



Peter Vasterman (ed.)

From Media Hype to Twitter Storm

News Explosions and
Their Impact on Issues,
Crises and Public Opinion





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*News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and
Public Opinion*

*Edited by
Peter Vasterman*



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It is not difficult to see the similarities between massive starling flocks, flying as one and creating new shapes – murmurations – and the way media operate during explosive news waves, the main topic in this book.



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8. How a small-scale panic turns into an unstoppable news wave about mass mugging on the beach

Gonçalo Pereira Rosa

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Abstract

An incident on a Portuguese beach in 2005 was built and distorted in the national media as an instance of a new crime, replicating known parameters of the Brazilian 'arrastão' (mass mugging). This chapter aims to discuss news values, organizational routines, self-referential production standards and bias and prejudice in newsrooms. The chapter suggests that, when in progress, a news wave – built with the contributions of major mass media organizations – is a near unstoppable force and any arguments against it tend to be dismissed.

Keywords: media waves, risk society, mugging, crime in the news, distortion

History volumes of media-driven panics and hoaxes (for example, Bartholomew & Radford, 2012; or Pereira Rosa, 2015) tend to refer the most embarrassing episodes to the distant past. One would say that journalism shortcomings, like the gullibility of accepting Orson Welles' 1938 Martian landing or the 1835 moon hoax, were long buried in layers of objectivity and professional standards. Using a 2005 Portuguese case study as a model, this chapter tries to reflect on modern dangers of self-referential journalism practices and real-time pitfalls that provide opportunities for news waves taking place – either based on actual facts or in dangerous rumours.

Research on news waves began in the late twentieth century and has broken exciting new ground, analysing hypes generated by rumours or disproportionate events and reflecting on our addiction to media systems

to obtain information and reinforce our own mythology about right and wrong and the proper functions of our of societies.

The case study

At 4.40 pm on 10 June 2005, LUSA, the Portuguese news agency, reported that, at 3 pm, at least 500 adults and youths, gathered in informal gangs, had entered Carcavelos Beach, a popular summer refuge for Lisbon's population. According to the report, gangs stole and assaulted whoever resisted them, quickly generating terror amongst bathers. Hours later, the story was developed by several radio and television networks. The structure of the incident was reframed: from that moment, it was described by the media as an imitation of the mass muggings in Brazilian beaches, popularly known as 'arrastões'. According to the information that was rapidly spread, the robbery implied organization and planning skills by the muggers.

In the following hours, all national news outlets covered the incident. Alleged eyewitnesses and police forces echoed the unprecedented event. The word 'arrastão' was first used to define the event during the evening news on the SIC television network.. Shortly after, at 9 pm, a bulletin was sent from the Lisbon Metropolitan Police Command to all mass media, in which the word 'arrastão' was used. Photographs taken by the owner of a commercial establishment were used as documentary proofs and gave an additional element of context: the majority of those involved, according to the visual proofs, were of African origin.

What really happened was later summarized: a group of a few dozen black individuals arrived on a packed beach on a summer holiday. Their presence, along with other black youths already swimming or laid down in the sand, caused discomfort to the usual white bathers. A police patrol appeared on scene and panic started. A few hundred individuals – black and white – started to run away: some fled the scene fearing police excess; others ran without any given cause. The photographs of this moment caused the subsequent distorted perception.

After 11 June, however, the police authority tried to introduce in the debate elements of contradiction to the thesis that was gaining momentum at the time. According to the interviews and bulletins produced by the police – practically ignored in the news media during the first week – no indications of organized crime were found: there were no complaints or arrests compatible with a mugging involving five hundreds individuals,

and the photos divulged at the time were taken when the police arrived, showing mostly bathers running away.

From the outset, the main political leaders at the time spoke about this event accepting and shaping the mass mugging already proposed by the 'actors of social control' (Cohen, 1972: 33) – the media and, to some extent, the police.

On 17 June, a report by journalist Nuno Guedes (*A Capital*) challenged for the first time the information provided six days earlier, but the news story received little resonance. A presidential visit to the Cova da Moura neighbourhood (an area in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon inhabited by large numbers of people of African origin and with a reputation for high crime and social deprivation) tried to cool the social temperature, but tension remained inflamed. A nationalist right-wing protest was held in Lisbon on the following day.

The first clear turning point for this frame happened on the first day of July. An investigation by journalist Diana Andringa produced the television documentary 'Era uma vez o arrastão', which dismantled the foundations of the media wave of the previous month. The reporter interviewed police agents, political leaders, representatives of immigrant communities, and eyewitnesses. It was aired on national television. It would take a couple of months before the publication of a report by the High Commission for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (ACIME, 2006) confirmed the distortion produced between what happened in Carcavelos and the reporting about the event.

