

# Transparency as a key element of data journalism

Perceptions of Brazilian professionals

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, especially because of disinformation, transparency has been an important part of journalists' work. Transparent conduct involves opening methods and procedures of reporting. It means, overall, showing the audience how the information was obtained and verified until being published. This study aims to unravel Brazilian data journalists' perceptions of transparency. In order to do so, it presents the results of a survey with 36 professionals in 2019. Most of them are data journalists that work in newsrooms for more than ten years. A significant part of the respondents believes that transparency must be shown every day to the readers. Among the main reasons to rely on transparency as an important value in their practice is the necessity to increase credibility in journalism and combat disinformation. Furthermore, this research suggests that transparency seems to be connected to objectivity and journalists' ethics, but not necessarily to the news outlets' rules.

## KEYWORDS

Data journalism. Transparency. Credibility. Disinformation.

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## 1. Introduction

Transparency is an important journalistic value to combat disinformation and increase news outlets' credibility. It is understood as a method to disclose news reporting processes, which means showing the audience how the information was collected and how far an investigation could be developed [7] [10] [19]. Data journalism is under development in Brazil. Through the Access of Information Law – which came into force in May 2012 and was based on examples such as the American Freedom of Information Act –, more information became publicly available online. It has contributed to data journalism' expansion in Brazil – there are 52 news organizations practicing it [16]. Unfortunately, the growth occurs in a period in which trust in news media has decreased.

According to the Digital News Report 2019 [13], trust in media has fallen 11 percentage points in Brazil compared to the year before. The last presidential elections, in October 2018, was extremely polarized and the use of social media contributed to the

spread of disinformation. Although it is hard to correlate the impact of disinformation with the elections' results, the far-right President newly elected Jair Bolsonaro certainly had influenced – and still influence – the population when he calls credible news media organizations “fake news” and offends journalists. Such as President Donald Trump in the US, he adopts a post-truth communication to create and share his own “facts” [20]. In this landscape, it seems to make sense to study transparency's importance in data journalism. It is a way for to journalists defend their own work while explaining to the readers why some stories were developed and how the information was obtained (sources' provenance). Transparency implies honesty.

This paper aims to understand how Brazilian data journalists perceive transparency. In order to do so, it presents the results of an online survey with 36 professionals. The people surveyed provided information about their procedures, strategies and perceptions regarding transparency in journalism. These preliminary results indicate that they believe data journalism has advantages on showing transparency, and this set of procedures may be closer to objectivity. Among the main reasons to rely on transparency as an important value in their practice is the necessity to increase credibility in journalism and to combat disinformation. Furthermore, this study suggests transparency seems to be connected to journalists' ethics, not necessarily the news organizations' rules. The group of journalists who filled the survey also said that transparency should be demonstrated every day, not only in special reporting.

## 2. Data journalism in Brazil

Data journalism is a term relatively new, brought up in the middle of the 2000s, and frequently referred to Adrian Holovaty's text about how newspapers should change. He basically defended that journalists should think about the use and reuse of information, and not only gather it for one specific story. Data journalism has predecessors such as Precision Journalism and Computer-Assisted Reporting (CAR). Open data policies around the world contributed to data journalism widespread particularly since the end of the 2000s. In Brazil, the Access of Information Law – popularly known as LAI, short for *Lei de Acesso à Informação* in Portuguese – induced a frequent use of data in newsrooms.

In the past years, databases and spreadsheets have become popular and governments from different countries started to provide public information online. Scientists, bloggers, developers, and journalists have demonstrated interest in generating knowledge through that. Bradshaw [3] defines data as the “information that

can be analyzed with computers”, but also recognizes it is a vague term. To some, data refers to statistics and facts, and to others it is about structured information, including numbers and text. After all, it seems that nowadays journalists have a unique chance to tell stories through data, and the power of the internet and computing provides the tools to do so in a way that has never been seen before.

