

## **Environmental journalism and the transformative power of happenings**

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### **Resumen**

La democratización de las noticias en el espacio mediático está asociada al presupuesto del derecho público a la información y al periodismo ciudadano, dirigido al cumplimiento de la necesidad de calificar la información, que es uno de los elementos que frena los debates acerca de cuestiones públicas. El propósito de este estudio es reflexionar sobre las relaciones entre el periodismo ambiental y el derecho a la información, en el sentido de investigar en que medida las prácticas de periodismo ambiental pueden tornarse prácticas ciudadanas. Trata también de una reflexión sobre el poder transformador de los acontecimientos desde la discusión de prácticas periodísticas y los movimientos comunicativos en las redes sociales. El método usado es bibliográfico y reflexivo.

### **Abstract**

Democratization of news media space is associated to presupposed right to information and public or citizen journalism, which point to the fulfillment of the need for qualified information, that is, one that enables debates on public issues. The purpose of this study is to reflect on the relationship between environmental journalism and the right to information, in order to investigate to what extent environmental journalism practices may become citizen practices. It is also a reflection on the potentiality for happenings to bring about transforming processes, by discussing journalistic practices in relation to communicational movements on social networks. The method used is bibliographic and reflective.

### **Keywords**

Environmental journalism; Right to information; Citizenship; Bibliographic method.

### **Introduction**

The mediatic field is a locus where discourses originated from distinct social fields are negotiated; these social fields express themselves more and more on socio-environmental issues, thus bringing about a social agenda-setting process.

A practice that is a common feature in this field is that of selecting and transforming happenings into news, by following universalized techniques among the area professionals, such as the news criteria. This and other elements are used to frame news that compose the regular agenda offered by the news media. Somehow these issues tend to gain relevance to the receivers by the mere fact they have been transformed into news by the journalistic field. This is the main assumption of the agenda-setting theory. Relevance level varies according to socio-cultural contexts of distinct receivers, including the mediatic context. All these refer to different kinds of information. Distinct sources enable reflection on different viewpoints emerging from a happening/piece of news.

News producers produce a discourse whose intention is to interact with the receiver, to seduce him/her into the social relationship represented by news "reading", here considered in its multiple possibilities of meaning reassignments. The sense of reality inherent to the news guides the receivers' social practices, and their position regarding the issues presented in the mediatic space, and therefore, impact human development in a given territory.

Nevertheless, the proliferation of social players occupying mediatic space in search for visibility for their discourses does not necessarily indicate that this public space of the globalized world is promoting democratization processes or construction of citizenship through media.

Democratization of news media space is associated to presupposed right to information and public or citizen journalism, which point to the fulfillment of the need for qualified information, that is, one that enables debates on public issues. According to Wolton (1995), democracy requires the existence of a public locus where the major current issues are discussed, allowing a bigger number of players to express their opinion about a bigger number of topics. It can be said that journalism is a segment that educates, mobilizes and impacts culture and political practices, besides providing information. Environmental issues have gained more and more visibility in media since the 1980s, mainly due to the environmental complaints, which impacted debates and society's perception on this issue nowadays.

The purpose of this study is to reflect on the relationship between environmental journalism and the right to information, in order to investigate to what extent environmental journalism practices may become citizen practices. It is also a reflection on the potentiality for happenings to bring about transforming processes, by discussing journalistic practices in relation to communicational movements on social networks. The method used is bibliographic and reflective.

This study is organized on the discussion about journalism and citizenship, and subsequently on the precepts of the right to environmental information. Finally, the potentiality for promoting citizenship processes that go beyond the journalistic space, through the possibilities offered by new technologies, is discussed.

### **Journalism and public interest**

Matrixes that conceive the public function of journalism emerge with the ideas of the French Revolution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The thought that human beings are free to express themselves and have the right to be informed on public issues becomes a fundamental element to guide legislations around the world. Consequently, right to information, democracy, development, freedom, citizenship and journalism become elements of an effectively public locus, one in which cultural sharing and social learning take place.

