

THE IMPORTANCE OF NEWSGATHERING IN COMMUNICATION

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to provide a few working tools when proceeding in newsgathering in communication sciences field (journalism, public relations, advertising). In our writing we shall approach key concepts, relevant information, documentation features, methods, techniques and procedures, as well as some elements of interaction with sources. Concurrently, an analysis will be carried out on the selection and structuring of information in communication products, making them easier to receive by an increasingly more demanding and heterogeneous audience. Newsgathering or documentation, as it is otherwise known in the media, is a specific activity, especially at the beginning of the communication process. Data collection can be carried out throughout the exchange of information. Virtual communication facilitates interaction and interactivity. The current communication sphere is particularly vast, a great variety of information and pseudo-information, events and pseudo-events trying to capture our attention. Users find increasingly harder to select what is valuable, what represents useful data in the existential and professional field. This study attempts to bring some clarification in the field.

Keywords: newsgathering, media, news, communication, public relations

1. About significance

Essential information rarely finds its own way to the communications professional. Most of the times they have to look it up themselves. In this context, it is not only important to develop the ability to collect data, but also to analyse and retain what is valuable content. Especially during this period of communication explosion, we require the development and training of analytical skills. As early as 1990, before the Internet surfing era, Alvin Tofler warned of these difficulties for communication and information

professionals: "Finding the right informative detail, accurately analysing it and delivering it at the right time to the right customer, results in much heavier problems than the actual collection "(1995, 224). The author refers here to the broad scope of communication, and information analysis is a specific action, closely related to the collection. The process of finding the significant element was also a concern for Mircea Eliade. The great historian of religions and writer was also a journalist, writing for longer periods of time for generalist publications. By 1937, he distinguished between the mundane everyday happenings and the really relevant content. He thus faces a great dilemma, which we cannot explain: "And then there is another question: do we always choose and transform out one of a million facts, into the significant fact - or is it the fact itself, qualitatively distinct from the millions of facts that surpasses and conquers?" (Eliade 1990, 172). The quality of news material is identified in the English-language with the term *Newsworthiness*. The invested interest in what happened and the proximity of the event are the main elements that make a newspaper product come into the audience's attention (Popescu 203, 161). Information collecting that results in effective communication is an essential process in all types of communication. As Newsom and Carrell (2004, 202) state: "Getting the information your organization or client wants in order to have news sources, that might present some interest, is a strategic task."

Concerns about human communication focus on a central idea, that of media coverage. The media coverage process is constructed on two key elements: the media and the public. In communication, information becomes public, intentionally or not, through technical equipment (electronic, computerized). There may be unmediated public communication, such as, for example public gatherings (political or other), as there may be technologically mediated links between people that are not public (telephone conversations or e-mails). It all stems from the need to know, to know the world and the others, to "stay in the know," Yves-F states. Le Coadic (2004, 8). In recent years, many studies have focused on identifying common elements and those that separate the two major areas of communication: mass media and social media. There is research that believes that social media platforms can be used efficiently by professional journalists (Brandtzaeg & Chaparro Domínguez, 2018). The danger of losing the identity of the two areas is one that cannot be neglected.

Communication is such a vast field, that a scientist like Umberto Eco felt the need to operate a constraint, to demarcate an area of *significance*. By defining the process, Eco imposes the condition "to request an interpretive response from the recipient" (2008, 22). It is not necessary that this response is sent to the emitter and it does not even have to be formulated accurately. It may be just an impression, an emotion, that is, a sign that the receiver has recorded a message, even superficially. In this context, communication, in Eco's work means "the passing of a signal (which does not necessarily mean a sign) from a source (via a transmitter, through a channel) to a destination. In a

process that takes place between two machines, the signal has no power to signify: it can only determine the recipient under the *species stimuli*. In this case, there is no meaning, but there is a transfer of information" Eco (2008, 22).

2. Communicating, communications and telecommunications

Public communication cannot be separated from the communications and telecommunications sector. The history of mankind is also a history of technical innovations, capable of facilitating communication. The roads and the vehicles traveling on them meant not only the improved mobility of people, animals and goods, but also information. For thousands of years, travel via land and water has been the main way of communicating and communication. The inventions of the printing press and the increase in the number of printed copies have made written works easier to access. After 1800, the technical progress is accelerated, which would revolutionise many sectors of human activity, including the exchange of information. Editors and publishers (media organizations) would benefit from the innovation called telegraph, and then would be equipped with a telephone. The media is now taking steps towards radio and television. Telecommunications were widely used in civilian and military life.

