

Fact vs. Text: How “Objectivity” Hides the Discursive Characteristic of Journalism / *Fato vs. texto: como a “objetividade” oculta o caráter discursivo do jornalismo*

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ABSTRACT

The concept of journalistic objectivity is grounded on the notion of “fact,” that means that journalism describes the world out there, like the natural sciences. Throughout the history of journalism, “fact” and “objectivity” have been central concepts for social affirmation and the elaboration of professional procedures. However, journalism does not focus on facts, except for a tiny part of its activity, but on texts, on discourses. It does not report the world; reports sources, reports other people’s information or texts. It is, therefore, fundamentally a discursive activity. This article criticizes the notion of “fact” in journalism and shows by means of analyses of texts from the UOL portal, how journalism is mainly language about language, and not language about the world. Thus, concepts from traditional positivism, from the subject and object dichotomy, do not apply to it. The discursive perspective is much more pertinent.

KEYWORDS: Journalistic Objectivity; Dialogism; Speech Genres; History of Journalism

RESUMO

O conceito de objetividade jornalística está lastreado na noção de “fato”, de que o jornalismo reporta o mundo exterior, como as ciências naturais. Ao longo da história do jornalismo, “fato” e “objetividade” têm sido conceitos centrais para a afirmação social e para a formulação de métodos profissionais. No entanto, o jornalismo não se debruça sobre fatos, exceto numa minúscula parte da sua atividade, mas sobre textos, sobre discursos. Não reporta o mundo; reporta fontes, reporta informações ou textos de outrem. É, assim, uma atividade fundamentalmente discursiva. Este artigo faz a crítica da noção de “fato” no jornalismo e mostra, com análise de textos do portal UOL, como o jornalismo é sobretudo linguagem sobre linguagem, e não linguagem sobre mundo. Assim, não se aplicam a ele conceitos oriundos do positivismo tradicional, da dicotomia sujeito/objeto. A perspectiva discursiva é muito mais pertinente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Objetividade jornalística; Dialogia; Gêneros do discurso; História do jornalismo*

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1 Fact and Objectivity

The concept of “fact” has been one of the most solid founding stone on which the whole discussion of journalistic practice is grounded. Under the hypothesis that there is a given object, real facts to know and that there are strict ways for comprehending these facts, the concept of journalistic objectivity is built and sustained. From this point of view, journalism can be seen as producing knowledge about facts of real world.

Several professional conceptions and theories about journalism with implications to the way newspapers are framed and produced are historically linked to the concept of “fact,” that is the assumption of the existence of a world that can be accessed and that it is independent of the existence of subjects to exist: an objective reality. “Journalists at the end of the nineteenth century were encouraged to assume the existence of a world ‘out there’ which could be appropriated, or known, through journalism, with accuracy” (McNair, 1994, p.27).

This assumption does not come from journalism itself, but from the epistemological work undertaken by Cartesian rationalism (Châtelet, Noel, 1992). Therefore, it is not a mere coincidence the assumption as first given that there is a world and that this world can be apprehended.

The debate on journalistic objectivity is generally constructed under the vulgar and conservative positivism of the last century (Löwi, 1985) which is strongly simplified by journal style guides. This positivism no longer finds so many supporters, but it suited as a starting point for the prolific development of positivist epistemology throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. This conception has impelled the ambition of science to produce a total knowledge and, together with photography, which also claimed the power to reflect reality, has taken journalism along the same path. McNair (1994, p.26) says:

Another foundation stone of journalistic objectivity was the acceptance, by the late nineteenth century, of positivism epistemology and photographic realism, “both of which claimed to reflect the world without reference to human subjectivity and selectivity.” The nineteenth century witnessed rapid technological progress, accompanied in the realm of philosophy by the beliefs in rationalism, realism, positivism, and empiricism. These philosophies of science

stressed the “epistemological primacy of scientific knowledge,” and the possibility of an objective, “knowable” universe. The social sciences, such as history, also adopted this view of the world, encouraging further “a general cultural acceptance of a reportable, objective world.”

Rationalism, empiricism, and positivism are all moved by a totalizing desire. These epistemological proposals, valid or not, aimed, by means of the method, to achieve the ultimate truths of the facts of the world and, hence, to finish the endless dialogue about the reality of things. Anchored in this project, journalistic objectivity has reached a level of productivity of unprecedented concepts, which ended up guiding the discussions and productions of journalism to a very significant degree.

Kunczik (1988, p.227)¹ also points out other elements that, in addition, explain how the impartiality thesis arises and is sustained:

The objective report is understood as dispassionate, without prejudice, impartial, free from sentimentality and according to reality. Dan Schiller (1979) cites three factors that favour the evolution of the journalistic objectivity standard in the United States:

1. The evolution of the press as a “voice of the people”;
2. The predominance of Francis Bacon’s ideas (1561-1621), which ascribe great importance to facts;
3. The development of photography, followed by the belief that it realistically represents “reality.”

