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Yesterday and today of reading interventions in the Argentine press

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Abstract

Letters from readers have been par excellence with the direct intervention of the reading public in the press. It is a non-journalistic space that questions specific problems and represents popular concerns. Currently, online comments in periodical publications fulfill that function in some way, but the forms of access have changed substantially in relation to those of the past, just as the modes of circulation of the press have changed. The proposal is to carry out an analytical approach of those interventions in periodical publications of rural towns in Argentina during the first half of the 20th century in rural spaces, with the objective of comparing them with the current dynamics of the digital era. It is then an exploratory work, which aims - through case studies - to carry out a comparative analysis of present and past reading intervention practices.

Keywords: Press. Rural. Argentina.

Introduction

The media talk about the society that produces them and many of its problems can be found reflected in them. Political traditions, in a broad sense, find an indispensable ally in journalism and publishing companies, to the point of generating academic opinions that qualify the press as a builder of the public agenda and even of reality. It is precisely this heterogeneity that is one of the conditions for appealing to them as a source of consultation. Since the beginning of the dissemination of information, the means and strategies have varied substantially: they have been modified and recycled at the pace of social needs and changes (POGGI, 2015).

Although there are prolific studies on citizen participation in the online press, the latter is less explored in rural environments. The local press is usually one of the most important spaces for recording the daily events of small towns, given that events of daily life are captured there that, otherwise, would be forgotten: from travelers, visitors, celebrations, births, weddings, baptisms, and deaths, even calls, requests for personnel for the field and political events.

In spite of being directly confronted by the medium, the participation of the residents in this scenario is from the role of recipient and without having any impact on the content. For this reason, it has been of interest to investigate the modes of citizen intervention in the press, where letters from readers have been revealed as the only possible site for direct action by the reading public, given that it is a non-journalistic space that challenges specific problems and that, in some way, represents popular concerns.

However, few newspapers in small towns eventually had the aforementioned section and the intervention of the residents found other ways to sneak the word between their pages.

This article aims to investigate these unconventional forms and, at the same time, make a counterpoint with current interventions that - without being directly compared for being different from their origin to their forms of circulation - are also part of the logic of citizen intervention in the press. For this reason, in the second part of the article, the current online comments in periodical publications will be explored, with the aim of identifying whether they also fulfill the function of letting the reader's word break through, although it is clear that the modes of accessibility have changed substantially in relation to those of yesteryear.

Therefore, the proposal is to carry out a first analytical approach of those interventions in periodical publications from the mid-20th century in rural areas of Argentina with the objective of comparing them with the current dynamics, in the Internet era. Although it is understood that the access possibilities make them essentially different, the objective is to identify these differences as well as continuities, both thematic and enunciative style. This is an initial, exploratory, and observational work that aims to be the kickoff of a series that investigates periodical publications of both local and national scope, in order to compare similarities and differences in varied periods.

Through case studies, a comparative analysis of past and present reading intervention practices will be carried out. With this intention, newspapers have been specifically taken as examples. *El Imparcial* (1946) and *InfoGBelgrano* (online, 2019). Both media are from the town of General Belgrano, province of Buenos Aires. This choice responds to the fact that, in both cases, they are the most recognized newspapers in the town in the years selected as samples.

General Belgrano is a town belonging to the Salado Basin, province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. It is an area with a predominantly agricultural-livestock tradition, with a large existence of cattle and the dairy industry and derivatives of milk exploitation (LEVENE, 1941). Another peculiarity of these spaces lies in the fact that, despite their geographical proximity to the Federal Capital of the province, the ways of life, rhythms and daily practices differ substantially from it. Specifically, General Belgrano was founded in May 1871 due to the

inauguration of the Southern Railway station called “Salado”. Only in 1981 did it change its name to its current version and the party was delimited (LEVENE, 1941).

In comparative terms, the analysis will be limited only to the structural scope, since the context in which each of the media is inscribed is naturally different, given the social, political, national, and global economic processes specific to each era.

The voice of the reader

Non-journalistic interventions in the press date back to the 8th century, when they were introduced under the name “dialogue with readers” (VILAMOR, s.f.), which refers to one of the most notable functions of this genre: the possibility of interacting, exchanging opinions between readers and authors (FERNÁNDEZ; GARCÍA, 2005).

According to the Latin or European tradition, journalistic genres are distinguished into three large groups of genres: informative (news, report, etc.), interpretive (chronicle, report) and persuasive (editorial, opinion column, criticism, etc.) (JIMÉNEZ, 2011). When we analyze the press analysis bibliography and take into consideration its nature, readers’ letters are not usually included as a specific genre, but if we observe their argumentative structure, it is possible to place them within the opinion genre. In short, these interventions support a position regarding a specific issue and to do so they are constructed from argumentation.

