

The Swine Flu Pandemics in Portugal Through Newspaper Humour

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Using semiotic and discourse analysis methodologies to uncover denotative and connotative meanings in journalism production, following Roland Barthes's work, our research analyzed newspaper humour published in one Portuguese newspaper about the global build-up of the swine flu (H1N1) scare of 2009-2010. Results demonstrate that humour was much quicker than traditional journalistic templates to assign responsibilities and depict failures in the crisis management system, precociously suggesting that the pandemic could be just another moral panic similar to the bird flu of 2005. Through humour, newspapers stressed the cyclic nature of health risks, reducing the impact of dramatic information on the audience. It is therefore suggested that the sociological analysis of a media outlet in the context of a complex and emotional case such as the 2009-2010 pandemic implies its deconstruction layer by layer in order to obtain a clear picture of the mechanisms of social construction of reality.

Keywords: editorial humour, risk society, news constraints, journalism

Introduction

Newspaper cartoons and other expressions of humour are valuable resources to study social trends and shared meanings, while providing information about the way social meaning is attached to specific risk events.

Simple and easy to interpret and decode, humour reaches a section of the audience usually not influenced by written news and therefore not included in the overall debate over the impacts of the risk society. Its study provides clues to design better communication strategies for events marked by uncertainty.

The headlines of two stories, published in the Portuguese newspaper *Público* during the global build-up, led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare the first pandemic of the 21st century on June 11, 2009. The Health Line 24 will encourage users to heal each other in a wikipedia logic and swine sue journalists for libel and damages. Despite the familiar template that resonates with a newspaper style, these fragments correspond to a discursive non-sense strictu sensu. They are only intelligible in the context of a humorous supplement, weekly published by this newspaper. Appropriately, its motto is: "It didn't happen, but it could have."

The Health Line 24 was the telephone service coordinated by the Ministry of Health to screen potential suspects of flu-like symptoms in order to alleviate pressure on the patient care units. At the peak of the pandemic in Portugal, in the second and third weeks of November 2009, the service could not respond in a satisfactory manner, thus justifying the joke about users being forced to heal each other.

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In contrast, the second headline may be explained by the discursive battle waged between WHO and the newsrooms. Following the first reported cases in Mexico, the Portuguese media have designated the disease as “Mexican flu”, a label that sparked panic in the tourism industry of this Central America’s country. They were right. To this day, the 1918-1919 pneumonic is still widely known as the Spanish flu, although it was not an epidemic confined to the borders of any specific country. It was then argued that the disease should be classified as “swine flu”, since the H1N1 virus had originated in pigs. However, this label also displeased economic interests in livestock, as it motivated indiscriminate slaughter of pigs in countries like Egypt. WHO finally announced that the disease should be designated as influenza A virus (H1N1).

This discursive struggle waged to define a new social problem sparked the inspiration to create a humorous text about the possible discomfort of pigs with the lack of newspaper accuracy. From a broader perspective, the two jokes express the larger editorial freedom enjoyed by humorists, since professional constraints force journalists to look for balances. This article discusses the merits and the validity of editorial humour stories applied to the case of swine flu.

Project

Much research has been devoted to the communication of risk in the face of disasters or other unforeseen accidents—the most prolific expressions of what Beck (1992) called the risk society. However, communication through images, either photographic or humorous remains to be examined, just as there are few studies on the role of editorial humour in the collective sublimation of the issues that arouse public alarm.

We seek to demonstrate in this article that humour had a relief role during news coverage of the pandemic flu, putting the real risk of contagion into perspective, playing with the consequences, and blaming the authorities and the media for the panic. We shall discuss how this function was put in practice long before the media discourse did the same.

We argue that humour is a journalistic tool comparable to the editorial column, expressing opinions not bound by the standards of objectivity that govern journalism. Through layers of meaning and different stylistic features that construct the connotative content of each humorous expression, there is an accepted space within the publications to make judgments that would not be accepted in traditional news pages. We also note that the constraints that ensure the subordination of reporters to professional standards become blurred in the case of humorists, opening a grey area within which (almost) everything can be written or drawn, under freedom of expression.

