

The ghostly social network site: how Snapchat is being appropriated for journalistic content circulation¹

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Abstract

This article aims to discuss how journalistic vehicles are appropriating the Social Network Site (SNS) Snapchat in order to circulate news content. The methodology of this descriptive-analytical study consists on a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques (literature review, data collection, description and analysis). The research considered the posts published on Snapchat by the profiles of the newspaper The Washington Post and the news portal UOL between June 22nd and July 5th 2016, and is based on the notions of Social Network Sites (BOYD; ELLISON, 2007, 2013; RECUERO, 2009) and Snapchat appropriations by journalism (BRADSHAW, 2016). Given the categories of analyses (periodicity, length, narrative modality and format), we noticed similarities and peculiarities in the content published in the Stories section. We conclude that Snapchat is a tool with a lot of narrative potential, capable of attracting new audience.

Keywords: Journalism. Digital Journalism. Circulation. Social Network Site. Snapchat.

Introduction

Journalism tells stories and leaves its records trough History². But how to narrate an event in excerpts of just ten seconds³? And what if, after 24 hours, each of those excerpts simply disappears⁴? In the image sharing application Snapchat⁵, which can be considered a Social Network Site (SNS), instantaneity and ephemerality are taken to the highest level. Is it possible to do journalism with those time constraints? The supposed contradiction of such an ephemeral tool, which has the picture of a ghost in its logo, is also figured in the name of the place dedicated to the exhibition of published photos and videos: Stories.

1 A preliminary version of this article was presented on the *14^o Encontro Nacional de Pesquisadores em Jornalismo - SBPJor*, which took place on Palhoça (Brazil) between November 9th and 11th, 2016.

2 History is understood here as the past of humanity, which was studied and certified by historians, according to a given time, place and a chosen point of view.

3 The maximum time of each video made with the Snapchat camera is 10 seconds. However, it is possible to record and post infinite videos which will appear in a chronological sequence. This way, a Story can have much more time.

4 Snapchat don't allow anyone but the author to download and archive its content. If a screen capture is done, the author of the content gets a push notification. There is, however, other ways to cheat Snapchat (such as using another device to record the screen).

5 When Snapchat was released, on 2011, its sharing only allowed pictures, which were deleted as soon as they were viewed.

Anyone can have a profile on Snapchat, from people to businesses, and fill the Stories section with images published in real time – or not. Some journalistic vehicles are creating content specifically developed to this ghostly app, in which the posts have an expiration date and no record is left, as consumers can't save the content or see it again after 24 hours of its publication. We understand Snapchat as a Social Network Site, even though it doesn't fit all the characteristics pointed out by boyd⁶ and Ellison (2013, 2007).

The objective of this paper is to discuss how journalistic vehicles are appropriating this Social Network Site, pioneer in ephemerality for news content and bearer of such unique characteristics, in the circulation of news content. The term “appropriation” is understood as the usage of a tool in distinct approaches of the initial proposal, a behavior considered to be natural in cyberculture, as proposed by Lemos (2001, p.49 – Our translation), which may appear both “as forms of using, learning and technical mastery” and as “‘deviance’ of the instructions of use, a space completed by the user in the gap not programmed by the producer / inventor, or even by the Corporations”.

This study, of descriptive-analytical character, was constructed from the combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques: literature review, data collection, description and analysis. The investigation was carried out from the publications of journalistic profiles of the American newspaper The Washington Post (@washingtonpost)⁷ and from the Brazilian news portal UOL - *Universo Online* (@UOLoficial) on Snapchat, between June 22nd and July 5th 2016.

Snapchat as a Social Network Site

Snapchat started to be developed on April 2011 by the North Americans Evan Spiegel and Bobby Murphy. The purpose was not to develop a tool intended to publish “beautiful or aestheticized” pictures, but to create a place where “strange and funny selfies” could be shared with the closest friends (ZEMBRISKI, 2014, online). In order to do it, the solution found was to develop an application where the post content didn't last long, disappearing after the visualization, leaving no records which could bring shame to the author in the future, or even turning into an obstacle to sharing – as once published, it would last “forever”. The application, whose name is composed of the words “*snap*”, as instantaneous, and “*chat*”, conversation, became available to be downloaded in September 2011.

