interaction* with the user, which begin to set out resources for investigation, on the site of the newspaper itself, of historical details concerning the material of the current news which is being offered, as well as the possibility of personalizing the user's memory in spaces on the very journalistic site that is being used (Palacios, 2008), by means of clippings, the creation of personalized theme-based archives or the use of on-line indexing tools (*Digg, Delicious, Flickr* etc).

The first outcome to be stressed refers to the establishment of the potential of the use of the memory resources in the structuring of the journalistic text and the editing of such. Not only does it become easier for journalists to incorporate elements of memory into the production of texts (comparisons, analogies, nostalgia, deconstruction, etc.), but a form of editing which entrusts to memory also becomes normal. Related texts start to

become hyper-textually indexed ('*Read more*'; '*Also see*'; etc.), be it through an instance of human editing, or be it through a (not always successful!) process of automated association, through tags or key-words in filed texts and the vehicles' databases.

We should also highlight the importance of the new forms of interaction between journalism and its users. At the very least, readers' comments on the articles (enormously increasing the potential of the old *Readers' Letters*), just as opinions left in forums or sections created to present contributions from the public start to work as a type of note-taking alongside the journalistic text, just as in the old days those copying the ancient manuscripts noted their opinions and observations in the margins (Jackson, 2001, esp. 81-100) and more recently as the readers of books did in their printed copies. A new area of interest for the historian should be opening, therefore, through these inscriptions, which bring together the users' voices and register their reactions to texts originally produced by the journalists.

As well as this, it is becoming increasingly common to see journalistic specials, reports with a 'memorialist' character, usually commemorating dates or important historical events, which sometimes create a type of 'presentification' of the facts, even narrating them as if they were taking place in the present day⁶. The recent commemoration of the 40th anniversary of man's landing on the moon was an opportunity for a great number of these kinds of articles in newspapers all over the world. In some cases, more radical experiments created a hybrid of journalistic texts and reports of the memories of the users, through the explicit request for the reader who lived through the facts to leave a record his memories in readers' memories sections, which had been specially created, through the hybridization of languages and 'presentification' of the past⁷.

A new journalistic genre? I leave the question to the specialists.

⁶ One example of this type of report in a Brazilian newspaper, took as its subject a trip to the Amazon by the Brazilian journalist and writer Euclides da Cunha, in 1905. The description of the journey was re-presented, day-by-day, through 'presentified' (present time) language, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the death of the writer, in a special for the *O Estado de S. Paulo* newspaper on the web. Available at: <<http://www.estadao.com.br/especiais/o-ano-de-euclides-amazonia-revisitada,50463.htm>>. Access on Aug 5, 2010.

⁷ An analysis of two of these types of experiments, relating to commemorative dates from World War II (on the BBC's website and that of the Brazilian magazine *Veja*) is on 'Casadei' (no date).

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Digital clipping is another emerging aspect to be considered in relation to the new uses (or increased potential) of memory: personal archives of journalistic material start to become easily constructed, instantly recoverable and socially shared, be it on journalistic websites which offer such a resource (such as AOL, for example), or through tools such as social bookmarking in sites dedicated to the storage and sharing of information such as *Delicious*, *Digg*, *Flickr* etc.).

Finally, it is important to stress that memory, whilst it acts as a manufacturer of context and adds depth to the journalistic product, should also start to be one of the variables to be observed and measured when we refer to the evaluation of quality of newspapers on the web. This concerns a new task, with challenges which start with the very need for the creation of specific instruments for the analysis of this dimension or characteristic of journalism on the web, since the instrument available, as much theoretical as empirical (questionnaires, evaluation forms, listings of criteria, etc.), have been, in the large part, created and formatted for the analysis of sites in general, and not for journalism in particular (Palacios, 2009b).

We can, for now, accept and incorporate, maybe, the disturbing image of liquid time (Bauman, 2007) as a characteristic of our time, which obliges us, such as in *Alice in Wonderland*, to race with all our strength in order to stay in the same place. But paradoxically, we may also have to accept that the multiple records of these times don't simply drain away down the plughole.

Or maybe there isn't actually any paradox at all, but rather a consequence: the speed of our times is of such great importance that we feel *compelled* to save the images of the present to go back to later, in a future which is calmer, and which we obstinately dream will one day exist. Just as tourists do as they desperately click away with their cameras during their trips, producing thousands of images which, very probably, will be forgotten, but also stored away in some HD or memory card after the holiday. Images which, different to the perennial nature of the marks on the rocks left by our Neolithic ancestors, or even our parents' photo albums, are extremely vulnerable to all sorts of *erasure*, be the 'images' technological, or be they purely and simply *forgotten*, which, just as centrally as *remembrance*, forms part of the work of memory.

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