

PARTICIPATION AND TRUST IN COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION: THE CASES OF *VELA NOTÍCIAS* AND *JORNAL DA ALDEIA*

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to delve into the dynamics of participation within news platforms curated by non-professional journalists residing in inland Portugal. Through an exploratory study, two initiatives originating from communities located in the country's inland areas are analysed: *Vela Notícias*, in the Centre region, and *Jornal da Aldeia*, in the Alentejo region. These initiatives serve as empirical objects illustrating a phenomenon that reflects the shift away from traditional media, the community's eagerness to disseminate locally pertinent knowledge, and the citizens' yearning for social and cultural representation. Both initiatives have emerged in ageing and sparsely populated regions, with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, according to the 2021 Census (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021).

To understand and address these concerns, alongside a thorough review of pertinent literature, semi-structured interviews were conducted as a methodological approach involving participants engaged in information production for the two community media outlets. The significance of this study lies in unravelling the intricacies of proximity communication dynamics spearheaded by non-journalist citizens.

The residents of both parishes actively contribute to content creation, topic selection, editing, and distribution of the newspapers. Production operates outside the norms of journalistic selection, filtering, and hierarchy. Nevertheless, interviewees exhibit keen interest and confidence in the published information. The motivation for participation stems from a desire to share common values and cultural connections, fostering a sense of belonging and social responsibility.

KEYWORDS

community communication, trust, participation, *Vela Notícias*, *Jornal da Aldeia*

PARTICIPAÇÃO E CONFIANÇA NA COMUNICAÇÃO COMUNITÁRIA: OS CASOS DO *VELA NOTÍCIAS* E DO *JORNAL DA ALDEIA*

RESUMO

Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo compreender as dinâmicas de participação presentes em veículos informativos produzidos por cidadãos não-jornalistas, no interior de Portugal. A partir de um estudo exploratório, são analisadas duas iniciativas desenvolvidas por comunidades localizadas no interior do país, o *Vela Notícias*, na região Centro, e o *Jornal da Aldeia*, na região do Alentejo. Estas são entendidas como objetos empíricos de um fenómeno que reflete o distanciamento e os constrangimentos dos média tradicionais, o desejo das populações destes territórios de partilharem conhecimento de interesse local e a necessidade de os cidadãos se sentirem representados social e culturalmente. As duas iniciativas surgiram em regiões desertificadas, com menos de 1.000 habitantes, e envelhecidas, segundo os Censos 2021 (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021).

A fim de compreender e discutir tais questões, além da revisão da literatura pertinente ao tema, realizaram-se entrevistas semiestruturadas, como procedimento metodológico, aos participantes envolvidos na produção informativa dos dois média comunitários. A importância do estudo consiste em compreender dinâmicas comunicacionais de proximidade que envolvem cidadãos não-jornalistas.

Os cidadãos das duas freguesias participam na criação de conteúdos, na escolha dos assuntos, na edição e na distribuição dos periódicos. A produção não está submetida às lógicas de seleção, filtragem e hierarquização jornalísticas. Ainda assim, os entrevistados demonstram interesse e confiança nas informações publicadas. O interesse em participar relaciona-se com o desejo de partilha de valores comuns e vínculos culturais, que contam ainda com o sentimento de pertença e de responsabilidade social.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

comunicação comunitária, confiança, participação, *Vela Notícias*, *Jornal da Aldeia*

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to understand the communication dynamics involved in community news production conducted by non-journalist citizens in rural Portugal. Specifically, it seeks to explore the impact of participation on mobilising populations residing in territories characterised by desertification and ageing (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021) and how proximity and shared interests influence the establishment of trust in the content produced and disseminated. Two community communication initiatives in the Centre and Alentejo regions help us in this work: *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia*.

They both have characteristics akin to traditional newspapers despite being entirely produced by citizens with no academic training in journalism. What binds them together is their strong connection to their parish and community. In these areas, where most of the population is elderly (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021), many individuals do not frequently access the internet or engage with social networks. Consequently, there

is a recognition that “older media consumers tend to opt for the stability of traditional formats, often due to difficulties in keeping pace with technological innovation and disruptive and/or evolutionary dynamics inherent in the media ecosystem” (Quintanilha et al., 2019, p. 148). Therefore, communication in printed form, such as *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia*, holds even greater significance.

These publications disseminate topics of common interest across a wide array of subjects and are distributed directly to households. As Paiva suggested in an interview, community communication has reinvented itself, seeking different spaces and approaches in recent years, but at its foundation is individuals’ capacity to get involved, claiming new spaces of power (Bertol, 2017).

Despite its exploratory nature, this study holds significant value due to its contribution to the literature on community communication, a topic that remains relatively under-explored and under-discussed in Portugal. Midões (2021) investigates this subject with a focus on Portuguese community radio stations. The author underscores that “historically, the facts show that public debate involves a limited number of citizens, with higher education and easier access to the media” (Midões, 2021, p. 7) and highlights that community communication initiatives encourage “civic participation, strengthen community cohesion and explore local identity” (p. 9).

In the cases of *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia*, these traits also appear to be conspicuous, particularly as citizens express a desire to see themselves represented in the information they read and an interest in sharing knowledge with their fellow citizens in a spontaneous and participatory way. From the theoretical perspective of participation (Carpentier, 2012), it becomes apparent that, in both cases, citizens collaboratively decide what to write and how to write it, which ultimately contributes to the credibility of the publications and building trust in the disseminated information.