In its first year of operation, Snapchat had just one feature: sending individual photos to friends⁸, which could be viewed one time only, for a maximum of ten seconds. Since December 2012, it's now possible to send snaps⁹ also in video. The content, in both

6 The author's name in quotations is written in lowercase.

7 The profiles on Social Network Sites are usually identified by an at sign (@) before the username.

8 On Snapchat, the profiles added by the users are called “friends”.

9 *Snap* is the name given to all the content produced on the Snapchat app, whether it's a picture or a video.

formats, disappear from the app and from the company's server after visualization. Due to the security sensation generated by the immediate erasure of the images, Snapchat from the start became popular in the practice of *sexting*¹⁰.

The ability to create and strengthen links between the actors involved was enhanced, according to Mager (2013), by the inclusion of Stories, in September 2013. The new feature allowed users to share content which created a kind of narrative – as it was sequentially published in a chronological order. The visualization of each image still lasts a maximum of ten seconds, but it disappears only after 24 hours of publication. The Stories of a profile create a kind of timeline on Snapchat, a common feature to other Social Network Sites – such as Facebook and Twitter, which allows the user to navigate and interact with others, facilitating and promoting social interactions (MAGER, 2013).

Especially because of the inclusion of this feature, Snapchat has come to be considered a Social Network Site – the technical space where Internet social networks associations and interactions take place (RECUERO, 2009; BOYD; ELLISON, 2007, 2013). Creators of the first definition of SNS, boyd and Ellison (2007) reformulated the concept in 2013, keeping the sharing of content with a limited group of users as a fundamental principle. However, they believe that those services, besides their proliferation, underwent social and technical changes, especially regarding the information flow. Among the major changes is the fact that profiles, rather than self-presentation and personal content distribution spaces, have become aggregators of information combining user-supplied content, other profiles content, and the system content (mediated by algorithmic equations) (ELLISON; BOYD, 2013). Rather than profile-based, SRSs are being increasingly typified by the circulation of information. Thus, the most current definition is:

A social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user generated content provided by their connections on the site. (ELLISON; BOYD, 2013, p.1).

We believe Snapchat fills two of the three characteristics pointed out by Ellison and boyd. Regarding the first one, the app allows the construction of an identifiable profile with information provided by the user (full name, username, animated picture) and also generated by the system (user acquired punctuation, linked to the number of interactions in the app,

¹⁰ *Sexting* is created by the contraction of the English words *sex* and *texting*, an Anglicism regarding the sharing of erotic and sensual content through text messages. Currently, the term is used to describe also other forms of electronic sharing, such as email or instant messages.

and an emoticon¹¹ of the user's zodiac sign). With respect to the third one, Snapchat users can consume, produce, and interact with the application content streams, which includes video and photo sharing publically, through Stories, or individually, through Chat windows, as well as conversation and screen captures – which, while happening, generates a push notification to the image author, leading to other interactions, such as a “like”.

However, the second characteristic couldn't be identified on Snapchat, since the connections between users aren't public. These private interactions can be seen as a limiter, while preventing conversations involving more users and, as a consequence, obstructing the expansion of the network. On the other hand, this is a particularity of the tool, allowing more personal interactions. In any case, we understand that it is the appropriations that users make of Snapchat that transform it, in fact, into a Social Network Site, as the application is used to create and reinforce social ties. Therefore, we consider it an appropriated SNS: “those systems that were not originally developed to show social networks, but which are appropriated by the actors for this purpose” (RECUERO, 2009, p.104 – Our translation).

The publicization of the user's social networks, the second characteristic pointed by Elisson and boyd (2013), can be suppressed through the integrated use of SNSs, once they “don't necessarily represent interdependent networks between one another” (RECUERO, 2009, p.105 – our translation), and many times can be used for different purposes and in a complementary way by the same user. Hereinafter we will comment on some studies reinforcing the understanding of Snapchat as a Social Network Site with the addition of a key adjective: “ephemeral”.

