

JOURNALISTIC IMAGES: MEMORY, FORGETFULNESS AND TRUTH

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Abstract

Journalism is one of the means used to produce knowledge and to offer a representation of the world. Even when competing with new forms of information production, it still has a fundamental role in the construction and shaping of our collective memory providing at the same time the tools to understand the present and to put in perspective the future according to cyclic reactivations of past representations. Re-composing the past is activated not only through our memory but also through forgetfulness. To remember, to recall and to forget are different cognitive operations, and in this paper we intend to discuss its epistemological value, in the journalistic field. We shall focus, mainly, in the field of imagery, which, for a long time possesses a strategic role in objectivating the journalistic speech. To forget through images is quite a traditional idea, discussed by several authors, but for us, at this moment, it's important to question the commitment of journalism to the truth, facing the memory and forgetfulness strategies, put in practice when produces and uses journalistic images.

Keywords

Journalism; Memory; Forgetfulness, Truth.

Journalism is one of the means used to produce knowledge and to offer a representation of the world. Journalism is not a mirror of reality; this is something that several studies in the news have widely affirmed since the middle of the last century, but the representation of the world it operates in that is one of the structural elements of our knowledge about it.

Based on the hypothesis that journalism is, in fact, a form of knowledge, the Brazilian Professor Eduardo Meditsch, wrote that it implies to stress its limitations. The knowledge «produced by journalism shall always be historic and culturally conditioned by its context and subjectively by those who participate in this production. It shall also be conditioned by the singular way as it is produced» (Meditsch: 2002; 18)

Journalism is a field of reconstruction by nature. It operates in the world, generating statements about it (building a *logos* on the *topos*); and in this process, reproduces not only the knowledge it generates, but also “knowledges” of other institutions. Journalism is not a mere discourse in itself; it is an agent of several other discourses (Van Dijk, 1988; Fairclough, 1995).

This reproduction of knowledge given by journalism shall be a *reproduction*: «Knowledge isn’t something transmittable, but reproductive» (Meditsch:2002;13) and *re-creates* whether by learning or by teaching. Conceiving journalism as a way of knowledge is, then, enlarging the understanding of its role in the process of social cognition. As Meditsch underlines, journalism operates in the field of common sense, according to a natural cognitive attitude that establishes a perception of reality as the dominant one, leading to the fact that the knowledge produced by journalism tends to be less rigorous than the one produced by science, and at the same time more holistic and less artificial.

It’s a fact that the public doesn’t know and sometimes idealizes the real conditions where the journalistic practice is developed and also that there are several constraints that poison the news process, that the tendency to make a show from the information (with the objective to make profit.), is a risk. «Journalism can eventually uninform people», as Meditsch recognizes, «but it teaches them a lot of useful stuff as well» (Idem; 20).

Understanding the usefulness of knowledge (re)produced by journalism, takes us to questioning the nature of its compromise with the truth. Even competing with other forms of production of knowledge, especially in a time when new technologies give and ease access to diversified sources, journalism remains as one of the privileged means of configuration of our social reality and that status comes, heavily, by the orientation of truth in which its professional ideology is founded.

In the nineteenth century, Honoré de Balzac, who despised journalism and journalists, affirmed in his work *Illusions Perdues* that the engagement of journalism with the truth is perverse because, for a journalist, what is probable it’s truth.

This is the kind of accusation that is still, today, hurting the principles of a journalistic culture focused on truth orientation. Although inserted in a newsroom, subjected to the impositions of the organizational constraints, conditioned by the context of happenings or by his own limitations and individual circumstances, the journalist is personally responsible, before the public, for the truth of the information he spreads.

The quest for the truth is, therefore, the legitimating pillar, necessary to all journalistic activity. Nevertheless, as Daniel Cornu underlines, this quest must be taken within the complexity of several orders of truth to practice: the truth of the facts, the truth of opinions and judgements and the truth of the forms of journalistic expression.

«The demand of truth is not only applied to the order of the facts, as a demand of exactitude, but also to the order of sense, as a demand of justice, and to the order of narrative, as a demand of veracity» (Cornu: 1999, 394). A.T.

To consider this plural dimension of truth implies to make all the intervenients in the process of journalistic production responsible for the way they build the social reality, and to look at journalism as a field of representation mediated by a set of cognitive operations, which epistemological value should be discussed.

