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- the Use of Qualitative Methodology in the Study
of Alternative Journalism in the Digital Age

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Exploring the Reporters Sans Frontières platform - the use of qualitative methodology in the study of alternative journalism in the digital age

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Abstract. Alternative journalism is usually associated with political involvement or activism, but it also addresses a series of other themes such as minorities, ethnic groups, cultural and social actions usually managed by non-professionals. However, there are several examples in which journalists work professionally in the political and investigative aspects of this type of journalism, such as Reporters Sans Frontières organization.

Technologic innovation - especially since the expansion of internet 2.0 and the creation of social networks - has been a fertile field for the expansion alternative journalism.

This is an exploratory study regarding the contents of alternative journalism in online platforms. We aim to understand the main themes addressed by alternative journalism organizations in the digital arena and, above all, to learn more about the Reports Sans Frontières digital presence. The work is anchored in the qualitative methodology, in particular, in content analysis. Data was retrieved from the *corpus latente*. After listing the platforms with more visibility, we have created categories in order to understand the type that each platform is associated to: politics, culture, arts, etc. We have also listed the headlines of all RSF news in French, English, Portuguese and Spanish languages between January and April 2019.

We were able to conclude that alternative journalism is generally developed in a professional manner. Alternative journalists use new online platforms to create more visibility and impact.

By performing qualitative analysis technique, we were able to conclude that in terms of content the majority is of political nature. And, were able to infer that the RSF through its significant worldwide network publishes hundreds of news focused on sensitive political issues.

Keywords: Alternative Journalism, Digital Age, Qualitative Methodology.

1 Introduction

In a generic approach it is accepted that alternative journalism might be as old as classical journalism. Alternative journalism is generally associated with political involve-

ment or activism, however, it can be dedicated to a series of other themes such as minorities, ethnic groups, cultural and social actions promoted by non-professionals. In contrast, there are several cases in which journalists work in a professional way in the political and investigative aspects of this type of journalism. It is believed that it is important to explore these themes at the academic level, particularly from the perspective of the impact of new digital technologies on alternative journalism, in the context of internet 2.0.

Certainly, social networks created the basis for a greater dissemination of alternative journalism. However, in this paper in addition to conducting a study of the main themes addressed by alternative journalism we aim to understand the work developed nowadays by an organization founded several decades ago (based on its presence in the digital world and the main published themes).

The work was divided into 6 chapters. In the following chapter - the second - we present a theoretical framework of alternative journalism and the media in the digital age. The third chapter is dedicated to the methodology, focused on the qualitative analysis methodology with the aim of justifying the option for this methodology based on the perspective of several specialists. The chapter ends with the description the investigative path. The fourth chapter addresses data collection and analysis techniques, also based on the vision of several authors. The fifth chapter presents the collected data and the results. In the sixth chapter we present some final considerations.

In our opinion, our study contributes to a better understanding of main themes addressed by alternative journalism based on real data, as well as the digital visibility of the work of journalists at Reporters Sans Frontières.

2 Theoretical framework

Today's global society is structured according to the dynamics and domain of different powers (political, economic, competition and others) and it is increasingly focused on media coverage [1]. This media coverage refers to the so-called social communication media or mass media such as radio, television and newspapers, being a "special type of communication" [2], which involves "different operating conditions among which are the nature of the audience and the communicator's communicative experience" as defended by Wright (1978) quoted by Kunsch (2003) [3], to which the internet and in particular social networks were added. In the above mentioned "special type of communication" alternative journalism is included.

Journalism has "several legitimate aspects that contribute in different ways to the functioning of democracy" as James Curran writes in the preface to his *Alternative Media Handbook* [4]. These aspects include the interpretive and subjective styles of journalism which can be found in most of what is considered as alternative media; forms of media that, for Curran, allow divergent social groups to define and constitute themselves, facilitate internal strategic debate, and promote the transmission of their concerns and opinions to a wider audience [4].

These authors are just some of those who have gradually helped to increase the “academic interest in alternative journalism” [5]. Studies on alternative journalism have shown, among other aspects, that:

“Alternative journalism comes from dissatisfaction not only with the main coverage of certain subjects and topics, but also with the epistemology of the news. This critique is defined as *inter alia*, that is, anchored in news source conventions and representation; the inverted pyramid of news texts; the hierarchical and capitalized economy of commercial journalism; the professional, the elite base of journalism as a practice; the professional norm of objectivity; and the subordinate role of the public as receiver” [6].

