

Whose is the agenda? Contents, practices and values in Portuguese regional newspapers

Abstract:

This article shows results from the project “Citizens’ agenda: journalism and civic participation in Portuguese media”, involving research on a sample of regional newspapers geographically distributed throughout the country. Through content analysis of sources, topics and framing, we sketch the general picture painted by the regional press. Drawing on inquiries to journalists and directors we also aim to understand which professional practices and values are prominent in regional press, paying special attention to questions linking journalism to democratic systems. Results indicate that recent trends of professionalization and commercialization prompted Portuguese local press towards the liberal model, which means growing autonomy from the state and politics, but also includes disengagement from civic pursuits of “general interest”.

Keywords: Local press, Civic participation, Political system, Portugal

The broad frame of this article is the relationship between the regional press, citizens and democratic politics, trying to understand the actual character of newspapers in local public spheres and to identify their potential for participatory democracy.

In order to do that we first sketch a threefold theoretical approach: first, on the relationship between the news media and the political system; second, on the theory of deliberative democracy; third, on the public journalism movement and goals. Still in the theoretical framework, we further consider questions connecting political system and democracy to local media, and we sketch a brief picture of the regional press in the Portuguese specific context.

In the second part of the article, we present some results from the “Citizens’ Agenda” ongoing empirical research and discuss them in an attempt to understand which trends and characteristics the local press has today in terms of its articulation to politics, to citizens and to models of democracy.

1. Democracy, local media and journalism in Portugal

It is a historical feature of Portuguese national newspapers that they never attained an overarching public sphere that would include both elites and wider popular segments of the population. This role has been played only by television, which meant a late formation (since the 1970’s) of a popular public sphere at national level.

On the other hand, regional press only in the last few decades has developed modern professionalism and partly incorporated market orientation. Nevertheless it arguably keeps an important role in regional public spheres (in the absence of regional television

channels), and other characteristics such as a strong sense of belonging to territory and proximity to elite sources at local level.

This context of recent professional and market environment calls for research on what kind of public spheres Portuguese regional press is actually constructing today and how it is providing, or not, room for a range of actors and voices in the media. What role does the regional press attribute itself? Who are the actors that really feature the agenda? Which means do the newspapers comprise for civic life?

1.1 Articulation of media and political systems

Our starting point is the specific role news media play at particular levels of a democratic system.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) offer an account of how the media development and character, particularly news media, has to be understood in articulation with political systems. Specific features both of politics and the media in each country interconnect to produce several models. The Mediterranean model, where Portugal takes part, share a number of historically and culturally grounded characteristics, but Hallin and Mancini also ask to which extent the Liberal (North Atlantic) model has become hegemonic and found conditions to gradually pervade the whole Western world as a homogenization force.

The fact that Portuguese national press historically formed a media system designed for dialogue between elite factions alone carries several meanings.

It means a number of features that revealed the lack of autonomy by the media before the political system: news agenda strongly dominated by institutional politics;

connections between journalists and politics; permeable journalistic professional norms; low internal pluralism in the media.

So, by this account, traditionally the press' agenda is mainly the agenda of political elites.

But Hallin and Mancini analysis, in its historical dimension, identify a general trend for differentiation between media and political systems (within an overall trend for social and systemic differentiation) along the modernity process. The Mediterranean model, albeit later than the other Western models, have also been treading on this path: increasing specialization and professionalization of journalists, and growing commercialization of media projects also became pervasive aspects in Portugal since the 1974 instauration of democratic regime.

If this clearly results in a lower capacity of media instrumentalization by the political system, it in turn may face strongest constraints over journalistic autonomy coming from market forces. News coverage increasing focus on personalisation and common people may come from political elites declining ability to impose their norms on media but also comes from commercial aims for enlarge popular audiences. Today's existence in Portugal of a specific journalistic culture that moderates influences from the political system has been confirmed at national news media, specifically in political journalism coverage (Serrano,).

1.2 Democracy, discourse and debate

If Hallin and Mancini's model is very useful to enlighten actual features of Western political and media systems relationships, and its variations, the fact is that it does not

aim to go deeply into questions of political philosophy and rests attached solely to what can be labelled as the liberal/representative model of democracy.

Alternative visions of democracy and the role played by communication and the media include philosophical traditions usually labelled republican, communitarian or participatory, which are variants akin to a deliberative model (Bohman, 1996), and always involve also a normative perspective about the media role (Christians et al: 2009).

Contrary to a liberal vision of democratic media that rests solely on journalistic independence from the state and political institutions (conditions for the media to exert a “watchdog” function over political representatives), and on the individuals’ ability to free choice, these other perspectives on democracy have underline questions of citizens’ participation, or lack of it, on mediated public sphere.

Jurgen Habermas has been the most influential theorist on the deliberative approach in the field of communication, feeding democratic perspectives on journalism different from the adversarial role and the function of displaying competing views in a marketplace of ideas where citizens can choose.

The very Habermasian conceptions of communicative rationality and communicative action bear a notion of speech and language that is closely linked to ideas of understanding and cooperation (Habermas, 2002). By this account, argumentative discourse tends to promote a mutual approximation of participants in dialogue and thus it carries with it the possibility of non coercive consensus as an outcome of rational discussion.

