

Data journalism in Chile: characterization, challenges, and opportunities in the big data era

Periodismo de datos en Chile:

caracterización, desafíos y oportunidades en la era del big data

Jornalismo de dados no Chile:

características, desafios e oportunidades na era do big data

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This study characterizes data journalism in Chile by examining professional definitions, its relationship with big data, technical skills, ethical challenges, and the impact of the transparency law. Based on semi-structured interviews with 13 journalists, academics, and editors, findings reveal an evolving practice driven by individual initiative and an incipient data culture. While the transparency law is valued, its implementation is criticized due to data quality and updating issues. Gaps in training and resources persist, though opportunities for innovation are emerging.

KEYWORDS: Data journalism, big data, transparency law, professional training, journalistic innovation.

Este estudio caracteriza el periodismo de datos en Chile, analizando definiciones profesionales, su vínculo con el big data, habilidades técnicas, desafíos éticos y el impacto de la ley de transparencia. Mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas a 13 periodistas, docentes y editores, se identifica una práctica en desarrollo, sostenida por iniciativas individuales y una cultura de datos incipiente. Si bien se valora la ley de transparencia, se critican limitaciones en la calidad y actualización de los datos. Persisten brechas formativas y de recursos, aunque emergen oportunidades de innovación en el campo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Periodismo de datos, big data, ley de transparencia, formación profesional, innovación periodística.

Este estudo caracteriza o jornalismo de dados no Chile, analisando definições profissionais, sua relação com o big data, habilidades técnicas, desafios éticos e o impacto da Lei de Transparência. Por meio de entrevistas semiestructuradas com 13 jornalistas, professores e editores, identifica-se uma prática em desenvolvimento, sustentada por iniciativas individuais e uma cultura de dados incipiente. Embora a lei de Transparência seja valorizada, há críticas às limitações na qualidade e atualização dos dados. Persistem lacunas de formação e de recursos, embora surjam oportunidades de inovação no campo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Jornalismo de dados, big data, lei de transparência, formação profissional, inovação jornalística.

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INTRODUCTION

Data journalism in Chile has progressively consolidated as a journalistic practice that takes advantage of access to data and public databases to make visible social, economic, and political issues. Emblematic examples include the report by CIPER (Bezama & Ramírez, 2014), which revealed the expenditure of more than six billion pesos by Chilean members of Congress between 2012 and 2014 without clear accountability mechanisms, and the work by *La Tercera* (Said, 2022), which evidenced an increase in the number of people living in informal settlements following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both cases demonstrate how data journalism has contributed to transparency and public scrutiny, addressing critical issues such as corruption and inequality. However, no academic research describes its implementation in Chile, nor systematically explores its challenges, characteristics, and particularities in the context of the big data era. Its absence, both in academic and professional literature, limits the understanding of how journalists are adapting to new dynamics of digitalization, marked by the abundance of data and the need for specialized technical skills to produce information (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013; Weber et al., 2018).

In this context, the general objective of this research is to characterize the practice of data journalism being developed in Chile within the context of big data and the associated professional challenges from the perspective of the journalists who practice it. To this end, four specific objectives are proposed: 1) to describe the journalistic process used to produce news information from data and the tools used to communicate it to the public; 2) to understand the skills and competencies that journalists consider necessary and their relationship with technologies; 3) to identify the ethical issues inherent to this type of journalism; and 4) to contribute to the theoretical conceptualization of data journalism in Chile by offering a proposed definition that considers the current dynamics of the profession and the challenges that big data introduces into newsrooms. This study, pioneering in its kind in Chile, aims to contribute to the training of future journalists and to the updating of practicing professionals.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Data journalism has emerged as a journalistic practice that is nourished by the abundance of information in the big data era. Researchers have drawn on interdisciplinary approaches from the social sciences (Steensen & Ahva, 2014; Zelizer, 2008). The lack of theories specific to journalism has generated a fragmented field of study, where academic efforts are developed independently, without shared knowledge that allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Zelizer, 2009). In the context of big data, the theoretical challenge intensifies, since there is neither a theoretical nor a conceptual framework that allows for a full understanding of the implications of this phenomenon for journalism.

