

## POTENTIALITIES OF PODCASTING IN HEALTH JOURNALISM — AN ANALYSIS OF THREE PODCASTS ABOUT COVID-19 IN PORTUGAL

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### ABSTRACT

The pandemic caused by covid-19 was a lever for the appearance of several podcasts dedicated to the disease. In several countries, including Portugal, the media added audio content to their traditional information offering by using this digital tool. The podcast's popularity has grown with audiences, and media companies look to this platform as a good strategy to diversify content and thus reach audiences. In times of crisis, such as a pandemic, the need for populations to access credible information they can trust and thus gain knowledge to help them make decisions increases. In this particular case, covid-19, the populations felt the need to be informed about an unknown disease, looking for information about symptoms, contagion, or means of personal protection, and podcasts represented an answer to these information needs. This article examines how three Portuguese podcasts dedicated exclusively to covid-19 treated the disease. Based on the data, we will reflect on the importance of this new tool for health journalism. The results of the research allow us to conclude that the national podcasts on covid-19 analyzed follow some patterns identified in the coverage of health topics in Portugal and that, adopting an "advisory" tone, they placed themselves in the position of supporting tools in combat the pandemic by clarifying, informing and clarifying issues related to the disease.

### KEYWORDS

health journalism, podcast, pandemic, covid-19, Portugal

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## POTENCIALIDADES DO PODCASTING NO JORNALISMO DE SAÚDE — UMA ANÁLISE A TRÊS PODCASTS SOBRE A COVID-19 EM PORTUGAL

### RESUMO

A pandemia provocada pela covid-19 foi uma alavanca para o aparecimento de vários podcasts dedicados à doença. Em diversos países, incluindo Portugal, os *media* acrescentaram à sua oferta informativa tradicionais conteúdos sonoros utilizando para tal esta ferramenta digital. A popularidade do podcast tem crescido junto das audiências e as empresas de comunicação social olham para esta plataforma como uma boa estratégia para diversificar os conteúdos e assim chegar junto dos públicos. Em momentos de crise, como uma pandemia, cresce a necessidade de as populações terem acesso a informações credíveis nas quais possam confiar e, assim, obterem um conhecimento que as ajudem a tomar decisões. Neste caso em particular, a covid-19, as populações sentiram a necessidade de estarem informadas sobre uma doença desconhecida, procurando informações sobre os sintomas, o contágio ou os meios de proteção pessoal e os podcasts representaram uma resposta para essas necessidades informativas. O presente artigo

analisa como três podcasts portugueses dedicados em exclusivo à covid-19 trataram a doença. A partir dos dados procederemos a uma reflexão sobre a importância desta nova ferramenta para o jornalismo de saúde. Os resultados da pesquisa permitem-nos concluir que os podcasts nacionais sobre a covid-19 analisados seguem alguns padrões identificados na cobertura de temas de saúde em Portugal e que, adotando um tom de “consultório”, se colocaram na posição de ferramentas coadjuvantes no combate à pandemia, ao esclarecerem, informarem e clarificarem questões relacionadas com a doença.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

jornalismo de saúde, podcast, pandemia, covid-19, Portugal

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic caused by the new coronavirus has generated a greater need for information about the disease, mainly because this is a new virus, and some of its symptoms and effects are unknown to the scientific community.

The demand for information by the citizens was matched by the media production, generating a sometimes chaotic context, such as the volume of news produced and made available in the public space. In this equation, we must not overlook the emergence of fake news about the pandemic that led to growing concern in the fight against the disease.

For this reason, the information produced in the media context gains relevance, within which journalists exercise their function according to a regulated framework and defined editorial policies. This aspect should be valued as people seek credible information about a fundamental area of citizens' lives: their health. Thus, journalism plays a vital role in people's health literacy (Azevedo, 2012; Levin-Zamir & Bertsch, 2018; Magalhães et al., 2017), to the extent that it can provide credible and useful information for each individual to make decisions to promote a healthy life.

In a pandemic scenario, the concerns of the populations are focused on the symptoms, the contagion, the cure, and the behaviors and, in this sense, journalism plays a vital role as a credible information agent supporting health authorities, both in traditional media and in the new digital platforms.

In fact, in addition to traditional media (newspapers, radio, and television), it is now possible to find journalistic content on health on websites, blogs, and social networks (Levin-Zamir & Bertsch, 2018; Schwitzer, 2009).

The present article intends to specifically analyze one of these new tools — the podcast — that grew with the audiences (Newman, 2021) and found in the pandemic context another reason to expand and consolidate its growth (Martins, 2020; Newman & Gallo, 2020).