The practice of data journalism is getting wider in Brazil. The 2017 Global Data Journalism, an international survey opened between December 2016 and May 2017, had 206 participants from 43 countries, and just three of them were Brazilian [6]. In a current approach, a survey [16] has shown that data journalism is being developed in 52 news outlets – it happens in 27 (51,9%) digital and disruptive news organizations, 19 (36,5%) mainstream news organizations, 4 (7,6%) non-journalistic initiatives and 2 (4%) other places. These numbers are a result of combined information from a questionnaire that was distributed by email and messaging apps. The researcher who conducted the study also included his own observation on social media. One limitation may be the methodology: it also includes non-journalistic places.

Numbers suggest data journalism is attracting interest in Brazil. In November 2019, the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas offered a massive course called *Data Journalism and Visualization with Free Tools*. In a map [8] that shows where the participants come from, it is possible to see that Brazil has the highest number of people interested in the training: 2,297 students. The second country with the highest number of participants were the United States (1,756 people) and the third was Mexico (775 people). Although the map presents European countries with a great level of interest, it revealed that journalists from America, in general, consider that training data journalism is an important practice to be developed professionally.

There are two leading institutions that promote data journalism in Brazil: The Investigative Journalism Brazilian Association (Abraji) and School of Data. They both host an annual conference about investigation, data journalism and digital methods, and offer online courses and tutorials along the year. In a recent crowdfunding campaign, the School of Data has created a new associate program and 170 people joined it. Abraji, in its turn, has 287 associates (250 journalists and 37 students), according to numbers released in 2019.

To better understand competences and skills that characterize data journalists' profile, Oliveira and Angeluci [14] have collected data from 14 semi-structured interviews with professionals and researchers in Brazil. After gathering and analyzing the content extracted from the interviews, the amount of six categories were created in order to present the competences of data journalists in the country: “[...] (1) differentiated academic curriculum, (2) foundations for programming culture, (3) verification and visualization narratives, (4) projects and partnerships, (5) hybrid teams, and (6) self-directed learning”.

The paper written by Oliveira and Angeluci [14] does not explore specifically transparency in journalism. However, it mentions transparency as part of the premise number 5. The authors argued that the category called *hybrid teams* suggests the need to a reporter develop an individual competence on “being a more

complete and experienced journalist with a more analytical view, yet without neglecting the social bias of transparency in news”. However, it is not clear what is the meaning of transparency for their study or if this word appeared during the interviews they have conducted. In order to clarify what is understood by transparency in journalism, the next section will discuss this topic.

### 3. The meaning of transparency

Transparency has been an ethical norm in journalism [9] [15]. Its practical dimension, however, is highly associated with the opening of reporting procedures. As truth-seekers, journalists must be honest with their audiences and explain how far they could go in an investigation [10] [22]. Transparency has often been the key to credibility [10]. It means, according to Zelizer, a form to “ensure the trust, credibility and legitimacy associated with the news” [25]. It also has been a form to distinguish professional journalism from other forms of public discourses, as well as managed as a normative innovation [4].

This journalistic value is frequently evoked by fact-checkers to defend their work, once transparency's approach requires demonstrating to the readers the news sources used. According to Graves [5], the practice of “showing your work” acts to argue, persuade and avoid critics. These professionals can also be the opposite of the journalists that usually do not reveal their sources, do not challenge claims made by politicians and do not act in a transparent way about their processes. Kovach and Rosenstiel [10] mention the “Spirit of Transparency” and its similarities to the scientific method: to explain how information was obtained and why it is reliable.

Transparency might have appeared in one of the first practices that later become data journalism: Precision Journalism, created by Philip Meyer around the 1970s in the United States. Meyer defended that journalists should apply social methods in their reporting procedures, approximating journalism to science [12]. It was, after all, a way through journalists could explain their work. This conceptualization is clearly connected to the norm of objectivity in journalism practice. While a variety of definitions of the term have been suggested or criticized, this paper will use Schudson's [17]. According to this scholar, considering the US landscape, modern analytical and procedural fairness dates to the 1920s – at the time, newsgathering was growing, and the rules of objectivity enable the principles of sincerity, truthfulness, accuracy, and impartiality. Although some authors disagree with the effectiveness of objectivity, a norm that refers to being free from opinion or bias, it seemed to be a natural ideology at a time when science was prestigious, and partisanship in journalism was left behind.

