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## THE GAME OF SOUNDBITES

### THE SHRINKING POLITICAL QUOTATIONS IN THE 'QUALITY' PRESS

RICARDO JORGE PINTO

In this article, I investigate the impact of soundbites in the political pages of 'quality' newspapers. The research focus on the length and profile of quotations in news stories, since the 1960s, of four daily newspapers from four different countries: France, England, Portugal and The United States of America. This cross-cultural study concludes that there has been an evident reduction of the percentage of quotation paragraphs in those stories. This phenomenon, it is my argument, is directly associated with the emergence of the concept of soundbites, and reflects a shift in the paradigm of political journalism.

Neste artigo, eu investigo o impacto de «soundbites» nos artigos de política de jornais de referência. A pesquisa centra-se na dimensão e características das citações de fontes em notícias, desde os anos 60, em quatro jornais de quatro países: França, Inglaterra, Portugal e Estados Unidos da América. Este estudo conclui que houve uma clara redução na percentagem de parágrafos de citação nessas peças noticiosas. O meu argumento é que este fenómeno está directamente associado ao aparecimento do conceito de «soundbite» e reflecte uma ruptura no paradigma do jornalismo político.

Soundbites have taken over the modern scenario of political communication, involving journalists in a territory of short quotations with high visibility. Long direct quotations, typical of the 1960s and 1970s, were substituted by short and scarce reports of declarations. In this study, I shall try to prove that the emergence of the concept of soundbites is closely related with the replacement of a journalistic model based in the quotation of sources by a trend of descriptive and analytical model of reporting political events.

According to van Dijk (1988), there are various standard strategies to promote the persuasive process of news story assertions. The conceptual difference between descriptive and analytical units of information permits the differentiation of two categories of strategies: a descriptive strategy, which emphasises the factual nature of events (e.g., direct description of events; using evidence from close eyewitnesses; using direct quotes from sources; signals that indicate precision such as numbers for persons, time, events, etc.); and an analytical strategy, which emphasises the interpretative frame

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of presenting data (connecting facts, events, and situations; explaining the reason why of events; making subjective judgements).

The aim of this work is to study the balance between these two strategies, since the early 1960s, in 'quality' newspapers from different countries. This study will concentrate mainly in the weight of quotation paragraphs in political news stories in those papers.

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I assume that the strategies referred by van Dijk, and its correlation, are the very essence of journalism. The modifications in the balance of those elements have played a major role in the evolution of information models. Therefore, any modification in journalistic patterns affects this strategy game. The mechanisms of change act upon the structure of descriptive, analytical, and quotation patterns of journalism.

My argument is that a revolution has occurred in the correlation of those patterns in news stories. The main evidence is the reduction of a structure visibly based on quotations of sources of information inside political news stories. This phenomenon has to be understood inside a communication scheme where soundbites emerge as a powerful concept in the relation of political agents and the media.

Soundbite is defined as a block of uninterrupted speech by a candidate on television news. The term was first used in the late 1960s (Jones, 1995: 27). In a more extended sense, it can be applied to the print press as a continuous quote or paraphrase.

Soundbites can contribute to create more complex units of information. On the one hand, they reduce the textual space reserved for quotations: they are shorter than the traditional quotes, and permit a more effective intervention of journalists in the ideas expressed. On the other hand, soundbites create a sense of impact on news texts that is attractive to both political advisors and journalists. Thus, soundbites help to understand the trend of the shrinking quotation paragraphs in the political pages of 'quality' newspapers.

#### **EMERGENCY, CALL THE SPIN DOCTOR**

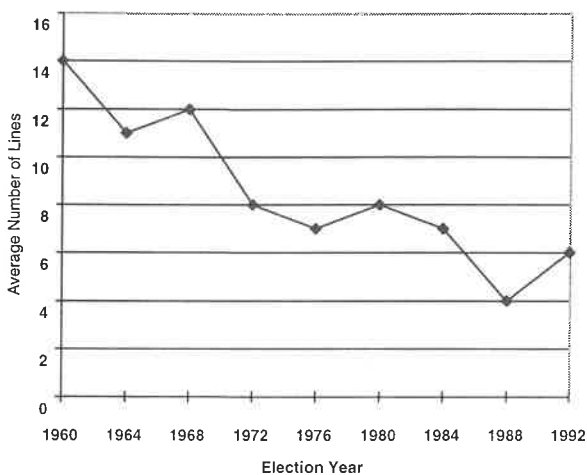
Thomas Patterson studied the coverage of American Presidential campaigns and concluded the press has been giving politicians fewer chances to speak for themselves through the news (1993: 75). According to the results of his study, when, in 1968, presidential candidates appeared in a television news story they were usually pictured speaking. During that period, in 84 per cent of the time the candidates' images on the screen were accompanied by their own words. The average soundbite in the 1968 elections lasted 42 seconds. By 1988, the average soundbite had diminished to less than 10 seconds. The

