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Information Technologies, Social Change and the Future

The Case of Online Journalism in Portugal

■ *Helena Sousa*

ABSTRACT

■ The main objective of this article is to equate social change and new information and communication technologies (ICTs). From a multitude of theoretical entry points, the author decided to outline the key concept of time and to discuss its explanatory possibilities in a specific context: the development of online journalism in Portugal over the last decade. She takes the view that general formulations about the relationship between social change and technology could not elucidate the nature of social transformations nor the driving and opposing forces in particular contexts. Technology per se is not a relevant explicative variable but, in context, it certainly contributes to clarify social change. This article argues that the understanding of different simultaneous rhythms of change requires complementary incursions through the past, the present and the empirically accessible future. ■

Key Words information technologies, Internet, online journalism, Portugal, social change

Introduction

Profound social and technological complexity, the acceleration of innovation and risk and radical uncertainty make it difficult to map out social changes and to make sense of extremely unstable technology-based empirical realities. In a volatile, multi-contextual world, the Internet

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has become a highly influential social utopia and dystopia. Despite the unending debate about the Internet's participatory potential vs the Internet as yet another (albeit more sophisticated) social control mechanism, there is a huge consensus among academics that the Internet, like any other technology, is simultaneously the producer and the product of social change. Technology is 'both the product and the instrument of social needs, interests and conflicts. Technology is effect and cause at the same time' (Beck, 2000: 122).

Though useful in providing orientation for apprehending the permanent dynamic between technology and social change, general formulations cannot satisfactorily illuminate the nature of social transformations. This article attempts to address social change and new information and communication technologies (ICTs), looking at the key concept of time in a specific Internet environment: online journalism in Portugal.¹

The two most relevant theoretical perspectives for the purposes of this article are the School of *Annales*, namely Fernand Braudel's dialectical duration, and the sociology of time, particularly Barbara Adam's conceptualization of time and the relevance of the future in the analysis of human intentionality and action. So, basically we look at time from two different perspectives: as a category which might help us identify different levels of social change (*what* has changed?) and as a potential explanatory tool of human action (*why* has it changed?).

Dialectical duration

To address change is to address time and no social discipline has paid more attention to time than history. The French historian Fernand Braudel, a prominent author of the *Annales* School (also known as *nouvelle histoire*), has put forward an analytic framework that might help move beyond dichotomized approaches to change, namely the identification of continuities and discontinuities, alterations and permanencies in social processes.

According to Braudel's (1969, 1981) 'dialectical duration', social time is plural; it is composed of different velocities. It integrates three simultaneous durations: temporality of events, intermediary duration of conjunctures and long-term structural time. Braudel recognizes the fragility of such categorization, where – from the instant up to structural time – multiple (infinite) additional layers of durations can be added. Still, we focus on his three organizing terms (events, conjunctures and

structures), since, despite their frailty, they can be productively distinguished and dialectically appreciated.

Like any other social science, history decomposes time, that is, it disintegrates chronological realities according to given criteria and preferences. When Braudel mentions the temporality of events he refers to innovations, inventions, episodes, individual stories and fast changing transformations. This is the time of the narrator, the time of the journalist. In this *événementielle* duration, the past is composed of never-ending shiny and obscure facts that tend to keep micro-history and micro-sociology busy. The French historian acknowledges that understanding the event as a noisy explosion that only lasts a moment is difficult to sustain. Events might be full of meaning and might express complex long-term ramifications. Still, Braudel argues that events do not have the necessary historic density to develop advanced scientific reflection: 'the temporality of events is the most capricious and deceptive of all durations' (Braudel, 1981: 11).

If the *événementielle* social narratives are frequently associated with traditional political history, the intermediary duration of conjunctures is often linked with social and economic history. If attention is paid to cycles, trends, regimes or cultural movements, 'one day' or 'one year' cannot be adequate chronological units. From this conjunctural perspective, time is no longer a succession of events. Daily episodes and individual actions are undervalued in favour of (supposedly more meaningful) 10-, 25- or even 50-year-long cycles. For Braudel, these chronological limits do not have absolute value as they might be adjusted according to the explanatory capability of particular periods.

