Information Quality in Brazilian News Portals: a Semiotic Approach

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RÉSUMÉ. *Cette étude vise à identifier et analyser la conception de la qualité de l'information dans le contenu diffusé par les webjournaux brésiliens. Ainsi, il a été mis au point une discussion théorique sur la qualité de l'information et de la notion d'information, des questions qui permettent une approche différente pour déterminer la qualité de l'information. La recherche a realisé l'analyse de l'utilisation des ressources hypermediatiques publiées dans trois grands portails d'information brésiliens: le G1 (http://g1.globo.com/) en tant que partie d'un groupe qui a comme principal véhicule de communication une chaîne de télévison, le UOL (http://www.uol.com.br/), qui fait partie d'un groupe de journalisme imprimé, et le Terra (http://www.terra.com.br/portal/) qui a sa origine dans le contexte numérique. Les webjournaux brésiliens ont été étudiée à partir de la perspective de la sémiotique de Charles Sanders Peirce, un encadrement conceptuel qui a orienté la réflexion et l'analyse pour comprendre les processus et la dynamique de la signification entre les différents acteurs sociaux impliqués dans la production, la diffusion de l'information et l'utilisation de cette catégorie de véhicule de communication.*

ABSTRACT. *This research aimed to identify and analyse the conception of informational quality in the information posted on online news websites, especially under the perspective of the user in relation to the specificities of the support. The research reference was the analysis of the usage of hypermedia resources in the news published in three major Brazilian portals: G1 (http://g1.globo.com/), part of a group whose main medium is a television channel; Uol (htpp://www.uol.com.br/), member of a group created to edit a printed newspaper; and Terra (http://www.terra.com.br/portal), whose origin is unrelated to support besides the Internet. The Brazilian news portals are approached from Charles Sanders Peirce semiotic perspective, which played the role of a conceptual framework. This perspective directed our view throughout the analysis, aiming to comprehend the process and the dynamics of signification among the different social actors involved in the informational production, diffusion and consumption in these media.*

MOTS-CLÉS. *information, webjournal-Brésil, qualité de l'information, sémiotique.*

KEYWORDS. *information, WebNews-Brazil, information quality, semiotics.*

1. Introduction

Information quality (IQ) is a non-consensual concept. Commonly used in a strictly quantitative manner, the IQ concept suffers ad-hoc reformulations whenever applied discussions find insufficient amplitude in the researches concerning the issue. A significant part of them start by grouping attributes such as relevance, precision and validity (KNIGHT & BURN, 2005; EPPLER e WITTIG, 2000), and, after having quantitatively measured them, these results are added in order to obtain a number that would thoretically represent information quality.

If, on the one hand, the discussions regarding IQ do not advance due to the absence of a return to former discussions and their deepening, opting for a pragmatic stance in which a new grouping of attributes is devised when the researcher encounters a problem; on the other hand, the qualitative discussion is reduced to the sum of the quantitative elements (MASREK 2007; VOIGT, BRUGGEMANN & PUDENZ, 2006), a condition that also becomes an obstacle for the development of studies on IQ and their qualitative points of view.

A central part of this debate, information itself also suffers characteristic impacts due to the privileged approach. In this work, information is understood as a semiotic sign – "the function of an object in the semiosis process" (NÖTH, 2005). In this sense, it follows one of the most widespread concepts of a sign, as formulated by Peirce: "something that represents something for someone in some aspect or capacity" (CP 2,228). It is in this sense that we say that every piece of information is a sign. The opposite is not true, though – not every sign is a piece of information, since anything that is in the place of another for someone plays the role of a sign, whereas this premise is not always true for information.

From the definition of information as a sign, it is possible to look at information quality from a wider perspective. We believe that the quantitative view of the concept must take into account not its division into attributes, but rather the profound discussion of its intrinsic characteristics, which define the relation of information to its support. These are the contextual characteristics, related to the conception and planning of a piece of information, as well as the relation of information to the user who it is directed at. In this text, we will focus our analysis on the adequacy of the transmitted information to the potentiality of its support, defined by Plaza as intersemiotic translation. The author states that (2003, p. 109):

The language movement from one means to another implies conscience of translation to be able not only to scrutinise the meanders of the new support's nature, its potential and limits, but also, based on this, to perform the qualitative leap, i.e., to pass from a mere reproduction to production.