From the perspective of this exploratory study, the presented cases offer insights for more comprehensive research, including “news deserts”, which entails identifying municipalities lacking traditional media outlets (Jerónimo et al., 2022). Although the parishes of Vela and Ciladas may not fall under the category of “news deserts”, there is recognition of a correlation between territories devoid of media presence and those less visible in news coverage, as those exemplified in this study.

This article is divided into four sections. The first one delves into the concept of participation in the context of community communication. Subsequently, the correlations between proximity and trust will be addressed, paving the way for a detailed examination of the case studies and the expansion of the intended discussions. In methodological terms, the literature review was fundamental to the development of this research. The findings also reflect the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with five participants in the two initiatives conducted between September 11 and 14, 2022.

2. ABOUT COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION

Conceptually, *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia* are regarded as community communication initiatives that, while recognising the distinct contexts of each location,

represent broader endeavours aimed at fostering spaces for dialogue, social transformation, and political influence. However, before delving into the particular perspective of community communication adopted in this study, it is essential to briefly address the notion of “community”, although without intending to explore it extensively.

Whether driven by the pursuit of better living conditions, the exploration of new places or the intention to promote cultural exchanges, people — individually and collectively — are increasingly on the move. Concurrently, technological transformations have facilitated the preservation of “bonds of belonging” even without a physical presence in a given territory, transforming the concept of “being in common” to one driven more by shared ideas and feelings rather than mere cohabitation in the same physical space (Saldanha et al., 2014).

These changes challenge us to transcend the notion of community as a simple clustering of people within a delimited geographic space, moving towards the concept of a “generative community” (Saldanha et al., 2014). Here, community is understood as the link between individuals, with the aim of fostering organisational expansion in harmony with historical and social realities, where cooperation and solidarity are foundational principles.

Generative community refers to the collective actions (driven by the pursuit of the common good) which can be undertaken by a group or a community of citizens. This concept is grounded in the recognition that the prevailing characteristics of contemporary society – such as the failure of “project-based politics”, the decentralisation of power, and the prominent individualistic and cosmopolitan tendencies – prompt a quest for alternative approaches. (Saldanha et al., 2014, p. 7)

In this sense, the term “generative” refers to the community’s capacity to unite around common objectives, proposals, and endeavours, with community communication serving as the conduit for this exchange of experiences.

Examining the shifts in the communication landscape brought primarily by the proliferation of digital platforms and the newfound potential for interaction and dialogue transcending geographical boundaries, Paiva (2023) advocates for an expansion of the scope of community communication. She argues that there is no longer a single platform that can accommodate the diverse needs of communities, emphasising instead the significance of community-centric communication initiatives operating across various environments.

The author also suggests that the emergence of community media is directly related — though not exclusively — to the need for information. In other words, a “pressing need to produce their own narratives since the mainstream media is unable to incorporate the daily life and cultural aspects of peripheral populations given the economic and power centres” (Paiva, 2023, p. 23). Providing a global overview of community communication as “peripheral political action”, Custódio (2016, p. 139), echoing Paiva’s perspective, states that the creation of community initiatives is driven by the demand for two central spaces of

power: the space to speak in the media and the institutional spheres for defining public policies. In this sense, community communication is an expression of the political struggle to gain inclusion within existing power structures or establish informal spheres of influence.

Drawing from a comparative analysis of newspapers and radio stations across communities worldwide, Custódio (2016) delineates three categories of community communication in Europe: one characterised by political-ideological resistance, one arising from the pursuit of ethnic diversity, and a third centred on the valorisation of local cultures and daily life.

In Portugal, Midões (2020) provides a significant contribution to the understanding of community communication by identifying five fundamental concepts: “community”, “proximity”, “empowerment”, “power”, and “participation”.

For the author, an essential feature of community communication lies in the existence of “a sense of closeness among its members, whether it be geographical or emotional, fostered through shared traditions and customs, which may manifest in face-to-face interactions or through digital resources” (Midões, 2020, p. 11). From this sense of closeness, the author underscores that processes of participation and power relations are established with the potential to enhance connections among community members.

While Midões’ (2020) primary focus is on mapping community radio stations, his exploration of objectives, management practices and, above all, participation contributes to a broader understanding of community communication. This framework helps in analysing the initiatives under discussion here.

Thus, given the characteristics outlined below, it is evident that *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia* align closely with the perspective of community communication that emphasises the appreciation of local cultures and everyday life. This approach involves citizen participation in communication processes and the cultivation of trust to facilitate the creation of spaces for dialogue, as will be further discussed in the following section.

3. PARTICIPATION AND TRUST IN COMMUNITY MEDIA

As demonstrated earlier, the concept of a “generative community” hinges on the notion of shared goals and collaborative actions. Thus, it is safe to say that there is no community communication without the participation of its members.

Carpentier (2012) grounds participation in democratic theory and the inclusion of people in decision-making processes. This involvement can happen to a lesser degree when, for example, participation is associated with the right of citizens to elect their representatives or to be elected, maintaining centralised decision-making, or to a greater degree, when citizens play a more significant role than simply electing their representatives and leading to more balanced power relations. However, the author argues that in contemporary societies, the meaning of participation transcends the realms of democratic theory since various stakeholders engage in political practices, thus broadening the scope of politics to the spheres of representation, which includes culture and the media.

