

*Rethinking History through Communication. The “public sphere” as a civic “imagined community” in late 19th century Portugal*

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An intertwined engagement between history and communication is posited, today, as a future-driven approach for each of these knowledge fields. Historians fundamentally know how much the past was always a multifarious process of communication, controversy and negotiation; symmetrically, all present day communication process is the dynamical outcome of an historical evolution in the making, which leads communication theorists and professional journalists alike to be historians of the present. For the field of communication, indeed, which is said to suffer “from a myopic preoccupation with the here and now” (Josh Lauer in Zelizer 2008: 18), added historical study and background may provide an adequate temporal context and thickness, curtailing an amnesic “short-termism”, and investing in the return of “long-termism” (Guldi and Armitage 2014: 14-37). As for historian practitioners, it has long been said (and credited to Philip Graham, former *Washington Post* president and publisher), that journalism is “the first rough draft of history”. Epistemologically wise, interdisciplinary is thus a positive and cross-fertilizing tendency in those two areas.

As a contemporary historian, my research and teaching has dealt with bridging subjects such as *Media History*, *History of Press and Public Opinion*, or *Media, Memory and History*. Authors like Asa Briggs and Peter Burke (2005), Paul Starr (2005), Jane Chapman (2008), or Roger Parry (2011), among others, have driven my theoretical concerns. I usually begin courses with students specializing in media studies (and not in history at large), testing their reactions to the on-set mood of Briggs and Burke (2005: 1-3): “whatever the starting point, it is necessary for people working in communication and cultural studies to take history seriously, as well as for historians (whatever their period) to take serious account of communication”.

This approach is then problematized by recurring to Barbie Zelizer's provocative questions in the introduction to a seminal book the said author edited (2008: 6): "What do we understand differently about history by virtue of its connection to communication? What impact does history have on communication? How does each deepen, enhance and complicate our understanding of the other?" Working on possible answers and examples to this can surely improve how historians and communication theorists think, research, teach and talk together.

Trans-disciplinary bridges connect, even if they should not dissolve disciplines' boundaries. These remain, lest we want to be all holistic academics, specialized in everything. Only by being an historian do I fully profit on what others can bring me and on what I can give others through those bridges. A practical example of this disposition can be provided by an historical theme that I work in classes, the goal of which is to explore a political, social and cultural historical issue through the lenses of key communication concepts, and to test how these can enlighten aspects of past modernizing processes – reserves and cautions applying, of course, against any anachronism in the use of concepts and ideas whose semantic meanings differ today from what they may have stood for in past times. That theme, here used as an example, is the content-and-form development of Portuguese newspapers and journalism between the 1860s and the 1900s.

Cometh the 2nd half of the 19th century, the age of capitalism and of material development did reach Portugal, creating new social and political sectors, especially in the two larger national cities, Lisbon (the capital), and Oporto. Mirroring other European countries, that was the period when factuality, professionalization and a commercial model of information started to foster and express new civic agendas, in a context of growing industrialization, mass politics and democratization, albeit in a country, like Portugal, where poverty, illiteracy and global backwardness never ceased to limit those transformations. The Portuguese "public space", or "public sphere" (a key concept in communication), was structurally transformed, with a growing and faster news flux, circulating in large, popular, cheap, day-to-day generalist newspapers, and reaching an ever-enlarging universe of urban readers (Dias 2007, and Sardica 2009). What happened in Portugal was a mimic of Émile de Girardin's French popular press, or of the British "penny press", and can be presented as the embodiment of an extended "public sphere", a discursive space planned, materialized and praised by a vast number of new intellectuals and journalists as an "imagined community" (another key concept, that communication actually borrowed from politics), of shared knowledge, reading habits and democratic-cum-revolutionary mobilization.

