Transformations of the Websites of Portuguese Newspapers

The main purpose of the project is to explore the changes in public communication resulting from the development of digital technologies based on the history of Portuguese digital journalism using the services of Arquivo.pt.

The first specific objective of the project is to characterize the technological changes of the interfaces of the websites of the principal Portuguese generalist newspapers, clarifying the changing structural characteristics.

The second specific objective is to develop clues about the mutations of the interfaces of the newspapers under study, suggest development trends, and evaluate and criticize the trends that have already been thought in the different Portuguese media investigations.

What can be known through the interfaces?

The study of the interfaces enables the analysis of the general structure of the websites, answering the question about what characterizes each moment of the website and what changes from one moment to another – such as that same structure or aspects in particular, such as domains, colors, log in and subscription formats, journalistic and advertising content available, in particular as text, image and video presentation structures.

The study of the interfaces also allows the comparison between the changing elements to inquire, date and periodize the concrete transformations of the interfaces of each newspaper and also to question the relations between these changes and other external instances to the newspaper in question, such as private companies – for example, the relationship between domain switching and synergies between media companies and other companies can be questioned to understand the extent to which these synergies have implications in the website changes.

Arquivo.pt is a *sui generis* research infrastructure

In this context, Arquivo.pt serves as a means of access and, ultimately, of facilitating access to the materials from which the empirical evidence will be collected. Although it seems to be similar to a conventional archive with which social scientists, especially historians, are accustomed to dealing with, Arquivo.pt as a digital archive arises as a *sui generis* means of investigation.

It is not just about accessing data that belongs to the past, but about having direct, public and interactive access to that data. Therefore, the relevance of Arquivo.pt to the project has to do, on the one hand, with the possibility of the researcher to be confronted directly and interactively with the archived materials, being able to fully explore the forms and the contents of the websites, to the extent they are preserved.

On the other hand, Arquivo.pt offers the researcher the possibility of overcoming the common limits of the memory of the investigated institutions, specifically the usual fragmentations of the self-perception of the institutional agents and the constraints and the formal limitations to the access to the institutional archives.

Knowing the websites, evaluating journalism

The main scientific benefits of this project are the widening of the knowledge about the ongoing digitalization process, particularly in journalism, the re-elaboration of the chronologies and periodizations in the history of Portuguese journalism, and the integration of the aesthetics of the interfaces as an investigative element in media research.

In social terms, the enrichment of knowledge about the heritage of Portuguese journalism and communication technologies and the expansion of the evaluative sphere of the political economy of Portuguese journalism are evident benefits.

Studying the change of 4 journalistic websites

The newspapers whose websites will be studied are *Correio da Manhã*, *Diário de Notícias*, *Expresso* and *Público*. These journals were selected based on two criteria that justify their relevance from point of view of the materials available in the Arquivo.pt.

First, its antiquity, because it would not make sense to study websites that, because they are too current, still have publicly available all the information that constituted them since their foundation.

Second, the constancy of its updates, given that a website that has remained relatively uniform since its inception poses few challenges to research on structural dynamics. From an exploratory survey, 3166 versions of the websites of mentioned newspapers were collected from the Arquivo.pt, dated between 1996 and 2015.

A new methodology for journalism studies?

In methodological terms, this project involves carrying out four major phases of research. In a previous phase, a zero phase, an approximation is made to the archives of the digital contents of the newspapers studied (this approach has already been carried out in an exploratory way; now follows a formal approach) and a state of the art with regard to the history of Portuguese digital journalism.

The first phase of research is to collect or survey the materials to be studied, from the covers of the available versions.

The second phase is the characterization of the structural changes and the date and periodize the concrete transformations of the website interfaces of each newspaper.

The third phase of research is to formulate an overall view from the historical-comparative cross-referencing of the data of the succession lines of the interfaces of each journal.

Finally, in the fourth phase the discussion of results is carried out, in which the results obtained with the analysis of archival materials are framed – or, if appropriate, unframed – in relation to the established views in the Portuguese media studies.