

## Keynote speech by Ruth de Aquino

Trends, concerns and challenges in the world's newsrooms

Good morning  
Dear colleagues

You already know this story. But whenever I am asked to talk in public about the future, I am terribly tempted to remember the past. Not for the sake of nostalgia. Just because memories give us such an insight that at least ageing seems a strategic advantage! And what is journalism about, any journalism, print, broadcast, multi, convergent, other than story-telling?

Almost 40 years ago, The New York Times was facing its longest and most damaging strike. I will quote from a recent book, *The Trust*, by Susan Tifft and Alex Jones.

“Readers addicted to The New York Times had to content themselves with the scarce copies of the western edition that were air-shipped back to New York. As the impasse wore on, NBC-TV and NBC Radio launched ‘The New York Times on the Air’ a Sunday program featuring the paper’s editors and columnists. Everywhere, readers bemoaned the absence of the newspaper they had come to regard as their daily history book. At Wake Forest University in North Carolina, an editorial headlined ‘we miss the Times’ noted that Americans had lost ‘one of the mainstays of our civilization’.”

Nine hundred employees remained on the job out of the former five thousand. Advertising salesmen had to run elevators, three-quarters of the paper’s city room was kept dark to save electricity. The Times radio station more than doubled its broadcast time, adding live reports from New York Times correspondents, most of whom had little concept of the impact of the spoken word. The publisher, Orvil, slept at the paper. It was a night-and-day performance. By the end of January 1963, after almost two months of strike, the New York Times was operating at a monthly deficit of 1.5 million dollars. The highest-paid employees had to accept a 50 percent pay reduction. The strike lasted 114 days. In the end, the Times made a *mea culpa* on the cover, with a historical article labelling the episode as a ‘history of failure’ and bluntly blaming some of its own executives. Readers had been lost, some forever, the daily circulation had dropped by 80 thousand and revenues that year would be down 16 million dollars. Two months after the strike ended, the publisher suffered a heart attack and died.

No, I am not suggesting that I fear for the life of chief editors and publishers in this fast changing era but I do find the NYTimes story so symbolic and so meaningful to all the present and sometimes meaningless arguments about the multimedia world, that I decided to run the risk of being repetitive. Maybe now you already know that I will not deliver here today a self-help guide to multimedia, or multiple media, or convergence newsrooms. I am sure that my colleagues here on the stage, who are dealing concretely with all the do’s and don’ts of the news industry, will show you striking images of present and futuristic newsrooms, where everyone is nice to each other, nobody shouts or swears. I must confess

that when I saw the title of my presentation - trends, concerns and challenges of the world's newsrooms -, I shivered and I was afraid that I would let you down. After all, I will play no visuals, only the realm of ideas.

But, come on, I thought, I will be talking at a University. Universities are still centres for thought and maybe, with my experience as a journalist, as a media executive and as a mother of two young men, one of them a 19-year-old training to become a journalist, and the other helplessly addicted, at the age of 13, to criticizing everyday the covers and the sports sections of newspapers, maybe I will be able to offer a reflection on what I believe is the cornerstone of the whole new integrated media world. It is not technology, it is not finance, it is not even content. It is something as old as the oldest profession. It is "power". It is the everyday clash over who leads, who profits, who conducts, who is the maestro, the master and the leader of the process, who decides the timing of a story, who discloses a scoop, who gets more repercussion and compliments, who is to be blamed, and how the revenue generated by multimedia projects will be divided among the many departments of a media company. I only hope to be able to raise some hot questions for debate and to challenge overtly our inherent journalist taboos, with no pretence of holding the key to the future.

So, The New York Times, almost 40 years ago, was forced by a strike to go multimedia. They went on "air". They used their radio and someone else's television, to communicate with their readers or consumers. It was not 100% effective, for many reasons. The Times didn't trust the other media to convey important news. The journalists hadn't been trained to dominate the particularities of radio and TV. And the consumers wanted to 'feel' the paper. We were living other times. The market was much more predictable, the world was much more ideological, different political parties had obviously different platforms and so did the papers, people enjoyed reading much more, technology did not play such an important role in our lives, newspapers' brands were almost sacred to their readers, the competition was not as fierce. Anyway, what happened in 1962 was that "printing limitations" forced the Times to diversify and this should have been a lesson learned if we had already thought of multimedia in those days. Or if we had the technology in our hands. Now, with the frequent price increases of newsprint, many newspapers are also being forced to diversify. Yes, limitations can provoke upsurges of creativity. Probably that is why one of the richest cultural periods in my country, Brazil, regarding cinema and music for instance, occurred exactly during the dictatorship. It is the underground struggling to make itself heard.