Media wave

This chapter tests the hypothesis that the first echoes of the Carcavelos event had the capacity to create an unprecedented media wave in Portugal for two weeks, closely following the model stages described by Vasterman (2005) when analysing the extraordinary crime news narratives in the Netherlands.

We suggest that the unanimity between news outlets, the consensus among primary definers, the volume of news coverage, the construction of a perception of damage to public order, and the exaggeration or distortion of the incident as representative of an ethnic group's behaviour, contributed to an escalation of this hype. It is equally suggested that this kind of journalistic unanimity is due to a resonant key incident – strong enough to fulfil news values needs and ideologically plausible for the majority of the audience.

Answering Vasterman's challenge (2005: 527) to produce more empirical research in order to understand the dynamic of these media waves and their capacity for producing exaggeration and distortion, we use this study to substantiate the model, providing an additional element: once underway, a media wave follows its unstoppable dynamic, integrating dominant frames to strengthen the news package and neglecting the frames that undermine it.

From the sociology of journalism's point of view, we accept the premise that any news is a social construction of reality, subject to complex forces and deep cultural constraints, often reflecting the ideology and causes of the most powerful social actors (Hall et al., 1978).

Under this model, we try to demonstrate that news coverage in these circumstances was highly concentrated in a short period of time, and the mass mugging was the predominant framework during a considerable period of that coverage, even serving as a prototype for interpreting similar occurrences. We analyse the predominant official sources in the journalistic speech about the incident and the degree of unanimity between them. With this background in mind, we introduce the criminal statistics for the year 2005 as a layer reference in relation to what it may be possible to suggest is the degree of distortion present in journalistic representations. Finally, we try to determine to what extent, and when, the predominant frame was challenged in the published texts.

Fear and terror in the media

The case of mass mugging at Carcavelos Beach explored the weaknesses of journalistic routines in respect of events that fall into the category of news Best (1999) defined as 'random violence'. News about incidents of random violence, like those resulting from a narrative constructed on the Carcavelos mass mugging, are usually marked by three claims: they have no detectable patterns; the actions do not seem to make sense to most of the community; and they represent a serious sign of a deterioration of public order.

Due to their unexpected nature, generating concern and fear, events of random violence become a target for intense coverage news, as they metamorphose unique tragedies (incidents) into typical examples (instances) of a broader and deeper social problem (Best, 1999: 15; Kielbowics & Scherer, 1986). The classification of an unknown problem with fearful examples democratizes risk as it makes the threat universal and generates a peak of social concern (Fumento, 1990).

Any society shares perceptions of what to fear and what it can do to prevent it. The perception of a degradation of public order – even when criminal statistics do not reflect this – is therefore particularly dramatic. As Altheide and Michalowski (1999: 477) wrote, fear ‘involves an interaction between an individual and a situation, but it can drastically alter how we deal with the situation and, ultimately, the nature of the situation itself’.

Integrated in the general frames through which crime is narrated in most contemporary media systems, fear becomes an instance of speech. It becomes the lens through which we judge the majority of incidents that are presented to us by the media, hence contributing to the progressive worsening of security concerns.

Cohen (1972) was one of the first authors to investigate the capacity of media speech to produce moral panics. Promoted by institutional social actors, one event may be enough for a social agent or group to be defined as a threat to social values and interests, in as much as it is presented in a stylized and stereotyped form by the media (Cohen, 1972). The moral barriers are inhabited by publishers, politicians, and other social actors, and the significance of the event can be amplified. ‘The mass media, in fact, devote a great deal of space to deviance: sensational crimes, scandals, bizarre happenings and strange goings on’, he wrote (*op. cit.*).

This is not just for entertainment or to fulfil some psychological need for either identification or vicarious punishment [...] [It] is a main source of information about the normative contours of a society. It informs us about right and wrong, about the boundaries beyond which one should not venture and the shapes the devil can assume. (Cohen, 1972: 8).

