

The newscast in the function of social consciousness during Covid-19: The relationship between journalism, information, empathy fatigue and compassion



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Matheus Aparecido Sartori Fernandes

Bachelor's degree in Social Communication, Advertising, and Marketing
Academic Institution: Universidade Positivo.

ABSTRACT

From the large panels of Times Square to the villages of the Amazon, multimedia information is becoming increasingly ubiquitous in society, and journalism is a fundamental tool for mass communication. The global connection is enabling

news to be disseminated in real-time, allowing cities and countries to act in synchrony with each other.

With the practical advancement of technology, it's possible to analyze the consequent psychological effects of this evolution. The present work reflects on how the excessive exposure to tragedies can generate a reverse effect to that intended by the press. Empathy fatigue is a phenomenon already observed in the realm of medicine and can be contextualized in the realm of journalism.

Keywords: Communication, Democracy, Digital culture, Memory, Technology.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 DEFINITION OF THE THEME AND OBJECT OF STUDY

The new Information and Communication Technologies can be seen as instruments that democratize access to knowledge and interaction (LÉVY, 2011), as they facilitate the exchange of messages between a large part of the population. Unlike traditional media, when there was a clear division between passive senders and receivers, they were usually isolated from each other. Communication through new technologies can reduce many limitations. Although these technologies may have a liberating potential, in the democratic sense, there is a possibility of being applied as tools of influence and domination by a minority that holds control of the means of communication (MARCUSE, 2015).

It must be considered that this phenomenon of communication does not mean that there are exclusively positive points. How to treat, for example, situations in which news is issued by individuals? People who have no training or regulation, as well as the legal entities of traditional media. When it comes to consuming the news, as in the case of Covid-19 or any other topic, the population can receive information from both *influencers* and journalists. To what extent can the democratization of communication affect the quality of the message to the receiver?

The press has the responsibility to report accurately and evenly - and to investigate, to denounce abuses of power (HABERMAS, 1997). In addition to the press, we currently have applications and



systems that manage the distribution of audiovisual content. Some social networks have a scenario where those who establish the rules of visualization are immaterial beings, called algorithms (BELLONI, 2009).

The present work aims to analyze the relationship between the perception of the news with the periodicity of the exposure, that is, to evaluate the relationship of the frequency of the message with the interpretation of the individual about the news. Large-scale tragedies, statistics, macro-social contexts – these contexts can be difficult to make tangible for much of the population. Since these phenomena are complex and multidisciplinary. The perception of these large-scale events may contain interference of cognitive biases on the part of those who receive the message (CORNEILLE, 2012).

As psychophysical research indicates, constant increases in the magnitude of a stimulus in a typical way provoke smaller and smaller changes in response. Applying this principle to valuing human life indicates that a form of *psychophysical numbness* may be a result of our inability to perceive human losses as the number of them increases. SLOVIC, KERJAN (2010, p. 34).

The media, journalism and audiovisual producers are fundamental pillars for society in relation to news, information and entertainment. They can act as a vehicle of education for notions of values, until they direct the individual's perception of what seems to be fair in society (ROSINI, 2012). The intention of this project is to understand how the media narrates and represents the images of social catastrophes, as well as which characteristics the recipients prioritize the most. For this reason, the objectives of this research include – as will be better detailed later, to analyze the discursive structure adopted by the Jornal Nacional regarding the coverage of Covid-19 during the period from April 2021 to April 2022 – with the task of measuring the impact of these messages, using the analysis, through the studies of reception with the viewers. Considering that one of the premises of journalism is to disseminate the prevention of catastrophes, it is crucial to analyze the memorization of the receivers in relation to the content and frequency, therefore, to deepen the relationship between the information disseminated and the possible overexposure of the message. Can the viewer reduce their empathetic capacity by receiving great exposure about a tragedy?

The perception of probabilities and the phenomena of cognitive biases are processes present in the construction of citizen awareness through journalism.

It is possible to confuse the availability heuristic to estimate the probability about a news story (CORNEILLE, 2012). Regardless of the existence of mathematical errors, the discourse is a form of cultural representation of social reality at a given moment (FOUCAULT, 1996).