Our study thus aims to understand how health journalism, concerning the pandemic caused by covid-19, has used this form of audio communication available online. We analyzed three podcasts exclusively dedicated to covid-19, identifying the themes, the voices, and the structure of their episodes and seeking to contribute to how journalism in the field of health can benefit from using this new digital audio tool.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Several authors (Azevedo, 2012; Hinnant & Len-Rios, 2009; Hodgetts, 2012; Magalhães et al., 2017) have demonstrated the importance of the media and particularly journalism to convey health information to citizens. For individuals, the media represent a way to disseminate health-related content and have the ability to promote behaviors and practices and lead to the adoption of healthy lifestyles (Azevedo, 2012; Magalhães et al., 2017).

The way we perceive health and disease is largely determined by how the media report these topics (Hodgetts, 2012), as the frequent placement of health-related issues on the public agenda can contribute to the populations' health literacy.

This social responsibility that, as in other areas, is inscribed in the praxis of the journalism profession leads, on the other hand, to a need for training and access to health information by journalists to transmit it in a clear and enlightening way to citizens. In this sense, some researchers (Hodgetts, 2012; Peters, 2000) have noted the existence of a clash of cultures between professional communities: doctors and other health-related professions, and journalists.

This clash is embodied in how both professionals perceive their role in society. Hinnant and Len-Rios (2009) state the following:

while journalists envision themselves safeguarding the democratic process, scientists feel that they do the same for scientific discourse. The former leads to oversimplification of scientific findings so that the public can understand the material, while the latter results in an overemphasis on technical information and the scientific process. (p. 90)

The scientific community values aspects related to the scientific accuracy of the information, while on the journalism side, the priorities are the need to inform the readers, listeners, or viewers. The problem is that, sometimes, this simplification (or decoding of information) can mean a lack of accuracy. The issue is complex and refers to how health news should be presented.

The media are seen “as strategic partners for both improving health literacy and increasing health education outcomes” (Azevedo, 2012, p. 188). Moreover, from this perspective, the idea advocated by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2004) about the function of journalism, which is to provide citizens with information that allows them to make the best possible decisions about their lives, can also be applied to health journalism in particular. In other words, it is up to journalists who work directly with this theme to provide the audiences with relevant information to make decisions and adopt practices and behaviors to promote good health. Azevedo (2012) argues that journalism has the role of “alerting to certain types of risk and behavior and reinforcing processes of change” (p. 189).

Therefore, taking the Portuguese reality as a starting point, it is important to understand how the news coverage of health-related themes has been carried out. Lopes and Fernandes (2012), within the scope of the project *Disease in the News*, identified some trends regarding this coverage. According to the study, “health policies” were the central

theme of news coverage in the analyzed newspapers (*Público*, *Jornal de Notícias*, and *Expresso*), “gathering almost 33% of all published texts” (Lopes & Fernandes, 2012, p. 18).

The study also concluded that the tendency of journalism not to privilege “disease” as a newsworthy subject persists: “updating this diagnosis, the 2012 data do not add any new element, since the total results show that only 33.9% of the articles refer to a specific disease” (Lopes & Fernandes, 2012, p. 21). As noted by the authors of the study, the exception was influenza A, which, in 2009, motivated the publication of several journalistic texts, underlining what had already been referred about the hyper mediatization of influenza A (Lopes et al., 2010).

The study also emphasizes the importance of information sources, and in this case, the official sources, which include “those connected to the political power or who hold management positions in public bodies, always play a major role” (Lopes & Fernandes, 2012, p. 23).

The object of the study we referred was the Portuguese press which, with radio and television, is the leading media through which audiences obtain health news. However, due to a new media ecosystem that now includes digital media and new forms of communication available on the internet (blogs, social networks, podcasts), has the potential to change (Azevedo, 2012, p. 187).

In other fields of journalism, as in the case of health journalism, the internet also has an impact that should be mentioned. According to Gary Schwitzer (2009), based on a survey conducted in the United States with members of the Association of Health Journalists, the new platforms for news created on the internet “have been a mainly positive influence on health journalism (64%, compared to 17% who said the impact was mainly negative” (p. 6).

Levin-Zamir and Bertsch (2018) talk about eHealth literacy to refer to the set of health information available on the internet, therefore, posing new challenges to health literacy and the role of information and communication. The authors argue that eHealth transferred health literacy traditionally generated from communication in traditional media to a different level as it “enables and invites the public to actively interact, respond, and participate in creating, criticizing, and sharing health messages and information” (Levin-Zamir & Bertsch, 2018, pp. 9–10).

Therefore, we start from the assumption that the new digital platforms represent one more way to provide journalistic content in the health area. That is a fact for the podcast, which is the tool we intend to explore in this article.

