The Collaborative and Online Research as methodology of work: notes from the Brazilian experience of the GJOL members

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1. Structuring the collaborative research

The studies about the cyber-journalism started to gain body and substance in Brazil, in the middle 90’s, together with the migration to the Web of the journalistic vehicles associated to big communication companies, at the same time that experiments intended to promote the use of the resources offered by the digital networks proliferated. As result of the effort to systematise the research in the cyberspace Journalism area started at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) in 1995, in 1998 the Group of On-line Journalism (GJOL) was created at the Faculty of Communication of the UFBA, coordinated by the professors Elias Machado and Marcos Palacios (Machado and Palacios, 2007).

The attitude adopted by the coordinators and participants of the GJOL, from the very beginning of their activities, privileged the idea of group work as one of the guiding principles of the group. More than a finished project a priori established, the methodology of a research group is improved all along the working process, gaining new formats whenever necessary, either to add new procedures acknowledged as valid,

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or to answer to new needs assumed by the activities, more and more complex, of the researchers.

The practice of the collaborative research as the central working point in all its stages, inside and outside the exclusive context of the classroom, is a decisive step in the transformation of a group of students and a group of professors, different regarding their accumulated knowledge, into groups of researchers (beginners, in training – degree students, PhD degree students and seniors), distinguished according to their individual capacity of participating and contributing in the search and creation of knowledge collectively built (Brandão, 2003).

The applying of methodology is not restricted to an individual exercise of the GJOL members carried out by means of simply adopting a set of prescriptions; it also implies the guided participation in the complex of activities collectively defined and carried out by the group. The own widening of these activities, with the establishment of research networks, international cooperation, structuring with the teaching of the degree and the approaching to the journalistic organisations by means of the applied research is more the result of a demand established by common consent, than a decision imposed to the group members by the coordinators.

Once ended the phase devoted to the internal organization as a collective research group – taking place between the year 1995 and the year 1999 – the GJOL was ready to confront two other essential steps in the production of knowledge in the contemporary societies, with deep consequences for the research methodologies used by the group researchers: 1) establishing national and international networks of theoretical and applied research and 2) consolidating local systems of technological innovation.

2. Systematics of research in dialogue

Taking into account the degree of development attained by the research in Journalism in Brazil, it seems prudent that we state that no research group of excellence should forget establishing national and international research networks in which it work as a point within a multiple structure gathering together researchers with several traditions, methodologies and particular knowledge around common thematic projects. The Internet greatly promoted the perspectives of quick interaction among researchers and the “individual research” tends more and more, to be characterized as a subproject
of wider and collaborative projects, carried out according to systematics and parameters previously established in the reference group. It seems to be unavoidable that the promotion agencies privilege the financing of projects included in such contexts.

From 2000, the GJOL takes part in scientific cooperation agreements with researchers from other countries (Portugal 2000; Texas 2002; Latin-American Network for the Development of Methodologies and Softwares for the Teaching of Journalism in Broadband Networks, 2003; Alfa Programme, of the European Union, 2004; Journalism on the Internet: Compared Study of the Cybermedia Brazil Spain, 2007). The research networks are nowadays of central importance and an imperative for the refinement of the different models of research systematic that are being developed within the Brazilian groups in process of consolidation.

First of all, the compared thematic researches carried out in a joint way have direct implications about the research methodology and the rules of operation adopted by the group. One of the criteria for joining the GJOL is the degree of proximity with the moulds researched by the networks in which the group participates. And this criteria is not given just because of instrumental reasons, but because, if the researcher is within the area of interest of the compared researches, he/she will have greater possibilities of exchange for his/her post-graduate studies, mainly in the case of PhD degree students.

Secondly, the methodology of collective work gains a new component with the incorporation of colleagues with different methodological traditions, cultural formations and professional experiences. Such cultural and academic diversity qualifies the capacity of exchange with the enrichment of the network of researchers, making possible methodological and conceptual discussions, which enable the members of the different groups to achieve a mutual learning, with the consolidation of a common knowledge.