Accordingly, Habermas’ conception of democracy starts with horizontal sociability between citizens. Public discourse, he affirms, must connect “informal discursive

sources of democracy with the formal decision making institutions” (1996: 169). Public sphere, as a space of discursive interchange, is thus the place where political decisions become democratically legitimate.

So Habermas states that deliberative democracy supposes institutionalized procedures of discursive participation on a rational basis, through which citizens’ communicative practices legitimate political decisions. The deliberative model, then, functions through communicative mechanisms, where they are sufficiently institutionalized. So, the question is how to institutionalize the demanding communicative procedures needed for democratic processes. The answer is a discursive theory where intersubjectivity takes place in public spheres and gives rise to the formation of rational opinion and will by civil society autonomously from administrative and economic powers.

Theories of deliberation do not focus only on legitimacy of decision making, but also, following a path opened by John Dewey, they stress the importance of conditions for debate as structures of continuous formation of will and opinion by the public as the very conditions for the existence of publics (Dewey, 1954: 178). Regular use of public reason by citizens is not merely a cognitive exercise. It is also, as Habermas notices, a fundamental source of political motivation and engagement; moreover, as Dewey stressed, “it forces recognition that there are common interests” and brings about clarification on them (Dewey, 1954: 207), being thus educational in democracy and counteracting individualistic forces that undermine civic involvement.

Public opinion, by deliberative accounts, is not a mere aggregation of individual ideas but rather a consequence of public debate. Thus public sphere’ democratic intensity depends on the degree and the quality of civil society participation through communicative structures. If individuals should not be mere consumers of the political

representatives' opinions, and should have chances themselves to speak for the public through the media, this means that a role of journalism is to provide debate within the community of citizens.

A way sometimes advocated for the media to enhance politics and revitalize civic life is through "life politics". As Peter Dahlgren puts it, popular forms of journalism "can help to extend the public sphere by engaging people who may feel remote from traditional forms of news and current affairs and by serving as discursive gateway where other kinds of topics can become formulated and enter into political life" (2000: 314).

Nevertheless, these "popular forms of journalism" easily risk to be appropriated by commercial strategies aiming to capture the attention of disengaged audiences by way of personalized and spectacular frames, rather than to provide room for debate in the media space.

Another attempt is public, or civic, journalism, a trend born in the early 1990's in the United States, stressing precisely that "telling the news is not enough" (Merritt, 1998), wishing to contribute for enhancing broad political debate, but also being much resisted by mainstream journalists advocating the traditional "neutral", non interventionist, role of the press before the reality of politics.

1.3 Public journalism and citizens' participation

Although not rising from Habermas' or other academic writings (Rosen, 1999), but rather from the practice of American news media political coverage, public journalism meets some of the deliberative concerns. Namely, its basic premise is not only reporting about public life, but also promoting and improving it, what means a journalistic

commitment to reinvigorate democratic participation and common discussion (Glasser, 1999). This means to enlarge the scope and plurality of participants in public sphere debates. It also supposes to break away from limitative routines and privileged sources. And it finally supposes the press' openness to sense civil society when defining news media agenda.

Instead of merely "covering the battles between competing interest groups", public journalism advocates propose that the press should "help to level the playing field by giving average citizens a voice in public policy debates" (Eksterowick and Roberts, 2000: xiv). The already two decade long history of public journalism have brought to practice, both in the USA and elsewhere, an array of experiences designed to build alternative agendas, frames and actors. Among these are attempts to cover elections from the publics' viewpoint, techniques to promote discussion between citizens and encounters with political representatives, and reorganization of newsrooms to continuously follow issues of citizens' concern.

Nevertheless, some scholars have noted a lack of theoretical precision and consistency on the public journalism movement. Namely, the much highlighted idea of citizens' participation is said to bear insufficient clearness about which kind of participation, towards which goals, should be put in place by public journalism (Hass, 2007).

A key question here is whether the political philosophy behind the idea of participation is closer to the communitarian variant or to the deliberative one. The communitarian tradition stresses dialogue, conversation, and the supposed existence, or formation, of common values and interests. The deliberative model tries to accommodate differences, inequalities and conflicts, underlining the possibility that rational discursive practices have for reaching mutual understandings and agreements. According to Hass, these two

standpoints also call for distinct journalistic practices, the deliberative one implying that journalists “need to incorporate a broad and diverse spectrum of citizen voices in their reporting” and also “to highlight citizens’ reasons for espousing certain opinions” in order for the others be able to evaluate them (Hass, 2007: 29). These practices embody what can really be termed as “deliberative journalism”, allowing for “the identification of the citizens’ ways of reasoning about issues that concern them” (Correia, 2010: 96).

As public journalism intends to be a movement for better democracy, citizens’ participation can be sensed in another way, namely about trends that may be put in place towards democratization of journalism itself. In this respect, public journalism practices have raised doubts about the real commitment to democracy it comprises if it does not imply mechanisms for more transparency and accountability of journalists neither is willing to share some power with the public, retaining all the control of news production inside the newsroom (Schudson, 1999).

Beyond the domain of public journalism, this question has been under discussion lately about online press and the participatory chances it opens to citizens. Research points to a general reluctance of newsrooms to give citizens some power in news production processes, even though new technologies can facilitate it (Domingo et al., 2008).