Memory and Forgetfulness in Journalism

So, journalism is one of the primary sources of information and a sharing of common experiences and its role in the formation of our collective memory on events is on the whole recognized. By observing, interpreting and narrating what's going on in the world in a given moment, journalism redeems the past and sets the bases of a prediction of the future.

Redeeming the past is cyclic and works as a framing mechanism, essential for us to understand what is happening. In this process, journalism activates memory but also forgetfulness; to remember and to forget are, therefore, two cognitive mechanisms that mould the newsmaking and, consequently, show, in their very own way, the nature of journalistic compromise regarding the truth.

The recognition of journalism as a working field on the memory has been feeding the historiography debate on the history of the present between academics and journalists. Journalists keep on anchoring their practices to daily factuality, immediacy, actuality and it's right here in this field they recognize each other in their professional sense; academics – mainly historians, with whom journalism disputes the partial authority of the speech of the reporting on events – continue to see journalism as dealing with a limited field to the immediate surface of events, polluted by a special own ideology.

The appeal to memory in the journalistic production in several levels seems obvious.

In the field of practice, journalism works on memory, reporting the events and unveiling hidden informations based on living testimonies and personal memories, recovering clues and documents, remaking paths. Appealing to the record, whether of a statement or of a scene, constitutes a mnemonic current use. Even the forms journalism are based on seem perfectly adjusted to the work on the memory, incorporating it – as Barbie Zelizer wrote - whether *by need*, when going back to the past it is fundamental (the case of obits and celebrations), whether *by invitation*, when it looks for models from the past to frame the present, (for example, using analogies to explain some events) as *by condescendence*, searching for events from the past to simply illustrate the present (Zelizer, 2008). By working on the memory, journalism works for the memory, in a secondary order.

There is no memory without loss and, at the level of the selection of news; loss is seen in a logic of simplification that traditionally elects some - few – events as the significant ones to be reported. Simplification is a strategy, normally identified as a measure to domesticate memory, mainly when collective memory is at stake¹.

To focus on the extraordinary, on the unexpected, in the rupture with the natural order of life, still configures the model from which, in future times, the actual present shall be rememorized. All this, in spite of the proliferation of other themes in the newspapers² that have a central place in the construction of the social memory as a long term process but that are generally driven away from this discussion because are considered “minor” as referred by Carolyn Kitch:

«Memory is thematically diverse, made up not only of crises and outrages, but also of the stuff of everyday life, the aspects of living that most of us do experience first hand: music, food, sports, work, fashion, friendships, family, food,

1. This vision is contrary to the one, for example, of Maurice Halbwachs, one of the pioneers in theorizing collective memory (1925, *Cadres sociaux de la Mémoire*) that prefers to underline the function of reinforcement and social cohesion of collective memory not by imposition but as the affective adhesion to their “common unity” in which a process of conciliation between collective and individual memories is developed. For the author, all memories would be built from the inside of the group, therefore, any individual memory, built from self group references, would exist from a collective memory. This living together would allow creating representations of a past - memories – reconstructed or simulated with the help of data borrowed from the present and from reconstructions made in previous times.

2. Blogs, in a certain view, confirmed this.

even the weather. All of these categories of life are subjects of journalism. Surely these aspects of social memory are more lasting and more central to our identity than our memories of the Watergate scandal or the fall of the Berlin Wall.» (Kitch, 2008: 313)

Consequently, and following Kitch's line, journalism builds memory in articulation with other forms of cultural memory, other means, in a registration of intertextuality that defines it, simultaneously, as a place of building memories and a space for commentary of other places (cultural, institutional) of the construction of memory.

It operates on the individual memory and societies, acting as a memory network connected to other memory networks.

«In this model, journalism is a process rather than a product. It is not a 'window' through which we can view something else, as many memory scholars have regarded it. Nor does journalism sit at the top of a hierarchical truth pile, as many journalism scholars assume. Journalism is inside memory; it is at its heart.» (KITCH, 2008: 318)

In this process we have to consider the value of the semantic opposite of memory: forgetfulness. The existence of memory logically implies a previous forgetfulness. We recall something that was momentarily taken out from memory. In the most severe cases, the impossibility of remembering takes us to a disease, to an amnesic condition. To forget is normally associated to ageing; degradation of brain functions and is pointed as one of the main problems of human memory. In the present technological context the problem seems to get more serious, with the creation of gadgets that expand memory, reinforcing the idea of incapacity and memory limitation of the human being. In this sense, forgetfulness would be a blockage to knowledge.

