

THE VISIBILITY OF SPECIALISED SOURCES IN JOURNALISM: THE EXAMPLE OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Portuguese news media assumed a crucial role in informing the population, striving to develop knowledge about the disease, and promoting preventive behaviours to reduce transmission. To do so, they relied mainly on experts. While official interlocutors were still present in journalistic texts, scholars and physicians gained significant visibility. This article analyses how specialised sources contribute to news content in the Portuguese press. It presents findings from a study on the coverage of COVID-19. This study examines editions of the Portuguese newspapers *Público* and *Jornal de Notícias* during the state of emergency periods from March to May 2020, November to December 2020, and January to February 2021. The corpus of analysis includes 2,933 news texts and 6,350 sources: during the first phase of the national emergency, 1,850 texts were published, citing 4,048 sources; in the second phase, 457 texts were published, citing 857 sources; finally, during the third phase, 626 texts were published, citing 1,445 sources. The content analysis findings highlight the strength of professionals as reliable sources of information, particularly health professionals and scholars from the medical and social sciences. Regardless of their position, experts are more prominent in the media than official sources.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, journalism, information sources, experts

A VISIBILIDADE DAS FONTES ESPECIALIZADAS NO JORNALISMO: O EXEMPLO DA COVID-19

RESUMO

Durante a pandemia de COVID-19, os *media* noticiosos portugueses assumiram um papel fundamental na informação da população, empenhando-se em desenvolver o conhecimento sobre a doença e em promover comportamentos de prevenção para reduzir a transmissão. Para isso, socorreram-se de modo especial dos especialistas. Foi através deles que as redações procuraram dar respostas e encontrar soluções. É verdade que os interlocutores oficiais continuaram a ser recorrentes nos textos jornalísticos, mas os especialistas, nomeadamente os académicos e os médicos, adquiriram grande visibilidade. Este artigo estuda a presença das fontes especializadas nos conteúdos jornalísticos da imprensa portuguesa, apresentando parte dos resultados de uma investigação que analisou a mediatização da COVID-19. A base do estudo são as edições dos jornais *Público* e *Jornal de Notícias*, referentes ao período em que vigorou o estado de emergência em Portugal (de 18 de março a 2 de maio de 2020, de 9 de novembro a 23 de dezembro de 2020 e de 15 de janeiro a 26 de fevereiro de 2021), compondo-se o *corpus* de análise por 2.933 textos noticiosos e 6.350 fontes: 1.850 textos foram publicados durante a primeira fase de emergência nacional, citando 4.048 fontes; 457 foram publicados na segunda fase, apresentando a citação de 857 fontes e 626 foram publicados na terceira fase, citando 1.445 fontes. Os resultados da análise de conteúdo evidenciam a força dos profissionais enquanto fontes de informação, particularmente os profissionais da saúde e os académicos das áreas médicas e das ciências sociais. Os especialistas ultrapassaram, em termos de presença nos meios estudados, as fontes oficiais, quer ocupassem ou não cargos de destaque.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

COVID-19, jornalismo, fontes de informação, especialistas

1. INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization decreed the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020. By then, the new coronavirus had infected more than 118,000 people in 114 countries and already caused 4,291 deaths (Duarte, 2022, pp. 19–30). The first cases in Portugal were reported on March 2, and 10 days later, the Government announced the suspension of all school activities. The first state of emergency was declared on March 18 and lasted until May 2. The fight against the pandemic in Portugal started with the news media playing a crucial role in reinforcing the public service mission. They provided credible and explanatory information from official and specialised sources, helping to keep the public informed.

Specialised information sources are called upon for their knowledge. They hold a central place in news reporting on science and health, particularly in addressing health topics related to research, innovation, and complex clinical treatments. In the middle of the pandemic, these sources (scientists, specialised medical doctors, and university professors) unequivocally revealed the importance of their contribution. They explained to the media, society — and policymakers — the severity of the health situation, the behaviour

of the virus, and what individuals and communities could do to help. At the outset of the pandemic, when there was limited scientific knowledge about COVID-19 and the virus was poorly understood, expert sources became hegemonic and provided the context journalists sought, showing the preponderance of experts in a public health crisis scenario.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. SIGNIFICANCE OF INFORMATION SOURCES IN DESIGNING PUBLIC MEDIA SPACE