1.4 Local media

Considerations about local press as the heart of journalism go back to Robert Park’s linkage between public opinion democratic governance and the need that newspapers “continue to tell about ourselves” and keep being “the diary of the home community” in ways parallel to those that provided country villages self-knowledge (Park, 1923: 101-102). Praise for local press goes even further back to Tocqueville’s idea of the

newspapers as representing an association and as a tool that allows for daily collective enterprises involving fellow citizens in their communities (Tocqueville, 1972: 332-3).

Precisely, one of the features said to distinguish the public journalism movement from conventional journalism is that the praised value of detachment is to be replaced by an “attempt to connect journalists with the community in which they operate” (Eksterowick and Roberts, 2000: xiii).

From a theoretical viewpoint, local small media have been considered as more viable spaces for democratization of discourse and redistribution of power (Christians et. al, 2009: 59), provided they are not overwhelmed by mainstream market forces. Research indeed shows that approval of public journalism values and practices is higher within smaller news organizations (Hass, 2007: 50). Empirical data reveals, moreover, that local journalists tend to address more value to citizens as sources, comparing to other journalists; but they also regard politicians as higher valuable sources than journalists in bigger news media do (De Kayser, Raeymaeckers and Paulussen, 2011).

In fact, public journalism was born inside media governed by market principles in the USA, but it engaged mostly with limited territorial circumscriptions where the press got involved in highlighting local problems, promoting discussion around them and sometimes cooperating in the search for solutions.

As Hass notes, public journalism drive to give people more voice did not aim solely to reconnect citizens and government, but also to counter the widening gap between the press and its audiences (Hass, 2007: 3), therefore accommodating entrepreneurial goals as well.

As complexity and pluralism are regarded as the most serious problems for deliberation in contemporaneous societies (Bohman, 1996), local media seem to be a potential space

for easier involvement of citizens and higher active participation in discursive democratic procedures. Due to smaller scale and familiarity of topics, many of the local questions are not so severely touched by the lack of comprehension of distant reasons and intricate nexus of phenomena that Dewey identified as one of the main reasons for the “eclipse” of the public, meaning it disinterest on political issues.

But local and regional media in Portugal and in other contexts within the Mediterranean model (or sharing some of its features) have some specific traits. There are, at least, three important features for our concerns.

The first one is that regional press tended to develop territorially overlapping political circumscriptions and state organization (Tétu, 2002), and it historically served for the expression of political groups or individuals disputing local or regional power (Carrato, 2002).

The second one is that regional media have been regularly seen, particularly when they incorporate new technologies, as an opportunity for more participation, less inequality and richer democracy. So was said about local “free” radio in the 1970’s and 80’s, supposed to be a space for the listener’s speech, belonging to whichever social group (Guattari, 1982). So, local radio would foster the renewal of local initiatives and community life (Flichy, 1982). In Portugal, local radios sprout from popular initiatives aiming to find ways of expressing local concerns and identities, not covered by national media. Citizens and local communities’ problems, unheard in national broadcasting, found space in free local radios, where the technique of “open microphone” enlarged the scope of the media agenda and actors. However, recent research on Portuguese local radio stations, found that only one fourth of news items is devoted to regional matters (Bonixe, 2006). National news items fill the majority of bulletins, collected from

national news agencies and newspapers and reproduced locally. There is only one exception to this: when the topic is politics, local news items surmount national ones (Bonixe, 2006), which is another sign of prevailing close ties between media and political systems at local level.

The third important feature is that approaches to Portuguese regional press have emphasized the existence of a strong tendency for political engagement in favour of perceived community general interests or regional common good. This sometimes includes a strategic “work of inclusion/exclusion of information” towards a “spiral of consensus” (Camponez, 2002: 250, 259). But in other accounts it includes a tendency for continued debate over recurrent topics or even a taste for polemicist discourse (Correia, 1998). Anyway, with more or less tendency for consensus, there is a legacy of public intervention by the press in local issues and especially when the community’s interests are perceived to be at stake. This kind of publicist tradition sometimes assumed clear links to politics (newspapers directors and owners who become members of parliament or local administration), and other times was exerted more in a civic way.

1.5 The Portuguese case: general characteristics

There are other two general aspects we must be aware of when approaching Portuguese non-national press. The first one is the political fragmentation of the territory below the central state level, divided in 307 small municipalities, with no regional level (apart from the islands case). The second one is the demographic structure of the country, scattered in many small towns, and bearing only two cities with more 200.000 inhabitants (and their metropolitan areas with more than 1 million).

So, Portuguese local press rarely becomes regional. Readership remains mainly in one municipality, with its limited population, often reaching more easily local migrants abroad than citizens of a neighbour municipality. This is, in itself, a sign of the existing ties, below national level, between the media system and the political system. Generally, the scope of a newspaper readership is the same of the political circumscription. Traditional ownership by local elites or the church grants this press primarily with social or political aims, and not economic ones.

This map has been challenged in recent decades by the entrance of national media players and other entrepreneurs in local press. A part of these newspapers, or new ones created by entrepreneur capital, became commercial projects and more professionalized structures, needing to enlarge readership and advertisement revenues to larger territories.

