

PORTUGUESE INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENTS: HOW COVID-19 AFFECTED THEIR WORK

Jaime Lourenço

NIP-C@M/UAL . CIES/Iscte

Carlos Pedro Dias

NIP-C@M/UAL

RESUMEN

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected every activity sector, including journalism. As the pandemic has spread globally, we turn our attention to the corresponding journalists that work as each country's anchor. The role of a correspondent implies that the international information is produced to the specifications of the corresponding country and social communication organ, in which the journalists view themselves as members of an interpretative community (Zelizer,1993).

The present communication intends to understand how the productive routines of Portuguese journalists with international corresponding functions were changed during the pandemic. To that effect, we inquired 15 Portuguese correspondents with television, press, radio or news agency functions to try to understand how their function was affected by Covid-19.

We identified that most of the questioned journalists altered their work methodology, stopping the coverage of usual themes, and even contact with sources stopped being in person. And 40% of journalists felt that they ceased to be close to the news, something essential to the proper journalistic profession performance.

Palabras clave

International Correspondents; Covid-19; Journalism;

1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus quickly spread all over the world, becoming a media topic and transversal to all countries. According to Hellman and Riegert (2012), in times of crisis, the media and particularly television, perform an important role as binders of society, in order to satisfy individual necessities and cultivate the community spirit (Hellman & Riegert, 2012, p. 170). In this exploratory study, we look to the portuguese international correspondents and their work during the first months of the pandemic (March, April, May and June of 2020) in order to try to understand how the productive routines of international correspondents changed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.1. THE INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENT

Historically, the media have acted as nation builders¹, in which, besides standardizing experiences, they supply a platform so that citizens exchange opinions about average public life, such as Habermas advocates, but also through comparisons, discussing the similarities and differences between the citizens and systems of other nations. The international correspondence then allows that the citizens to be aware of events and issues from around the world and how they might influence the way that people, as well as institutions, interact and communicate among themselves and how they relate with other nations (Terzis, 2015, p. 297).

The correspondents' function as a certain country's anchor (Rodrigues, 2008, p. 53), being, above all else, a journalist and therefore, shares the values, duties, ethical principles and very own ways of looking at the world based on a public commitment with a sense of credibility. Basically, they constitute themselves as an interpretative community, as Barbie Zelizer (1993) proposes, in in which it is assumed that the journalist's authority is derived from their presence in the events, according to the "eyewitness" authenticity ideology. In this context, journalists have the necessary qualifications to assess a certain critical event (Zelizer, 1993, p. 224). It is, in this context, that the presence of the correspondent in the location of facts and events is the way to convey and present to society the political, economic, social and cultural environment that that is present in the country in which it is located. However, even though informative activity is the main *raison d'être* of journalism, "the journalist analyses, comments, expresses opinions. Observes, interprets and narrates. He manages the access to the 'public space' of other words considered 'legitimate': political and social actors, intellectuals, citizens in general" (Mesquita, 2003, pp. 72-73).

1 The news, besides being the main product of contemporary journalism (Traquina, 2002, p. 9), reflect society by mirroring their concerns and interests (Tuchman, 2002, p. 91), as well, as Robert E. Park (2002) states, a casual source of information by being related with society's participation in political life, providing information and allow the dynamization of economic activity.

In this sense, the facts are arranged through language, contextualized and interpreted by the journalist who apprehends them. The journalistic 'act' presupposes the search, the selection, the research and the interpretation of events (Mesquita, 2005, p. 9). The journalist Daniela Santiago (2013), current correspondent for RTP in Madrid, also defends the same perspective, when she states that for the journalist, journalism is not a simple transmission of information, facing in a more professional, ethical, correct and more objective way, assuming, before the public, journalists as human beings (Santiago, 2013).

When talking about correspondents, autonomy is the keyword (Rodrigues, 2008, p. 53). According to Ana Luísa Rodrigues (2008), these journalists, by being less exposed to organizational hierarchies, enjoy some freedom to propose journalistic pieces and movements, especially if the country in which they find themselves is not in the media spotlight. However, experience leads them to channel the choices of topics to address for the mainstream agenda (Baptista & Henriques, 2015, p. 202). In turn, the editors who are in the newsrooms of the agency they work for serve as a 'barometer' for correspondents to assess what is or is not interesting for the audience. This way, the routines are structured in two axes: one work interaction in the location where the correspondents are headed and another with the central wording of the media for which they work (Rodrigues, 2008, p. 52).