Differently from conjunctures, structures are long-term continuous durations (apparently immutable) that incorporate cyclical changes and multiple events. Structures are constructions (*architectures*, to use Braudel's concept) time can hardly erode. In this sense, they operate as the wider contexts within which forces of change and resistance are simultaneously exerted. Structures are the individual's geographical, biological, spiritual and mental limits. 'Mental frameworks are also long duration prisons', specifies Braudel (1969: 51). Thus, cultural semi-immobilities are related to these profound structural constraints. For Braudel, structural time has an exceptional value because it illuminates events and conjunctures.

Braudel's dialectical duration is therefore about going beyond the individual and the event while perceiving them as integral parts of wider and deeper social realities. The dialectical duration is therefore a multi-layered, composed time that dynamically incorporates different velocities of change. The observation of social time as plural might eventually

contribute to the analysis of diverse levels of change in contemporary ICT-related phenomena. The acceleration of technological innovation and social consequences are difficult to frame within dichotomized views of changes vs permanencies. Continuities do not outweigh discontinuities or vice versa. Changes and continuities are intricately related. Fast-changing individual and episodic developments can only be adequately framed within individual and collective durable structures. Social processes incorporate different rhythms of change.

Events

An *événementielle* or episodic approach to online journalism in Portugal would display a tumultuous succession of events from 1995 up to the present day (see Pinto et al., 2000; Granado, 2005). *Jornal de Notícias* was the very first Portuguese daily newspaper to put its print edition online. In the same year, other relevant traditional media either registered their Internet domains or put their editions online (e.g. *Público* newspaper and *Lusa* news agency). From these early days to the turn of the century, the Internet was seen (though not very clearly) as the future: local, regional, national newspapers as well as radio and television broadcasts became freely accessible on the Internet. A few traditional media (such as TSF radio) developed independent newsrooms for specific online editions and a handful of exclusively online journalistic projects were launched (e.g. *Setubalnarede.pt* in 1997, *Diário Digital* in 1999 and *Portugal Diário* in 2000).

From the turn of the century, uncertainty became the rule of the game. New investments continued to be made in the digital media market (Impresa' *SIC Online* is a relevant example), but the Internet could no longer be viewed with such unabated optimism. The excitement of the first half decade has been followed by the crude reality of unsuccessful financial investments. The most important Portuguese weekly newspaper, *Expresso*, closed its online daily news production and 17 journalists were laid off. *Diário Digital* decided to merge its three sites into a one single site and its labour force was reduced: 20 journalists were made redundant (Bastos, 2005; Granado, 2005). In some cases, however, trimming down was not quite enough. In 2001, for instance, the *Imaterial.tv* project promised to revolutionize Portuguese journalism but a few months after contracts were signed 40 journalists lost their jobs and the Internet site never went past the conceptual/experimental phase (see *Visão*, 19 July 2001; Bastos, 2005). The downsizing or utter failure of online journalistic projects suggests that there was a discrepancy between

expectations and the companies' effective sustainability in the new digital environment.

The sustained growth of Internet penetration² and the increase in readership of news sites³ are not yet sufficient to pull companies out of a precarious situation. No satisfactory business models have been developed so far, and autonomous and multimedia groups oscillate from investment to disinvestment, from models based on free access (believing that attention might attract advertising) to partial or fully paid access (hoping that the number of paid hits will eventually pay off). The initial technological euphoria and the ultimate instability have certainly created the conditions for an abundance of events but online journalistic companies have not achieved a financial return and traditional media companies are not taking dividends out of their online investment. The gap between technological expectations and social materialization is obvious.

Conjuncture

Acknowledging that the development of online journalism is taking place now, it is obviously difficult to discuss online journalism in Portugal as a new journalistic cycle. A succession of events (however detailed) cannot necessarily demonstrate this possibility. As Braudel has argued, the temporality of events is deceptive. Nonetheless, it can be asked if the series of events that have taken place are part of a new conjuncture. If so, what transformations are taking place? What trends can be identified within this hypothetical new cycle? If it started in the mid-1990s (initially with the mere transposition of traditional newspapers' content to digital supports, the so-called 'shovelware'), how long will it last for? Is it a short 10-year cycle and is it just about to finish or will it last for another 10, 20, 30 or 40 years?