Social Functions of Humour

Humour’s success derives from its ability to act as an inverted image of the seriousness of speech imposed by institutions like the media (Mulkay, 1988). However, even in its most distorted versions, the humorous discourse maintains the pretension of representing reality, because it is endowed with meaning associated with real persons, institutions, or events. Therefore, it reflects cultural attitudes and shared beliefs of a fraction of society within an historical context (Giarelli, 2006).

Smyth (1986) studied the rapid proliferation of jokes in spoken folklore about the Challenger shuttle disaster and suggested that one function of humour facing disaster is the ability to represent the abstract concept of death in a way that can be mocked. In doing so, it empties the collective anxiety by integrating the most morbid details in a humorous structure. By making fun of ideas, institutions, or events that may precipitate its

own mortality, society expresses inhibited impulses about the taboo subjects, drawing pleasure from this behaviour. We have selected answers for the second example to this logic. It was published at the same time, as it became known—through a public comment of the President of the Institute of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine—that a pandemic could infect two to three millions Portuguese and cause 75,000 deaths in this country alone. The catastrophic scenario functioned as a spur for alarm and anxiety. The swine law suit helped to defuse it.

Smyth also drew attention to the impossibility of escaping the news representation of a catastrophic event in the contemporary society. He proposed that another function of humour in these circumstances is precisely the targeting of aggression towards the media and the power they wield over other social actors. Humour that places the media in the centre of mockery also acts as an implicit criticism of the devices that make a private universe—such as the case of the patient that desperately struggles to communicate his flu-like symptoms to a jammed telephone service—into a public event. Television shows, such as the widely known *Daily Show*, that mock real news through commentary represent an expression of this trend (Baumgartner and Morris, 2006).

Meyer (2000) systematized three additional features of humour—relief, incongruity, and superiority—usable in accordance with the purpose to unite or divide the audience. In stressful situations, humour can mock the threats and signal that they may not be as severe, producing collective relief in the audience; incongruity, in turn, is expressed when a society shares certain standards of reality and the use of humour can divert the audience's attention from the problem to the standards themselves, thus pointing out that deviations from the standards are laughable. Ultimately, the function of humour may be an exacerbation of one group over the others, pointing out its superiority in the face of real or perceived ignorance of “the other”, like adults laughing at child's follies or courtiers mocking the court jester.

Cartoons and Other Humorous Styles

Modern society operates through its texts. Symbolic representations that join text with image are therefore a useful mechanism to successfully reach the public. Editorial humour—in particular cartoons—provides cognitive maps to decode the everyday life, but sociology has devoted little attention to the visual discourse built on these supports (Greenberg, 2002). Morris (1993) argued that editorial cartoons present four advantages for the newspaper: They establish the source (the artist and newspaper) as an expert on the problem; they propose a frame by suggesting an interpretation and a course of action; they define a normative agenda that allows readers to evaluate the cartoon in moral terms; and they promote the desire for action, capitalizing symbolic resources to a particular cause.

In this context, we accept Gitlin's (1980) definition of news frames as “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (p. 6). In other words, a frame is an organizing idea beneath each newspaper item, even if the author did not explicitly accept it.

The comedian on a newspaper has a similar role to the columnist, expressing opinions on a topic without pretensions of objectivity (Connors, 2005). He has fewer constraints because of the absence of direct relationship with news sources and therefore he is not subject to external pressures. Making use of myths, narratives, metaphors, or cultural and symbolic representations, the cartoonist helps to spread news frames,

simplifying them to its roots (Gamson & Stuart, 1992). Conners (2005) found that to achieve this objective the comedian can make analogies with sport, festive occasions, film, or literary references, the entertainment industry, advertising, or television programs (pp. 482-486). Another resource, as noted by Smyth (1986) points out that the recycling of narrative structures had already used in the past (p. 249).

