

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: QUALITY OF JOURNALISM

NOTA INTRODUTÓRIA: A QUALIDADE DO JORNALISMO

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Quality of journalism, in journalism, within journalism. Irrespective of the phrasing (which is not indifferent and contains particularities we will not discuss here), this concept has an enduring tradition in the scientific field of journalism and communication studies. However, over the last few years, due to the economic and technological transformations in the media ecosystem — in which journalism operates — this debate has gained renewed interest, seeking solutions or strategies that allow understanding and addressing numerous issues. These include the need for new business models or the sustainability of journalism (according to the theoretical perspectives of this argument), the fight against misinformation, the relationship between journalism — and the production of journalistic narratives — and the production of journalistic narratives with formal professional sources (consultancies, public relations) or informal ones (spin doctors) or even the profound changes in the dynamics of newsrooms and work routines.

Nowadays, journalism is a point of confluence of a wider range of issues. Some argue that the quality of the political experience of today's societies and citizens is recognised to be directly related to the quality of the information produced by journalists and the media. However, this fact seems no longer enough to safeguard journalism from the threats hanging over it and the crises surrounding it in the last decades. Hence, we contend that studying and discussing the quality of journalism holds social significance; it is relevant within the journalistic field, impacting journalists directly, and has relevance within academia from a scientific standpoint.

The premise that studying the quality of journalism is socially relevant is grounded in the attributed role of journalism within democratic societies and its contribution to fostering citizenship (Adam & Clark, 2006; Carey, 1999; Curran et al., 2009; Franklin, 1997; Hackett & Uzelman, 2003; Harris, 2001; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2003; McNair, 2000; Meier, 2019; Meyer, 2004; Patterson, 2000; Tsfati et al., 2006). However, the relationship between journalism and democracy has challenges (Curran, 2005). It is crucial to note that

while there is a natural connection between journalism and democracy, it should not be assumed that journalism has the ability or obligation to create democracy (Schudson, 2003).

The quality of journalism, extensively deliberated in literature, emerges as a multidimensional and intricate concept that defies easy definition and assessment (Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015; Maguire, 2005; Molyneux & Coddington, 2020; Picard, 2000, 2004; Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2004; Shapiro, 2010). On the one hand, this feature represents an epistemological challenge and creates difficulties in its empirical implementation (but does not make it impossible, as research has shown). On the other hand, it gives it the flexibility often necessary when it comes to changing ecosystems to attain the ability to become an operational and coordinating concept, shared with other related concepts like “credibility”.

While establishing precise definitions or methods for assessing the quality of journalism proves challenging, there has been notable scientific production in this field, with diverse proposals targeting different dimensions of its implementation. Efforts have been made to organise this body of work through meta-analyses of the literature (Marinho, 2015; Pinto & Marinho, 2004). The editors of this volume propose organising these contributions around three approaches (that are not rigidly defined or mutually exclusive): literature that focuses on assessing the quality of journalism essentially from the perspective of the news production processes and conditions, literature mainly centred on the news product and its inherent attributes; and literature primarily addressing the assessment of quality from the viewpoint of audiences and their uses (including the accessibility of content). Gómez-Mompart and Palau-Sampio (2013) add those dimensions when defining quality in journalism:

journalistic quality embodies different processes involved in gathering and handling information. It emerges from upholding standards of balance and impartiality, contrast and plurality — aligning with ethical codes and self-regulation standards. Simultaneously, it demands diversity and originality — in content and treatment — thorough research, in-depth study and independence — from political conditions and economic pressures. All these elements prevent journalism from being detached from specific production conditions and the context of its reception. (p. 35)

This perspective brings us to another central idea: the study of journalism and its quality is contextual and reliant on the axes that “shape, influence, and enhance it” (Pinto & Marinho, 2004, p. 576). This is because “journalists operate within specific socio-cultural contexts and timeframes, elements that structure and at times impose constraints on their work” (Marinho, 2015, p. 125).

Within this framework, it is crucial to acknowledge that journalistic production occurs within the broader information/data production and dissemination ecosystem. Today, information permeates every facet of contemporary society. As such, the journalistic production of information stands as a crucial element in the relationship between societies and their foundational elements, serving as a primary method for constructing narratives rooted in reality to elucidate and uphold social experiences.