The adequacy of the support is one of the fragile points in the production of content in Brazilian journalistic portals. Even though some progress has been made, the specific resources of hypermedia as of yet have seen little use in the analysed portals. The even tighter agendas of people that produce material for online journalism, as compared to those of traditional media, make it more difficult to use the specific resources of hypermedia, a condition further worsened by the lack of training that would enable the professionals to deal with such resources.

2. Methodology

Let us now analyse the portals, seeking to understand how the demands of the users are translated into routinely published information. In order to do so, we have selected three of the largest Brazilian journalistic portals: G1 (http://www.g1.com.br), Terra (http://www.terra.com.br) and Uol (http://www.uol.com.br).

The analysed portals were chosen both for their representativity in terms of traffic and number of subscribers and for their origin: G1 is part of *Organizações Globo*, which has *TV Globo* as its most representative medium and are the largest Brazilian informational group; Uol is part of the *Folha-Uol* group, created from the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*; and Terra, which, without any relations to other media in the country, is part of a transnational group with portals in over nineteen countries. Therefore, they represent a diversity of origins that may define the way they deal with information in its various formats. The analysis conducted here was performed using all the news headlines on the portals main page during one week[1]. Everyday, between 12h and 14h, the main pages of each portal were stored, and, in order to avoid the randomness originating from updates, the news registered in these files were the ones accessed.

In each article accessed, we analysed whether there were photofigures, illustrations, infofigureics, videos, sounds and links; whether the access was unrestricted or allowed only to subscribers; the producer of article; whether the access to the page was direct or intermediated by sub-portals; and whether there were incentives for interactivity with the public, and if so of what kind. The same routine was implemented in the years 2005, 2006 and 2009. In 2005, 2,128 news WebPages were analysed, being 442 of Globo.com, 804 of Terra and 882 of Uol. In 2006 we analysed 446 pages of G1[2], 248 of

[1] In the initial sampling, in 2005, two weeks with a separation of approximately one month in between them were used.

[2] In 2005, the informational website of *Organizações Globo* was Globo.com. In the following year, a change in its structure occurred, when G1, its new informational website, was launched. Our efforts were thus directed to G1.

Terra and 258 of Uol, totalling of 952 pages. In 2009, these numbers were, respectively, 353, 271 and 429, adding up to a total of 1,053 pages.

Except for the change of Globo.com to G1, which represented a growth of 203% in the amount of news published, the portals showed a reduction in the number of pages linked to their news section between 2005 and 2006. From 2006 to 2009, G1 reduced the amount of news announced on its main page, while Terra and Uol increased it. It is worth mentioning that, for the latter two, this increase followed modifications in the portals visual format, which became more dynamic and, to a certain extent, more similar to G1, which was the last of them to be launched.

3. Analysis of the portals

Our analysis begins by evaluating the access to the news – whether it is open for all users or restricted to subscribers. This access restriction to the content was reduced between 2005 and 2006, as shown in Figure 1, and in 2009 was not present at all in our sample.

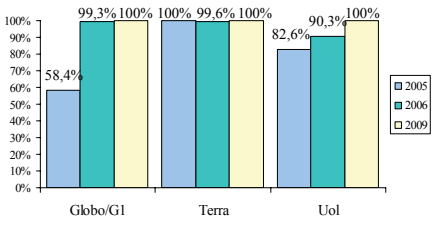


Figure 1. *Percentage of articles with non-restricted access in 2005, 2006 and 2009*

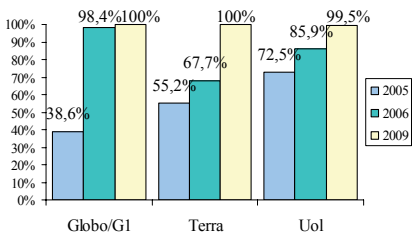


Figure 2. *Percentage of directly accessible articles in 2005, 2006 and 2009*

Granting access to non-subscribers is fundamental for maintaining high the number of visitors. In 2005, sources related to the three portals already assured that more than half of their visitors were non-subscribers. Therefore, having a higher share of access-restricted news would have a direct impact on the portal audience, and, thus, on the relation to the announcers, since the number of access is commercially valued.