The objectivity norm helped journalists to differentiate from propagandists and public relations once they were conscious about the manipulation that information could have. Currently, in new forms such as 360° Journalism, this paradigm may be unstable – while pursuing a more accurate and objective reporting, journalists end up constructing the illusions of accuracy and objectivity through images alterations and other techniques [1]. In such cases, the problem seems to be using journalistic norms to compromise the truth and justify manipulation in the name of the

audiences' expectations. However, this is not what objectivity is about.

Even some might believe that is impossible to practice objective journalism, there is no way to do that without subjectivity – and it is not what the approach of objectivity suggests. Objectivity is about revealing methods, procedures and being honest with the audience [10]. Journalism objectivity is grounded on the readers' perceptions of truth and trust [11]. Truth is part of the contract between readers and news outlets. It makes sense as part of discursive conditions to determine that news corresponds to reality [21]. According to Anderson [2]: “The scientific processes, and the various forms of evidence upon which science drew, would reduce situational uncertainty and allow journalists to become more objective”. Thus, transparency is also discussed as the new objectivity [23].

Data journalism's stories have been published mostly on websites. In a linked medium such as Web, the narratives may provide connections (hyperlinks) that show where the information was obtained [23]. Since the 20th Century, the commitment to journalistic objectivity has been the response of the profession to face moments of crisis [2]. To some scholars, transparency and objectivity mean offering objective and fairness reporting. In order to practice that, journalists are concerned about their methods during all the investigation: gathering, researching, and evaluating information.

Accountability and transparency are important terms mentioned in the last Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics of the United States, edited in 2014 [18]. Briefly, it informs, in a whole section, that journalists must explain ethical choices and processes to audiences, respond to questions about accuracy, clarity and fairness, explain corrections and expose unethical conduct in journalism. The current Brazilian Code of Ethics, written in 2007, does not specify transparency as a topic of interest. The text argues that the access of information is a fundamental tool for reporting, but it seems to be, in general, outdated.

Theoretically and discursively, data journalism has the potential to explore transparency. However, after analyzing more than 150 data journalism articles in the US, Zamith [24] found out that “[...] nearly nine of ten articles did not link to any of the datasets used and that fewer than two in ten included a section for methodological details – two important aspects of disclosure transparency”. In the next section, this study examines how Brazilian data journalists perceive their practices. Further research may combine content analysis, as developed by Zamith, and responses from surveys, such as this study.

#### 4. Research question and methods

Based on the literature explored before, the following research question is posed. RQ: **How do Brazilian data journalists perceive transparency?** In order to answer this question, an online survey was distributed to approximately 200 people through specific groups (websites, social media) of data journalists in May, October and November 2019. It is difficult to estimate how many professionals work specifically in this area in Brazil currently. Overall, 36 data journalists filled the survey.

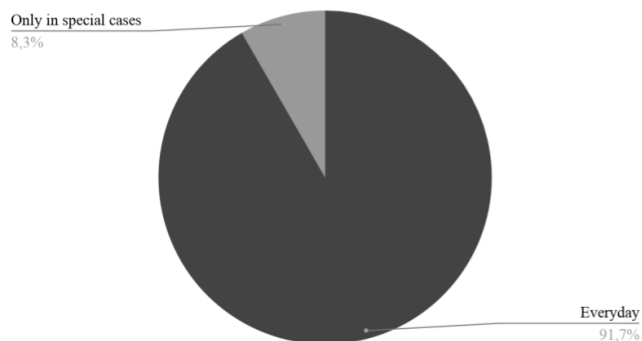
Although this number is not necessarily high, it might represent the expectations of the data journalism community – this set of practices is evolving in Brazil and, considering there are 52 news organizations that practice it, the number of respondents are satisfactory at the moment. The survey had the following types of inquiries: demographic questions, open-ended questions, closed-ended questions, scale and multiple-choice. The main part of the respondents is data journalists who work in newsrooms for more than ten years. The results will be discussed in the next session.

