

The Portuguese news industry's perspectives and roles on the making of active citizens: readers' skills to comment on the news

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Abstract

This article investigates the news industry's perceptions of letters to the editor and online comments in the context of the digital world and of the challenges journalists face. Using a sample of 11 semi-structured interviews with journalists and ombudsmen in Portugal, we analyse the news industry's views on readers' ability to comment on the news and on the industry's possible contributions to creating critical and engaged publics. The interviewees express concern about harmful behaviours in online environments and point to differences in online and

offline contexts of participation. The results, however, do not reveal a proactive attitude in the news industry as the news professionals focus on their daily work activities as a form of media education and argue that schools and the public, instead, should take the lead in these activities. To support their statements, the interviewees cite factors such as the possibilities of digital culture, the promotion of media education, the need to foster a reciprocal relation between learning and the existing forms of journalism newsroom culture.

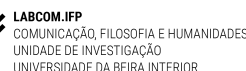
Keywords: letters to the editor; online comments; portuguese online news media; journalism and democracy; media education; digital possibilities.

Participatory spaces for citizen engagement: letters to the editor and online comments

LETTERS to the editor and online comments provide two paradigmatic examples of public forums where readers have their voices heard. Today, letters to the editor face new competition from online reader comments, but online comments may reach different audiences – posting a comment is simple, quick and easy, while submitting a letter requires extra effort and time (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011). Although this subject has received much less scholarly attention than other areas of journalism studies, relevant academic research has not ceased in recent years (Perrin, 2016; Barrios, 2015, 2013; Reader, 2015; Silva, 2014a, Silva 2012a; Ribeiro, 2014, 2013;

Data de submissão: 2017-10-01. Data de aprovação: 2017-12-04.

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



Puustinen, 2013; Pastor Pérez, 2012; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011; Jiménez, 2011; Young, 2011; Nielsen, 2010).

Even in the context of newer forms of engagement, letters to the editor remain an important vehicle of readers' opinions in mainstream media publications around the world (Perrin, 2016; Silva, 2014a). Letters to the editor prove that media organizations' interest in audience participation is not a new trend or phenomenon. The professionalization of journalism, though, has changed the nature and role of these letters. They once formed the centrepieces of newspapers due to the importance attributed to critical opinion essays by well-known writers published as letters to the editor in 18th-century British and American newspapers. During the long process of the triumph of facts over opinion in the 19th century (Schudson, 1978), letters were allocated to the inside pages of penny newspapers in clearly marked sections intended to distinguish "professional" from "lay" contributions. Thus, "in the new world of the press as a medium for the masses [...] letter writing [...] gradually became less of a professional occupation and more of a customer service [...] for editors to encourage public engagement with their papers" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007, p. 39). For years, letters to the editor were the only form of audience participation and interactivity with mass-media news products. Letters, thus, served as a pre-digital genre of user-generated content (Millioni, Vadratsikas & Papa, 2012; Robinson, 2010).

Many scholars have confirmed the significance of letters to the editor, highlighting their relevance to contemporary public discourse (Gregory & Hutchins, 2004), as a feedback opportunity for the ordinary citizen (Raeymaeckers, 2005), that broadens public communication and debate while allowing the entrance of new topics of discussion besides the established news agenda (Silva, 2014a). "In short, letters are an important way for outside voices to formally participate in the narration of mass media stories" (Young, 2011, p. 3). They can be considered to be a mid-range form of political participation (Perrin, 2016, p. 55) as they constitute "a fragmented, contentious, sparsely and selectively populated zone that gives a few readers the chance to participate in particular, individual, and mainly expressive ways in 'the media' and occasionally perhaps beyond that in 'politics'" (Nielsen, 2010, pp. 33-34).

Nevertheless, readers must obey specific rules to get their letters published. As Silva (2012a, p. 260) concluded, "the public debate that occurs in the letters' section is a construction of selected voices and opinions. Many of these criteria remain unknown to the public, but they are intimately related to journalistic routines and practices." In addition to providing a (somewhat mediated) forum for citizen engagement and public debate, letters to the editor may help "communicate a newspaper's brand identity through representing the quotidian preoccupations of its readership" (Richardson, 2008, p. 1). The simple presence of a letters-to-the-editor section can demonstrate that a media organization is open to diverse perspectives, fitting the image of the Fourth Estate (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts, 1978) and increasing the organization's credibility in the eyes of the public (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007).