Another restriction that almost disappeared from the portals was the necessity of going through a sub-portal before reaching the news itself, when clicking on a link to an article. This was common in Terra during the first two years of the analysis.

In a support that has speed as one of its pillars, it seems contradictory to insert pages between the links on the portal and the article to which they refer to. Going through an intermediate page demands extra time from the user, which may increase his or her dissatisfaction with the portal. Another problem is that the news highlighted on the portal is often not given emphasis on the intermediate page, requiring the user to perform a search that in many cases does not succeed.

There are two explanations for structuring information with intermediate pages. On the one hand, it gives the visitor a wider range of possibilities – by clicking on an link related to health, for example, the user would be taken to a sub-portal with many other articles related to the issue, and not only the one he had initially chosen. Another element that must be taken into account is that interpolating pages increases the portal's pageviews, i.e., the user clicks more times in the site's content. But, besides making it harder to access the site content, it may lead visitors away.

Making it harder to access the non-restricted content selected by the visitor is one of the – already overcame – initial incongruences between the sites news and the logic of hypermedia structuring. The multifarious character, i.e., the possibility of choosing a non-linear access, lacking any pre-established order, is a central characteristic of hypermedia. Implementing mandatory midpoints in the users' navigation impairs this multiplicity. Such midpoints, a kind of sub-portals, would centralise the site traffic, while hypermedia logic stimulates the exact opposite: navigation without centralising nodes, the creation of individual paths.

These individual paths are made possible by the presence of links. In the analysed articles, the links were found both in the text and in a list of pages theoretically related to the issue at hand. However, the quantity of articles that do not make use of this resource in their body is increasing (Figure 3), many of them just displaying, at the end, a standard list of links with leads to other news of the same area.

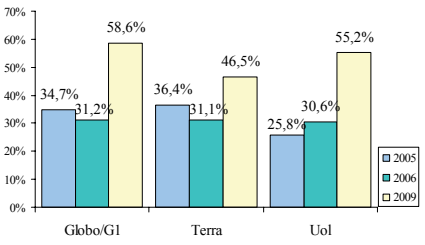


Figure 3. *Percentage of articles without links in 2005, 2006 and 2009*

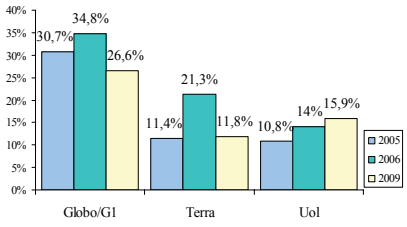


Figure 4. *Percentage of articles with videos in 2005, 2006 and 2009*

The percentage of articles without links had been reduced on Globo.com/G1 and on Terra between 2005 and 2006, but, in an inflexion of this tendency, it increased on all of the portals between 2006 and 2009. On two of them, G1 and Uol, more than half of the articles do not make use of this resource.

The lack of links in the news strongly impairs the multiplicity of versions of the same information, since to the user who faces a page without links the only options available are returning to the original portal to choose another article or going to one of the available content areas.

Even on pages that have links, many of them do not add to the accessed news. If there is news about the victory of the Brazilian soccer team, for example, a link regarding a local team game cannot be, *a priori*, considered as complementary to the original news.

The growth in the number of articles without links points to the prioritisation of speed in the logic of the production of journalistic news for the digital medium, in lieu of other characteristics. Moretzsohn (2000) states that the greatest value to be found in contemporary journalistic information is speed. The author states that journalistic speed has become a fetish, in the Marxist conception of the term, acquiring importance by itself.