Photography suggests that it is possible to reflect reality without necessarily having to go through the subject’s judgement. Through the machine, reality can be reproduced without human interference. Thus, the photographic image was not only the representation of reality but was free from subjectivity as well. This illusory search for a straight representation of the world begins, however, with shorthand.

Shorthand was the first of that long series of journalistic techniques which at first seem to promise the reader the complete recovery of some semblance of reality. A fully competent shorthand reporter seemed to have acquired an almost supernatural power, and shorthand was invested with the same kind of social optimism as the microphone and the television camera in later times. By presenting the reader with the *ipsissima verba* of a speech, it seemed at first that reporting was capable of providing a true mirror of reality (Smith, 1978, p.161).

¹ KUNCZIK, M. *Concepts of Journalism North and South*. Translated by Diet Simon. Bonn: Friedrich- Ebert- Stiftung, 1988.

The second half of the 19th century would see the emergence of the information paradigm, a refusal to bind the press to political groups and a subordination of newspapers to the commitment to their readers, to be the “voice of the people,” as explained by Kunczik (1988).

Nelson Traquina (2004) points out two distinct factors for the emergence of objectivity and the informative paradigm. The first was the idea of splitting facts and opinions, of producing texts that reported what happened, much advocated by news agencies such as Havas, French, Associated Press, American, and Reuters, English. The informative text, opposite to the controversial text that had reigned in the press of the previous phase, emerges in the middle of the 19th century. For Traquina, however, the concept of objectivity was fully consolidated only in the 20th century, between 1920 and 1930, as a reaction of journalism to the development of Public Relations and the effectiveness of Advertising in the First World War. Objectivity would not be “the final expression of a conviction in the facts, but the affirmation of a method conceived according to a world in which even the facts were not worthy of trust” (Traquina, 2004, p.148).²

Nazism made wide use of the cinema machinery and developed propaganda techniques that distorted reality by using an apparent objectivity in representing the world aiming at deceiving the masses. What seemed a sign that the technique could reproduce reality in an impartial way became an illusionist strategy with the Nazi regime:

By the 1920's, then, journalists had come to accept that ‘there were no longer facts, only individually constructed interpretative’, but asserted that these interpretations could be, and should be constructed in a methodologically objective manner, i.e. using professionally agreed rules which could minimise the impact of subjectivity in reporting. Thus, argues Schudson, the emergence of objectivity as a journalistic ideal came at the same time as a deeper loss of faith in ideas of rationality, absolute truth, and progress; reflecting the need, as it were, to reassert possibility of a transcending truth in the face of twentieth-century propaganda techniques (McNair, 1994, p.27).

² In Portuguese: “a expressão final de uma convicção nos fatos mas a afirmação de um método concebido em função de um mundo no qual mesmo os fatos não eram merecedores de confiança.”

There are, therefore, two relevant movements in the consolidation of the concept of objectivity: the first, still in the 19th century, is the consolidation of the belief in the ability to describe the world objectively, without bias, reporting only the “facts”; the second, by the middle of the 20th century, is the recognition that “facts” are suspect so it makes it necessary to consolidate accepted methods by the entire professional community. The journalist is no longer the guarantee of objectivity, but journalistic methods instead. For Traquina (2004), these movements solidified what the author calls mirror theory, founded on the supposed ability of journalism to reflect reality, without distortion. This theory is not developed academically, but it is powerful in professional culture.

Derived from this premise but now based on academic studies, there emerges in the middle of the 20th century the concept of gatekeeper. “The concept of gatekeeping presupposes the idea of something called neutral or objective information or news. The journalist is deemed to be a neutrally distant agent that is able to convey information with objectivity and professional ethics” (Kunczik, 1997, p.98).³ We can see here the unveiling of a series of positivist concepts: the dichotomy between a subject that detains knowledge and the object that is opened to be known, the possible neutrality of the subject and its authority, given by professional criteria, in selecting from reality the most relevant data.

2 Fact and Method

Throughout the process of development of the concept of objectivity, the purpose of reporting the facts as they are led journalism to the elaboration and valorization of journalistic methods. All professional journalists are subject to them. Today, such methods have been reasonably universalized, and journalism seems to be practised worldwide based on the same principles and methods (Traquina, 2005). These methods guarantee journalistic objectivity.

³ In Portuguese: “A noção de *gatekeeping* pressupõe a existência de algo chamado informação ou notícia neutra ou objetiva. O jornalista é considerado um agente neutramente distanciado para poder transmitir a informação com objetividade e ética profissional.”

The concept of “objectivity” is premised on the assertion that “a person’s statements” about the world can be trusted if they are submitted to established rules deemed legitimate by a professional community. (...) The belief in objectivity is a faith in *facts*, a distrust of “values” (McNair, 1994, p.25; our emphasis).

Legitimated by the professional community, journalistic methods must do the job of separating facts from opinions. To objective science and to journalism only the first matters.

