

PORTUGUESE PRESS AND ITS PUBLIC. PERCEPTIONS AND MOTIVATIONS

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Abstract

Letters-to-the-editor constitute one of the few feedback opportunities for the reader to have its say in press. We can indeed affirm that this newspapers' section intends to operate as a space for public debate about a variety of subjects, having, thus, a democratic purpose (Wahl-Jorgensen, 1999, 2002). However, this aim can be challenged by the existence of several criteria for selection of letters, in which the majority of them is based in unwritten conventions and norms, thus rendering the process unclear to readers.

Having previously done research about the attitudes and behaviours of Portuguese editors and journalists towards the readers and the letters' section, as well as the main rules for selection¹, this paper intends to uncover letters' writers' perceptions about this section and compare them to the cultural construction that press has about its public. Empirical research in American newspapers shows, for instance, that these readers believe that their letters affect and form public opinion (Vacin, 1965).

Through questionnaires sent to several Portuguese letters-writers, either to the occasional, either to the so-called "regular writers", our goal is to identify their main motivations and expectations when writing letters to newspapers, as well as their understanding about the section, rules of selection and editing.

Keywords

Letters to the editor; Newspapers; Participation.

1. This paper is part of my PhD Dissertation, set to be concluded in 2009. The research focuses on the process of selecting letters-to-the-editor in four Portuguese national press publications, in order to fulfill a larger aim: the way that the public is constructed by press; the newsroom practices and behaviours beneath the selection process; the way that journalists and editors see their readers; the way by which letters-to-the editor may be (or not) a real space for public discussion; the motivations of letters writers; the themes aroused in the letters' section. Many methodologies are being used, such as content analysis of letters (published and unpublished), participant observation (to observe in loco the process of selection of letters, the rules applied and the attitudes of editores towards their readers), in depth interviews (with editors and ombudsmen) and questionnaires (letters writers).

Letters-to-the-editor and letters-writers: a brief approach

In press, letters-to-the-editor may be described as a means by which the readers have the opportunity to express their opinions about many subjects. “They constitute one of the few feedback opportunities for the ordinary citizen in the daily and weekly press” (Raeymaeckers, 2005: 201). The letters-to-the-editor section has, thus, a democratic purpose, because it intends to operate as a space of public debate. The space of letters-to-the-editor may serve to the exchange of ideas between the newspaper and its readers. Thus, we can define it as a means by which readers talk with the newspaper, in the newspaper and possibly about the newspaper.

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, from Cardiff University, is the author of the most systematic and complete studies on letters-to-the-editor and its relevance to the understanding of press in democracy. Wahl-Jorgensen (1999a, 2000, 2002a, 2007) claims there is a conflict between the historic roles of mass media, as a public service, and the dominant model of media as a financial source. This tension affects editors’ views on the letters-to-the-editor section: they recognize its democratic potential, as a public forum (and the newspaper’s duty and responsibility to provide it), but they also understand it like a “customer service”, as a complaints’ receiver, which makes the readers happy and may increase the newspaper’s economic profit. According to Wahl-Jorgensen, the coexistence of these two visions entails a “normative-economic justification” for public discourse: what is good for democracy is also good, and inevitably, for business.

Although the letters’ section is viewed as a key feature to public debate and dialogue, it can also be seen as a strategic place that aims to reinforce the newspaper credibility to readers’ eyes, like if it was a “public relations” tool (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002a: 121). On the other hand, it gives angry and dissatisfied readers an opportunity to express themselves and to be heard. “In its columns its readers should be encouraged to express their opinions, their fears, their hopes – and, just as important, their grievances” (Bromley, 1998: 149). Therefore, through letters-to-the-editor, the newspaper reinforces its credibility, because allows the public to express its opinions (Nemeth & Sanders, 1999: 2).

Besides this discussion about the nature of the section, an essential aspect of letters-to-the-editor is the fact that it is the newspaper and not the readers that determine who can access the letters’ section. In fact, as the newspaper cannot publish the total amount of letters that is received daily, there are specific rules that readers

must obey in order to get their texts published. Few of these rules are explicit to the readers, as they are constructed through a process of selection profoundly rooted in journalism practices and routines. The criteria according to which certain individuals are given access to the press remain thus unclear, since “these varied forms of access are governed by largely unwritten conventions and norms” (McQuail, 2003: 129).

Wahl-Jorgensen (2002b: 69) identifies four rules for selection of letters-to-the-editor. Firstly, *the rule of relevance* or letters shall respond to items already placed firmly on the agenda by the newspaper and talk about newsworthy events. Secondly, *the rule of entertainment* or editors prefer touching and provocative letters (human interest and polemics). Thirdly, *the rule of brevity* or letters must be short and concise. Last, but not least, *the rule of authority* or the editors prefer well-written letters and texts from persons of authority (the so-called “informed outsider”, who corresponds to cultural standards of eloquence and expertise about a topic of discussion). Wahl-Jorgensen concludes that editors create the debate flourishing in the letters section when they select readers’ texts, giving preference to certain types of public discourse. They decide not only those who can talk, but also the form by which they can talk.