Now, with freedom of expression, high technology, globalisation, what does this broadband world reserve to us, journalists? As a provocation to those who criticise journalism nowadays as empty infotainment, I will compare our dilemmas to the ones of Hollywood. Let's travel in time again. The scenario is not far from here: the University of Southern California. We are in the seventies. Robert Zemeckis - who directed *Cast Away* and *Forrest Gump* - is at the USC and hears when a professor interrupts a couple of students talking about 'audio'. Zemeckis recalls the scene: "The professor said: 'Men' - and it was all men back then - 'you are in film school, and in film we talk about picture and track. There is no video, and there is no audio'.

Now, as I am sure you already know -- because we are expected today to be fed with news 24 hours a day by all media, and we are all a very well-informed group of people or so we pretend to be -- , Robert Zemeckis opened last week, in Los Angeles, a Center of Digital Arts at the same university. The classroom for beginning film students is filled with 30 Avid film-editing machines. There are 110 Sony digital cameras for students to use for their school projects. As chief benefactor, he started this project in 1998 with a \$5 million contribution. George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and others followed him with donations. According to Zemeckis, "the center looks like the kind of places where these students will actually work when they graduate." It is exactly, I believe, what Ifra is trying to do with some initiatives, like Newsplex. Creating prototypes of future places of work, for the new generations or for the old fearless ones. The undergraduates of the present are the information professionals of tomorrow who will not demand extra compensation for working simultaneously in different media. On the contrary, they will demand receiving properly diversified and multiple training. It will not even cross their minds the idea that convergence could be a threat to accuracy or good journalism. They would rather go multiple than be forced to restrict themselves to one medium only. In their first job, they will prefer to have more visibility and more perspectives for growth.

Elizabeth Daley, dean of the U.S.C. film and television program, said that their hope "is that you're not training students in yesterday's way of doing things, you're training them in tomorrow's way. The kids coming out of here will, for the first time, know more than the people who are actually working in the industry."

Is it scary? Are these new kids in town going to steal all our jobs? Only if we keep a stubborn defensive attitude against some obvious synergy trends or technology advances. For instance, this Digital Arts Center in Los Angeles is basically for new filmmakers, many of whom grew up with home video cameras and have never worked with film in their lives. Well, it does ring many bells to me when I see my sons dealing simultaneously with all media as consumers of all kinds of information.

I remember last year, when I entered my son's bedroom to ask him something. The television was on, with no sound. The CD was loud - some funk or reggae. He was surfing on the Net while talking on the phone with his girlfriend. A school book was open. He was also studying for an exam on the following day. I felt like a trespasser in a world that was not my own. I must confess: I wondered whether my son had gone mad or if I had become a dinosaur. The latter option was more likely. Bruno was just heavily concentrating. And that is what concentration means today: to be able to use all media for different purposes and extract the best from each. In a certain way, I have always been a firm multimedia believer, since the days I myself took the pictures when I was abroad on foreign assignments, be it in the Angolan war, or in Russia, or in Germany after the wall fell.

I dislike extremes. Therefore, when I am asked if there is any future for a journalist who just wants to write, I answer: it will depend on his or her talent. To know how to write properly is such a gift. Excellence will always have its place in any profession. But the words 'multimedia' or 'convergence' have unfortunately become a taboo among

journalists of my age and the reactions are sometimes radically obtuse and conservative. Some journalists fear the trend as the ultimate threat to journalism. They honestly think that the international associations of newspaper editors should rule out multimedia altogether and disclose the evil meanings behind the convergence newsrooms, which would be: exploitation, superficiality, unemployment, the end of scoops. A tragedy. These complaints are heard in different levels in ALL newsrooms, depending on the degree of freedom of expression enjoyed by the staff. Unless you have effective and charismatic editors and leaders who are able to act as multimedia mentors, there will be strong resistance from many older journalists. Enjoying the superiority earned with prestige and reputation, they will contaminate most of the newsroom.