Taking the provisional view that online journalism and its inevitable articulations with traditional supports (press, radio and television) constitute a new cycle in public communication, differences in relation to previous cycle(s) must be observable. The technological possibilities of the Internet are outstanding and if journalism has entered a new 'medium cycle', distinct practices must be in place. Interactivity, hypertextuality, multimediality and asynchronicity have the potential to challenge and redefine online journalism and journalism in general (Bardoel, 2002: 505). But have they?

According to Canavilhas's (2005) recent study of online journalism in Portugal, the (theoretical) recognition of the Internet's potential has

not profoundly transformed journalistic routines and logics. Indeed, Canavilhas (2005: 2–3) demonstrates that online journalism in Portugal is basically characterized by last-minute news updates on the web. The exclusively online paper *Diário Digital* is like a news agency with hyperlinks, archives, opinion slots and journalists' contacts. In addition to these functions, another solely online paper, *Portugal Diário*, has multimedia dossiers (containing texts, photos and video clips). The other online publications share similar characteristics with the traditional media.

Despite the initial hype, online journalism in Portugal is a small-scale professional activity. Canavilhas (2005) has identified 25 online publications (comprising both exclusively online editions and traditional media with online editions) and a total of 93 journalists, although the final sample in this study included only 20 publications and 79 journalists. The journalists working on the online media are young (83.4 percent are under 35), they are just starting their professional careers (53.7 percent), they lack specific online training (only 68.5 percent use hyperlinks and only 44.4 percent mentioned the use of non-textual elements in their journalistic work). Furthermore, online publications do not explore the interactive potential of the web, as is exemplified by the fact that only 22.2 percent of all journalists include their electronic addresses in their byline. Significantly, however, 91.6 percent of those who do make their email address available receive feedback from their audiences.

Considering the reduction in the online sector in Portugal and the slow transformation in journalistic praxis, it could be argued that increasing Internet penetration and the web's technical potential did not cause any immediate major changes. To fully appreciate gradual changes at this level, a deeper analysis of the relationship between technology and social practices would have to be attempted.

Structure

If 10 years of digital journalism is too short to speak confidently about a new journalistic cycle in Portugal, an even greater difficulty would apply to any attempt to depict the period as the initial stage of a new structure, a new architecture, a new long-term social construction in terms of public sphere communication. Though not specifically mentioning the Portuguese case, several authors believe we are facing an irreversible structural change in public communication that will inexorably transform journal-

ism as we have known it since the 19th century (Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998; Alves, 2005; Chalaby, 1998, 2000, 2001).

Structures are, in Braudel's words, long-term constructions time can hardly erode but they are certainly not immutable. According to Chalaby (2000: 1–2), journalism is not a timeless, universal discourse. Its emergence in the 19th century was determined by specific economic and political conditions. Journalism corresponds to a distinct period of capitalism and moment in modernity. When these conditions change, public discourses, such as journalism, change. If indeed capitalism is moving from its industrial to its informational phase (Castells, 1996, 1998); if indeed the process of modernization is dissolving the structures of industrial society and replacing them with a risk society (Beck, 1992), then the economic and political conditions that brought journalism into existence will soon cease to prevail, and journalism, at least in its traditional form, with them.

Chalaby argues that the age of journalism stretches from the mid-19th century to the end of the 20th century. During this period, journalism was invented, newspapers depoliticized, discursive practices professionalized, newspaper content commercialized and the press became an industry. Due to a combination of economic and technological factors, this long-term structure is now changing:

Digitalization and globalization weaken public broadcasters; the Internet multiplies content providers; new media allow new sources to communicate directly with their audiences; entertainment precedes journalism; news is changing, and finally, leading journalistic organizations are integrated into transnational entertainment corporations which today dominate media markets. (Chalaby, 2000: 1)

Since the mid-1990s, journalistic companies have mostly transposed traditional discursive codes to the Internet. Alves (2005) believes that the Internet is not just another medium like radio or television. The web represents a paradigmatic change in the sense that it alters the balance of power between the sender and the receiver, which is – in his view – a true break from unidirectional traditional models.

