

Journalism as a cultural practice: a brief historical analysis of the journalism values of the Globo and BBC networks

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Abstract

This article consists of a comparative analysis between the news broadcasting of two major networks: Brazil's Rede Globo and that of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), both considered references in the field of journalism in their respective countries. It examines the historical relations these broadcasters have established with the basic premises of journalism (public service, vigilance, the "fourth power", objectivity, actuality) and also outlines the historical development of both networks, as well as the social, technological, political and corporate factors that have helped shape the style of journalism adopted by each.

Keywords: news broadcasting; BBC; Rede Globo.

Introduction

Contemporary studies of journalism indicate that the values and premises that we recognize today – objectivity, newsworthiness, truth and relevance, actuality, vigilance, independence, public interest – were established in the sociopolitical context of Angle-American societies during the nineteenth century (Chalaby, 2003; Traquina, 2004). The advent of democracy, in conjunction with other social factors (increases in urban populations and improvements in public education), economics (industrial development) and technological advances (the invention of the telegraph and the camera, the possibility of larger print runs for newspapers) were essential in the implementation of a "new journalism" (Traquina, 2004), one no longer based on opinions and propaganda but on factual information.

The later expansion of this way of conceiving of and performing journalism created the impression that this model was reproduced without variation in the rest of the world, which would mean that the field of journalism was indelibly marked by these values, leaving no possibility for other/newer concepts. Raymond Williams (1997), however, has demonstrated that journalism is a cultural practice and, as such, is subject to variations, depending on the context. Rejecting the idea of viewing the social sphere as a crystallization

of relations, formations, institutions and positions, Williams (1971) sustains his cultural theory within a flexible, mutable dimension of social processes, which implies that culture and its constituent elements are always in transformation. Journalism is no exception, since its values are in permanent dialogue with the society that consumes it. Thus, it is possible to consider, from a cultural studies perspective, that journalism is in a process of formation, re-signifying its premises in response to socio-cultural changes, political transformations, technological innovations and the very demands of its audiences. This being the case, journalism develops within a dynamic that permits the maintenance of values considered essential for its social recognition – the relationship to the real, truth, and objectivity, among others -, at the same time that these same values are themselves in transformation, as they adapt to new contexts.

In his history of the North American press, Michael Schudson (1978) demonstrates that objectivity became a dominant value in journalism when the informational model became the preference of local elites. Associated with this, the development of the telegraph and news agencies accelerated the dissemination of this way of producing news, transforming it into a more current practice.¹ As a result, other models of journalism, such as sensationalism, were relegated to inferior status. Thus, objectivity is not an inherent attribute of journalism, but a characteristic that developed from a series of historical processes that shaped journalistic procedures and also the expectations of the medium's audiences.²

The journalism that is practiced on television sustains itself with these premises – which belong to the field of journalism as a whole, not to any specific vehicle– and which materialize via interaction with the audiovisual medium. The use of images as strategies for legitimacy in covering the facts (as though images were more faithful representations of reality, conferring rhetorical legitimacy to television programming), the legwork of TV crews in search of information, editing techniques, camera framing styles, the use of live footage, are all strategies of television language that are utilized by programs in constructing their authenticity in the eyes of the audience.

¹ The author's argument continues, demonstrating that after World War I, North American society underwent a period of "disbelief of the facts" and subjectivity began to be incorporated into journalistic narratives.

² Other authors, such as Afonso de Albuquerque (1999) and Mark Deuze (2005), also demonstrate the cultural transformations of journalism values.

In the present paper, I will attempt a brief comparative analysis between the journalism of the Rede Globo, Brazil's biggest network, and the British Broadcasting Company, known as the BBC, both considered to have high standards of journalism in their respective countries. Utilizing historical documents from these networks, I will seek to show how these two networks address the premises of actuality, public service, vigilance, fourth power and objectivity. Thus, I will trace the historical development of the BBC and Globo as well as the social, technological, political and organizational factors that influenced the construction of the journalistic model of each company.