Ephemerality on Snapchat

Bayer et al (2015) characterizes Snapchat as an ephemeral social media feature, opposing the app to traditional persistent-type Social Network Sites – a classification proposed by the authors to platforms whose shared content can be accessed on a long-term basis once it's archived (such as Facebook and Twitter). Whether persistence, as points out Bayer et al (2015), increases potential audience time and allows publications to be revisited, on the other hand it can generate conflicts between past user's data and the current ones, emphasize Xu et al (2016), causing a “collapse” of the information context, with the risk of negatively affecting people's ability to communicate in those networks.

Therefore, Bayer et al (2015, p.2) suggests that, in response to the persistent media, “there has been a growing interest in platforms that are designed to erase communication artifacts after a short period of time”. This response was carried out as the development of ephemeral social media. Xu et al (2016) define technologies with “default deletion” in opposition to the “automatic archiving” of published content. This kind of platform, of

¹¹ Term created by the merge of the words *emotion* + *icon*, understood as a sequence of typographic characters.

which Snapchat is pioneer, carries the idea that “scarcity has value: less available objects are more special” (XU et al, 2016, p.1).

Reinforcing the appreciation of ephemerality, the Stories space has been incorporated by other Social Network Sites, essentially persistent and with an older and broader user base. In August 2016, the Instagram application added a feature with the same name. In October of the same year, it was Messenger’s turn with the Messenger Day. In February 2017, WhatsApp released the Status function, and in the following month, it was Facebook’s turn to introduce the Stories feature. All of those tools follow the same logic: the sharing of short duration images which disappear after 24 hours.

There are some benefits attributed to ephemeral social media by their users: a higher level of privacy, priority in direct and personal communication, greater control over the audience - due to the possibility of choosing to whom the shared content will be sent, the display of those who viewed the content and so forth (BAYER et al, 2015). On the other hand, the authors consider that the temporal characteristics of the ephemeral content challenge the benefits brought by documentation – such as the archiving of the information. This is directly related to journalism, which, as we have already mentioned, has the duty to register the present and turn it into History and that’s been using Social Network Sites to approach the public. It is in this field, between ephemerality and the historical record, that our research is inserted.

Snapchat appropriations by journalism

Internet Social Network Sites open the “gates” to new voices and a new space for the circulation of news content, which is being intensively used by journalistic vehicles. Snapchat, in this regard, may have been the most frustrating feature of all, according to Bradshaw (2016) as there are many contradictions between the ephemerality of the produced content and journalist’s aspiration to tell stories that endure. Besides, there is the amateurism of the images produced in the application, since they don’t go through the traditional editing process.

Even in the face of this challenging context, the expressive numbers of engagement led journalists to the appropriation of the tool which, “has some really powerful storytelling possibilities that other platforms just don’t offer”, as Bradshaw assessed when Snapchat was the only ephemeral SNS option (2016, p.1).

Among the forms of journalistic content circulation on Stories, Bradshaw (2016) listed four possibilities, of which we’ve appropriated for our analysis:

a) Photo stories: when photos or videos are used in the narrative of a given event, using images captured through the app. This category can have polls and interviews which will help to give a context to the subject. The journalist can be depicted in the video or can

just tell what he's seeing, but the same event will be the link of those news contents. The fact is told directly where it happens.

b) Snapchat pieces to camera: commonly ten-second-videos where the narrator talks about a given subject. This kind of publication is similar to the "naked note" of the TV journalism¹². However, it's the reporter or the newscaster himself who holds the phone (replacing the camera) and talks directly with the audience. "The 'presenter' is once again a crucial element: not because the video has any inherent journalistic value, but rather to give us a human connection" (BRADSHAW, 2016, p.15). The narrator is not in the place of the event, but recalls certain news events, gives more detailed explanation on the subject or even give suggestions (of cultural attractions and premieres in the cinema, for example).

c) Interviews: a way to address certain subject when the journalist isn't the main character. The interview can be associated with the first two categories, as a poll in a journalistic coverage or as support to explain an issue.

d) Behind the scenes: Photos or videos showing the production process of a product developed by a journalistic vehicle; the newsroom relaxing time or the backstage of an interview (behind the cameras or before the interview itself).