In Cohen’s study design, crime was researched whenever a journalistic deviation occurred, in what Ferrell (1995: 27) called the anchorage of the meaning of criminality ‘in the style of its collective practice’. Cohen approached the media from a circular perspective, assuming the intensive news coverage had an impact, which, in turn, produced reactions in society, and further impacts on future coverage. The media, he said, invented ‘folk devils’, which have become stereotypes of each crime, usually exaggerated and distorted. Words or photographs – once neutral – symbolize the deviation in journalistic speech (Cohen, 1972: 39-45), under the assumption that what happened in the present can be repeated or worsen in the future. Social agents or stigmatized groups are often built represented as a collective mass of individuals, typified in a folk category, regardless of the layers of culture, ethnicity, or economy a community may be built upon. Ferrell researched

further and concluded that several modern crimes are actually inscribed on the correlation between youth, culture, and crime itself, because youth cultures are 'primary settings for the production of alternative style and meaning, and therefore [are] the primary targets of legal, political and moral authorities, threatened by the audacity of these cultural alternatives'. (Ferrell, 1995: 35)

After the pioneering work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) postulated the growing role of the media in defining public agendas, successive investigations have focused on the journalistic fascination for crime news. Hall et al. (1978) documented how crime news legitimizes the ideological prejudices of primary definers and interests that each news media serves, and often expresses trends or 'concern peaks' that criminal statistics do not confirm.

Sacco (1995) reported on the usefulness of crime news – virtually inexhaustible – to newspapers, as compensation elements that can fulfil larger or smaller 'news holes', according to the newspaper's daily agenda. Snow (1983), on the other hand, investigated communities that were subject to intensive crime news and he found that a large portion of individuals included sceneries and words associated to the news reports they were exposed to in their speech definitions.

Altheide and Michalowski (1999) discovered that the word 'fear' and other synonyms are now much more frequent in journalistic texts than in the past, while Banks (2005) concentrated his efforts on the importance of local contexts beyond media as modulating forces of crime news interpretation for each audience.

The notion that fear and terror are important pieces of contemporaneous journalistic reports is common to most of these papers. And 'when fear is the prevailing framework for looking at social issues, the other competing frames and discourses lose out' (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999: 476).

Similarly, the amplification of a social problem to the detriment of others, through its exaggerated representation, produces a non-negligible effect. The public may overestimate the frequency of an incident and therefore misinterpret reality (Heath & Gilbert, 1996).

Frames and journalistic practices

The impact of any message is measured, above all, for its contribution to defining the position in society of each social agent involved. In a way, from this perspective, the definitive sense of any text is transformed by the collective interpretation made by social agents of all available texts (Snow,

1983). It comes as no surprise that the majority of modern texts available are news reports. Therefore, since the pioneering Goffman research (1959), there has been a current of sociology of journalism analysing the processes of news interpretation, as well as the narrative structures behind it.

The cultural meanings inherent in the constructed narratives about social problems have earned different names, but in this chapter we will use Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) definition of frames. The inherent frames of any news or succession of news invoke powerful images from the rhetorical point of view, shared with a significant percentage of audiences that provide a common sense to the narrated incidents by the media. Each social problem, or even each news story, appeals to what Gamson and Modigliani (*Ibid.*: 3) designated as 'interpretative packages'.

In their proposal, each frame is socially constructed. Hilgartner and Bosk (1998) had set the field of news as a strong symbolic battleground between possible interpretations of reality. In this arena, the best interpretative frame, the one that collects more supporters or more symbolic capital, has more chance of thriving and, therefore, of being passed on to the audience. Gamson and Modigliani established that some frames evoke profoundly mythic themes or reflect wide cultural resonances and are, therefore, used often. Other authors, such as Wolfsfeld (1997), considered that the media chooses, traditionally, the most favourable frames for authorities, except in incidents in which these institutions cannot influence the process of news production, in which case, other pressure groups fulfil this role.

In news about crime, the media repeatedly appeal to more profound cultural frames. Swindler (1986), moreover, defined culture as society's toolbox, a diverse collection of ideas that may be invoked whenever necessary. In moments where reality is constructed based on our fears, it is likely that the narrative appeals to society's deeper doubts. As a result, there is a constant effort for referent framing, and the natural marginalization of other interpretive frameworks (Noelle-Neuman & Mathes, 1987).

Equally important – and with clear implications for the Carcavelos mass mugging case – is the role of sources. Journalists cannot report on all events through direct experience and so they are forced to resort to the recollections of sources. Although the productive routines identified, for instance, by Tuchman (1972) define several defence mechanisms, often a source has a leading role in news production, providing exclusive information, qualifying the event or comparing it to other previous events. Manning (2001) considered, moreover, that those sources that are in the position of labelling a key event have a considerable impact on media coverage, as happened in this case study.

Media waves about crime

A media wave about crime may be generically described as a 'sudden increase in the criminal activity, increases that demand explanation' (Best, 1999: 34). But there is a substantial difference between any media wave about crime and a continuous volume of media coverage dedicated to a particular occurrence. The media wave demands a generalization beyond the details of the case and does not exempt the characterization of the incident as an instance of a new trend or a broader social problem (Ibid.: 35).

