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Why to develop a critical reading of the newspaper?

Market journalism and media literacy

Abstract

This paper results of a PHD research, where we identify a market journalism more directed to consumer-reader than to citizen-reader. Thus we find news carrying a hybrid discourse containing elements from both journalistic and advertisement logics with implications in the consumptions and lifestyles.

Here we present a discussion of the analyzed data through seven dimensions: body care; diets and food; health; substances; leisure; icons; metareflexivity. In conclusion we found a need of developing strategies of media literacy in order to be more aware and critical about the media content - from this will result a new research project, still in design.

Keywords: market journalism, media literacy, citizen-reader

Resumen

Este paper resulta de una investigación de posgraduado, donde identificamos un periodismo de mercado más orientado hacia el consumidor-lector que hacia el ciudadano-lector. De ese modo, encontramos noticias conteniendo un discurso híbrido con elementos de las lógicas del periodismo y de la publicidad, con consecuencias en los consumos y los estilos de vida.

Aquí presentamos la discusión de los datos analizados a través de siete dimensiones: cuidados corporales; dietas y alimentos; salud; sustancias; láser; iconos; meta-reflexividad. En conclusión, identificamos la necesidad de desarrollar estrategias de alfabetización mediática para conseguir una mayor concienciación y crítica sobre el contenido de los medios – de aquí resultará una nueva investigación, en fase de diseño.

Palabras clave: periodismo de mercado, alfabetización mediática, ciudadano-lector.

Resumo

Este *paper* resulta da minha pesquisa de doutoramento, onde identificamos um jornalismo de mercado que é mais orientado para o leitor- consumidor do que para o leitor-cidadão. Daqui resultam notícias contendo um discurso híbrido, contendo elementos das lógicas jornalística e do marketing com implicações nos consumos e estilos de vida.

Aqui apresentamos a discussão dos dados analisados, baseados em sete dimensões diferentes: cuidados corporais; dietas e alimentos; saúde; substâncias; lazer; icons; matereflexividade. Em conclusão defendemos a necessidade de desenvolver estratégias de literacia para os média de forma a desenvolver competências de atenção crítica acerca do conteúdo dos média. E daqui resultará um novo projecto de investigação, ainda em fase de desenho.

Palavras-chave: jornalismo de mercado, literacia mediática, leitor-cidadão.

Introduction

This is a working paper where we trace a research process. The starting point are the results of a PHD research, *Imagem mediática dos consumos: Mediação e Jornalismo de Mercado na Construção Social dos Estilos de Vida* (Mediated Image of consumptions: Mediation and Market Journalism in the Social Construction of Life Stiles).

In this research we identify a market journalism that is more directed to consumer-reader than to the citizen-reader. In this market journalism the news have a hybrid discourse which contains elements from both journalistic and advertisement logics. With the fusion between advertising and programming, the boundaries between what it's advertising and not advertising material becomes very fluid. Thus, the traditional formula that separated the media content (entertainment, information and education) from the advertising (selling), is replaced by another one where the advertising itself can be seen as entertainment and information. This hybrid nature is present in the analysed news articles about consumptions and lifestyles collected in newspapers and magazines of generalist information with largest circulation.

In this paper we discuss the market journalism that we have found. And we present the main results of analysis of news articles arranged into seven dimensions – body care, diets and food, health (and illness), substances (chemical and natural), leisure (facilities and activities), icons (public people and famous personalities), metareflexivity (journalistic articles that reflect on the speech of the media itself or on consumptions and lifestyles in present societies). In conclusion and from this analysis we found a need to develop strategies of media literacy in order to be more aware and critical about the media content for what we'll end presenting some new research guidelines.