Although there is an undoubted weight of local newspapers in the country's press landscape (also because of the low number of national press readers), there is a great deal of inconsistency in figures about local newspapers readership in Portugal. Whereas some surveys estimate that around 50% of the population has the habit of "reading or leafing through" local or regional newspapers (ERC, 2010), this is not confirmed by the much more modest number of newspapers buyers or subscribers. The newspapers with the largest circulation in the sample used for this research can be estimated as having between 50 and 150 buyers/subscribers per 1000 adults in their core territories. If this questions the popular scope of local newspapers readership (how much larger than local elites?), it nevertheless confirms that, at least in some regions, local press does have enough presence to contribute to a public sphere.

Local and regional press is also touched by other general trends in Portuguese news media universe. In twenty years time (1988-2008) the number of professional journalists in Portugal increased from 1704 to 7402. So, professionalism was also attained by local press in the last two decades, but this still means newsrooms with a low number of journalists. Among 728 local and regional newspapers, 49% have less than 3 journalists, and only 7% have 6 or more professionals (ERC, 2010).

On the other hand, research done in the 1990's still found that local press usually suffered many pressures and censorship coming from political actors (Pascoal, 1995), and that the adversarial ethos of questioning and watching local political systems was very weak in practice (Carvalho, 2005).

Finally, the focus on regionalism was not contradicted by the increasing professionalism from the 1980's onwards; on the contrary, there are some signs that professionalism came along with the "regionalization" of news and editorial frames (Carvalho, 2007).

2. The "Citizens' agenda" study

So, Portuguese regional press was formed around a number of core characteristics that can be summed up as follows: coincidence with political circumscriptions (mostly local /municipal); a "publicist" tradition (commitment to regional "general interests"); links to local elites and institutions; and traditionally suffering political pressures and censorship.

Nevertheless, increasing professionalization and commercialization in the last 20 years have introduced some forces for change, at least in the most modernized segment of this press.

The “Citizens’ agenda” study, developed by LabCom research centre in the period 2010-13, deals with a sample of 9 newspapers belonging precisely to the more professionalized sector of Portuguese non-national press.

The 9 newspapers sample has an average of 5.6 professional journalists per paper, thus belonging to the small group within the Portuguese local and regional press whose newsrooms have more than 5 journalists (only 7%: about 50 out of 728 newspapers).

These publications also belong to large economic groups, operating nationwide both in media business and in other entrepreneurial activities.¹ And, moreover, their newsrooms are in tune with national trends towards professional qualification, our sample showing high rates of university education (88%) and a fair level of feminization (38% in local sample; 33% at national level [1997]).

This means that the “Citizens’ agenda” study is focused not in the local and regional press as a whole, but it may be representative of its more professionalized segment.

The empirical research on the 9 newspapers content comprehends the analysis of 54 complete issues, with all its journalistic texts from the main body of the newspaper (excluding sports sections), what comprises a total of 3602 texts.² Empirical data used

¹ The sample includes one newspaper (Jornal do Fundão) owned by Controlinveste, a national media group operating in cable television, national and regional newspapers and radio. The other 8 newspapers were owned in 2010 by Sojormedia, a group operating originally in other economic sectors throughout the country; three of these newspapers (Região de Leiria, Ribatejo and Jornal da Bairrada) are still hold by the same group; other four were sold in April 2011 (As Beiras, Grande Porto, O Algarve and Jornal do Centro) to several smaller and local entrepreneurs; one newspaper (Vida Ribatejana) ceased to function by the end of 2010.

² The texts’ sample was randomly selected within a period of 17 weeks (236 newspaper issues) between February and June 2010.

in this article, also includes the results from an inquiry to the universe of 45 professional journalists from 8 newspapers, which was answered by 34 journalists; and, finally, data from interviews done to newspapers directors.³

Given that the newspaper segment under research is one that a theory of modernization would see as a vanguard trend, a key question raised by Hallin and Mancini is about what an enhanced differentiation of the media system will mean in terms of power structures and chances for social representation.

So the general questions go like this: Does Portuguese local press attain differentiation from the political system or does it remain attached to the so-called Mediterranean model, serving mainly as a resource and tribune for local elites under the flag of regional interests? Does it take an important part in a local public sphere actively involving common citizens and grass-roots organizations, and drawing on a publicist tradition and a “general interests” perspective?

2.1 Autonomy of local news media from political system

Looking for the logic that articulates communication and politics at local level means to examine what the practices and attitudes of local press towards the political system do reveal in terms of journalistic autonomy. Thus, the first specific question is if there is autonomy of local news media from the political system.

To research whether the press serves more as a tribune for elites or as a wider public sphere it is useful to deal with the concepts of “political parallelism” and

³ One of the newspapers which content was analysed, Vida Ribatejana, ceased to function in 2011, before the inquiry to the journalists was done.

“professionalism”, operated by Hallin and Mancini. These conceptual constructions include several dimensions, namely content, connections to politics, pluralism, journalistic culture, professional autonomy, and public orientation.

In this article, the question of news media autonomy before the political system is based particularly in the observation of the following dimensions: *topics; sources; journalistic culture; and pluralism*.

Categorizing the overall sample of 3602 journalistic texts by main topic (according to the way each text is framed), the most representative subjects are culture (19.5%), politics (15.9%) and economy (13.3%).⁴ When we aggregate main and secondary topics, politics end up being the most present theme in news items (24.3%).

If we consider only the items on the newspapers cover, as an indication of news hierarchies being practiced by editors, we see that politics is again the most valued topic (figure 1), summing up to 21% of all headlines in front pages. In contrast, the most present topic in the overall newspapers, culture, is granted a mere 10% of cover headlines, below economy, judicial affairs, and urban issues.