Public journalism emerged as a movement in the late 80s in the United States aiming at revitalizing journalistic practices, as a return to its fundamental principles, which became confused under the diverse names this form of journalism acquired, as authors discussed it: civic, communitarian, of public service, citizen, participating, engaged, popular (Santos, 2012; Dornelles, 2008). "They all have in common the centralization of the objectives of this occupation to stimulate and support citizenship, by improving public debate, analyzing public life and contributing to a better democracy" (Dornelles, 2008).

Authors refer to this as a journalism that takes over the responsibility of improving public life, therefore it is committed to democracy and to the strengthening of civic culture, it sees itself as part of society and a player concerned with community interests and that interferes in the construction of a public locus by promoting debate. These aspects guide journalistic practices as a fundamental element of public communication.

According to Matos (2009, pages 26 and 27) public communication is "[...] a plural locus for citizens to engage in debating issues of collective interest", thus increasing social capital. The concept of social capital focuses fundamentally on trust and share of norms and values; perception of interdependence, solidarity, mutual engagement and acknowledgement among members of a group; the existence of social bonds, bonds of belonging based on interaction and flow of information; and common objectives related to some kind of civic, collective commitment".

Interrelation between communication and social capital points to the concept of communicational capital, defined by Matos (2009, page 28) as "[...] the inter-subjective potential for inter-comprehension and mutual negotiation of understandings and viewpoints before a situation that requires coordinated action to solve predicaments and problems."

The debate on socio-environmental issues enable the creation of a social capital through the nature of the issues: they impact citizens globally. The public debate on these issues may promote the share of values of environmental citizenship, the perception of interdependence among forms of life, the formation of bonds of belonging among people, and between people and the environment, and the setting of common objectives to improve socio-environmental conditions. These are for Author (2012), elements that determine the socio-environmental communicational capital. It is a capital of biocentric nature, originated in talks on issues that affect citizens and their quality of life, and that receives from the media interpretative interferences, rather than informative ones, resulting from an investigative process on the happenings, therefore qualifying public debates, and perhaps, stimulating citizens to take an active stand.

The construction of a socio-environmental communicational capital demands a citizen journalism, seen by Author (2013) as a journalism that is constituted by itself as a public locus open to a heterogeneity of voices that circulate in the social system, a representative of the various sectors of the global civil society. Author states that, for this to occur,

[...] values need to be reviewed, so as to constitute a 'story', that go beyond the news-values and approach values regarding citizenship and democracy. This requires journalism to have its role reappraised and reoriented, and it to become an interested party, socially and politically involved in the fate of the global civil society. For this to happen, it is necessary to consistently approach emerging social movements that bring new (and also old) values into debate, movements capable of oxygenating the mediatic agendas (Author, 2013).<sup>2</sup>

David Merritt, one of the pioneers of the civic journalism movement, however, points out that if people do not pay attention to public life, this journalism would have no reason to exist (Santos, 2012). In other words, civic journalism considers both journalists and the public as players with shared responsibility in the process of building citizenship, which might originate from circulating journalistic information.

To make this possible, professionals of the journalistic field need to be familiar with the interests of the public, what problems they face, information they need, elements that may contribute to their life quality, so as to work to meet this information demand, which might bring about bigger social participation. They cannot assume what the interest of the public might be; instead, they have to investigate it. Consequently, it is essential for them to take the debate on public issues as organizing aspects for the citizenship and governance processes, making citizens capable of, and giving them the possibility to, influence public policies.

Jacobi (2012) coins the word governance, so as to reflect upon environmental governance, explaining the elements it requires, such as partnership, network action, empowerment, perception of interdependence among the players, integration, complementarity, co-accountability, educational practices, shared decision-making and negotiation. (Jacobi, 2012). Therefore, the word governance, in this study connected to the journalistic field, refers to a journalism whose agenda is not only based on the news makers, but also includes its receivers' interests, which become known upon a closer approach between media and society, for a shared and negotiated decision-making on the happenings that deserve society's attention.

Campello (2012) supports that "mediatic visibility was important to transform environmental issues into discussed topics, and subsequently to stimulate the design of public policies". To this author, media enables social development and the facing of environmental crisis, once it is "informative and formative, of major relevance to build a complex environmental perception, to promote habit and value changes, and to mobilize public action to create socio-environmental public policies".