Contrary to what formed the historical core of journalism's growing social centrality until the emergence of the internet, journalistic information is increasingly produced in an immense informational environment that, besides outspreading and diluting it, simultaneously forces it to be competitive. Journalism still has a reserve of legitimacy, bestowing authority to the information it produces. This legitimacy is based, on the one hand, on the tradition related to its fundamental role in developing the modern public sphere and, on the other hand, on the general knowledge of the internal and external control mechanisms of journalistic practices for journalistic production is supposed to be scrutinised from its *ethos* and *praxis*. However, the modes of competition in which it is progressively immersed bring it closer and closer to the possibility of exhausting that reserve. Hence, the constantly discussed threats to journalism are rooted in its economic sustainability models, which impose the urgency of competing for visibility metrics. But also in the intrinsic information production models, which qualify it or not as public interest information and make it compete with the production of information not mediated by journalists.

There is no doubt that journalism has perpetually existed amidst tensions. Over the last two centuries, with the escalating industrialisation of journalistic production, establishing newsrooms as the epicentre of news creation marked the pivotal juncture, the decisions between what aspects of the world *are showcased* and what *remains concealed*, *the methods that reveal more* and *those that reveal less*, the newsroom became the quintessential place where these tensions unfolded.

In this sense, it is important for scientific reflection to challenge the oversimplified aphorism that *journalism depends on the existence of journalists* — which places the core of the problem in issues such as the precariousness and depletion of newsrooms, which play a fundamental role in assessing certain quality conditions, but are insufficient to account for all the tensions that pervade the field. Hence, analysing the *quality of journalism* must consider the study of journalists' current extent of agency, which involves understanding how the *individual dimensions of the journalistic act* can manifest within the conditions of the possibility of contemporary journalistic production (Loureiro, 2023). Indeed, journalists acknowledge a decline in the quality standards of journalistic products, a trend they attribute to the ongoing crisis within the sector (Gómez-Mompart et al., 2015).

Research into the quality of journalism holds significance not only for the journalistic field and journalists themselves but also encompasses another dimension: the quality of journalism can serve as a “strategic investment” (Marinho, 2015; Pinto & Marinho, 2004). This concept implies that investing in the quality of journalism can yield financial returns, suggesting a symbiotic relationship between quality and business within the field. This perspective — the association (not necessarily causal) between investment and revenue — has been explored from different angles by several authors (Allern, 2002; Bogart, 2004; Edmonds, 2004; Lacy & Martin, 2004; Meyer, 2004; Meyer & Kim, 2003; Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2004). This is a relevant axis, especially when aligned with the public/audience: the quality of journalism as a path to credibility and fostering the establishment/maintenance of trust among the public, based on the assumption that more audience/consumption would generate a higher financial return.

Journalism is exposed in a field where its economic survival, social relevance, suitability to the technical and technological environments in which it is immersed, and objective and subjective conditions in which it is produced are simultaneously at stake. Thus, analysing *quality in journalism* means embracing an increasingly complex public problem that only a multidimensional scientific approach can attempt to address — even though it risks falling short of the mark.

We proposed organising the literature on the quality of/in journalism into three approaches: first, works that address journalism quality assessment by examining the process and conditions of news production; second, those focusing on the news as products and their attributes; and finally, those that approach quality assessment by considering audiences and their uses. The thematic section of this volume comprises eight articles — ranging from theoretical reviews to empirical approaches — primarily falling within the first two approaches. However, that does not mean these texts do not consider the public and the relationship between journalism and its audiences. As emphasised, these are not watertight or mutually exclusive approaches. Their arguments primarily steer clear of examining how the public engages with news reception and assesses journalistic quality.

Most of the contributions (five out of eight) are categorised within the first approach — focusing on the quality of journalism from the perspective of the process and conditions of news production. Pedro Coelho's text on "New Frontiers of Investigative Journalism: From the Lone Wolf to the Pack"; "A New Form of Precarity (of Practice)? Professional Deskilling at the Centre of the Hijacking of Quality in Journalism", by Tiago Lima Quintanilha; "The Strategic Approach to Quality in Journalism: Innovation, Technology and Applied Research", by Josenildo Luiz Guerra; the article on "Local Journalists and Fact-Checking: An Exploratory Study in Portugal and Spain", by Pedro Jerónimo and Marta Sánchez Esparza; and Marta Santos Silva's contribution, "I Don't Have the Necessary Conditions': How Television and Radio Journalists Rate the Quality of Journalism in Portugal". Within the second approach — assessing the quality of journalism based on news as products and their inherent attributes — we encompass two contributions: "Transparency as a Quality Dimension: Media Ownership and the Challenges of (In)visibility" by Alexandra Figueira and Elsa Costa e Silva; and "Responsability and Quality of Journalism: Digital Accountability Instruments and Practices in the Portuguese Media", by João Miranda. Finally, the section closes with a systematic literature review of the "quality journalism" concept: "Bibliometric Study on Quality Journalism in the Scopus Database: Evolution of the Topic and Characteristics" by Luisa del Carmen Martínez García and Edson Capoano.