Thirdly, the co-orientation assumes, more and more, an institutionalized form of existence, with the permanent cooperation between the advisers of several groups. A resource that guarantees an increase in the quality of the formation since it allows, the junior researchers, a contact with different methodologies and bibliographies, removing the ever present danger of the endogeny, which so much damage has caused to the research centres, in lots of places all along the time.
It is not, obviously, a case of unifying of methodologies, but, on the contrary, of leading different methodological proposals to a meeting point for dialogue. For each situation of network formation, the dialogue must necessarily be established, taking as joint point concrete problems determined by the thematic of the joint research. From such dialogue and negotiation must emerge the consensual model of researching action, created for that specific task, from the methodological contributions of all the participating members (Palacios, 2007).

In our experience up to this moment, it stands out as really close to this procedure, the systematic adopted with the Works of the ICOD Network, through the Alfa Programme, of the European Community, to which the GJOL was linked between 2004 and 2006. Under the coordination of the Professor Carlos Scolari, of the University of Vic (Spain), and bringing together researchers from Spain, Portugal, France, Argentina, Cuba and Brazil, the network began its works with a working day of three meetings aiming at the exchanging of experiences and dialogue about the multiple perspectives opened for the carrying out of the task proposed by the group.

Centred in the study of the professional competences and academic challenges in the era of the digital communication, the group of researchers got a synergy in the exchange of accumulated experiences of research, which resulted in the establishment of a systematic of work coherent and with clearly defined lines, having as result a valuable contribution to the studies of such subject matter, (Scolari et al, 2006). In such situation of work, the diversity provisionally coalesces in a methodological unit, which besides producing a product compatible with the accumulated and shared experience of the participants, works as a highly efficient mechanism for the improvement of the systematics used in the context of each group involved.

3. Reports of Experiences

The carrying out of the PhD and post-PhD stay in a foreign university is aligned with the systematics of the collaborative and online research which guides the work of the GJOL. This is also one of the anchoring points for the outlined actions, because, the insertion of PhD students and people with a PhD degree in work teams of groups abroad

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6 The final report can be visited online at <http://www.icod.ubi.pt/home.html>.
has assistance in the expansion of the group action with its participation in international scientific projects, in the own formation of research networks, as well as in the socialization of the knowledge produced in Brazil in the field of journalism and, specifically, in the sub-field of cyber-journalism.

The stays abroad favour for the PhD students – researchers in training – the fundamental opportunity to practise autonomy of research, prospect contacts and future agreements, besides representing a fertile period for the opening of ideas, personal and academic enrichment in the professional careers of these researchers. Besides this, the agreements and projects signed by the GJOL from 2000 have lead the senior researchers, people with a PhD degree and people who have recently obtained their PhD degree to the carrying out of post-PhD researches in European institutions. Also in these cases, the individual researches are configured as subprojects integrated to the wider intentions defined for the works developed with foreign colleagues and groups.

From 2007 onwards, with the validity of the project Journalism in the Internet: Compared Study of the Cyber-media Brazil/Spain (CAPES/DGU), financed by the Ministries of Education of both countries, PhD students and doctors are already working together with groups of the universities of Navarra and Santiago de Compostela, and it is planned that until 2009 at least other four researchers will stay in different Spanish institutions (University of the Basque Country, University of Malaga, etc). On the other hand, stays of PhD and post-PhD Spanish researchers in Brazil are planned.

Next, as illustration of the positive effects of the academic exchanges, evidences of the experiences during the PhD stay – and during the post-PhD research currently taking place – are presented. They are reported by Luciana Mielniczuk, Suzana Barbosa and Carla Schwingel.

3.1. Luciana Mielniczuk

In the period between January and December, 2001, when I was in the third year of the PhD degree, I carried out the PhD stay in collaboration with an institution abroad at the Department of Communication and Art of the University of Aveiro (UA). The stay took place in the context of the CAPES/ICCTI agreement. Participating in a stay supported by an agreement between the university institutions offers better backing for the coexistence in the academic environment and the joint professional action.
I can state that I received the same treatment dispensed to the PhD students of the UA and, as soon as I arrived at the UA, I was integrated into the work groups and into the activities of the Department, such as seminars, meetings with teachers of other institutions and missions of work at other universities. Besides, I had access to the library with right to ask for the acquisition of works and I also received financial help from the Department for the presentation of work in congresses in Portugal, Spain and Denmark, just like other students of that institution.