International correspondence is not just journalism, it has always played a role of diplomatic relationship and cultural exchange (Leal-Adghirni, Pinson, & Ruellan, 2016). The international correspondent is considered a citizen of the world, a cosmopolitan, possessing a hybrid culture that creates "new cultural forms, composites, from crossings" (Fortuna & Santos Silva, 2001, p. 432). This journalist is someone who permanently lives between two (or more) parallel lines: "two realities, two countries, two cultures, two time zones, two languages" (Rodrigues, 2008, p. 47).

This way, the international correspondents fulfil the functions of reporting the news and analysing and commentating the events from their perspective (Sambrook, 2010, p. 8), accenting a domestication operation, since international information is produced "made to measure", for a given media, and not only based on submissions from news networks whose perspectives are necessarily more general and vast (Rodrigues, 2008, p. 52).

With the emergence of the internet and social media, journalistic information that before was geographically distant, is now, literally, one click away. For countless journalists who look at international information from their desk with immediate *online* access to several sources, information and social networks, the concept of international correspondent is redundant, since that any journalist can have access to any source through the use of *online* tools such as *Skype*, *Facetime* or *Zoom* and the traditional vox pops in the streets are today mirrored in social networks like *Twitter* (Bebawi & Evans, 2019, p. 24). Richard Sambrook (2010)

highlights the decrease in the number of international correspondents because of the new possibilities granted by technology, mainly in Western countries. However, there is still to be value in highlighting a journalist as a correspondent in order to contextualize, cover and analyse the various events (Sambrook, 2010); But there are examples, like Brussels, in which the number of correspondents has slightly increased in the last few years (Terzis, 2015, p. 300). In the same sense, Cristina Archetti (2012) states that the struggle for economic survival in a very competitive context that is leading to a decline in international correspondents, is also driving towards a greater confidence in these journalists (Archetti, 2012, p. 853).

According to the *Mapping Foreign Correspondence in Europe* (2015) study, in 2013 there were more than 6600 international correspondents working for over 130 media in the 27 member-states of the European Union (Terzis, 2015, p. 297). The same study concluded, that among others, most international correspondents stopped working full time in the press, to transition working freelancer, dedicating themselves to several media, sometimes from different countries. (Terzis, 2015, p. 298).

2. STUDY DESIGN

With the intent to understand whether productive routines of international correspondents changed during the Covid-19 pandemic, we decided to look at the reality of Portuguese international correspondents. We listened to 15 journalists who worked for several Portuguese media, from the press, radio, television and news agency. These journalists were offered a questionnaire survey via e-mail that seeks to understand how work routines changed in the first months of the pandemic (March, April, May and June 2020). In this questionnaire we looked at the main themes that the correspondents dedicated themselves to, contact with sources, journalistic genres and the main challenges faced during this period.

The journalist that answered to the query are split between traditional media: television (46,7%), news agency (26,7%), radio (13,3%) and press (13,3%). This *corpus* made up of journalists is also characterized by including “senior” correspondents, who have been in the role for over 20 years, but also journalists that act as correspondents recently (less than 5 years).

3. FINDINGS

3.1. THE PORTUGUESE INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENTS

The Portuguese international correspondents are spread a bit over the whole world, with a greater focus in the main european capitals, portuguese speaking countries,

in western political decision-making centers (such as Brussels and Washington D.C.), among others.

In Portugal, the media with the largest investment in international correspondents are those with public domain, such as Agência Lusa and RTP. The professional situation of the Portuguese correspondents varies a lot. From journalists that belong to company boards to freelancers paid by story.

According to data obtained from the interviewed journalists, the majority agrees that the work of a correspondent journalist is one of greater autonomy than that of a journalist based in a newsroom. This information agrees with what Ana Luísa Rodrigues (2008) referred to when she stated that autonomy is a central concept when approaching the routines of the corresponding journalists. According to the author, this is due to the time management of this routine that is very personalized by each correspondent, but also, and most of all, in the selection of themes and the diversity of work they can perform (Rodrigues, 2008, p. 53). For the journalists that we heard, the selection of topics is, in the vast majority, decided jointly, between the correspondent and its editor based in Portugal, the three main themes they normally deal with being Politics, Economy and Security.