One of the merits of editorial humour lies in the capacity to charm readers who believe not to be eligible to participate in a debate at the more sophisticated level of the hard news sections. Cartoons only require a “minimum cognitive strain” (Giarelli, 2006, p. 74). Concision increases the impact of editorial humour, as its most obvious meaning is captured in a few seconds and not after reading a dense text column (Caswell, 2004, p. 17).

There are of course limits to the comedian. He has a narrow space of intervention and is expected to comment on issues already defined by the media (Greenberg, 2002). The arguments should be condensed into mini-narratives, crudely personalizing problems and building idealizations of the world. Therefore, its legacy is less durable than the news texts. Moreover, the comedian is not completely autonomous, in that he must absorb the prejudices and the editorial line of his publication and his audience expectations (Hansen, 1997, p. 1799). Even so, the humorous expressions provide important clues about the familiarity of ordinary people with specialized topics.

Methodology

This study followed the methods of Petersen (2002) to study the portrayals of human cloning in the Australian press and Conrad (1997) in his approach to the historical frames of genetics. All issues of the newspaper during the sample period were read and coded according previously anticipated frames, although later we adjusted the model to include unforeseen categories. Following procedures of discourse analysis, we divided each article by one or more frames provided by the usage of expert sources, the tone of sentences, the usage of imagery, and the association of the swine flu to other risk scares.

In the context of images, Barthes (1977) pointed out that one also has to realize the informational, the symbolic (or obvious), and the obtuse meanings of each photography or cartoon (pp. 52-54). Procedures of semiotics were hence used to compile a list of meanings associated with the expressions of newspaper humour through image.

Following Pierre Bourdieu’s (1996) concept of journalistic field, we inscribed this project in a line of studies that define journalism practice as a symbolic struggle between sources with conflicting or converging interests, which have different amounts of symbolic capital, and as such, enjoy different possibilities to influence the agenda in each historical context.

We have identified four humorous techniques used by the newspaper (mostly in its humorous pages, but also found in other sections) from April 2009 (the first news of the deaths in Mexico) to August 2010, when WHO declared the end of the pandemic. The cartoon consists of a single caricatured image with a possible caption; the strip corresponds to a sequence of three or more vignettes, usually predefined by the author; the photomontage glues the face of a public figure to a bizarre body or scenario; and the humorous text by itself dismisses any image. In humorous expressions of a single image, the success of humour depends on the shared knowledge between artist and audience; in compound expressions, such as the strips, it is easier to establish the parameters of debate (Giarelli, 2006, p. 64).

We have also identified during the sample period, all relevant textual references to swine flu in newspaper,

quantifying the number of items per day, the number of times the subject was treated on the first page, and the number of times that made headlines. By item, we mean any autonomous block of the newspaper, textual, illustrative or mixed, visually identifiable, suggesting to the reader that this is an independent unit. We have outlined the moments of hegemony of seven major news frames in the news coverage and in the humorous production: (1) the description of the epidemiology of the virus (severity, causes, history); (2) the battles for the definition of the disease's designation; (3) government statements appealing for normality; (4) impacts on economy and everyday life; (5) vaccination and resistance to vaccination; (6) accusations of media hysteria; and (7) accusations of poor risk management. Naturally, the definition of one or more frames in a news story or a humorous expression is a subjective exercise. This stage of the project is therefore more qualitative than quantitative, but we believe that the set of items accumulated over a given period allows us to identify the hegemonic frames of any given time, following Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) approach to interpretive packages expressed by nuclear messages.

All image outlets have connotative and denotative meanings (Barthes, 1977). Meaning and, by extension, humour is produced in two semiotic ways—verbally and visually (Tsakona, 2009). Humour is normally produced through the interaction between drawing and text whether by juxtaposition of concepts or by contradiction between them. Through Barthes' semiotics, an image can be decomposed by layers of meaning, from the most obvious to the most profound and unintended. The use of cultural resources should therefore be identified, as stigmatization, personalization, and other rhetorical figures provide clues about the author's intention. For instance, Giarelli (2006) analyzed the use of Frankenstein's metaphor in cartoons about cloning and concluded that cartoonists sometimes suggest an inference to their readers: If two subjects share some common characteristics, they may share all (p. 71).