The speed of diffusion is, doubtlessly, one of the characteristics of Internet news. It is necessary, however, to question the centrality of this resource as compared to other possibilities of hypermedia. It is also worth mentioning that speed is a traditional value of journalism, prioritising it leads to a smaller requirement of investments in training and personnel; if a single journalist can produce a larger amount of articles at a given time, the obvious tendency, especially during a world economic crisis, is to reduce the site´s staff. Hence, besides poorly trained professionals, the portal editorials are comprised of a reduced number of journalists who are responsible for a large amount of news. It becomes yet harder, due to the lack of time, to invest in the adequacy of the information to the support and thereby make use of the specific resources of hypermedia.

In this scenario, the convergence of resources also loses space. In the three sites, icons mark the usage of videos and sounds: a video camera for video and moving pictures, and a speaker for sounds. The very existence of such icons is a sign of how scarcely used are the resources besides plain text. It depicts the fact that sounds and moving images are the exception. Even when they are used, such resources frequently do not qualify for the hyper character – bound to their own content, videos, sounds and texts often do not interact with each other.

Exceptions are progressively being found, especially on G1. Besides being the portal with the greatest amount of news-related videos (Figure 4), which was to be expected, given its proximity to Brazil's largest TV station, the site innovated in how it exhibits videos. Nevertheless, the usage of this resources was reduced from 2006 to 2009, the same occurring on Terra.

A large part of the videos on G1's news (found in 26.6% of them) was embedded in the texts. Upon entering the page, one sees the text and a selected frame of the video, which plays the role of a photofigure. While one reads the text, the video is loaded and automatically begins to play. The portal has thus introduced, in Brazilian digital journalism, the integration of texts and videos.

Nonetheless, G1's usage of videos does not extend to another resource, audio. It was the one to make less use of this resource (Figure 5).

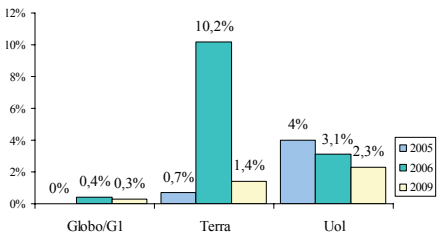


Figure 5. *Percentage of articles with audio resources in 2005, 2006 and 2009*

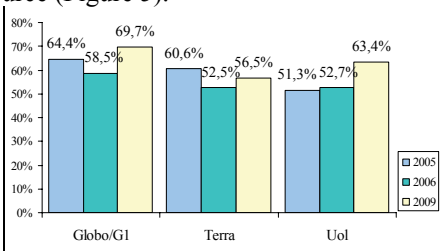


Figure 6. *Percentage of articles with still images in 2005, 2006 and 2009*

More widely used than audio resources, and also traditionally employed alongside plain texts as a heritage of the printed media, the photofigures, illustrations and infofigureics receive considerable space on the analysed pages. Still images are the most used of the resources that, together with the text, compose information (Figure 6).

Even G1 and Terra, that displayed a declining tendency in the utilisation of such resource between 2005 and 2006, show in 2009's analysis a significant use of still images.

On the three portals, photofigurey was the still image resource most frequently found. Infofigureics begin to gain space. If in the 2006 analysis they were only used by G1, they can currently be found on all three portals. They were present in 4.8% of G1's articles, 1.1% of Terra's, and 3% of Uol's.

Especially on Uol, there is a tendency to reproduce infofigureics published in the group's newspaper, *Folha de S. Paulo*. Thus, a large share of the infofigureics

published on the portal are stactic, not presenting options for the user to interact with.

On Brazilian portals the stimulus for the active participation of users is growing. In 2005, Globo.com intensely used polls, particularly in the sports section – to each piece of news there was an associated poll.

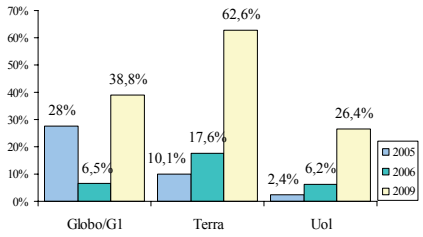


Figure 7. *Percentage of pages with polls, forums or blogs in 2005, 2006 and 2009*

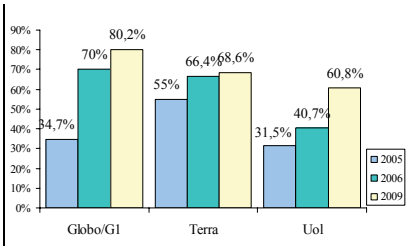


Figure 8. *Percentage of self-produced content in 2005, 2006 and 2009*

The change of Globo.com to G1 represented a significant decrease in the amount of polls (Figure 7). However, interactivity was stimulated again as of 2009. As in the other analysed portals, there was intense growth in the stimulus to the participation of the users.

