

PATHOLOGIES AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE MEDIA CONTEXT

1ST VOLUME

JOÃO CARLOS CORREIA
ANABELA GRADIM
RICARDO MORAIS
(EDS.)



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THE CONTROL OF SCREENS AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION. TV NEWS AND CONTEMPORARY ACTIVISM IN PORTUGAL

Naide Müller¹

Abstract: The deep crisis of confidence affecting advanced industrial democracies that extends to the new and more recent democracies is creating a fertile ground for the growth of “populisms” that can affect significant activist historical achievements regarding basic human and civil rights. The debates about how social networks are contributing to this reality reinforces the need to strengthen the basic institutional and democratic functions of traditional media. In Portugal and in Europe television remains the most common medium used by citizens to access information, so it is important to present citizens other possibilities for public participation with the capacity to assert a set of social “counter-powers”. The production of fictional realities increased by digital environments can be seriously detrimental to some audiences and postmodern PR professionals will necessarily have to adopt a critical attitude and vigilant of “meaningless communication” patterns. This article presents preliminary data on the representation of contemporary activist movements in the television news of the four generalist Portuguese free-to-air channels and approaches the possibilities for media professionals, as *symbolmakers* in *hyperreality* contexts, on counteracting the tendencies towards the standardization of beliefs in ways that can contribute to help activists, who defend democratic values, to reach the television screens.

Key Words: Democracy; activism; public relations; media

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Introduction

In the history of liberal democracy, and hence of the democratic state, social movements have been considered as the fundamental intermediaries for civic participation. In European history they are directly related to the emergence of an open and active “public sphere”. It has been under the pressure of social movements of various kinds that the system of representation has been constituted. Free association such as freedom of conscience, discourse, industry, religious belief and the press emerged as an invention that began to build institutions and practices for the recognition of collective identities (Della Porta, 2015: 768-770). Recently, significant social changes have taken place because contemporary social movements can become organized globally and are no longer limited to their places of action (Kunsch and Kunsch, 2007: 10).

Activism is an “action in the name of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine” (Martin, 2007: 19). From a historical point of view, activism has played an important role in ending slavery, defying dictatorships, protecting workers from exploitation, protecting the environment, promoting equality for women, opposing racism and many other important issues, however, activism can also be used for other purposes such as attacking minorities or promoting war, so activism is not necessarily something good or bad. It all depends on the cause, actions and appreciation of each individual on what “is worth” to defend (Martin, 2007: 19).

In the process of social change in which the media have become increasingly influential in the various areas of the public sphere that we call mediatization (Esser and Stromback, 2014: 4), debates and concerns are arising about the inevitable involvement of media and the emergence of neo-populist movements, with sensationalistic media coverage of conflict (Mazzoleni, Stewart and Horsfield, 2003: 6-8). The proliferation of debates about how social networks are changing societies and the rise of populist leaders are now prominent in many countries (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 2) and reinforces the need to strengthen the basic functions of traditional media, as a

pillar institution of democratic societies, with several authors pointing out the real and inherent dangers of overly optimistic discourse and perception about the new media and what they represent for social changes around democratic values (Curran, 2012, Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010, Couldry, 2004). Since our experience is mediated almost entirely by technical means that disseminate content on a global scale, we see a “cognitive dependence of individuals on the media in mediated societies” (Biroli, 2011: 85-86) allowing the “controllers” of the screens to significantly influence the collective imagination. The cultures of celebrities and consumerism and the economic constraints of the media industries lead to practices and representations that tend to ignore the agenda of social movements (Hackett, 2000: 62), at a global moment in which these voices and “critical spirits” become increasingly pertinent. In this scenario, research that seeks to bring visibility to democratic resistance forces that are based on values of respect and tolerance of diversity becomes more relevant.