The fundamental principles developed by journalism to guarantee objectivity compose the professional code of ethics and are, in general terms, two: 1) where there is information that can be checked, it must be checked, all information must be reliable; 2) where there are opinions or information that cannot be checked, the broad contradiction must be promoted. These principles unfold in several other procedures (information protection, source confidentiality, transparency, etc.) and end up in journal style guides, standardizing professional procedures in the pursuit of facts.

In the eighth edition of *Introduction to practical journalism*, Walter La Roche offers the following criteria for ‘objective representation of reality’:

1. all facts must be correct;
2. (...)
3. do not add ornamental or complementary facts (unjustified bias) (Kunczik, 1997, pp.231-232).⁴

In Brazil, the *Journal Style Guide [Manual de Redação]* of the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, considered to the most complete guide on written press, asserts: “Write impartial and objective texts. Do not expose opinions, but *facts* (my emphasis), so that the reader can draw their own conclusions from them” (Martins, 1990, p.18, our emphasis).⁵ And it also affirms the precedence of “facts” in the journalistic texts: “Remember that the newspaper daily exposes its opinions in the editorials, making it unnecessary to produce comments in the news material” (Martins, 1990, p.18).

⁴ In Portuguese: “Na oitava edição de *Introdução ao jornalismo prático*, Walter La Roche oferece as seguintes normas para a ‘representação objetiva da realidade’: 1. todos os fatos devem ser corretos; 2. (...); 3. não acrescentar fatos ornamentais ou complementares (tendenciosidade injustificada).”

⁵ In Portuguese: “Faça textos imparciais e objetivos. Não exponha opiniões, mas *fatos*, para que o leitor tire deles as próprias conclusões.”

3 Limits of Criticism of Objectivity

Throughout history the concept of objectivity has never been static. Criticisms or the development of other communicational practices that circulate alongside journalism have always put such a project in doubt. Nevertheless, Anthony Smith (1978) asserts that objectivity is still one of the most important qualities expected from journalism, although it varies and is sometimes treated as a glorious objective, or an external technique or purpose that journalism serves. He says:

Recently, the idea of objectivity has become subject to various kinds of criticism, some of it severe: it has been accused of being intellectually impossible within the modalities of journalism. Alternatively, it has been accused of being fraudulent altogether – a ‘strategic ritual’ used simply to defend journalism against its host of critics and inquisitors (Smith, 1978, p.153).

However, as blunt as they may be, criticisms cannot, for the most part, escape the fundamentals on which the concept of objectivity is built. Still under the aegis of the concept of “fact,” the questions lose much of their strength and do not get to the heart of the matter.

Michael Kunczik (1997, p.232), for example, makes a pertinent criticism, recognizing the importance of the concept of “fact,” but is not able to escape its traps:

The concept of “fact” plays an important role in journalistic notions of objectivity. The corresponding criticism is that the mass media have spread the image of a colourful world that seems to be formed by many intertwined particles. By selecting facts, events according to their actuality and significance, the reader-listener-spectator paints a picture similar to a kaleidoscope of colours. The facts are exposed without further comment or analysis that would help the receiver to create a picture of “reality.”⁶

The same criticism can be made of any form of knowledge production or transmission. By acting in a disciplinary way, separating disciplines or fields of

⁶ In Portuguese: “O conceito de ‘fato’ representa um papel importante nas noções jornalísticas de objetividade. A crítica correspondente é que os meios de comunicação de massa têm difundido a imagem de um mundo colorido que parece formado por muitas partículas entrelaçadas. Mediante a seleção dos fatos, de acontecimentos segundo a sua atualidade e significação, o leitor-ouvinte-espectador pinta um quadro semelhante a um caleidoscópio de cores. Expõem-se os fatos sem maiores comentários ou análises que ajudariam o receptor a criar um quadro da ‘realidade’.”

knowledge from the heterogeneous universe that is the reality, there would be a greater possibility of getting deeper in each fact to be known. Not having a holistic dimension, not understanding the world as a whole would imply failing to understand what is known. The criticism resonates, strongly, against the disciplinary methods of science and even schools, but it is still based on the concept of “fact.” For journalism, a good recommendation, derived from this criticism, would be to treat facts by establishing causal links between them, without separating one from the other, seeing them as a whole, taking on the duty to undertake interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary efforts.

However, by preserving the notion of fact as the axis of this criticism, Kunczik maintains still intact as a chimera or a feasible project the concept of objectivity. The defect of journalism, due to this bias, is not to cling to unrealistic concepts or unreachable projects, but not to fulfil its task satisfactorily. The whole concept remains and maintains its strength.

Adelmo Genro Filho, in *O segredo da pirâmide [The Secret of the Pyramid]*, makes similar efforts. The author says: “The criticism of the ‘ideology of objectivity’ is made by many authors. Nonetheless, in general, it does not go deep into the problem, boiling down to sociological and psychological aspects regarding the inevitability of opinion” (Genro Filho, 1987, p.185).⁷ A Marxist scholar, Genro Filho does not escape, however, from the same fallacy by criticizing concept based on the same notions. While denying, it reaffirms objectivity:

Just as each scientific discipline builds the facts with which it works, news is the basic unit of information in journalism. Journalistic *facts* (my emphasis) which are the object of the news, constitute the smallest unit of meaning. Journalism has its own way of perceiving and producing “its facts.” We know that facts do not previously exist as such. There is an objective flow in reality from which facts are cut and constructed obeying determinations that are both objective and subjective.