Besides the Stories, Snapchat has also the Discover feature. Released in January 2015, it is supplied by a limited group of 20 media corporations that share with the Snapchat owners the ads profit. In this space, news content produced specifically for Snapchat are published. Following the apps ephemerality logic, Discover is updated daily and its contents are deleted after 24 hours.

In this article, we will focus on the Stories section, as it's a feature allowed to any journalistic vehicle whose content will be mixed with those produced by "common" people in the users' timeline, which may lead to a more spontaneous and incidental news content consumption (KANNENBERG, 2017). Stories may be appropriated by journalism to circulate news content produced in the app itself, assembling the features necessary to create native narratives without other software or apps.

The circulation of journalistic content on Snapchat Stories

Circulation, as production and consumption, is one of the stages of the news-building process (RODRIGO ALSINA, 2009). However, they do not necessarily occur in a linear way, since the boundaries between those stages are increasingly blurred. In the context of contemporaneity emerges a hybrid circulation model, in which "a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways" (JENKINS; FORD; GREEN, 2014, p.24 – Our translation).

12 Live note or "naked note" is the jargon used in the Brazilian TV journalism to describe the news read by the newscaster without the support of any image or illustration.

Snapchat is one of those channels used by journalistic vehicles for the circulation of content. Thus, we consider that the circulation of content in this SNS is part of a process defined as journalistic convergence, a way of planning the production and dissemination of news information using each media's potential (KOŁODZY, 2009). Convergence, in this sense, is a way of attracting new audiences, especially young people, for whom providing information itself is not enough anymore.

Lara (2008) presents three reasons that justify the need for innovation in journalistic organizations: 1) the aging of traditional media audience; 2) new markets to be explored with greater number of connected users and greater network time of use; and 3) because it's a way to "reconnect with society and overcome the crises of authority, mediation and credibility in which the press is currently submerged" (LARA, 2008, online – Our translation). Snapchat has the advantage of being essentially used by young people. According to a ComScore research¹³, until December 2015, 71% of Snapchat users were 34 years old at most. Thus, the application has a special appeal with this public that journalistic vehicles are eager to conquer.

It's important to highlight, however, that we understand Snapchat as a device – that's to say, now only as a technical entity or a support of material nature, "but as a matrix imposing its forms to the texts" (MOUILLAUD, 1997, p.35 – Our translation). Therefore, the elements which constitute the journalistic posts circulating on Snapchat are directly related to its functionalities and appropriations.

Snapchat Stories as a place of journalistic content circulation

To reach the objective of this paper, we've chosen to analyze two journalistic profiles on Snapchat: @washingtonpost, from the North American newspaper The Washington Post, and @UOLoficial, from the Brazilian news portal *Universo Online* – UOL. Those accounts were chosen as The Washington Post is pioneer in this environment, as one of the first newspapers to create a Snapchat account (in 2014) and because UOL was nominated as one of the best Brazilian companies in mobile content producing and development in 2016.

This study, of descriptive-analytical character, was constructed from the combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques (LOPES, 2010; FRAGOSO; RECUERO; AMARAL, 2011). Besides the literature review, a foundational step in any academic research, this study also used the following techniques: data collection, description and analysis. We've chosen to create a proper methodological framework, without linking ourselves to a unique perspective, as the Stories phenomenon, apart from being very recent and with few theoretical references, has its own challenges regarding data collection – as the snaps aren't recorded in the platform. We understand that this combination of techniques,

13 Available at: <goo.gl/rz2LdB>. Accessed on: June 3rd, 2016.

inspired in Content Analysis and Grounded Theory procedures, mainly regarding empirical observation while seeking to identify similarities, patterns and particularities in the object, shall be satisfactory to start the discussion over the subject.

We defined that the period of data collection would last two weeks, in order to gather the needed amplitude of data, allowing a greater variety of information on the Snapchat appropriations by the analyzed journalistic vehicles. The posts were collected between June 22nd and July 5th, 2016, a period that preceded the congress for which this article was submitted preliminarily. The Stories were daily recorded between 6 PM and 7 PM, so it was possible to capture the last 24 hours before the deleting of the content of each vehicle. As it's not possible to download the content published by other accounts, or to retrieve the history on Snapchat, we've used two smartphones: one to display the Snapchat publications and the other to record the screen. Altogether, we've collected 22 units for analysis; 8 from @washingtonpost and 14 from @UOLoficial.