The global information system has allowed, after 1994, when the Internet had united the world, a higher degree of interference and networking and thus diversifying communication possibilities. In the broad field covered by communications and information sciences, contents are transmitted, that is to say, in elements of public interest. Contents can be grouped into three broad categories: 1) information (news); 2) educational (instructive) data; 3) entertainment (Briggs and Burke 2005, 173-239). The public communication sphere is diverse, but in order to provide focus, we shall mention here five areas of manifestation: 1) mass media; 2) public relations; 3) advertising 4) propaganda, 5) databases. Media communication is performed by processing information gathered from different sources and presented to audiences in the form of specific products. Public relations are concern with the management of information about organizations and products, with the specific aim to increase their efficiency and to distinguish a positive image. In the field of advertising, data is used to determine consumers to purchase products and services. Propaganda constructs messages to support the spread of certain ideas or the downfall of others. Managing databases means making information available to those interested and offering elements to satisfy the need to get inform, access training and entertainment. The transmission and exchange of information, as well as the reception of certain content and consumption of entertainment represent professional communication acts, and this is the spot where specialists intercede.

3. What we mean by information, methods and techniques

Information can be identified as being a fragment of the world capable of raising interest, representing a novelty. The insignificant is irrelevant, and the communication process is only possible when the transmitted data has a certain degree of relevance, even if the degree is low. Thus, in a more elaborate definition, information means meaningful content that can be expressed and transmitted through a code and a means from one person to another or to an audience. It is a functional definition because the semantic area of information is particularly wide. In order to have good communication, in addition to new content, it is important that the information is understood and deciphered (Floridi 2011). It is an issue that arises a lot of problems in practice, especially when someone's life is at stake or important institutions are at risk. There is another term of operation, that is, *data* (which is identical in the singular and plural form). There is a long debate about the identity and content of the two terms, information and data. There seem to be three more distinguished meanings: 1) the two terms are synonyms; 2) data represents elements of the information; 3) information is structured data (Floridi 2010, 20-21).

Information gathering is done through *methods*, *techniques* and *procedures*. Defining each term is somewhat of a difficult task because both normative work (dictionaries) and proposed positions by various researchers tend to induce a state of confusion. This seems to be generated by the synonymy (sometimes outright) between the terms, but also by the lack of a preoccupation for establishing a reference framework. The method can be considered as technique and procedure, as each of the relationship terms can be found in the other. Sometimes other semantic terms are introduced, such as manner, means and way. In the acceptance of this paper, there are important differences to be made between the three concepts, considering that they are operating in a structured system, which involves a hierarchy and a well-defined field of action. There are differences between fields and researchers regarding the number of methods or techniques, as well as the structure outline. Thus, De Ketele and Roegiers, in a dense and specialized volume; presenting the word methodology in the title, award methods with an important role, considering techniques rather as procedures (*démarches*) (Ketele and Roegiers 2009, 118). Other research technique specialists, term that allows us to think about a wider (and more complicated) process when compared to that of collecting information, will, at a later moment, revisit and admit: "In public relations, however, research techniques are also used to collect data and information" (Wilcox, Ault and Agee, 1997, 124).

By *method* we mean a structured system of techniques and procedures engaged to achieve a goal. Because the activity of collecting information in communication sciences is carried out as a process, *method* can be understood as the set of actions performed for finding, attaining, absorbing and capitalizing on the information.

Technique represents a specific way of working to achieve a goal. A method can be supported by one or more techniques, used crosswise, successively or concurrently. In

this approach, techniques are subsidiary to the method, from the theoretical possibilities offered by the method, the communication specialist utilises the technique (or techniques) that yield the best possible result.

Procedure designates the practical tools available to the user in the actual information gathering activity. A technique has several working procedures, used together or separately, depending on the specifics of the communication situation.