⁴ For our analytical purposes, the category “politics” was defined as news stories related to institutions or people from local or national governments, other political bodies or parties, elections and questions directly involving the political system.

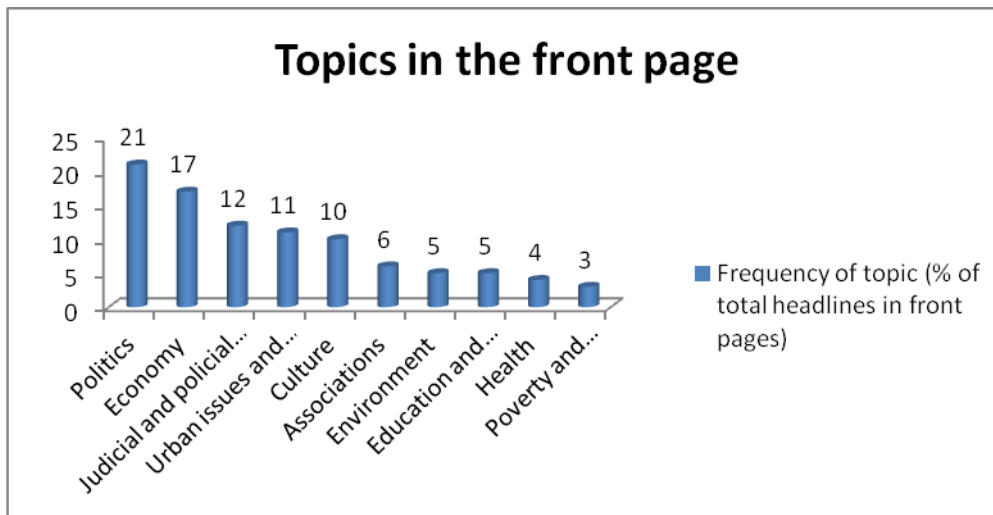


Figure 1

On their own, these data point to the existence of a comparatively high news value assigned to traditional politics, but not an overwhelming salience of politicians and political institutions as newspapers' protagonists.

If we can say that local journalistic culture remains relatively close to the political system (due to the amount and the first rank of political news), we may also notice the existence of areas significantly retained out of political accountability. These are the cases of poverty, environment, or urban issues, which are often reported with no relation to the political system.

This proximity of journalistic practices to the political system seems to come more from professional motivation than from motivations linked to engagement in politics, so it is indicated by the level of political orientation of local press reporters: 64.7% declare to have none or low orientation in political terms.

Another item pointing to some autonomy from the political system is the one that examines the tone of news stories (figure 2).