Permanently establishing an influential public platform, the news media seem to open before everyone ways for wide expression and free access, euphemistically populated by euphemistic citizens in a euphemistic democracy, in which everyone has the illusion of joining (Lopes, Loureiro & Neto, 2013, p. 8). However, throughout the years, the social platform created by journalistic media for individuals to express their opinions or witness events has not been fully democratic. Instead, journalists tend to privilege the binomial power/large urban centres, establishing a restricted and localised fraternity attached to the *status quo* that has taken the centre of the public media space by storm. Over the years, this dominant power created tight opinion frames in which any thought “outside the box” has little chance of gaining acceptance. Although the radio and press are more democratic, they have not been able to challenge the hegemonic order. Many of these television commentators also write opinion columns in newspapers and participate in radio debates, thus creating a circular opinion structure. There is still the digital universe of (almost) universal access, where everyone can create their blog or a social network profile with practically limitless means of expression. However, some users are better known than others, and the first ones also form a wider fraternity but share the same identity traits as those avowed in other media. Finding an authentic public sphere in news media as a space for action and citizenship where diverse opinions from individuals with different profiles and legitimate perspectives can be heard has proven to be a complex task. We have been very far from a rational communicative plural action, guided by the understanding described by Jürgen Habermas (1962/1984).

That was the basis of journalistic information until the pandemic, particularly regarding the sources of information usually at the top of the news line-up (Lopes et al., 2013). Confronted with an unexpected outbreak that suddenly became global and confined part of the world’s population, journalists adopted other health-related topics more relevant to citizens’ concerns. Furthermore, they acknowledged the significance of regularly searching for other specialised sources offering analytical insights rather than simply presenting facts. As highlighted by Olsen et al. (2020), we realised that journalism could not be just a business but also a fundamental part of the infrastructure of democracy that was “threatened” by SARS-CoV-2. During this time, newsrooms focused on providing a public service by prioritising important information over interesting content, reaching high consumption

levels, and extending to population groups that were not always interested in journalistic information. As Casero-Ripollés (2020) emphasises, “this extraordinary growth (of news consumption) shows that information is, at certain times, a highly valuable resource for citizens” (p. 9).

The pandemic led to the recognition of journalism as an essential element in 21st-century societies. The anxiety caused by the global spread of the virus that threatened our way of life was widespread. Providing quality, useful, pertinent, and integrating information in collective life has always been the structural purpose of journalism and one of the essential elements of its conception (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007), strengthened as never before during this pandemic.

According to Andreu Casero-Ripollés (2020), when considering the impact of COVID-19 on the global information ecosystem, it is clear that journalistic information played a vital role in guiding people and reducing uncertainty during that time. In such a mission, the official sources with credible information, and the specialised sources with a thoughtful analysis have proved to be fundamental to the quality of information recognised by several scholars (Costa-Sánchez & López-García, 2020; Masip et al., 2020) and to other designs of the media public space: illustrative of what was happening in search of a “wise knowledge” that would contribute to reducing people’s fear, concerned with providing people with the means to prevent a pandemic that caused a deep halt on a planetary scale.

2.2. SPECIALISED SOURCES: THE VOICES THAT ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF JOURNALISM

The relationship between journalists and their sources is pivotal to journalistic production (Fisher, 2018). Sources are at the root of the information we read, see and hear in the media, designing the public media space through a constant flow of information, eagerly sipped — but also sorted and transformed — by the newsrooms. In this complex interdependent relationship, journalism has always prized sources associated with the ruling power, transforming this field into a privileged place to reproduce the dominant power the elites linked to the various social fields have sought to impose. Theoretical approaches such as cultural studies, which had Stuart Hall as one of its references, have consistently argued that the media would serve to maintain an ideological hegemony of society. Authors of an interactionist approach, who have dedicated part of their work to the analysis of the performance of sources in the journalistic field, such as Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester (1993), have repeatedly noted that the primary definers of the news have enormous proximity to the power structures. The communication and journalism bibliography shows us that, in the context of pre-pandemic normalcy, news coverage relied heavily on official sources (Berkowitz, 2009; Kleemans et al., 2017; Splendore, 2020). In Portugal, pre-COVID-19 health news coverage was politicised, dominated by government officials and members of health authorities (Araújo, 2017; Lopes, Ruão et al., 2013).

Although political power significantly influences health news production, journalists have always given high credibility to specialised sources. Free, impartial, and committed to protecting the public interest, particularly within the academic and scientific environment, these sources offer valuable knowledge, rigour, and credibility to news like no other group of sources, and journalists recognise these important attributes (Magalhães, 2020). Thus, specialised sources of information (such as scientists and physicians) now play a crucial role in health news coverage, both in the clinical and scientific aspects (Hanson et al., 2017; Nisbet et al., 2003; Stroobant et al., 2018; Viswanath et al., 2008). Ultimately, they underpin highly complex news reporting, lending the reputation of their professional, academic, and scientific credentials to journalism (Magalhaes et al., 2020).