In Portugal, there has also been significant social changes resulting from the era of “network communication” (Cardoso, Costa, Coelho and Pereira, 2015: 11-12). But despite the fact that the digital environment has brought new configurations of political and social involvement and participation, as well as new and unexpected forms of collective mobilization and activism (Campos, Pereira and Simões, 2016: 28), television continues to be the privileged mean for the majority of citizens in Portugal to have access to information (Burnay and Ribeiro, 2016: 6) and “television news are, by their representativeness, one of the main sources for the social construction of reality” (Brandão, 2010: 134). Portugal follows an European trend, since, according to the Eurobarometer Standard survey (88) in autumn 2017, television (watched on TV or on the Internet) remains the most common medium used by European citizens: 84% attend every day or almost every day, an increase of two percentage points since the same survey in the autumn of 2016 (EB86).

This article presents a theoretical approach to contemporary activism in democratic and mediated society's connecting it with the work of *symbolmakers* in hyperreality contexts (Holtzhausen, 2002: 30-38). It also presents preliminary data on the representation of contemporary activist movements in the television news of the Portuguese free-to-air television channels. In 2015, 2016 and 2017 the news programs of the four Portuguese free-to-air channels (RTP1, RTP2, SIC and TVI) mentioned the words "activism" and "activists" 582 times. In general, the references to these concepts have been increasing in the news programs of all channels, with a high general increase between 2016 and 2017. This may be related, to a global tendency, identified by some researchers, that is connected to the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States (Marris, 2016; Yukich, 2018, Horsford, 2018). But, besides this, the general percentage of references on the news programs to these concepts is reduced.

Media, democracy and contemporary activism

The results of the Democracy Report of 2018, the second annual report of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem, 2018) project, recently released, positions Portugal at the 10th position in the ranking of democracies worldwide. On the other hand, the researchers alert to the fact that democratic space in the main countries on the democracy-autocracy spectrum side is shrinking. A much larger share of the world's population today is experiencing autocratization.

Meanwhile, Portuguese democracy is also experiencing a certain feeling of helplessness in civil society due to the emptiness that exists between the certainties given by the previous forms of social organization and the embryonic state of the new proposals of social change that are intended to bring the meaning of life in a defragmented perspective, for the various areas of social reality (Cardoso, Costa, Coelho and Pereira, 2015: 11-13).

As with the appearance of the press, the euphoria of the internet in the 1990s predicted an opportunity for democracy to march and that dictators

would fall because the internet inspired and demanded freedom, but many authoritarian governments around the world obtained only the best tools at their disposal and are in a better position to censor and alter content than what the mid-1990s ‘cyber utopic’ had predicted (Curran, 2012: 49-51). The strongly contested statements by Jair Bolsonaro, a candidate for the presidential elections in Brazil, on October 7, 2018, in a video broadcast live on his social networks to comment on the results of the first round of Brazilian presidential elections, are indicative of these trends: “Let’s put an end to all activism in Brazil” (Folha de São Paulo, 12.10.2018). Regarding the optimistic ‘apocalyptic statements’ about this subject and not detracting from the obvious benefits that technological advances have brought to societies, it is important to remember that the new and old media are ‘living’ in an articulated way with the new complementing the old (Ribeiro, 2015: 212).

Recognizing that an active civil society and a free press and internet are very important hallmarks of liberal or representative democracies, we cannot deny that the Internet is increasingly presenting itself as a specific territory for public intervention and political and civic participation, particularly among young people. However, this “emancipatory, democratic and participatory role “also brings risks and challenges, particularly regarding to the balance between the traditional and “virtual” forms of activism and its different publics (Campos et al., 2016:42-43). Online activism has been criticized for not being followed or complemented by forms of offline participation, and often rejected as *clicativism* or *slacktivism* (Gladwell, 2011; Halupka, 2014; Karpf, 2010; Morozov, 2009; Shulman, 2009) supposedly fulfilling only the desire for instantaneous self-satisfaction and having little or no impact on the actual political processes and the actual actions of the citizens. Some authors have rejected the perspective of digital democracy as a myth, with online politics showing more similarities than traditional politics differences (Hindman, 2009).

Although there are perspectives that believe that the media reconfiguration brought by the digital environment will make television, in the short and

medium term, an irrelevant medium of communication, especially among the younger demographics, the evidence points to a scenario of complementarity (Vicente, 2016). The study *New Power of Television* (2012) indicates that television consumption is driven by online, in an increasing multitasking behaviour, with TV content serving as an excuse for interaction, sharing and commentary on social networks and blogs. In addition, in Portugal there is a preoccupation concerning the younger demographics being little involved in civic and political activities (Lobo, Ferreira and Rowland 2015).