We also interviewed two newspaper cartoonists, hoping to obtain additional information about the limits and objectives of the spaces of humour in the pages of *Público*.

Results and Discussion

The swine flu has killed 124 people in Portugal, in the autumn and winter of 2009-2010. The peak of flu-like symptoms occurred in November and December, months in which more than 10,000 people were infected each week and dozens were hospitalized (Direcção-Geral de Saúde, 2010). More than half of the deaths occurred in those two months, but the worsening of disease's indicators does not reflect the emphasis the newspaper devoted to the case. Indeed, as Eldridge and Reilly (2003) noted on their analysis of media coverage of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in British media, the scientific story may occur in a different timeline regarding the news story. We believe that this have happened with the swine flu in Portugal.

Table 1 distributes the number of items, the number of cover mentions and occasions on which the swine flu was the headline. The newspaper produced 785 items about the flu. Sixty-nine references were made on the first page—18 of which as headlines. The peak of coverage occurred in July, as cases proliferated throughout the world, but the virus arrival to Portugal was slower. The newspaper anticipated the threat, although there were no clinical cases to justify alarm. Earlier, in May there was a period of intense news coverage, which served to define the new social problem. The third peak occurred in November in conjunction with the spread of symptoms and the first deaths.

Table 1

Items, First Page References, Headlines, and Predominant Frames From April 2009 to August 2010, Público

Month	Item	First page	Headline	Predominant frame
April 2009	42	5	3	Description of epidemiology of the virus/Battles for the definition of the disease's designation
May 2009	91	8	1	Government statements appealing for normality/Impacts on economy and everyday life
June 2009	43	5	1	Government statements appealing for normality/Impacts on economy and everyday life
July 2009	140	15	7	Impacts on economy and everyday life
August 2009	90	9	2	Government statements appealing for normality/Impacts on economy and everyday life
September 2009	71	7	3	Government statements appealing for normality/Vaccination and resistance to vaccination
October 2009	88	8	1	Government statements appealing for normality/Vaccination and resistance to vaccination
November 2009	106	6	0	Government statements appealing for normality/Vaccination and resistance to vaccination
December 2009	34	1	0	Government statements appealing for normality/Vaccination and resistance to vaccination
January 2010	25	1	0	Government statements appealing for normality
February 2010	14	1	0	Accusations of poor risk management/Government statements appealing for normality
March 2010	3	0	0	Accusations of poor risk management/Government statements appealing for normality
April 2010	9	1	0	Accusations of poor risk management
May 2010	4	0	0	Government statements appealing for normality
June 2010	5	0	0	Government statements appealing for normality
July 2010	4	1	0	Government statements appealing for normality
August 2010	16	1	0	Government statements appealing for normality/Accusations of poor risk management

In January and February 2010, months in which the WHO and the European Commission have been criticized for having yielded to lobbying from the pharmaceutical industry, the story was no longer interesting for the Portuguese press. It was followed at a distance, almost without first page references.

From a clinical standpoint, the periods of stress were quite different. The peak of infection occurred in the last fortnight of November, during which more than 20,000 people were infected each week. December and January were the months in which more people died of the disease.

As suggested, the predominant frameworks varied over news coverage. In April 2009, the newspaper echoed the interpretive packages that we have designated as "Description of the epidemiology of the virus" and "Battle for the definition of the disease's designation". From May to September, the newspaper reported under the frames of "Government statements appealing for normality", "Impacts on the economy and everyday life", and occasionally "Accusations of poor risk management". In October and December, the frame of "Government statements appealing for normality" was still predominant but there were more information on the theme of "Vaccination and resistance to vaccination".

From January to August 2010, one can easily find "Accusations of poor risk management" and

“Accusations of media hysteria”, although health officials struggled to broadcast how the government was in control. In August, WHO declared the end of the pandemic. By then, the predominant interpretive package was again the “Accusations of poor risk management”. In a way, the newspaper was slow to calling into question the assumptions that official authorities have chosen to define the issue, confirming yet again the decisive influence of officials with scientific authority in the initial framing of controversial health topics (Traquina, Cabrera, Ponte, & Santos, 2001). However, at least section of the newspaper has reported otherwise.