This means that there is a certain dose of subjectivity and ideology, though objectively limited. Objectivity offers an infinite multitude of aspects, nuances, dimensions, and possible combinations to be selected. (...)

The material from which the facts are made is objective, as it exists independently of the subject. The concept of fact, however, implies

⁷ In Portuguese: “A crítica da ‘ideologia da objetividade’ é feita por muitos autores. Porém, em geral, ela não vai ao fundo da questão, resumindo-se a aspectos sociológicos e psicológicos referentes à inevitabilidade da opinião.”

the social perception of this objectivity, that is, the meaning of this objectivity by the subjects.

(...)

Journalistic facts are a cut from the continuous flow, a part that, to some extent, is arbitrarily separated from the whole. To that extent, it is inevitable that the facts themselves are a choice. But, to avoid subjectivism and relativism, it is important to add that this choice is delimited by objective matter, that is, by a historical and socially constituted substance, regardless of the subjective and ideological approaches at stake. The truth, therefore, is a process of revelation and constitution of this substance (Genro Filho, 1987, pp.186-188).⁸

This criticism, devastating in tone and consistency, makes the same mistake as all others. It denies journalistic objectivity but reaffirms its relationship with “facts.” Marxist, Genro Filho feels the need to affirm the materiality with which journalism works, affirms that there is a concrete world that needs to be known. In producing his criticism this way, he approaches a rationalist Marxist view in his beliefs in the possibility of knowing the truth. An unshakable faith in reason is maintained, which, despite the obstacles, will reach the ideal knowledge of the world.

Genro Filho runs the risk of his rationalism leading to the conclusion that human knowledge can be produced as if it were natural knowledge. And, in this, it gets dangerously close to a positivist postulate: the homogeneity between the object of natural knowledge (natural sciences) and human knowledge (human sciences).

⁸ In Portuguese: “Assim como cada disciplina científica constrói os fatos com os quais trabalha, a notícia é a unidade básica de informação do jornalismo. São os *fatos* (grifo meu) jornalísticos, objeto das notícias, que constituem a menor unidade de significação. O jornalismo tem uma maneira própria de perceber e produzir “seus fatos”. Sabemos que os fatos não existem previamente como tais. Existe um fluxo objetivo na realidade, de onde os fatos são recortados e construídos obedecendo a determinações ao mesmo tempo objetivas e subjetivas.

“Isto quer dizer que há uma certa margem de arbítrio da subjetividade e da ideologia, embora limitada objetivamente. A objetividade oferece uma multidão infinita de aspectos, nuances, dimensões e combinações possíveis para serem selecionadas. (...)”

“O material do qual os fatos são constituídos é objetivo, pois existe independente do sujeito. O conceito de fato, porém, implica a percepção social desta objetividade, ou seja, na significação desta objetividade pelos sujeitos.

(...)

“Os fatos jornalísticos são um recorte no fluxo contínuo, uma parte que, em certa medida, é separada arbitrariamente do todo. Nessa medida, é inevitável que os fatos sejam, em si mesmos, uma escolha. Mas, para evitar o subjetivismo e o relativismo, é importante agregar que esta escolha está delimitada pela matéria objetiva, ou seja, por uma substância histórica e socialmente constituída, independentemente dos enfoques subjetivos e ideológicos em jogo. A verdade, assim, é um processo de revelação e constituição desta substância.”

4 Text is the Substance of Journalism

The main point is that journalism does not deal, except to a small extent, with facts. The reality with which journalism and all forms of human knowledge deals with is text, it is the significant matter, in the terms of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, p.103):⁹

If the word “text” is understood in the broad sense – as any coherent complex of signs – then even the study of art (the study of music, the theory and history of fine arts) deals with texts (works of art). Thoughts about thoughts, experiences of experiences, words about words, and texts about texts. Herein lies the basic distinction between our disciplines (human sciences) and the natural ones (about nature), although there are no absolute, impenetrable boundaries here either. Thought about the human sciences originates as thought about others’ thoughts, wills, manifestations, expressions, and signs, behind which stand manifest gods (revelations) or people (the laws of rulers, the precepts of ancestors, anonymous sayings, riddles, and so forth).

This is the most devastating criticism that can be made to the concept of journalistic objectivity and, also, to the totalizing positivist project of studying human beings as they study natural phenomena. By shifting the question from this false notion that journalism works with facts, the discussion about objectivity is not only contradicted, but also meaningless. One can speak, then, of journalistic ethics to deal with the symbolic material of which it is constituted or the way in which it constitutes its symbolic materiality, the procedures for attributing veracity to the text, but not about methods for apprehending reality.