Dissatisfaction, as Denis McQuail defines is an "expression of celebration in completely different ways, free from established systems". This author proposed the concept of the media as "democratic participant", a way of explaining or at least labeling the "many ideas in favor of alternative media grassroots that express and care for the needs of citizens" [7].

Initially, alternative media were not accessible to the general public, however, with technological development, information capacity, storage and data transmission, there has been a large number of content creators and followers since new technology allows small communities to expose their problems, concepts, opinions and making themselves known far beyond their geographic and cultural boundaries.

Now the analysis of the information contained in digital media within the framework of the use of various media “allows to see their place in the context of the combination of media for different purposes, being accepted that digital media, also called 'new' media, do not simply replace the previous ones - 'traditional' or 'old'-, but recombines them” [8].

The use of platforms in the field of alternative journalism constitutes (similarly to collaborative journalism) a modality and integration of a potentially disruptive or innovative technology, based on the 3T's model [9]:

- Transfer - which corresponds to the mere transfer of conventional approaches to a work environment with technology;
- Transform - which involves redefining conventional approaches to technology-based work environments;
- Transcend - which manages to break up with conventional approaches, allowing new paradigms to emerge.

So, technologic evolution, in particular the internet and social networks, were an important innovation for journalism and, consequently, for alternative journalism, contributing to the visibility and power of both.

3 Methodology

In general terms, scientific research consists of an investigation that: a) seeks answers to a question; b) systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question; c) collects evidence d) produces findings that were not determined in advance e)

produces findings that are applicable beyond the immediate limits of the study. Qualitative research shares these characteristics [10].

Qualitative methodology is understood as “a means to explore and understand the meaning that individuals, or groups, attribute to a social and human problem” [11]. The main characteristics of qualitative methods in the analysis of human behavior from the actor's perspective are naturalistic observation, subjectivity, orientation towards discovery and process, their exploratory, descriptive and inductive character, and the non-generalization of results [12]. The word qualitative implies highlighting the qualities of entities, processes and meanings; a qualitative study emphasizes the socially constructed quality of reality, taking into account a constructivist framework, the closest relationship between the researcher and the object of study, and the situational constraints that shape the investigation [13].

Qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the participant's point of view. Extracted data is generally not countable or measurable. Qualitative research techniques include analyzing texts and documents, such as government reports, media articles, websites or journals, to learn about private or public matters [14]. Furthermore, it seeks to understand a particular problem or research topic from the perspectives of the stakeholders themselves. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations [10].

Moreover, qualitative methods are no longer considered useful only because they allow dealing with data seen as inadequate for statistical analysis. Qualitative analysis methodology is more and more recognized and is now considered by many experts as a legitimate method to obtain information and understand how human beings' act. Although qualitative research has long been 'out of fashion', the modern interest in it represents the resurgence of an approach that has as much history in the social sciences as quantitative methods [15].

Regarding the criteria to apply qualitative analysis the main ones are defined by Guba & Lincoln (1994), [16] quoted in the Qualitative Research in Education Handbook [17]:

- Historical contextualization of the studied situation (considering socio-economic, cultural, gender background);
- Degree to which the study focuses on the erosion of ignorance (unmasking prejudices);
- The degree to which it provides a stimulus for action, that is, for existing transformation.

Based on the coordinates of the quoted authors, we understood that the qualitative methodology was the most appropriate, especially due to the exploratory nature of this research.

4 Data collection and analysis techniques

The purpose of data analysis “is to organize, provide structure and extract meaning from the content. Transcripts must be read and reread and then organized, integrated and interpreted, and the final challenge is to reduce data for reporting purposes [18]. Therefore, according to the author, it is possible to state that qualitative analysis is a research process, interpretation, reduction and ordering of data to achieve the description or explanation of a phenomenon [18].

Data analysis is defined by Morse as:

“a process that requires intelligent questioning, a continual search for answers, active observation and accurate memory. It is a process of joining and joining data, making the invisible obvious, distinguishing the signifier from the insignificant, linking seemingly unrelated data, fitting categories into each other and attributing consequences to antecedents... It is a process of conjecture and verification, correction and modification, suggestion and defense. It is a process of organizing so that the analytical scheme appears obvious” [19].

In terms of analysis techniques, content analysis was selected. The content analysis technique is characterized by the search for explanation and understanding, allowing inferences to be made that, in a systematic and objective way, identify singular and implicit characteristics of the discourse, as it seeks to know what is behind the words in search of other realities [20]. Therefore, inferences are made about what may affect the type of interpretation, based on establishing a relationship between the obtained data [21].