Table 2 represents the monthly publication of one humorous approaches to the subject of swine flu. Twenty cartoons (some of which purchased abroad), seven strips, 19 photomontages, and 60 texts were published during the sample period.

Table 2

Humorous Items and Predominant Frames in Público, From April 2009 to August 2010.

Month	Humorous from item	Predominant frame
April 2009	11	Accusations of media hysteria
May 2009	13	Impacts on economy and everyday life/Accusations of media hysteria/Accusations of poor risk management
June 2009	-	-
July 2009	35	Accusations of poor risk management/Accusations of media hysteria
August 2009	13	Accusations of poor risk management/Accusations of media hysteria
September 2009	4	Accusations of poor risk management
October 2009	14	Accusations of media hysteria Vaccination and resistance to vaccination
November 2009	10	Accusations of poor risk management
December 2009	2	Vaccination and resistance to vaccination
January 2010	5	Accusations of poor risk management
February 2010	-	-
March 2010	1	-
April 2010	-	-
May 2010	2	Accusations of poor risk management
June 2010	-	-
July 2010	-	-
August 2010	2	Accusations of media hysteria

The treatment of swine flu in humorous items was as intense as in the news sections. After all, humour is generated by the mockery of current affairs. However, the use of comedy frames was different from the rest of the publication.

Humour as a place of rebellion is more effective as a device to critique. The absurd or the unreal allow claims that do not require auxiliary evidence, as required by professional standards of journalists. Thorough

factual checks, the search for witnesses or documents proving the allegations is exempted. Naturally, one runs the risk of libel or of injustice to public figures, but at the same time a healthy area of critique is fostered. One could assume that its value to the newspaper is precisely the indiscipline it resonates.

Since the beginning of the swine flu case, newspaper humorists downplayed the severity of the threat and compared it with the previous health panics like the outbreak of SARS in 2003 and the avian influenza in 2005. For instance, the last cartoon of our sample, published in late August 2010, fits the flu in a circular motion, on which every health threat is just a step on the way to the next big scare. The representation of the pandemic as just one more health problem denies its severity and places the debate on the level of the responsibilities of those involved in its public build-up.

In April 2009, almost simultaneously with the first reports on the situation in Mexico, the newspaper published texts and humorous cartoons that attacked the journalistic propensity for disaster. A good example is expressed in Figure 1.

Fig 1: I quote George Orwell: “The journalist serves the interests of no creature except himself.”

Fig 2: “If there is a guilty part, it should be the ducks!”

In this photomontage, published in April 2009, journalists are attacked by humorists on the account of their limited ability to challenge official positions. The dialogue represents one of the pigs in a higher level of consciousness, discussing the fragility of the journalistic process, while another, more naive, see nothing more than the finger of the ducks. The author hence produces comedy by exaggerating the Orwellian critique of journalists and by the incongruence of the new and unexpected culprit.



Figure 1. Photomontage. Source: April 2009. Unknown author.

It is quite evident in this example the meta-referential power of humour, which is allowed to express

doubts over the merits of its own outlet. One can find examples of this meta-function on editorial columns and interviews with subjects who cast doubts on the media's role. But humour is much more comfortable—and it is given a bigger latitude by the publication—in the critique of the newspaper itself.

Figure 2 is also representative.

Visibly unwell, the pig sneezes coins, which will enrich some external part. This cartoon uses a reminiscence of the childhood piggy bank, which is emptied with just one sneeze. The reader is left with the responsibility of guessing who will get the flying coins. It should also be noted the crack in the piggy bank, a blink to the already depleted Portuguese finances.