Initially, one issue that stands out about both networks is that they are public services regulated by the State, a practice that arose after the economic crisis that developed in the 1920s, reaching its worst in 1929 (Jambeiro, et al. 2000). At that time, the State, which until then had remained aloof from any control or regulation of the market, entered the scene, offering a way out of the economic situation and becoming a protector of public assets. In the case of radio, State regulation was implemented because of that industry's dependence on a public asset: the electromagnetic spectrum. In the United Kingdom, the State not only conceded the right to exploit the airwaves, it also financed the radio stations. In the case of Brazil, the State distributed the right to exploit the airwaves to private enterprises, an act that marked Brazilian television as commercial from the outset.³

Then, the idea of public service became incorporated into journalism programming, and their content was developed around the notion of serving the public interest and being its spokesman. In the institutional book of the *Jornal Nacional*, Armando Nogueira, ex-director of journalism of the network's principal newsprogram, stated, "We can never lose sight of the fact that television was a public service concession, a precarious one. At any moment, we could be displaced. And this was an element that they [the military] often utilized in order to pressure us in certain situations" (*Jornal Nacional*, 2004, p. 81). But this characteristic of public service led to different conceptions of journalism in Brazil and the United Kingdom.

BBC: seriousness and independent journalism

³ In Brazil, only *TV Brasil* and the *Educadora* stations receive public financing.

Some of the characteristics of the journalism of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) developed during the age of radio. When it later became a TV network, its journalistic style was already in place as a social institution (Seaton, 2003). As an ideal, “public service” meant, to the BBC’s producers, activities centered on a notion of the common good, public interest and consensus. Under the leadership of John Reith in its early years, the BBC (still a radio network) stood at a distance from political representatives, positioning itself as a “neutral” voice, above partisanship. This attitude was less an externally imposed policy than a consequence of Reith’s own personal convictions, since he believed that “the management of radio programming should be done by specialists in the area, independently of the government and the business world” (Briggs and Burke, 2006, p. 219). The insistence on political independence established the first parameter of one of the premises of journalism: objectivity. Considering that the notion of objectivity, as a journalistic concept, arose historically as an alternative to politically engaged, opinionated journalism, the BBC thus distanced itself from activist journalism. But if in the 1800s objectivity manifested itself as “real transmission of the facts”, in the mid-20th century objectivity was more linked to an independent, nonpartisan voice, without ties to the ruling political party.

The fact is that this position on the part of the BBC gave it credibility in acting as a “watchdog” for the interests of society as a whole: since the directors of the BBC were not politicians and were not allied to any political party, the audience took this as a sign of reliability, which ensured fulfillment of the social mission of vigilance, a premise that also formed in England and in the United States during the previous century. During the nineteenth century, journalism needed to assume a position that legitimated its existence and relevance. Thus, journalism found inspiration in democratic theory, also serving as a “watchdog,” a vigilante monitoring the dominant political powers, with the goal of ensuring freedom of expression, as well as defining itself as a space for debating public issues, permitting the people to have a voice and to demand their rights from the authorities (Traquina, 2005; Gomes, 2003). It is because of this that journalism is also known as a “fourth power”.

In the BBC, however, this premise was tested during its coverage of the General Strike of 1926, when the network gave more visibility to the voices of those in government, representing them as the voices of order, while the strikers were interviewed on location, in

the tumultuous atmosphere of the strike itself. This implicitly characterized the latter as disorderly, giving audiences the impression the network was aligned with government interests and thus bringing on a crisis in public recognition of the BBC's credibility in the coverage of national affairs. In response, and as an attempt to strengthen itself in the communications sector, the BBC learned to censor itself internally, to avoid being perceived as holding pro-government views. This became the norm, even entering into the network's code of ethics, thus marking the journalistic style of the BBC from then onwards, notably during the coverage of World War II. This event, from its sheer scale and importance, permitted the BBC to promote national cohesiveness and to become the medium most utilized by the British population in keeping up with the events. Differently from the strike, in the case of the war there was no internal division in the country, it was simply the United Kingdom against the advances and attacks of Hitler and his allies.