According to Dornelles (2008), an environmental agenda fundamentally needs to perform a pedagogic function, by systematizing concepts, publicizing information, knowledge and experiences, that is, by enabling the ordinary citizen to participate in the debate. This requires the questioning of the occupation's historical assumptions, which she considers will hinder its fulfillment: objectivity, neutrality and impartiality.

According to the new journalists' profile, they would have to be open to see democracy as something to be created, reinvented, re-imagined. Within this context, they cannot, nor should be, neutral about the issues involving people's participation in public life, about the existence of an expanded and serious public debate, about the functioning of the political system and other themes inherent to the existence of a political democracy. The journalism professional cannot be indifferent to the quality of democratic practices. (Dornelles, 2008).

Girardi et al (2012) agree with Medina when she proposes that environmental journalism should stop "the other's negligence", by opening itself to the "urge for information on the streets". The authors propose an independent action, a plural locus of systemic approach, instead of the factual and programmed coverage. In this sense, they also agree with Dornelles (2008), to whom an environmental journalism, as it is idealized, will be responsibility of the parallel and alternative media.

Furthermore, Gavirati (2012) points out that the possibility of environmental transformations requires one to think about the communicational dimension beyond the mass media, once the author questions a current assumption among certain sectors that the mass media may play a role in raising environmental awareness, once he thinks the

mediatic nature itself prevents this from occurring. To him, counting on the media to do it means "asking the fox to look after the hens". This happens because mass media is conditioned by or represents economic and political interests that generate the environmental crisis. Moreover, the editorial line of newspapers would be apart from environmental movement discourses. Gavirati's assumption destroys the expectation that commercial media should inform and raise awareness of receivers to change their actions. The author states that environmental ideals contrast with the daily functioning of institutionalized journalism.

One needs to distinguish between news about an environmental issue and news given within an environmental perspective. The former is the most common one, and is what the traditional journalism usually incorporates in its routine regarding environmental issues. The latter would mean the *environmentalization* of the media institutions, that would give way to the emerging 'environmental journalism'. (Gavirati, 2012).

The author suggests another stimulating assumption in his study on the coverage of the XV United Nations Convention on Climate Change (COP 15): that bigger media repercussion of environmental issues does not mean something favorable, once excessive mediatization may reverberate negatively. Esteves (2003, page 45) also calls attention to the fact that as public communication relies more on communication media, it "tends to lose its free and autonomous nature"

Besides the parameters presented, environmental journalism also finds support in the right to information, provided by the current constitutional state. This right also becomes a requirement for making popular participation effective in the processes of journalistic and environmental governance, and consequently for constructing citizenship, as it will be seen later.

### **Right to environmental information and the media**

There is no doubt about the gap between current reality and the fulfillment of both the right to information and the Fundamental Right to Environment, set by the Declaration of Stockholm in 1972, mainly in a period characterized by the growing depletion of natural resources. Political, economic and social actions are necessary, actions that dismantle an alienation process which excludes and harms the environment, with the purpose to guarantee the right to an ecologically balanced environment, originated from the right to dignity to the human beings (Bobbio, 1999).<sup>3</sup> This right is assured through information access, citizen participation and construction of socio-environmental communicational capital.

In Wolton's opinion (1995) wider circulation of information does not automatically imply in effectiveness of communication processes, which requires understanding among the ones involved in it. Consequently, the processes of

environmental mediatization that take place in the institutionalized journalistic field do not necessarily point to processes of governance and of effectiveness of the right to environmental information, a thought that approaches statements by Gavirati, as mentioned before.

[...] capitalist society and the model of capitalist exploitation of economically valued resources are organized around practices and behaviors that may potentially produce situations of risk. This model of economic, political and social organization progressively and constantly exposes the environment to risk. (Leite and Ayala, 2002, page 103).

Sometimes such risk is not understood by ordinary citizens, once a proper understanding requires publicizing information that enable reflection and a critical stance from society on the environmental issue. Quite often this right is guaranteed only partially, whether by governmental organizations (which are in charge of guaranteeing it by law) or by the action of civil society or of the mediatic field.