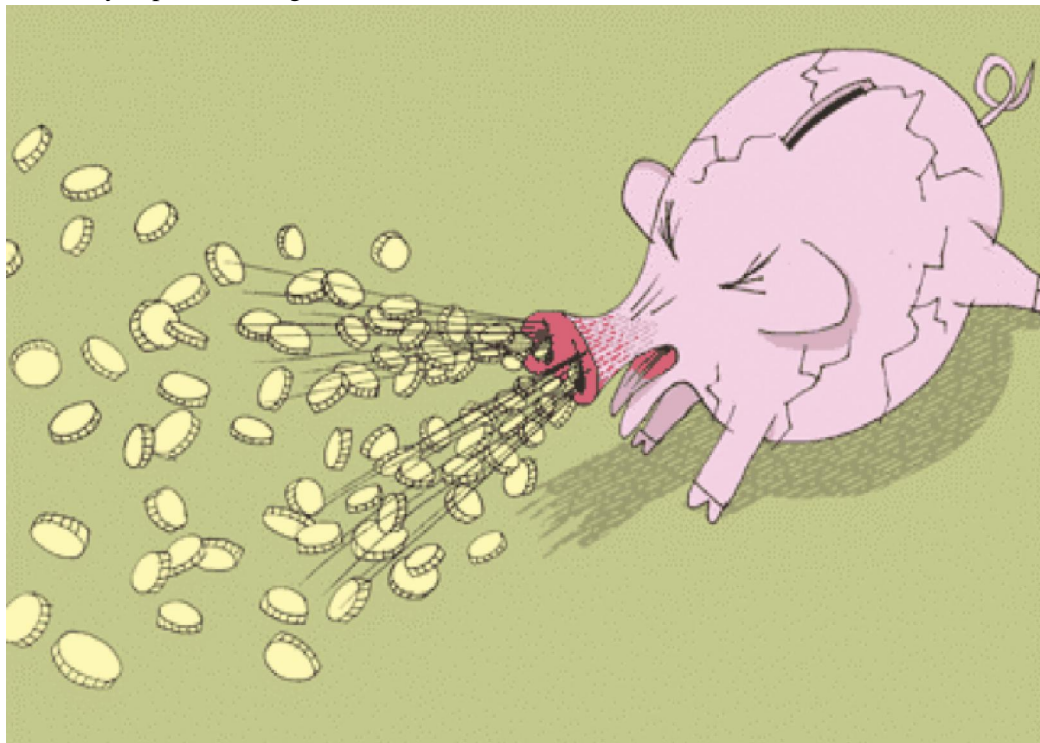


Figure 2. Cartoon 1. Source: April 2009. António Jorge Gonçalves.

The cartoon has a denotative meaning, as the pig was often used for designating the disease but is should be noted, at the connotative level, the association of the piggy bank to the money issue, as a symbol of economy and savings. The act of throwing money away is thus a metaphor for what the cartoonist thinks of official health politics. Importantly, in the first weeks of coverage, cartoons like this have sought to suggest vested interests in the pandemic's origin. As the author explains:

At this point—with the West at the brink of an economic crisis—I realized that we were seeing a media battle in which various parties were trying to get the better of the discussion using pragmatic arguments. Health authorities used the issue to reaffirm the importance of their decisions; the media (as usual) wanted to have larger audiences and played with the public's voyeurism (Interview with António Jorge Gonçalves, cartoonist, April 9, 2011).

Figure 3, published in May, exacerbates the previous two frames.

A little pig in the foreground sees his shadow amplified in the world's map, suggesting a gross distortion of its real impact in benefit of others. This cartoon is part of the list of humorous work that the newspaper

bought to foreign authors.

Notice just two additional examples. Figure 4, published in October, during the critical phase of the vaccination programme, challenged the medical authorities that imposed the vaccine. Although every citizen was free to choose, a huge media campaign boosted the importance of being vaccinated, selecting risk, and age groups. In the cartoonist's eyes, scientific evidence was not enough to urge the public to the vaccination needles but the free will was given very narrow latitude.