The first relevant issue, both for journalism and the humanities, is the distinction between the objects of human and natural knowledge. Natural sciences deal with silent objects. We can speculate almost anything about them. Human sciences have the human being as a central element. And the human being does not remain silent, except provisionally: “The spirit (both one’s own and another’s) is not given as a thing (the direct object of the natural sciences); it can only be present through signification,

⁹ BAKHTIN, M. The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee and Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp.103-131.

through realization of texts, both for itself and for others” (Bakhtin, 1986b, p.106).¹⁰ In stating anything about human beings, we obviously run the risk of being contradicted by our “object” of knowledge. This “object” is constituted of signs, their consciousnesses are constituted of signs, they perceive themselves as human beings when in contact with signs and, when observed, they keep the same characteristics as their observer. Therefore, there is no subject / object relationship, but a subject / subject relationship, which can only occur in signs. In other words, dialogue is the only way to know the human being, because it is in the dialogue that the human is manifested and constituted.

What matters, therefore, is to study the life of signs as a privileged sphere of human manifestation:

We do not address inquiries to nature and she does not answer us. We put questions to ourselves and we organize observation or experiment in such a way as to obtain an answer. When studying man, we search for and find signs everywhere and we try to grasp their meaning. We are interested primarily in concrete forms of texts and concrete condition of the life of texts, their interrelations, and their interactions (Bakhtin, 1986, p.114).¹¹

If human knowledge is produced in the relationship among subjects through signs, it is much less “scientific” knowledge than it is interpretation of texts. More than that, the movement of knowledge production developed by the observer is of the same nature as the process of understanding a statement.

All that journalism takes as “facts,” is, in reality, socio-historical and contextual conditioning of signs. All journalistic work is focused on text, on its characteristics in the interaction processes, where the language has a concrete existence. A concept that separates “facts” from signs, the language world, and understands objectivity as an adequacy of the second to the first, can only be anchored in the univocal word, as relates to Ferdinand Saussure (1995). When it comes to the polysemic and multi-vocal word, it is impossible to separate sign from its concrete realization. Linguistics studies only the relationship between the elements within the language system, and not the relationship between the statement and reality (Bakhtin, 1986).¹²

¹⁰ For reference, see footnote 9.

¹¹ For reference, see footnote 9.

¹² For reference, see footnote 9.

If it is possible to speak of ethical commitment in the humanities, the consideration of the humane in its specificities should be one of the fundamental pillars. Under the totalizing impulse, the almost unshakable search for the ultimate essences and the truth of things, science and journalism have been making efforts in favour of a monological knowledge. In the human sciences, this has implied a reification of the human being, who, is treated as a thing, matter without language, and loses much of his specificity. Only in this context it is possible to maintain the thesis that full knowledge situates at the end of the tunnel where we find the complete revelation.

Journalism, by affirming “facts” as its subject, and objectivity as its goal and metrics, institutes the monologue, wants to be the only voice. Journalistic objectivity, from the point of view of the text, is not a relevant issue. But his postulation is often an intentional gesture with precise objectives. And, unfortunately, despite all the criticisms to which the concept is submitted, “The ‘objectivity assumption’ remains powerful and prevalent amongst journalists” (McNair, 1994, p.31).

5 Language Everywhere

Any subject has both material and symbolic relations, but tends, however, to overestimate the former to the detriment of the latter. Few things escape the symbolic dimension, which does not imply a complete disregard for the world of real things and independent of signs (hereinafter, only the world).¹³ What cannot be left out, however, is that the human being exists, constitutes and interacts through language.

Journalism is one of the projections of the technical evolution of society that seems to concern the real world, using language only to express itself. Perhaps the naturalness with which signs exist is the best explanation for a long conceptual journalistic tradition that relegates the word to a mere supportive role. And yet, journalism is, along with literature, one of the most refined expressions of activity pervaded by the symbolic horizon in almost all its aspects. Even when dealing with what we conventionally call “facts,” being a witness of events, the journalist reports an object on which many speeches have already been built. Seeing and saying “a murderer

¹³ Feeding, for example, is a material necessity independent of signs. However, such a need for energy generation does not distinguish human beings from nature.

killed a child” means, in some way, dialoguing with a whole humanistic tradition that considers such act as barbaric. It means scandalizing people whose value is child protection (and values are embodied in signs in their consciences). There is no world to be named for the first time.

The newspaper is, in its sign materiality, text about text, word about word, statement permeated by statements by others, sign about sign. It feeds on signs and produces them. Its interference in reality is also semiotic. Its constitution is dialogical in at least two senses. First, because journalism participates in a dialogue, it produces statements that add to the endless dialogic chain of statements. It responds to demands, which are manifested symbolically, and generates new needs for answers. Its effects may be the reason for new productions of utterances. For example, by spreading the rumour that a bank is about to undergo intervention, a newspaper can generate an affluence of clients to the alleged bank for withdrawals and closing banking accounts. This event, an act-response to the statement produced by journalism, can serve as a statement, gaining symbolic value, generating new articles (or statements) in the newspaper. In this sense, there is no non-interventionist journalism, because no one can participate in a dialogue without producing answers or, at least, giving a responsive attitude towards it.