Ruben Martins (2020) refers that, during the first months of the covid-19 pandemic, 21 podcasts were created in Portugal. Many were not related to the disease but arose due to the lockdown periods the country has undergone. However, as the author points out, several podcasts eventually became extinct after a short time.

The author notes that between March 14 and 21, 2020, “21 original contents were created under the pretext of the covid-19 pandemic, whose general theme or one of the episodes was the sanitary context or the greater temporary availability provided by the quarantine period” (Martins, 2020, para. 2). The contents were produced by media

outlets (*Público*, Antena 1, Antena 3, *Observador*, and TSF) and by independent producers. Regarding the content, the option was following the pandemic's evolution and answering questions in those episodes dedicated to the disease.

The covid-19 pandemic was, effectively, a lever for creating several podcasts either dedicated to the disease or to the effects it caused in the lives of populations, particularly concerning periods of lockdown.

In a search conducted on Spotify, Google Podcasts, and Apple Podcasts platforms and with a purely exploratory purpose, we identified the existence of Portuguese podcasts with topics related to covid-19 produced by media outlets, other institutions, and independent production.

These are the cases of *P24* and *Em Casa* (*Público*), *Perguntar Não Ofende* (produced by Daniel Oliveira who created a special dossier on the subject), *Podcast do Hospital da Luz*, *Vai Ficar Tudo bem* (*Expresso*), *Querida Quarentena* and *Anti-Vírus* (Rádio Comercial), *Conversas Visão Saúde* (*Visão* magazine), *Relatório Coronavírus* and *Covid-19: Perguntas, Perguntas e Efeitos* (Antena 1), *Perguntas Com Resposta* (TSF). It should be noted that from this list, many already existed and were dedicated to various health issues. With the pandemic they also started to address covid-19 in some episodes.

The reality verified in Portugal gains a much larger dimension in other latitudes, such as the United States, France, Australia, Denmark, United Kingdom, and Sweden, whose realities are highlighted in a Reuters Institute study: “dozens of daily news podcasts were launched in March and April, focusing only on the pandemic and its implications” (Newman & Gallo, 2020, p. 21).

The study concludes that the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus generated in the audience a desire for more information on various aspects related to the disease and that this triggered the production of news content in podcast format, particularly in the period of lockdown. In this regard, the authors of the study refer to:

coronavirus appears to have accelerated plans for daily news podcasts, with a number of publishers looking to tap into a heightened interest in news and in deeper coverage. A number of news brands launched “pop-up” coronavirus podcasts during the lockdowns, many of which have become breakout hits. (Newman & Gallo, 2020, p. 6)

### 3. THE GROWTH OF THE PODCAST SECTOR

A podcast is an audio file available on the internet that has the advantage of being downloadable to a computer or mobile device. That is audio communication, but, unlike radio broadcasts, the podcast is not tied to a temporal logic of the messages. That means that it gives listeners the possibility of listening to a given content when they want and at the time they want, rather than being tied to the rigidity of radio programming.

We don't need some big music company or radio station to make that happen. It could just be some blogger posting a review of the song mix, say, and then attaching an MP3 audio file as an enclosure to it that then, thanks to RSS, is sent and downloaded right into your computer and then to your iPod. (Kline & Burstein, 2005, p. 276)

Its success is explained by the fact that it is free, portable, gives the listener autonomy, and simplifies production processes. The Reuters Institute report, looking ahead to the year 2021, states the following: “podcasts continue to go from strength to strength, despite the pandemic making them available to morning commute one of the most popular times of day for listening” (Newman, 2021, p. 28).

This tool has seduced several fields of activity in its short history, from public entities to companies, including the media. Examples are the Pentagon, NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), religious institutions, companies, schools, universities, radios, newspapers, and televisions.

In addition to these institutions, many amateurs make independent production of podcasts. This scenario motivates some authors to consider this form of communication as a new and more democratic platform (Balzen, 2017; Bonixe, 2006) in the sense that it generated possibilities for citizens without experience or access to the media to be able to express themselves through a digital tool.

In the Portuguese case, podcasting arrived in the first quarter of 2005 by Duarte Velez Grilo, who created *Blitzkrieg Bop* in March. After 2 months, the Media Capital Rádios group started to make opinion programs available on its portal Cotonete. It was the first Portuguese media group to provide radio programs available in this format. Cotonete was also the first national aggregator of podcasts by including the episodes produced within the Media Capital group and the few amateur-produced ones.

In September 2005, Carlos Jorge Andrade created Lusocast, the first directory exclusively for Portuguese podcasting. However, given the low initial expression of podcasts produced in Portugal, Lusocast started by making available programs produced in Brazil. The portal started with about 30, from which the Portuguese produced less than half.