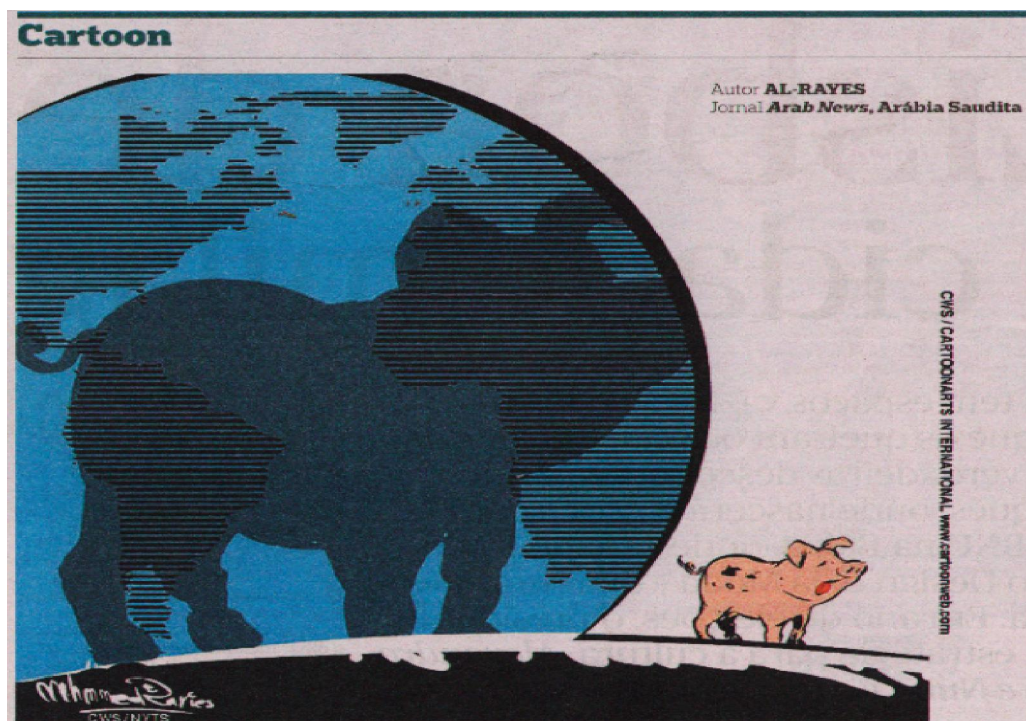


Figure 3. Cartoon 2. Source: May 2009. Repeated in October 2009. Al Rayes.

There is a clear association with Orwell's *Big Brother* and its oppression, which subordinates individual freedom to the needs of the collective. The syringe, which intentionally emerges from the television, offers no alternative to the individual who feels compelled to get vaccinated. We identify in this cartoon the news frames of "resistance to vaccination" as well as "Accusations of media hysteria".

I think we lived in a kind of ultimatum: In face of the (legitimate in my view) hesitation expressed by citizens at the lack of assurances from the vaccination program, authorities, in liaison with the media, used an offensive tone exploiting the fear. This patronizing attitude is recurrent in health authorities (Interview with António Jorge Gonçalves, cartoonist, April 9, 2011).

Figure 5, finally, represents the Minister of Health, which the humorous sections repeatedly addressed as "The Minister of Swine Flu".

Minister Ana Jorge became famous for her daily appearances on television in connection with this case. In January 2010, the newspaper mocked her actual role, representing her with an evil look, washing her hands with all the precepts taught by the Ministry and wiping them to a roll of paper labeled as "false pandemic".

No text of the news sections dared to personalize so much the responsibility of the case, pointing the finger at the minister and so clearly suggesting collusion with other interests.

It is also worth discussing the degree of autonomy within the comedian's publication. *Público* is the daily newspaper with the longest and more successful humorous section. One of the comedians (António Jorge Gonçalves) recognized that there are discussions with the newspaper editor about the topic and the approach of each cartoon, but it remains as an artist's decision. The other one (Luís Afonso) stressed that with the current software to access the newspaper back office, the editor sees only cartoons when they are already online. Hence the only constraints are organizational (when there are already too many pieces on the subject in one issue) or commercial (when the interest of a sponsor can be tweaked), within a framework of healthy autonomy.