Regarding the first set of texts, three tackle, from varying perspectives, the influence of technological advancements on determining the quality of produced journalism and/or its assessment. Pedro Coelho, in "New Frontiers of Investigative Journalism: From the Lone Wolf to the Pack", builds on the rejection of the idea that all journalism is, by nature, investigative in order to choose "journalistic investigation as the prime embodiment of high-quality journalism" (p. 1) and "seeks to identify potential solutions that can sustain

the *watchdog* role associated with investigative journalism” (p. 1). He acknowledges the role of digital technology in these solutions. However, he cautions that “investigative journalism may be living a second life, but there is a risk that this rebirth is not reaching everyone, and it should not be overlooked” (p. 15).

In “A New Form of Precarity (of Practice)? Professional Deskilling at the Centre of the Hijacking of Quality in Journalism”, Tiago Lima Quintanilha delves into the results of systematising the literature on professional deskilling. He concludes that journalists are facing the creation of a new type of practice-related instability, “able to capture journalistic quality and which goes beyond the traditional and well-documented precarity of employment and labour” (p. 1). Given journalism’s susceptibility to the effects and pace of technological evolution, the author highlights the implications of this exposure on “the quality of journalism and the deterioration of the journalistic product” (p. 13). However, he acknowledges the potential for technology to facilitate a process of “professional reskilling and the rescuing of quality journalism supported by an infrastructure that takes care of the trivialised tasks of the profession” (p. 13).

In “The Strategic Approach to Quality in Journalism: Innovation, Technology and Applied Research”, Josenildo Luiz Guerra describes quality in journalism as “an organisational effort that integrates external conditions and demands with internal actions, from planning to final product delivery” (p. 1) and proposes that it be evaluated from a quality management system, understood as “a set of integrated actions that aligns assessment with editorial management guidelines, production processes and products. The implementation of this proposal requires investment in innovation” (p. 1), which will involve, among other things, leveraging the technological potential available to companies and journalists, for the author, this investment is justified since “the current editorial model lacks metrics and rigorous methods for measuring the quality claimed by organisations, failing to uphold the trust placed by society in these professionals and companies” (p. 16).

Pedro Jerónimo and Marta Sánchez Esparza, and Marta Santos Silva, also focus on the process and conditions of news production by gathering insights from journalists. Through surveys, these researchers delve into the practices and perspectives of these pivotal actors in this dynamic. In “Local Journalists and Fact-Checking: An Exploratory Study in Portugal and Spain”, Pedro Jerónimo and Marta Sánchez Esparza interview journalists from 12 local media outlets in Portugal and Spain to collect and analyse their perspectives and approaches to fact-checking. The analysis identified internal (or subjective) and external factors that condition the ability and ways of verifying information: “time limitations and a shortage of personnel to perform the task optimally” (p. 13) and “excessive reliance on official sources, sometimes combined with sloth — as Portuguese journalists admit” (p. 14). One positive aspect is highlighted: “journalists are aware of the problem and how the decline in the quality of information undermines public confidence”, and they are “the first to take an interest in tackling these problems, learning from their experiences and implementing new approaches in their newsrooms” (p. 14).

Marta Santos Silva, in “‘I Don’t Have the Necessary Conditions’: How Television and Radio Journalists Rate the Quality of Journalism in Portugal”, through semi-structured interviews with 11 radio and television journalists in Portugal, seeks to answer two questions: how do television and radio journalists define quality journalism? And how do television and radio journalists assess the quality of journalism produced in Portugal? The analysis points to

the lack of investment or funding for newsrooms, the resulting reduction in human resources, and the lack of time to devote to journalistic work, which is partly the result of this loss of labour, and partly driven by competitive dynamics and the speed of the digital medium. (p. 15)

While opinions on the quality of television and radio journalism in Portugal vary among interviewees, most believe that “their working conditions for producing good journalism fall short of what is desired” (p. 16). It is also clear “that journalists are able and willing to make negative assessments of their own work and to justify these assessments by stating the factors that cause the results to fall short of what is desired” (p. 16).