Readers’ letters are presented in the journalistic company as a space offered to regular readers of the newspaper who are allowed to express their opinion on social problems. They can enunciate their speech both individually and institutionally, intending to allow the arguments to be related to events in the public sphere and not strictly to the privacy of citizens (GARCÍA, 2008, p. 3).

The origin of the press can be recognized in 1810 with the publication of *La Gazeta*, a journalistic style conceived as the one “of ideas” (ULANOVSKY, 2005, p. 14¹). Thus, since its arrival, the press has played a fundamental role in Argentine society: the vehicle of ideas. However, this idea was mutating and by the end of the century the concept of the press was closer to that of information of facts than to the expression of ideas (POGGI; SALOMÓN, 2015, p. 9-10). Furthermore, the relationship of trust between press and reader led to the published information being conceived as a reflection of reality. It will take a long time for the formation of a critical mass that challenges the news as a record of reality susceptible to subjectivities and intentions (ULANOVSKY, 2005, p. 9-10).

On the other hand, since the arrival of the digital press, gradual changes have also occurred. Initially, the version online of newspapers responded to the printed edition. Over time, these formats were expanded with, among other modalities, updates, links to previous news and, of course, spaces for reader comments. In addition, each medium has its social network sites, which allow news to be shared on user profiles, in their own accounts.

1 All the references written originally in Spanish have been freely translated.

As Bourdieu puts it, words represent relations of symbolic power and contribute to forming the social world. Therefore, replacing one word with another is changing the vision of the social world and, consequently, contributing to transforming it (BOURDIEU, 2001). Thus, starting from the premise that the press constitutes a political actor that intervenes in the construction of social representations and influences people's behavior, it is interesting to delve deeper into the modes of citizen intervention in the press of yesterday and today.

In this sense, in both cases it involves publicly expressing sayings that cannot be done face to face, that require the intrinsic reflection of writing, the choice of each of the words and their order and adapting the text to a reduced space. What a task for those who are not part of the journalistic space and choose to participate in it in this way.

However, to understand the current dynamics, it is necessary to consider the modifications that the press has had since its “put on screen”, in a constant interrelation between the technical and the social (ANSELMINO, 2012, p. 26). That is, “a gradual and variable capacity that a media has to give greater power to its users/readers in the construction of current affairs, offering them both possibilities for content selection and expression and communication” (ROST, 2006, *apud* ANSELMINO, 2012, p. 66), given that the proliferation of devices proportionally increased the possibilities of intervention, modifying public participation in newspapers with new logic online.

Analogue interventions

The newspaper *El Imparcial* was founded in 1905 directed by Tomás Pico and Francisco Marquie and, in broadsheet format, it is published weekly (every Sunday). It is a publication of “general interest, literary, social and news”, as the medium itself announces under its title.

Although it is not possible to give a date for the first relevant participation of a citizen in the pages of a paper newspaper, it is clear that readers' incursions into newspapers date back to the beginnings of journalism but have materialized in different ways. Various such as letters, complaints, clarifications, recommendations, opinions, etc. (GALDOSPIN; LAREQUI, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, and as has been detected in the present study, they did not always enjoy a constant space (GALDOSPIN; LAREQUI, 2017).

Thus, even though *El Imparcial* did not have letters from readers², in the work of replacing sources, it has been observed that some spaces fulfill that function in some way: giving the floor to strangers to the medium. Despite not being strictly a letter, they share the fact of being an annex genre and of being prepared by someone outside the medium, who does not know the process of production and circulation of news and who, even so, prepares a writing to communicate / report something.

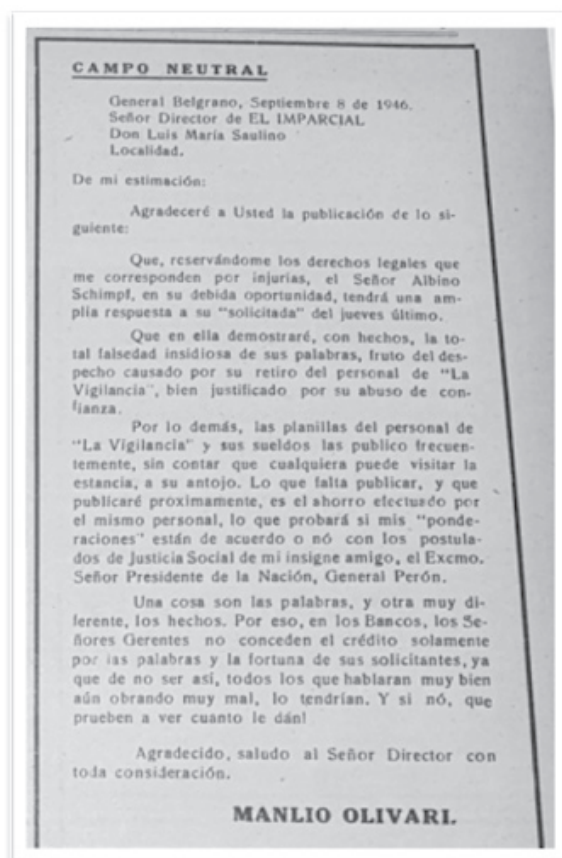
In that newspaper, it has been possible to identify reader interventions in two specific spaces: *Request* and *Clarification*. Although these are not spaces in which readers would like to