After the collection, we've built a Table (Table 1) with the categories of analysis which emerged from the literature review and guided the description process and data analysis.

Table 1 – Categories of analysis

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Periodicity	Update frequency of each profile on <i>Stories</i>
Length	The length of each unit of analysis
Narrative modality	The use of elements such as photos, videos, texts, emoticons and filters to tell stories
Format	Presence of the formats quoted by Bradshaw (2016): <i>Photo stories</i> , <i>Snapchat 'pieces to camera'</i> , <i>Behind the scenes</i> and <i>Interviews</i> .

Source: Organized by the authors.

Having presented the categories used in this study, we'll proceed to the description and analysis of our empirical objects.

- Periodicity: We've realized that the profile of the North American newspaper doesn't have regularity while posting, as it was not updated every day¹⁴. The Brazilian portal, however, posted daily over the analyzed period.

For that matter, the UOL account has even fixed sections produced specifically for Snapchat, such as the “*Giro de notícias do fim de semana*” (Figure 1), published on both Mondays of the analyzed period which consisted on the newscaster's comments on what was reported on Saturday and Sunday in many news sections (such as Sports, Lottery, Politics, World and Entertainment) and the “*Guia Cultural UOL*”, published on Fridays and bringing journalists' suggestions on attractions for the upcoming weekend.

Figure 1 – Excerpts from @UOLoficial “*Giro de notícias do fim de semana*”



Source: Organized by the authors.

- Length: We've verified that the average length of all the publications was from two minutes and 21 seconds. The shortest Story had 24 seconds, and the longest four minutes and eight seconds, both produced by @UOLoficial. The majority of them (14 publications) were between one and three minutes long.

¹⁴ The Washington Post didn't publish anything on the following days: Jun. 28, Jun. 30, Jul. 02, Jul. 03, Jul. 04 and Jul. 05.

UOL produced Stories longer than four minutes in two days. On both cases, the vehicle posted an interview. On June 22nd, it was a conversation recorded specifically for Snapchat with the singer Carlinhos Brown. On June 30th, it was the “behind the scenes” of an interview with the writer Pablo Miyazawa for other UOL product and a conversation with the journalist who interviewed him. On the same day, the portal published videos discussing cinema, which helped to make UOL’s Story longer.

The longest @washingtonpost’s story had three minutes and 41 seconds, published on June 23rd. On this day, three reporters made the journalistic coverage of two distinct events (Figure 2): the decision of the abortion permission on Texas (USA) and the voting for the Brexit – when the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union (in London).

Figure 2 – Excerpts of the @washingtonpost’s Story from June 23rd



Source: Organized by the authors.

- Narrative modality: We’ve observed that the preference for moving images is quite notable, as only one of the 22 analyzed units didn’t consist on a video. From the full amount of the 40 minutes of content published by both analyzed profiles, there were 300 videos and 67 photos.

We’ve also notice that all of the Stories exhibited resources made available by the app, mainly texts and emoticons over the pictures (Figure 3). Texts were used as captions

in order to give a context on what was being shown or to support narrations or interviews. The emoticons were added in order to emphasize aspects of the images and to reinforce informality – a characteristic of the tool, even when the subject was “serious” (as while dealing with a decision over abortion, for example).

We also emphasize that the following resources were used: the “free hand” style drawing on the screen, to add information or highlight something; The zoom, to give dynamics to the image or to bring some object closer; The black and white color effect, while showing a “behind the scenes” or some personal comment on the subject addressed; The speed-up effect of the image, to give a movement idea; The geolocation feature, to help contextualize the fact and also to bring value to the coverage, highlighting that the reporter is at the place of the fact.

Figure 3 – Examples of the narrative modalities used in the publications



Source: Organized by the authors.

- **Format¹⁵:** We’ve noticed that the most used formats were Photo stories and Snapchat pieces to camera, with eleven cases each. Right before, there’s the Behind the scenes, used on three of the publications, and Interviews, at last, with only two.