4. Sources and resources

Sources refer to people holding information or documentation elements that contain information. *Human sources* are represented by natural persons, individuals and collectives, organizations, institutions, commercial companies, known as legal entities. *Documentation sources* can be material (physically existing in print) or virtual (electronic databases). We also distinguish between the sources with which the communications specialist (journalist or relationalist) works and sources of information for the public (audience). The communicator collects data for his own professional (ready to publish) products. Their further dissemination to the targeted people (audiences) transforms the supplying organization into a source of information in the public sphere (Szabo 1999, 12). Sources will be analysed in detail in another chapter of this paper.

In this context, it is important to mention the *means* (resources) needed in the information gathering process. The methods (with their subsequent components, techniques and procedures) are part of the cultural and scientific repository at the user's disposal (the communication specialist), acquired during the training process and applied in various specific activities. Furthermore, means may be identified in accordance with the general management rules of any human activity, alongside financial resources, the time budget, the staffing needs, and the appropriate equipment for the information gathering operation. In this context, we notice that the information gathering activity is a process, structured as a specific professional activity, within the framework of certain professional organisations, which entail an adequate bureaucratic and economic-financial model to function.

5. Searching and collecting

Most information is searched by specialists, which implies an active involvement, using resources and luck in some degree. However, there are sometimes instances when important data easily reaches the communicator. Stakeholders have a vested interest in conveying information, even it being to denounce a suspect, illegal, immoral or extraordinary situation. The process of collecting information in the field of communication is elaborated and is comprised out of distinct stages. First, the need for information is identified. It is established that a certain audience is interested in certain data, that now needs to be procured. At the next step, the source is identified, which

means the search for information. We can identify situations where data providers come to offer them by themselves, such initiatives are being encouraged. The retrieved data are subjected to a first analysis and synthesis and are recorded on different means. Subsequently, at the office (which may also be a virtual one) the information will be processed in a set form that will get broadcast or made available to users.

However, news gathering cannot be regarded as a superficial operation, as if the data were available somewhere, in very close proximity, in a database, waiting for the communicator. The main problem of good information, really relevant, in the sphere of public communication is that it is not easy to come by. Searching proves to be an essential activity, even if sometimes it does happen that exceptional things are quickly discovered. It depends on flair, luck, but then again, we find that these elements do not show up every time. Sometimes, one must be assertive and work intensively and carefully. The information is to be published and the publication is done in the form of specific communication products (Szabo 2014). In many cases, the data that is to be published or broadcast alters the lives of some people, so they will be reluctant to provide details. It is thus paramount that withholdings are diminished, this being the only way to offer good information.

Some researchers distinguish between the information received and the information researched (Agnès 2011, 67). It is a technical differentiation, which attempts to separate between what reaches the journalist from an exterior initiative and what he or she looks for out of own initiative. In reality, the two processes are complementary and integrated. The communication process between the publishing company employee and their sources is dynamic and much more complex now than in the past. Until the invention of the fax machine, but especially the invention and use of electronic mail, and thus before 1980, the means of individuals and institutions to transmit information to the media were limited to letter writing and telephone calls. In the former case, communication was deficient, for it took a long time for a letter to reach the editorial office. As far as the phone is concerned, it was not widely available, with a small number of posts. At the beginning of the twentieth century, some publications engaged the phenomenon of transmitting telegrams by reporters from different places, the mechanism were adapted to the one practiced by detectives. However, the current phenomenon, especially present in mass media, when communicators cease to travel in search of information and are satisfied with what they receive from outside sources, must be avoided. This leads to a concept notion - the passive journalist, evoking a dangerous situation for professionals (O'Neill and O'Connor 2008).

6. Looking for significance

The last decades had witnessed the phenomenon of interdependence, whereby institutions, even ones more discrete in the past, have begun to seek journalists'

attention. At the beginning of the third millennium, there was an intensification in flooding editorial offices with various information, an aggregate sometimes difficult to control and capitalize, the main channel to information traffic being electronic mail. However, a small amount of data is used in the editorial process, many of the messages find themselves in garbage bins, or remaining forever buried in the electronic mailboxes of the editors or journalists. The phenomenon does have an explanation: the information received by the editors is favourable towards the issuers (institutions and organisations). Only low-performing journalists can be content with such products often developed by public relations offices or spokespersons. An interesting relationship is thus created, that of identifying, structuring and publishing relevant information for the public through their negotiation process between specialists, journalists and relationalists. Their activities may be congruent or divergent, as a press release cannot (perhaps only exceptionally) be a quality journalistic product.