Despite the recognized strategic value of audience participation, many scholars have shown that journalists have negative views of their audiences as not capable of expressing ideas in a relevant way (Sorlin, 1992) or as unrepresentative of the general population (Gans, 1979). These views can be explained by journalists' perceptions of themselves as autonomous professionals who can make more valid decisions than their publics (Schlesinger, 1978). As shown by Wahl-Jorgensen

(2007), Raeymaeckers (2005) and Silva (2014a), the devaluation of letters to the editor also stems from journalists' sceptical view of what they perceive as the poor quality of public participation, even using an idiom of insanity labelling some readers as "crazy" or "insane". These views not only indicate a depreciation of the public's expression of opinion but also, to extent, de-legitimize the value of the letters section as a forum for readers to have their opinions heard, when some contributors fall short from the ideal of public deliberation and dialogue that the correspondence section might represent.

Today, however, participatory journalism – from citizen blogs to citizen stories, from readers' comments to discussion forums and social networking – is challenging both traditional newsrooms and the hegemony of journalism as the gatekeeper of the "processes and effects of ordinary citizens' contributions to gathering, selecting, publishing, distributing, commenting on and discussing the news that is contained within an institutional media product" (Hermida, 2011, p. 15). Those new ways by which audience feedback can be solicited creates thus "new challenges and concerns for all involved, from the author-editors who manage such forums to the individual participants who turn to them as outlets for their expression" (Reader, 2015, p. 26).

Many major news outlets remain averse to opening up significant stages of the news production process to audiences (Hermida, 2011) and insist on maintaining domination and control over the news field (Chung, 2007). A new paradox seems to have emerged in the relationship between media and their audiences: an increased desire for and interest in audience participation even as audiences are excluded from the news production process (Silva, 2014b).

Readers' comments, as a form of participation in the interpretation stage (Domingo Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer & Vujnovic, 2008), offer potential for critical discussion of public matters. These comments provide one of the newest ways for audiences to be heard (Henrich & Holmes, 2013) and to engage in extensive levels of participation. Readers' comments can add "perspectives, insights, and personal experiences that can enrich a news story as well as enabling the tracking of user interests or getting sources and tips for future stories" (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011, p. 134), while having the potential to "increase our understanding of public opinions, how the public makes decisions and how beliefs are formulated" (Henrich & Holmes, 2013, p. 1). Journalists can thus consider these spaces for comments like a "community-building and engagement tool, as a place to help people connect, as conversation about the news story or news topic, as a product feature with monetizing potential, as a source of information, and as a way to extend the story" (Robinson, 2010, p. 132).

Nevertheless, online comments have proven to be quite controversial due to their perceived low quality (Reich, 2011), uncivil and disruptive discourse (Meyer & Carey, 2014) or venomous dialogue (Zamith & Lewis, 2014). Anonymity has been suggested to be an important reason for the uncivil tone of online discourse, granting users license to say things they would not if the content were published under their own names (Reich, 2011; Singer & Ashman, 2009). Namely, "the anonymity of the online posts might have freed the audience from public scrutiny and judgment that limits opinion expression, in comparison to letters to the editor, which contained the writer's name" (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011, p. 314).

Overall, studies have shown that journalists support, welcome and encourage active engagement and audience participation but there are criticisms of the quality of some comments, as well

as a permanent discussion about the degree of control or freedom that can be allowed (Trygg, 2012), namely in what concerns moderation policies.

Democratic potential

When reflecting on online comments, it is valuable to consider the context of critical literacy, which is highly connected with audiences' critical reading of the world and participatory dimensions. These issues are latent in the ways that the news industry chooses who can participate and how they view online comments. Journalistic standards are connected to democratic standards, which mutually influence each other. In this context, "a lack of media literacy hampers a citizen's access to accurate and independent media" (Negreyeva & Prasad, 2012, p. 33).