The year 2006 started with TSF radio joining the podcasting and making six programs available. In February of the same year, SIC became the first national television station to make some of its programs available on podcasts. A month later, it was time for *Expresso* newspaper to create press content in the podcast format for the first time in Portugal. This case was an interview conducted by the newspaper with the then Portuguese prime minister, José Sócrates.

*Observador*, a media website created in 2014, launched its first podcast the following year. “It is 22 seconds heard on Soundcloud in which David Dinis, then executive director, announces two programs with podcast distribution” (Reis, 2018, p. 212). That was followed by *Público*, which, from 2017 onwards, started to provide regular podcast content.

In recent years, the Portuguese media have continued to invest in providing podcasts. These are the cases of *Visão* magazine and *Expresso*, which, through its magazine,

has launched in 2019 an innovative project by making a special fully available edition in podcast format.

According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*, which analyzed several countries, including Portugal, “36% of the audience listen to a podcast every month” (Newman et al., 2019, p. 11). This percentage is slightly lower in the Portuguese case, standing at 34% (Cardoso et al., 2020, p. 28) and with a tendency to grow to “close to 40% in 2020”, according to the Portuguese communication observatory (Cardoso et al., 2020, p. 33).

Technological developments help explain the degree of popularity of podcasting since it has simplified listening processes (Berry, 2015). Unlike the early years of this tool, nowadays, one no longer needs to have an Mp3 player or an iPod to listen to or download a podcast. The availability of smartphones completely changed the way the podcast came to be seen by the public, democratizing its access and being responsible for the increase in consumption, especially among younger people (Newman et al., 2019; Newman & Galo, 2020).

The investment that audio platforms have made in podcasting also helps us understand the trivialization of the phenomenon. Apple, Spotify, and Google now have podcast aggregators, which allow listeners to access this type of content with enormous ease. “More platform support for subscriptions. That is already underway (e.g., Apple News+, Subscribe with Google, and Substack for independent writers), but we can expect more seamless integration of subscription into a wider range of native platform experiences this year” (Newman, 2021, p. 13).

One also needs to look into the contents when trying to understand podcasting’s impact on audiences. The podcast *Serial*, created in 2015, is a good example. That is a two-season podcast in which Sarah Koenig narrates research into the death of a university student in Baltimore, United States. *Serial* has been downloaded 340.000.000 times, and, according to Richard Berry (2015), it represents a turning point in podcasting history, launching a golden age for this digital tool. The same author states: “what *Serial* did was offer a podcast that not only had mass appeal but also presented itself as a narrative in which the audience could engage with intellectually and emotionally” (Berry, 2015, p. 171).

Since then, the podcast has encouraged independent journalistic production and provided traditional media with an effective way of captivating and keeping audiences (Newman, 2021).

This growing popularity translated into the generalized use by institutions, media companies, and amateur individuals (without any connection to the media industry) leads Bonini (2015) to consider that we are in the second era of podcasting. The author argues that this second podcasting era is embodied in the existing market and the professionalization of production. For Bonini (2015), this phase began in 2012 in the United States when the first business models emerged “capable of supporting the independent production and consumption of audio content distributed through podcasting” (p. 24).

The growth of podcasting has also motivated the academic community’s interest which started to invest in this tool as a study object, not limited to the radio (Kischinhevsky

et al., 2020). The podcast is beginning to assert itself as a relevant media sector, particularly in some countries, such as the United States or the United Kingdom. According to Deloitte (as cited in Newman, 2021), the podcast industry could in 2025 exceed “\$3.3bn globally” (p. 29).

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to understand how this new audio communication technology (the podcast), which has seen a growth in audience, has been used as a media resource to inform about the covid-19 pandemic.

From listening to three podcasts produced by Portuguese media, we carried out a content analysis of the episodes available between March and July 2020, identifying: (a) the main themes of each episode (Table 1), (b) the sources of information with voice (frequency in the episodes of protagonists who are health experts as well as other sources) and, (c) the structure of the podcast (fixed headings, interview model, response to pandemic issues, resident panels).

THEMATIC CATEGORIES	DESCRIPTION
Disease	Episodes focused on the disease (covid-19): symptoms, medication, vaccination, contagion, risk behavior
Economy	Effects of the pandemic on the labor market and public and company finances; episodes focused on teleworking, unemployment, and business opportunities
Animals	Topic relating to the presence of the new coronavirus in animals
Pandemic	Episodes focused on the global effects of the disease. This theme relates to the worldwide consequences of lockdown and the pandemic
Mental health	Mental health effects of the lockdown
Politics	Party-political approach to the pandemic
Public health policy	Themes related to public health policies
Rights	Citizens' rights regarding teleworking, privacy, such as distance learning and videoconferencing, fever measurement by non-medical institutions
Communication	Themes focused on the way governments, particularly the Portuguese government, communicated measures concerning the care and management of the pandemic

Table 1 Description of the podcast themes

The analyzed podcasts are the following: *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos* (Covid-19: Questions, Answers, and Effects), produced by Antena 1, *Anti-Vírus* (Antivirus), produced by Rádio Comercial and *Gabinete de Crise* (Crisis Cabinet), produced by *Observador* (Table 2).



