

## **INTRODUCTORY NOTE: COMMUNICATION AND FREEDOM**

### **NOTA INTRODUTÓRIA: COMUNICAÇÃO E LIBERDADE**

**Luís António Santos**

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal

**Liziane Guazina**

Faculdade de Comunicação, Universidade de Brasília, Brasília, Brazil

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The realisation that freedom is a supreme value has deep roots in the history of philosophical and political thought. Nevertheless, both because of the breadth of the idea of “acting freely”, from thought as a form of action, and because of the dynamism of societies, where every day new challenges destabilise what was once thought to be certain, the terms in which the freedom is experienced (or not) remain unsettling. In the field of communication, the global assumption (less universal than Human Rights suggest, however) of the principle of freedom of expression has also not been enough to guarantee that the scenarios of restriction have been overcome.

The Reporters Without Borders ranking (see <https://rsf.org/pt-br/ranking>) reveals some very worrying realities in countries where censorship and attacks on journalists (in some cases murder, in others imprisonment or violence) keep the value of freedom of expression on a blurred horizon. While the figures regularly published by organisations of this kind are alarming enough, new forms of limitation and new vulnerabilities are also questioning the fullness of this principle. There can be no doubt that the blessings of communication technologies — which have widened access to information and democratised the production of content — are now accompanied by other risks and threats to the fundamental freedoms of thought, opinion, creation, expression and action.

Hate speech, which has become a critical issue in the context of social networks, is one of the areas where the problem of freedom of expression is discussed as an ethical dilemma (Gorenc, 2022). The same goes for the phenomenon of disinformation, in particular fake news, a territory where there seems to be a little more acceptability in defining limits to freedom (Mathiesen, 2019). Often identified with the social media context (Shu et al., 2020), the problem of disinformation, which is recognised as a threat to democracy (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021; Trottier et al., 2020), has to do with the fact that it no longer corresponds to a kind of deprivation of the right to be informed, but rather a violation of freedom through the perversion of the information conveyed.

In times of explicit censorship or in regions where there are still regimes of formal control over communication and information flows, the limit to freedom stems from silencing strategies that translate into “you can’t say” or the inhibition of disclosure. However, what makes the feeling that freedom is still a fragile value disturbing is that it is now less a matter of assumed censorship and more a matter of manoeuvres of distortion, noise generation and subversion, including as a political communication strategy

by public authorities to influence the public agenda, stimulate polarisation and create identification with audiences (Recuero, 2024). In addition to the subtle deliberate action of deception under the guise of truth, there are a number of other facts that contribute to the shattering of free thought and suggest a necessary return to the emblematic work *Sobre a Liberdade* (On Liberty) by John Stuart Mill (1859/2023). The debate on freedom as an ethical principle from the field of communication therefore involves understanding new variables: (a) the serious economic constraints and precariousness that affect journalistic companies in particular, with obvious effects on the slimming down of editorial staffs and, consequently, a critical condemnation of the standardisation of thought, or even the extinction of thought; (b) the disengagement of citizens, in many circumstances denouncing a lack of media literacy; (c) the emergence of authoritarian digital populism and the viral traffic of information; (d) the platformisation and algorithmisation of choices; and (e) the rate of urgency applied to practically all human activities, condemned to the dictatorship of the clock.

The relationship between communication and freedom has been understood as one of the fundamental pillars of democratic life, the production of knowledge and social coexistence itself. That's why the end of dictatorships — such as the one that lasted in Portugal until 1974 (in many ways similar to the one that lasted in Brazil until 1985) — has a very particular significance for the field of communication and the media. The end of the Estado Novo represented not only the end of prior censorship, but also the beginning of higher education in journalism and an important movement of the newspaper and radio markets, first, and television almost 20 years later. The extinction of the “blue pencil” gave way to new hope for the expansion of thought, creativity and criticism.

The establishment of the democratic regime in Portugal paved the way for an experiment in freedom that completed half a century of history in 2024. Revolutionary on many levels, the change experienced since April 1974 had a particularly significant impact on the field of communication. The media landscape was transformed to finally follow the development trends promoted by technology. At the same pace as the so-called developed world, Portugal is therefore no longer oblivious to the multiple dimensions in which communication is constituted as a battleground for freedom.

Organised on the pretext of the commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, this special thematic volume of *Comunicação e Sociedade* brings together eight texts that, from different geographies and from different angles, put the relationship between communication and freedom into perspective. Opening the volume, Marcio Martins Calli, Kátia Lerner and Fábio Castro Gouveia discuss the reconfigurations of journalistic praxis in a media ecosystem in which new social and digital actors and algorithmic functions intervene. Based on interviews with journalists from five regions of Brazil, the authors seek to understand how newsroom routines have been transformed, concluding that time imperatives and the logic of information platformisation have led journalists to give up their autonomy in terms of editorial decisions.

Focusing on the history of the 25th of April itself, Helena Lima and Ana Isabel Reis' approach reconstructs the role of radio in the revolution, recalling the moments in

the early hours of 1974 when Rádio Clube Português became the command post of the Armed Forces Movement. In a text that recalls the episodes that led to the surrender of Marcello Caetano's government, the researchers from the University of Porto point out that the innovative nature of Rádio Clube Português at the time, with hourly news broadcasts for both mainland Portugal and overseas, may have contributed to the choice of this station, which the regime's forces tried to silence several times.

Also on communication strategies during a revolution is the article by Leila Nachawati Rego, who analysed images of banners and posters put up by activists in Kafranbel, a town in northern Syria. Considering that these communicative elements became "a powerful tool for storytelling and resistance during the Syrian uprising" (p. 58), the author — an expert in conflict and media studies — points out that "the mobilizations and revolutionary processes that unfolded in the region were driven by a strong aspiration for free expression" (p. 50). She concludes, on the other hand, that "use of humor, satire, and global references illustrates a strategic effort to resonate with diverse audiences and emphasize universal themes" (p. 59).