These previous aspects are also related to the need to consider which actors can contribute to promoting critical readers and commenters. Letters to the editor and readers' comments go through a selection phase that is also related to the public's ability to critically read the world. While schools play an important role in promoting this capacity, the news industry is also a major influence (Brites, 2017b). Critical literacy is a necessary component of literate citizens and of democratic societies (Gregory & Cahill, 2009). Freire and Macedo (2005/1987) refer to the emancipatory literacy political project, which promotes a definition of literacy viewing citizenship as a lifelong project (Gregory & Cahill, 2009; Dewey, 2007). In fact, critical literacies are a step forward in matters of democratic correspondence of the citizens, due to the fact that being valuable active in the current media and information environment is a key factor of success. This can be easily achieved with the societal involvement of different media and social actors. "Citizenship begins with a sense of belonging, first in one's immediate life, and then in locales such as the home or school" (Clark & Monserrate, 2011, p. 429). Media education is proposed as a solution to the growing demands for active citizenship in democratic societies (Kleemans, 2016). Informed citizens make democracy work (Milner, 2002) and need a certain degree of literacy to acquire valid civic knowledge (Dahlgren, 2009). In this context, news literacy has the potential to connect the worlds of journalists and audiences, which have grown increasingly unrelated (Mihailidis, 2012).

Do professional journalists have some roles and responsibilities in this democratic need? Brites (2015a) and Brites (2015c) found that audiences dislike having little access to journalistic environments and that the distance of traditional journalism from the public is perceived negatively and pushes audiences away. Brites (2017b) also reported that journalists tend to avoid the role of actively contributing to public education – other than through their daily life activities as journalists – and believe that other actors, especially schools, should act as learning facilitators.

Journalists, therefore, can address issues of literacy and democracy. "The task of journalism education has been defined in relation to both the professional needs of the journalism industry and the need to educate well-informed citizens" (Clark, 2013, p. 1). Media activists criticize mainstream media and their usual agenda for tending to neglect important issues, such as anticipating the 2008 global financial crisis (Clark, 2013, p. 4). From the point of view of citizens and alternative media, professional journalists are placed in an uncomfortable situation toward audiences of all ages that are placed apart. For instance, when individuals feel invited to share their worldviews as media creators and/or consumers and when they are given possibilities to establish

these considerations in “non-threatening environments that enable them to co-learn with those whose life experiences differ from their own, they may be able to consider [...] whether or not their worldviews are consistent with the work of media activists” (Clark, 2013, p. 13). Clark and Monserrate (2011, p. 427) explained how high-school journalism experiences can be used to promote socialization: “participation in high school journalism further socializes young people into an understanding of journalism’s role in relation to citizenship within that collective”. Audiences consider their connection to professional journalism to be more fruitful if they have opportunities to get close to journalism and journalists and to go further than simple sources of news (Brites, 2015a). This connection can happen regardless of audiences’ democratic ability and potential to comment online (Strandberg & Berg, 2013).

Journalists have increased responsibilities in the current digital fluid environment, where there is a flood of information that leads to an increasing difficulty in understanding and selecting information. Media literacy can be a part of the response to this digital culture era and its implications in searching reliable information (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). Hobbs (2010) defends that digital and media literacy programs should construct learning environments where audiences can learn how to ask more critical questions, better listen, use collaborative multimedia tools and establish connections between their world and the wider environment. Frau-Meigs (2017) also points to the need to connect media literacy with the citizens’ need for a critical view of the world. Even if journalists are not always aware of their responsibility of engaging audiences in news and media literacy, some of the existing experiences show positive results.

“Some news literacy practitioners emphasize that they are not in the business of teaching journalism. However, offering children and teenagers the chance to do professional journalism for an hour, a day or a week provides very memorable lessons. Reporting is fun, scary and demanding, and there’s nothing like trying it even for a very short time to appreciate all of that. Newsrooms staffs also learn from this activity as working with young people breaks stereotypes about them.” (McMane, 2016, p. 18).

Online comments’ management policies and strategies around the world: the current context and the Portuguese case

Decisions on whether and how to moderate readers’ comments have been seen as highly problematic by news organizations around the world. Over time, media outlets have explored various moderation options through trial and error, including more radical decisions such as abandoning online news comments. In a study of the reader-comment management strategies of 24 European and North American online newspapers, Reich (2011) identified two main approaches: pre-moderation performed before publication of comments and post-moderation performed after publication only in case of complaints about a specific comment or topic.