It is not new that the right to environmental information is included in the citizens' fundamental rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, and signed by Brazil that same year, already stated in article 19 that "[...] Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." (UNO, 1948). Within this same context, the Stockholm Declaration (1972), stated in its principles 19 and 20 that:

Principle 19: Education in environmental matters, for the younger generation as well as adults, given due consideration to the underprivileged, is essential in order to broaden the basis for an enlightened opinion and responsible conduct by individuals, enterprises and communities in protecting and improving the environment in its full human dimension. It is also essential that mass media of communications avoid contributing to the deterioration of the environment, but, on the contrary, disseminate information of an educational nature on the need to protect and improve the environment in order to enable man to develop in every respect. (authors' emphasis) (UNO, 1948).

Principle 20: Scientific research and development in the context of environmental problems, both national and multinational, must be promoted in all countries, especially the developing countries. **In this connection, the free flow of up-to-date scientific information and transfer of experience must be supported and assisted, to facilitate the solution of environmental problems;** environmental technologies should

be made available to developing countries on terms which would encourage their wide dissemination without constituting an economic burden on the developing countries. **(authors' emphasis)** (*UNO, 1948*).

The publication of the National Policy for the Environment, through Federal Law 6.938 in 1981, incorporated this right to the Brazilian legal system, by establishing among its objectives "[...] disseminating environment handling technologies and environmental data and information, as well as raising public awareness on the need to preserve environmental quality and ecologic balance". It also upholds that the National System for Environmental Information is one of the instruments of the National Policy for the Environment (article 9) (*Brazil, 1981*).

The promulgation of 1988 Federal Constitution creates a new scenery in Brazil, mainly characterized by democratization of processes, with subsequent participation of population in major decisions, and by transparency of public processes. In order to guarantee such precepts, access to information was assured in article 5th, XIV, XXXIII, and in article 37th, § 3rd, II, assigning it the character of fundamental right. In 1992, Rio Declaration mentioned such right once more, stating in its Principle 10 that:

Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided. (*Conference, 1992*).

Specifically speaking, various environmental legislations focus on the right to information. Such is the case of Law 9.433 from 1997, that by establishing the National Policy on Water Resources, also mentioned the right to information, suggesting in its 5th article, VI, the creation of the Information System for Water Resources (*Brasil, 1997*).

The National Policy for Environmental Education, Law 9.795 from 1999 (Brasil, 1999) considers as an obligation of the mass communication media to "actively and permanently cooperate to disseminate information and educational practices on the environment and incorporate the environmental dimension into its programming", once they are seen as non-formal environmental education media.

More recently, on November 18th, 2011, the Public Information Law 12.527 was announced, which assures access to information for all Brazilian citizens, regulating this right provided by the Constitution.



Such law was regulated by Decree 7.724, from May 16th, 2012, upholding that "[...] organs and entities are in charge of promoting, regardless what it takes, the dissemination of information of collective or general interest they produce or sponsor, on their Internet sites" (article 7th). Paragraph 1 of this same article adds "[...] organs and entities shall implement on their Internet sites specific sections to publicize the information referred to in the *caput*" (Brasil, 2012).

After all that has been exposed above it can be observed that the access to information has been effectively regulated both by national and global documents, prepared by both governmental and non-governmental organizations, which supports its imperative implementation, once this right of society and duty of the media guarantees the citizenship process.

In this globalized world it is assumed that all have access to information, that it reaches everyone at every level, in every country, and moreover, it does so instantaneously; however, one has to consider there are serious inequalities in this access. Furthermore, it is known that this right does not correspond to a duty exclusive to the State, but also to the organized civil society, and mainly, to the news organizations, given the central position the media discourses have acquired in contemporary times.

In this sense, it is understood that the implementation of this right should be guided by the principles presented in the article 221 of the 1988 Constitution, which incorporate a proposition of social communication. Such article provides that:

Production and programming of radio and television stations shall meet the following principles:

I - educational, artistic, cultural and informing objectives are given preference;

II - promotion of national and regional cultures and incentive to independent production whose purpose is to disseminate them;

III - regionalization of cultural, artistic and journalistic production, according to percentages set by law;

IV- respect to social and ethic values of individuals and families (BRASIL, 1988).