The purpose of content analysis is to “quantify salient and overt features of a large number of texts, and statistics are used to make broad inferences about representational processes and politics” [22].

In short, as Castro advocates, for research to have a scientific character, a threshold of control over observation methods is necessary [23] which means, according to the author, the use of systematic and structured methods of observation and evaluation. Starting from these bases, this study is fundamentally exploratory empirical research, trying to present an integral vision and a general holistic understanding.

In practical terms, we began by collecting the names of organizations with greater visibility in the internet in Portuguese (choosing only publications of Portuguese origin) and in English. Then, a categorization or “coding” [24] was carried out in order to understand the typologies associated with alternative journalism: politics, culture, art, etc.; keeping in mind that

“Coding is one of the most difficult processes in content analysis (...) since a large part is closely linked to the richness of the discourse. It is possible to think of the codification process as a space for induction and deduction (...); the categories deduced from the literature review allow the creation of an analysis framework” [25].

The second step was data collection, organization and coding about the Reporters Sans Frontières platform news contents. Data was also retrieved from *corpus latente*, then a content analysis of the collected data was carried out (without the use of content analysis software).

5 Results

The internet search allowed to identify Portuguese and international online publications referred to as alternative journalism. The following table (Table 1) presents a list of the organizations that were identified, based on their greater 'visibility':

Table 1. List of the organizations with more visibility in the internet

#	Alternative Journalism	Name	Type	Source
1	Portugal	Fumaça	Política	https://fumaca.pt/
2	Portugal	Divergente	Política/Investigação	https://fumaca.pt/
3	Portugal	Q!News	Política	https://q!news.pt/
4	Portugal	O Corvo	Política	https://ocorvo.pt/
5	Portugal	Arte/Factos	Arte e Cultura	http://www.arte-factos.net/
6	Portugal	Praxis	Política	https://praxismagazine.org/
7	Portugal	Jornalismo de Causas	Política	https://jornalismodecausas.wordpress.com/
8	Portugal	Vice	Política	https://www.vice.com/pt
9	Portugal	Comunidade Cultura e Arte	Arte e Cultura	https://www.comunidadeculturaearte.com/
10	Portugal	Mapa	Política	http://www.jornalmapa.pt/
1	International	Media Partners	Política	https://euroalter.com/media-partners
2	International	RSF - Reporters Sans Frontières	Política	https://rsf.org/pt
3	International	ICIJ: International Consortium of Investigative Journalists	Política/Investigação	https://www.icij.org/
4	International	The Corbett Report	Política/Investigação	https://www.corbettreport.com/
5	International	Moon of Alabama	Política/Economia	https://www.moonofalabama.org/
6	International	The Anti Media	Política	https://theantimedia.com/
7	International	Global Research/Mondialisation	Política	https://www.globalresearch.ca/about-2
8	International	We are a change	Política/Ativismo	https://www.youtube.com/user/wearechange
9	International	The Rubin Report	Política/Sociedade	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJdKr0Bgd_5saZYqLCa9mng
10	International	Consortium News	Política/Investigação	https://consortiumnews.com/
11	International	Truth In Media	Política	http://truthinmedia.com/
12	International	Media Roots	Política	http://mediaroots.org/
13	International	Propublica	Política	https://www.propublica.org/
14	International	Periodismo alternativo	Política	https://periodismo--alternativo.com/
15	International	Off Guardian	Política	https://off-guardian.org/
16	International	21st Century Wire	Política	https://21stcenturywire.com/

Source: *Corpus Latente*

Table 1 identifies 10 national and 16 international alternative news organizations. Data shows that, in Portugal, 8 out of the 10 selected organizations focus on political issues, the other 2 are related to arts and culture. At international level, all 16 listed organizations' work is related to politics; of these, 3 organizations associate politics with investigative journalism, 1 focuses on politics and economics, and another on politics and society.

From the perspective of resorting to the so-called digital world, it's important to note the presence of these organizations/publications in the various social networks (that can be accessed from websites or platforms). It was also possible to verify that some of the listed organizations have, for instance, their own YouTube channel.

Regarding the RSF platform, as well as learning about the themes of the published news, we intended to observe the transition and visibility of this entity (which has been in existence for several decades) to the digital world.