Regarding content production processes, Carpentier (2012) outlines three levels of participation. The first level is access, defined as the presence of individuals within media organisational structures, whether physically or through machines and technologies, to provide opportunities for them to be heard. The second level is interaction, which involves the establishment of socio-communicative relationships within the media sphere, facilitating the collaborative production of content within a group or community. The primary distinction between access, interaction, and the third level, actual participation, lies in the degree of equalisation in power relations. In participation, citizens are not merely interlocutors or co-producers but also co-decision-makers and content creators.

In other words, at the level of access, people can be heard, but they have no power to determine what and how content will be produced; at the level of interaction, people have limited power as the final decision on what will be created and distributed still lies with the media organisations; finally, in participation, the decision on content is made collaboratively. Participation itself and its correlations with the community are important aspects of this study, as they offer insights into the communication dynamics developed in the cases of *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia*.

In *Media e Participação* (Media and Participation), published in Portuguese in 2017, Carpentier once again delves into a comprehensive interdisciplinary examination of the connection between media and the concept of “participation”. This includes analysing case studies across various fields such as cinema, radio production, and television. In his critical review of the work, Montargil (2017) contends that by employing five secondary analytical dimensions in these case studies, Carpentier effectively offers an encompassing overview of the discussions pertaining to quality content and the concept of “participation”.

In the cases examined in this article, participation serves as the cornerstone for establishing trust. In community communication, individuals engage because they seek platforms for dialogue and sharing, driven by their familiarity with others involved, their stories, and their shared values. This relationship differs markedly from that which individuals have with traditional media, be it national or regional journalism.

In traditional journalism, trust and credibility are instilled by certain expectations. In essence, the reader/listener/spectator trusts the information disseminated by the media because they believe in the expertise and accuracy employed in producing the news (Aguiar & Rodrigues, 2021). Trust in the adherence to the facts (Lisboa & Benetti, 2017) makes media information credible because it is supported by institutionalised “credibility devices” (Serra, 2006b, pp. 5–6), such as objectivity, factuality and veracity. In the case of community communication, specifically in the cases studied in this article, trust is not inherently bestowed; it is not a given. Instead, it is a predicate built through participation.

Hence, in community communication, credibility is perceived as a characteristic of what is deemed trustworthy (Lisboa & Benetti, 2017). Viewing trust and credibility as attributes perceived by individuals helps elucidate why readers place trust in blogs (Serra, 2006a) authored by non-journalists (Rosen, 2005), as well as in communication platforms created by citizens, for instance.

Certainly, when discussing participation, we cannot ignore the tensions and challenges arising, especially in communication through digital platforms. Companies like Google, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft and Amazon are part of a powerful group of platforms whose control and profits dictate information flows, not to mention the development of labour exploitation systems that make thousands of people and journalists precarious worldwide (Figaro & Marques, 2020). Sometimes, the content consumption mechanisms of these platforms inadvertently foster what is termed as “dark participation” (Quandt, 2018, p. 40), where the participant’s goal is to insult, threaten, spread hatred or simply cause harm to other people. This stands in stark contrast to the kind of participation envisioned in community communication.

In models such as community communication, people tend to favour local and hyperlocal information (Jenkins & Graves, 2019) that pertains to common interests. Zago (2009) observes a growing trend towards informative hyperlocality, fuelled by the widespread adoption of mobile devices and the possibility of journalistic production on digital networks. Within this context, the specificity of news seeks to meet the needs of individuals in circumscribed territories. This is because, in the scenario promoted by the development of the world wide web and mobile devices and by globalisation, where information tends to be overly generalised and focused on events of national or international interest, “knowing what’s happening around the corner” is as important, if not more important, than knowing what’s happening in the world. Hyperlocal news takes this specificity a step further, covering “a community, a neighbourhood, a street or even a specific block” (Zago, 2009, p. 1).

In this way, as in community communication, the essence of news and information pieces lies in the bond and proximity among individuals, usually focused on the experience of a particular community, intended for consumption by its members (Aranha & Miranda, 2015). In this sense, ordinary citizens play a pivotal role in building information networks and engaging in the production and dissemination of content (Holanda, 2008). In contrast to the “deterritorialisation” proposed by the global information order, which can separate the centre of the action and the seat of action, with a degree of reliance on external factors, the local information order “reterritorialises” as, based on internal logic, it brings together people, companies, institutions and social forms in favour of common interest (Barbosa, 2002).

According to López-García (2017), this proximity fosters interest in the information, which in turn leads to the awareness necessary for decision-making by each citizen. Although López-García’s perspective primarily focuses on grassroots journalism, it offers insights into the mechanisms for cultivating trust and credibility in community communication, which differ from those in conventional journalism, as previously discussed.

When examining trust in online communities, Donath (1996) identified that trust is not solely determined by the identity of the speaker but especially their claims of real-world experience and their track record of accurate contributions are directly related to the trust placed in them by the participants. This aspect is crucial in understanding how trust is established in communication models managed by individuals, as the correlation

between the accuracy of information, facts, and accounts elevates the credibility of the participants, making them more trustworthy and accepted by others. Such communication models are usually motivated by a sense of responsibility, a willingness to share knowledge and mutual assistance (Broncano, 2008; McMyler, 2011) as they separate competence from technical ability.