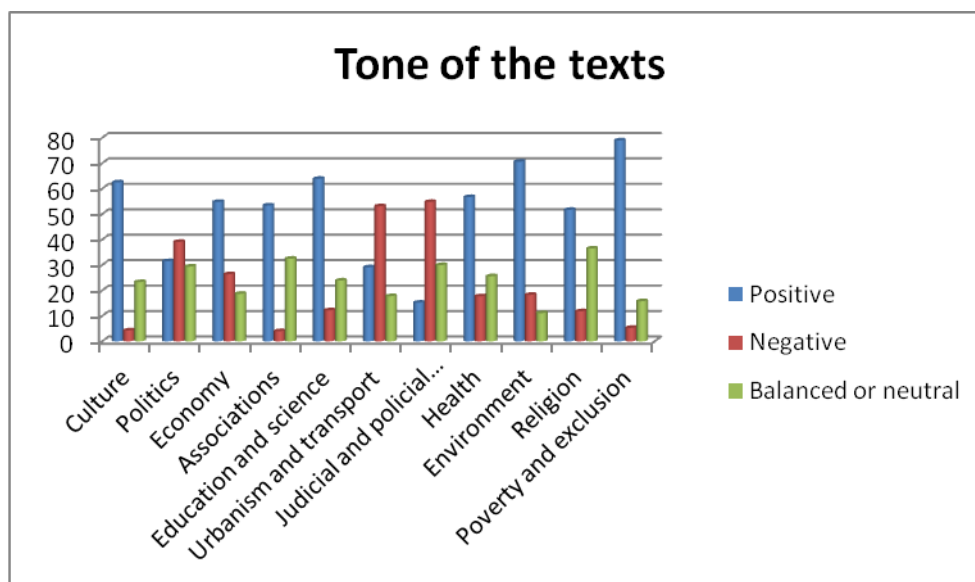


Figure 2

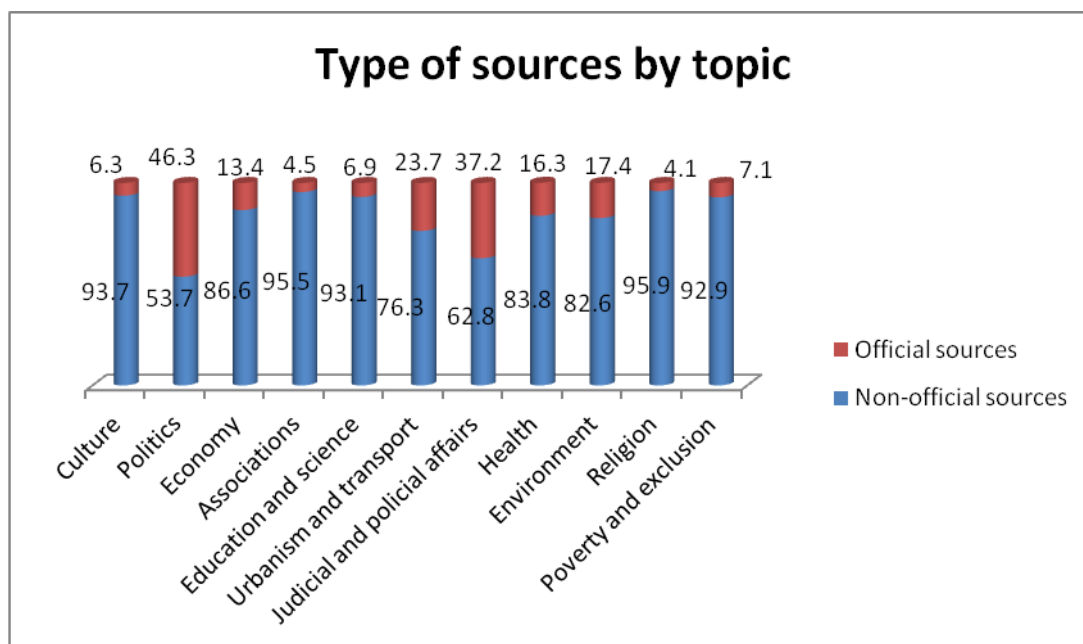
Contrary to the unquestioningly positive tone prevailing in topics such as culture and economy, the set of political news stories presents fair percentages of positive, negative, and balanced or neutral approaches. This is also connected to the existence of internal pluralism in the political domain, another characteristic of more autonomous media models, such as the Liberal one.

Inquiring on which main duties news workers ascribe to local press journalism, results indicate, on the other hand, that non-national journalistic culture has come close to liberal values (the professional ethos of neutrality, balance and information provision to citizens), and distances itself equally from news sources and community causes, not seen as primary addressees of what should be local journalism loyalty.

These trends, pointing to a fair degree of political autonomy in local journalism, have decisively to be checked by approaching which kinds of sources are used in news

content. A conspicuous dichotomy here is the one between official sources (from state institutions) and non-official ones (not state).

By this dichotomy, local newspapers produce an overall picture where non-state sources are overwhelmingly predominant in quantitative terms, whereas texts whose main source has official background (town halls, local councils, police forces, and others) make up only a small amount (14,8%).⁵ Content analysis shows us that this predominance reaches very high levels in topics such as culture, education, associations, religion and poverty, where non-official sources rank above 90% of news items. But even in politics, official sources make up a minority of the overall journalistic texts (figure 3).



⁵ Classification of journalistic texts according to type of source was based on identification of the original source for each news story in headlines, leads or superleads. This methodology isolates the main source of each text, thereby classifying news stories as being based whether on official or on non-official sources, regardless of stories possibly containing more, secondary, sources.

Figure 3

This can be taken as a finding which contradicts the expanded idea that local news media exist immersed in high levels of dependency from official sources of information. But do these figures really mean that citizens and civil entities are the protagonists in local newspapers content?

Some factors allow us to assign a more relative weight to non-official sources, not as prominent as suggested by the general picture.

The first factor is that news stories with official sources tend to be longer than the ones based on non-official ones. Within the share of news items based on non-official sources, a considerable part (35%) is limited to very small texts, with only one paragraph. Such brief texts do not exceed 18% of the news items with official sources.

A second factor is the rank in news hierarchies. The share of stories based on official sources rises up to higher levels within newspapers front pages (26% of all cover stories; 28% of main headlines), indicating that journalistic evaluation of a story's importance is not independent from the kind of source providing the information.

This may mean that local state institutions do not provide enough material for journalists to produce weekly or daily editions, but the one they provide generally have good chances to take the lead and get more space within the newspapers agenda.

Nevertheless, evidence still supports that local press agenda is not a realm commanded by state officials or the political system more generally, neither in quantitative terms nor in tone of texts. We can, thus, conclude that the more professionalized segment of local news media has attained a fair degree of autonomy from the political system.

Political pressures did not disappear, but the very fact that some newspapers' directors mention them when interviewed for this study reveals a professional ethos eager for autonomy.

This trend towards local media relative autonomy from the political system is, obviously related to newsroom changes and business orientation introduced in the last decades.

First, the pattern of local newsrooms based on young journalists with no experience, and under quick rotation, has changed in the most professionalized newspapers such as the ones in our sample. As data from our inquiries shows, the majority of journalists are working as professional for more than 10 years, usually in the same newspaper. This carries more room for the formation of professional ethos, and builds up local professional communities (across several media) with some stability, which reinforces specifically journalistic interpretative frames in approaching politics.

Second, most directors in the sample do their job having in mind economic goals framed by the entrepreneurial media groups that own the newspaper. Therefore, political coverage is not an end in itself, and the articulation between local media and the political system is to be managed within a larger horizon of audience and advertisement targets.