Market journalism and mediation

The analysis of the selected news allowed to understand the way Portuguese press express and represent consumptions and lifestyles and have shown that convergences are more significant than the divergences. These divergences exist, in a relatively smooth way, for example: *Única* is the magazine with more articles collected in the dimensions "Diets and food" and "Icons"; in *Correio Vidas* the "Body care" is the predominant dimension; in *Jornal de Notícias* and in *Notícias Magazine* more importance is given to the "Substances"; *XIS* seems more worried about "Health" and "Leisure"; finally, in *Visão*, the majority of selected articles belongs to the "Metareflexivity". However, these cannot be considered as deep divergences which can divide or move away unequivocally the journalistic supports (periodicals, supplements and informative magazines).

The diversity of sources considered in terms of preferential public-target, of periodicity, of national and regional broadcasting disclosed some differences in the focus given to certain particular contexts. However, this didn't create significant differences, since in all these we have found news where That have present problematic in study which is thematized. We also transversally found - in the diverse consulted sources, and in the considered dimensions - elements revealing the hybrid nature of a news discourse that results in a presence of marketing elements set together with the journalistic logic of news production.

Therefore, we identify the "marketing attitude" defined by Lendrevie and others (1993), which implies that the decision processes are, more and more, guided for, and in function of, the consumer; in this case, the reader of the written Portuguese press. According to Serrano (2006), the emergence of supplements in newspaper came to answer, precisely, to this need. Need that is, simultaneously, of periodicals (as a way to answer to market demands: readers and advertisers), of its public (which look for utilitarian information strictly linked with the supply and demand of products and services, to the consumption and the taste) and of the advertisers (who, by this way, see their products, services, brands and prices promoted in news articles).

This trend strengthens the need of a widened vision of the "universes of news", in the expression of Ponte (2004), allowing to involve the field of culture and representations conflict, in nowadays' societies. This must be done taking into account the implied questions in this news selection and in its productive processes (Wolf: 1992). In other words, the images that newspaper and advertisers have of their public perpetuate ways of saying that tries to approach this interest' (represented) public. In the analyzed articles, these processes are identified in a hedonist nature associated to consumption. For instance, even when we find news with stories of more difficult situations (as cases of disease), the focus rests in some suggestions - that can be of technological innovations, products or services - in order to improve the quality of life. This perspective is, still, strengthened by articles centred in self-support. Another example, in the headings of the articles we find traces that the consumptions and lifestyles, in the several analytical dimensions, translate news focus that feed entertainment and information spaces. Thus, we assist to a "marketization of the speech" (Fairclough: 1995). That is, the journalistic speech tries to become more appealing by increasing the resource of visual and pictorial elements: colours, photographs, illustrations. In the analyzed news this marketization of speech is very present, since only about 5% of the news did not have any type of photograph or illustration. These market journalism elements, present in most of analyzed articles, tend to configure the role of media in the social construction of reality, since they contribute to create shared experiences. Thus, the media are assumed as collective instruments of knowledge and agreement of real.

Therefore, in mediation process, the created meanings are dynamic. Concretely, in consumptions and lifestyles' field, we assist to its reproduction, transformation and emergency that can be identified in the considered analysis dimensions. Reproduction refers to patterns of consumptions and lifestyles culturally rooted that are represented. For instance, the body care, traditionally associated to women is starting to be a concern for men. Well, this represents the emergent media attention to these issues. Transformation of consumption trends that, when revitalized, assume modernity and current forms. This is the case of trend "retro", which is manifested in dress style, in decoration or other signs linked to consumption and lifestyles, as places to be or music to hear. Finally, emergency of new trends, associated to the "styles" of celebrities (icons) in the clothes they wear, the *griffes* they choose, the cars they drive, the travelling destinations they choose, for instance.

Let us now see the main conclusions for each one of the considered dimensions.

Market journalism in consumptions and lifestyles

The empiric referent is composed of 1105 news of the written Portuguese press, collected between 2004 and 2005, in periodicals and magazines of generalist information with largest circulation. After collecting the news we could arrange them by seven dimensions that were defined according both theoretical and empirical frame.

These collected news articles were analysed in three main phases: first we have made a quantitative survey in order to understand the distribution of news by sources and by dimensions. Second, for a first organization of the news collected we have made a content analysis that relied on formal variables (such as news signature, source of information, voices mentioned, geographic location) and operative nature issues (as represented space and thematic content of categories based on social and cultural constructs) (Ponte, 2005).