4. VELA NOTÍCIAS AND JORNAL DA ALDEIA: GEOGRAPHICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

This exploratory study examines two community initiatives in Portugal: the newspaper *Vela Notícias*, situated in the parish of Vela within the municipality and district of Guarda, and *Jornal da Aldeia*, located in the parish of Ciladas within the municipality of Vila Viçosa and district of Évora.

The Centre and Alentejo regions share similar geographical and demographic features. Geographically, they are both located in the inland of Portugal, where there has been a notable decline in population over recent decades, attributed primarily to two factors: firstly, the migration of young individuals to coastal areas and emigration to other countries, and secondly, the ageing of the population. These migratory patterns are largely influenced by economic factors, as individuals seek job prospects and higher salaries (Castro et al., 2020).

As the working population migrates, businesses and services in these territories become increasingly scarce, exacerbating their desertification and isolation. Data from the latest census helps illustrate this situation (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021). Young people are leaving these areas, and those who remain are the oldest: in Vela, around half the population is over 65, with only 20 young individuals under the age of 14. In Ciladas, there are 46 young people for every 259 residents aged over 65 (see Table 1).

PUBLICATION	<i>VELA NOTÍCIAS</i>	<i>JORNAL DA ALDEIA</i>
Parish	Vela	Ciladas
Municipality	Guarda	Vila Viçosa
District	Guarda	Évora
Total inhabitants	423	816
Area (km ²)	21 km ²	107.54 km ²
Inhabitants aged 65+	219	259
Inhabitants aged 0–14	20	46
Population density	20 inhabitants/km ²	8 inhabitants/km ²

Table 1. Geographical and demographic characteristics of the two towns

Note. Data retrieved from the 2021 Census (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021).

The two parishes currently have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants combined. Notably, Ciladas spans approximately 108 km², while Vela has just 21 km². So, Vela has an average population density of 20 inhabitants/km², whereas Ciladas has only 8 inhabitants/km².

According to the 2021 Census (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021), over the last decade, Ciladas experienced a population decline of 23.8%, while Vela's population

decreased by 13.7%. This demographic shift is described as “both a cause and a consequence of social, economic, and environmental dynamics” (Castro et al., 2020, p. 10), with implications extending to the information landscape.

4.1. DESCRIPTION OF THE OBJECT OF STUDY

Vela Notícias and Jornal da Aldeia were chosen as the objects of this study due to their status as publications generated by non-journalist citizens and their location within the inland of Portugal. In both initiatives, citizens voluntarily undertake tasks spanning information gathering, topic selection, writing and editing texts, and distribution to their fellow citizens’ letterboxes. The publications seek to leverage participants’ knowledge, specialisations and areas of expertise in content production.

In both cases, content production deviates from the conventional logic of selection, filtering, and prioritisation typically observed in traditional journalistic outlets. Nevertheless, despite their non-professional status, they are presented with names and graphics designed to align them closely with journalism at large and conventional newspapers in particular (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