The really relevant information is quite rarely discovered through the initiative of certain people in the organization. It can be used to build the context, but the reporter will focus on two other directions: 1) identifying relevant information beyond what is officially communicated on the subject by means of press release, verbal spokesperson statement or chairperson of the institution; 2) searching for relevant topics for the public in other spheres than the institutionalized messages. However, the involvement of the two sides cannot be avoided. However potent a reporter discovered subject may be, it cannot be dealt with, it cannot be disclosed, without considering the opinion of those involved in the story and of the competent institutions. You will never read a corruption related press release by a relationist about the institution they are employed by. They will react (often by denying) when inquired by the press. In the cases where sufficient echo is drummed up in the public sphere, the opinion of lawyers or even representatives of legal institutions will be needed. We thus note that it is not enough for a public relations specialist to send a message to an editorial organization. A skilled and scrupulous journalist will always insist on details, some of which may be uncomfortable. On the other hand, a press worker will also have to ask for details, often difficult for the subject of the piece of news, but interesting for the general public. The relationist will strive to reveal as little as possible and minimize the impact, while the journalist will strive to find as many details as impactful and maximize the effect. The information positioned between the two and shared by both in often times the same, but it is valued differently.

It is important to understand the gathering of information in the wider context of documentation to achieve communication content. The activities during the documenting process are structured according to the purpose and characteristics of the final product. In these cases, we distinguish between informative or factual materials and opinion or analysis. In the first case, when communication refers to the factual, an event, a significant element of reality, the basic information is the information gathered

on the spot of the happening. In the case of opinion materials, the authors rarely do field work. They gather their information from the existing communication content, where the information has already been processed. They can pull their sources from mass media, but also from other public sources, such as reports, sentences, and decisions taken by various organizations, or even opinions and analyses taken or made by other commentators. We use the term *factual* to denote the concrete elements of reality, that is, the facts *that* get publicized and not *how* they are publicized. The term is not deprived of a certain amount of imprecision, as Daniela Zeca-Buzura points out, referring to associated media phenomena (2009, 47-50).

Thus, a new selection of information is coined, which is processed in a higher register, the one where informed opinion is endorsed, and the new content of communication is written by journalists with great experience, editorialists or people with notoriety in the public sphere. Of course, the danger of introducing a higher dose of subjectivism increases and the emergence of unilateral approaches is possible. Thus, we see that the original information, which speaks of a significant occurrence in its raw data, can experience multiple developments on the communication route (Szabo 2014). Depending on the options and necessities, based on motivations that cannot be considered wrong from their starting point, good or bad, the same set of data can be structured in content that becomes contradictory or even opposable. These changeable features are part of the elements capable of structuring human communication in a sometimes surprising and even disconcerting diversity.

The extremely diverse technical means currently available to communicators cannot replace the sense of news and the need to seek it out. In this context, that of mediated communication, information is regarded as news. In the professional jargon, the two terms are regarded as synonyms: to supply a piece of news means to provide information with impact for a certain audience (Rosca 2004, 109-110). However, from the information in the primary stage to the elaborated news, as a good communication product, there is a certain distance to be travelled. On this communication route one or more communication specialists are placed with well-defined roles in completing the media product. Clarifications are necessary because there is information gathering and exchange in other contexts that do not represent mediated communication. There are researchers who talk about information management in the general context of information philosophy, a field of study that has been developing rapidly in recent years: "In contemporary life, some of the most important decisions that people have to make are about managing information the collection, organization, distribution, and evaluation of information "(Fallis and Whitcomb 2009).

7. Information analysis

Evaluation is a process taking place under certain rules aimed to determine the relevance of the information. The operation takes place on several levels, with multiple control gates: 1) pre-publishing evaluation, when the focus is on the data itself; 2) post-public sphere broadcast analysis, where research focuses on the finished product. It is obvious that in the first stage, on the route from source to the communicator and publisher, control over the information is significant, even if not total, since various elements (sometimes significant ones) may not have reached the communication specialist (reporter, editor, relationalist). However, they are the decisive force over what and how they will publish. On the link from the media to the public, the interventions of the people who collected and disseminated the information are hard to make, the publishable content has its own public adventure.