2 JUSTIFICATION

Psychic numbness, a term coined by Robert J. Lifton, is a psychological way of "turning off" the sensations related to tragic events (SLOVIC, KERJAN, 2010). And this phenomenon can be



beneficial or destructive. Just as a doctor uses this psychic numbness to maintain calm and coldness during emergency care, viewers can experience this phenomenon to assuage emotions related to the tragedy, causing apathy and inertia in the face of major tragic events. This shutting down of sensations can be done consciously, as in the case of doctors, but it can also happen because of empathy fatigue, that is, overuse - just as it happens with muscles and with mental efforts, such as focus. (GOLEMAN 2014).

We are confronted by a range of different identities (each making appeals to us, or rather making appeals to different parts of us), among which it seems possible to make a choice. (HALL, 2006, p. 75)

In a situation like this, it is crucial to examine the effect of the media on maintaining social relations and the perception of reality. The media play a relevant role in the construction of the collective imaginary in relation to catastrophes, acting as an intermediary in this process. Just like academia and industry – influencers' decentralized media has the potential to make a big impact on society. These 'peripheral powers' are sometimes articulated or related to the state. It may even be indispensable for sustaining and acting on governance. (FOUCAULT, 2014).

Another fact that demonstrates the importance of this theme is the Federal Law 9,795 on the National Environmental Education Policy (PNEA). This law says that everyone has the right to environmental education, and it is up to the media to "collaborate actively and permanently in the dissemination of information and educational practices about the environment and incorporate the environmental dimension in their programming."

In addition to the emission of the message of journalism, *the interaction between* the receivers about the news also generates a form of propagation of the news. Social dynamics result from interactions, while they generate new interactions between individuals and their different environments (OLIVEIRA, 2009). With the popularization of the internet and its utensils, we witness the fact that everyone can experience and complete their own representation of the world in this ocean of information and truths. (BRONNER, 2021).

In human communication, Language is essentially dynamic: it is always in action. This constant movement makes one observe in language the most extraordinary things, such as the variation of meanings WHITAKER, (1977, p. 36).

Many social disasters have detailed information in areas where they are not the specialty of much of the public – such as the chemical perception of the oil spill at sea, the extent of the reforestation time of a fire, or even awareness of the impact of Covid-19 on the economy. With complex information of varied topics and taking into account the influence that a person has when passing on a "summary" of the news to another individual, we cannot ignore the relevance of the concept of post-truth, elected word of the year 2016 by *Oxford*, according to the respective dictionary:



"circumstances in which objective facts have less influence to form public opinion than the appeal to emotion and personal beliefs."

Another reason that gives more relevance to this project is the theme that orbits in the relationship between journalism and the message. It's the fake-news. Inspired by philosopher Harry Frankfurt's reflection to analyze the difference between lying and bullshit : Unlike the liar, who keeps an eye on the truth to omit or distort the message, the Bullshitter doesn't care about fact-checking.

(DIEGUEZ; MARMION 2021) The prioritization of characteristics can also impact the effect of the news, such as analyzing which values have more weight in the interpretation of the message. For example, "expressing oneself with passion", "speaking in the can", "being sincere", may be characteristics more valued than prudence, accuracy or serenity (DIEGUEZ; MARMION, 2021).

There are indications that we are in a moment of society of high appreciation of the spectacle (DEBORD, 1987), if entertainment is more important than information, sensationalism can gain the space of journalism. Although rationality is a relevant characteristic in the language of informative journalism, it has the possibility of being transformed into an instrument of domination and oppression of ideas (ADORNO, HORKHEIMER, 1985).

Interdependence and globalization are themes that make us not only more connected, but also more vulnerable to each other. Today, more than before, the political and environmental decisions of one country can affect another continent or the entire planet. The importance of these themes is expressed in the words of Albert Camus:

Hitherto I have always felt like a foreigner in this city, and had no concern for its people. But now that I've seen what I've seen, I know I belong to this place whether I want to or not. This is a subject that interests everyone. (SLOVIC, KERJAN 2010, pg.49).

Our tragedies make us wiser and more ruthless, more prepared to face the horror. We seek peace because we have been through many wars. (ECO, 2020, p. 65).

The availability heuristic can lead people to consider that the things that come more easily to mind are more important and likely (CORNEILLE, 2012).