PODCAST	PRODUCER	NUMBER OF EPISODES ANALYZED	AVERAGE EPISODE LENGTH	PERIOD ANALYZED	WEBSITE
<i>Covid - 19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos</i>	Antena 1	29	8 minutes	March 25 to July 17, 2020	<a href="https://www.rtp.pt/antena1/podcasts/Covid-19-perguntas-respostas-e-efeitos_11178">https://www.rtp.pt/antena1/podcasts/Covid-19-perguntas-respostas-e-efeitos_11178</a>
<i>Anti-Vírus</i>	Rádio Comercial	27	2 minutes	The episodes available are all dated March 2020	<a href="https://radiocomercial.iol.pt/podcasts/anti-virus">https://radiocomercial.iol.pt/podcasts/anti-virus</a>
<i>Gabinete de Crise</i>	Observador	18	20 minutes	March 27 to July 24, 2020.	<a href="https://observador.pt/programas/gabinete-de-crise/">https://observador.pt/programas/gabinete-de-crise/</a>

Table 2 Characterization of the analyzed podcasts

The choice of podcasts presents different models of media companies: one produced by public service radio (Antena 1), an entertainment broadcaster (Rádio Comercial), and another one created by an online medium, despite also owning a radio (*Observador*).

All three analyzed podcasts have in common the fact that they do not represent native productions, that is, their contents, or part of them, were also broadcasted on the radio and do not exist only in the podcasting format. Nevertheless, despite being linked to the radio programming of the referred stations, that connection is established differently. Thus, the podcast *Gabinete de Crise* is a segment of the morning programming of Rádio Observador. The *Anti-Vírus* podcast results from interviews conducted by its author to broadcast Rádio Comercial. These interviews were conducted with experts in the medical field and were broadcast for about 1 month on the radio and available in podcast format on the station's website. Finally, *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos* results from a combination of interviews made by the author-journalist of the podcast, some of them previously broadcasted on Antena 1. Therefore, this podcast is the only one presenting different content from what aired on the radio.

Since podcasts have different structures regarding their alignment, we consider it relevant to describe each of them briefly.

The *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos*, from Antena 1, is presented in the form of an interview, in which the host of the podcast asks the experts questions that arise on various issues related to the pandemic, whether concerning the disease, the consequences on the labor market or education. The podcast does not have resident commentators/experts, but the repetition of protagonists in the analyzed episodes is frequent. The podcast is always presented by the same journalist, António Jorge.

The podcast *Anti-Vírus*, from Rádio Comercial, has a lighter structure and presents the contents much more synthetically. It always starts with a question answered by a resident specialist according to the topic addressed. It has a short duration of around 2 minutes. The presenter is Ana Martins, who remains in all the analyzed episodes.

Finally, the podcast *Gabinete de Crise* has the most complex structure. Each episode has several fixed segments and usually follows the same alignment. The episode starts

with the “Número do Dia” (Number of the Day) in which the resident commentators/experts present a number related to the pandemic and develop the discussion around it. In the second part, a guest speaker elaborates on the focus of that day’s program with the journalist and the resident commentators. The podcast also contains the segments “Desfazer Mitos” (Dispelling Myths) and “Nota de Esperança” (A Note of Hope) and is presented by journalist Carla Carvalho.

Based on the data collected from listening to the episodes, we reflected on how health was communicated in these podcasts using the theoretical framework presented in this article.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. THEMATIC SCOPE: HEALTH, ECONOMY, AND RIGHTS

The main topic addressed in the podcasts was the “covid-19 disease” (Table 3). That happens in 44.59% of the analyzed episodes, especially on *Anti-Vírus* and *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos*. The podcast *Gabinete de Crise* is from the three analyzed the one that presents a smaller number of episodes where “disease” is the central theme.