The starting point of this Portuguese "industrial era of the press" (Tengarrinha 2013: 211-215) was the creation of *Diário de Notícias*, in 1865, the seminal inspiring newspaper for the later stages of that century. Presenting a clear, concise and simple style, "*Diário de Notícias*

– the title says it – will be a careful compilation of all the daily news, of all countries, of all specialties, a universal newscast. In a readable style, with great simplicity, it will inform the reader of all interesting events [...] eliminating the doctrinal article, it doesn't discuss politics, nor sustains controversy". In short, that founding Portuguese title aimed at "interesting all classes, being affordable to all pockets and understandable to all intelligences" (*Diário de Notícias*, presentation issue, 29.Dec.1864, 1).

In the trail of *Diário de Notícias*, a myriad of new newspapers, their statements and targeted publics – at the time when a second Portuguese liberal generation speeded up press modernization, journalism becoming a full grown "profession" (Vargues 2003) –, revealed how a unifying civic "culture" was emerging in Portugal from the 1860s until the end of the monarchic regime (in 1910). Press turned into a powerful meta-instrument to awaken old and to mobilize new social actors, and to network dispersed readers into a public, whose self-perceived affinity and voiced opinion was to be the living expression of the nation, easing the conversational connection between rulers and ruled. Eça de Queirós, the chief literary author of the late 19th century Portugal, and a leading journalist, who had always equaled "public opinion" to "the permanent intervention of the country in its own political, moral, religious, literary and industrial life" (1867: 9), summed up the novelty, by contrasting the 18th century elitist, philosophical and individual "reader" with the 19th century popular collective "crowd", dynamically gathered inside a new entity called the "public", and representing a renewed concept of nation and national identity (Queirós 1886: 6).

That would be precisely the propaganda message of the republican newspapers, fighting the constitutional monarchy, while struggling – as Magalhães Lima, the founder of *O Século* (1881), would say – to electrify the public spirit and to create a new civic collective "devotion towards democracy and progress" (Lima 1927: 137-138). Either opposing the decaying monarchy, or upholding the futuristic promises of republicanism, the literate Portuguese elite's self-portrait was that of an "imagined community" of mature citizens, with an enlarged debating "public sphere" that modeled society like "a unified whole, traversed by communication instruments" (newspapers, leaflets, public rallies and partisan meetings), "as a truly articulated body" (Ramos 2004, 128-129). Material progress, industrial employment, rural-urban migration – Portuguese population living in major cities rose from c. 475,000 inhabitants to c. 810,000 between 1864 and 1900 (Ramos 2001: 36) – gave birth to a new society, new political habits, a deepened democratic and pluralistic context, in which "a free press naturally flourished and played a decisive role in building a civic conscience within the literate urban strata" (Pinto and Almeida 2000: 6). Hence some distinctive macro numbers: in 1880, Portugal had c. 200 important newspapers registered; in 1894, the total had risen to c. 400, and in 1900 to 592 (Aranha 1900: 8).

To fully disclose and understand this Portuguese communication history landscape, Jürgen Habermas' "public sphere" (1991 and 2010), Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" (2016), and other authors' ideas and vocabulary are very helpful, like roadmaps and descriptive devices to what many wrote and spoke about in the late 19th century Portugal. Recalling also technological concepts into history, newspapers were the "rooters", or the "modems", of a social and political refashioning of the nation, since shared reading created a more homogenized civic structure, an intended actor of development and democracy, fuelling the political process of replacement of the old bourgeois monarchy by a new republican regime, that would indeed triumph in October 1910. Interdisciplinary angles, therefore, show how grand communication concepts can cast light on time and space historical transforming periods, thus bettering the way historians can rethink what they study *through* communication, and enlarging the academic and general public they seek to address.

In sum, how can one's understanding of 19th century Portugal be enriched through the use of communication bridging concepts, like those ("public sphere" and "imagined community") above mentioned? Firstly, such bridges enlarge the focusing angle, decentralizing it from the mere institutional, governmental or legal aspects of political struggle. Secondly, they can gather and systematize different historical materials and considerations into a more unified view of the modernizing Portuguese path of those decades. And thirdly, those interdisciplinary, or trans-disciplinary, connections allow for the establishment of international comparisons with other 19th century realities, and even with present day times, thus deepening the understanding of the two founding and defining boundaries of the historic field of knowledge: time and space – in the example here presented, that of Portugal in the last decades of the 19th century.

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