By the 1940s there were some important consequences. The war's importance as a subject led to the idea that news should be transmitted as quickly as possible; this gave rise to a new focus on instantaneousness as an essential characteristic of journalism. In this period news programs began to be exhibited every half hour, giving updates on the latest events in the battlefields and the decisions of Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Currently, the BBC⁴ still presents half-hour news programs, called *BBC News*, at the same intervals as the radio programs of the World War II era, seeking to keep viewers who just switched on the TV updated on the most important events happening around the world.

Another consequence of the World War II coverage was that the generalized fear of an air strike by the Axis Powers led the public to demand detailed explanations about the issues. Audiences wanted programming with more in-depth information and they came to have a more complex understanding of political events. This led to the development of new program formats, such as radio debates in which philosophers and renowned newspaper journalists were invited to discuss the issues, offering more sophisticated perspectives. Thus, the BBC fulfilled its social role of supplying the populace with important information thus permitting it to formulate informed opinions.

⁴ It should be noted that this analysis is based on the BBC International, which is available in Brazil on cable TV. There is no access, in Brazil, to the BBC programming aired in the United Kingdom, but I believe that the journalism premises are similar.

This function of the BBC's journalism is evident to this day, in documentaries such as *Little Europe*, which addresses the political and economic questions affecting the European Union and the repercussions of its leaders' decisions for its citizens. Another manner of offering in-depth information is seen on the program *Hard Talk*, a tough talk show in which a network journalist questions a prominent individual with expertise in some area, such as economics or culture, but from an international perspective. The program's goal is to put its guests into a situation of conflict and contradiction.⁵ This "inquiry" into the interviewee's public life constructs a sense of truth and good investigation. Truth as a value also arose in the BBC during the coverage of World War II, when the network adopted the maxim the truth of the war should be shown, no matter how terrible it was.

Following the events of the war, the BBC journalism was strengthened and institutionally constituted. With values recognized by the audience, such as public service, objectivity, vigilance, clarity, truth and actuality, when the BBC made the transition to television, its journalistic approach was already in place, which helped it to survive as, over time, competing networks arose. The BBC's values were far from a play for government approval.⁶ Indeed, they earned the BBC strong government pressure and threats of a shutdown that intensified under the rigid government of Margareth Thatcher, which sought to turn the network into a mere forum for publicizing government actions.

Since the Conservative party remained in power for more than twenty years, there was no other version of the facts that could create an opposition to Margareth Thatcher's policies, a role that ended up falling to the BBC. Thus, on the one hand Thatcher hoped for an alignment on the part of the network and the negation of dissident voices, threatening to revoke the BBC's concession and cut its funding; on the other, the BBC hoped to carry out a public service that could give visibility to various social classes and various versions of the facts at the time represented by the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and by England's adversaries in the conflict over the Malvinas. For the Prime Minister, an Englishwoman,

⁵ It is worth mentioning that Tim Sebastian, formerly the official host for *Hard Talk*, skillfully performed this role.

⁶ Since there was no direction from the representatives of the political parties in power in the United Kingdom and because of the policies of John Reith, in terms of distancing the agency from political influence, there was a discussion in England questioning how the government could continue to fund the network when it was interviewing and giving air time to people who opposed the government. How could the BBC continue to maintain itself as a public service, maintaining this kind of impartiality that showed both sides? Thus, the BBC defended itself using the concept of public interest: its role was to keep the populace informed and that is what ensured its credibility.

giving voice to the IRA and the radical Protestants of Northern Ireland was a direct attack on her authority and an act of disloyalty.