And finally, we conducted a critical discourse analysis of news, in order to realize the presence of different ways of talking about consumptions and lifestyles, either those expressed, or those that are represented as emerging in the information products of today's Portuguese press (van Dijk: 2005).

Next we briefly present and discuss the results of each dimension.

Body Care

It's a set of 118 news articles that approach themes related to the body hygiene – well-care directed to specific areas (feet, hair, face, hands) and beauty advices to maintain the young appearance, tricks for special occasions (as make up or self tanners), rituals to follow and keep "perfect shapes". These news evidence an increasing importance given to the personal image, of body and fashion. The fashion – of dressing and silhouettes – is one of the most significant expressions that makes the values system circulate, collectively shared with its rules of behaviour (Castilho: 2006).

It is the notion of the beautiful body that seems to become the standard in the construction of an ideal body, according to which it evaluates, it moulds and it builds the own body, based in stylized images, build and propagated by the media. The self image of the body seems to be dependent of social images and the individual seems to invest lots of his time to control and to supervise the appearance of his body, his "look". The collected articles show this concern. They also witness a strong presence of the marketing logics, specially, expressed in the diffusion and advising of places and products.

Diets and Food

This dimension is about news (141) which central subject is nourishment: places of meals or acquisition of specific foods, the benefits of some foods for the health and well-being, fast-food, alimentary riots, and so on.

The trend seems to be the search of the perfect nourishment to keep health and silhouette; this situation can lead to the riots of the alimentary behaviour, to the excesses – obesity –, to the scarcity – anorexia – or to the healthful obsession for - ortorexia. In parallel, there are contradictory information related to the relationship between the dangers and the benefits of diets or, specifically, of particular kinds of food, which is connected to the notion of risk society (Beck: 1992).

In these articles there is, clear and constantly, one appeal to the healthful and concordant consumptions and lifestyles with the standards presented by the media, expressed in the idea of the nourishment as a form to get a healthful appearance and a favourable physical form, that is, lean.

Health

Health is a dimension composed by 179 articles that approach questions as illnesses (diverse physical and psychological pathologies), innovations (advances to the levels of the medical techniques and medicines), dangers (alerts to some levels - technological, pharmacological, of practices and behaviours), prevention of illnesses (through the promotion of health and of physical and psychological well-being).

The concerns appear out of context and globalized; it is the case of the alimentary and the environmentally concerns in health; or the case of the pandemics, as the birds flu. However, technological advances, at same time, create new expectations with new therapies and also alert for the discovery of until then unknown effects.

Substances

This one mentions substances capable to modify the mood and conscience states and to reduce the suffering. It is the dimension with more collected articles, 209.

These news products express the social search of different experiences to the level of conscience and mood states and to the level of the integration and interaction, through the use of diverse practices and substances. Here we find parts on alcoholic beverages, alcohol free drinks, tobacco, legal substances – as medicines –, illegal substances – as "drugs" – and several addictions.

In a transversal way to all the substances that are quoted we note the complexity of the economic interests that cross the respective fields – of medicines, drinks and others. Another transversal aspect to all the quoted substances is the fact that the substances, by themselves, are not beneficial or harmful; the benefits or damages happen, generally speaking, of the uses that each one makes of it – this conclusion, not being explicit in any of the articles, is allowed by crossing the information of the different articles.

Leisure

This dimension relates to a set of articles (168) related to travelling destinations suggestions according to a logic of valuation a natural, healthful and stress less life.

The leisure holds a double reading: on one hand, the articles (or this kind of articles) tend to fulfil, more and more, the function of entertainment; on the other hand, the presented offers tend to configure, essentially, forms of breaking up with the daily routine. This rupture can be made through more spirituals ways to reach greater serenity or through other more material strategies, as travelling, renew the wardrobe, the house decoration, for example.

Icons

The icons represent the reference of public figures (in 133 articles): their lives and careers, forms of diversion, styles to follow.