An example of this phenomenon is represented in the research promoted by Lee, Schwarz, Taubman and Hou (2010). People were interviewed about the degree of satisfaction with the country's health system, or questions about the degree of agreement regarding the proposal to pass on money to sustain a green economy for vaccine development. During the interview, there was a planned sneeze in conversation with a research group. For the group that perceived the sneeze, the perception of risk was more pronounced, as well as they reacted with more dissatisfaction about the health system. The recent and accessible memory of the sneeze may have influenced the perception of the probability of events. This study indicates that people can draw systemic conclusions based on contextual situations in the environment.



It may be the situation, rather than a personality trait, that determines your actions (SOMMERS 2010). This was possible to conclude after Solomon Asch varied aspects of his famous experiment, drastically altering the statistics of the behaviors of the research groups. The error rate dropped to less than 10% in the group once someone disagreed with the colleague's response, giving the first example of disagreement in the group. The fact that many people consider error a conscious choice makes these "group tendencies" relevant to the present study.

There is another phenomenon that can also be considered in situations in which the individual decides in a group. Studied by the French agricultural engineer Maximilien Ringelmann (1861 – 1931), the study shows the correlation between the size of a group and the attitude of its members. Ringelmann found that when group members work together on a task, such as pulling a string, there is a significant reduction in effort compared to when members act alone or in a smaller group. This concept may be relevant in the context of news at the national or global level, such as the effort to adopt new prevention habits en masse.

Studies indicate that the human mind wanders about 50% of the time (GOLEMAN 2015). In this time of rambling, how do people get information from TV? Do receivers evaluate information more in these moments of rambling or become less critical of messages? This phenomenon occurs daily in situations where people are "distracted" from the television while using the cell phone, but continue to "capture" the information coming from the television.

In "The Brain a User's Guide," Dr. John Ratey, a psychiatrist and adjunct professor at Harvard Medical School, considers through research that on average a quarter of people end up believing in false memories after being induced about some false memory of the past. According to the author, two factors that accentuate the chance of believing false memories are the fact of imagining the event in detail and a trusted person confirming the event, even if by mistake. Dr. Ratey's study was also based on another leading researcher on the topic, Elizabeth F. Loftus, an American cognitive psychologist who specializes in human memory. One of the conclusions is that fictitious suggestion can alter real memory, distorting the reality that happened.

The formation and recall of each memory is influenced by the mood, environment and gestalt at the time the memory is formed or retrieved. That is why the same event can be remembered in different ways by different people. One person is not necessarily "right" and the other "wrong." Memories also change to the same extent that we change over time. New experiences change our attitudes and therefore how and what we remember. RATEY (2002, p. 209)

Memories can be categorized in some ways, such as: subjective memory, working memory, explicit memory, implicit memory, sensory memory, motor memory, verbal memory, visuo-spatial memory, among other subcategories (RATEY 2002). The process of memorization is also a phenomenon of extreme importance for the present work.



In Brazil, formal education is still lacking in science teaching,¹ granting the media an important role in the process of scientific learning. Journalism is one of the ways and sometimes the only way to bring the citizen to the knowledge of the discoveries of science or scientific matters in general.

To conclude the justification of the relevance of the present work, it is evidenced a phenomenon that, perhaps, part of journalism is referencing itself in characteristics of entertainment to attract audience. It is possible that a portion of current journalism has adopted more dramatic elements in its narratives, resembling movies and soap operas.

Sensationalism can be the reflection of the monetization of information. News can become a product, and truth can be sacrificed in the name of profitability. (MCCHESENEY 2016).

3 GOALS

3.1 GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To evaluate the impact of reports of social tragedies, from the point of view of content, frequency, and recall, carried out on TV Globo, having as an analytical approach the understanding of the research subjects about what was reported.

3.2 SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- Check if excessive reporting can cause a reduction in viewers' empathy;
- Investigate the processes of memorization in relation to journalistic discourses
- Measure questions about the interpretation and frequency of the message;
- Analyze the understanding of the concept of dangerousness, magnitude;
- Contextualize the answers and notes obtained with concepts elaborated by the authors that were used to support the present work;
- Catalog which values are prioritized in the perception of the receivers.