	COVID 19: PERGUNTAS, RESPOSTAS E EFEITOS	ANTI- VÍRUS	GABINETE DE CRISE	TOTAL
Disease (covid-19)	12 (41.37%)	17 (62.96%)	4 (22.22%)	33 (44.59%)
Economy	12 (41.37%)	0	4 (22.22%)	16 (21.62%)
Animals	1 (3.44%)	0	0	1 (1.35%)
Pandemic	4 (13.79%)	0	2 (11.11%)	6 (8.11%)
Mental health	0	10 (37.03%)	1 (5.55%)	11 (14.86%)
Politics	0	0	1 (5.55%)	1 (1.35%)
Public health politics	0	0	4 (22.22%)	4 (5.41%)
Rights	0	0	1 (5.55%)	1 (1.35%)
Communication	0	0	1 (5.55%)	1 (1.35%)
Total	29	27	18	74

Table 3 Main themes of the episodes of the podcasts analyzed

The podcasts produced by Antena 1 and Rádio Comercial followed a similar logic. In the case of the podcast *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos* we found several episodes dedicated to issues related to group immunity, contagion, the use of the mask, the effectiveness of the medication, and the effects of the disease in children and pregnant women. The *Anti-Vírus* podcast also predominantly focuses on topics directly related to

the disease caused by the new coronavirus. It addresses sub-themes of the category “disease” related to the use of masks and gloves, how to proceed in case of symptoms and which are the most frequent, ways of contagion, and dangers for pregnancy.

The predominance given to the theme “disease” in the analyzed podcasts contradicts previously found data regarding the journalistic treatment of health issues in Portuguese newspapers (Lopes & Fernandes, 2012), which stated that “health policies” dominate the media agenda.

In the analyzed podcasts, “health policies” did not deserve particular relevance. Even so, the *Gabinete de Crise* presents several programs in which issues related to the Portuguese National Health Service and its resilience to the pandemic are addressed.

However, the data we collected about the priority given to themes directly related to the “disease” aligns with what was obtained about the Influenza A pandemic. Thus, it is consistent with the hyper mediatization of health topics when we talk about events that break into the news and that, either because of lack of knowledge about the new disease or its effects on health, generate a greater number of news items.

The themes related to “mental health” also deserve a highlight. In this case, the Rádio Comercial podcast absorbs, almost entirely, the number of analyzed episodes dedicated to this subject. Issues related to mental health were also addressed in the two other analyzed podcasts, although with lower incidence and in a different perspective. In the case of Antena 1, some episodes addressed the issues of panic, isolation, and loneliness. In the case of *Observador’s Gabinete de Crise*, the theme was addressed in only one episode during the analyzed period studied (June 26, 2020) and focused on issues related to the feeling of fear and depression. The *Anti-Vírus* dedicated, in the analyzed period, 10 episodes to this theme, which represent 37.03% of all the available episodes. The podcast advises listeners on dealing with the pandemic and, in particular, the lockdown period. Some of the themes are suggestive: “is it normal to cry?”; “does laughing help?” or “how to deal with our shadows?” were some of the questions asked in the episodes.

As we can see in Table 3, the themes related to the effects of the pandemic on the “economy” have great importance, particularly in the podcasts from Antena 1 and *Observador*. In the first case, this theme is central in 12 episodes. As sub-themes, we find a significant focus on issues related to telework and what it implies in terms of labor law. Unemployment caused by the economic crisis, how companies are reorganized because of the lockdown, and the reopening of commerce in the post-lockdown period are the main themes categorized under “economy”.

In the case of the *Observador*, episodes also focus on issues related to telework, the implications of distance learning, the reopening of borders, and tourism. Again, the perspective of the podcast *Gabinete de Crise* is more global and dialogic, promoting the discussion between several perspectives, particularly from the resident guests.

Unlike previous podcasts, Rádio Comercial’s *Anti-Vírus* did not devote any episode to economic issues.

If the themes related to “disease”, “mental health”, and “economy” are a priority in the analyzed episodes, we also found other less focused subjects, but still worth

mentioning. Thus, we find an episode of the podcast *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos* dedicated to companion animals. The *Gabinete de Crise* presents several other topics: communication of measures concerning the pandemic, the way political parties are managing the pandemic, privacy, and ethical concerns such as temperature assessment in non-clinical services.

## 5.2. A STAGE FOR THE EXPERTS

Lopes and Fernandes (2012) refer that health news are “usually built using information sources” (p.23). Listening to the analyzed podcasts allows us to confirm this scenario and realize the producers’ concern with disseminating information according to and validated by sources related to science.

Table 4 shows how the voices of doctors are a priority in all three analyzed podcasts. In addition, other protagonists linked to health, such as researchers, medical professors, and pharmacists, are also relevant.