Despite constant pressure from Margareth Thatcher's threats to deregulate the BBC, the network did not adopt a partisan approach and maintained its style of constructing social reality by weaving together different versions of the facts, with the goal of offering a wide perspective on the subject at hand. Although the BBC suffered a number of internal changes, it remained true to its journalism premises established in the radio era and continued to structure itself as a politically independent public service.

Globo: public service with political alignment

Unlike the situation in the United Kingdom, in Brazil television was commercial from the very beginning, oriented toward mass audiences. Its concern was not to educate the people but to entertain them, which served to justify the quantity of imported telenovelas and talk shows that marked its early years (Ramos; Borelli, 1989). With the assistance of financial resources, equipment and staff from the North American company *Time-Life*,⁷ the Rede Globo de Televisão emerged as a major force on the national scene in 1965, as a competitor to the already established networks TV Tupi (the pioneer, created by Assis Chateaubriand) and TV Excelsior.

The Rede Globo's position with respect to the federal government also differed from the BBC. The fact that it was a public concession did not lead it to seek political impartiality but to support the military government in power at the time that the network was born and began to make its presence felt on the national scene. Because of this, Globo's journalism assumed the role of official spokesman of the federal government, under the pretext of fearing the strong censorship imposed by the military regime. However, even after the decline of the dictatorship, Globo continued in the same vein, which reveals that its approach was more due to editorial decisions than to external circumstances.

⁷ Two months after TV Globo was launched, in April of 1965, the then governor of the state of Guanabara, Carlos Lacerda, denounced the network's accords with the North American company as illegal, basing his statement on Article 160 of the Brazilian constitution. In 1966, Roberto Marinho himself testified before the government committee that was investigating the case, defending the contracts. See http://memoriaglobo.globo.com/Memoriaglobo/upload/depoimento_rm_02.html.

If in its TV news programs Globo sought to adopt the position of political alignment assumed by the network's director, Roberto Marinho, in its dramaturgy and other journalistic products the network gambled on the audacity of leftist authors. This was the case of the miniseries, *O Pagador de Promessas* [The Payer of Promises] and the telenovela *Roque Santeiro*, by Dias Gomes, and the documentary *Wilsinho Galiléia*, by João Batista de Andrade, produced for the *Globo Repórter* (1978), all censored by the military government shortly before their scheduled broadcast date.

This illustrates the kind of vigilance that the Rede Globo seeks to perform. Since vigilance is a fundamental value of journalism, the Central Globo de Journalism cannot simply dispense with it; the network thus focuses constantly on political life, in order to reassure its audiences that it is keeping an eye on the powers that be and keeping track of their decisions. According to Afonso de Albuquerque (1999), in Brazil, what elsewhere is known as the “fourth power” assumes the role of a “moderating power,” in other words, the local press claims the authority to put one power against the other, in order to maintain public order and stability. For Albuquerque, the relationship between the press and the Executive Power, for example, is marked by a posture that is generally characterized as pro-government, one that involves placing itself at the government's side in order to support its actions. Because of this, it is possible to perceive the effort that the journalistic vehicles make in publicizing the presidential agenda, the speeches made by government officials, the decisions taken. However, this pro-government stance can be easily countered, when it breaks with the idea of stability that journalism seeks to construct. It was this attitude of “moderated vigilance” that earned Globo controversial questions, such as the coverage of *Diretas Já* [Rights Now] in 1985, and of the presidential debate between Fernando Collor and Luís Inácio Lula da Silva in 1989.

In order to construct a position of authority that permits it to carry on this kind of game (oscillating between a pro-government stance and an accusing one, when government officials act in a way that disrupts stability), Globo assumes an ideal of objectivity, avoiding commentaries and localizing them in specific programming moments and spaces. The news anchors, who function as spokespersons for the institution, refrain from evincing direct opinions when they are recounting events, leaving opinion to specially designated commentators. On the morning news program, *Bom Dia Brasil*, the commentators take on

central importance, dialoguing with the hosts and seeking to provide viewers with an ampler assessment of the events of the previous day, so that they leave home with a panorama of the repercussion of the events and what can be hoped for from them. On the *Jornal Nacional* and the *Jornal da Globo* the commentators do not appear regularly, except when a subject arises that the network believes is worthy of a more in-depth approach.

