Silent citizens
On silence and silencing in journalism

Manuel Pinto
Communication and Society Research Centre
University of Minho, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Constructivist approaches to journalism, which have dominated the field for most of the second half of the 20th century, underline how selection and ranking processes produce representations and interpretations of social reality. Theoretical perspectives such as agenda-setting or framing have been pointing to the ways production of news messages are shaped and issues are defined.

Research inspired by these contributions does however seem to keep in an area of relative shade not so much what is said and published but what is not selected: the unsaid, the withheld, the untold of journalism. The reality that remains in silence, for not being noticed or for being silenced, is the reverse of the coin of what is made visible.

In this paper, it is suggested that this situation opens up the debate to a relatively unknown continent, which could contribute to the larger discussion on the current crisis in journalism. It is our contention that 'the untold' might be at the confluence of different levels: the journalistic agenda-setting by news sources; the deterioration of working conditions of journalists, compromising the investigation; and the social capital asymmetries from important segments of the population, hampering the public word (speech?) and the right to communicate.

In order to build a comprehensive picture of the potentialities and contradictions of journalism from the unsaid side, we would put forward the outline of a typology of journalism's silences, with particular emphasis on some aspects of "discursive discrimination" (Boréus, 2006), on the one hand, and on citizen silence in the process of journalistic production, on the other hand.

KEY WORDS: Silence, silencing, journalism

1. Journalism as producer of silence

By definition, news is enunciation, which means text, image, sound, multimedia, discourse, stories. We hypothesize here that silence is a conceptual category which is needed for a more complex and broader understanding of what journalism is. But how can we conceive silence? What is its epistemological and empirical status? How have we to proceed in order to grasp and typify its diverse dimensions and meanings?

Paraphrasing a well-known say, we could state that until now journalism studies have been occupied with what is said, showed and represented by news media. Time has come to look after what it does not say and show, and to focus on the withheld, the untold. In a certain way we would say that this approach must include the silence of research about media's silence as well.

Rethinking journalism in a time of crisis requires a careful introspective analysis which should include a review of its assumptions, capabilities and limitations. As an analytical category, silence can be a powerful indicator of such limitations and possibilities.

Silence has been socially and culturally perceived either as something positive or as something negative: there is a silence sought and a (hetero or self-) imposed silence. It is a pre-requisite for listening, for insights in one's deep inside and for contemplating an external or internal landscape. It may even be considered a right. A Portuguese philosopher, for instance, wrote about the right not to be bombarded with torrential data and information (Lourenço, 1998). On the other hand in some countries people have the support of the law to remain silent when questioned by a judge or a lawyer.

The very definition of journalism as enunciation implies in itself producing silence: every enunciation involves a choice and a perspective as well as an election of certain realities to the exclusion of others. Moreover journalism favours facts and events (the *événementiel*) leaving aside or disregarding situations.

2. Silence in journalism theories

It is interesting to take an overview of different theoretical approaches that have been proposed to illuminate the roles of journalism in society and the ways they work. Almost all of them present another side of the coin: the untold.

One of the most appealing theories of media is Manning White's gatekeeping model (1950), following Kurt Lewin research on the selection and adoption of food by 'housewives'. As developed from the early formulations, this approach stresses the role of gatekeepers - in fact multiple gatekeepers along the news

process – from sources to the hierarchy and ordering of the news items. This seminal work must be connected with a plethora of studies focused on the concept of newsworthiness. The knowledge thus produced is of crucial importance for understanding the processes of newsmaking and the concepts of news. At the same time, it is also relevant to the understanding of how silence is produced. In fact, by focusing on factors such as professional culture, institutional values, newsrooms' constraints, cultural and political frameworks journalism is, at the same time, defining matters, people and situations that by default are not covered and fall in media invisibility. And this means social silencing.