The World Editors Forum (2013, p. 21), which investigated best practices for moderating online comments, found that, of 104 news organizations across 63 countries, 42 news organizations opted to moderate comments after publication, and 38 before publication, while 16 followed

mixed strategies similar to reputation-based solutions, such as collaborative/crowd-sourced moderation. Three years later, the World Editors Forum engaged a total of 78 news organizations in 46 countries through a workshop, interviews and an online survey to find that 39% of the inquired organizations moderate comments after they are published, while 29% pre-moderate them. More than half said that their journalists and editors read the comments but “when pressed further, very few have their journalists regularly participate in the conversation, citing issues of time, workload and willingness” (World Editors Forum, 2016, p. 16).

These news organizations’ decisions can be explained by many factors, particularly the amount of human resources available and the consequent costs for news organizations. “Managing participation at any level or in any process of the organization will lead to a need for more capacity, more working hours, and more resources from the company side” (Nyirő, Csordás & Horváth, 2011, p. 132). The ongoing controversies surrounding the quality of online debates are another key factor in moderation policies. Although non-moderation (or post-moderation) can be viewed as the best policy based on resources management, it can lead to a series of other problems, such as the posting of abusive and defamatory comments which damage the organization’s brand (Canter, 2013, p. 612).

By 2014, some newsrooms, including Reuters, Recode and Mic, had decided to move from online comments to Facebook comments with the aim to improve the quality of the debate and prevent anonymity. These news organizations also viewed social media as the new online forum for public debate on the news. In social media, though, the challenges are many and vary depending on the platform. As Domingo explained, “newsrooms do not have full control over the rules of what is expected and acceptable in these social media spaces. Journalists feel the need to be there because that is where their audience spends a lot of its online time” (2015, p. 160).

Portuguese media organizations are no exception to these challenges concerning moderation policies. Some particularities in its media environment, though, should be considered. Portugal is classified in the Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004), characterized by the relatively late development of capitalism, industrialization and democratic traditions and the late development of mass press (reflected in low circulation figures) or a generally weak media market. The country has only five paid daily newspapers: *Diário de Notícias* (1864–), *Público* (1990–), *Jornal de Notícias* (1888–), the newspaper *i* (2009–) and *Correio da Manhã* (1979–). Moreover, Portuguese media groups have experienced difficult times exacerbated since 2007/2008 by the global financial and economic global crisis, which has hit the more peripheral Eurozone economies, such as Greece, Spain and Portugal, especially hard (Silva, 2015: 47).

Making a brief examination of the online comments management options taken by the five paid daily newspapers and public service television and radio websites in the country, at the date two newspapers (*Diário de Notícias* and *Jornal de Notícias*) use Facebook-commenting through the Facebook comments plugin, while newspaper *i*, public service television RTP and radio Antena 1 outsource comments’ management to Disqus, a blog comment hosting service. *Correio da Manhã* has a pre-moderation system, assessing every comment before it is published, while *Público* has a somewhat more sophisticated way of involving users in moderation and at the same time maintaining editorial control (a so-called collaborative model) – audience members can become

“community members” (through the accumulation of points), sharing the moderation duties with the community manager of the newspaper.

Methodology

In this article, we consider the evolution of letters to the editor and readers' comments from the perspective of the news industry, focusing on its views of being citizens and readers. The main research questions are: How does the news industry perceive readers' capacity to comment on the news? And how does the news industry view itself contributing to critical and engaged publics?

This article is part of a larger research project seeking to more deeply understand news audiences (i.e. young people, families and educators). In this first stage of the project, we focus on the production dimension, following Buckingham's (2008) advice to adopt a holistic view connecting production, text and audience. To investigate production, we analysed 11 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Portuguese journalists, news editors and former news ombudsmen. The interviewees were selected due to their expertise and were considered to be good informants in this context (Höijer, 2008). Some were or had been related to news media projects, or their news media work had a relevant presence in Portuguese society. In particular, all the interviewees or their news organizations were related to or promoted news literacy projects (e.g. school newspapers, workshops for teachers and students).

These interviews conducted in 2015 were aimed at identifying the elements that define news literacy in the context of the news-making industry and determining whether the interviewees were aware of their role in news media education and the promotion of democratic public awareness. The interview script contained questions on the news industry's role in the promotion of news literacy and citizenship and on the intersection of citizenship, letters to the editor and online comments. The interview data were analysed using NVivo software version 11.3.2 (1888).