In the political field, several studies have shown that the mainstream media have passed from mere channels of communication to actors of the electoral process itself. However, media discourses do not reflect the plurality of perspectives existing in society, significantly affecting the exercise of democracy and distorting the integration of social diversity (Morais e Sousa, 2011:4-13). On the other hand, recent research has shown that some kinds of youth participation in the digital media sphere representing a new and significant form of political activism has been unrecognized or trivialized by the public at large (Jenkins et al, 2016).

The proliferation of debates and studies on how social networks are changing societies and the “rising phenomenon of populist leaders currently prominent in many countries” (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 2) reinforces the need for the “image renewal of protest movements”, associating them with a construction that translates social consciousness, responsibility and exercise of citizenship rather than the usual association of common sense with “subversion”, “revolution”, “radicalism” and “political exaltation” (Assis, 2006; Batista, 2012).

What counts as activism depends on what is conventional. In societies where freedom of expression is respected and protected, making government complaints is a routine occurrence. But in a dictatorship, such complaints can be seen as subversive and those responsible can be punished. It is usually those who hold less power in society who resort to activism since those

who hold positions of power and influence can usually achieve their goals through conventional means (Martin, 2007: 19-20).

In a scenario in which the public debate, online and offline, continues to mirror Michel Foucault's "torture" system of punishment and discipline, controlling the population by creating oppositions within them and the so-called civilized screens resemble "a furnace that lights up violence" (Foucault, 1999:13), the challenge for contemporary activists in the areas of social innovation, protection of the fundamental rights and dignity of all life on the planet will be the reconfiguration of their action, between the real and the virtual, with the aim of winning a credible voice on mainstream screens that "try to resist the forms of dominant power" (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002).

Symbolmakers in *hyperreality* contexts

We're living in a new sociocommunicational paradigm of great complexity in which the capacity to effectively decode and encode information presents itself as a "determinant for full social integration" (Lopes, 2011: 02). We live the future of Huxley (2002) in this kind of "civilized chaos" that immerses us in waves of information, stimuli, acceleration, sensations, emotions and possibilities (Ilharco, 2014). Edward Wilson challenges us with the statement that we are "drowning in information and thirsty for wisdom" (Wilson: 1998: 294).

The illusion of civilization is confused with an "anti-nature" extreme organization where everyone is controlled and the process of 'McDonaldization' spreads to the production and consumption of images, visual culture and lifestyles (Ritzer, 1993). The new castes of this contemporary "Brave New World", the ones that generate the most evolved beings, are now based on access to technology and first-level education. The protected organs of the original panopticon of the industrial process gave way to the cybernetic panopticon of digital capitalism that "produces docile minds locked in their screens" (Hand and Sandywell, 2002:204).

The representations of these realities exist, not because an order is objectively true, but “because believing in it enables us to cooperate effectively and to forge a stronger society”. A natural order is stable, otherwise gravity could cease to function tomorrow, but we continue to nurture the “imagined order” that depends on myths that disappear when people stop believing in them” (Yuval, 2017:134-137).

In his book *The Burnout Society*, the German philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2014) presents hyper communication as a modality of positive society violence, this is linked to various excesses, particularly to a productivity overload and media stimuli. Because of the fragmentation and dispersion of perception and the technique of multitasking, associated with this dispersion, the deep and contemplative attention of cultural life has been supplanted by a “hyperattention” that gives place to an “alienating fatigue” (Han, 2014: 26).

The human need to control reality creates the “normotics of informational culture”. This “Normose” is the result of a set of beliefs, opinions, attitudes and behaviors considered normal. There is a consensus of normality that can have pathological and/or lethal consequences. Some examples of these norms are: food uses like sugar, use of agrochemicals and insecticides, drug use such as cigarettes or alcohol, the Newtonian paradigm and the subject-object dualism fantasy in science, the consumerism associated with the destruction of life on the planet (Weil, 2000:62). It is useful to remind Dostoiévski (2008: 34-36) in the defense that “it can be very fruitful for man to go against the normal interest, positive, secured by the arguments of reason and arithmetic” (...). “Two and two are four for me is an impertinence (...). It can be much better two and two to be five?”