average soundbite in 1992 also lasted less than 10 seconds. «The voiceless candidate had become the norm: for every minute that the candidate spoke on the evening news in 1988 and 1992, the journalists who were covering them talked 6 minutes» (75)<sup>1</sup>.

But presidential campaign coverage has also evolved in the newspapers, and the candidates' words have been squeezed out even of the quality papers. The study of Patterson revealed that, in 1960, the average continuous quote or paraphrase of a candidate's words in a front page of The New York Times story was 14 lines. By the election of 1992, the average had fallen to 6 lines (see chart 1). «The candidate's words are now buried in a narrative devoted primarily to expounding the journalist's view» (75)<sup>2</sup>.

«The media has gone from covering what the candidate says to covering

Candidates Statements



what the media says the candidate says», noted James Carville, a political consultant for candidate Bill Clinton in the 1992 Presidential elections (Matalin & Carville, 1994: 433). In some cases, reporters are as important in a political campaign as the candidates.

That is why the political system had to fire back to this personalisation attack of the media, by contracting spin doctors and media consultants. The

<sup>1</sup> Hallin (1992) also studied the issue.

<sup>2</sup> A recent study indicates that the twenty-year trend of the shrinking soundbite in American presidential campaigns may have achieved a saturation point and has stopped (Weaver & Drew, 1995).

transformation in the relationship with the sources made the political system search for new and improved methodologies of contact with reporters. The soundbite became an important tool in this new game, for it was the most effective way of making messages escape the filter of journalistic interpretation.

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Patterson's study refers to the shrinking of soundbites, but in this phenomenon one can sense that now the soundbite is as important as ever. And spin doctors are well aware of that fact, because they understand that they have to work at the heart of the interpretative process of the reporter. «When you are spinning a reporter, you're telling them how to look at a story. Or you're telling them they're covering it wrong» (Matalin & Carville, 1994: 431). The spin doctors take advantage of the fragility of journalists, who still need orientation for the interpretation they make of political facts and events. As journalism becomes more analytical, politicians have to find solutions to escape the web of facticity created by the interpretations made by reporters in their coverage of events. Soundbites are one way to be heard «ipsis verbis»<sup>3</sup>.

Soundbites are less frequent, and they are shorter. But, because of these facts, they can be even more important. Thus, the art of phrase-making has been refined and improved, and soundbites have remained highly individualistic forms of expression. They can be of paramount importance to express the main ideas of a project, and the impact of a good short sentence is mightier than that of a good long speech. «Close to the top of any soundbite hit parade would have to be The Lady's Not For Turning, Margaret Thatcher's strident refusal to change course when faced by a deepening recession and rising unemployment» (Jones, 1995: 27-28). These «quotable quotes» must be audible, intelligible, pithily expressed. Thus, soundbites have become a rare and exquisite product, useful to journalists and politicians. Under these conditions, newspapers grabbed the opportunity to make flashy headlines out of those short slogans and started presenting lists of the best quotes of the day or the week, as a regular feature.

This is a significant transformation since the period when the journalist was the messenger of statements from politicians. At that time, the journalist was the deliverer of political attitudes, collaborating in the enforcement of political realities shaped inside the political system. Although Jones refers to the role of parliamentary reporters, not in full terms political reporters, he sees it as the role of scribes of the system: «When I joined the Times as a parliamentary reporter in 1968 a fast shorthand note was the essential tool of the trade. I was one of a team of twelve journalists who produced a closely

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<sup>3</sup> However, there is always the danger of the quote being taken out of context.

printed broadsheet page packed with verbatim reports from both Houses of Parliament...» (Jones, 1995: 11).

However, the media don't quote the janitor of the hospital, or the student, but the director of the hospital, or the principal of the school. «These are the people who are recognised socially to be in a position to know. They have been authorised to give an account that serves the public expectation that their organisation is accountable» (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989: 4).