Another modality of users' participation is collaborative journalism. Although links are still not frequently seen on the portals, they were found, in four of the seven days of analysis, on Terra for *Vc Repórter*, which publishes material sent by users after it has been duly confirmed and edited by journalists.

There is another aspect to be mentioned regarding interaction. Whereas in the 2005 analyses almost no blogs were found, the usage of this resource was frequently detected in 2006. In this year, on G1, 4.5% of the pages linked to the portal were blogs, compared to 0.4% for Uol. In 2009's analysis, all of the portals adopted this format and frequently posted links on their main page to blogs maintained by hired professionals. On G1, 6.5% of the analysed pages were of blog format, compared to 2.6% for Terra and 6.5% for Uol.

A common routine on G1 and Uol, is the use of the portals professionals (or those of the group to which it belongs) as bloggers which contributes to the perception that a larger share of the published content is made by the portals' own team. We now begin another aspect of the discussion, more related to the content than to resource usage.

In traditional supports, such as radio and TV stations, newspapers and magazines, the discussion about each medium focus on the selection and framing of the published content, its analysis and consequences. Since it is a new support, which tends to mirror the way of making journalism in traditional formats, it is paramount for online journalism to discuss the usage of resources that are specific to it. However, one cannot forget that the intersemiotic translation has an objective: to enhance the potential of expression (PLAZA, 2003, p. 65). But the expression of what?

In the analysed portals, we see that, in many cases, what is expressed is the informational content produced by partner sites or news agencies. In 2005, only 34.7% of Globo.com news content was produced by the site's team. For Terra this figure reached 55%, and for Uol 31.5% (Figure 8). Uol was especially concern with producing more material internally than using content from other media of the group or from news agencies. Such directive led to the growth of the content produced by the site's team in the subsequent analyses, a tendency also found on the other portals.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the criteria used to determine what is considered self-produced material are different for the three portals. G1 considers as their own, the articles produced using information received by news agencies or from other media of the group. On Terra, they seek to check all information before publication, whereas Uol only considers as self-produced content that acquired by the site's team.

4. Conclusion

In the first analysis, in 2005, a certain uniformity of the results reflected a similar approach to journalism by the portals. Among the three that were analysed, Terra was the one with the greatest differences in intersemiotic translation, partly due to the necessity of overcoming a lack of journalistic experience in other media. Both Uol, that was created by *Folha de S. Paulo* and is part of the *Grupo Folha-Uol*, and Globo.com, of *Organizações Globo*, had this experience. Terra sought to adopt an approach not based on traditional format parameters. As an example of such approach, we can mention the incentive for visitors to participate in forums, that allowed them to express themselves more freely than in polls; the creation of *TV Terra*, which complemented the content published in plain texts; and the fact that all of the content was open to non-subscriber access.

The appearance of G1 was another improvement towards Brazilian portal journalism intersemiotic translation. The integration of videos, still images and texts, the adoption of blogs and the wider usage of infofigureics put the portal one step ahead in the usage of the specific resources of hypermedia's as compared to the general context of Brazilian internet journalism.

In 2009's analysis we observed a decrease, on the three portals, in the investment in intersemiotic translation. After G1 was launched, with a different visual layout, Terra and Uol modified their design. All of three currently follow similar patterns of structuring their main pages.

Visual innovation does not seem to be accompanied by an effort in editorial innovation. On Brazilian portals, the adoption of new formats is conducted in a slow and cautious manner – as it can be seen in the case of the blogs, that greatly expanded themselves on the Internet but took years to be incorporated to the portals, or also regarding collaborative content, that as of yet is still rarely found. Despite lagging behind in relation to current tendencies, Brazilian portals can be seen as the mainstream of national digital information.

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