Several authors advocate emerging theories that seek to counteract the tendencies towards the standardization of beliefs. These defend, for example, that human rights advocacy in the 20th century should be extended to the non-human world (animals and nature) in the 21st century to ease the il-

lusion of human control over nature and other forms of life on the planet (Cavalieri, 2002; Cullinan, 2011; Klein, 2014; Nash, 1989; Singer, 2009). By their “collective attempts to infuse new beliefs, norms, and values into social structures”, activism and social movements can create social and institutional changes depending upon framing processes, mobilizing structures, and political opportunities (Rao, Morrill and Zald, 2000: 239-242).

Public Relations (PR) have a complicated relationship with activism because historically activism has justified the organizational investment in PR services to avoid public criticism (L'Etang, 2016: 207). The operational area of media relations has been largely censored for creating a “hyperreality that leads to the conception of a hypercivilization that has no factual existence” (Holtzhausen, 2002: 29). However, postmodern perspectives on technology argue that the role of media relations in PR will be more sought after than ever. Digital environments will increasingly enable organizations to obscure their real intentions and produce fictional realities by providing “useless information” that can be seriously detrimental to some audiences and post-modern PR professionals will necessarily have to adopt a critical attitude and vigilant of this “meaningless communication” to ensure that all audiences are fully informed and participate in the discussions (Holtzhausen, 2002: 30-38). The allocation of power and the dominant ideology can be seen through a critical view of the signs and symbols of a culture. “Public relations practitioners can be called symbolmakers if one considers their work is largely word and image” (Mickey, 1997:271). And it is also known that 50% to 75% of mainstream media content is provided or significantly influenced by Public Relations (PR) professionals (Macnamara, 2015: 118).

So the same advertising, social marketing, and PR strategies that successfully established mass consumption in big screens as a way of life can serve to promote sustainable consumption as an alternative lifestyle (Muratovski, 2013: 1). There are authors analysing the role of PR in the growth of generalized sustainable consumption (Tafra-Vlahović, 2012; Acaroglu, 2014: 19) and

this can be applied for analysing the image of social movements defending alternative perspectives of reality.

In interpreting symbolic forms, individuals incorporate them into their understanding of themselves and others. The receivers are currently participating in a structured process of symbolic transmission, and mediated communication is always a contextualized social phenomenon. “When humans use the media they are making networks of meanings for themselves” (Thompson, 1995: 11). Hence, individuals who occupy dominant positions in large institutions may have vast resources at their disposal, enabling them to make decisions and pursue goals that will have long-term consequences (Thompson, 1995: 12-14).

Human beings are called upon to make decisions on complex issues, even without having reasonable knowledge about them, which imposes an interpretation of reality according to the partial, possibly naive, perspective of reality. Lippman argues that the ideas and impressions that we form about the facts depend on “where we stand and the habits of our eyes” (Lippmann, 2008 [1922]: 22-84). Political or technological changes do not take place without cultural or institutional changes that depend on clarification and individual and collective capacity to reinterpret reality (Illich, 1971: 148-156). If societies do not have this culture, if citizens are not accustomed to being exposed, in the mainstream media, to content that defies the collective misconception of what it is to be human and about life on the planet, the new social movements will not succeed only by the hypertechnological structure (Marchioni, 1991: 40).

Method of data collection and research questions

In our study, we have identified the TV news programs that made use of the words “activism” and “activists” aired on the four Portuguese free-to-air channels between 2015 and 2017.

The choice of these channels was based on the fact that their content is representative of the information produced in Portuguese newsrooms. Furthermore, these are the channels that reach a larger number of viewers, according to CAEM / GFK audiometry data. A significant part of the population considers that these channels offer “sufficient programs for the satisfaction of [their] informative and recreational needs” (Burnay and Ribeiro, 2016: 25).