Jeremy Tunstall argues that newsgatherers are news source-oriented, «as long as the basic newsgathering technique consists of talking to people» (1971: 41). This situation presents the risk of hegemonic control of information by the sources. Critical researchers argue that a permeation of ideological influences, forced by those powerful sources, ensures a reproduction in the news of differential power relations inside society (Hall, 1982).

The 1970s were a period of intense use of quotable information. The use of quotations of official sources provided the required credibility of journalistic information. The more official the sources the more credible the information would be, according to this believe that still prevails in the mind of some political journalists (cf. Sabato, 1993).

In this context, I shall try to see if there really is a trend of diminishing quotations in the political news stories of referential newspapers.

#### **METHOD:**

I chose four 'quality' daily newspapers: *Diário de Notícias* (from Lisbon); *Le Monde* (from Paris); *The New York Times* (from New York); and *The Times* (from London). I chose these four newspapers for five main reasons: they are representative of the so called Western developed countries; they are standards of 'quality' press in their countries; they are trendsetters in terms of newspaper content and style formats; they are influential outlets among political elites; and they are similar in their structure, but still exemplify diversity.

The analysis comprises three distinct periods: 1960-1965; 1970-1975; and 1990-1995. I collected the data from news stories included in the political pages of the four newspapers. Only hard news pieces were selected, which means that I left out interviews, editorials, and opinion articles. Also, only the articles concerning party political activity were chosen, leaving out those related to government policy. The reason for this selection is connected with the fact that government policy is treated in various other sections of the

newspapers<sup>4</sup> and, thus, it would expand the span of analysis much further than the section of politics.

The data was collected in groups of entire weeks, in all four newspapers. For the 1970-1975<sup>5</sup> and 1990-1995 periods, 21 weeks were chosen randomly, being attributed seven weeks for each of three sub-periods (0,1; 2,3; 4,5); for the 1960s, the same conditions applied, but only 12 weeks were selected, four for each sub-period. There were only two restrictions in the choice: that the selected weeks were not included in periods of main national political elections; and that they reflected the various «political seasons» of the year.

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The news stories were segmented in paragraphs. In this study, I tried to evaluate which paragraphs were constituted mainly by quotation units of information, defining those as quotation paragraphs. I also determined if those quotations were made in direct or indirect speech.

In order to try to help me understand the data from the content analysis, I interviewed journalists from the four newspapers. Most of the interviews were conducted personally, the rest over the telephone. The interviews were labelled as informal conversations. Still, I was allowed to take written notes of those conversations.

#### **ANALYSIS AND RESULTS:**

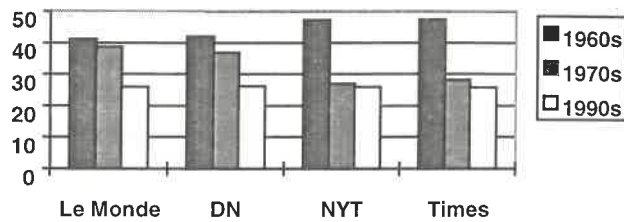
The data of the content analysis reveal a significant decrease in the percentage of direct quotation paragraphs since the 1960s. Chart 2 shows that the trend is common in the four newspapers.

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<sup>4</sup> The economical policy is treated in the section of economy, the government relation with sports is treated in the sports section, and so on.

<sup>5</sup> For Diário de Notícias, this period was restricted from January 1970 to April 1974, to include only the political administration before the revolution of 25th April 1974. The transformation then occurred transformed greatly the whole social panorama, making impossible any provisional comparison.

### Direct Quotations



This effect of reduction of direct quotation paragraphs between the 1960s and the 1970s is more evident in The New York Times and in The Times, although Diário de Notícias and Le Monde have also registered a slight decrease in that percentage. The former two papers reflect better the evolutive trend in this factor, during the period of paradigm shift. Le Monde and Diário, for different reasons, did not follow the same pattern.

In the case of Le Monde, the chronological difference happened for editorial reasons. When I showed chart 2 to a political reporter who has worked in Le Monde since the early 1970s he did not show any surprise: «In the beginning of the 1970s, there still was a concern to preserve the integrity of statements from political sources. It was an editorial principle every new journalist had to learn: quote, quote, quote»<sup>6</sup>.