	<i>COVID-19: PERGUNTAS, RESPOSTAS E EFEITOS</i>	<i>ANTI-VÍRUS</i>	<i>GABINETE DE CRISE</i>	TOTAL
Health researchers	1.85	0.00	1,89	1.49
Health professors	3.70	0.00	33,96	14.93
Pharmacists	1.85	0.00	0.00	0.75
Doctors	50.00	62.96	22,64	41.79
Psychologists	3.70	25.93	0.00	6.72
Non-healthcare professors	0.00	0.00	5,67	2.25
Priests	0.00	11.11	0.00	2.24
Veterinarians	1.85	0.00	0.00	0.75
Patients	1.85	0.00	0.00	0.75
Economists	1.85	0.00	35,85	14.93
Managers	7.41	0.00	0.00	2.99
Lawyers	20.37	0.00	0.00	8.21
Human resources of companies	5.56	0.00	0.00	2.24

**Table 4** Presence of information sources in the analyzed podcasts (%)

The presence of these voices that explain, clarify and inform about the disease (symptoms, behaviors to avoid infection, medication, and vaccines) occurred following two strategies: as resident commentators or as guests. The podcasts *Anti-Vírus*, from Rádio Comercial and *Gabinete de Crise*, from *Observador*, adopted the strategy of having

resident guests. In the first case, André Almeida, an internist at the Central Lisbon Hospital and assistant professor at the Lisbon Faculty of Medical Sciences, has participated in all the episodes dedicated to health issues. In the podcast, *Gabinete de Crise*, the guest speaker on health Alexandre Abrantes, from the National School of Public Health, was later replaced by Sónia Dias, from the same institution. The participation occurred in all the podcast episodes, regardless of the theme. The podcast *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos*, from Antena 1, did not use resident experts but had a notable presence of health-related voices, as shown in Table 4.

The use of health-related experts aligns with international practice regarding podcasts on covid-19. The Reuters Institute study on podcasts dedicated to the new coronavirus in the United States, Denmark, France, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Sweden reveals that the strategy involved the presence of doctors in podcasts on covid-19 “answering listener questions and helping to correct false information” (Newman & Gallo, 2020, p. 21). We perceive this model as a way for the media to strive in these moments to provide audiences with accurate and fast information ensuring “better information and, consequently, a prevention behavior in citizens” (Lopes et al., 2010, p. 21).

The participation of experts from other areas was also noted in other themes mostly linked to the economic consequences of the disease. In this regard, once again, we noted the presence of a resident speaker, namely the podcast *Gabinete de Crise*, who participated in all episodes. In the case of the Antena 1 podcast, the presence of experts linked to the economy followed the guest model when the theme addressed in the episode justified it. The podcast *Anti-Vírus* did not use guests connected to the economic area, which is justified by the absence of the theme in the episodes provided.

We also identified other expert voices that, although they do not have particular relevance in the set of the three analyzed podcasts, are important in the individual context of some programs. Thus, we observed the presence of voices from the area of law in the case of the podcast *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos* from Antena 1. These experts intervened in episodes dedicated to teleworking and issues related to citizens’ freedom, rights, and duties in the context of the lockdown. In the two other podcasts, we did not observe the presence of voices linked to these areas.

Another presence that deserves to be highlighted is that of psychologists in the podcast *Anti-Vírus*, due to the program’s approach to these themes in several episodes, through issues related to mental health. The presence of psychologists in the other two podcasts analyzed is residual (in the case of Antena 1) or non-existent (in the case of *Observador*).

One fact that seems important to refer to is that the voice of a covid-19 patient was heard only once. It happened in the Antena 1 podcast *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos* and, even in this case, it was a doctor who had developed the disease. None of the other podcasts presented the testimony of someone who had experienced the disease in their episodes. This absence of patients can be explained by the priority given to the voice of the experts and less to those who, despite having developed the disease, would not have the scientific knowledge to explain or clarify the symptoms, limiting themselves, if they had participated, to being a voice of personal experiences.

### 5.3. THE PEDAGOGICAL AND SUPPORTING TONE

Listening to the three podcasts, it is evident the option of its producers to adopt an explanatory and elucidative tone regarding a new issue that incisively affected the world population. The analysis we bring to this article was conducted at the beginning of the lockdown when many doubts persisted about the virus's behavior, the symptoms, and the behavior we should all adopt to protect ourselves and others.

Analyzed podcasts show a concern to answer questions on the agenda during the period under analysis and discussed in the public space, either by health officials or politicians. For this reason, we found in the various episodes themes related to the use of the mask, which even generated some controversy at the beginning of the pandemic with officials from the Portuguese Directorate-General for Health stating that such use would not be a priority. Likewise, the use of gloves was also a topic addressed in several episodes, with the intervention of health experts who tried to explain the advantages and disadvantages of their use. The symptoms of the disease, the differences from the flu, the medication, the vaccine, the care to be taken during pregnancy and with children were recurrent themes, particularly in the podcasts *Anti-Vírus* and *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos*. In all of them, the strategy was to resort to explanations by experts.