With regard to another political context — that of Brazil between 2017 and 2022, whose presidents were Michel Temer first, following the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, and Jair Bolsonaro later — a group of researchers from Belo Horizonte tried to identify social mobilisations for freedom of artistic expression. Using as a reference "89 instances of censorship, attempted censorship, artist intimidation, or repression of artistic expression" (p. 70), Maiara Orlandini, Bruna Silveira de Oliveira, Marina Mesquita Camisasca and Fernanda Nalon Sanglard analysed the manifestations of reaction, which they classified into four categories: campaigns, street protests, alternative actions and hashtags. Despite the adverse political scenario, according to the authors, Brazilian society has shown a capacity for resistance favoured by the popularisation of the internet, which offers "innovative opportunities" such as "hashtag activism" (p. 81).

In an analysis of the Brazilian media system, Ana Beatriz Lemos da Costa and Jairo Faria Guedes Coelho emphasise the importance of the freedoms of the press, expression and opinion and identify the factors that favour them and those that can compromise them. In this context, they consider that the implementation of normative and regulatory mechanisms has the potential to "promote the expansion of freedoms", while the "increased ownership concentration and ideological coercion ( ... ) result in a retraction of these freedoms" (p. 102). In a text in which they return to the concepts of accountability, transparency and participation, the authors place particular emphasis on issues of media financing, considering that "the financing structures of media institutions play a crucial role in maintaining this balance between responsibility and capture" (p. 102). They therefore argue that "a balance between financial independence and constraints on commercial exploitation is essential to ensure that consumer and citizen freedoms are respected" (p. 102).

The article "Digital Platforms for Participatory Politics as a Space for Dialogue Between Citizens and Public Representatives" has a special focus on freedom of

participation in content creation. Based on an exploratory analysis of interactions on the digital platform Osoigo.com, “an online portal promoting participatory politics and accessible to the general public” (p. 113), Elizabet Castillero-Ostio, Álvaro Serna-Ortega and Andrea Moreno-Cabanillas, from the University of Málaga in Spain, sought to understand the interactions between citizens and public representatives. The results point to a great diversity of issues addressed by citizens to politicians from across the ideological spectrum, although with evidence of formulations with a left-wing bias. With a particular focus on social issues, citizens’ questions also reveal an interest in economic matters. As for the politicians’ responses, the authors’ work emphasises a tendency to adopt “a moderate, balanced and consistent tone” (p. 128).

Also about platforms, but from a regulatory perspective, Marina Silva’s article problematises the activity of big tech, while at the same time exploring the concepts of the attention economy and freedom of expression. At a time when algorithms are making decisions on behalf of users, in an “environment driven by automation” (p. 140), the author notes that there is a “relentless pursuit of our attention” (p. 141). The relationship between the way attention is directed and the way we express ourselves, as well as the worsening phenomena of disinformation, polarisation and hate speech, are for Marina Silva reasons that justify an understanding according to which, although it may mean “to establish clear boundaries for freedom of expression” (p. 143), the regulation of digital media in democratic states is “essential to ensuring that platforms operate responsibly” (p. 146).

After articles focussing on freedom to exercise creativity, freedom of the press, freedom of expression, freedom of opinion and freedom of participation, in the text signed by Lurdes Macedo, Nuno Bessa Moreira and Vanessa Ribeiro Rodrigues, we find the most frequent invocation of freedom of thought. The authors analyse the literary and critical career of Jorge de Sena, “an intellectual outlawed by the autocratic Portuguese regime” (p. 154), whose thought was not given significant expression in the media. Mapping the content “by or about Sena, across various media over more than 80 years” (p. 154), the empirical work of this approach suggests that the media have created “narratives about Sena that offer limited insight into his intellectual journey — and even less into his ideas on the PS(I)CC [Portuguese-speaking (inter)cultural community]” (p. 166).

The relationship between communication and freedom has different nuances that mobilise references from different fields. In this volume, there is a cross-section of contributions that call on approaches from history, journalism studies, the political economy of the media and media studies in their relationship with the study of conflicts or literary studies. However, far from exhausting the pretexts for why freedom will always be a sensitive topic in the field of communication sciences and social and humanistic studies in general, the articles in this volume signal at least some of the critical points that a free society should not be able to ignore.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Luís António Santos is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Sciences at the University of Minho, and an integrated member and deputy director of the Communication and Society Research Centre. His research interests include the changes taking place in journalism, new content production platforms (namely social networks), public service media and sound and radio studies.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7062-0307>

Email: [lsantos@ics.uminho.pt](mailto:lsantos@ics.uminho.pt)

Address: Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade – Instituto de Ciências Sociais – Universidade do Minho – Campus de Gualtar – 4710-057 Braga

Liziane Guazina is a professor at the Faculty of Communication at the University of Brasília, a permanent researcher in the Postgraduate Programme in Communication at the same university and a collaborating researcher in the Postgraduate Programme in Communication at the Federal University of Mato Grosso. She is the coordinator of the research groups Observatório do Populismo do Século XXI and Cultura, Mídia e Política,

both certified by National Council for Scientific and Technological Development. She is also a researcher at the National Institute of Science and Technology on Disputes and Informational Sovereignty. Her research interests include communication and politics, political journalism, public communication and communication and gender.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4765-6918>

Email: [lguazina@unb.br](mailto:lguazina@unb.br)

Address: Faculdade de Comunicação – Universidade de Brasília – Campus Universitário Darcy Ribeiro – Asa Norte – Brasília-DF – CEP 70910-900



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