Among the most important activities for the PhD dissertation, which tackled hyper-textual journalistic narratives, I emphasize the carrying out of the study about the applying of characteristics of the digital journalism of the Portuguese press in the Internet and also the higher understanding about the development of products for the digital media because of the emphasis of the course entitled New Communication Technologies and the multidisciplinary formation of the group of researchers. The subjects studied by colleagues with whom I shared meetings of studies and space in the office, were discussed in formal or informal situations favoured by the academic life shared.

From the exchange with the teachers and PhD students enrolled in the project, I could also spread out the professional contacts with researchers of other universities, through visits made to the University of Beira Interior, University Fernando Pessoa and University of Braga, in Portugal, besides the Spanish universities of Santiago de Compostela, Autonomous of Barcelona and Navarra.

I emphasize as a very positive point of this experience the possibility of dialogue and exchange of experiences with colleague researchers of another institution in a foreign country. I observed, on behalf of the Portuguese colleagues, an attitude of respect and interest in knowing the reality of the research in my country, as well as in knowing the Brazilian bibliography about the subjects dealt with.

3.2. Suzana Barbosa

The systematic of work shared, which directs the actions of the GJOL, and which, at the same time, stimulates the autonomy in its researchers in training, was and has been basic to guide our insertion in teams and groups abroad. The formation with
the periods spent in foreign universities is also a moment to socialize the knowledge, contributing with new experiences which help us to test what we have learnt in our country. And, in exchange, they make us grow in a more plural and international research practice, avoiding the isolation and predominance of endogenous views.

In my experience, the stages of the PhD and post-PhD stay are quite linked; at the same time that they reflect a lot of what has been the *modus operandi* of a methodological way in development by the group. One year is the interval that frames the PhD stay to carry out, in this moment, the post-PhD. Between them there is the finishing and the presentation of the PhD thesis, which expresses a good deal of what constituted the stay at the Laboratory of On-line Communication (LabCom) of the University of Beira Interior (UBI, Portugal), in 2005, which led me to the current research in the Group of New Media of the University of Santiago de Compostela (USC, Spain).

With both teams, I emphasize the confidence established; the participation in the development of specific projects of the groups, the organisation of events and the publishing of books (e.g. *Jornalismo digital de terceira geração*, 2007\(^7\)) the opening for the search for contacts together with other researchers, both from this and from other countries; the direction for the composition of future networks and joint actions. Above all, I emphasize the partnership in the guidance with the supervisors of those groups. The support received and the constant motivation has favoured productive research stays, making possible the widening of the mutual collaborations beyond the period of the stay.

The post-PhD together with the Group New Media has confirmed that the choice of this laboratory to go on with the PhD degree research – testing and perfecting the functionalities and categories of analysis of the Digital Journalism in Database Model (JDBD) as paradigm for dynamic cyber-media – was a good choice because of the qualified team, because of the affinity with the research topic and because it favoured the theoretical-conceptual and methodological refinement. Finally, the inclusion of our research as a subproject of a wider project also allows building comparative charts

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\(^7\) This book is a collection of the articles presented at the “Jornadas Jornalismo On-line 2005 Aspectos e Tendências”. It is available at: [http://www.labcom.ubi.pt/livroslabcom/fichas/ficha_barbosa_jornalismo_online.html](http://www.labcom.ubi.pt/livroslabcom/fichas/ficha_barbosa_jornalismo_online.html).
about the specific object in the Brazilian and Spanish context, and it also helps to incorporate and discover other important variables in the itinerary of these studies. This increases the profits obtained with the result of the research, mainly because of what adds to the whole of the works of the GJOL and in the revision of this knowledge to promote local systems of innovation in which the group is included.