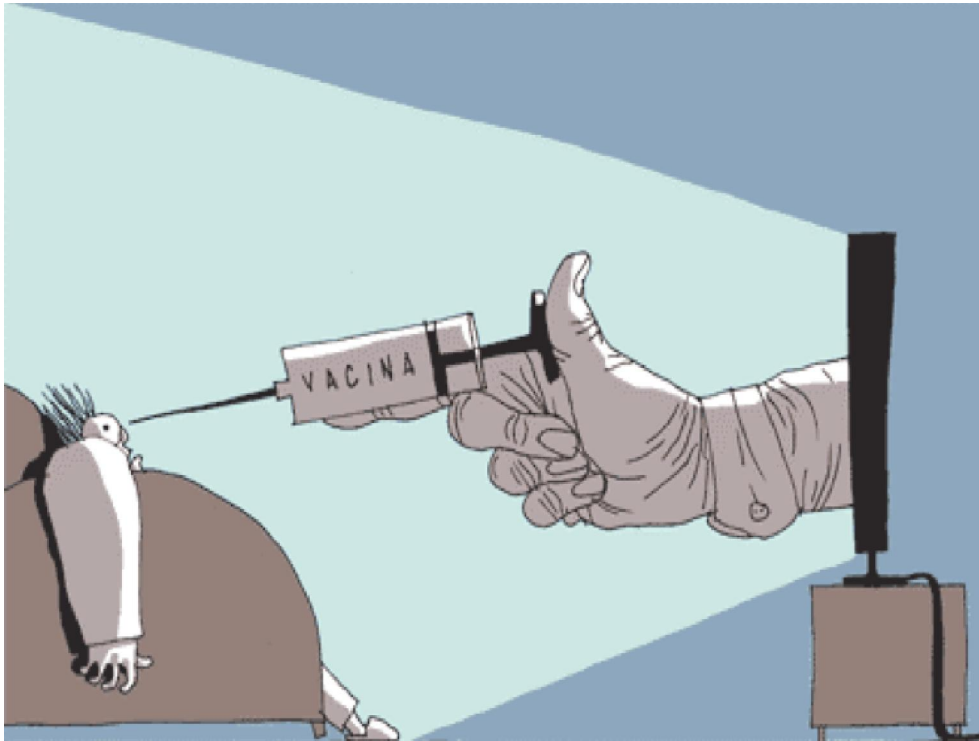


Figure 4. Cartoon 3. Source: October 2009. António Jorge Gonçalves.



Figure 5. Cartoon 4. Source: January 2010. António Jorge Gonçalves.

They found their work more relatable to the columnist's than to the journalistic function. They express free opinions, but the work still requires an analysis on the current affairs (to see which topics are broad enough to warrant treatment) and documentation (to know what to draw).

Both valued the advantage of not dealing with sources since it provides a safeguard against the sanctions and pressures from external sources. Both defined themselves as representatives of the audience, i.e., social agents halfway between the newspaper and its public, a sort of moral reserve or a reader's ombudsman.

Conclusions

The role of humour in the journalistic construction of risk stories warrants further approaches. We believe that in this case, the humorous sections have embodied the relief role envisioned by Morris in the face of the information overload produced about a previously unknown threat. Cartoonists joke about what is important as the transformation of fearful subjects into current news proceeds.

At the same time, we find in humour a willingness to discuss news frames—even if not in an objective way—that is non-existent in the traditional news sections. Even the columnists or the interviewees who questioned the government's risk management waited until late June 2009, two months after the case's spur, to voice their concerns. One would expect the cartoonists to refrain from commenting on the most controversial issues, hoping thereby not alienating readers. But instead, we found a healthy trend of vigorous commentary about the controversial and serious instances of public life since the beginning of the affair.

The role of humour in the contemporary press justifies sociology's attention. We therefore recommend additional studies seeking to gauge the scope of these sections on attitudes and behaviors about the risk society. Moreover, crisis managers should take into account these non-conventional spaces of intervention in the press, realizing that a cartoon like Figure 5 has a tremendous impact on the audience, suggesting doubts on the merits

of health officials plans at the worst possible timing.

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