As for the articles centred on assessing the quality of journalism based on news as products and their inherent attributes, this imprint is evident in two of the contributions in the thematic section, both dedicated to discussing — from different perspectives — media regulation: the text entitled “Transparency as a Quality Dimension: Media Ownership and the Challenges of (In)visibility”, by Alexandra Figueira and Elsa Costa e Silva, and the article “Responsibility and Quality of Journalism: Digital Accountability Instruments and Practices in the Portuguese Media”, by João Miranda. These two texts, even though they do not assess the quality of journalism from the standpoint of public reception, underscore a crucial aspect: comprehensive, clear and transparent information on media ownership and companies’ accountability mechanisms is a pre-requisite for establishing and sustaining the trust of citizens/readers, and, ultimately, for promoting news consumption and people’s interest (Hermans & Drok, 2018), which does not necessarily have positive implications if we consider the pressures introduced into journalists’ work by audience measurement (Meijer, 2013), which is increasingly present in newsrooms. By integrating these articles into an approach examining quality from the viewpoint of the attributes or characteristics of the journalistic product, the term “product” is understood broadly. It also encompasses the information made publicly available by companies/organisations about their nature and procedures.

Alexandra Figueira and Elsa Costa e Silva’s “Transparency as a Quality Dimension: Media Ownership and the Challenges of (In)visibility” draws from the regulatory decisions of the Portuguese Regulatory Authority for the Media and “examines how the principle of media transparency is perceived in the Portuguese market, analysing non-compliance and objections to disclosing the required information” (p. 1). The analysis points to a “lack of broad reflection on transforming it [transparency] into a tool serving public communication policies that foster, for instance, independence and diversity in journalism” (p. 16) and that “public engagement in discussing the risks associated with media ownership in Portugal” (p. 15) remains a distant prospect. In other words, the

authors emphasise that “transparency alone does not deliver the expected outcomes” (p. 16) and that “transparency in terms of ownership of production does not solve the need for transparency in terms of distribution” (p. 16).

João Miranda, in “Responsibility and Quality of Journalism: Digital Accountability Instruments and Practices in the Portuguese Media”, reflects on the “relationship between media accountability and the quality of journalism while also examining how new forms of media responsibility could enhance information quality” (p. 1), based on an “exploratory study mapping and analysing the level of implementation of digital responsibility and accountability mechanisms of six Portuguese editorial projects” (p. 1). The analysis highlights

on the one hand, the heterogeneous reality and potential underlying the adaptation of conventional responsibility models to online formats. It also underscores the mandated nature of media accountability and transparency processes, suggesting the need for further in-depth research into this phenomenon. (p. 18)

It also underlines “[the expansion of] new opportunities for mobilising and broadening the scope of these journalism quality monitoring processes. They have also heightened the potential for user participation and dialogue between the media and their audience” (p. 18).

The thematic section is completed with the article “Bibliometric Study on Quality Journalism in the Scopus Database: Evolution of the Topic and Characteristics” by Luisa del Carmen Martínez García and Edson Capoano. In the systematic review, based on a sample of 971 scientific articles published between 1939 and 2022 and indexed in Scopus, the authors conclude that “there is no watertight definition of what the quality of journalism is, at least in the sample collected. Instead, there are dynamic definitions shaped by evolving demands and ongoing debates” (p. 15), although anchored “in the thematic debates prevalent within the journalistic field, such as the challenges of disinformation in the 2020s, the proliferation of digital communication during the 2010s and the methodologies and genres emerging and re-emerging in the field” (p. 15) or even the “changes in the craft and societal expectations throughout the analysed period” (p. 15).

As previously noted, scientific output on the quality of journalism has been substantial. However, as editors of the thematic section of this volume, we emphasise the importance of acknowledging that this topic might fade from the research agenda. Due to its intricate associations with many other concepts and dimensions of journalistic practice, it is a pivotal concept, significantly contributing to their comprehension and coordination. Hence, this issue of *Comunicação e Sociedade* challenges the scientific community to reflect on quality in journalism, both as a theoretical field of intersection and insertion of journalistic production in information production and as a field of empirical research into the quality(ies) that characterise contemporary journalistic production and affirm it as an inalienable value in the ongoing construction of citizenship.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is supported by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P., under the project UIDB/00736/2020 (base funding) and UIDP/00736/2020 (programme funding).

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