For some authors, like Ericson, Baranek & Chan, what appears to be the least mediated, the most open and democratic element of a newspaper is, in fact, as mediated, closed and anti-democratic as other aspects in journalism (Ericson *et al.*, 1989: 338). In the opinion of these authors, who studied this theme in a Canadian newspaper, the selection of letters stresses the power of media, because they have the possibility to include and to exclude certain sources from public conversation – letters’ writers that show authority through their professional or public status or by their knowledge about a certain subject, or readers that represent an institution or organization, are more likely to be selected.

Moreover, the selection rules show that rationality, coherence and writing accuracy are essential to editors. The participant observation carried by Wahl-Jorgensen in an American local newspaper, *The Bay Herald*, demonstrated the scepticism that editors often reveal towards the letters’ section as a place for democratic communication, using a kind of “idiom of insanity” when referring to certain letters’ writers, thus seeing them as “crazy” or “sick” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002b: 185), as opposed to the “rational” or “normal” readers. “The preoccupation with rationality that is so central to much of democratic theory and, in particular, theories of deliberative democracy, became almost an obsession in the culture of *The Bay Herald* newsroom, as the flip side of the insanity of the letter-writers” (*idem, ibidem*: 194).

Editors use an “idiom of insanity” when they refer to some contributors to the section as “crazy”, such is, the people that lack the rationality that is necessary for public deliberation. “Editors generally lack affinity with the letter writers and their way of life, and have been known to label quite a few of them as ‘crazy’” (Raeymaeckers, 2005: 204). Although they view the correspondence section as a forum for rational and public debate, editors “are sceptical about the value of the letters section as a site for free expression and democratic communication because of what they perceive as the poor quality of public participation, and the non-representativeness of the letters writers. Editors view the letters section as important to democracy and would like for it to be a successful forum for public debate. In their view, however, it falls short of this ideal” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 135).

In fact, academic scholars have previously shown that journalists are not used to interact much with their public, in order to get feedback from their work, and also have a negative image towards its audience, seeing it as not being capable to express ideas in a relevant way (Gans, 1980; Sorlin, 1992). Plus, “journalists are largely dismissive and indifferent to feedback from the audience because they see it as unrepresentative of the general population” (Gans, 1980: 234/235).

Most studies about letters-writers in press appear in the United States, during the 1950’s to the 1970’s, being thus relatively old. They are also based in small samples and in case studies in local American newspapers (Hill, 1981: 385), and their main focus are the readers who have letters published (Reader, Stempel & Daniel, 2004), although some researches are also based in questionnaires sent to readers who write letters to newspapers, independently of having their texts published.

Empirical studies from the middle of 20th century show a very specific profile for the letters-writers – male, middle-aged or older, white, with a stable job and university level. Gary L. Vacin, in his master thesis in Kansas University, analysed 193 letters published in three Kansas daily newspapers, as well as 123 answers to a questionnaire sent to those letters-writers, in order to observe the type of individuals who write letters to newspapers and also their motivations when writing (Vacin, 1965: 464-5). Similarly to Steve Pasternak (*apud* Lambiase, 2005: 3) or Sidney Forsythe (*apud* Singletary, 1976: 537), Vacin concluded that letters-writers are of all age groups, but most likely elderly or middle-aged; are predominantly well-educated; most of them are men.

Through questionnaires sent to letters-writers of 25 non-daily newspapers in 22 counties in Pennsylvania, Singletary and Cowling also showed that more than 65% of letters were written by persons above 41 years old, 58% of writers attended colle-

ge and 76% of them were male (Singletary & Cowling, 1979: 165-167). Similarly, when studying letters-writers who sent letters, in a six-month period, to the newspaper *Eugene Register-Guard*, in Oregon, Tarrant concluded that writers were better educated, less mobile, more mature, better read and much older than the average citizen (Tarrant, 1957: 502).

Although the referred studies about letters-writers are rather old and although we can criticize them for the lack of topicality, the quantitative study of Bill Reader, from Ohio University, confirms the previous profile of letters-writers (Reader, 2005a; Reader, 2005b; Reader, Stempel III & Daniel, 2004). In 2003, Reader conducted a national telephone survey of 1017 American adults to ask them about their letter-writing habits and to collect demographic information, such as age, sex, race, income or level of education; the survey also asked respondents whether they had recently written letters-to-the-editor and whether their letters had been published.