But to forget is not a unitary phenomenon, and we shouldn't condemn ourselves for that (Connerton, 2008).

There are several motivations, individual or social, to forget. It can be done in the name of a pain or trauma, by repressive and continuous actions of a state or group, in the name of the formation of a new identity, by excess of information, etc (cf. Connerton:2008). For some authors forgetting is not necessarily bad. For Nietzsche, for example, forgetfulness is the pacifying state that erases mind to allow incorporation; to forget allows discharging, energizing memory. Bergson considered it fundamental as

a liberating mechanism of memory directed towards action. By associating the brain to matter, by opposing to memory as virtual, Bergson connects it to forgetfulness; the brain is entitled to shrink and simplify the past, suspend memory, which maintains in virtual condition, being updated regarding the present interest (Cf. Monteiro, 2007).

Forgetfulness would be, then, a natural procedure of memory: memory forgets to store other memories. Facing the excess of information that inhabits our daily life, to forget can be the best form of acting in this era of information overload. To forget can also be a matter of need. The fact that a long term codified information is available, doesn't mean it is accessible. According to Singer and Conway (2008) information exists in the memory in different accessibility stadiums. In this sense, there is no real forgetfulness.

How does Journalism forget, and what consequences does it have in the representation of the reality it produces?

In the journalistic production forgetfulness integrates the work of Journalism "about" and "for" the memory. It does it, at the level of content, through erasing the marks of our daily lives regarding an abnormality model of how the world functions (the rare, the awkward, etc) or through the unconscious or deliberate occultation of some events (for example, the western vision predominating in the media is keen on the forgetfulness of some areas of the world). It does so at the level of practice, determining for example, who has and who does not have access to the media; the presence (as an antinomy of forgetfulness) is, for example, pointed by the law, (by assuring spaces as the portuguese "direito de antena") and there is the possibility of surveillance, by regulation entities, of the equity of those presences. The absence of visibility may work in these cases, inside a hermeneutical perspective, as a presence. It will also do it at the level of relating, by sometimes telling second hand journalistic stories based on fragile, volatile and disperse memories that leave space for journalism to make instead of remaking the happening.

Journalism also forgets, when working for the memory, when it closes its speech in the present event, relegating past for the archives, ready to be properly put into action according to circumstantial interests. These operations of forgetfulness recover the issue of the authenticity and veracity of the discourses Journalism produces.

In any of the circumstances we've pointed out, forgetfulness doesn't happen so much because of the withdrawal, suspension or refusal of the past but because of the denial of what could be. It is the consequence of the journalistic ideology and part of its work on memory.

The field of image, privileged domain of making the journalistic speech objective, offers the scenario to evaluate the implications of the memory and forgetfulness work, concerning the compromise of Journalism with the truth.

The truth in journalistic images

Images, mainly technical ones, have an extremely important role in the way Journalism represents the world. The introduction of photography in the press had remarkable consequences. Anchored to image, it was the value of the information itself to be reevaluated, adding to that the onus of responsibility of the evidences, mainly where the written discourse is not enough: in the presence.

Visually transporting the readers to the moments and places impossible to experience by the sight, introducing them to a fixed and unknown world beyond their space and time, a new individual and collective conscience was formed little by little. Although, its ability to mirror the world was subject to criticism since its beginning, photography became a fundamental instrument to the objectivity of speech, from the first moment it inhabited the newspapers' pages.

The appearance of television, one century later, enhanced the testimonial and symbolic value of the images and today TV images dominate our iconosphere imposing a visual model of the word. Meanwhile, with the appearance of new images, produced with the help of new information technologies, the ontological and operative value of images as testimony and instrument of a common memory has been widely questioned.

In this new universe, distinction between real and simulacrum seems somehow diluted. At the same time, the desire for the ownership and use of images is stressed, confirming the cultural importance of optical gadgets as privileged vehicles of knowledge and power over the world.