² Although only one case is presented for this opportunity, it is necessary to clarify that, in the consultation of sources from both other newspapers in that town and others, also from the Cuenca del Salado, no letters from readers have been recorded in any case.

express their opinion about a current topic, but rather defend their honor and good name, they maintain the characteristic opinion format and the structure of a letter with date, place, and signature. Even without strictly responding to the format of a reader's letter, understood as an intervention in relation to a social fact, while the argumentative and opinion structure, in the first person and in reference to a fact of public knowledge, fulfills a similar objective.

These publications were made sporadically, and it has not been possible to determine a thematic logic or a periodicity of appearance. Given the characteristics of small communities, it is possible to argue that the publication of a specific opinion in *El Imparcial* happened because they were people with personal contacts with the editor or because they were relevant figures in the community. Such is the case of Manlio Olivari, a local landowner, known to Juan Domingo Perón (Argentine president for three terms), fleeting mayor of the party and vice president of Banco Provincia, who defends himself and responds to a request that, according to records, appeared previous week signed by Alberto Schimpf:

Image 1 – Request in the newspaper *El Imparcial*



Source: *El imparcial*, 9/26/1946, p. 3.

The common themes had to do with denying previous requests, such as what had just been seen, or from other media. Replies to publications in the newspaper *El Telégrafo*, the local competition, were very common, such as the one that appears in the example below:

Image 2 – Requested in the newspaper *El Imparcial*



Source: *El imparcial*, 2/11/1946, p.10.

Then the *clarifications*, already stripped of the letter format and a strict argumentative structure, still involved a subject outside the press who, in some way, intervened. Some examples are provided below:

Image 3 – Clarification in the newspaper *El Imparcial*

Source: *El Imparcial*, 2/11/1946, p.10.

Thus, and in line with Martínez Mahugo (2006, p. 2) “until the emergence of the Internet, the letters to the editor section, the right of reply and the right of clarification were the only paths available to the public to contact the media and report errors, abuses or irregularities.” The new century will bring with it substantial developments in the ways of producing, intervening and circulating information.

Interventions 3.0

The era of globality introduced elements that significantly modified communications. The media were not immune to them and quickly adopted the New Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for the circulation of information. In this sense, the possibilities of public participation became more flexible while spaces were opened that made it possible to speak:

The digital editions of traditional media have been transformed in recent years to welcome citizens with open arms, providing them with participation tools that to a greater or lesser extent allow the involvement of the audience in the content offered by these websites. Most of these digital media offer various avenues for participation, such as the option to post photographs, participate in forums, write news, ask questions, register blogs or comment on the news. This type of citizen incursions into digital media has been widely analyzed in recent years (GALDOSPIN; LAREQUI, 2012, p. 133-134).

On the other hand, social network sites began to constantly replicate the news emanating from the official media themselves: newscasts, radio programs, newspapers, magazines, journalists, etc. They began to be frequent users of networks with accounts in which the information constantly circulates and recirculates. So, the information space was no longer the exclusive monopoly of a few who are professionally dedicated to journalism, but immediate access to information with spaces available to give their opinions incorporated the citizen as another link in the circuit.

The use of the global network has reconfigured traditional modes of production, circulation, and consumption of information (POGGI, 2018). That is to say, the dynamics of relationships and communication in society have been transformed, in which users are no longer simple spectators, but also become producers of content and informative immediacy is the common denominator (BRICCHI; MANSILLA; PENNACCHI, 2015). Along these lines, the use of ICT has spread and diversified in both urban and rural areas (CIMADEVILLA; CARNIGLIA, 2009; LARDONE, 2012). Thus, it is possible to insinuate that ICT breaks the unidirectionality of information construction and “puts new participants in virtual spaces into dynamic and active interaction” (DUARTE; MACHADO; POGGI, 2016).

Today, with the naturalization of information consumption and participation through social networks, what happens with readers’ letters and citizen participation? And what are the links between letters and comments on social networks in this new context of cyberjournalism or journalism 3.0?³

To observe the reading interventions in digital media, in the digital newspaper *General Information Belgrano*, directed by Carlos Baña, the police news published in the month of July 2019 have been taken into analysis. The choice responds that it is the section with the largest number of publications and therefore it is in the space in which the most participation have been found to contrast with the dynamics of the mid-20th century. In addition, it is understood that security is a relevant issue for a usually quiet and safe town.