3.3. Carla Schwingel

The agreement in which I participated during my PhD stay (2006-2007) took place between the Faculties of Communication and of Information Sciences (UFBA), with two departments of the University of Texas (UT Austin) (Radio, Cinema and Television and School of Journalism), and it was institutionally coordinated by the professors Othon Jambeiro (UFBA) and Joseph Straubhaar (UT). In the contexts of the Faculty of Communication and of the School of Journalism, the coordinators were the professors Elias Machado (GJOL) and Rosental Calmon Alves (UT).

My PhD project is directed to the study of “Automated systems of content publication in cyber-journalism: models of systems of composition and of architectures of information in the development of digital journalistic products” and the opportunity of interaction with North-American specialists and their working methods of a more pragmatic and quantitative character was, from the very beginning, an incentive for the advance of my research and for readaptations of the initially established work.

From April 2006 to March 2007, I carried out systematic researches in the catalogue of the university and in the data basis, mainly using the LexisNexis Academic, where all the academic articles published in the United States can be found, and in the Factiva, where there are more than 10 thousand sources of journals and magazines from 152 countries, written in 22 languages. On April, 2006, during the 7th International Symposium on Online Journalism, I established contact with journalistic companies that apply Content Management Systems in their sites, together with companies of technology that develop such systems according to the flow of journalistic production of those mentioned first.

The opportunity of working in the Centro Knight for Journalism in America, carrying out searches, edition and translation of materials about the freedom of expression and press in Brazil and the Anglo-Hispanic America, made possible a view
about the journalism in the three countries, their differences and idiosyncrasies. Working with a team which monitors the situation of the freedom of press and expression in the three continents, as well as it applies training courses for journalists, mainly in Latin America, was a return to the critic of the everyday journalism which led to a better understanding of the need of teaching and journalistic composition tools.

On September, 2006, I moved for a visit to the Annenberg School for Communication, at the University of South California (USC), in Los Angeles, having this way the opportunity of visiting the laboratories of the university, knowing their research and teaching methods, as well as of interviewing professor Larry Pryor. The next visit was to the department of Communication of the University of California, in Los Angeles (UCLA) and, on January, 2007, to the College of Journalism & Mass Communication, in the University of Georgia. I had also the opportunity of presenting the article “The State of Studies About Digital Journalism in Brazil” in the XXVII Annual ILASSA Student Conference, event organized by the students of the Institute of Latin American Studies Tereza Lozano.

The PhD stay in the UT made possible the contact with experiences of journalistic products and with leading journalists of the United States, as well as with researchers and researches’ accounts. The pragmatism of the analysis carried out made me possible to acquire a different perception of the research done in Brazil; and the opportunity of sharing disciplines such as “Contemporary Trends in Journalism”, taught by the professor Maxwell McCombs and “Interactive Multimedia Research”, taught by the professor Mark Tremayne, led me to a readaptation of the methodological aspects initially proposed in my PhD research.

CONCLUSIONS

In the complex societies the production of knowledge is becoming, more and more, a specialized professional activity requiring the task of the scientific inquiry to be developed by teams of researchers organised taking the form of national and international thematic networks (Castells, 1996; Fulk, 2001). In the GJOL, all the researchers – from the beginners to the senior ones – are stimulated to work in group and articulated with the networks composed by the group. Each new research looks for
advancing the accumulated knowledge, reformulating or updating previous results (Machado e Palacios, 2007).

The experience accumulated in the organization and management of a research group points to a guideline that we consider essential: the establishment of a common research systematic and the collective construction around such systematic. Working collectively, in a research group, does not simply mean adding researchers working with similar topics, but establishing a shared work systematic, in such a way that each one of the works be in interaction and continuous dialogue with the whole of the production of the group.

We do not present the specific model of research systematic built around the GJOL as the only model to follow. Far from this, we prove the multiplication of different systematics, within diverse groups to be essential. The construction of knowledge is made by means of diversified routes, with differentiated thematic and disciplinary emphasis, especially in a transdisciplinary area such as ours. Through the dialogue within each group’s networks it will have greater possibilities of perfecting and developing its own methods of work. The key to the question is the introduction of the networks and the collective, accumulative and complementary construction, within each unit or research group around a specific thematic (Palacios, 2007).

REFERENCES