Synthetically, RSF is an international organization with consultative status at the United Nations (UN), UNESCO, the Council of Europe (EC) and the International Organization of the Francophonie (IOF). RSF is an independent organization based in Paris, with daily and multilingual publications in French, English, Spanish, Arabic and Persian, and often in other languages (Chinese, Portuguese, Russian, etc.), the organization also publishes reports and press releases on the situation of freedom of information in the world and the attacks directed against it. RSF's communication campaigns go around the world, not only as a result of digital visibility, but because the organization itself is present in 130 countries through a vast network of correspondents. Interventions in the international press raise awareness among the general public and influence political leaders on particular cases or cross-cutting issues. RSF works to defend freedom of speech and to protect the freedom and lives of reporters in challenging scenarios, such as war zones.

Also, by comparing the headlines in the different languages we inferred that, on the one hand, journalists are not limited to translating the contents as there are specific news for audiences in the respective languages. On the other hand, the analysis of the content of the themes published between January and April in the different languages allows us to infer a great amplitude in terms of the scope of their communication and to corroborate the political aspect of the themes dealt with.

Finally, we observed the contents of the platform itself. This process allowed to infer the fact that his organization communicates in six languages and its present in all social networks is of enormous importance and might be one of the factors that contribute to effectively having an active (and influential) voice at a global level and that RSF maximizes it through the use of digital media.

As mentioned above, we listed all the headlines of the news published on the RSF platform between January and March 2019, and divided them by language (French, English, Spanish and Portuguese) as summarized in Table 2:

Table 2. Quantity of news (headlines) from January to March, 2019

Language	Total
French	200
English	215
Spanish	62
Portuguese	11

We have also listed all the news headlines by date and language.

Regarding their business model, it was possible to infer that, in addition to creating some self-sufficiency generated from the online store, it is based on the support of donors (whose identification is listed on the platform) as well as public funding for about 50% of its budget total.

Furthermore, RSF produces an annual publication: 'The Press Freedom Index' and maintains an online barometer where the numbers of victims of the repression on freedom of speech are registered. According to RSF this ranking or Index, which assesses the situation of journalism annually in 180 countries and territories, reveals the triggering of a mechanics of fear that is very harmful to the serene exercise of journalism.

Hostility against journalists, and even the hatred transmitted in many countries by political leaders, resulted (in 2018) in more serious and frequent acts of violence, which increase the risks and, as a result, generate an unprecedented level of fear in certain countries and places. The Index indicates that out of 180 countries press freedom is considered good in just 24.

Therefore, the 'Press Freedom Index' demonstrates not only the political aspect that has been highlighted, but also the pertinence of the themes dealt with and the need for an active voice to defend the work of these professionals and citizens.

6 Final considerations

This study allowed us to verify that alternative journalism is very active and has a large presence in the so-called digital world, achieving through this presence a global reach among its audiences.

The existence of several organizations dedicated to alternative journalism puts together "normal people as a set of voices with an equal right (to be heard) with elite groups" [6]. Having this right to be heard and having access to spaces where they can establish dialogue with others is seen as crucial for people to be active citizens, among other factors.

Nevertheless, through the selected example of RSF platform, we could demonstrate that alternative journalism is not only developed by individual, but also carried out by a large number of professionals who "promote the transmission of their concerns and views to a wider audience" [4], and the use of new technologies allows them to create greater visibility and impact. In this sense, we were able to demonstrate that there are larger organizations dedicated to alternative journalism, including supported by a large number of donors, and interestingly in the case of RSF by public funding.

The work of these organizations, in particular that of the RSF, is internationally recognized through several awards (and includes representation at the United Nations), allowing the inference of the high degree of professionalism and the power of influence conquered over time by RSF, whose visibility is considered greater in the digital age.

In terms of digital technology, it was concluded that within the scope of alternative journalism, the RSF platform constitutes a modality and integration of a potentially disruptive or innovative technology, based on the 3T's model [9] that was described based on the concepts of transference (transfer), transformation (transform) and transcendent (transcend).

Finally, it is important to highlight that the continued existence of some forms of alternative journalism and the expansion of social spaces for dialogue and participation remain essential for the healthy functioning of society which is attested by the results of the 'Press Freedom Index', where only 24 of the 180 countries in the world are considered 'good', *i.e.*, as having favorable conditions for free journalistic expression.

Regarding the option for the qualitative methodology, content analysis allowed us to achieve the main objectives of this study. In terms of content, after codification it was concluded that it is markedly political, both in alternative journalism digital webpages as well as in the RSF platform.

The next step of this study should be to carry out the content analysis using specialized software such as MAXqda, webQDA or Nvivo in order to compare results. In the digital environment, it is also considered important to analyze the presence of alternative journalism in social networks .

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