In the beginning of the second decade of digital journalism it becomes clearer the extraordinary transference of power from the sender to the receiver. It opens up the way to self-centric communication because it is based on the receiver's individual choices. (Alves, 2005: 4).

The dissemination of portable media devices and the popularization of RSS aggregators or weblogs are examples of such a change.

The exponential proliferation of information production centres and the extraordinary expansion of audiences' participatory power appear to be at the heart of the paradigmatic shift. In this irreversible structural reconfiguration of the public sphere, journalism has lost its monopoly as the principal narrator of the present in the public sphere. Journalism might well maintain its core professional values and techniques but the digital age has fundamentally eroded its role as the actuality storyteller.

If this is the beginning of a new structure, the fundamental reasons for that change are not to be found in journalistic activity itself but in the transformation of global cultural, economic, social and technological conditions. The conditions under which journalism is operating are irreversibly different. Therefore the relevant question would be not 'what is changing in journalism?', but 'how are structural changes changing journalism?' Though not explicitly, this approach also incorporates a deterministic disguise as it does not perceive journalism itself as a constitutive part of the dialectical construction of the (supposedly) new paradigm.

Future

The extremely short life of online journalism in Portugal makes it exceptionally difficult to assess structural change. However, a preliminary incursion through Braudel's dialectical duration seems to identify different levels of simultaneous movements. Apparently one social reality incorporates distinct rhythms of change, taking for granted the conceptualization of social reality as flux and incessant transformation. Fast-changing events intertwine with intermediary durations and with (almost inaccessible) long-term structures. But, if incursions into the past have been crucially recognized as indispensable to the understanding of present-day uncertainties and complexities, the same has not yet happened in relation to the future. In fact, there is no consensus regarding the integration of the future as a decisive dimension to grasp the complex dynamics of social change.

Braudel (1981) recognizes that the present and the past mutually illuminate each other but he has not fully acknowledged the role of the future in historical analysis. Grounding his sociological analysis in the present and in the recent past, Castells (2004: 164) states that the future cannot be studied in scientific terms. Indeed, social scientists have been particularly preoccupied with giving answers as to how the present and the future follow on from preceding events, i.e. the past. At very

best, the future has been perceived as a consequence of past and present actions but the present has not been recognized as a consequence of the future.

Wilbert Moore, a mentor of the sociology of the future, stated that 'the future *is* the cause of the present in substantial degree, and it is the failure of sociologists to come to terms with human purpose that has hidden this verity from their view' (Moore, 1966, cited in Adam, 2004a: 10). According to Adam,

as scientists sociologists cannot evade past-based causality, since this is the undisputed scientific way of explaining temporal relations. . . . There is however, another, much older way of explaining causal relations and it is grounded on "why" questions and it is predominantly focused on the pull from the future. (Adam, 2004a: 11).

The present might be the locus of both individual and collective action but visions of the future, ideals and utopias guide those actions. Images of the future are reality in the sense that they orient human action and produce social effects. Individual and collective imaginaries and expectations are real (despite their 'immateriality') insofar as they produce social consequences.

Equally fundamental to contemporary theory is St Augustine's counter-intuitive observation that the 'flow of time' is from the future via the present into the past. When we observe the world around us it appears as a progression from past to the future. Yet, from the relative position of the Self, we must admit that life involves an unbroken chain of future-oriented decisions that bring the future into the present and allow it to fade into the past. (Adam, 2004b: 54)

If this means crucially that the time of the mind and the time of the external world move in opposite directions, addressing social change, particularly in innovative technological contexts, must also integrate the study of the perceived future. In Germany, there have been a few studies on visions of the Internet future. Following a 1995 study by Beck and Vowe (a qualitative content analysis of 25 reports and articles on the Internet in different traditional media between 1992 and 1994), Rössler (2001) studied coverage of the Internet in the three most popular weekly magazines (*Der Spiegel*, *Focus* and *Stern*) over three-and-a-half years (from 1995 to June 1998). Among other things, Rössler's work demonstrates that news magazine framing was characterized by a 'strong bias towards *positive*, sometimes euphoric argumentation patterns' and by a 'strong

tendency to expect *emancipatory effects* of the internet on the single individual' (Rössler, 2001: 62; emphasis in the original).