A thorough reading of this article leads one to conclude that freedom of expression is connected to the compliance with these principles. Therefore, State and citizens should take on their duty to monitor and supervise communication media so that they do not become what they themselves attempt to oppose, that is, a "dictatorship" of the word.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember that in the current constitutional system, communication media are classified as public concessions, and thus they have the duty to comply with the previously mentioned principles. On the other hand, in the lack of their compliance, it is the State's responsibility to enforce their fulfillment. Only the regulation of this media will avoid the perpetuation of domination processes by the same media.

In this situation, Todorov's warning (2012, page 142) seems to be appropriate: "Not all information, not all opinions are accepted with the same ease by the country's big media. [...]" Well then, the free expression of the powerful ones may have deleterious consequences on the speechless. The author mentions the following example: "[...] if somebody makes use of freedom to state that all Arabs are non-assimilable Islamites, and all the black people, drug dealers, these will have their freedom to find jobs, or even to walk freely on the street, hindered."

This phenomenon is also noticeable in the environmental scope. One such example, the big bottled water companies, for very long, and still nowadays, have sponsored reports whose intention is to disseminate the idea that tap water is not proper for consumption. Such information reach the general public, and thus, make the demand for bottled water bigger and bigger. However, analyses carried out with the bottled water have shown that it does not always comply with the potability patterns established. Therefore, it can be concluded that the information on this topic is kept away from the purposes provided by article 221 of the Constitution, of an informing, educational and ethical character. According to Todorov,

[...] our action imperatives are based on the information we have about the world; thus, such information, assuming they are not untrue, were selected, sorted, grouped, built on verbal or visual messages to lead us to one decision, rather than to another one (Todorov, 2012, page 143).

This way, the journalistic discourses may stimulate public communication processes, which requires effective participation of citizens in debates on issues of public interest, among which, the environmental issue. Therefore, governance processes might be established, through which society finds community spaces and representation loci where, it itself may voluntarily, based on previously received information and knowledge, set cooperative and participating manners to manage the common assets.

### **Environmental journalism, social networks and transforming potential of happenings**

Besides guaranteeing the right to information, which seems to be assured by the present legal framework, the current discourse should be concerned with retrieving the constitutional foundations to make this right be exercised, once they focus on the construction of an effectively social communication. In order for this to occur, it is necessary to take into consideration the fact that the media is taking over more and more

daily life spaces, many times restraining, other times contributing to the formation of a critical public opinion.

Within this context, when one reflects on environmental journalism focusing on citizenship, one defends it should prioritize its public nature, by investigating what issues interest society, and not only assuming what they are, so as to generate communication processes that indeed safeguard each citizen's right to information and stimulate his/her duty to search for information in the most diverse available sources.

The debate cannot be qualified without information, and it becomes limited to a reverberation of the empty common sense, with participation, quite often, propelled by preconceptions, which do not inspire processes of public communication, citizenship and governance.

As it has been seen, some authors consider these doings as inherent to the alternative media, once they do not see them as coming from institutionalized media. This thinking is consonant with conclusions of various studies in communication sciences, but this would mean losing connection with the core of journalism, and accepting its more cynical version as a natural one. The public function is intrinsic to journalism, whether that delivered by big companies or by alternative processes.

Nevertheless, it has to be pointed out that the institutionalized media is not the only one in charge of promoting this debate, once the internet, and more specifically the social networks, offer astounding possibilities to processes of media and environment governance, which raise new questions regarding the predisposition for using information technologies addressing public communication and mobilization for environmental issues.

But how are the possibilities offered by the Internet determining the construction of socio-environmental communicational capital? How do news media and social networks develop, or how would they develop, their transforming potential from appropriating happenings? How can a social network be constituted around a cause-issue? How can an issue that brings citizens together within a public debate have the potential for raising a feeling of social belonging? Would environmental conflicts be more mobilizing than the common purposes of a group when there is no conflict involved? If conflicts can mobilize more than common purposes, what would explain this kind of need to generate engagement?