Agenda-setting is a well-known theory about what we think about and how the issues we think about are defined or influenced by the media agenda. Its founding authors and hundreds of subsequent empirical research projects tested the hypothesis of a relation between public cognitions and the (limited number of) issues emphasised by the news media – "relatively few issues and subjects", as remarked by David Weaver (1984: 680). On the other side, developments of the theory have put the focus not only on "who sets the public agenda--and under what conditions?" but also on "who sets the media agenda?". Song (2004), for instance, studied "how do the problems of the marginalized pressure groups succeed in occupying the public attention". Similar research problems had already been examined in different empirical domains, as Livingston (1996) who asked: "why do some situations become the object of intense news scrutiny while others of an exact or similar nature remain obscure?". The answers converge in the same direction: both synchronically and diachronically, there are vast territories of the social landscape that remain aside of the media focus, which concern above all the powerless or marginalized individuals and groups. Indeed the problem is broader than a mere exclusion or disregard of issues. As framing and priming approaches have stressed, what is at stake is also a problem of emphasis and salience, of angle and perspective as well as of interpretation and definition in journalism coverage of social reality.

We know that the agenda and definitions of the social life represented in the media are a powerful factor, though not the only one, that influences people. In any case, as Noelle-Neumann has stated, "the two sources we have for obtaining information about the distribution of opinions in our environment [are] firsthand observation of reality and observation of reality through the eyes of the media" (Noelle-Neumann, 1980). By fear of isolation and alienation some people avoid expressing their own opinions in public, when perceiving that these opinions go against the dominant ones. The result is the silencing of minority views (or what is perceived as such) and consequently the reinforcement and amplification of the majority ones. This is, in a simplified manner, what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has termed 'spiral of silence'.

From a political economy point of view, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1996) points out that journalists have a "*de facto* monopoly on the instruments of production and dissemination of information on a large scale" and, through these instruments, on the "access of ordinary people to public space". This monopoly allows them to impose their vision of the world and their issues to the whole society, and to censor what they do not consider newsworthy. Given the ruling journalistic culture and the pressures of the market logic, Bourdieu stresses, the overall outcome is a biased representation of the social world, favouring what fits the tastes of the masses and, in general, what interests to large audiences.

Finally, we have to consider also those cases or strategies, whether or not involving the media, where public attention is driven to fabricated events or issues, in order to get support for political and/or economic powers' decisions. What we have seen about the ways media gave support to the Bush administration strategy to 'substantiate' pleas on the hiding of massive destruction weapons in Iraq, in order to initiate the war, is an enlightening argument about the consequences of media performance. And it is also a sophisticated way to mute all the sources and voices questioning and contradicting the official truth. We observed something similar during the Vietnam War[1]. What is of concern is that the repetition of such practices

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[1] For a recent note on this approach, see Boyd-Barrett (2009).

suggests a pattern of behaviour, implying dimensions close to what Herman & Chomsky (1988) have denominated "propaganda model".

In recent decades different authors have reflected on the roles of news media in democracies, instituting a kind of self-analysis also known as meta-journalism or meta-media. French sociologist and cultural analyst Jean Baudrillard, for example, questioned the communicative dimension of the media:

> "What characterizes the mass media is that they fabricate noncommunication – if one accepts the definition of communication as an exchange, as the reciprocal space of speech and response, and thus of *responsibility*. In other words, if one defines it as anything else than the simple emission/reception of information. Now the whole present architecture of the media is founded on this last definition: they are what finally forbids response, what renders impossible any process of exchange" (1985).

And he goes on to interpret the silence of the masses *vis-à-vis* the mass media as no more "a sign of passivity or alienation, but quite to the contrary an original strategy, an original response in the form of a challenge (…) no longer optimistic or pessimistic, but ironic and antagonistic" (Baudrillard, 1985).

Given the cues proposed so far, we can sum up some relevant topics about the silence produced by the news media as well as by journalism and media studies:

a) Through processes such as selection, emphasis or framing, news media inescapably produce silenced realities and silenced perspectives of reality;
b) These processes involve every step of news production, from sources to the users;
c) Closeness and intimacy of mainstream media with political and economic powers favour particular news agendas;
d) The dominant communication pattern of main news media (one-way, top-down, allocutive) does not encourage a position of attention and proximity to life of deprived individuals and social groups.

The result of these several combined processes is that by emphasizing certain agendas and by silencing certain groups and issues, journalism undermines its role in enunciating the social life, staying away from the (common) people.