Because of its evocative power, images are adequate to the ransom of memory but also allow opportunities to forget. How does Journalism recall, through images? By recording, for example. Technical images, mainly photography and video, serve Journalism accordingly to a logic of testimony and registration. Marked with the strength of and indelible belief in the place and moment of its production (Barthes; 2001), they find there their representation value, "freezing" the past and keeping it for future uses. The images that Journalism uses and produces have, therefore, a role of sys-

tematization of the common experience. Susan Sontag underlines, considering this issue, the strength of photography:

«Continuous images (television, video and cinema) surround us non stop, but when it's something that we have to remember, photography bites deeper. Memory freezes images; its basic unity is individual image. In an era of information overload, photography gives a way of rapidly learning something and a compact form of memorization. Photography is like a quotation, a proverb. All of us mentally store hundreds of photographs, available to be remembered instantaneously» (Sontag, 2003: 29). A.T.

Images used and produced by journalism have, therefore, systematization role of common experience they are used in different ways, being traditionally operated in the journalistic speech as a proof, a denunciation or mark of occurrence. When used to directly evoke the past, they are recovered, re-contextualized and manipulated. In both cases, they try, by anchoring to reality to build bonds to the demand of truth proclaimed by Journalism.

One of the routine journalistic practices is recurring to archive images. Taken out of the context, thrown away to their phenomenological circumstances, put together and adapted to circumstantial demands, they denounce the risks of their use through memory and to memory: they symbolize too much, they see their sense in a way too enlarged (or much enlarged way), in a work of formal comprehension that produces stereotypes of apprehension of the world. In this process there's a complete ideological speech being created, making clear the nature of their bonds to reality and, consequently, to the truth.

«Assembling gives, then, to images, this status of enunciation that shall convert them, according to their value of uses in fair or unfair: as a fiction movie (...) can take images to a level of intensity capable of making one truth appear from them, also a simple television news service may use documental images and produces a falsification of an historic reality that, despite of that, they archive» (Didi-Huberman: 2004; 202). A.T.

Another frequent practice of journalism is the production of images aiming the reconstitution of the past. In these circumstances, it perverts the indexical nature of images and building upon it a second discursive order. Appealing to fiction, putting characters in spaces and times they never lived in, displacing to the present the

existence of the simulated past, Journalism makes the images accomplices of its ambition, aggregating the sense of the past with consequences in the status of representation of these images: in a certain way, they lie. In this case, journalism seems to completely grapple memory, promoting and at the same time, avoiding forgetfulness. To forget through images is very much possible.

Allowing living again through collective memory, journalistic images can help to overpass common trauma. Confronting society with their traumas gives them the opportunity to continue to watch until fear goes away, it is one of the merits of the images. Another merit is the exhibition of the public to violent images as a form of making it responsible for what it sees. But the management of this exposition is determinant for the effectiveness: without the right fundamentals, images can be used to forget (Zelizer: 1998). As we saw before, to forget is not necessarily bad; sometimes it is the only possible answer. The excessive exposure to horrific images may lead to indifference, contemplation and not to action (Sontag: 2003; Zelizer: 1998). Image's value of truth is, in these circumstances, evaluated about their interpretative capacity. To contemplate without seeing avoids meaning fluidity and puts at stake the truth effect preconized by journalism.

The absence of images of certain events is normally seen, within the framework of the media editorial options, as an indicator of the possibility to forget; if we exclude professional neglect or news disinterest, the scarcity of images on a certain event increases its symbolic value which ends up by serving a "simplification" strategy, fundamental to memory.

Conclusion

To remember and to forget are, therefore, part of the condition of journalist images. Opened to a plurality of uses and meanings (sometimes spurred by words) they coexist with other types of images (namely from publicity) with which they compete in the construction of our visual collective memory. In the absence of an iconic itinerary that allows to place different images in its use and context (cf. Baeza, 2001) journalism should clarify the aim of their uses, taking into account its true ideology orientation. The construction of collective memory sponsored by journalistic images is, therefore, plural and must be understood in the light of that concept of truth as a critical and normative instance, preconized from the beginning. Once again, truth and responsibility

are the inseparable companions in this project of a common memory, simultaneously reliable, liberating of senses and adaptable to change.

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