Secondly, dialogism manifests itself in its materiality. The symbolic material produced by journalism, apprehended in real achievements of linguistic interaction, is permeated by the word of the other. The term “justice” resonates all the enunciations where this term may have been used provoking positive or negative shades of memories of it. The word may, most likely, have been used with different intentions, good, bad, negative, fair, sincere, cynical, it does not matter. Thus, its meaning and its axiological strength are in dispute by the various voices that pass through it including the voice of the journalist. In the journalistic text, the heteroglotic character of the language resonates, its incredible capacity of belonging to anyone and nobody, to be able to be appropriated, resisting with greater or lesser intensity.

For all those reasons, journalism is a fact of language, which goes far beyond the recognition that it expresses itself in a symbolic way. It deals with enunciations not facts, as it is not an “eyewitness to history” as stated in the slogan of the old TV news,

Reporter Esso.¹⁴ It is related to the world, but its linguistic dimension is much greater than we can suppose. More than that, its most fundamental material is linguistic.

A look at any journalistic materiality will very clearly show the lack of facts and the predominance of language, in a discursive, non-linguistic conception. In other words, language as an expression of social organization, which carries out human relations.

Let's look at a page, chosen at random, from the main news portal in Brazil, the *Universo online* (www.uol.com.br).

COMBATE À PANDEMIA NA CAPITAL

Covas diz que feriados são 'última cartada' para aumentar isolamento

São Paulo terá feriado amanhã e quinta, ponto facultativo sexta e avalia parar na 2ª

- Com 6 hospitais municipais lotados, SP avalia rodízio no feriado antecipado
- Doença estabilizada e falta de PM tiram lockdown do horizonte do estado de SP
- Países adotaram lockdown muito antes do colapso nos sistemas de saúde

UOL ENTREVISTA
Maierovitch diz não entender o que o Parlamento espera para um impeachment

DENÚNCIA DE MARINHO
Apurações e relatório derrubam versão dos Bolsonaros para negar vazamento na PF

SÃO GONÇALO (RJ)
João Pedro, 14 anos, é morto em operação; família crítica polícia

Let's look at the six most relevant headlines: the main and its three correlates and the two secondary. The main headline (“Covas diz que feriados são ‘última cartada’ para aumentar isolamento” [“Covas says holidays are ‘last card’ to increase isolation”])¹⁵ and the first secondary headline (“Maierovitch diz não entender o que o Parlamento espera para um impeachment” [“Maierovitch says he doesn’t understand what Parliament expects for an impeachment”])¹⁶ are evidently discourse about discourse, something very common in journalism. Reporting is, in general, saying something that a source said. Many sources are human beings, as in these two cases, but

¹⁴ Brazilian radio and television news that lasted from 1941 to 1970.

¹⁵ Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/05/19/covas-diz-que-antecipacao-de-feriados-e-ultima-cartada-por-isolamento.htm>. Access on May 19, 2020.

¹⁶ Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2020/05/19/maierovitch-nao-entendo-o-que-falta-para-o-parlamento-comecar-impeachment.htm>. Access on May 19, 2020.

they can also be public or private social actors. In this case, they are the mayor of São Paulo, Bruno Covas, and the jurist Wálter Maierovitch. There is therefore no objective fact to be reported, except if interviews, linguistic material, are considered to be a fact. Considering journalistic activity from this perspective would be impoverishing, as interviews are relevant due to a set of discursive factors, by being given by relevant actors well positioned socially, as they authorities as knowledge or political power is concerned, by the journalists' intentions of meaning, compressed by the newspaper's intentions of meaning, by Brazil's historic moment, facing a pandemic under Bolsonaro government. Even the respect for the *ipsissima verba*, the description of the said in an absolutely precise way, does not characterize an "objective" treatment of the "fact," since the most important thing is not to report how it was said, but to respect the universe of meaning from which the discourse comes. Often, journalists accused of not adequately quoting what was said respond that the words are exactly those. This is falsely evoking objectivity in order to fallaciously defend oneself from criticism. Even quoting directly and faithfully, a quotation can even express the opposite of what was said. Respect for the voice of the other is an ethical issue, of the fundamental rules of respect for the word of others. It is a matter of otherness, not of objectivity.

Two other news are constructed in the same way, although they do not focus on the source words itself, as the first two. They are: "Com 6 hospitais municipais lotados, SP avalia rodízio em feriado antecipado" ["With 6 full municipal hospitals, SP evaluates rotation on the anticipated holiday"]¹⁷ and "Doença estabilizada e falta de PM tiram 'lockdown' do horizonte de SP por ora" ["Stabilized pandemic and lack of PM remove 'lock down' from SP horizon for now"]¹⁸. Both are built based on information from official sources in the city of São Paulo and the government of São Paulo.