Naturally, not all the media companies follow the same multiple path. I do not interpret convergence as the only road to doing a good job in Journalism. Some big conglomerates choose to keep their various media operations apart, competing among each other. They think it is better for business and in some countries perhaps they will be right. But I suspect that they will change, either to save costs, or to attend the needs of the New Digital Family, or else to exploit better the potential of their multi-skilled journalists. I just do not predict a bright future for a print-only company because our new information consumers are exactly like the film students in South California, who did not grow up with celluloid. Our sons and grandsons are not very keen on reading from paper. They are much more mobile. Faster. More technology-driven. It makes sense not to ignore them, doesn't it? Better, if we want to stay profitable, we should anticipate their desires with proper research and revolutionary experiments. Knowing that paper will not disappear: only its use will change according to specific consumer needs.

Not everything is grim in the transition from a print-only to a multimedia staff. You can definitely encounter positive surprises. Once you are able to explain clearly what a multimedia operation is, once you win over the natural scepticism of our profession, the enthusiasm you awake may be rapturous. At the newspaper I worked for in Rio, we managed to set up a partnership with a university and an open-channel for 6 annual courses. Every two months, we would train 14 print journalists for TV. Over 8 Saturdays, from 9 am to 3 pm, this group would study TV reporting and editing at the University. Some would then go to the newspaper because it was their weekend shift. The newspaper provided transportation. I was in the first group of students. During these two months, each trainee would go out with the TV crew for two weeks to observe how they worked and record some stories to be edited by them at the University. During these two TV weeks, they did not work for the newspaper. Some editors complained, but the journalists knew that I would convince the editors of the importance of that training process. I also hired, full time, a specialist in news reading, who gave lessons at the newspaper building to improve voice, posture and breathing of our staff. It became immediately trendy. Journalists who were selected to attend the TV course felt more important than the others. I received internal e-mails from many reporters asking when they would do the course. And I must admit: the training was tiring. But everyone wanted to do the course immediately. It was difficult to manage all the demands. The journalists wanted to broadcast on the radio that belonged to the group, they suggested partnerships with local TVs and started writing programs for TV. Reporters wanted also to do the camera course designed for the photographers. A woman

reporter did a facelift. The fat guy submitted himself to a diet. Even the dress code was changing in the newsroom. All this because they had seen their images and had decided they should become more attractive. Mainly, they wanted to expand their job possibilities in the Brazilian market.

So, lights, camera, action, cut now and let's go back to Hollywood. Robert Zemeckis said that he has noticed 'the new word you hear students use is capture'. "You don't shoot a scene, you capture it. It's not principal photography, it's the initial capture. That's because with digital technology there is so much that you can do with the image after you shoot it. The whole notion that what was photographed in the camera is the final image is gone forever".

Does this sound familiar to us? Yes, now print journalists also capture. Capture words, audio and images. That piece which used to be double-checked, written and signed, sometimes waiting hours to appear only in the following morning as a 'final' document, final at least for one whole day, may now be edited and re-edited for different purposes many times a day, before and after printing. How many times has a reporter slept thinking that his material was exclusive and, on the following day, found out that the bloody rival also had it, although with less details? Had the source been irresponsible? How would you explain this to the editor? Now, you can either do the same, bet on the strength of your print product, or you can disclose part of it on TV, late-night, advertising the morning edition of the newspaper.

This is the concern number one: who owns the story in a multimedia operation? Who discloses it? According to the Orlando Sentinel's multimedia editor, the newspaper has priority. For other operations, TV, as the mass medium par excellence, should disclose the news first, giving credit to the reporter. To be fair, let's say it will depend on the case. Journalism has never been good at establishing inflexible rules. Now, we must be ready to be more flexible than ever. And the pace of decision-making has been accelerated. There is more stress in a multimedia news operation than in a single one.

Zemeckis also said that "almost everyone in the entertainment industry now is well aware that developing digital technologies will profoundly affect and permanently alter not only the way movies are made, but also the kinds of movies that get made."

Concern number two: so, the content is going to be altered. Is that what we are being told? Then, our precious content will have to be modified by technology? These guys from the Computer department who seem to us to be living in a completely different world, another dimension, will have a say on the kind of content we deliver? Maybe yes, maybe no. Again, forget the self-help guide, the how to, let us be aware that the ego war season is open in every newspaper. That the former clear monopoly of the newsroom is a bit blurred nowadays and that in publishers' international conferences we hear open proposals to make the chief-editor report not to the owner but to the marketing executive or to the advertising genius.