Because they have such a determining role, it is important to know who these sources providing information and expert opinion are (Boyce, 2006). According to Albæk (2011), “the expert generally provides background knowledge and serves as a sparring partner for the journalist in the attempts of the latter to interpret a given event or course of events on the public agenda” (p. 335). Experts are valuable sources who can collaborate effectively with journalists to improve the quality of information conveyed. This creates a dialectic that enhances the credibility of the information conveyed. Experts assist journalists in shifting from reporting facts to more explanatory and interpretative journalism, which translates into news pieces “by explaining the background, interpreting the significance and assessing the possible future consequences” (Albæk, 2011, p. 336). In other words, when it comes to interpreting and translating complex health information, experts in these fields are considered the most important sources of information (Araújo & Lopes, 2014; Deprez & Van Leuven, 2018; Lopes, Ruão, et al., 2013; Magalhães 2020). Of course, experts are also often used as “compensatory legitimation” resources (Weiler, 1983). That is, they confirm a fact or conclusion already known to the journalist, lending their scientific credentials to guarantee credibility and impartiality.

Aware of the complexity of many medical themes when choosing specialised sources, journalists admit that they are looking for the best-informed sources who can more efficiently deliver the message to the audience, placing less emphasis on the hierarchical positions (Magalhães, 2020). In other words, when health crosses the line of science, journalism can bypass traditional sources, namely the official ones, by resorting to alternative sources grounded in knowledge, such as researchers, medical doctors and other experts, medical, scientific journals, and research centres, among others (Deprez & Van Leuven, 2018; Len-Rios et al., 2009; Magalhães, 2020).

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic challenged, from the outset, the official sources' responsiveness, as the need for information was permanent, and the responsiveness was limited. In this context, journalism had to expand its reach by bringing into the media space (more) experts from diverse social fields, mainly from the field of health, holders of “wise knowledge” unknown to public opinion but with “peer” scientific

credibility. The increase of expert sources in journalism can be viewed positively for improving quality. However, more experts with an “open microphone” can lead to conflicting opinions due to the evolving nature of science and the blurred line between expert comments and personal opinions. A study conducted in Canada, for example, shows that there were often “too many experts” in the news, with only some having specific backgrounds and technical expertise relevant to justify the journalists’ choice (MacDonald, 2021). Again in Canada, Perreault and Perreault (2021) note that journalists highly valued the input of doctors as experts but were also aware of the potential risks that could come with collaborating too closely with them. There are several risks to be aware of, including the spread of misinformation, the possibility of one’s work being disregarded due to a lack of perceived credibility, and the risk of one’s work being viewed as biased. As stated by the risk theorist Ulrich Beck (as cited in Boyce, 2006), experts may be “playing off each other”, but what they say provides specialised knowledge of analysis and reflection to the public media space.

3. METHODOLOGICAL OPTIONS

This study seeks to understand how much visibility professional sources, particularly those with specialised expertise in a specific field, had as a source of information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It makes a content analysis of the news on COVID-19 published in the national daily press: the digital versions of two national printed newspapers were chosen, a mainstream newspaper, *Jornal de Notícias*, and a reference newspaper, *Público*. They were chosen for their generalist and national nature. The sample was non-probabilistic, which means that it is not possible to determine probabilities or generalise the findings (Agesti & Finlay, 2009). The data collected were studied through the content analysis established by Laurence Bardin (2008). It was then organised, coded, categorised, inferred, and digitised using the statistical analysis software SPSS, according to a previously developed and tested analysis grid (Araújo, 2017; Lopes et al., 2011; Magalhães, 2020), which was deductively adapted to the pandemic context (Table 1).

	GROUP OF SOURCES	SPECIFIC SOURCES
Status	Official	President of the Republic; President of the National Assembly; members of parliament; Prime Minister; President/representative of the Government of the Islands; elected officials; Director-General of Health; representative of the Directorate-General of Health; president/representative of the municipal councils; hospital chairpersons/directors/managers; international politicians; vaccination task force; others
	Professionals with position	company/group directors; lawyers/judges/prosecutors; farmers/technicians; artists; consultants; sports persons/club representatives; economists/business people/managers; engineers; journalists; military/police/security and civil protection officers; chairpersons/directors of research centres; chairpersons/directors of faculties/universities; chairpersons/directors/representatives of scientific societies; chairpersons/directors/representatives of patient associations doctors; nutritionists; nurses; pharmacists; psychologists/social workers; university teachers/researchers (health sciences); university teachers/researchers (humanities and arts); university teachers/researchers (natural and physical sciences); university teachers/researchers (social sciences); university teachers/researchers (technological sciences); school teachers; religious leaders; party leaders; other
	Professionals with no position	The above with no position
	Representatives of professional associations	Primary sector; secondary sector; tertiary sector
	Non-professionals with position	Party members; members of patients' associations; others
	Non-professionals with no position	The above with no position
	Citizens	Patients; patients' relatives; students; unknown persons; notables; other human sources
	Documentary sources	Press releases; scientific papers; official bulletins/reports; legal documents; other
	Media	National (generalist); national (specialised); international (generalist); international (specialised)
	Web 2.0	Blogs; social media; websites; other web 2.0 sources; other non-human sources