3 The classification proposed by Juan Varela distinguishes between the three versions of cyberjournalism: 1.0, which is merely responsible for transferring the content of traditional media to the Internet; 2.0, which generates specific content for the network with the potential it has; and 3.0, which contains the socialization of information through a virtual conversation in which the participants intervene in the message itself (VARELA, 2005).

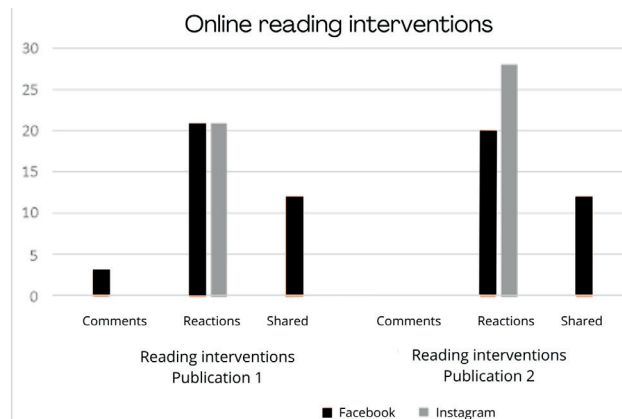
In the cases studied, the digital newspapers themselves do not have the notes. Even in other sections not analyzed. However, these notes are replicated on social network sites and that is where participants can be found in the form of comments, or indicating support or disagreement regarding the various topics. In addition to the various interventions, it is also possible to observe endless virtual debates between users.

By analyzing the behavior in their replicas on social network sites *Facebook* and *Instagram*, it is noted that the publications do not coincide with those of the medium - that is, the news responds to the theme of insecurity but does not coincide with what is published in the newspaper online-, although among those published on networks by the medium itself. Even though this allows us to doubt the journalistic rigor of *Info General Belgrano*, it is on social network sites where comments appear in some cases. These comments preserve, just like the old letters from readers, a declarative structure of opinion, which is generally reduced to a single sentence. It is worth mentioning that *InfoGBelgrano* uses its social networks not only in informative terms, but local advertising predominates and it is full of photographs corresponding to social activities in the municipality.

In the case of *Facebook*, it is observed that the first publication (7/13) has reader participation with 3 comments, 21 reactions and 12 shares. On the other hand, the second publication (7/18) has no comments, although it has been shared 12 times and has 20 reactions.

In *Instagram*, although the interaction through likes exceeds *Facebook* - with 28 *likes* in each case -, there are no written reading interventions in any of the observed publications.

Graph 1 – comparison of reading interventions in *InfoGBelgrano* and its *Facebook* and *Instagram* accounts.



Source: elaborated by the authors.

It is necessary to contemplate that virtual participation in the genre studied behaves like a hybrid between orality and writing: the spontaneity of orality (where the reflective act is not a condition) coexists with the possibilities of writing (such as selection and order of the words

used). It is in this sense that, in many cases, the interaction is limited to showing liking or disliking in an iconic way, without the need to expressly express it through a written intervention.

Currently, the online press has multiple spaces generated by the interface itself that enable interventions while generating participation statistics for simple visibility and recognition for users, that is, the display of the newspaper - and with it, the emergence of the spaces from which the reader's discourse materializes - brings with it new possibilities of recognizing recognition (ANSELMINO, 2012).

Final considerations

The objective of this work has been to observe continuities and ruptures of practices that involve opinions in the press of rural spaces. To do this, media were selected with the common characteristic of widespread popularity among the local population, in their historical context.

This first observation task, far from reaching decisive conclusions, opens up questions that indicate paths to continue investigating. Firstly, the comparison between analog and digital intervention behaviors confirms that the dynamics have varied substantially. While the interventions found in those requested in the mid-20th century are usually extensive and have the characteristics of a letter, the current ones are brief and indicative. In any case, the *clarifications* of *El Imparcial* could be noted as an intermediate format.

Thus, the main question that arises - and which is considered important to highlight in this space - is whether there is a need in small towns to publicly express opinions in the press, before and now, regarding specific issues. The first hypothesis is negative, given the nonexistence of letters from readers and the little intervention in the formats of *requests* and *clarifications* found. Currently, this behavior is maintained, and written interventions are null in the digital medium itself, and few in the replicas on social networks.

So, independently of the changes that have occurred from the various historical processes that modify societies and their behavior, of the modifications in the practice of writing and its modes of public expression, and regardless of the abysmal distance in the modes of circulation of the information that has passed in just under a century, the active face-to-face sociability existing in spaces of small populations could be a first answer to this question. In the senses studied, the folklore of word of mouth seems to remain rooted before virtual citizen participation.

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Data availability

The author confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Conflict of interest

The author declare no conflict of interest.

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