3. Journalism: crisis and reform movements

It may be said that the reform movement known as "public journalism" or "community journalism" that emerged in the United States of America at the end of the eighties is in some way an attempt to answer to the mentioned limitations and shortcomings. Some of the projects and theoretical elaborations related to public journalism try to overpass the perceived gap between journalism and citizens, involving members, groups and institutions of the public in the journalistic production process and extending, at the same time, the range of covered issues. It is, indeed, a changing focus not only regarding content but also regarding process and method. In fact, it expresses openness to the issues that concern citizens and local communities and reflects an effort to involve more citizens in journalism. Some of its approaches also include citizens' empowerment concerning assumptions, options and criteria that guide newsrooms' activity.

Summarising research and conclusions of reports about this perspective, Tanni Haas defines what is at stake as follows:

> (…) as a journalistic notion, public journalism is centrally aimed at (1) reporting on problems of particular concern to citizens (e.g., by focusing more attention on substantive policy issues than on isolated political events), (2) covering those problems from the perspectives of citizens (e.g. by including more citizens, including women and minorities, as sources of information), and (3) involving citizens in efforts to address problems in practice (e.g. by including more mobilizing information about how to become involved in local community affairs) (Haas, 2007: 67).

We have here a meaningful sign of a change of attitude. Journalists and journalism are going to demand and put themselves in position to listen, instead of imposing their agenda and vision to society.

It should be noted that despite the interest of this movement and the questioning that it represents to the 'canonical' journalism, its expression and reach are limited - even in the United States of America, the cradle of the experience, where only one in five daily newspapers have been involved with one or more public journalism initiatives. Moreover, under this umbrella, took shelter initiatives of quite diverse range, with regard to Haas conclusions, set out above. On the other hand, it may be recognized that the vast majority of these initiatives did not deal with election matters (as it was the case, when the movement begun) but "have taken the form of special projects on problems of concern to residents of given communities" (Haas, 2007: 11).

Since the mid-90s, with the Internet and the World Wide Web, new media and digital platforms have created new opportunities for the initiatives of citizens, thus increasingly facilitating self-expression and self-publication at a global level. Through such tools as weblogs, wikis, twitter or social networks, new voices could be heard, sources and discursive production increased and possibilities of participation expanded. New media have started their journey, some of them by the initiative of journalists, other by amateurs and others combining contributions of amateurs and professionals. Thus, the volume of information produced, managed, disseminated and stored has grown exponentially.

However, there are indicators pointing out that quantity does not mean diversity. Marty et al. (2009) tested the common sense idea that the multiplicity of sources has an empirical correspondence in the pluralism of information. Their results suggest a "high concentration of a few major issues, often treated in a redundant way", suggesting a framework analogous to the rule of thumb known as Pareto's Law[2]. The authors go on to observe:

> Search engines, aggregators, portals, digg-like platforms, even
> individual blogs act as infomediaries inside the online media sector by
> distributing large amounts of journalistic content. Nevertheless, this content is

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[2] Also known as de 18.20 rule, it "states that, for many events, roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes" (see Wikipedia, "Pareto Principle"). Pareto found that 80% of countries' wealth was owned by 20% of the population. The uneven distribution law has been applied to other social domains.

essentially redundant and originates from press agencies and traditional media corporations. (Marty et al. 2009: 2)

A similar conclusion had already been advanced by Paterson (2006). His research intended to "determine if online news has corrected - or replicated - the inequities and limitations" of the international journalism provided by "traditional media", as far as diversity is concerned. The conclusions couldn't be clearer: "despite the deluge of information available online, the most conservative (…) old media sources remain the privileged tellers of most of the stories circulating about the world" and they are Reuters and the Associated Press.

This "illusory diversity" conclusion is of utmost importance not only because it contradicts the dominant *doxa* concerning the Internet and the "information society" but also – and again - because of the social silence implied in this lack of diversity. Indeed, the last decade has put in evidence the fact that an increasing number of people can come into the public space and share news, ideas and comments about general or specialized matters, either on specific users' spaces offered by mainstream media or on users' own webspaces.

Developments in journalism, from its citizen and alternative to crowdsourcing or participatory initiatives suggest that there are now more voices about more subjects. Apparently, social silence would be decreasing, as a result of the developments on the World Wide Web and the forms of its social appropriation. However, things may not be what they seem. We may consider the central role mainstream media play in the public sphere (and probably will continue to play). Moreover, we may take into account the effects of social and digital divide, affecting specially those that cannot access and/or use efficiently and meaningfully new digital tools and networks. With this in mind, we hypothesize that the increasing of "citizen participation" in the (new) media sphere corresponds to those who already possessed cultural and educational resources (social and symbolic capital, in Bourdieu's terms).