Table 1. Parameters and variables for the analysis of the sources identified in the news items (own production)

To address the COVID-19 pandemic comprehensively and effectively, we selected three comparable periods when a state of emergency was in effect in Portugal: March 18 to May 2, 2020; November 9 to December 23, 2020; and January 15 to February 26, 2021. This approach ensures a comprehensive and meaningful analysis. For the selection of cases, all news texts published in the newspaper sections entitled “Primeiro Plano” (*Jornal de Notícias*) and “Destaque COVID-19” (*Público*) were considered. These sections were chosen for their potential for comparative analysis, as they represent the most relevant parts of the news repertoire of each edition.

The corpus of analysis comprises 2,933 news texts and 6,350 sources: 1,850 texts were published during the first phase of the national emergency, citing 4,048 sources; 457 were published in the second phase, featuring the citation of 857 sources and 626 were published in the third phase, citing 1,445 sources.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. APPRECIATION OF SPECIALISED SOURCES IN THE COVID-19 COVERAGE

The analysis of the Portuguese generalist press during the state of emergency shows a strong contribution of professionals as sources of information and, within these, health professionals and scholars from the medical and social sciences fields. The official sources were equally relevant. Namely, the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister and some ministers (of Health, the Presidency, the Economy, Education and Labour and Social Security), but the interlocutors with specialised knowledge gained unprecedented visibility.

It is possible to see fluctuations within each category (Table 2), scanning through the three states of emergence, but the relationship between them remains consistent throughout this time. The three most cited types of sources were: human professionals, human officials, and documents. Those with a position were invariably given preference within the professional ones. In the first state of emergency, they represented 21.8%; in the second period, they added up to 19.7%; and in the third period, they reached 21.3%.

SOURCE STATUS	FIRST PERIOD OF ANALYSIS		SECOND PERIOD OF ANALYSIS		THIRD PERIOD OF ANALYSIS				
Human professionals	With position	21.8	33,1	With position	19.7	30,5	With position	21.3	32.6
	With no position	11.3		With no position	10.8		With no position	11.3	
Human officials	28.1		22.4		27.1				
Documents	11		17.3		12.1				
Citizens	7.3		6.2		7.2				
Media	7.3		8.1		7.4				
Representatives of associations	4.1		6.1		4.1				
Non-professionals	0.7		1.5		0.8				
Other non-human sources	6.5		6.9		6.5				
Other human sources	1.2		0.9		1.2				
Other	0.7		0.1		1				
Total	100		100		100				

Table 2. Relative distribution of information sources by status in the articles published in the daily press (percentage figures)

In the official sources in Table 3, the Prime Minister was highly mentioned compared to the President of the Republic and the President of the National Assembly. Government leaders were also very present in the Portuguese press, especially the Minister of Health and the Ministers of Economy and Home Affairs.

OFFICIAL SOURCES	CITATIONS (IN PERCENTAGE)
President of the Republic	1.1
President of the National Assembly	0.1
Members of Parliament	2.6
Prime-Minister	3.1
Other government leaders	5.8
Director-General of Health	2.2
Mayors	4.2
Other official sources	3.8

Table 3. Official sources cited in the articles published in the daily press (percentage numbers)

The professional sources cited in the news texts about the pandemic have different origins, thus creating a considerable fragmentation of categories. In Table 4, only those with a frequency of 2% or more are listed. Three categories stand out in this group: scholars, health professionals, and administrators/economists. The military only becomes more relevant due to the strong presence of Vice Admiral Henrique de Gouveia e Melo in the news media, who appears here as the head of the vaccination task force. That percentage can be added, by extension, to that of health professionals.