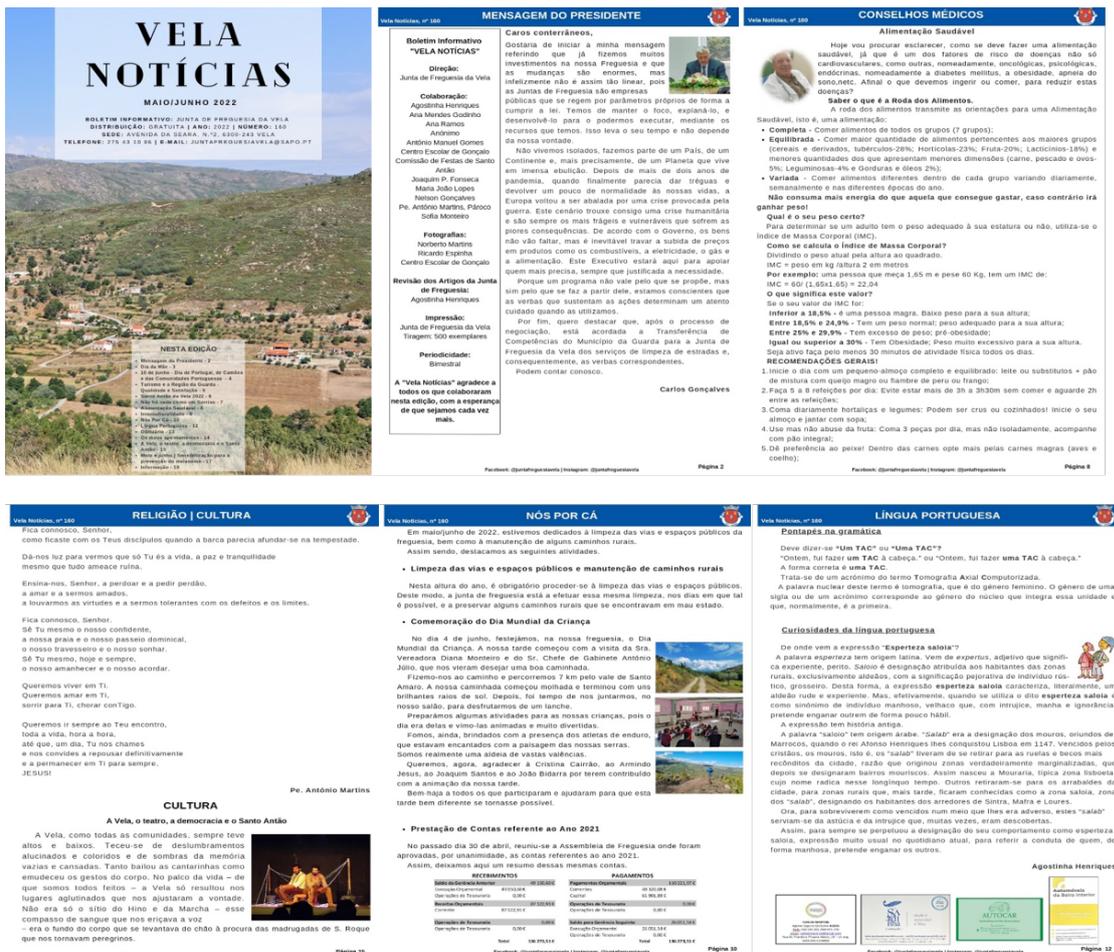


Figure 1. Format and content organisation of Vela Notícias. Note. Copies collected by the authors.

(Medicine) section, and a language teacher shares insights on “Pontapés na Gramática” (Grammar Tips) and “Curiosidades da Língua Portuguesa” (Portuguese Language Trivia). The president of the Parish Council pens “A Mensagem do Presidente” (The President’s Message), expressing concerns about current affairs, both local and global. Other sections include “Nós por Cá” (About Us), authored by Parish Council members, highlighting parish activities and initiatives; there is also the “Obituário” (Obituary), acknowledging recent deaths; and “Os Novos Filhos da Terra” (The New Kids in Town), celebrating recent births (see Table 2).

PUBLICATION	VELA NOTÍCIAS	JORNAL DA ALDEIA
First Edition	October 2000	August 2022
Format	Printed	Printed
Print run	500 copies	400 copies (first edition)
Frequency	Bimonthly	Monthly
Printing and graphic layout	Parish Council	<i>Motor Social</i> project and Parish Council
Participants	General community	Young people aged 12 to 16

Table 2. Characteristics of the mediums

Vela Notícias is issued every two months with a print run of 500 copies per edition. Citizens distribute the copies door-to-door and mail some copies to their fellow citizens residing abroad. Proofreading is undertaken by one of the participants, a retired Portuguese teacher. A member of the Parish Council manages text coordination and layout.

The inception of *Jornal da Aldeia* dates back to August 2022. The newspaper was initiated through a collaboration between the *Ciladas* Parish Council and the *Motor Social* project. It aims to contribute to the education of young people, encouraging citizenship through participation in topics of community interest. Young individuals aged 12 to 16, with the guidance of two adults, are involved in selecting topics, writing and editing texts, as well as printing and distributing copies door-to-door in the village. The *Jornal da Aldeia* is published on a monthly basis and has a circulation of around 400 copies.

While *Jornal da Aldeia* may feature fewer pages and a simpler aesthetic compared to other publications, its content is rich in local narratives, village anecdotes, folk traditions, interviews, community events, and cultural highlights (see Figure 2). Young participants actively contribute by proposing topics and generating content, which is refined collaboratively with the involvement of adults in the initiative. A member of the *Motor Social* project oversees the editing, coordination and layout of the texts. This type of participation fosters a sense of citizenship, community and local identity (Midões, 2021).

In both cases, the Parish Council serves as the printing outlet for the newspapers. What sets apart *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia* from municipal newsletters is their community-driven content. Aside from the designated sections like (“A Mensagem do Presidente”) and (“Nós por Cá”), the information shared in these newspapers is authored by various members of the community, irrespective of local political power. Camillo (1998) defines municipal communication as a “global, coherent and continuous set of

communication initiatives conducted by the institutional structure of the municipality” (p. 15), which includes the City Council, the Municipal Assembly and the mayor. This form of communication is a resource the municipality uses to address specific issues. The informative nature of municipal communication is corporate in the sense of disseminating the deliberations and decisions of the municipality. The municipal notice and bulletin, akin to the *Diário da República* (Official Gazette) at the central government level, are instrumental in fulfilling these objectives.

Hence, despite one of this article’s objects of study features sections with institutional messages, the overarching attributes of both *Jornal da Aldeia* and *Vela Notícias* preclude their categorisation within the realm of municipal or autarchic communication. Consequently, these initiatives align more closely with the principles of community communication.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study favoured a qualitative methodological approach and selected two community communication tools: *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia*. In order to understand the dynamics of communication, information production and public participation within these publications, we employed complementary methodological strategies. Firstly, we collected and qualitatively analysed the newspapers. Here, we tried to understand what kind of content was published, who wrote it, how the articles were graphically presented, and whether there were calls for participation in the editions. We then contacted the individuals accountable for the publications and conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Duarte, 2005) with the participants. A total of five participants were interviewed between September 11 and 14, 2022, via video calls on the Zoom platform and telephone conversations (Table 3). While the sample size may not be extensive, the insights provided by the interviewees significantly contributed to the exploratory nature of this study, prompting new inquiries and potential avenues for future research.