The presence of these people in media configures them as icons, as models to follow in their consumptions – body image, dressing and the accessories, fragrances, the daily things, as the cars they drive or their travelling destinations. The icons are models of behaviour and styles to follow and imitate. And even when they appear associated to socially less valued behaviours, they give the idea that they had been able to get over them (with all the resulting implications).

Metareflexivity

Metareflexivity is composed by 157 articles and holds two sub-dimensions. First, Metadiscourse is centred in articles in which speech produces and represents one proper vision of the media concerning the consumptions and lifestyles. We find, here, articles where the relation, stronger and stronger, between information, entertainment and spreading or promotion is explicit, in market logic. And second Reflexivity is centred in articles that, in some way, intend to reflect about the consumptions and lifestyles in the current societies. It discloses a concern with the media effects on the audiences, with a closer attention to those considered more vulnerable, as children, and a concern with the excesses associated to consumption.

Media literacy

The mass journalism, as result of market orientation, has become: more focused on profits; more dependent on advertising; more directed to entertainment; and one guide of consumptions. This orientation has also gradually stimulated new demanding in consumers, which stimulates themselves with critical analysis skills, with responsibility and capacity to develop organized forms of action.

The consumptions and lifestyles imply choices and these ones reflect, through their meaning, the cultural model within they are. Also the media consumption implies choices. To make choices the individuals must have information concerning the diverse options, as well as the results (positive or negative) that can come from there.

Thereby, from the conclusions of this research, we identify a need to develop strategies of inquiry-share in the areas of media literacy and consumption literacy. By these we aim to stress the need of develop actions that promote citizenship in general and in consumer's behaviour specifically – specially in media's consumers. Aiming, thus, to promote the consumerism, understood as the spontaneous or elaborated participation of the consumers in the socioeconomics decisions that affect them (Santos: 1994; Hébert: 1997). In this context and based on these conclusions we argue that consumerism and media literacy skills allows individuals to have a critical reading of the newspaper.

That's the reason for that we aim now to present the main guidelines of a new research project on media literacy (still in design).

We found that research on media literacy has been mainly related with youngster populations (Livingstone: 2002; Mediapro: 2006; Hasebrink et al: 2007; Barra: 2007; Cardoso, Espanha, Lapa: 2007; Vieira: 2007; Drotner, Livingstone: 2008; Ponte: 2008, 2009). Although the results point to a generation gap between media users – Prensky (2001) refers to digital natives

and digital immigrants – and a lack of guidance and support from adults (parents, teachers) to youngsters, it seems to have little knowledge about adults' media literacy skills, specially Portuguese adults. So, our research problem is to learn more about how Portuguese adults are dealing with these challenges, what answers are they finding to deal with this issue.

In nowadays societies we assist to an increasing of media convergence. This is not only a technological process, but the current convergence scenario also relates to a cultural change, where consumers of content are encouraged to seek new information and establish connections between content available through scattered media. At the same time the convergence of media encourages the development of participatory culture that allows ordinary citizens to create, own and share in new and powerful ways.

Newspaper and information also are in transformation process in result of these technological changes. The online information tends to increase the complexity of the social uses and representations through and with media (Cardoso: 2009). To handle this scenario requires new skills of media literacy. Thus, with this research we intend to contribute for the understanding on what media literacy skills Portuguese adults already have, once their involvement in participatory culture and network that emerges from the digital world in which many of us are already in. Thus, the empirical referent will be the Universidade Aberta students. They are Portuguese adults who use several combined media, at least due their frequency of an e-learning model course.

In summary, we intend to unveil in this population the main processes of acquisition of media literacy and their concrete expressions. Necessarily we expect that it will be related with more critical and less instrumental procedures, for instance, identification and recognition of the spatial and timing context, encoding and decoding media discourses in general and information ones in particular.

We agree with Cardoso (2009) who defends that media literacy in nowadays is an essential element. It is needed to creativity, to defend ideas and ideals, to create alternatives, to change the real.

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