¹⁵ In order to analyze this category, we’ve sectioned the Stories regarding different events in distinct analytical elements. This way, it was possible to correctly classify each publication on Snapchat, as the data collection criterion considered only a period of 24 hours and not the subject separation. Thus, 22 Stories totalized 27 subjects.

As example of the Photo stories, there's the coverage of the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union, by @washingtonpost. There were two different publications over the subject on June 23rd and 24th. In both of them, the reporter interviewed Londoners asking: "What does the European Union means to you?", showing the voting places, the mood and the riots. Early in the morning, at 05:03 AM, the profile noticed the result of the voting, informing that the "separatists" had won.

In the case of the Snapchat pieces to camera format, we have as an example the publication of the North American newspaper where a newscaster who presented herself as "Sophie, the social media trainee", explained how the US court vote on the abortion law worked. She used physical elements (notepads with texts) and features of the app (emojicons, captions and on-screen drawings). She appeared in some of these Snaps, while in others there was only her voice.

We have two examples on the Behind the scenes format. The first one was a video with the singer Zé Felipe getting ready to be interviewed by the UOL team, on June 23rd. The second one involved the research conducted by The Washington Post with their Snapchat friends in order to understand how the audience evaluated the way how the newspaper was using the tool, on June 29th.

The Interview format can be identified in the Snapchat-exclusive interview made by the UOL team with the singer Zé Felipe, where reporter and interviewed talked directly to the device screen. The video appeared in a unit collected on June 24th.

Figure 4 – Example of the Format category



Source: Organized by the authors.

Final Considerations

From the literature review and the data collection of the The Washington Post (@washingtonpost) and UOL - *Universo Online* (@UOLoficial) Snapchat's profile, we've described and analyzed how journalistic vehicles have appropriated this Social Network Site for the circulation of news content through four categories: periodicity, length, narrative modality and format.

Although the first experiences of the analyzed vehicles on content circulation in this environment started only three years ago, the periodicity category led us to conclude that news information is circulated in Snapchat on a regular basis. There's also some initiatives specially developed for the application – such as the sections “*Giro de notícias do fim de semana*” and the “*Guia cultural UOL*” from the @UOLoficial profile.

Another conclusion concerns the length category. The circulation is characterized by micro contents that last, at the most, five minutes every 24 hours, and are not necessarily produced and circulated at once. Updates can be split throughout the day, according to the journalistic vehicle's planning. We believe this is due to the fact that Snapchat is a mobile application, and small bits of content make it easy to consume on the go. Additionally, the fragmentation promotes the incidental consumption of content, since each time the profile is updated, it goes to the top of Stories' timeline, a space which is not mediated by algorithmic equations like the timeline of others SNSs.

In relation to the narrative modalities, we conclude that most of the posts are videos and have extra features such as texts, drawings made on the screen, emoticons, color effects, speed-up and slow-motion effects, time and temperature, geofilters and so on. The use of these elements generates identification, since they are available to all users, and can be used in a journalistic way in order to increase the public's understanding, to contextualize or explain a commented subject in the photo or video, to draw attention to something and to make the published content more dynamic or complete.

Regarding the format of the publications circulating in Snapchat, we conclude that there are two predominant types: Photo Stories and Snapchat pieces to camera, which may indicate that those are already consolidating themselves as specific content formats in this environment, as well as two other complementary formats: Interviews and Behind the scenes. As Bradshaw (2016) stated, they are not entirely new formats for journalism, but by associating them with the categories mentioned above, we can confirm that Snapchat has “really powerful” narrative potentialities (p.1).

Storytelling is one of journalism's goals and Snapchat, as a pioneer among ephemeral Social Networking Sites, brings new challenges to the journalistic practice. From our study, we can affirm that it is possible to make journalism in Snapchat, even with the limiters of temporality, informality and instantaneousness of the tool. To regard this SNS

as a device (MOUILLAUD, 1997) helps us to understand the appropriations of the tool for the circulation of news content. The categories of the circulation analysis (periodicity, length, narrative modality and format) show us how Snapchat has elements that reshape conventional ways of telling stories with the potential to reach new audiences, something journalistic vehicles are eager to do.

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