But it should not be forgotten that the increasing number of professional journalists in local newspapers since the 1980's paralleled the expansion of local politics that came along with instauration of municipal democratic institutions. The post-1974 political system, based on regular elections and cooptation of popular support, needed local media for bridging public opinion and manage articulation with the social system at municipal level, frequently not very vast but large enough for political actors to need

more than interpersonal contact. This means that the very growth of more professional news media projects at local level is intimately tied to the expansion of democratic politics and representative state institutions.

Consequently there is a sense of ambivalence in this set of trends and data about local newspapers, some features pointing to a fair level of autonomy from political system, others indicating persistence of a relative closeness to the politics.

2.2 Local press and participatory public sphere

The second specific aspect we try to deal with in this article is about the relationship between local press and the idea of public sphere in participatory and deliberative ways. More precisely the question is what do the journalists' practices and values reveal in terms of enhancing participation and deliberation in local public sphere?

The main dimensions, both of newspapers content and journalists' ethos, we take as related to participation and deliberation are the following: *voices; actors; narrative frames; perceptions of democracy.*

Once discourse is a key aspect in participatory and deliberative forms of democracy, the first aspect to be examined is which kind of actors does have a voice in journalistic texts. If we take direct quotes as a pointer of the actors' chances for discourse in public sphere, we see that local press promotes rather unbalanced opportunities for speech according to actors' formal status (figure 4).



Figure 4: Voice of actors, by type of source

This data indicates that, if civil society actors are indeed included in local press, they are mainly incorporated without discourse, in perfect opposition to what happens with official actors. Hence, in terms of conceiving participatory democracy as enlarged conversation around common issues, local public sphere is strongly biased in what concerns to discursive power. Political representatives and state officials are very frequently given voice by journalists, but the same does not happen with common citizens or members of non-official organizations in general. This obviously connects to the power of defining what the local general interests are.

This tendency to prioritize official voices may or not accommodate the practice of watchdog journalism in questioning authorities, but what it surely indicates is again the persistence of proximity to the political system in a way that privileges discourse from those already having more power.

Taking Tanni Hass' distinction between communitarian and deliberative features of participatory democracy, we further observe newspapers content that may indicate the existence of informal deliberative dialogues in local public sphere. The idea of

incorporating a spectrum of voices and opinions in journalistic reporting can be evaluated through the degree of plurality found in news items (figure 5).

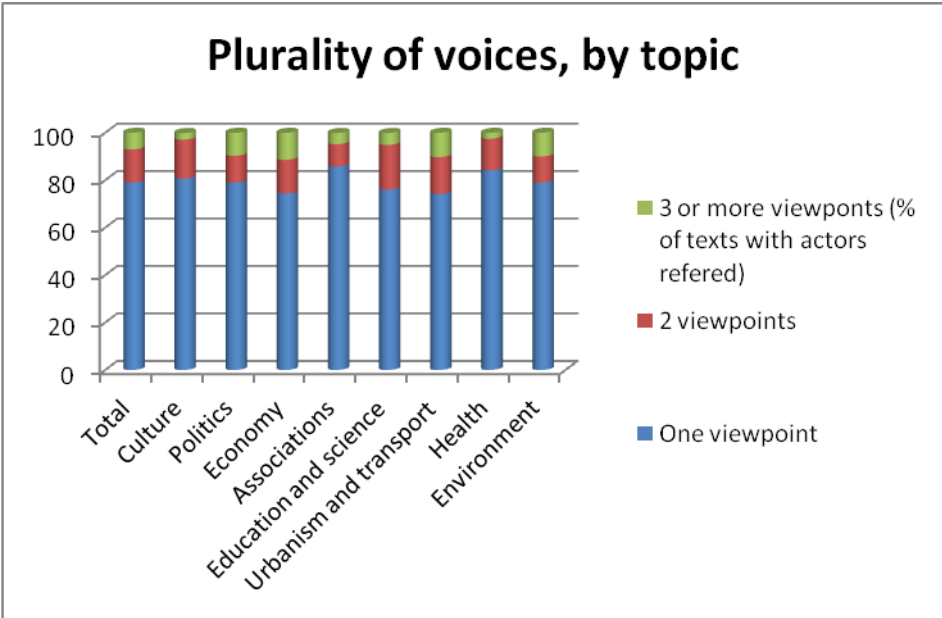


Figure 5

Here we find a clear minority of news stories carrying internal debate. The average of texts bearing only one viewpoint is 79%, and the maximum of plurality occurs in urban issues with 26% of news items including many viewpoints (aggregating two, three or more voices).

But if we examine plurality of voices by type of source, and compare the set of texts based on official sources with the one based on non-official ones, we find that the former includes several voices in 36.6% of cases, while the second does it in 16.8% only. It means that when debate happens it is much more likely to involve state and political actors than civil society voices.

It may be considered, however, that the press contributes more informally to the public sphere, not just by promoting debate within its own pages, but also by offering subjects and ideas to the audiences which they further may discuss among them in contexts of non-mediated interaction.

There are, nonetheless, some journalistic frames more inviting than others for prompting debate among the public. Naming these as narrative frames, we defined four types of news items according to the openness they carry (figure 6). Contrary to closed events and announcements, ongoing process and debates offer the public a sense of having a chance to debate issues while they develop and potentially to become participants in public sphere discussions or even to be involved in decisions.