This attempt to divorce fact from opinion is personified by the news anchors who, in the beginning of telejournalism, had a role more akin to that of hosts, acting as ventriloquists (Verón, 1983) in relation to the discourse of the network. Even though they may make comment to each other about the news items (as happens on *Jornal Hoje*, in which Sandra Annenberg and Evaristo Costa make brief comments about the news footage shown but do not seek a more in-depth understanding of it), they do so at specific times, after the news has been presented. Although the programs do not directly utilize the mediators' opinions or assessments, the *Jornal Nacional* seems to break this rule via the anchors' facial expressions. Fátima Bernardes' wink, Bonner's reproachful look, expressions of doubt, tone of voice, all of this helps to construct an idea of the news program's opinion about the events it is reporting.⁸ The reproachful looks are not associated with the anchors but with the institution – the *Jornal Nacional* – that they represent.

Some characteristics of the network's journalism are related to the very notion of "national journalism." The technological advances of satellite transmission, which permit network transmission, as well as the alignment with the military government's interests in promoting national unity, led to the formation of Globo's principal journalistic product, the *Jornal Nacional*, the first news program that broadcast a single version of the news all over the country. This is relevant because it was the basis for establishing one of the main premises of Globo's journalism: to offer a public service of interest to all Brazilians. Thus, the *Jornal Nacional's* approach, as well as the subjects it covers, cannot be rooted in a particular geographic locale but in a more general appeal that could hold the attention of people in different parts of the country. "Seu João", "Dona Maria" and "Seu José" are characters that embody the subjects covered in the TV news, seeking to create a sense of proximity with viewers in their homes. The humanization of the story is the most appropriate resource for

⁸ Elsewhere, I have described the *Jornal Nacional's* anchors as news interpreters (Silva, 2005).

constructing this relationship, since it takes a Brazilian's life as the most important thing in the relationship.

Throughout its history, Globo's news programming has been top quality in technical terms, which indicates a concern with the premise of clear presentation of information. In order to create order in the complexity of the world (Traquina, 2005), Globo, or more precisely, the *Jornal Nacional*, appropriates television language as a way of making subjects clearer to viewers. When the *Jornal Nacional* arose, in 1969, there was a concern by the network in solidifying its position in the sector (at the time still incipient) of Brazilian TV networks, and thereby begin moving along the path to public legitimacy. The *Jornal Nacional* was created to compete with *Repórter Esso*, a news program that was first created for radio and later shown on TV by the Tupi network. During the 1960s *Repórter Esso* was the main television news program in the country, being shown in a number of state capitals. In order to compete, the *Jornal Nacional* used technical quality as its hook, also appropriating television's visual language. Thus it was that the "Globo standard of quality" arose, which ended up becoming the standard of TV journalism in Brazil. In order to fulfill its social mission of clearly providing information to all Brazilians, independent of age, social class or level of schooling, the *Jornal Nacional* (and the rest of Globo's news programs follow this guiding principle) invests in graphic resources, maps, sounds, stamps, colors; in other words, resources that can make the "driest" subjects understandable to the audience.

The effort to maintain clarity in relaying the news also can be seen in the search for a solid investigation, which reveals the network's attempt to show the truth, principally in the news items that take on greater public importance, that is, the ones that are related to exposing frauds involving politicians and political institutions. Expressions such as "our team searched for...", "... gave an exclusive interview to our crew...", "exclusive images of the accident, you see them here," seek to show, rhetorically, the network's commitment to investigative reporting which gives greater credibility.