In the case of Diário de Notícias, the explanation may be connected with the fact that, in the early 1970s, the media was still under close government control. «In the dictatorial regime, the authorised sources had to be respected. And that respect had to be shown by quoting their exact words, even if that meant printing incredibly large speeches», said a journalist of Diário de Notícias.

Thus, The New York Times and The Times represent better the transformations occurred in the use of quotations in the 1970s. These modifications had a major impact on the creation of a new concept of political news. The direct quotation factor concerns verbal reactions to information, which is a central point in the process of newsmaking. Thus, any modification in this area results in redefinition of the entire structure of news stories.

In the 1960s, following a tradition that came from previous times, the use of quotations dominated the entire structure of the news stories, with long

<sup>6</sup> Statement obtained during an informal interview.

sequences of citations from credited sources. A typical news story of the 1960s was constructed around the accumulation of quotations from credited sources. In many cases, there could be as many as 20 or 30 paragraphs containing an entire speech of a public official. And this was frequent in any of the four newspapers, and in similar formats.

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The following is a typical example of a news story of the 1960s, from the edition of September, 27 1963 of The New York Times, page 3, under the title «Kennedy attacks Goldwater line». This structure could be seen in any of the other three papers in that period:

IN A SPEECH THAT SEEMED AIMED AT SUCH CONSERVATIVE CRITICS AS SENATOR BARRY GOLDWATER, PRESIDENT KENNEDY REJECTED TONIGHT A FOREIGN POLICY BASED ON "BLACK-AND-WHITE CHOICES OF GOOD AND EVIL".

"IN THIS DANGEROUS WORLD," HE SAID, SUCH A POLICY IS ONE "OF RETREAT, NOT OF STRENGTH."

SPEAKING IN THE MORMON TABERNACLE HERE AT THE END OF THE THIRD DAY OF HIS "NONPOLITICAL" TOUR OF ELEVEN STATES, MR. KENNEDY DECLARED: "IF WE WERE TO RESIGN FROM THE UNITED NATIONS, BREAK OFF WITH ALL THE COUNTRIES OF WHOM WE DISAPPROVE, END FOREIGN AID, CALL FOR THE 'RESUMPTION' OF ATMOSPHERIC NUCLEAR TESTING AND TURN OUR BACK ON THE REST OF THE MANKIND, WE WOULD NOT ONLY BE ABANDONING AMERICAN INFLUENCE IN THE WORLD - WE WOULD BE INVITING A COMMUNIST EXPANSION WHICH EVERY COMMUNIST POWER WOULD WELCOME."  
(...)

The text continued with seven more paragraphs with quotations from Kennedy's speech. The usual technique of this kind of news texts was to insert as much quotations as possible, reducing the space for descriptive or analytical text frames. The structure was identical in the other papers: an introduction, the presentation of the sources, and then quotations in direct and indirect speech.

This pattern of news stories dominated the entire period before the modifications in political journalism produced during the 1970s. There are two key words to explain this phenomenon: credibility and objectivity. In the 1960s, these concepts were closely associated with the trustworthiness of sources of information.

On the one hand, reporters relied on the integrity of the quoted sources to ensure the credibility of their information. Print political journalists had the function of transcribing official speeches. The fact has an historical context, when the broadcasting media were still forming their character as informative channels of information and audiences had to rely on newspapers to know the exact words of the public figures.

On the other hand, in this theoretical paradigm journalists had to rely on their sources to sustain an idea of objectivity. «We were expected to write solely the ideas and the information provided by our sources. Newspapers were, by then, the only means of knowing what politicians had to say. The credibility of our news relied on the accuracy of those quotations», said a French journalist who, in the 1960s, worked for Le Figaro and in the 1990s works for Le Monde<sup>7</sup>.

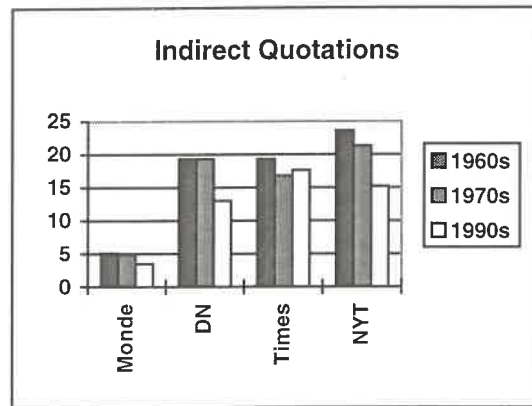
That is why radio and television started giving more attention to political affairs in their news bulletins, providing audiences with the words of the sources, newspapers had to alter their function in relation with quotations (cf. Smith, 1980). If the audiences had already heard the exact words, newspapers had to complement that information. And they did just that, in a first stage of the new paradigm, in the 1970s, providing more descriptive information about the issues, and in a latter stage of the paradigm, in the 1990s, with interpretative views on the issues.