#### 5. Discussion

The survey entitled *Data journalists' perceptions of transparency* was filled by 36 professionals in Brazil. The first demographic question was about place of work. Half of the population (50,0%) surveyed works in a newsroom, while a quarter (25,0%) claims to be entrepreneur. Another significant part of the respondents is a freelancer (8,3%). People that represent the other 16,7% claimed to be trainees, public workers, project coordinators, data scientist reporters and members of communication team at a non-governmental organization (NGO). Regarding the years of work, just over a third of those surveyed (38,9%) indicated that they work as a journalist for more than ten years; a third of the respondents (33,3%) works from six to ten years; and less than a third (27,8%) indicated that they work as data journalists from one to five years.

After two demographic questions, the respondents needed to answer these closed-ended questions: 1) According to your experience, do the readers demand more transparency? 2) When transparency should be demonstrated to the readers? Both results indicate that journalists perceive transparency as an important value for the audience and that it should be demonstrated frequently. In response to question 1, 88,9% of the respondents believed that the audience demand more transparent procedures in journalism, while just 11,1% said that the readers are not concerned about it. Considering question 2, a great part of the population surveyed (91,7%) indicated that transparency should be demonstrated every day, in every story, while 8,3% believe it must be adopted just in special news reporting stories (**Figure 1**).

When transparency should be demonstrated to the readers?



**Figure 1 shows how data journalists perceive the expectations of the audience. Transparency should be demonstrated every day, according to most part of them.**

In a multiple-choice question, where journalists were able to select more than one sentence, they were able to express why they believe transparency is important for journalism. A significant part of the professionals (91,7%) said “It contributes to increase credibility in journalism” and more than two-thirds (86,1%) said it is essential because “It shows the evidences of the fact”. The majority of participants (80,6%) also agreed with the statement that transparency “Helps to combat disinformation” and that “It increases the quality of the content produced”. Three-quarters of the respondents (75,0%) said transparency “Helps to create a respectful relationship with the readers” and approximately half (52,8%) of the professionals believes transparency is important because “It shows the readers which news sources were used”. For a small number of participants (47,2%) transparency is also important because “It involves opening the code” (Figure 2).

Transparency is important in data journalism because:

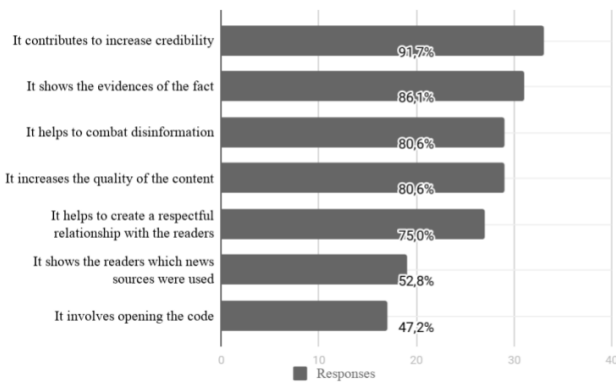


Figure 2 demonstrates why Brazilian data journalists consider transparency an important value.

This study also used scale in the survey. Scale was from 0 to 5, and the results presented here are aggregated (0-1: strongly disagree/disagree; 2-3: neutral; and 4-5: strongly agree/agree). To summarize it, professionals were highly confident of data journalism and its capacity to demonstrate methods and procedures. Respondents were invited to express in what extent they agree with the sentence “With scientific origins, data journalism is one of the most efficient forms to present transparent content once it allows the method reproduction”. More than two-thirds of the journalists (80,6%) said they strongly agree/agree with that, while 19,4% declared being neutral about it. Nobody disagrees with that affirmation. The main part of the respondents also agrees on some level with the sentence “Transparency is intimately related to ethics in journalism”. About that, 72,2% of the participants said they strongly agree/agree, while a third (25%) remained neutral about it. Only one person (2,8%) strongly disagree/disagree with that affirmation.

Journalists were a little divided when another important topic appeared: objectivity. After reading the sentence “Transparency is the new objectivity in journalism”, more than half of the participants (58,3%) said they strongly agree/agree with that affirmation, while almost a third (27,7%) stayed neutral about it. Moreover, 14% of the respondents strongly disagree/disagree with that (Figure 3). Interestingly, the concept of transparency is the

new objectivity is highly encouraged by scholars, but this premise does not encounter the same adherence among data journalists.