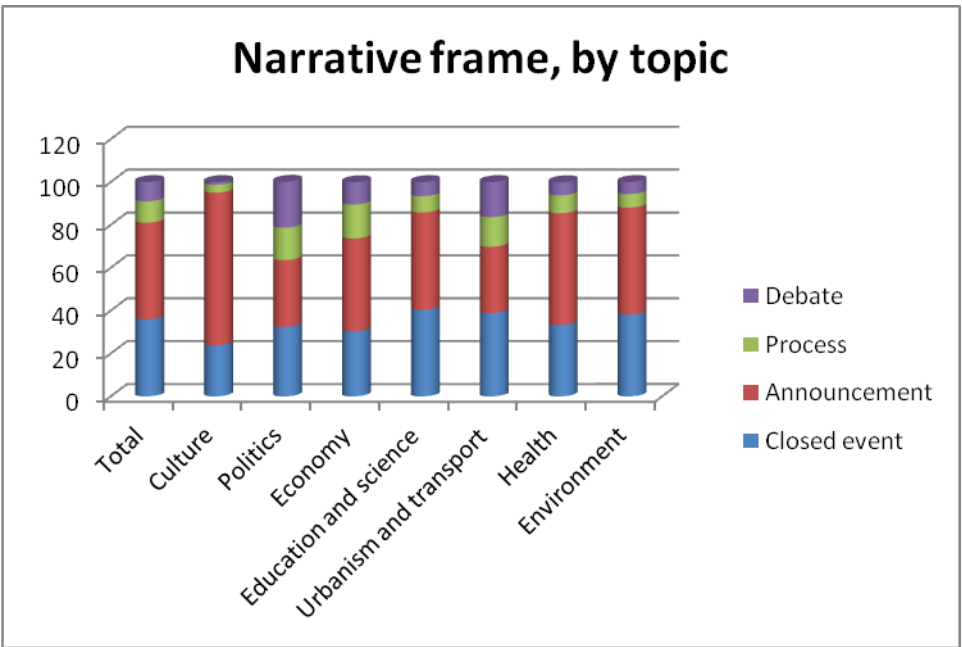


Figure 6

Most of news items belonging to the announcement category correspond to brief information about events that are going to take place, as it is typically the case in culture issues. This sort of information has its own value in democratic terms, in the sense that it allows common citizens to be aware of happenings where they may take part, thus being functional for possibilities of participation. But in terms of journalistic frame, this is not the kind of text containing by itself the openness that favours discussion.

Therefore, the more potentially deliberative frames (processes and debates) are scarce, not more than 19% of all texts. But, among the several topics, politics is the most salient in terms of open frames, summing up 35.5% of the stories which are reported or commented while evolving. In terms of discussion and deliberation chances for the public, institutional politics is thus the privileged domain.

If we compare again news items based on official and non-official sources, we find that the later are less framed in debated and ongoing stories (12.3%) than the former (17.5%), what finally reinforces that common people and civic organizations tend to have less discursive chances in open evolving issues than political officials do.

In spite of a tradition marked by regionalism, “publicist” commitment and closeness to municipal political system, the actual journalism conception of local professionals today is much in tune with the conventional journalistic norms (table 1). Functions and values assigned to the profession regionally by journalists themselves are mainly to provide information to citizens and to watch public authorities, two sides of the same coin in the liberal model of news media.

Main functions of regional journalism	%
To defend regional general interests	58,8
To inform and elucidate citizens	85,3
To assure social and political pluralism	52,9
To allow for large participation in decision taking	41,2
To contribute to solve problems	61,8
To promote debate at regional level	44,1
To promote public or ideological debate	23,5
To expose problems and watch public administration	73,5

Table 1: Local professionals' conceptions of regional journalism

(Accumulated percentage of the four items scored higher by respondents)

In order to accomplish their first duty, informing citizens of what is at stake in power circles, journalists must above all question political protagonists and therefore reproduce their discourse becomes primal. Under the liberal ethos now hegemonic in these modernized local newsrooms, journalists may have considerable regard for aspects such as pluralism, regional general interests or enhancement of citizens' participation, but they tend to downplay such practices comparatively. And, in fact, promoting participation and debate are not priorities inside these newsrooms, ranking relatively low among the expected duties of present regional journalism.

Conclusions

Results about local newspapers content and journalists' attitudes and values indicate that professionalization and commercialization prompted local press towards the liberal model, which means growing autonomy from the state and politics, but also includes trends of disengagement from civic pursuits of "general interest".

On the one hand, increased differentiation between the media and the political system gives chance to relatively plural representations of local public life, the press not being overwhelmed by traditional politics and protagonists, and including a range of other topics.

On the other hand, as local journalists adopt "professionalism" and incorporate watchdog duties towards the political system, they also tend to adopt liberal perceptions of local citizens as individuals to be served by the media or used as information sources and actors.

On this way, the "new" local press neglects mediatization of intersubjectivity and privileges ideas of production/consumption and diffusion/exposure of information, within a relationship between newspaper and individuals.

In this sense, even if more participation is favoured by local journalists' dispositions, that does not mean to promote deliberation. Enhancing citizens' participation in the media may be seen as simply giving more chance for exposing individual views.

In this context, the local press "publicist" tradition and the defence of regional "general interests" may be not enough impulses for deliberation, also because that traditional publicist commitment seemed to be closer to a communitarian ethos, with presupposed but not discussed common interests, than to democratic deliberation, with its ideas of argumentative debate between different views as a public process towards decision taking.

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