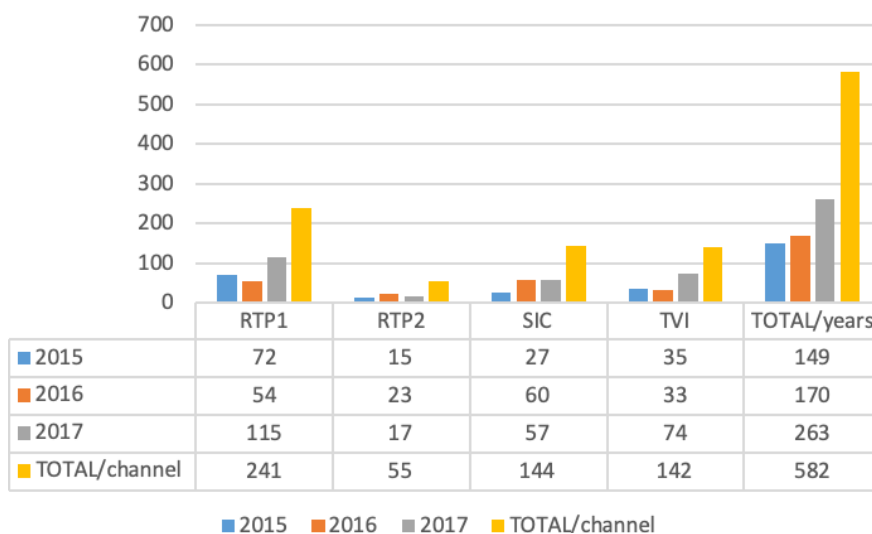
The programs covered in our analysis are: RTP 1 – Bom Dia Portugal (from Monday to Friday); Jornal da Tarde (daily); Telejornal (Daily), Sexta às 9 (Friday’s) || RTP2 - Euronews (from Monday to Friday); Journal 2 (Daily); || SIC – Edição da Manhã (from Monday to Friday); Primeiro Jornal (daily); Jornal da Noite (Daily); || TVI - Diário da Manhã (from 2nd to 6th F); Jornal da Uma (daily); and Jornal das 8 (daily).

We intend to answer the following research questions:

1. How many times information news programs of the Portuguese generalist television free-to-air channels mentioned the “words “activism” and “activists” between 2015 and 2017?
2. How much airtime was given in 2017 to news pieces dealing with the concepts of activist and activism movements in Portuguese generalist television free-to-air channels?

Results and analyze

The first objective was to quantify how many times the words “activism” and “activists” were mentioned in the news information of the four Portuguese generalist free-to-air channels RTP1, RTP2, SIC and TVI in the period between 2015 and 2017. The following results were obtained:



Graphic 1 - Number of references of the words “activism” and “activists” in the news programs of the Portuguese generalist television free-to-air channels between 2015 and 2017
By Cision Ltd

In these three years the news programs of the Portuguese free-to-air television channels mentioned the words “activism” and “activists” 582 times. It is possible to see that the references to these concepts have been increasing in the news programs of all channels, with a high general increase between 2016 and 2017- total of 170 references in 2016 and a total of 263 references in 2017. The continuation of the research is expected to provide the detailed analysis of the news content of the 2017 television news programs that referred the concepts of “activism” and “activists”. In any case, the significant increase in the references to these terms may be related to a global tendency, identified by some researchers, that is connected to the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Some authors argued that this election has created an urge for a new wave of active social participation and activist leadership in different areas of society since arts, education, religion and science to reinforce the defense of climate activism, civil and human rights, and the value of science and progressive values (Marris, 2016; Yukich, 2018, Horsford, 2018). On the other hand it is possible to see that the Portuguese public television channel (RTP 1) was the

one that mentioned most these concepts - 241 times. This may be related to the discussion about the role of public television in stimulating participation as a space for informed citizenship (Brandão, 2010: 164). The substantial quantitative increase of the reference to these concepts in 2017 is, for itself, a phenomenon that inspires further investigation and reflection on the relationship between contemporary activism and the production of television news.