In this sense, Deuze and Witschge (2018) suggest adopting a post-industrial perspective to analyze how society, the economy, and culture are being transformed by data and how these changes influence journalistic practice. Lewis and Westlund (2015) propose focusing the research on four key concepts: epistemology, expertise, ethics, and economics, and based on these, analyzing the changes produced in the phenomenon of interest. These four conceptual perspectives are valuable to adopt because they open possibilities for concrete analyses to observe the changes that data has generated in the journalistic discipline. Although actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005) has been used in research on data journalism to examine the integration of technology into journalistic work (Bucher, 2017), this theory could shift the attention toward technological actors, rather than focusing on the human decisions that influence the production of data-based news.

Therefore, this research chooses to adopt a post-industrial approach, analyzing the effects and challenges of big data in data journalism from an epistemological, expertise, and ethical perspective. The economic conceptual perspective is excluded because it is understood that data journalism is a product that may have economic applications and that emerges from big data.

Regarding journalistic epistemology, it focuses on understanding how journalists produce and communicate knowledge. That is, it is concerned with studying the practices that transform information into news

(Ekström, 2002). According to Ekström et al. (2019), in the case of data journalism, this approach allows examining how journalists convert data into news. From this perspective, Lewis and Westlund (2015) point out that one of the main challenges for data journalism professionals is verifying the accuracy of the information obtained from databases.

To address this challenge, researchers propose analyzing the routines and procedures that journalists adopt to ensure that their claims are legitimate and properly justified. This approach is crucial in a context of massive data, since it is often accompanied by an “aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy” (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 663), but, like human statements, it may also be subject to errors or biases.

In addition to the above, in the case of Latin America, it is necessary to analyze external factors that interfere in the chain of news production, not only in data journalism but in journalism in general. Among these external factors are media concentration, the political-social environment, and access to information. Journalism also develops in a context marked by violence and repression (Saldaña & Mourão, 2018), which affects the safety of journalists and their ability to carry out their work.

Regarding the political-social environment, Orchard and Fergnani (2023) highlight that, during the social uprising of October 2019, the perception of insecurity experienced by journalists marked a milestone in their work, since in that moment of conflict tensions were generated in the construction of all types of news, including those based on data.

Finally, regarding access to public information regulated by the Chilean Transparency Law (Law 20.285), it is recognized that this constitutes a key factor for the development of data journalism. As identified by La-Rosa and Sandoval-Martín (2016), the enactment of the transparency law in Spain coincided with the emergence of data journalism in that country. However, as has been evidenced in newsrooms in different contexts, access to information continues to face challenges linked to low data quality and insufficient technological infrastructure, which makes it difficult to build reliable databases (Camaj et al., 2022).

Thus, the epistemology of data journalism not only focuses on how data is transformed into news, but also on how contextual factors, such as media concentration, the political-social climate, and limitations in access to information influence journalistic production. These elements,

taken together, configure a complex scenario that journalists must navigate to ensure the legitimacy and justification of their work.

Regarding expertise, data journalism demands specific technical skills, such as programming, statistical analysis, and data visualization, which are not part of traditional journalism training (Heravi, 2018). This generates a gap between professionals' competencies and the needs of the environment, since journalism curricula do not always incorporate these contents (Appelgren & Nygren, 2014).