This paradigm shift is related with the issue of direct quotations, rather than indirect quotations. The model of indirect quotation reports words of another with such changes as are necessary to bring the original statement into grammatical conformity with the sentence in which it is included. Thus, it requires an active participation of the writer of the news stories. It implies a different type of information control from the journalist, by transcribing statements in their own words. In a certain sense, indirect quotations already imply an interpretative effort of the journalist.

Indirect quotations might have many purposes inside a news text. As Kevelson remarks, «frequent use of indirect quote, with 'reported' or 'said' in the headline is a press adaptation of the rhetorical figure classically called Apomnemonsys, with which the speaker implies his own position by letting it stated from someone else's mouth» (1977: 3).

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<sup>7</sup> Statement obtained during an informal interview.



This may explain why, in all four newspapers, and between the 1960s and the 1970s, the percentage of indirect quotation paragraphs has decreased much less than the percentage of direct quotation paragraphs (compare charts 2 and 3). The use of indirect quotations reflects a different attitude from the one of direct quotations, despite all similarities between these two models: «With indirect quotations, we replace statements of sources by analytical views of their ideas. We spare words in news stories and, in many cases, we improve source's ability to express themselves», said a journalist of The Times<sup>8</sup>.

See this example of an indirect quote. It comes from a news story of The Times, on its edition of January 20, 1994, page 2, under the title «Taylor troubled by loss of right to silence in court». I underline the indirect quotation units.

(...) LORD TAYLOR SAID THAT, PROVIDED THERE WERE SUITABLE SAFEGUARDS, SUCH COMMENTS SHOULD BE ALLOWED. THIS VIEW WAS ACCEPTED NOT JUST BY THE GOVERNMENT BUT BY MOST SERVING JUDGES, AND BY TONY BLAIR, THE SHADOW HOME SECRETARY. IT WAS ALSO ACCEPTED BY LORD SCARMAN, THE RETIRED LAW LORD "WHOSE LIBERAL CREDENTIALS ARE IMPECCABLE", HE SAID.

LORD TAYLOR SOUNDED A NOTE OF WARNING ON A PROPOSAL BY THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE TO ALLOW RESEARCH INTO JURIES AND THEIR VERDICTS. THIS CARRIED GRAVE RISKS, HE SAID. SHOULD SUCH A SCHEME BE INTRODUCED, HE SAID, IT WOULD HAVE TO BE MONITORED CAREFULLY BY THE LORD CHANCELLOR, AND PREFERABLY CONDUCTED BY HIS DEPARTMENT. IT WAS OF FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE THAT THE CONFIDENTIALITY OF JURORS WAS PRESERVED IN PERFORMING "ONE OF THEIR MOST IMPORTANT CIVIC DUTIES".

This example reveals the usefulness of indirect quotations. In that text, the first indirect quotation allows the journalist to resume two different ideas in one single sentence: one concerning the allowance of a certain kind of

<sup>8</sup> Statement provided by informal interview.

comments; the other concerning suitable safeguards. The second indirect quotation allows the inclusion of an interpretative scheme of the words of sources. The sentence «this carried grave risks», is attributed to Lord Taylor, but the reader does not know whether he really said those words, or that is just an interpretation of his ideas made by the reporter.

The economy of textual space, conceded by indirect quotes, is also accomplished by direct quotations, if these are short and effective. This aspect is connected with one phenomenon that marked the shift to a new structural cycle of political news, in the 1970s: the emergence of soundbites. In its essence, a soundbite is a unit of quotation. However, the expression applies to complex formulas of presenting ideas in short sentences with high impact on people.