In the investigation produced on these peaks of dense media coverage, Best (1999), Vasterman (2005), and Brosius and Eps (1995) identified the indispensable condition to any media wave: the occurrence of a melodramatic event, a 'key event' (in the Brosius and Eps model), which allows for the definition of the issue within known borders, thus presenting a sequence of events as relatively unprecedented and, at the same time, evoking cultural resonance with the audience.

From social psychology, Brosius and Eps (1995: 396) retrieved the concept of the prototype, a mental unit that organizes and guides our construction and understanding of social reality. The prototype is an ensemble of recognizable attributes shared by objects, people, or events. When asked by a social agent to appoint a tool, the authors remind most people choose a hammer or a saw, taking the particular instrument as the prototype of the whole group. To some extent, that is the function of the key event, summing up a category of actions and gathering them under the same label.

Apart from the key event, a media wave is also characterized as generating a snowball effect: when there is a dramatically increased report of a crime type, it is likely that other victims will report it to the authorities, and the problem will actually be exacerbated. At the same time, journalists format their event selection criteria to include the new type of crime (Fishman, 1980; Hall et al., 1978). Ironically, similar events – that weeks before would not have had space in the media – may gain additional relevance in the eyes of reporters.

A media wave creates an intensification of news reports and modulates future coverage of this theme. As Vasterman puts it (2005: 517), 'one result of media wave will be an expansion of the definition of the problem'. It is a well-known truth within sociology that the more broadly a term is defined, the more people or instances there are that fit within it.

Although refusing to compare the statistical crime rates with news stories built about them, Vasterman created a model for identifying media waves about criminal activities, hence explaining the role they play in

defining frameworks and social amplification. In the formation of a media wave, we have seven factors:

- (i) In a media wave almost all journalistic outlets cover the incident, leading to overproduction;
- (ii) The issue is shaped as a symbol of the acute deterioration of the problem. When the media wave is spurred by a new type of crime, all similar incidents – or even those that can be adapted to the problem's definition – gain new visibility and receive feeding news coverage. The media wave feeds on itself because news organizations are self-referential and therefore monitor the production of competitors and incorporate it, imitating their own content in a circular movement (Kitzinger & Reilly, 1997; Ramonet, 1999). Manning called these cycles 'media loops', characterized by the increasing tendency to show an image in another context, reframed, constantly recycled, reproduced in new contexts and re-experienced (Manning, 1998: 26). In media waves about crime, this journalistic mimicry may contribute to increasing the frequency of certain crimes or to the reporting of previously hidden crimes.
- (iii) A media wave, according to Vasterman, is also defined by the influence of several official sources, originating from authorities, whose contribution journalists accept. The unanimity between primary definers about what the event was and what it means is fundamental to giving credibility to the journalistic construction and generating the media wave. A media wave is only built if the event is interpreted in the light of dominant frames.
- (iv) A factor inherent to the media wave concept lies in the disproportion between the newsworthiness of the event at the beginning of the wave and the relevance attributed to it in the following days and weeks. This is why we believe the analysis of criminal statistical data can help to strengthen the conviction that the relationship between the number of incidents reported and the real frequency of these incidents is distorted in a media wave.
- (v) Also according to Vasterman's model, a media wave is not produced from the multiplication of minor incidents. It demands a resounding key event, with the capacity to fulfil the criteria of journalistic selection (the news values) and infiltrate the agenda. The reactions by political parties or other interest groups, which frequently lead to political decisions, are important news values in the initial coverage.
- (vi) Although it may work as a prototype from that day forward, the media wave inevitably reaches saturation point. That is the moment

when its promoters deem its potential exhausted and journalists redefine the selection criteria. The saturation can be caused by the slowing down of the news wave about that particular crime, by the media's refusal to address it further, or, as is happening frequently in our societies, a new crisis emerges and hides the previous ones in the shadows.

- (vii) To these six factors, we add an additional circumstance: once the news coverage is in this process, attenuating information, corrections, and any other challenging content will tend to be ignored. Until saturation point is reached, the media wave only integrates the information compatible with the dominant frame. In this picture of increasing repetition, the snowball gains velocity downhill, from the moment of its definition and acceptance by audience and journalists.