An additional obstacle is the aversion to mathematics and statistics often expressed by journalism students, which hinders their adoption (Hewett, 2016). However, some research suggests that this aversion is more a myth than a real inability, since journalists can learn and apply these skills successfully when provided with the appropriate tools (Nguyen & Lugo-Ocando, 2016). In addition to technical skills, data journalists must master legal aspects, such as regulations on access to information, and dedicate considerable time to data cleaning and analysis. These processes, which are essential to ensure the quality and accuracy of news, may affect the frequency of their publications (Appelgren & Nygren, 2014; Rubio Jordán, 2021). Therefore, the expertise of data journalists involves not only acquiring technical competencies, but also overcoming educational and psychological barriers, as well as efficiently managing time to balance analytical rigor with the production of journalistic content.

Regarding journalistic ethics, it guides professionals toward responsible work, protecting the integrity of sources and respecting people's privacy (Ward, 2019). In Chile, the code of ethics of the Colegio de Periodistas establishes standards to guide journalistic practice, although it does so without explicitly addressing the specific challenges of data journalism (Díaz del Campo-Lozano & Chaparro-Domínguez, 2018), which introduces particular ethical challenges related to privacy, accuracy, and transparency in data handling. For example, publishing sensitive data, such as addresses or personal information, may violate people's privacy (McBride, 2016).

In this line, the publication by the Chilean media outlet *Interferencia* during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disclosed the home addresses of the first people infected by the virus, violated the privacy of those

individuals.² Incidents of this kind underscore the need for careful and responsible handling of information, especially when dealing with data that may affect people’s lives. Transparency is another fundamental ethical pillar in data journalism, which involves sharing datasets and the methodologies used, allowing audiences to verify information and strengthening trust in journalistic work (Tong et al., 2021). However, this practice is not always implemented consistently, which may generate distrust and doubts about the credibility of news (Chaparro-Domínguez & Díaz-Campo, 2023).

Additionally, the contextualization of data is essential to avoid misinterpretations. Tools such as clear visualizations and the use of hyperlinks to provide additional information are fundamental to ensuring news is understandable and accurate (Bradshaw, 2014). Without adequate context, data may lead to erroneous conclusions, which affects the quality of journalism and its impact on society.

Therefore, ethics in data journalism requires a balance between protecting the privacy, transparency in information handling, and accuracy in data presentation. These considerations not only reinforce journalists’ credibility, but also ensure that data journalism fulfills its function of informing in a responsible manner.

METHODOLOGY

The study is framed within the paradigm of qualitative methodology, which places the researcher in the observed world, allowing them to “see beyond the ordinary and understand social life” (Strauss & Corbin, 2002, p. 17). Given that the objective is to characterize the practice of data journalism in Chile, semi-structured interviews were conducted with practicing data journalists, university professors who teach it, and media editors who have supervised this type of work. Constructed through snowball sampling, the final sample of interviewees consisted

² The publication by *Interferencia* is no longer available on the Internet. However, political authorities in the country, such as the Ministry of Health (“Minsal anunció acciones”, 2020), criticized the outlet’s actions, announcing legal measures against it.

of 13 professionals linked to data journalism in Chile. It is important to note that all interviewees practiced data journalism. Those who were professors also worked as journalists and even as editors. However, one role predominated over the others. This multiplicity of roles is a characteristic of data journalism in Chile, since when identifying the professionals, it was found that it was a very small group concentrated in Santiago, Chile.

An aspect to highlight about the interviews, conducted between October 2022 and October 2023, is that they revealed that artificial intelligence (AI) was not a relevant issue in newsrooms at that time. This finding in that temporal context is particularly significant, because in a short period of time, AI has radically transformed journalistic practice. Thus, the interviews captured a crucial moment in which professionals did not anticipate the impact that tools such as ChatGPT would have on journalism, which adds historical and contextual value to the data obtained.

A thematic analysis was applied to the interviews, which allows identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, the NVivo software was used to organize and code the information.

RESULTS

Teachers' perspectives

The interviewed teaching staff offer a broad and, at the same time, critical view of the impact of big data and data journalism in Chile. A first point of agreement is that the concept of *big data* is interpreted heterogeneously: for seven of the 13 participants, it essentially refers to a large amount of data, while for the other six it implies a cultural and social change in access to information. This divergence is not minor, as it influences the way in which teachers conceive the practice of data journalism and the profile of future journalists.