4 HYPOTHESES OR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Do people become more empathetic after being exposed to tragedies?
- Does too much information about accidents make the public more apathetic?
- Can advertisements that precede and precede newspaper programs - with simulated and programmed contexts - affect the interpretation of journalistic facts?
- Can the frequency of the message impact the interpretation of the news?
- What factors can alter our memories of past events?

¹ Data taken from the <https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/censo-escolar/inep-divulga-dados-da-1a-etapa-do-censo-escolar-2021> and <http://portal.mec.gov.br/component/tags/tag/33571>



5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As classificatory living beings (DURKHEIM, 1999) the objective for this phase is the use of interactive activities by the investigator of this study, employing the approach of Reception Studies as a methodology. Categorize analyses of the message emission and evaluate the impact on each social subject, phenomena where various meanings, subjectivities, and expressions of way of life circulate, as well as consider the priorities when memorizing news. This methodology is chosen with the objective of analyzing the social dynamics in the processes of signification and expression, a phenomenon that involves the exchange of different codes, messages and meanings between senders and receivers. To obtain answers that offer foundations to the question raised, it is recommended to employ quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The first will occur through the application of a questionnaire, being possible to collect information and point out the profile of the analyzed publics, such as age group, habits, socioeconomic level and lifestyle. The research samples are relative to the time and resources of execution, estimating between 300 to 900 respondents. The outcomes will guide the qualitative phase, which will enable the evaluation, validation, or rejection of the proposed assumptions, also provide answers to the statements presented in the course of the project. The proposal for the second stage is the application of dynamics by the researcher of this work, employing the In-depth interview. The methodology of reception studies offers researchers a series of resources to analyze how different parts of the population interpret and assign meaning to the messages conveyed in TV news programs. Considering the social impact, the selection of the newscast is made based on the audience. Among the strategies applied, interviews, questionnaires and observation stand out.

6 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

To deepen the methodology of research in communication, Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes. To study social phenomena with emphasis on group behaviors, Solomon Asch, Maximilien Ringelmann were studied. So did Dr. Michel-Kerjan to clarify concepts about decisions and contexts of uncertainty. To analyze concepts that touch reports of great magnitude, systems thinking can be considered relevant. Therefore, the literature review of Peter Senge and Daniel Goleman. Dinair Velleda Teixeira regarding the importance of the media in the construction of the collective imaginary about environmental disasters. On the processes of memorization and on the expression of these memories - the basis was made with Dr John Ratey and Elizabeth F. Loftus. To explain the theme of language, communication, polysemy and rhetoric, José Roberto Whitaker Penteado.

Concepts of cognitive bias and heuristics are supported by Corneille Oliver, Ewa Drozda-Senkowski and Daniel Kahneman. Themes closely linked to the phenomena of decision and preference. Also considered are the research and excerpts from Darren Bridger's work regarding



concepts of Neuromarketing, such as perceptual fluidity and the unexpected influence of journalism. The news can influence behavior even in unexpected ways, such as the increase in sales of Mars chocolate ²in 1997 when NASA's *pathfinder* robot had descended on the planet Mars and was very much in the news.

To this end, the concepts of Stuart Hall will be studied, regarding cultural consumption and group identity. Lee, Schwarz, Taubman, and Hou regarding the relationships between risk perception and probability surveys.

To delve into the strong relationship between psychology and the context environment, Sam Sommers.

Daniel Goleman again to delve into topics such as mind-wandering - a phenomenon very present while users watch news on TV while using cell phones. Sebastian Dieguez to delve into the way people prioritize information and values for interpretation over the message. Umberto Eco regarding the relationship between cultural divergences and social interdependence. Grounding the relationship between politics, cooperation, democracy and communication, Jürgen Habermas.

SCHEDULE 1. Literature Review: August 2023 to December 2023. 2. Adequacy of the project and definition of the objects of study April and May 2024.3. Elaboration of the research questionnaire June 2024.4. Application of reception surveys July 2024 to December 2024. 5. Descriptive analysis of the collected data.5. Final writing of the dissertation and preparation for the board January to August 2025.6. Correction and final delivery October 2025 to December 2025.

² BERGER, J. Contagious: Why Things Catch On. Nova York: Simon and Schuster



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