The explanatory and informative tone is perfectly noticeable in the three podcasts analyzed. In the case of *Covid-19: Perguntas, Respostas e Efeitos*, and *Anti-Vírus*, the structure of the episodes is quite evident, since in some cases, the host introduces the topic in an interrogative way, moving on to an expert's answer. It is a format of a kind of consulting room. The podcast *Anti-Vírus* also leaves no doubt as to the strategy used, presenting itself on the website as follows: "do you have doubts? Rádio Comercial asks the specialists".

The *Observador* podcast *Gabinete de Crise* has a slightly different logic. However, the explanatory and informative tone is also present throughout the episodes, especially in the segment called "Desfazer Mitos" (Dispelling Myths), in which the two resident speakers of the program clarify some issues individuals perceive as accurate. Nonetheless, that science has concluded to be false or not yet proven. As examples, we refer to these two cases: "is it true that it is dangerous to have pets at home?" (*Gabinete de Crise*, May 15, 2020) or "do the most severe manifestations of covid-19 affect only the elderly?" (*Gabinete de Crise*, June 26, 2020).

The studied podcasts sought to assist in the enlightenment of the population standing on the side of science. They advised, informed, clarified behaviors, practices, symptoms, and effects of the disease on issues related to contagion, group immunity, or the use of personal protection. This model of asking practical questions about the disease proved to gain acceptance in other contexts where podcasts on covid-19 were created as people want "relevant, direct, trusted information, and they want their questions answered" (Newman & Gallo, 2020, p. 21).

This practice places journalism in the "supporting role as a strategic field to influence individual and collective behaviors and attitudes" (Azevedo, 2012, p.188), a function verified by Lopes et al. (2010) regarding the news coverage in the Portuguese press

about influenza A. The authors state that in the “context of a possible epidemic, it is not surprising that the sense of social responsibility underlying the exercise of journalism reaches the top” (Lopes et al., 2010, p. 21).

Still in the field of health, but in this case, mental health, we also found several episodes focusing on clarifying and advising practices to reduce the lockdown effects. This theme, as we have already mentioned, is mainly addressed in the podcast *Anti-Vírus*, and in it, we find episodes in which a psychologist or a priest answer questions like “exercises to keep the mood high?”, “does making a list of intentions help?” or “how to deal with uncertainty?”.

The explanatory and informative tone, close to that of a “doctor’s office”, is also perceptible when the themes are related to telework, the rights and duties of citizens in lockdown, the behaviors to adopt after lockdown, particularly during vacation periods, like going to the beach. In all these situations, interventions from specialized sources are hegemonic, especially when linked to health or the economy.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Analyzed podcasts followed a supporting logic that is part of a global strategy to fight the pandemic. In any of the analyzed cases, the recourse to experts aimed at clarifying, informing, or correcting incorrect information about the disease and the population’s behavior against the new virus. This option of the producers is in line with previous studies, which refer that “health journalism, particularly the one that happens in a risk environment, shows great dependence on official and specialized sources, by the required decoding” (Lopes et al., 2010, p. 153).

The dialogical model adopted by the podcasts is close to what could be called a “doctor’s office”, where listeners have the opportunity to have some of their questions clarified. The tone used is one of clarifying doubts about something unknown to the population that generates uncertainty and fear in such a relevant area as health. By focusing mainly on the “disease”, podcasts created a consensus around specific issues, such as the use of masks, the identification of symptoms, or the need to avoid personal contact as much as possible. However, the practice model has also been extended to issues concurrent with the disease, such as lockdown effects on work and mental health.

Podcasts producers have taken on the role of spokespeople experiencing an unexpected pandemic situation and are looking for answers to help them make health-related decisions regarding their health. In this sense, as we have stated in the theoretical framework, podcasts align with the authors who identify journalism with an essential role concerning health literacy (Azevedo, 2012; Magalhães et al., 2017). This role is especially relevant during a pandemic that generated a scenario of uncertainty and concern about health, both the disease and the consequences of lockdown.

The podcast can, in this context, be an essential tool as a means of disseminating health information, in line with other international contexts where several daily information podcasts were created (Newman & Gallo, 2020). Despite the growing use of the

tool, including by the media, the Portuguese podcasting context has not yet reached the dimension of countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, where the financial and production levels are very different from those of Portugal (Newman, 2021). Nevertheless, the podcast popularity among the Portuguese public has been growing in recent years, and the media have adopted this tool to get more time and space for content production that, otherwise, might not have room on the traditional platforms. That happened in the coverage of the covid-19 pandemic by creating several podcasts exclusively dedicated to it or producing episodes of existing podcasts. In our opinion, this practice reveals that health journalism can find in this new medium an additional outlet for information, leveraging its popularity with audiences, its free and easy access, and autonomy, allowing the listeners to listen whenever and wherever they want.

**Translation: Maria Luísa Murta**

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