Those who associate it with the massive accumulation of data tend to emphasize the technical capacities for storing and processing large volumes of information, without attributing a deeper meaning to it. A data journalism professor said: “The processing of large volumes

of data has existed for decades. Big data is a concept that has gained popularity recently, but its practice dates back several years” (E1). This historical appreciation is repeated in other voices. Another professor adds: “Big data influences data journalism, but I don’t think it is the most relevant. In the end, we are still telling a story, and it is not enough to make connections in Excel” (E2). These words reflect the idea that, beyond technological availability, journalism remains centered on storytelling and critical interpretation of information.

However, for some teachers, big data is a transformative sociocultural phenomenon that has modified both the profile of journalists and the dynamics of access to information. A data journalist who also teaches stated: “Today we have access to information that was much more difficult to obtain before, and journalists have had to update their skills to manage and analyze this data” (E3). This perspective emphasizes the constant updating of professional competencies and the ability of journalists to integrate analytical tools that were not previously common.

In this debate, teachers also highlight the political push toward transparency. According to a journalist and professor:

The existence of large databases is preceded by transparency. If we did not have transparency laws, it would be much more difficult to access massive databases. Although data journalism has existed for years, today it feeds on large databases and on political support that facilitates our access to them (E4).

Although only six of the 13 interviewees explicitly link transparency laws with big data, all 13 recognize the importance of the regulation for the practice of data journalism. As one professor summarized: “Without the transparency law, we would not have data journalism in Chile” (E5).

The way in which teachers define data journalism also reveals diversity. Only one of the 13 interviewees described it as a journalistic genre and two as a discipline. One even preferred to refer to it as “data-based journalism”. In this regard, a professor relativizes the importance of the label by stating that “all journalism is done with data and the core of this practice is knowing how to use databases to generate journalistic

stories” (E6). For another professor, the central issue is to open a dialogue among those who practice it:

This is a discipline in which we have not reached agreement among those of us who practice it, but we should. I am probably interpreting another colleague incorrectly because we have not sat down to discuss what data journalism actually is, and that is the first step. How are we going to agree if we have not even faced each other? (E5).

Beyond conceptual discrepancies, everyone agrees that data journalism is, above all, a working methodology that combines data analysis tools with journalistic standards:

Data journalism is more than a journalistic tool. The tool is the program that helps you process, let’s say Excel or a more sophisticated one like Python or R. Data journalism is a methodology that allows you to achieve an end, which in essence is to present, communicate, and disseminate information of public interest and relevance (E4).

In the educational sphere, teachers acknowledge that universities have lagged behind technology. One professor states: “Universities are running behind technology and new ways of doing journalism. I don’t know if as universities we will be able to reach all new technological developments in the appropriate way, but we try” (E1). Another journalist and professor who has observed the situation with concern said:

I work with students nearing the end of their studies, and I see that they come with a serious distortion from the school, which makes them think that journalism is only about talking to people. They are taught that journalism is only press conferences or daily journalism. What we do in this course is to show them a side of journalism that takes more time, that is not immediate, and that relies heavily on the journalist’s initiative rather than being assigned to cover something (E7).

Finally, regarding the stages of data journalism, teachers emphasize

the importance of asking meaningful questions to databases and subjecting information to a rigorous analytical process:

We have to answer questions that are hidden in the databases because they are not obvious. It is not just about finding what the most expensive purchase was, but identifying which types of buyers benefited the most during a certain period, for example (E2).

JOURNALISTS’ PERSPECTIVES

The journalists who participated in the study complement these views with their experience in the daily practice of data journalism. They agree that big data has implied a shift in the scale of access to information, forcing professionals to update their competencies. As a journalist and professor stated: “Today we have access to information that was much more difficult to obtain before, and journalists have had to update themselves to manage and analyze this data” (E3).