The first, in short, reports that six municipal hospitals have all their ITU beds occupied, based on information from the municipal health head, Edson Aparecido. The news refers to three more sources: a bulletin from the Municipal Health Office, with more accurate information, the State Secretary of Health, José Henrique Germann, with data on the purchase of respirators, and other texts by UOL itself, on actions to increase

¹⁷ Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/05/19/seis-hospitais-da-capital-estao-com-utis-lotadas-diz-secretario.htm>. Access on May 20, 2020.

¹⁸ Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2020/05/doenca-estabilizada-e-falta-de-pm-tiram-lockdown-do-horizonte-de-sp.shtml?origin=folha>. Access on May 20, 2020.

the social distancing. This last source is traceable because it is common practice on the website to link the material that provides the information.

Basically, there is an objective data: number of beds occupied, but the journalist never dealt with this, but with sources of information. That is, it did not deal with the adequacy of the description of the facts of the world, with something that can be analysed by the principle of objectivity, but with reports, which impose another metric that is fundamental to everyday journalism: the reliability of sources, your access to information and your intentions to disclose it.

The text on the possibility of ‘lock down’ is based on information from the state government of São Paulo and, again, with information from other UOL texts. Unlike the previous one it does not deal with something objective such as the occupation of beds, but with the probabilities of decision making in the future by the state government. It assumes that, in this case, the public power that decides on the pertinence and feasibility of the ‘lock down’ and the State Military Police are reliable sources to address the issue. Even more clearly, the question concerns the relationship with the sources.

The third correlate in the main headline (“Países adotaram ‘lockdown’ muito antes de colapso de seus sistemas de saúde” [“Countries adopted a ‘lock down’ long before the collapse of their health systems”])¹⁹ is an assessment of the situation in several countries and how they fought the Coronavirus pandemics. Basically, there are objective, measurable data: numbers of deaths, numbers of infections, bed occupations, tests done, etc., but the journalist got this information this from reports by governments or other newspapers, obviously, considering that it would be impossible to produce the data himself or even be the first to report it. In comparison to the six cases mentioned, the result of this last one reflects the most common situation in journalism that is: making a synthesis of several other subjects. Currently, the practice can be seen as a type of content curation, increasingly common in an environment of excess content.

The sixth text has a title that suggests that there is something new in the story: “Apurações no RJ e relatório federal derrubam versão dos Bolsonaros para negar vazamento na PF” [“Investigations in RJ and the federal report overturn the Bolsonaros’

¹⁹ Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/equilibrioesaude/2020/05/paises-adotaram-lockdown-muito-antes-de-colapso-de-seus-sistemas-de-saude.shtml?origin=folha>. Access on May 20, 2020.

version to deny leakage in the PF”].²⁰ The text is in fact a collection of already known information, joined together in a longer and more argumentative matter, which points out the movements of accusations and defences. The sources are an interview published by Folha de São Paulo newspaper, with Paulo Marinho, in the May 17, 2020 edition, UOL’s own articles, texts from Senator Flávio Bolsonaro’s social networks, Federal Police investigation reports, among others. There is, in this case, an objective question on which the matter is concerned: the existence or not of leakage of investigations from the Federal Police to the senator in 2018, but this is not the purpose of journalism, it is not he who ensures or not that leakage, nor does it investigate crimes or verify bank transactions that would prove the existence of the “rachadinha”.²¹ Journalism reports what has been said, reported, written in reports, recorded on videos, posted on Twitter. Once again, the journalist does not dwell on anything objective and fidelity to the facts is not something that makes sense to him, unless texts, reports, posts are taken as facts.

Texts are texts and it is possible to be faithful to them, for sure, synthesizing them or not, comparing them or not. It is possible to establish relationships with sources, trusting them, distrusting them, analysing, assuming a responsive role in relation to the statements of others, dealing with other discourses from an individual perspective anchored in a set of values in a specific field of knowledge production: journalism and its ethics. And that is what it is about: journalism is discourse about discourse.

Conclusion: Discourse Ethics and Objectivity as Utopian North

It is common to hear from journalists that they must be objective. Journal style guides say that texts must be objective. Lecturers teach us about journalistic objectivity. However, when it comes to explaining how such objectivity applies, journalists are vague, guides talk about relationships with sources, lecturers discuss history and its concept. There is no mention on how to apply it to the daily life of journalism. Generally, “canine fidelity to the facts, to the factual truth,” as the respected journalist

²⁰ Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/05/apuracoes-no-rj-e-relatorio-federal-derrubam-versao-dos-bolsonaros-para-negar-vazamento-na-pf.shtml?origin=folha>. Access on May 20, 2020.

²¹ A form of money division from corruption among representatives and their assessors in Municipal, State and Federal chambers.

Mino Carta²² defends, is a positive value of journalism, if taken as an intention, as utopian north. As a daily practice, it is not practical. It can mean, therefore, not to publish inaccurate information, to check data, not to qualify texts, not to build fictions based on parts of reality, a set of practices that are in the sphere of volition, not cognition. In other words, the journalist must be honest, not mystifying, not inventing plots, not fabricating the world, maintaining his fidelity to the sources, as well as his distrust of them, to narrate in a reliable, credible, reasonable and balanced way. Objectively? Obviously not. The objective world is not the object of observation. Journalism is much more an ethical issue than an epistemological one.