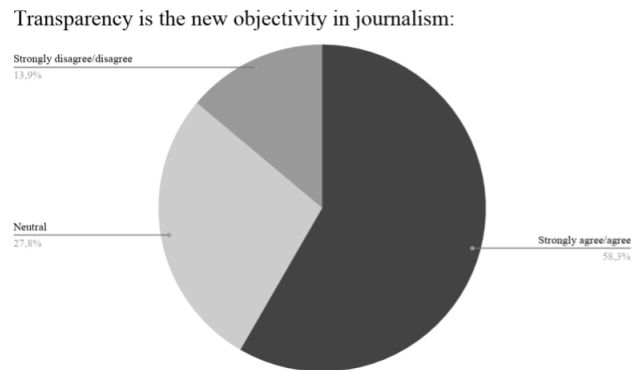


Figure 3 indicates how the professionals surveyed feel about comparing transparency and objectivity.

The results of the survey also indicate that journalists believe that transparency is more connected to the *ethos* of the professional and adopting ethical conduct, and not necessarily to what news outlets comprehend as journalistic values. Regarding the affirmation “Some news organizations avoid being transparent (offering a code that is open-source, for example) because of competition with other media outlets”, more than two-thirds of the respondents (72,2%) said they strongly agree/agree with that sentence, while a quarter (25,0%) stayed neutral about it. Just one journalist (2,8%) disagree with that.

At the end of the survey, journalists were invited to mention what transparency strategies or tools they frequently use in their work. The participants, on the whole, demonstrated they often use hyperlinks to indicate the original news sources consulted (including news articles published in other media outlets), documents that indicate the provenance of the information, detailed methodology and an open-source code in order to provide statistical analysis and other important procedures developed during the news reporting. Overall, the respondents also believe transparency should be improved in Brazil by adopting specific manuals in the newsrooms, detailing methodologies and providing editorial decisions and limitations that eventually occurred.

## 6. Conclusion and further studies

The purpose of the current study was to determine Brazilian data journalists’ perceptions of transparency. The survey collected information about 36 participants, and it was developed during part of 2019. This study has shown that transparency is linked primarily to ethics (also *ethos*) and frequently explored by journalists, but not necessarily by news outlets. Generally, these professionals identify the audience’s demand for more transparency and find important to provide details about facts and news gathering. The connection between objectivity and transparency, however, is often made by scholars, but it does not encounter the same adherence in journalism practice. The data journalists surveyed seem to be motivated by the fact that transparency may increase credibility in journalism and combat

disinformation. In countries where disinformation had a significant impact in everyday life, like in Brazil, it seems even more important to stand up for journalism.

The scope of this study was limited in terms of identifying the universe of data journalist's population in Brazil and extracting a precise sample. Considering it is a relatively new field in the country, further studies may cover this gap in order to provide new insights for data journalism in general. A natural progression of this work is to analyze how transparency is related to the use of news sources. These findings showed that data journalists believe they are adopting transparent conduct when they provide to the audience some hyperlinks, spreadsheets, documents and the programming code used to sustain statistical analysis. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel [10], detailing the news sources are the most effective form of transparency that news organizations have at their disposal. One limitation of data journalism, on the other hand, seems to be the constant use of official news sources [24], which sometimes reflects on the lack of autonomy in journalistic investigations.

Furthermore, new studies could also investigate if data journalists' discourse in defense of transparency in fact occurs, considering some news outlets do not open their procedures because of competitiveness. The next step for this research is detecting forms of transparency in Brazilian data journalism to find out what strategies and tools demonstrate transparency in the use of news sources. What has been currently observed, probably motivated by disinformation and the decreasing of journalism credibility in Brazil, is that news media outlets are explaining why a specific content is published. Websites are making it clear with specific sections in news articles. Interestingly, in a landscape where trust in news media has decreased, not only the methods need to be contextualized, but also the motives for an investigation.

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