Technology, as we know, is a necessary but not sufficient factor in promoting citizen participation. On the other hand, technology is not a neutral factor, from

a social point of view. The social uses and appropriations as well as social detachment and disengagement deserve further attention from social research. Participation, considered the greatest problem in modern democracies (Dahlgren, 2006) is a social construction, not an obvious product of digital technologies.

4. Typifying media silences

To sum up, we could say that there are vast territories not covered by the media or covered for particular and very episodic (even exotic) reasons; and there are a considerable number of people that are living apart, do not care or even ignore the possibilities and opportunities open by the Internet. In both cases, it is a considerable universe that is poorly understood and which raises serious questions to democratic life.

The challenge we have to face in this domain is to typify these media silences, considering the processes and mechanisms of silence and silencing. In this regard, media are at the same time subject and object of silence.

They are object of silence whenever powerful agents or institutions manage to interfere with newsrooms or journalists' independence, by way of money, enactment of laws, moral pressing and so on. In democracies, where there are checks and balances, attempts to silence news media come more frequently from economic power (and for that reason are hardly detected)[3]. They are subject or agent of silence by ways such as bias and (or including) oblivion, (i)legitimation, amplification, manipulation, diversion, devaluation, ignorance, among other forms. Factors that may interfere include strategies of sources; policies concerning secrecy or censorship; aspects of the professional culture of journalists; media institutions constraints; regulation and self-regulation

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[3] A recent research in seven Latin American countries revealed "a growing trend" of governments "to interfere with the independence of media and journalists in making use of subtle mechanisms that are beyond public knowledge". State advertising funds arbitrarily distributed to reward favourable media coverage and punish those who are critical vis-à-vis the governments; contracts for direct payments to journalists; phone calls to editors from officials disturbed by the circulation of certain news: these are practices that limit freedom of expression and are enacted behind the scenes" (Asociación por los Derechos Civiles / Open Society Justice Initiative, 2008; news story by Marcela Valente. On-line: www.tlaxcala.es/pp.asp?reference=5859&lg=fr , accessed on 26th February, 2009).

processes; literacy and cultural standards of the general public. It is worthy to mention in this context the media 'self-reference', an aspect underlined by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "circular circulation of information", relating to a media trend, especially regarding television, which consists of media referring to themselves in spite of referring to the external reality (Bourdieu, 1996: 22). This closing of the media on themselves entails a form of alienation of the problems and situations in society.

In order to contribute to the development of this typology, what we have said so far suggests that the silence of the media are not just a problem of perception and coverage of what is happening in (or affecting) the world. It is also an issue of salience and emphasis, of framing and bias, of silencing of problematic voices and perspectives.

Moreover, the silences of journalism stem not only from missing voices, but also from what Gronbeck (2004) termed surrogate or "substituted" voices[4], bounded voices[5] and muted voices[6]. From the citizen's point of view, it is useful to inquiry about the meanings of silence and non-participation and how social invisibility is produced, taking into account that, as underlined by Fossum & Trenz (2005), silent (silenced) people and social groups are difficult to be observed empirically.

For civic reasons, to study in depth the social and cultural processes that produce the invisibility of some groups in society as well as the role media play in these processes is of paramount relevance. Journalism may enrich its scope and social meaning if it takes care of those large territories of unsaid, unseen, unknown human realities. Society as a whole would benefit from a more accurate representation of itself.

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[4] Voices eared only by other voices that speak for them.
[5] Voices allowed to speak but confined to specific areas, where they can not be eared.
[6] Voices controlled through fear and intimidation.

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Manuel Pinto is researcher at the Communication and Society Research Center at Universidade do Minho, and Associate Professor of the Communication Sciences Department at the same University. He has been journalist and served as news ombudsman at the Portuguese daily newspaper *Jornal de Notícias*.
Address: Departamento de Ciências da Comunicação, ICS - Universidade do Minho,
Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga - Portugal
E-mail: mjspinto@gmail.com or mpinto@ics.uminho.pt
Weblog: http://mediascopio.wordpress.com