This so-popular clash that we have been living in the newsrooms reflects the redefinition of the meaning of information. What is essential, what is useful, what is relevant. Let me tell you another story that occurred to me a couple of weeks ago in Paris, where I am living. My boyfriend is an artist. He despises computers, notebooks, palms, even mobiles. For him, this technology world is a waste of time and energy and is also a neurotic place full of unknown viruses. But my boyfriend is also a passionate football fan. And his team was playing a decisive match in Rio. It was a semi-final. I downloaded an audio software from the site [globo.com.br](http://globo.com.br) and he listened, live, from Paris, to the final 10 minutes of the match broadcast by Radio Globo. All this accessed through a local and free French provider. He couldn't believe his ears. And his team won. He may be starting to see technology as an ally.

So, concern number three. Is this journalism? Is it entertainment? Maybe it is enough to say that it is Sports coverage. But it was definitely the most important news my boyfriend could seek on that day as a citizen, a consumer of information, or whatever you call these people we pursue as our subscribers. We are after their loyalty. And we have to very good on choosing what to offer, when and through which medium. Because the noise provoked by news today is maddening. For instance, the New York Times says that 7 million people read the paper on Internet. I am one of their subscribers. But unfortunately I do not consider myself to be a proper reader. I have no time. I read the quotes, excellent, I choose one or two stories max a day to read and sometimes e-mail to me, and that is it. I wish I could read more.

Let's hear George Lucas. "What we are going through, with this shift to digital, is on the same level and just as significant as the change from silent to sound films, or the shift from black-and-white to color," he said to the New York Times. His "Star Wars: Episode 2", which will be released next year, is supposed to be the first major studio film shot entirely with new generation digital cameras. "What happens with digital is that it makes the medium much more malleable. You can do things that you just could not do before". So, digital data is much more elastic than film images, frozen on celluloid. A director can shift the perspective of a scene, add a fresh camera movement, alter an actor's performance, transfer the location from Red Square to Times Square, speed up time, slow it down and generally do whatever schedule and budget allow to get the desired images up there on the screen. "What's happening is that digital technology is creating the potential for a lot more flexibility," said the director Ron Howard. "It's pretty liberating", he adds.

OK, I know you are going to argue. That is fiction. We, media people, deal with truth. Do we always? But let me assure you that, from the perspective of a 46-year-old journalist, technology can be extremely liberating to us. There is nothing worse than trying to file your stories from Moscow to Rio, in a public telex room, full of Babushkas bossing you around. They were threatening to lock me in because their shift had ended, while I had to concentrate, write and file simultaneously for the national newspaper I worked for, without time for revision, and I would shout back to the women, in my language because they wouldn't understand English, that I would not abandon my post before I had finished my work. And what about carrying huge and heavy laptops, or transmitting data before the Internet. Sometimes I would take longer trying to file than actually writing my stories.

We know that changes awake fears. It's human nature. There is always a group of people who see danger at every corner. For instance, in Los Angeles, there are people worrying that the emphasis on expensive state-of-the-art equipment might distract students from the prime task, which is learning how to tell a story with a camera.

"It's all nice to be able to learn the craft of digital effects and digital production, but the content is really the heart and soul of any project," warned an academic administrator at U.C.L.A.'s film school. Zemeckis agrees. He predicts that, as digital effects become cheaper and more polished and it becomes possible to create almost anything on screen convincingly, the impact of blockbuster action moments will be lessened. If you can do anything, then what's the big deal about crashing a car into a building or crashing a rocket on Mars? That, Mr. Zemeckis said last week to the New York Times, will drive film makers back towards storytelling.

"I really think that's what's going to happen," he said. "It's all going to come back to substance. That's the really good news."

Bernard Margueritte, a well-known French journalist, remembers that when he landed his first newspaper job in Le Monde, Paris, its then editor, Hubert Beuve-Mery, required the applicant to prove his deep will to serve his fellow citizens and future readers. During the job interview, the would-be journalist had to show he realized this job could not be done correctly without a true love for people.

So, what are our challenges? To be more flexible and multifunctional team-oriented, less defensive and less cynical, more open to training and to cross-media projects. But never to forget our core talents: to have the best possible command of your oral and written language, a historical perspective, to strike the best balance between being profound and light, between being consistent and charming, whether you are writing about fashion or covering a war. And relate to people. In this new century, a good information professional will still need to care for human beings but also to be suspicious of all, especially of conferences' speakers.

Finally, a last scene for you to 'capture'. A celebrated British editor at the beginning of the century was on his deathbed and surrounded by his family. Seeing the end, his oldest son lent over to him and asked if he had any last words for them. "Yes", gasped the old man, "Check your sources". And departed. (THANK YOU)