Citizenship is a process in ongoing construction, never finished, and the guarantee of its effectiveness, even though it is intrinsically and contradictorily ephemeral, requires continuous processes of participation in public debates, by integrating citizens into communities, whether through traditional journalism or the new media. The Internet seems to make participation easier, due to the abundance of spaces open to political manifestation. Yet, one has to take into consideration that citizenship originated in the

interaction with media tools requires, besides economic access to technologies and information on their possible uses, motivation from the user to be involved in issues of public interest, this being determined by the political culture.

In this sense, might one consider that the use of technologies is still largely rudimentary? In what phase would we be, concerning the social use of these tools to devise environmental citizenship processes? Would we be using the web's unmeasurable potential to represent ourselves rather than representing the collective; however, one has to consider the assumptions by sociology authors, who widely analyze and theorize on the dialogic relationship between individual and collective dimensions, which intertwine in building both individuals' and groups' identities? To what extent does the individualistic nature that culturally pervades our society determine the use of social networks, diminishing their potential to become networks that effectively represent collective purposes, and rather build sociability networks and publicity of ideals in a non-participatory way? Does the Internet indeed provide space for public conversation? Can one imagine the environment of the web as a locus of transparency and social control where users are capable of politically deliberating on public assets or would we come (in the height of optimism) to consider it merely as a participatory locus?

One could also question what characteristics a debate process should have or what requirements it should meet to trigger transforming, citizenship and governance processes? In the web, would it be enough to bring together expressions from the users, or will it be necessary to progress in constructing dialog and mediation practices, as well as sharing stances? In summary, how do the discourse practices in the social networks differentiate from those of the environmental journalism regarding the possibilities of devising processes of public communication, citizenship and governance?

Even if the mentioned requirements are considered, it is necessary to acknowledge that information technologies bring along the potential of including a bigger diversity of players into the debate, of making citizens' access to media democratic, so as to make them take the place of information producers, of broadening information channel access as a receiver, of generating encounters among those who are physically apart, of enabling multiplication of spaces for expression and participation, and of determining cyber-activist processes, as those begun in June 2013 in Brazil, and still in progress. The organizational triggering of social groups, manifesting on the streets, gathered by the social networks, show the relevance of the new media. Information being circulated on Facebook has been determining for manifestations to happen.

One may ask, who makes or shall make the citizen media? What is the role of the journalistic field in this scenery? Will they be run over by history, by social networks and by their own production processes stiffened by newsworthiness criteria which do not take into consideration (not even initially, as one might think fit), the voices of the street and the popular and citizen manifestations, showing a detachment from the founding values

of the journalistic field? What is the possibility of a happening to be considered news because it is framed into what might be a newsworthiness criterion: its transforming potential? Would not this be the value to retrieve the public sense and the proximity of journalism for exercising citizenship?

It seems we lack a journalism, as well as a society, less conservative of themselves, less afraid of reinventing themselves. We rush, and this is a relevant discussion, because it directly impacts the meanings our lives take, many of them borrowed from media agendas. We need to "annoy", raise awareness, stimulate public discussion on urgent issues, among which, the environment and media.

Finally, without qualified information, whether from traditional or internet media, participation is emptied, thus triggering a fake democratic and social politicization process. Information is a requirement for all the citizenship manifestations discussed in contemporary society, which has not been named information society for no reason. For democracy to become effective, participation requires plural viewpoints, more than a plural number of players involved in the debate. Or can one consider that every manifestation is valid? We are aware that, as there are multiple questions, there are potentially multiple answers to each question posed.

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### Notas

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<sup>2</sup> These values traditionally refer to the proximity of the happening regarding the medium public, its intensity, relevance, topicality, impact, human interest, expected audience, competition, potential to sell the news, etc. These elements have historically remained as guidelines for selecting social happenings to be transformed into news in the journalistic production process.

<sup>3</sup> 2 - Bobbio (1999) supported that there is an agreement regarding the guarantee of fundamental rights, but in despite such "foundations" of this belief are considered unquestionable, reservation and opposition may occur.