In the daily practice, journalists identify three main ways to obtain databases: state transparency portals, requests made under the transparency law, and the creation of their own databases using techniques such as web scraping or surveys. Although the portals are valued, they also receive criticism for their lack of updating and the absence of data in some sectors. A journalist acknowledges: “It is not easy to find official data. Excluding the Ministry of Health, which is one of the most advanced in the digitalization of information, there are few that have available data” (E8).

The process of data analysis does not end with obtaining information. Journalists emphasize the need to interview people to validate their findings and give a human dimension to the stories: “We have to tell a story led by someone of flesh and blood. Regardless of whether we hide their identity, data journalism needs a face. If we don’t do it, we run the risk of stopping doing journalism” (E4). This perspective balances the technical dimension with the narrative and social vocation of the profession.

However, as one journalist emphasized, an excessive workload is a constant obstacle. “I think few media outlets have an exclusive data section because journalists are involved in many topics. With

little time, it is not possible to do something with the depth that data journalism requires” (E9). This limitation not only affects the quality of data projects but also explains the scarcity of specialized sections in traditional media.

In this context, alternative media appear as spaces for innovation:

Editorially, independent outlets have an advantage in that they feel there is a bit more freedom in what they publish. Even if they are smaller and have less money, there may be more interest in innovating because there is a greater need to find something that distinguishes you from others in order to survive (E10).

The flexibility of these media contrasts with their economic fragility, which poses a challenge for the continuity of data journalism projects.

EDITORS' PERSPECTIVES

Editors share many of the previous concerns but emphasize a critical point: in Chile, the adoption of data journalism depends largely on individual initiatives rather than institutional strategies. One journalist commented: “Thinking about traditional Chilean media, all innovations are driven by a *busquilla*³ journalist. Rarely is it an editor who comes up with the idea that ‘this needs to be transformed and updated’” (E11). She herself, who later assumed an editorial position, recalled:

Relying on the model of *The Guardian*, I made a presentation and pitched it to editors who might be interested. At that time there were not many examples of data journalism, so I said, “whatever comes out”. I begged to see who would buy it, and a year later we launched it as a section. It was not an easy process (E11).

³ “Busquilla” is a Chilean colloquialism that refers to a proactive person who takes initiative to seek out solutions or opportunities, especially in contexts of scarcity.

Among these editors, training in data tools is often self-taught, reflecting the absence of formal training programs: “Since the basics of data journalism involve working with spreadsheets, I had to teach myself Excel. That was how I got started. Later, I learned Python, although I use it less often” (E12). In the same vein, another editor and professor added: “Unfortunately, curricula have been very slow to update. In many areas, not just data. I say this because I taught digital journalism at two universities and there are fundamental topics that are still not taught” (E13).

This lack of systematic training reinforces the perception that data journalism advances more through individual curiosity and effort than through the existence of policies or structures in newsrooms. In this sense, editors who also teach emphasize the need for rigorous ethical criteria in data handling:

We must be careful not to include names, ID numbers, or personal data in the report. Although the law does not allow the disclosure of personal information, I have had instances where, under the transparency law, I have been sent databases containing personal information, but I do not publish it (E12).

Like journalists, editors recognize that alternative media and universities offer fertile ground for experimentation in data journalism, although the lack of economic stability and the slow pace of curricular updates continue to be significant challenges.

DISCUSSION

Definition of big data and its link with data journalism

The analysis of the interviews shows that Chilean journalists reveal a lack of consensus regarding the meaning of big data, interpreting it both from a technical perspective (volume and processing of data) and a sociocultural one (transformation of information dynamics). This divergence reflects the absence of formal spaces for discussion and comprehensive training on the subject both in media organizations and in journalism schools or faculties. Although the Transparency Law 20.285

has facilitated access to large volumes of data, its adoption in data journalism remains limited, with few journalists drawing on international models for its local application.