REFERENCE	ROLE	ORGANISATION	DATE OF INTERVIEW
Interviewee 1	Collaborator and layout coordinator	<i>Vela Notícias</i>	September 11, 2022
Interviewee 2	Collaborator	<i>Vela Notícias</i>	September 13, 2022
Interviewee 3	Collaborator	<i>Vela Notícias</i>	September 13, 2022
Interviewee 4	Collaborator and layout coordinator	<i>Jornal da Aldeia</i>	September 14, 2022
Interviewee 5	Collaborator	<i>Jornal da Aldeia</i>	September 14, 2022

Table 3. Participants interviewed for the study

All the interviewees authorised the recording of the interviews for scientific purposes. However, it was decided not to disclose their identities. The responses were analysed qualitatively and interpretatively without the use of software. Three analytical dimensions were addressed: (a) participation process; (b) perceptions of trust in vehicles; and (c)

transmission of values and sense of belonging. The interviews covered 11 questions related to the establishment of these community media and their objectives. Participants also answered questions such as: “what does it mean to you to participate, and how do you contribute to this initiative?”; “does knowing that other people in the community participate in the newspaper enhance trust in the content?”; “does the absence of journalists interfere with this trust/credibility?”; “to what extent does this initiative succeed in conveying the values, culture and way of life of the parish residents?”, among others.

Duarte (2005) highlights that the individual in-depth interview has become the classic method for delving into a subject by seeking out information, perceptions and experiences of the interviewees/informants in order to analyse and present them in a structured form. A key strength of this approach is its flexibility, as it allows the interviewer to adjust their questions while leaving the interviewee free to define the timing of their responses.

In the view of Stokes and Bergin (2006), this flexibility provides the conditions for the interviewees to express their beliefs and feelings on a given subject, which is why interviews lead to greater contextualisation and comprehensive research. Boyce and Neale (2006) suggest that this technique is particularly suitable when researchers seek detailed information about individuals' behaviour, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon or situation and uncover the reasons behind it. In this way, “narratives allow researchers to go beyond the transmission of information or content, making the experience revealed, which involves fundamental aspects to understanding both the subject interviewed individually as the context in which she/he is inserted” (Muylaert et al., 2014, p. 188).

6. FINDINGS

Analysing the interviews provided insights into how participants relate to the community and the publications, as well as how trust is built in this community communication model. At *Vela Notícias*, participants suggest some topics and contribute various types of content, presented in the form of chronicles, interviews, short stories or poems. In the *Jornal da Aldeia*, primarily involving young people aged 12 to 16, the work is developed by the youth with the support of two adults. One of the initiative's coordinators views participation as a means of “contributing to the young people's training, facilitating the acquisition of skills in the area of reading and writing” (Interviewee 4). On the other hand, although some young participants may see producing the newspaper as a “holiday hobby”, they perceive it as an opportunity to learn “more about the world of journalism” and to get to know “the village and its people better” (Interviewee 5).

It was also possible to ascertain the motivations behind participation and how they contribute to the dependability of the information disseminated. Overall, alongside “participation”, terms such as “representation”, “belonging”, “social responsibility”, “proximity”, and “trust”, commonly used to rationalise involvement in the production of publications, were frequently mentioned.

In this sense, both initiatives reflect a common aspiration among the population of those parishes to be represented and informed about local and hyperlocal issues. The latter does not always have adequate coverage in conventional media. In a study of journalists in the Centre of Portugal, the respondents highlighted some challenges in gathering information, such as: “finding credible sources”, “defining what is important due to a large amount of information”, and having “time to research outside the agenda” (Morais et al., 2020, p. 73). This is noteworthy because, despite the existence of regional media outlets in both municipalities (Vila Viçosa and Guarda), the interviewees emphasise the need for specific communication that can reflect the challenges and virtues of the localities, aiming to “shed light on what is going on in the parish and reach out to the entire community” (Interviewee 1).

These testimonies indicate that the participation of residents in collective decision-making regarding issues and topics of local interest increases trust in these vehicles and the information they provide. This is evident in the following statement: “the news is exclusively about the village and issues that are of interest to the residents” (Interviewee 4).

Moreover, this statement underscores an interesting aspect regarding the understanding of the disseminated content, which also relates to the format and structure of the texts. In essence, the absence of journalists does not seem to affect the perception of the quality of the information and the structure of the narratives. Hence, the term “news” is used to describe the content produced by citizens.

Based on this rationale, the interviews suggest that the participants perceive both initiatives as “local newspapers” due to their proximity-based characteristics, their role in mediating between the population and the political power, and their informative presentation: “there is an informative nature here in the relationship with the parish and in the close relationship between the population and the politicians and the newspaper also bridges this gap” (Interviewee 2); “it is a means of communication dedicated to the daily life of the village, its history and people” (Interviewee 4). Additionally, it becomes apparent that the fundamental concepts of community communication are implicitly present in these statements, even if unintentionally.

The meaning of the statements highlighted above becomes more evident when considering other testimonies: “I consider it a newspaper, without a doubt, because it provides information on issues related to the parish” (Interviewee 3), “I think the newspaper is made by journalists (although amateurs) and it is a newspaper, I have no doubt about that” (Interviewee 2), but also: “it is a printed media outlet, publishing news and opinions on the most diverse areas of interest to the inhabitants and young people” (Interviewee 4).