The project

We developed seven lines of research on news reports built in the press with regard to the incidents of 10 June 2005 in Carcavelos: (i) initially, we intend to test the notion that the dominant frames in the news consisted of a robbery by several hundred people, copying the mass muggings on Brazilian beaches; (ii) we also submit to scrutiny the claim that the ethnicity of potential assailants was an important element of news and allowed for a strengthening of the framework of the mass mugging; (iii) In this context, we sought to analyse the weight of representatives of immigrants or descendants of immigrants as journalistic sources, especially in the early days following the incident; (iv) assuming that the photographs taken by a local entrepreneur helped formulate the dominant framework, we measured the number of days on which they were published; (v) in a media wave such as this one, it is undeniable that the early days have a higher journalistic glow than the following weeks. Accepting this premise, we tried to measure the space the press devoted to the issue, and what weight the articles containing the first denials carried as they dismantled the frameworks of the mass mugging; (vi) recognizing that the main frame might have been built through semantic resources that associated the incidents to latent fears and terror in society, we estimated the variation of articles that called upon the vocabulary of fear, using expressions such as 'terror, fear, panic, horror, violent, or vandals', as well as others with the same semantic charge; (vii) finally, we test the hypothesis that these incidents of

June 2005 may reflect, as several journalists and political leaders defended, a real increase in criminal data.

Methodology

The project began with a content analysis of all articles published in the daily, weekly, and monthly Portuguese press between 11 June and 15 July 2005. We used the database of the High Commission for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities as well as the authors' archives.

We defined *article* as any individual newspaper item dedicated to Carcavelos incidents, with or without title, with or without a byline, and which can be placed under one of the four major journalistic genres – news, report, opinion, or interview. Under the principle of mutual exclusion, each article was coded in a single category.

In the analysis, we coded the following categories: *journalistic genre* (news, report, opinion, or interview), *mass mugging as framework* (percentage of articles that framed the events as a replica of a Brazilian mass mugging), *colour or ethnicity* (percentage of articles that mentioned colour or ethnicity of the robbers), *immigrants as source* (percentage of articles that used statements by immigrants or immigrant descendants), *photos* (ratio of articles that used the photos taken by the owner of a commercial establishment at Carcavelos Beach, which were widespread in the media and helped to visually build the frames of the mass mugging), *disassemble* (percentage of articles that disassembled the frame of the mass mugging) and *fear in the news* (percentage of articles that used the vocabulary of fear to narrate events).

As Gamson established (1992: 179), any news story may express more than one frame. The identification of the frame is a qualitative effort, which depends heavily on the author's experience and the nature of this project. We decided, therefore, to identify the predominant framing detected in each article, neglecting other accessorial frames found in the same text.

We divided the articles into six periods of time, marked by events that branded the news in those weeks. A first group was made up exclusively of materials published the day after the incident; the second covered the period between 12 and 16 June, since it was on the following day, 17 June, that the first challenging report was published; the third block included the period between 17 and 23 June, a week of huge controversy marked by the presidential visit to Cova da Moura and the nationalist oriented protests in Lisbon; the fourth block analysed those articles published between 24 and

30 June, when criticisms of the media's mistakes were echoed; the fifth block studied the articles published between 1 and 8 July, a period characterized by early dissemination of journalist Diana Andringa's research and the results of her documentary; finally, the analysis focused on the articles published between 9 and 15 July, during which the events at Carcavelos were mentioned purely as a questionable example of the media's performance.

Exclusively content analysis-based research is useful but incomplete. To detect strategies not reported in the news, we also interviewed the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities, seeking to realize the extent to which the social construction of mass mugging reflected the latent fears of the section of Portuguese society that associates immigration with crime, a view still echoed in daily news reports (Ferin & Santos, 2006).

We believe the examination of a wider range of media support could have produced different results, especially if it had included the content of television news. Correia (1996), moreover, documented the influence of television. The main news programs replicated a specific construction of this event, while later taking decisive turn to criticism of this frame. However, sociological research suggests that newspapers are still, in association with personal experience, the outlets with most influence over public opinion in complex and time-consuming issues (Marques, 2005: 57).

Discussion

By imposing the results of our analysis on the model suggested by Vasterman for defining the dynamics of news waves, it is legitimate to conclude that the Carcavelos events produced a media wave. Between 11 June and 15 July, 150 articles were produced in the Portuguese press about this issue. As is the case with the majority of media waves, the first two weeks represented the most intense period (seventy-four per cent of the total articles), with the number of articles increasing as the frame of mass mugging was building.

All national publications highlighted the event and, although this article does not discuss television content, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the amplitude of journalistic coverage also extended to this platform with identical unanimous parameters. In the first twelve days of the sample, ninety-nine articles (of a total of 109) used the frame of mass mugging to interpret the occurrence. The metaphor itself was quickly assimilated by strength of association to a previous Portuguese known precedent: the mass muggings on Brazilian beaches, providing journalists with a 'story of convergence' (Correia, 2006: 206).