The understanding of the analysis process is facilitated by taking into account other implications, investigating the process of news production and communication content. There is a long tradition of research on receiving messages from the public, with essential contributions from the whole sphere of social sciences (sociology, psychology, law), but also from the humanist area (literature, art, cultural studies or history). Political sciences are mainly interested, in the past decades, in receiving process elements, participating in the discussion about persuasion, propaganda and manipulation. There are numerous studies of the philosophy of communication, including logics, and there are almost no textbooks on these disciplines that do not highlight the effects of message broadcasting. However, the effect analysis should not neglect what goes on prior publication and what is the criterion that has led to the structuring of a message in its public presentation format. In conclusion, information is analysed: 1) by a communicator before being made public; 2) by receptors (most non-professionals) after being broadcast.

Of course, it is very important what we know as public, as actors in the public sphere. We are the consumers, the message recipients. However, these contents are structured in a specific manner by professional communicators. An analysis process is needed both on how the public evaluates and exploits the information, and on the process by which the communicator collects and selects the data. For a communication specialist, this non-public stage of the media broadcast is essential because a communicator is able to control almost entirely. As two American researchers point out, it is necessary to shift our attention from the communication product to the elaboration process: "Often no meaningful distinction exists between the study of news as knowledge, which focuses on how news contributes to the social construction of reality, and the study of the epistemology of journalism, which deals with how journalists know what they know "(Ettema and Glasser, 1985). How (where from) does a communicator know what he knows? This is a fundamental question in the communication sciences.

8. People, messages, actions

Who is the entity that collects information? Common sense dictates: everyone! We differentiate, however, between the general public ability to engage and the specific, professional activity of communicating. Professional communicators belong to several categories. They can be journalists, relationalists, advertisers. But we accept that most people make communication products. A first type of professionalization occurs in the pre-school system, where little children are accustomed to a particular discipline, they draw or are involved in games, a ludic approach in which they receive information and acquire certain behaviours. In school, students gather information by observing, listening, reading and seeing the world around, watching TV or computer communication products. By working on themes and their projects, they are already accustomed to the basic forms of professional communication. These skills are continuously developing, being customized afterwards to communication situations at the workplace, public and family life sphere. It is obvious that everyone communicates; most of the people have professional knowledge, although the specialists in the field are but a few. These mentions are necessary because if, on the one hand, in the specialized communication only the journalists write reports, the relationists write broadcast statements, the prosecutors write indictments, the judges sentences, and the security services write reports, on the other hand, we all communicate through messages (paper, e-mail or social media), or are in the position to edit and process requests, invitations, minutes, memos and sometimes intervene in debates by commenting on the journalistic content on various media platforms. Citizen-Journalism is a constant everyday challenge, sometimes tending to erase the flexible borders between communication professionals and non-professionals.

We obviously collect, analyse and interpret information about people and the events of their lives, that is, everything that affects them and, above all, interests them. This interest is a common one, not necessarily a scientific one. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between information gathering as is practiced in the communications sciences and other fields, such as ethnography in social sciences or in the specific field of information services. The techniques are the same in all areas, as per principle, but differ by focusing on one or the other, for efficiency or by using customized procedures. Ethnography refers to the study of human communities in everyday life, in common day to day activities and the religion or culture specific activities, that is to say, spiritual life. Ethnography is based on interviewing and observation techniques. Both are also used in communication sciences. Ethnography facilitates the collection of common, repeatable data that unites the community to undergo research. Integrating features are pursued (McGranahan 2014).

The data collected in communications sciences, in the practical work of journalists, of relationalists or other specialists in this area results in that which is not pertaining to the common sphere, i.e. the exceptional, the accidents, the important administrative and

political decisions, the security or health challenges, the natural (earthquakes) or provoked acts (terrorist attacks). In the case of threats, security service officers also use the observation and interview technique, alongside others, which can be interceptions and communication surveillance (including Internet traffic). One inkling of potentially dangerous information is enough to engage the system. Agents can directly visit the headquarters of organizations to investigate suspicious activities and people. In some cases, they work undercover. They openly participate in public activities, enrol in courses under the cover of being a student, and enrol in smokers, revolutionaries, farmers, drug addicts, anonymous alcoholics associations or others alike. Here they observe the respective communities and detects potential security risks. Sometimes they engage in friendly conversations with suspicious individuals, directing these individuals towards issues of interest, taking care not to blow their cover or cause too much suspicion. All of these call for good communication skills.

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