We acknowledge the potential value and benefits that the participation of professional journalists could bring to both initiatives. However, it is noteworthy that the non-professional aspect of the publications was only emphasised by one of the interviewees who viewed the newspaper as the product of journalists’ work: “I don’t consider it a newspaper, as we’re not journalists” (Interviewee 1). On the other hand, the non-involvement of professional journalists in the publications seems to be compensated for by a very specific verification dynamic facilitated by the proximity of the people involved. It appears

that the fact that participants and readers know each other and maintain social, cultural and emotional ties streamlines the processes of verifying the information disclosed. This is evident in the following statement by Interviewee 2: “information has to be verified in any case, and here I can verify this information because I go to my neighbour and ask if it’s true or not. I do fact-checking almost immediately”.

Hence, the interviewees unanimously underscored that the absence of journalist involvement in the publications does not affect community trust. They attribute this to the perceived relevance and significance of the information disseminated. Moreover, they elucidate that familiarity with the individuals behind the content enhances both interest and credibility. This sentiment is encapsulated in statements such as: “if I know the person, I’m more interested in reading, or I’m especially interested because I know I’m listening to a person from my community” (Interviewee 2).

The newspaper is produced by community members, and we think that this instils confidence in the news and information being conveyed. We believe that the fact that people know who is writing gives them some credibility and empathy. (Interviewee 4)

This sentiment leads us to conclude that the egalitarian nature of communication, coupled with proximity and the alignment of common interests, is considered a benefit by the participants. This attribute is evident in the statements of all five interviewees: “the newspaper is by the people for the people, both residents and outsiders” (Interviewee 1) or “the fact that it gives people a voice and that the newspaper isn’t made by just one person or just the Parish Council, it’s more representative of the whole community” (Interviewee 2).

It is also evident that the interviewees attribute a representative nature to the publications, reflecting the sense of belonging to their territories and the cultural heritage of those regions. This feature appeals to both residents and those who no longer live in the area but maintain an emotional connection with it. This is noticeable in testimonies such as: “this newspaper is really written for the people who live in Vela or for those who, although they are from Vela, don’t live here, but live in other parts of Portugal or abroad” (Interviewee 3); or: “this dissemination abroad is very important because people feel closer to home. They feel their roots when they receive information about what’s happening in their locality” (Interviewee 1); and: “the newspaper has a lot of impact in the sense that those who are away can follow the news about Vela, from a vehicle of information that gets to their homes” (Interviewee 2).

In summary, the disseminated information holds significance for the residents of both parishes as it combines representation and belonging with local interest. “The newspaper reflects the desire to have a place that could gather information from the people of the village” (Interviewee 2). “In an ageing village, in this case, the oldest and most geographically isolated in the municipality, this newspaper is a means of providing information that is important to the community, most of whom don’t have social networks” (Interviewee 4).

Finally, the wish to contribute to the community's development and the sense of social responsibility reflected in the intention to share knowledge seem to be among the main motivations highlighted by the interviewees.

If we have things to share and we think the rest of the people will be interested in it, I think it's a responsibility. And above all, as a member of an association, I believe that a village association has an obligation to participate in and support the newspaper. (Interviewee 2)

"My contribution to this newspaper is to help people speak better and to know the origin of various commonly used expressions" (Interviewee 3).

Furthermore, certain interviewees express a feeling of contentment in their ability to contribute and share information. This encourages them to continue participating and reading these publications. Statements such as "I think people feel useful and happy when they write about subjects they like" (Interviewee 1); "I'm happy when people ask me if I know what I'm going to write about in the next edition" (Interviewee 3); and "I feel great joy because we're making the village famous and we're helping more people to get to know it" (Interviewee 5) make this sentiment quite clear.

7. DISCUSSION

Whether through the participation of parish citizens in the content production process, editorial decisions and distribution processes, by strengthening relationships of affection and trust between community members, or even through the valorisation of local cultures, *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia* are two initiatives that reflect the relevance of community communication in places of low population density in the inland of Portugal. It is also worth noting that in both villages, Vela and Ciladas, the population is mostly elderly and does not often access the internet, so information is disseminated essentially through traditional media such as television and the printed press.

Interviews with participants offer valuable insights into the emotions and significance associated with engaging in a collaborative content production process. These media outlets, produced by non-journalists, align with the concept of "community communication" by reflecting a shared aspiration to reinforce the cultural heritage and values integral to local identity (Midões, 2021). Moreover, they address the demand for local information exchange, often overlooked by national and regional media outlets (Paiva, 2023).

The interviews indicate that residents see these initiatives as a means of preserving the values of their community and disseminating the main events in their parish, both for other residents and for those who have relocated abroad.

Overall, interviewees expressed a sense of fulfilment in sharing their knowledge and talents. They also exhibited a strong sense of belonging to the village, responsibility and social commitment, as well as an affection for the community that binds them together. These factors can be listed as the primary motivations for participating in *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia*.