The news industry and its views of readers' capacity to comment on the news

Today, the relationship between journalism and the public is multidimensional. These many aspects must be considered to understand the industry and the dimensions of change it is undergoing, keeping in mind its past structures of interactions and how they operated. In this study, we analysed online comments, letters to the editor and interviewees' representations of different publics and journalists in an exercise looking inside and outside the journalistic field.

We identified three themes concerning the public's capacities that emerged in the journalists and ombudsmen's discourses. First, across these themes, there generally was a negative perception of readers' willingness and abilities and the evolution of readers' comments and views of the news. This image contrasted with the celebratory promise in the early years of Internet 2.0, when the positive and participatory online possibilities for common citizens were anticipated as inevitable (Castells, 2008; Loader, 2007; Jenkins, 2006).

One of the most cited themes in the interviews was *behaviour in online environments*, especially regarding online comments. Such behaviour was associated with anonymity and the cause of harm. This view put in perspective the one-time enthusiasm for an online project with a truly

interactive dialogue between the public and journalists: “the majority of commentators are fascists and xenophobes; they don’t have anything positive. The ideal situation was that people could have a dialog with us, making questions, pushing us further” (newspaper deputy editor). The same editor also pointed to the differences between online and offline environments and argued that the newspaper had not yet gained many benefits from its presence on social networks. The deputy editor stated: “online comments that have vulgar or dirty words are difficult to control, whereas in letters to the editor, people are identified; it is compulsory to be published. [...] It is good to have an echo in social networks. But our potential is bigger than the results. We have 1 million fans on Facebook, and we take very little credit for it” (newspaper deputy editor). Social networks, however, created a different environment for offensive comments as having a picture and a name was mandatory for users. According to the interviewees, this led to less offensive comments.

Perhaps due to this negative view of the online world, the interviewees expressed strong opinions about the *differences between online and offline behaviours*, with older readers having a nostalgic view of writing letters to the editor. While discussing and looking through a print newspaper that still received many letters to the editor, along with online comments, newspaper editor 1 stated that this case was uncommon among newspapers. Readers, though, still wrote long letters to issue protests, make suggestions and call for interventions. According to this editor, this newspaper was different as it still advocated social causes, in line with the findings of McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2007). In contrast, while browsing through online newspapers using an iPad, newspaper editor 2 voiced a more positive opinion about the online relationship with the public and explained that letters to the editor mostly concerned opinion articles. Editor 2, a highly technical professional, stated that these letters were carefully written, much like newspaper articles. Editor 2 added that the issue was that the online world placed journalists under constant scrutiny, diminishing the confidence of some who were always being ‘verified’ by readers.

These differences between online and offline environments and the newness of this situation for the news industry led organizations to adopt different strategies to deal with comments and different standards for each type of consumer participation. ‘The reader, in a system of merit, can have rights inside the system: we have a comments editor, a community editor that is a type of judge, that will decide. It is a form of reader participation’ (newspaper editor 2). Freedom of expression was a matter considered when making decisions regarding imposing rules on readers’ comments, which could be considered to be an act of censorship and a restriction of liberties: “There is a perverse effect from these decisions [to shut down reader comments] because of the supposed injuries to the freedom of expression” (national radio station deputy editor).

Another theme warranting discussion was *discontentment with harmful behaviour*. Some interviewees’ discourses strongly pointed to a negative view of the public, especially those which made online comments, that required the news media to develop stricter policies than Facebook and letters to the editors. These ideas are not new, support the findings of Gans (1979) and Sorlin (1992) on the sceptic image that journalists have towards the audience, and have not changed much with the Internet. This negative view of readers’ comments drove the news media to adopt different policies to check comments and not allow harm to be done through their websites: “Is it coffee talk? Is so, then take the comment out! [...] We had an internal system with 25 comments

editors, from journalists to the copy desk. But this was not a sustainable system” (newspaper editor 2). This negative opinion identified differences from a time that had passed away when readers more regularly approached journalists. This opinion also contained nostalgia for the times when journalists had a superior level of knowledge compared to the public.