Even if these results cannot be directly transposed to the Portuguese context as no comparative data are available, there is evidence to indicate that the Portuguese media and other social actors were also tending towards a highly favourable assessment of the Internet at least until the turn of the century. There was a belief that the Internet was the future and if journalism was to be part of that future it would have to pay serious attention to this new converging medium. The Internet introduced profound uncertainty into the journalistic field and the perception of inevitable and irreversible change. 'No one knew which was the right path but everybody seemed to have the inexorable certainty that the digital journalism revolution had arrived and no one wanted to be left behind' (Bastos, 2005: 2).

In a written statement, Pedro Brinca, director of the first exclusively online journalistic project in Portugal, *Setúbal na Rede*, has explained the foundation and the development of the publication, stating that it was not the result of an entrepreneurial plan. At the time, 'there was no perception that it was a pioneer project nor did it emerge with specific commercial interests. The imperative was to do new things with quality, dignity, audacity and ambition' (Brinca, forthcoming).

The urge to get involved in Internet-supported journalistic projects regardless of business plans was not unique to *Setúbal na Rede*. In fact, two years before, in 1995, the leading generalist newspaper, *Jornal de Notícias*, had decided to put its paper edition on the Internet. Despite the lack of clarity in terms of the business and editorial potential of the initiative or its further developments, the technological possibilities of the Internet were too appealing. Molinos et al. (2005) describe the technological drive behind *Jornal de Notícias'* investment in the online arena. The authors argue that technological curiosity rather than editorial rationale or business strategies was the *leitmotiv*. Initial discussions about the *Jornal de Notícias* website date back to 1994, when online journalism was in the international forum: 'it sparked the spirit of the technical drive' (Molinos et al., 2005: 2).

In contrast to *Setúbal na Rede* and *Jornal de Notícias*, many online journalistic projects have either substantially downsized or have closed down completely during the post-2000 Internet dystopia. Nevertheless, a proliferation of projects during the first few years of online journalism in Portugal suggests that technological utopias also played a role in the decisions made in the sphere of online journalism and therefore in its present-day configuration.

Technology and change: concluding remarks

The main objective of this article has been to equate social change with the new ICTs. Accordingly, from many possible theoretical entry points, it was decided to outline the concept of time, in a specific context: the development of online journalism in Portugal. We took the view that general formulations about the relationship between social change and technology could not shed light on the nature of social transformations nor on the driving and opposing forces in particular contexts. Theories must be constructed slowly, departing from contextualized empirical realities in articulation with other contextualized empirical realities.

Referring to his previous work, Manuel Castells – probably the contemporary author who has paid most attention to the relation between technology and society – states that what he was trying to do was to find the key sequence for social change and to propose analytic and conceptual tools that could inform the process of change. For that purpose, he felt he needed to find a common nucleus for that change that would be applicable to multidimensional transformation in all contexts:

I believe I found it. Indeed, it is not technology, though technological transformation is the conductor of all change and it has been a useful starting point. It is the double logic of networks and identity. On the one hand, the networks of instrumentality moved by new information technologies. On the other hand, the power of identity, tying up people to their history, geography and cultures. (Castells and Ince, 2004: 165)

For someone with such an impressive body of empirical work, the theoretical link between technology and social change is remarkably unclear.