It is important to highlight that both outlets strive to align themselves with traditional journalistic media, not only in their format but also in the names they adopt. The interviews also revealed that the participants try to establish this association by frequently using terms such as “newspaper”, “news”, and “information”. However, unlike traditional media, where trust in the information is assumed, in these cases, trust is constructed over time. It is nurtured through close relationships, shared interests, and bonds within the community. Additionally, information is verified almost immediately as it is received, given the proximity between the reader and the writer, who often happens to be a neighbour, family member, or friend. This immediacy in verifying information further strengthens the bond of trust.

The two regions where the media outlets studied in this paper are situated share similar territorial and demographic characteristics, which further distance them from the centres of power where mainstream media are typically based. Despite Portugal’s long-standing tradition of regional journalism, recent years have witnessed the closure of numerous newsrooms, a shortage of financial and human resources, and a precarious labour market for journalists (Jerónimo, 2015). In a way, this contributes to the emphasis on events of journalistic interest occurring in urban centres and more densely populated areas, leading to a certain detachment of journalism and journalists from towns and villages, as observed in the cases under scrutiny here.

In initiatives such as *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia*, citizen involvement can be classified as the highest level of participation or participation itself (Carpentier, 2012). Here, individuals are not merely invited to be present within the organisational structures of these media; they are not mere spectators waiting for the opportunity to be heard and to express their desires and demands. The purpose of citizen participation in *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia* also extends beyond interaction, with a focus on co-production, as typically occurs in traditional journalistic media.

Through their involvement in thinking, organising, writing content, contributing to the graphic structure, distributing, and even mobilising other participants, citizens establish a profound bond with the “newspapers” and their communities. They transcend being merely interactive agents and become participants with a degree of decision-making authority. According to the scales identified by Carpentier (2012), this places them squarely in the realm of actual participation, as “the key defining element of participation is power” (p. 170), whether in production or reception. In the “newspapers” examined in this article, individuals have a say in determining the content they will work on, collectively select the individuals, issues, and actions they will address, and ultimately decide on the most appropriate organisational strategies for the success of the two initiatives.

Studies of this nature are significant because they highlight the constraints of the vertical, hierarchical and somewhat detached mode of traditional journalism. These constraints can impact citizens’ desire and commitment to engage in producing and disseminating their own communication. However, they also point towards potential avenues for collaborative production between citizens and journalists, particularly in regions

deemed “news deserts” (Jerónimo et al., 2022). Initiatives like *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia* demonstrate that community communication can address gaps in information dissemination and provide valuable insights, particularly on topics that receive limited attention from traditional media but are important to local inhabitants.

In this scenario, the traditional vertical model of one-to-many transmission in media is being replaced by a horizontal logic, where information flows in multiple directions continuously. This shift in communication practices has led to the emergence of a new type of individual: the *pro-am* (professional-amateur), as noted by Ramonet (2011/2012). *Pro-ams* engage in amateur activities but uphold professional standards in their endeavours. Consequently, citizens are no longer passive readers, listeners and viewers of media; instead, they actively participate by writing, speaking, photographing, filming, and even analysing conventional journalistic productions.

Hence, citizen-led production presents challenges to professional journalism in certain aspects, as it can establish credibility and trust through the development of decentralised communication dynamics. Analysing community communication initiatives like *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia* enables us to delve deeper into this type of debate, particularly as they originate from regions underrepresented in the media and illustrate the vitality of citizen-driven information production in sparsely populated areas within Portugal’s inland. As discussed earlier, the absence of professional journalists does not appear to diminish individuals’ commitment, willingness to participate, sense of responsibility and trust in the information disseminated by these tools.

All stages of the information process, spanning from collecting information to distributing printed material, are undertaken by citizens with no academic training in journalism or prior experience in the media sector. What binds these participants together is a shared aspiration to disseminate pertinent information with their fellow citizens while also seeking to stay informed about the events within their community and parish in detail.

8. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In an era where digital platforms dominate communication channels, *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia* persist in delivering information through traditional print formats. These “newspapers” serve as a window into the challenges, culture, events, and strengths of communities in Portugal’s inland, where residents are predominantly elderly and have limited digital literacy. Two interviewees underscore the significance of disseminating information in print, particularly to those without access to social media, a demographic that comprises the majority of *Ciladas*’ population. Additionally, the content featured in these publications diverges from typical regional journalism by offering in-depth coverage tailored to specific communities, thereby fostering greater reader engagement.

Hence, citizens use *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia* as mechanisms for self-representation, finding in them vehicles for sharing knowledge and shouldering social responsibility for their communities. This study thus serves as an indicator of an under-explored

communication reality warranting ongoing scholarly attention. In a country where 166 out of 308 municipalities (53.9%) are totally or partially without traditional news coverage or face the risk of such coverage depletion, it is crucial to note that the Centre and Alentejo regions are two of the most affected, bearing 80% of this news desertification burden (Jerónimo et al., 2022).

If we scrutinise these figures, can we inquire about the extent to which community communication endeavours such as *Vela Notícias* and *Jornal da Aldeia* mitigate the impact of this desert? Can collaborative work between journalists and citizens bridge the news gap in these territories, promoting closer integration between professionals and residents? What insights does community communication provide in response to these questions?

In this work, we leave these questions open-ended, offering glimpses into the evolution of communicative and participatory dynamics aimed at counteracting the myriad facets of desertification in Portugal's inland villages.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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