In addition to the perception of online news as potentially harmful, the interviewees also shared negative opinions about the issues the public rose for the news media. One editor expressed regretted that journalism has found itself in a very difficult situation today and lost the confidence of its publics: “I cannot make an average, but we have news each half an hour for 24 hours, and we receive one or 2 emails per week. It is too passive a relationship” (national radio station deputy editor).

Possible contribution by the news industry to creating better publics

Given this discussion, how does the news industry see itself as contributing to creating better publics? This is an important question when considering the democratic responsibilities of journalism (Levine, 2014; Mihailidis, 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010). Although the journalists interviewed generally considered they work performed in their profession in everyday life to be sufficient to fulfil their democratic role (Brites, 2017b), we can identify four specific contributions which journalists saw themselves as making.

First are the *possibilities of digital culture*. Newspaper editor 2, who played with an iPad throughout the interview and believed that preoccupation with technological evolution is a main characteristic of newspapers, widely discussed the new possibilities of the digital culture, particularly to better explain issues to consumers. Nevertheless, we should also highlight that even editor 2 anticipated difficulties adapting the important innovations of digital culture to deliver better information to the public. Editor 2 mentioned that one possibility allowed by new technologies was to make public the backstage of the newsroom. For instance, even if organisations produced DVDs, they still might not produce an online version as it took time and money and demanded high final quality, which was difficult, even for news media producers. “When I say that the readers help us to make the newspaper and that they participate, I am not doing rhetorical speech” (newspaper editor 2). Regarding social networks, the editors emphasized the need to pay attention to journalistic values and rules and to ensure that journalists acted as journalists even there.

Considering the *promotion of media education*, the interviewees reluctantly accepted their role in this matter (Brites, 2017b) but did note areas where they could act: “Regarding media education, our concern is to make a type of clear journalism, to use simple and understandable language. Media literacy is a matter of day-to-day practices” (newspaper editor 2). “We know that the choice of a front-page photograph of Socrates [a former prime minister who was arrested] or Cristiano Ronaldo gets more clicks. But we are not here to give fame; we are here to give information. Literacy is useful; it is a question of citizenship, people being well informed” (newspaper deputy editor). The interview data indicated two problems related to the implementation of media literacy programs. These programs were a lower priority for journalists than direct journalistic activities, and as mentioned, they found it sufficient to perform their role of making the news. Carefully producing the news was equal to promoting media literacy.

Some interviewees found it problematic to view journalists as actors in this process of promotion of media education. Paradoxically, they asserted that consumers should learn about the journalism field but through school or on their own: “[Regarding the publics], what shocked me the most is to see that consumers know so little about media processes. [...] This leads to the fact that people can unknowingly use information that is not good to make decisions in their lives” (former ombudsman). A former ombudsman saw this ignorance as making the public more vulnerable: “Why I was an ombudsman? I was astonished how people made such wrong criticisms due to a lack of knowledge of the news media processes” (former ombudsman and news editor who promoted a national news literacy program). Therefore, he felt it important to explain the role of newsrooms: ‘Several times, I felt the need to explain this to the readers’ (former ombudsman and news editor who promoted a national news literacy program).

This last responsibility was linked to a relational view also presented by the interviewees, especially by the ombudsmen and journalists who took part in educational projects. They saw a *reciprocal relation of learning* as a positive and needed function of the news media: “one of the ombudsman’s roles is to show that this system works. What was interesting was that the journalist would try to say, ‘You don’t know how this works!’ And the reader would say, ‘Yes, I know’, and explain how he knows. To deconstruct this combined condition of journalistic work is one of the most relevant things” (former ombudsman and news editor). “DN was a newspaper directed at decision makers. Even so, there was a lot of illiteracy. Some of the readers used to ask questions that revealed a lack of knowledge of journalistic processes. [...] Today, the concept of literacy is even more important” (former ombudsman). This opinion aligns with the findings of other studies (Brites, 2015a; Clark, 2013; Mihailidis, 2012). “Today, it is a more reciprocal relationship than in the past. [...] The Internet gives the possibility of a better, more in-depth type of participation. [...] Because of that, we were impelled to be more proactive, at the same time that readers became more active” (newspaper editor). “All this soup where we are is moving ... a lot. I still think that journalists did not lose their moderator roles, but the truth is that people have access to what is going on” (public-service online, television and radio journalist).