Verification of information and journalistic routines

In Chile, data journalists combine traditional practices, such as interviews with witnesses and experts, with their respective data analyses to corroborate that the information they will publish is correct. However, given the lack of formal training, it will be important in the future to verify whether the analyses reported in their journalistic content are free of errors.

Evaluation of the transparency law

Journalists recognize the progress brought by the transparency law, but they criticize slow response times, low data quality, and the lack of a transparency culture in the country. Despite these challenges, the law has allowed journalists to expand the limits of what is accessible, although optimal implementation will require a broader cultural and structural change.

Ethical challenges and care in data presentation

Journalists are aware of the ethical challenges associated with handling sensitive data, such as protecting privacy and rigorously verifying information. However, as in the previous point, an analysis of their journalistic content is required to verify that these safeguards are actually ensured.

CONCLUSION

This article has characterized the practice of data journalism in Chile, identifying advances, challenges, and opportunities in its development. Through interviews with 13 professionals linked to this type of journalism, it has been shown that the specialty is at an incipient stage, marked by innovation, but also by structural and cultural limitations that condition its growth. The main conclusions for each conceptual perspective (epistemology, expertise, and ethics) are presented below.

Epistemological dimension

Data journalism in Chile is based on a process that integrates data collection, analysis, and presentation, which is carried out mainly through the acquisition of technical skills learned in a self-taught manner. This reflects a pragmatic and experimental epistemology for its implementation. Although journalists have managed to overcome technical barriers, professionalization is still in its early stages, limiting the scope of its development.

Expertise dimension

Data journalism requires advanced technical skills, such as the handling of data analysis and visualization tools. In the country’s media organizations, journalists face structural barriers, such as lack of resources and scarce –or nonexistent– interdisciplinary collaboration with technologists. According to what was stated by the interviewees, none work in teams that include data analysis experts. In the absence of such collaboration, reporters interview those involved in the topic addressed to provide audiences with certainty that their work is truthful. That is, they rely on classical journalistic techniques. On the other hand, self-taught training and experimentation have been fundamental aspects for the development of expertise in data journalism. What is currently required is greater investment in training and resources to consolidate this specialty.

Ethical dimension

The interviewees emphasize the importance of protecting privacy and ensuring data integrity. However, it is essential to contrast these statements with practice. This consideration is relevant because the lack of specific training in data journalism –and, therefore, in data ethics– together with the absence of clear guidelines in newsrooms, may generate contradictions that aggravate this problem.

Conceptualization of data journalism

Data journalism in Chile is conceptualized more as a work methodology than as an autonomous specialty, which limits the development of a robust conceptual framework that integrates technical skills, ethical

principles, and even innovative narratives. Its consolidation as a specialty requires a joint effort between academia, media organizations, and the State, with the aim of overcoming the structural and cultural barriers that still persist. In the country, this type of journalism represents an opportunity to transform the national media ecosystem, promoting transparency, accountability, and informed decision-making. However, its consolidation requires addressing critical challenges such as the lack of comprehensive training, the absence of interdisciplinary collaboration, and ethical limitations that may arise from data handling.

To move forward, it is essential that journalism schools incorporate data journalism as an essential subject in their curricula, integrating both technical skills and ethical principles. In addition, a cultural change is required at the political level that values the importance of open data and fosters collaboration between journalists, technologists, and other relevant actors. We believe that data journalism has the potential to evolve from an emerging tool into an indispensable standard in journalistic practice.

To achieve this objective, a joint effort is necessary to address the structural, technical, and ethical barriers that still persist. Only in this way will data journalism be able to contribute significantly to the construction of a more informed, critical, and democratic society. Although this study provides a detailed characterization of data journalism in Chile, its development was not without limitations, mainly due to the limited presence of actors involved in it. For future research, it will be essential to identify whether the number of journalists involved in data journalism has increased, remained stable, or decreased.

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