

## **Professional views' on letters-to-the-editor as a means of audience participation**

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Due to its historical watchdog and mediator function, journalism provides citizens direct access to the public sphere, in the form of diverse means of participation, ensuring that the voice of the people can be heard in the democratic process (McNair, 2009). In that context, writing letters to the editor is one of the existing vehicles for participation in the printed press, enabling the exchange of information, ideas and opinions between different groups of people, and thus providing a significant forum for public debate. Despite the continuing growth and omnipresence of electronic and digital media, and consequently more diverse forms of audience participation, newspapers (specifically the letters-to-the-editor page) remain an important site of contemporary public discourse (Gregory and Hutchins, 2004). Promoting citizens' involvement in public life and, also, allowing readers to "talk back" to newspapers (Reader, 2001).

In this essay, we retake the findings of a previous research on letters to the editor in the Portuguese press (Silva, 2010, 2012). Particularly in respect to the relationship between journalists and letter-writers, as well as the former's views on the correspondence section, trying to grasp the professional's perceptions on this form of audience feedback and participation. We used qualitative methods in order to gain a thorough understanding of the journalists' perspectives on letters and letter-writers, using extensive interaction with four Portuguese national press publications<sup>1</sup> (participant observation, as well as informal contacts with journalists/editors in charge of the section) and in-depth and semi-structured interviews with the editors-in-chief of the selected publications<sup>2</sup>.

In terms of perceptions on the letters-to-editor functions/roles in press, the professionals interviewed showed a very similar perspective: the correspondence section constitutes an open forum for participation, dialogue and even criticism towards the publication. "Readers have here the opportunity to express their opinion, and sometimes providing a different point of view on a certain issue" (editor-in-chief, *Expresso*), as well as

“to correct a news article, offering feedback to journalists” (editor-in-chief, *Diário de Notícias*). Additionally, the editors-in-chief inquired sustained that letters are a kind of “barometer” towards issues of collective interest, and also towards the press publication’s performance.

The letters’ section, though constructed by professionals as an exercise in public debate, also enhances credibility in the eyes of the readers and increases circulation (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007); like if it were a “public relations” tool (*idem*, 2002). The editors-in-chief underlined this perspective: “If people send letters to us, it’s a sign that we are important in society” (editor-in-chief, *Metro*); “marketing studies show that the letters section is very important to readers” (editor-in-chief, *Visão*), which makes the correspondence section “absolutely structural” in the design of a newspaper and “untouchable to readers”, contrary to other sections of the newspapers (editor-in-chief, *Expresso*). “We usually publish letters that criticize our news reporting (...). Is this a benefit, in terms of public image of the newspaper? It certainly is” (editor-in-chief, *Metro*).

Similarly, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2002, 2007), from Cardiff University, claims that editors recognise the democratic potential of the letters section, as a public forum, but they also understand it like a “customer service”, which makes the readers happy and may increase the newspaper’s economic profit.

The coexistence of these two visions entails a “normative-economic justification” for public discourse: what is good for democracy is also good, inevitably, for business (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002). Through the interaction with the newspapers’ offices and the in-depth interviews with the editors-in-chief of the selected publications, we may also say that the correspondence section is viewed simultaneously as a forum for public debate but also a strategic feature on the reinforcement of the newspaper’s credibility to its reader.

This assertion is reinforced by the sharp contradiction between the normative view on the letters’ functions in the press, expressed by these professionals and the skeptical view on letter-writers. In fact, scholars have previously shown that journalists have a negative image towards its audience, seeing them as not being capable to express ideas in a relevant way (Sorlin, 1992) or unrepresentative of the general population (Gans, 1980).

Moreover, the interviews with the editors-in-chief, as well as the informal contacts with the journalists in charge of the section, showed that these professionals clearly assumed that the letters’ section is not valued by journalists, understanding it as something absolutely secondary in the newspaper context. For instance, the journalist in charge of the *Expresso* letters’ section claimed that journalists usually looked at readers’ correspondence as a sort of second-level opinion, contrary to the op-ed articles, seen as “major” opinion. The editor-in-chief of the same newspaper goes beyond this perception, by saying: “it is very rare that something that interests readers is valued by journalists as well; 80 per cent of what interests journalists doesn’t interest readers, and vice-versa”.

Although they view the correspondence section as a forum for public debate and as a crucial element of the organisational structure of the newspaper/magazine pages, editors “are skeptical about the value of the letters section as a site for free expression and

democratic communication because of what they perceive as the poor quality of public participation, and the non-representativeness of the letters writers" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 135). Indeed, the editor-in-chief of *Metro* newspaper affirmed that the majority of letters are just "common sense and do not add new perspectives nor information". We could confirm the devaluation of the letters section and its contributors by the informal contacts and participant observation that we carried out on the four publications; examining the behaviours, the attitudes and the discourses towards the correspondence page.

We observed that the correspondence section was managed in the context of the professional routines of the journalists in charge of the section; the selection process of readers' texts was thus conducted depending on the time left for it and it was perceived as an activity to perform alongside other activities, that might possibly be seen as more important and interesting (Silva, 2012).

We also verified that the language used by the journalists in charge showed their dissatisfaction with the letters task: for instance, an editor referred ironically to the section as "a nice page" and also suggested that she was in charge of the letters because "someone had to take care of it" (*ibid*). Although the editor showed her dislike about the task, there were some readers' texts that received a very positive reaction, for the editor considered them to be "very interesting" or "funny".

In terms of language and attitudes towards letter writers, we observed an "idiom of insanity" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007) towards some readers, when they refer to them as "crazy". Indeed, we may say that editors generally lack affinity with the letter writers, and sometimes label quite a few of them as insane (Raeymaeckers, 2005: 204), as opposed to the "rational" or "normal" readers.

As observed in the informal contacts with the publications selected, some "regular" letter writers (the ones that send letters to newspapers once or more a week) were considered insane because they wrote (too) many times to the newspaper, or they focused only on a particular issue very close to their hearts. The editors showed, through their daily language, major skepticism and even despise towards these writers, using expressions such as "nuts", "insane" or "crazy" when referring to them. Therefore, their letters were almost automatically rejected for publication. We can say that this "idiom of insanity" somewhat delegitimises the value of the letters section, even though it was used towards a few letter writers. This type of behaviour was also common in the publications' offices that we observed, although there were rare moments where the journalists/editors seemed to enjoy some letter writers' opinions.

Thus, through this case study of the relationship between journalists and letter writers in the Portuguese press, we can infer that, while maintaining a normative view on the correspondence section, in respect to its democratic functions, the inquired professionals have a general negative perspective on the value of letters to the editor as a forum for public discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> *Diário de Notícias* (a daily national newspaper), *Expresso* (a weekly national newspaper), *Visão* (a newsmagazine) and *Metro* (a free daily national newspaper).

<sup>2</sup> The interaction with the four press publications and the interviews with the editors-in-chief were both carried out between 2007 and 2009.