Date	Articles	News or reports	Columns or interviews	Articles using mugging as frame	Articles referring to colour, ethnicity	Articles with emigrants as sources	Articles using the photo	Article using the vocabulary of fear	Articles denying the mugging frame
11.06.2005	15	12	3	15 (100%)	6 (40%)	0	9 (60%)	14 (93%)	0
12-16.06.2005	31	20	11	29 (93%)	23 (74%)	2 (64%)	6 (19%)	24 (77%)	2 (6%)
17-23.06.2005	63	44	19	59 (93%)	48 (76%)	15 (23%)	10 (15%)	42 (66%)	12 (19%)
24-30.06.2005	15	8	7	10 (66%)	13 (86%)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)	8 (53%)	3 (20%)
01-07.07.2005	12	5	7	9 (75%)	5 (41%)	0	2 (16%)	2 (16%)	5 (41%)
08-15.07.2005	14	8	6	14 (100%)	5 (35%)	0	7 (50%)	1 (7%)	13 (92%)

Table 8.1. The Carcavelos mugging in the printed press (11 June–15 July 2005)

More than a journalistic initiative, the construction and promotion of the media wave came from institutional sources, endowed with more symbolic capital. It was the massive use of these sources that provided the primary definition for the event (Hall et al., 1978) and hence modelled the future interpretation.

In the days following the event, there was complete unanimity among an important group of political definers. Amongst the political agents, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the leaders of the two most powerful political parties in opposition and the Mayor of the city of Cascais promoted the framework of mass mugging, conceiving it as an act of random violence, and accepting or promoting the definition of this incident as organized crime. They provided reporters with the necessary cohesion to strengthen the original frame, particularly because they represented a broad ideological spectrum. The representatives of other parliamentary parties were not heard. Other agents of social control, such as the spokesmen for the police or television criminologist Francisco Moita Flores joined this unanimity.

We argue that journalists's resistance to listening to immigrants or descendants of immigrants also played a part. These were the individuals that could rebut the charges that were being made against them. Very few journalists sought alternative sources to the dominating discourse. Throughout the news coverage of the incident, the voices of victims were not heard (twenty-three per cent of articles in the journalistic production phase). It is likely that an implicit bias was also at play, restricting access to media forums. Indeed, the Portuguese press has been known to restrict access by people of African origin to its pages on specific occasions, like sporting events or entertainment content (Ferin & Santos, 2006). Even the clarification between immigrants or individuals already born in Portugal was not made at any point in a process of 'othering' the foreign and portraying them as scapegoats.

We also identified an essential element to the construction and acceptance of the framework of the mass mugging in the widespread use of the photos taken by an observer, illustrating the time of arrival of the police and the ensuing panic. On the day after the incident, nine out of fifteen articles written on the subject integrated these images. They served as visual proof and gave credence to the frightening version of a mass assault. Ironically, in the event disassembly stage, half of the sample articles continued to reproduce the images, as if the visual testimony mitigated the mistakes.

In the linguistic field, and taking the example of the media wave on other crime incidents, the language used was part of what we call the 'vocabulary of fear'. Given an occurrence that had irrefutable news value, journalists spared no adjectives. On 11 June, the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* described 'moments

of terror' and 'young people spread panic'; *Correio da Manhã* reported that 'two shots into the air spread panic' and that the robbers 'sowed panic'; *Jornal de Notícias* used, in different headlines, 'violence', 'panic' and 'terror'; *Público* described 'youth gangs created panic' and 'mass mugging swept the sand'; *24 Horas* mentioned 'hundreds of vandals attack bathers and create panic'.

Until the end of July, the incident was systematically built according to this semantic framework. More than half of the articles called upon these marks of terror and fear, which helped to cement the suggested frame. It is naturally debatable whether the audience absorbed terror in their interpretation of the event, but one incident that took place on 20 June deserves to be mentioned: passengers on a train to Sintra experienced panic sparked by the sound of alarming cries, which were interpreted as another mass mugging in process; terrified passengers dived out of the carriages (*Jornal de Notícias*, 22 June 2005). For some, at least, the mass mugging was visibly assimilated in their daily lives.

In the footsteps of Vasterman's model, the Carcavelos incident was equally used as a prototype during the following weeks, reproducing the dominant frame to define apparently similar instances. This incident worked as a key event, introducing to the agenda the concern for criminal cases of random violence.