Professional Sources	CITATIONS (IN PERCENTAGE)		
	With position	With no position	Total
Scholars	3	3.9	6.9
Healthcare professionals	3.6	1.8	5.4
Business administrators/economists	3.2	0.9	4.1
Military	1.4	0.6	2
Other professionals	8.2	4.1	12.3

Table 4. Professional sources cited in the articles published in the daily press (percentage numbers)

The scholars standing out are from the health sciences (2%) and social sciences (1.7%). Also, these types of sources are more likely to speak on their behalf than in the representation of a group. Among healthcare professionals, doctors stand out, making up 4.2% of all sources cited, and those who hold a post are the most sought-after by journalists (3%). The sources from the economic field also gain some relevance due to the impact of a pandemic with significant consequences in various sectors of the country's economic life.

The official documents are more relevant concerning the documentary sources (Table 5). That can be interpreted as the focus on the decrees and regulations of the successive states of emergency produced by the Government and the Presidency of the Republic. However, in the ensemble of documents, the Directorate-General for Health bulletins always had much information regarding disease prevention and treatment, and the scientific articles were appreciated, thus contributing to a more contextualised, explanatory and pedagogical construction of journalistic texts.

DOCUMENTARY SOURCES	CITATIONS (IN PERCENTAGE)
Legal documents	3.6
Notices	2.1
Health authority bulletins	2
Scientific articles	2.1
Other documents	3.3

Table 5. Documents cited in the articles published in the daily press (percentage numbers)

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In pandemic times, information sources underwent a substantial change. While pre-pandemic journalism mainly privileged official sources the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus introduced new stakeholders and brought experts to the centre of the public media space. These expert sources are mainly doctors with positions in their organisations (hospitals, healthcare services, etc.) and researchers in health, mathematics and social sciences who represent themselves and their knowledge. This “wise knowledge” that was so prominent in the Portuguese daily press is completely new in health journalism, and it helped journalists to widen their angles and better contextualise an unknown and uncertain reality.

It is worth noting that official sources have not disappeared. On the contrary, the Government, and the Presidency of the Republic, on the one hand, and the health authorities, on the other, have had an intense presence in Portuguese journalism. However, in the survey conducted to know the journalists’ perceptions of their work during the first phase of the pandemic, the journalists expressed the difficulty they experienced in accessing the information they needed (Lopes et al., 2021). The demand for data was permanent and official sources could not respond to so many requests, nor could they extend their expertise to the necessary contexts and clarifications. While the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic were the leading political voices at crucial moments, more information was needed, especially from a more remote area, the advisory services. In the most critical phases, the Directorate-General for Health held daily press conferences and responded, within some time and resource constraints, to the various requests from the news media. Nonetheless, the permanent flow of information being produced, focusing on COVID-19, the extreme uncertainty about what was happening, and the proliferation of false information demanded more collaboration and, above all, information that contextualised what was happening. It is, therefore, in this context that specialised sources gained greater visibility and were more unbiased with decision-making processes, but with more ability to discuss, contextualise, and explain, thus helping the population acquire other health literacy skills. No longer only the factual function is valued, but the reference and metalinguistic functions of what was being communicated, without ever underestimating, naturally, the communication ability of those who spoke and which was seen as a requirement to the effectiveness of the message.

6. CONCLUSION

Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic always require up-to-date, immediate, and accurate information (Masip et al., 2020). With official sources failing to provide the flow of relevant data that newsrooms so desperately needed, experts would always gain considerable prominence. That happened during the SARS-CoV-2 period, and, as a result, journalists could diversify topics, multiply angles, be more analytical, and put the information they were broadcasting into a more accurate context. In times of great uncertainty, such as those we went through during COVID-19, specialised sources were essential to help journalism become one more tool in the fight against this pandemic, guiding behaviour to prevent the disease and providing citizens with more knowledge.

Changing who is given a voice in the news discourse requires a structural change in the public media space. Unlike what has happened since the implementation of the democratic regime in Portugal, journalism ceased, in this pandemic period, to prioritise the power elites to value specialised sources, most of them unknown to public opinion. Many authors argue that in critical times citizens are more receptive to different voices, especially from more credible fields, and better qualified to foster a more enlightened public debate (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016). Journalists did that, adding to a higher quality of journalistic information.

As Andreu Casero-Ripollés (2020) underlines, the coronavirus outbreak restored part of the journalistic authority that had been lost. The underlying issue, he reminds us, is whether this was an exception or a structural change in news production processes. Many of the changes verified in the journalistic field during this exceptional period, both professionally and in terms of news production, may mark a change of paradigm that only time will determine. Nevertheless, the privileged recourse to specialised sources also requires the consideration of several aspects that, in critical times, tend to be elided or sidelined in the name of the “greater good”. We refer, for example, to the choice of specialised sources (who is heard and why) and the necessary compromise between the specialised and political dimensions.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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