This innovative model of political marketing that has developed since the late 1960s carries a strong influence on news texts. The quotation of sources in news stories has become less frequent, as soundbites have got shorter and have fixed their efficiency in being kept short and easily memorised. This is an important concern for political advisors: «We look for punch lines, expressions with high impact on people. We call them soundbites. Television people love them. And the guys at the papers got used to them. First they used them in the headlines, but now they insert them in the middle of the stories», observes political adviser to President Clinton, James Carville<sup>9</sup>.

The following example comes from The New York Times, on its edition of November 6, 1993, page 1, under the title «Perot debates seen as way to try to save trade pact». This news story depicts the usefulness of soundbites in a context of direct quotation units. I underline those units.

(...) A REPUBLICAN PUBLIC OPINION SPECIALIST, ED GOEAS, SAID THAT WHILE MR. PEROT'S POPULARITY HAD FALLEN, HIS CORE OF ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORTERS REMAINED STRONG, AT ABOUT 25 PERCENT. STILL, MR. GOEAS SAID OF THE DEBATE: «IT'S A MOVE THEY HAVE TO TAKE IF THEY ARE GOING TO SALVAGE NAFTA. AT SOME POINT, THEY HAVE TO DISCREDIT PEROT.»

ANOTHER REPUBLICAN CONSULTANT, ED ROLLINS, WHO WORKED BRIEFLY FOR MR. PEROT'S PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, MAINTAINED THAT THE WHITE HOUSE WAS MAKING A BIG MISTAKE. «IT'S THE STUPIDEST DAMN THING THE WHITE HOUSE CAN DO.» HE SAID. MR. PEROT, MR. ROLLINS CONTINUED, «WILL CHEW UP AL GORE AND SPIT HIM OUT. GORE WILL GIVE INTELLECTUAL ANSWERS, AND PEROT WILL HIT THE EMOTIONAL BUTTONS AND SPIT OUT SOUND BITES.» (...)

It is no surprise these soundbites are attributed to political advisers: Ed Goeas, a public opinion specialist, and a republican consultant, Ed Rollins.

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<sup>9</sup> Lecture at the George Washington University (Washington DC), September, 1996.

They are the masters of soundbites, and their language has been adjusted to the informative media.

#### DISCUSSION:

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The diversification of sources, in the 1990s, with a compelling search for new angles for a story, contributed to new formats of access to the media<sup>10</sup>. The plurality of visions furnished by those sources helped to create a broader concept of news. Sources have also become more accessible, not only because of their status<sup>11</sup>, but also because new technologies contributed to more frequent contacts between reporters and their sources<sup>12</sup>. The specialist journalist gained more powerful instruments to produce information more rapidly and more effectively.

The schemes of journalist-source relationships are complex<sup>13</sup>. They are based upon different factors of involvement and their interactions define the structure of knowledge control. This form of control is contextual, transitory, and unresolved (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989: 2), but it is always the result of source-journalist transactions.

This relationship is essential in newsmaking for two main reasons. Firstly, because these contacts absorb much of the energy and time reporters spend at their work. But also, as Entman and Paletz (1980) refer, because news is rooted in the action and talk of the elites who are the sources and subjects of the stories. This is especially true in political journalism, where journalists, by adhering to routine channels of news-gathering, leave to sources much of the task of selecting information (cf. Sigal, 1973).

These conclusions easily led to the idea that the trend of diversification of sources would produce a multiplication of quotation paragraphs in the political pages of the newspapers. However, the data of this study prove the contrary. Despite a diversification of sources involved in the information schemes, journalists tend to quote less and use less space for the used sentences from sources.

This cross-cultural study of four 'quality' newspapers reveals a severe shift in the correlation of the descriptive and the analytical strategies, since the

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<sup>10</sup> cf. Pinto, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Journalists started to use as sources not only high officials, but also less important members of organisations.

<sup>12</sup> The portable telephone proved to be revolutionary, whenever journalists have access to the private numbers of their sources.

<sup>13</sup> The issue of the relationship between journalists and sources has been researched since the early days of media studies. However, the first important work on this particular theme only appeared in the late 1950s (cf. Carter, 1958).

1960s. The modifications in the balance between these elements has been the essence of evolution of journalistic models.

The present study proves that there was an effective reduction of quotation paragraphs in political news stories in four different 'quality' newspapers. This reduction can be attributed to different factors, but there seems to be a direct association of that situation with the emergence of the concept of soundbites in political communication. Therefore, we may assume that a paradigm shift has occurred in terms of political journalism, as far as the 'quality' press in the countries analysed is concerned.

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