Program/Channel	Nº of Emissions/2017	Nº News. No Ref/Activ.	% Progr. With Ref. Activ.
Bom dia Portugal (RTP1)	250	195	22%
Jornal da Tarde (RTP1)	365	340	6.8 %
Telejornal (RTP 1)	365	340	6.8%
Sexta às 9 (RTP 1)	52	51	1.9%
Euronews (RTP 2)	250	250	0%
Jornal 2 (RTP2)	365	350	4.1%
Edição da Manhã (SIC)	250	222	11.2%
Primeiro Jornal (SIC)	365	348	4.6%
Jornal da Noite (SIC)	365	353	3.2%
Diário da Manhã (TVI)	250	217	13.2%
Jornal da Uma (TVI)	365	346	5.2%
Jornal das Oito (TVI)	365	343	6%

Table 1 – Broadcasts of news programs of the free-to-air generalist Portuguese channels with and without reference to the concepts of “activists” and “activism” in 2017

During 2017 the four free-to-air television channels (RTP1, RTP2, SIC, TVI) broadcast 3607 news programs and 263 of these contained references to the concepts of “activism” and “activists”. Despite 2017 having been a year with a high general increase of references to these concepts, only 7% of the total news programs aired these channels have referred to them. It is possible to see that the news program that most referred these concepts is the morning news “Bom Dia Portugal” from the public Portuguese television channel, with 22% of the programs broadcast referring to the concept of “activists” or “activism”. The morning news programs are, in general, the ones that mention more these concepts – Edição da Manhã (SIC); Diário da Manhã (TVI). But besides this, the percentage of references on the news programs of the four Portuguese free-to-air channels is reduced. In further research the objective is to better understand why these happens and how the interaction between PR and journalists is, or can be, connect to this phenomenon.

Conclusions

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represents a paradigm change in the international policies on development cooperation but this can only be achieved with a strong commitment to go beyond the situations of paradigmatic invisibility. Journalists and PR professionals have a huge challenge in this process reconfiguring the counterintuitive effect of messages and understanding that fear disables action (Acaroglu, 2014: 19). If publics are confronted everywhere with narratives about a world full of problems without solutions, and they believe it, the next step will be avoid this dramatic hyper-reality and assume that they have no power or choice to change it. Besides their useful function of warning about dangerous directions, dystopias can create additive systems about a world that is going to be even worse than the one we are living in, discarding the human capacity to mobilize and get out of these externalities. Otherwise historic rebellion would be a fraud only to be used by the brands of counter-culture products. It is a case to say “get out of the Matrix” referring to the movie where in a dystopian future reality as perceived by most humans is actually a simulated reality called “the Matrix” (Andy Wachowski & Larry Wachowski, 1999).

If technologies have brought a new space of visibility to activist organizations that defend human, civil, environmental and animal rights, they have also made it possible for extremist organizations and totalitarian movements to create virtual spaces that naturally undermine public confidence in elections, in the courts, in the traditional media and in science, with conspiracy theories, false narratives and ignorant perspectives on religion and race (Albright, 2018: 20-30).

In this context, those who define and seek to influence what is reported in the TV news programs (journalists and PR), have a greater responsibility and interest to provide perspectives that allow us greater independence from the most varied attempts of “intellectual subjugation” inherent to the

production and dissemination of information (Tornero and Varis, 2010: 24-26). On one side, this preliminary data analysis confirms an increase of the reference to the concepts of “activism” and “activists” between 2016 and 2017 in news programs of the Portuguese free to air television channels and, on the other, indicates a reduced general reference (only 7%) to these concepts in the news of these channels in 2017.

The deep crisis of confidence affecting advanced industrial democracies that extends to the new and more recent democracies is creating a fertile ground for the growth of “populisms” that are offering to, increasingly discontented citizens, a simplistic discourse in an accessible language, vulgar and particularly, “attractive and mobilizing” (Teixeira, 2018: 123-127). To counterbalance this state of things, it is important to present citizens with other possibilities for public participation with the capacity to assert a set of social “counter-powers”. A kind of “parallel system that, far from being undemocratic, presupposes a healthy relationship between governors and the governed”, based on the use of instruments of evaluation, control and accountability of the actions of the governments that, by consecrating impartiality, plurality and proximity, are capable of limiting the “absolutism” of the legitimized rulers by the consecration of the elections (Teixeira, 2018: 123-127).

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