At the height of journalistic production on the risks of the new mass muggers and the way the authorities prepared for the new threat, two examples justify the above. On 12 June, journalists reported a possible copycat event at a beach in the Algarve (a summer destination in the south), mistaking a small beach incident for a symptom of a new potential mass mugging. On 17 June, and in the following days, SIC television broadcast images captured by surveillance cameras on trains in Greater Lisbon (without identifying the date of recording). They were selected to illustrate acts of delinquency by young African men. The relevance of these incidents to the Carcavelos 'mass mugging' was null, but the television network and some newspapers took advantage of the predominant framework – suburban young people, mostly from ethnic minorities, are potential authors of acts of random violence – and added under this category incidents out of context that would have been previously ignored. As Thompson (1995: 117) noted, 'by making images and information available to individuals located in distant locations, the media shape and influence the course of events, and indeed, create events that would not have existed in their absence'.

Like Vasterman concluded in his case study, news construction of this event also extrapolated conclusions not supported by crime statistics, suggesting a breakdown of public order. Although several newspapers echoed

Years	Crimes of physical violence	Street robberies with contact to victim	Street robberies without contact	Crimes against public peace *	Total of crimes
2005	686	5,518	11,413	101	384,975
2004	777	6,247	11,606	163	416,420
2003	895	6,377	10,552	139	417,383
2002	842	5,958	10,970	129	391,599
2001	862	5,373	10,613	208	372,170
2000	805	5,515	9,008	90	363,294
1999	896	5,741	7,804	85	362,589
1998	954	4,635	5,614	118	341,122
1997	959	6,252	5,706	153	321,644
1996	958	5,504	5,690	138	322,255
1995	933	6,902	5,793	94	326,829

Table 8.2. Incidents of four type of crimes, 1995-2005

Source: Legislative Policy and Planning Office of the Ministry of Justice, 2006

* These include terrorism or terrorism association; riots; insubordination or public instigation of crime; criminal association; and others against public peace. The group violence, quoted in 2005 newspaper articles, is not a statistical category.

an increase of these indicators, claiming they reflected a significant deterioration of public order, detailed analysis of official indicators produced by the Legislative Policy and Planning Office of the Ministry of Justice confirm no indicator of this type of crime reached a peak in 2005.

Instead, with the exception of street robberies (with unknown perpetrator), the remaining categories had significantly lower numbers in 2005 than in previous years, reflecting a positive evolution of criminal data in clear contradiction to the news content (see Table 8.2).

We verified a clear disproportion between the relevance of the Carcavelos event and the content of the news coverage generated by it. Indeed, a key aspect in the media wave construction was precisely the use of crime data as grounds for the mass mugging frame.

The statistics, as Sacco (2000: 205) estimated, are important

rhetorical devices in the social processes by which crime and (other social) problems are constructed and maintained. Such statistics are used to press claims about the pervasiveness and scope of new problems and therefore about the need for urgent social action.

Days after the occurrence in Carcavelos and after news reports voiced criminal statistics, slogans in a nationalist protest replicated the same content, proving that the numbers had sunk in and were being integrated into speech, strengthening the vocabulary of fear and proving Howitt's suggestion (1982), according to which the occasional victimization statistics report can ignite public anxiety.

News coverage about the Carcavelos event reached saturation point on 23 June, twelve days after the key event, with 109 articles, while the next fifteen days the newspapers offered twenty-seven articles, in total 150 (see Table 8.1). Without new information and with the probable weakening of the commitment of key definers, journalists ended the coverage of the Carcavelos mass mugging.

Strongly self-referential, the news coverage systematically reproduces the same framing, reducing the opportunity of conflicting interpretations. In this case, the unanimity of the early days was not challenged until 16 June, when a police spokesperson drastically reduced the estimated number of assailants and the damage actually caused. On 17 June, an article was published in *A Capital*, contradicting the thesis until then undisputed. But throughout June the dominant frame was always the mass mugging. By the time the denials and corrections gained weight in the news, the media wave was already fading.

According to the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities, 'the police officers themselves recognize that they tried to correct the initial estimate immediately on 10 June, before the TV news. However, no one wanted to hear. The story was already framed and no one bothered to crosscheck it with other sources' accounts, to question the hasty analysis of two or three characters or even submitting it to a common sense judgement. When the media wave finally began to run out of steam, there was a willingness to find other centres of attraction. And it turned out that the police had something to say. There were other sources. The official data did not correspond to the largest mass mugging in the world. Unfortunately, however, the damage was already done'.²

The media wave took shape in news and reports, but, in the disassembly stage, the main actors came from outside the journalist sphere, including ombudsmen, politicians, and other civil society agents. In a way, the mass mugging was challenged in the opinion columns and not so much in the news items.