The search for quality investigation arose in Globo's telejournalism at the moment when the network suffered a fire in the 1970s, after which the journalism facilities relocated from Rio de Janeiro to São Paulo. The country was going through a moment of political opening, with lessened restrictions on journalism, which led to the professionalization of Globo's

telejournalism. At the time – as if it were a watershed for “serious” journalism – the TV journalism sector also included reporters who had worked in print journalism. Thus, the professionalism that Globo aspired to was associated with the methods of constructing the news in print formats: “so at that time, we looked to the print press, to journalists who were concerned with investigation, with the integrity of the news. We thought that this was what was lacking in TV. We struggled against the superficiality of [the TV format],” (Jornal Nacional, 2004, p. 79). The coverage of the metal-workers’ strikes of the São Paulo metropolitan area and of the Jacareí prison rebellions, also in São Paulo, were a great turning point, solidifying the professionalization of the network’s journalism. The quality of investigation was seen, above all, in the images: there was a marked effort in the *Jornal Nacional* to show images of the events and to legitimate the role of the reporter as an eyewitness to those events, appearing in the middle of the footage, thus ensuring a sense of truth. For example, reporter Carlos Nascimento and cinematographer Reynaldo Cabrera put themselves in the middle of the gunfire that was happening in the prison, recording it live, as it occurred. That coverage got them the Vladimir Herzog Prize from Amnesty and Human Rights.

Final considerations

Returning to the premises of journalism and their appropriation by the television networks examined here, we see that, with regard to *public service*, British telejournalism distanced itself from partisanship in order not to compromise its oblique perspective of events, assuming a politically independent posture. In Brazil, however, there was an opposite approach: political alignment in order to avoid confrontation with the military government. Roberto Marinho himself stated this position in an editorial published by the newspaper *O Globo* in 1984 (see the website MEMÓRIA GLOBO).

A direct result of the concept of public service is the way that networks deal with the function of *vigilance* and “*fourth power*”, ideas that express themselves in relationship to political powers and the social function of serving the *public interest*. Thus, the BBC, through its objective stance, legitimates itself as an authority in addressing issues related to the government without directly assuming a partisan position. Subjects that the BBC considers public interest are related to politics and the economy, as well as social problems.

MATRIZes

In the case of Globo, the idea of vigilance is tied to the coverage of the spaces where the decisions are made. The subjects that are pertinent to the public are the ones that directly affect the audience's everyday life: changes in telephone rates, decisions about social security, political scandals.

A fourth premise that appears in the networks is the concept of *truth*, which, in the case of the BBC, manifests itself through the journalist's work in getting to the bottom of the subject to the greatest extent possible. The search for truth, for Globo, also manifests itself through the investigation of the news piece, but here it is more linked to the use of the image as a way of showing the "real fact." The value that Globo places on its reporters and the network's style of placing them "where the news happened," even though nothing may be happening at the moment of filming,⁹ is a guarantee of legitimization. In Globo's case, this relationship to the truth seeks to promote a distancing from the direct opinions of the mediators, who place themselves *objectively* as spokespersons for the institution. The truth of the information contained in the news piece is linked to the *clarity* with which the issues are addressed, utilizing resources from television's visual language (graphics, maps, sound, editing resources, etc.) in order to present the news in an ordered and logical way to its viewers.

This analysis shows that journalism is the fruit of a historical and social construction that began in the second half of the nineteenth century but was later modified as the result of tensions undergone by the field. Because of this, we cannot consider journalism to be consolidated, but rather a culturally constructed process. With this brief analysis, my objective was to show that the cultural environment can affect journalism's relationship to its premises and to use this to suggest a pathway for analyzing journalistic products.

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⁹ Frequently, Globo reporters are shown discussing a given issue live and on location, but nothing is actually happening on the location. This is evident in the *Jornal da Globo* when it shows a reporter speaking live from Brasília, in front of the national Congress or the esplanade where the ministries are located. Although these offices have already closed for the day at broadcast time of the *Jornal da Globo*, the background image tells the viewer that the reporter was present at the site where political decisions took place, thus investing him with credibility in discussing the subject.

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