In this context, news (53,3%) and reporting (33,3%) are the main journalistic genre used by these journalists. The inquired correspondents also confirmed that the essence of the correspondent journalist is their proximity to the event. Just as Zelizer (1993) states, "journalists authority is assumed to derive from their presence at events" (Zelizer, 1993, p. 224), which is extensible to the work of the corresponding journalists. Bebawi & Evans (2019) are decisive when they indicate that "there is still a need for reporters on the ground to cover on events" (Bebawi & Evans, 2019, p. 25). In this sense, this coverage "consists in observing, interpreting and narrating the 'social reality', of which they are also builders" (Mesquita, 2005, p. 22).

These professionals, however, take into consideration that they are addressing the Portuguese audience, regardless of the media that they work for and 46,7% of inquired journalists consider that a Portuguese protagonist of a given event constitutes a news value, with the presence of Portuguese protagonists being usual in the work carried out by these professionals. This refers to proximity as a news value, as spoken of by Traquina (2002), since a Portuguese protagonist can be considered relevant in geographic and cultural terms.

Questioned about the main challenges that Portuguese international correspondents face, the journalists state that, among other aspects, questions related to the selection of the most relevant information for the Portuguese audience, having to translate realities distinct from the Portuguese. Several underline the fact explanation, in which they try to summarize the information daily, while trying to be more explanatory and simplify complex issues. One of the inquired points out

as a challenge “translating for television language, subjects with various details, sometimes historical, that are important to contextualize, but are not familiar to the Portuguese”. This correspondent adds that he tries “that the final result is well summarized, explained and that it is not superficial”.

Other mentioned aspects go through the difficulty of integrating in the first years of correspondence whether at an establishment level as well as the constitution of a new contact schedule; However, sometimes, they also go through solitary work, in which the journalist has to travel on public transport, calling into question the speed to arrive at events.

Between the “permanent state of alertness, study and reflection on multiple themes, unpredictability and constant travel”, the difference in time zone, the “little or no feedback” and the scarce dialogue with headquarters is also referred to, translating into a “little opportunity for dialogue with co-workers”.

3.2. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The coronavirus, that initially shook China and the Asian countries, quickly spread all over the world, causing an unprecedented pandemic crisis. Said crisis that spread through all of society's sectors, including media. According to the OberCom report (2020), the medium in which the impacts will have been less pronounced will have been the radio, while the press will have been the medium most affected by this crisis, exposing the fragility of these companies (OberCom, 2020, p. 4).

As Portuguese international correspondents were spread all over the world, they too had to deal with the Covid-19 crisis. In view of the collected data, we can confirm that the routines of Portuguese international correspondents changed profoundly in the face of the crisis created by the pandemic. 93,3% of inquired correspondents claim that, in the first months of the pandemic crisis (March, April, May and June of 2020), their work was, primarily, dedicated to covering Covid-19. This led them to stop addressing themes that were common in their routines. Among the main themes, Health became the main one, followed by Politics, Economy and Security. The latter, probably also due to the pandemic.

If proximity is an essential factor of journalistic activity, 60% of these correspondents felt they stopped being close to the news. This implies weaknesses in the journalistic coverage of the events and calls into question the information conveyed, in this case, by the correspondents, since the function of observation on the ground becomes weakened. However, besides that distancing from the news, 80% of inquired journalists state that the number of work hours increased, reaching, in some cases, twice as many hours a day as in normal times.

The main journalistic genres continue to be the news (with 66,7%), the reporting (with 13,3%) and the interview (with 13,3%). However, for the execution of these works,

contact with sources is essential, as Felisbela Lopes (2016) points out, sources of journalistic information constitute a central point for understanding journalistic content (Lopes, 2016). But in times of reduced face-to-face or even non-existent contact, 73,3% of correspondents mention that they had difficulty in contacting sources during this period, which, by itself, reveals an obstacle to the normal flow of journalistic activity. As a way of circumventing these difficulties in contact with sources, correspondents used, to a large extent, tools such as *Skype* or *Zoom* to get in touch with their sources. The traditional telephone was also one of the means used for this contact, thus avoiding face-to-face interaction. However, although contact with sources is distanced, the use of a mask and personal and workspace disinfection, regarding the protection measures that international correspondents have adopted, has become part of the daily routine.

Concerning the main adversities, they faced in the exercise of their work, journalists claim that the risk of contagion and the mandatory confinement were transversal and affected them both as a professional and human beings. They also chose contact with the sources as one of the main difficulties, namely the complications of contacting someone via telephone, since the companies closed or obtained, in the case of television, authorizations to record in specific places, such as hospitals.

In addition to these issues, this period was also about adapting and learning new tools and software that journalists were not used to. This adds to the “huge amount of information to deal with given the size of the country and the complexity of the relationship between political information and health information”, as one of the journalists indicates.