Castells (1998) sees the network logic pervading all spheres of social, economic and cultural life. It is self-expanding and all-embracing. As van Dijk has critically pointed out, Castells neglects the design dimension and the social struggle over networks. ‘Social actors take positions inside networks communicating at centres, nodes and terminals, and they are engaged in daily struggles over the construction and use of these networks’ (van Dijk, n.d.). If networks have autonomous logics, independent from human action and desire, it might in fact be argued that networks alone cause change. But this is, one must recognize, a difficult argument to sustain. Probably, Castells established such a blurred connection between technology and society because, if attempted in general terms, it is an impossible assignment. Grand theories (e.g. globalization, digital age, postindustrial society, the information era, information society and knowledge society) cannot account for particular social dynamics. Grand angular lenses might offer valuable broad pictures

but they certainly do not provide one single key capable of opening theoretical entry points to highly differentiated sociological contexts.

In the case we have put forward, it would certainly be quite difficult to argue that technology itself is the cause for change. Technology per se is not a relevant explicative variable. In context, however, it is certainly an integral part of intertwined multi-level social transformations. From an *événementielle* perspective, it might be argued that technological innovation (namely the fast development of Internet software, collaborative tools, interactive new instruments, etc.) made online journalism possible. The Internet, over and above increasing the access to information and interactivity for journalists operating in traditional media, became a new form of technical support for journalism. Rapidly changing technical developments in the Internet have created the conditions for new opportunities and in fact online projects have been developed. Technological possibilities and concomitant technological utopias certainly contributed to the turbulent succession of events in the first 10 years of online journalism in Portugal.

If it is relatively easy to chart events, the same cannot be said in relation to longer durations. To assess conjunctural change is a far more complex task and not enough time has passed to assertively identify 1995 as the landmark year for the beginning of a new journalistic cycle in Portugal. The Internet, which up to the mid-1990s had just been timidly used as an additional information source for traditional media, became effectively a new technological support for journalism. The Internet's technological possibilities would certainly allow for radically new formats and new professional practices. Nonetheless, Canavilhas's (2005) study shows that it has not quite happened, yet. As Bardoel (2002: 502) puts it, technological changes can indeed proceed quite rapidly, but changes in social behaviour take much longer. Indeed, looking solely at the Internet's extraordinary technological capabilities, the maintenance of pre-Internet habits and routines can hardly be explained. Furthermore, technology alone does not elucidate the extremely small dimension of the online journalism market in Portugal nor does it clarify the economic failure of numerous online projects.

From a structural point of view, it is obviously even more difficult to see online journalism as an integral part of a new long-term social construction and to establish a clear link between change (in this case, extremely slow change) and technology. Authors who believe that the Internet's technical developments will inevitably take society into a new communicational paradigm centre their arguments on the exponential increase in production centres and in the interactive possibilities. They

argue that the proliferation of tools of self-expression such as blogs will inexorably alter the traditional unidirectional media paradigm that characterized the pre-Internet age. Indeed, the technological possibilities for multidirectional communication are in place and it is clear that the national blogosphere has boomed and consequently it has complicated public debate in Portugal. Journalists, it might be argued, have lost the monopoly of present-day narratives (they now compete with new non-journalistic news production centres) and, due to new watchdogs (particularly media weblogs), they are scrutinized in an unprecedented manner.

Nevertheless, the expansion of access to information and the escalation of the (highly fragmented) debate in Internet forums appear an insufficient basis for a paradigmatic change. The participatory technological potential of new Internet tools might play a very significant role in this new eventually long-term construction. But for that to take place, citizens in general, and not just cultural elites, must recognize the individual and social value of their participation. That appears to depend more on the extremely slow change of Braudel's prisons (such as mental frameworks) than on the autonomous revolutionary power of Castell's networks.

Notes

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1. Though access to Internet content is possible from any Internet-linked computer, online journalistic publications are registered by the Portuguese authorities and operate within the national legal framework.
2. Internet penetration in Portugal is 58 percent (almost 10 percent above the EU 25 average) and 'user growth' increased 143.6 percent between 2000 and 2005 (at: internetworldstats.com/stats9.htm, accessed 19 February 2006).
3. The number of people reading news sites in Portugal increased from 662,000 in January 2005 to 794,000 in January 2006 (www.marktest.com.wap, accessed 19 February 2006).

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