At the same time, journalists generally also had a corporate nature. The *journalism newsroom culture* was one of the most cited justifications for the media making all the decisions regarding the newsroom culture and journalistic norms. “There is no tradition of journalists trying to know who their publics are. They write for themselves, for their friends, for themselves. This is a permanent fight in the newsrooms, to try to write to the reader” (newspaper editor 1).

Another important theme was the on going lack of financial investment in newsrooms due to the financial crisis (Silva, 2015). ‘We need readers, listeners and TV watchers that understand us better. We need to take care of them; otherwise, they will go away. Mostly, we need to make them stay; most of the press, newspapers are losing readers every day. It is a serious problem’ (public-service online, television and radio journalist).

Discussion and conclusions

As noted, Dewey (2007) described literacy and citizenship as lifelong issues that affect each other and are related to journalism, digital opportunities and the public. Supporting this idea, Ne-

greyeva and Prasad (2012) argued that the close connections of good standards of democracy and journalism make both prerequisites for effective media literacy promotion, while Dahlgren (2009) contended that a minimum level of literacy is needed to possess valid civic knowledge. Andrews and McDougall (2012) call attention to the relevance of mediation and consecutive participation in daily life. Letters to the editor and readers' comments can reveal and promote these opportunities.

Given that this is one of the least studied areas of journalism, especially in connection to critical literacy and daily civic needs, this article gives valuable insights into audiences from the perspective of the news industry. At a first glance, we would argue that this connection between journalism and its audiences in a critical form towards news is needed, regardless of the environments where journalists act. This is valuable, namely, if we consider the current situation where fake news easily spread (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Frau-Meigs, 2017; McMane, 2016), which requires critical audiences that can be able to search and decide among problematic information.

In the results from this investigation of the news industry's views of readers' capacity to comment on the news, the interviewees' discourses expressed a concern with *online environments behaviour*, particularly in online comments. This led to another strong emphasis in all the interviews: the *differences between online and offline behaviours*. In the interviews, though, editor 2, who had a more positive relation with technology, and the ombudsmen, who also had a more positive view of the role of technology in journalism, thought that the challenges to journalism posed by the online world could improve the news media's activities involving the public. A third related theme highlighted was *discontentment with harmful behaviour*. This theme was the most negative criticism of readers' capacity to comment on the news and expressed by all the interviewees. As well, the first two themes revealed increasingly negative views over time, from letters to the editor to readers' online comments.

Considering views on the news industry's role or possible contributions to creating better publics, the interviewees' answers identified four possible contribution to aspects already intrinsically connected with the daily life of newsrooms and with journalistic culture rather than pro-active initiatives to increase public interest in the news and democracy.

The possibilities of digital culture, as hypothesized, enabled connections between journalists and their publics and facilitate access to news. The second of the four identified contributions was the *promotion of media education*. The ombudsmen interviewed tended to believe that journalists should have an active role in attempting to connect citizens with the news, including through promoting special programmes on media education. The journalists, in contrast, were more likely to view their work capturing the truth in clear language as a form of media literacy. The journalists also thought that schools and citizens themselves were the ones who had to make efforts in this area. They also pointed to a need to foster a *reciprocal relation of learning* which can be reinforced by the Internet. Finally, when discussing possible contributions, both journalists and ombudsmen identified the characteristics of the *journalism newsroom culture*, including the effects of the financial crisis and journalists' tendency to ignore external opinions challenging their perceptions of the world.

These findings emphasized a profound and persistent disconnection between journalists, newsrooms and their publics. Some decades after the emergence of the Internet and its celebrated democratic potential, we found that our interviewees were especially concerned with the global

financial crisis and held negative views of the publics' attitudes expressed in online comments. We must remember that the interviewees were selected because they or their news media were connected to or promoted media and news literacy projects. One might expect this sample to voice more positive views on the news industry's role or possible contributions to creating better publics and/or audiences that are more positively interested in news. Our conjunction is that with a sample of interviewees that had none of these selection criteria we would face even more discontinuities. In the future, it could be very relevant to work issues of journalism from the perspective of media literacy, in order to improve continuities and consider solutions to an on-going problem of critically read the world.

Acknowledgements

This article is part of the news literacy project ANLite: Audiences, News and Literacy (2014–): SFRH/BPD/92204/2013, funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (<http://anlitemediacom.com>).

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