One of the heard journalists also mentioned that, for security reasons, had to return to Portugal, which implies that a Portuguese media no longer had a journalist present in a certain country, which certainly created a weakness in information about that country in that media.

However, the journalists also felt some difficulties in escaping the Covid-19 media agenda and present stories that were not related to the pandemic.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the present study, we looked at the changes brought about in the productive routines of Portuguese international correspondent journalists by the Covid-19 pandemic. We found that there was a considerable shift in the professional performance of these journalists, from the main topic treated became health; to an increase in the number of hours worked; and to adapting to new work tools (like *Skype* or *Zoom*). During this period, journalists felt that they were no longer close to the news, there was even a case in which they had to return to Portugal for security reasons and the main obstacle to the work of these correspondents was contact

with sources, something indispensable in journalistic work.

In addition to the changes caused by the pandemic, we were also able to look at an exploratory characterization of portuguese international correspondents and the challenges they face in the performance of their profession.

This study opens the door to a possible future investigation that deepens the changes caused in the productive routines of international correspondents, expanding the number of respondents and proceeding with personalized interviews.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archetti, C. (2012). Wich Future for Foreign Correspondence? London foreign correspondents in the age of global media. *Journalism Studies*, 13(5-6), 847-856.

Baptista, C., & Henriques, C. (2015). Foreign Correspondents in Portugal. In G. Terzis (Ed.), *Mapping Foreign Correspondence in Europe* (pp. 203-212). New York: Routledge.

Bebawi, S., & Evans, M. (2019). *The Future Foreign Correspondent*. Sydney: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fortuna, C., & Santos Silva, A. (2001). A cidade do lado da cultura: espacialidades sociais e modalidades de intermediação cultural. In B. d. Santos (Ed.), *Globalização, Fatalidade ou Utopia?* (pp. 409-461). Oporto: Edições Afrontamento.

Hellman, M., & Riegert, K. (2012). Emerging Transnational News Spheres in Global Crisis Reporting: A Research Agenda. In I. Volkmer (Ed.), *The Handbook of Global Media Research* (1ª ed., pp. 156-174). Blackwell Publishing.

Leal-Adghirni, Z., Pinson, G., & Ruellan, D. (2016). Correspondentes internacionais - introdução. *Sur le journalisme, About journalism, Sobre jornalismo*, 5(1), 12-14.

Lopes, F. (2016). Uma proposta de um modelo taxonómico para a classificação de fontes de informação. *Observatorio (OBS*)*, 10(4), 180-191.

Mesquita, M. (2003). *O Quarto Equívoco - O poder dos media na sociedade contemporânea* (1ª ed.). Coimbra: MinervaCoimbra.

Mesquita, M. (2005). Teorias e práticas do jornalismo: do telégrafo ao hipertexto. *Trajectos*, 6, 9-24.

OberCom. (2020). *Impacto do Coronavirus e da crise pandémica no Sistema mediático português e global. Versão II*. Lisbon.

Park, R. E. (2002). As Notícias como uma forma de conhecimento: um capítulo na sociologia do conhecimento. In J. P. Esteves (Ed.), *Comunicação e Sociedade: Os Efeitos dos Meios de Comunicação de Massa* (pp. 35-60). Lisbon: Livros Horizonte.

Rodrigues, A. L. (2008). *Aos Olhos do Mundo: Portugal e os Portugueses retratados por correspondentes Estrangeiros*. Lisbon: Livros Horizonte.

Sambrook, R. (2010). *Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant?* Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Santiago, D. (2013). Ameaças e Desafios do Jornalismo Contemporâneo. *Comunicação Pública*, 8(14), 95-135.

Terzis, G. (2015). The 'Professional Strangers' of Europe at the Dawn of the 21st Century. In G. Terzis (Ed.), *Mapping Foreign Correspondence in Europe* (pp. 297-313). New York: Routledge.

Traquina, N. (2002). *O que é Jornalismo* (1ª ed.). Lisbon: Quimera.

Tuchman, G. (2002). As notícias como uma realidade construída. In J. P. Esteves (Ed.), *Comunicação e Sociedade - Os efeitos dos meios de comunicação de massa* (pp. 37-50). Lisbon: Livros Horizonte.

Zelizer, B. (1993). Journalists as Interpretative Communities. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 10(3), 219-237.

Zelizer, B. (2000). Os jornalistas enquanto comunidade interpretativa. (N. Traquina, Ed.) *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens*(27), 33-61.