This ethical discussion (which journalism relegates to the background) focuses on the ways journalism reports and cites its sources. The main characteristic of journalism is having to work with an immense plurality of genres, statements and spheres of production (Bakhtin, 1986).²³ In journalism, dialogue can reach its maximum expression, as in literature. The newspaper, filled with articles by experts in economics, politics, fashion, psychology, sexology, sports, education, health, is the landscape of this dialogue. Articles made from multiple sources are also an expression of dialogue.

The texts that circulate in the newspaper have been enunciated in other spheres of production. Thus, an article written by a doctor could be considered to belong to a genre in the medical sphere. That is not what this is about. As much as it retains characteristics of the sphere in which the article editor professionally works, its characteristics must be adapted to the sphere of the newspaper. No doctor or any other specialist writes as he produces his linguistic interactions in his own sphere of production. By giving in to the characteristics of the newspaper, the writer is located in another sphere, even if it brings marks of the statements produced in his own professional environment.

The insertion of a locutor used to another sphere in the newspaper lies the most accentuated characteristic of journalism: its urge to dialogue with the whole society, incorporating this dialog into its own genres, some are products from the relationship of

²² Available at: <https://observatoriodacomunicacao.org.br/clippings/os-sete-mandamentos-jornalismo-segundo-mino-carta-publicacao-nao-autorizada-pois-ele-admite-os-tres-primeiros/>. Access on May 05, 2020.

²³ For reference, see footnote 9.

two or more genres, but all belonging to the same sphere of production known as newspaper.

The informative text analyzed in this research paper is the most typical text genre of journalism. It is the genre that has the ability of maintaining relationships with a broader number of spheres, genres and an immense diversity of words. The newspaper is considered to be the most dialogical of the genres and their respective utterances it manages to incorporate. A speech genre called informative text is at the heart of this task.

The appearance and meaning of an informative text is circumscribed, at the same time, by material conditions, relating to its sphere of production, the relationship with other genres in this or other spheres, and its own discursive past. In other words, its development is connected with the history of the language. The spheres of production, speech genres and utterances are related to the history of the language and, within it, to each other. In Bakhtin's words: "The utterances and their types, that is, speech genres, are the drive belts from the history of Society to the history of language" (Bakhtin, 1986, p.65).²⁴

If the nature of journalism is discursive, if its social commitment is ethical, not epistemological, then is it possible to throw the concept of journalistic objectivity away in the trash of history? Obviously not. If objectivity is a false concept, its role in journalism history is far from irrelevant.

Eduardo Galeano quotes Fernando Birri: "Utopia is on the horizon. I take two steps closer, she takes two steps away. I walk ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps. No matter how far I walk, I will never reach it. What is utopia for? It's for that: to walk."²⁵ Over nearly 150 years of professionalization of journalism (Traquina, 2005), the pursuit of objectivity has been the horizon. And the horizon cannot be reached, but we have come a long way. To the distrust of facts, we respond with professional methods. And what are they? Obligation to check and the offering of ample contradictory views. The second value is derived from liberalism, from the incorporation of the market of ideas by journalism. The first, however, is not about checking facts, but checking sources, establishing rules for dealing with those who

²⁴ For reference, see footnote 9.

²⁵ In Portuguese: "A utopia está lá no horizonte. Me aproximo dois passos, ela se afasta dois passos. Caminho dez passos e o horizonte corre dez passos. Por mais que eu caminhe, jamais alcançarei. Para que serve a utopia? Serve para isso: para caminhar." Cf. <https://www.revistaprosaversoarte.com/para-que-serve-a-utopia-eduardo-galeano/>

provide information. Fonts are more or less reliable. The *Folha de São Paulo Writing Style Brochure* (1987), for example, adopts two criteria to judge the reliability of sources: 1) access to information; 2) direct interest in publishing information. The best sources are the ones that have access to information, but they may not have any advantages in disclosing that information, for instance a public servant reporting something in its sphere of action. The worst, the one who does not have access to information, but is interested in spreading it, like a politician denouncing his adversary about something he would not be able to know.

I could say, in other terms, that someone's reliability varies according to their social position, that speech is more or less reliable according to the discursive conditions in which it is produced. That's why journalists value so much "informants" or "whistle blowers" and professional secrecy (source protection) is so valuable to journalism. Those who are most trusted to provide information are as well often the weakest to withstand pressure so they need to be protected.

Over time, in the chasing for objectivity, journalism has yielded rules to ensure that reliable contents may be published, being it government official announcements about something to be done or information conveyed by those who have little to profit from what they say. None of this has anything to do with objectivity, but it was and it is done in its name.

To recognize the historical and utopian value of the concept of "fact" and journalistic objectivity, however, does not mean to mystify it. Journalism's social role is assured. We can already think without fear.

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