Regardless of the corrections that some newspapers included, the mass mugging never ceased to be the dominant frame. On 18 June, in *Público*, Eduardo Dâmaso epitomized the conclusion shared by many media professionals: 'Reducing the size of what happened in Carcavelos to "thirty or forty" people involved in the assaults is an absurd simplification of those who refuse to see the obvious'. Speaking to the *Jornal de Notícias* of 22 June, the minister António Costa also confirmed that it was 'indifferent to the seriousness of the matter the actual size of the mass mugging!'

Indeed, despite the police rebuttal of the initial thesis of a mass assault, our content analysis shows that the phrase 'mass mugging' continued to be used in many of the journalistic texts. By the end of the sample, it seems obvious that for the Portuguese journalists, with more or less people involved, with or without planning or organization, with or without official complaints or registered injuries, Carcavelos was the scene of a mass mugging. Even in the last week of the sample, at a time when the Carcavelos events were only mentioned because of Diana Andringa's documentary, the expression was still firmly present in the journalistic lexicon, leaving clues that for the audience, the size of the incidents had been crafted according to the first proposed frame.

Moreover, as Castro (2006) warned, the word entered the vocabulary and even exceeded the initial resonance. On 4 July, *Correio da Manhã* explained in a headline that, with a new beach vigilance system, the police were 'Ready for mass muggings'.

It is legitimate to argue that during the formation of a media wave, official sources and journalists are prone to ignoring or minimizing the elements that may contradict the already set frame. The media wave feeds on the consistency and cohesion of key players, dismissing the arguments that rebut it.

Conclusion

The mass mugging incident collates several news values irrefutable to the Portuguese newspapers, involved in a daily battle for leadership in a short and competitive market. It was an unexpected event, occurring on the

capital's doorstep, involving a high number of people. It spurred a response from the main political sources and produced an event and subsequent copycat events of high emotional depth.

The unanimity between news organizations is another noteworthy factor. In a field as self-referential as journalism, a new event is rapidly integrated into cross-media agenda and exhaustively repeated. In the maelstrom promoted by the desire to beat the competition, the stages of reflection and fact checking are shortened and widespread journalistic representations become fragmented and distorted. Carcavelos happened in a world before the take-off of social media. It could be argued that the same set of events would be subject to an even bigger amplification in the Facebook and Twitter era, but one can only hope that these same tools could also provide quicker and irrefutable counter-proofs to the dominant discourse.

Could the media wave happen without consensus among primary definers? It is unlikely. The use of the legitimacy of official sources is an unconscious defence, held up by journalists in response to accusations of irresponsible reporting or, worse, malpractice. It is not surprising that the dominant frame was not contested in the media during the first stage of the news coverage. Although other social agents had a different story to tell, news organization did not feel the need to listen to alternative voices to what seemed consensual amongst official sources that defined the event.

Built around the deviant behaviour of an ethnic group already stigmatized, represented in an incorrect and fragmented way, the media wave about the mass mugging swallowed up the timid attempts at rebuttal until it reached saturation point.

Although this chapter does not discuss the information reception, it is likely that the Portuguese public integrated this new instance into their mental framework. On 29 July, more than a month and a half after the Carcavelos incident, the newspaper *Meios e Publicidade* published a survey of editors, coordinators, journalists and editors-in-chief working in the national media. More than half of respondents (fifty-three per cent) argued that journalists had not misbehaved in relation to the story of the mass mugging, reflecting the deep-rooted idea that if one obeys the professional standards accepted by the majority of the community, then journalistic practice is self-assessed with merit.

As journalism is revolutionized by the concept of the never-ending deadline in online journalism, social media, television and radio, the adaptation of professional routines to a new era of real-time journalism will feed further events like this. Journalism's sociology should address

media waves fed by unanimity and fragile consensus as a by-product of the information abundance. This phenomenon reveals a frightening predisposition to information circularity and the flighty representation of minority groups, associated a priori with deviant behaviours, which justifies more attention by researchers. Surette's recent work (2015) on performance crime in the age of new media also suggests that attention-seeking offenders of the twenty-first century will place additional stresses on the criminal system, generating changes in law enforcement and ultimately on crime perception itself.

Sociology will find in media waves a promising and relevant field of research. Future inputs can be produced by studies that acknowledge the power of social media as unanimity generation mechanisms. New media mixes content from legacy media with personalized and high-speed content, thus changing the way the public creates its narratives of law-breaking or law surveillance (Surette, 2015). The tools through which citizens become information producers should now be researched in order to assess to what extent a time interval marked by a media wave and the corresponding consensus frames in the media actually exists.

Notes

1. It was the only time during this process that the police authorities referred to the incident as 'arrastão', or mass mugging.
2. Author's interview with the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities, February 2010.

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