Bill Reader concluded that people over 45 years old are most likely to be letters-writers (Reader, 2005a: 5). He also noted that education levels and incomes correlate directly with both letter-writing activity and letter-writing success on publication – 40% of respondents earning \$80,000 or more per year were the most likely to write letters (25% got published); on the other hand, those who pursued or completed post-graduate degrees were the most likely to write (44,7%) and to get published (27,3%). Despite concluding that white respondents are most likely to write than non-whites, Reader found no differences in letter writing or publication in terms of sex or religion.

In his 1977 study, Tunstall also noted that letters appearing in American newspapers were written by less than 1 per cent of the population and came from white, middle-class men (Tunstall *apud* Bromley, 1998: 150). Therefore, “scholars are sceptical (...) about the representativeness of opinions expressed in letters columns. This scepticism is based largely on the perception that persons who write letters-to-the-editor are a tiny and atypical group of citizens” (Hill, 1981: 384).

However, the empirical research conducted by Hill, which analyses 632 letters-to-the-editor which comment on the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and compares them with public opinion surveys about the subject, in order to determine the representativeness of letters, points out that the opinions expressed by letters-writers are very similar from those of the general population (*idem, ibidem*: 390). Also, Grey and Brown emphasize that, although letters-writers have been considered by scholars as an articulate minority with certain demographic characteristics, the truth is that their opinions “are often shared in the mass and all social and economic and educational

levels (...). Certainly letters can help give some indicators of levels and directions of public interest” (Grey & Brown, 1970: 455).

On the other hand, most newspaper editors say that the majority of letters-writers are occasional writers and react to a specific topic or event, but “also admitted that there are a group of regular writers, some writing more than one letter a day on the widest variety of subjects, sometimes to different newspapers” (Raeymaeckers, 2005: 211). For a question of “fair play”, some newspapers tend to limit the publication of letters of the so-called “habitués”, in order to give voice to other readers that write letters more occasionally. “Like every newspaper, we have what we call the chronic writer who just wants to get in print. These we limit firmly but kindly to one letter per month. Experience has shown that these people tend to frighten away people who otherwise could make a good contribution to the public thinking” (Andrews, 1968: 13), says a local American newspaper’s editor, referring to these kinds of letters-writers.

An article published in *The Masthead*² gives an interesting testimonial, made in the first-person, of one of these professional letters-writers. Fred Holzweiss, from Englewood, USA, writes letters for different press publications since 1970 and describes himself as an “inveterate letter-writer”, who expects at least a 50% publication rate; during 2000, he wrote 97 letters-to-the-editor to newspapers and magazines, from which 46 were published. Holzweiss has retired from his job on IBM and now has more time to contribute, about twice a week, when he has “something to say”, has “a valid position”, can support his contentions and believes that his voice “should be heard” (Holzweiss, 2001: 2).

This reader fits in the definition of professional letter-writers, but there are more extreme cases, including registers in the Guinness World Records book – Pooran Chandra Pande broke the world record of “most letters published in a single national newspaper in one year, having 118 of his letters published Indian newspaper *Dainik Jagran* during 2001³. Before that, Walter W. Seifert (1913-2000), emeritus professor in Ohio State University, where he taught public relations, was quoted by the Guinness World Records book in 1990, for having published more than 1600 letters-to-the-editor (AAVV, s.d.: 4).

The letters from these so-called “regular customers”, that can be described by their high cultural capital (as Pierre Bourdieu would say) and levels of eloquence, are

2. *The Masthead* is the quarterly magazine published by the National Conference of Editorial Writers (NCEW), a non-profit American association, founded in 1947.

3. Information retrieved from the Guinness World Records website (www.guinnessworldrecords.com)

frequently selected for publication by some newspapers, although others may be reluctant in choosing their texts. Our case study of a Portuguese newspaper of record, *Público*, noted that around 23% of letters were written by these kinds of letters-writers and, above all, the editor admitted a certain preference for letters from some professional writers. According to the editor, “these letters-writers write very well and, on the other hand, they talk about newsworthy events” (Silva, 2007: 94).

In terms of gender of letters-writers, with exception of Bill Reader’s study, all of the empirical researches previously mentioned and others (Santiago, 2005: 8; Williams & Medina, 2001: 1; Silva, 2007: 104) noted that men are most likely to write letters than women. In fact, a content analysis of more than 600 letters published in seven North Carolina newspapers pointed out that 67% of letters-writers were male (Cooper & Knotts, 2005: 5). This study also concludes that gender differences may have consequences in the letters subjects: for instance, women are less likely to write letters about defence than men, but, on the other hand, are most likely to write letters on education or civic rights/liberties.

Lonna Atkeson and Ronald B. Rapoport examined the differences between men and women in terms of their political attitudes, besides elections, analyzing the American “National Election Study” (NES), from 1952 to 2000. Despite the fact that, in the last 50 years, the political resources that facilitate political participation (such as education, income or job) have greatly improved, for both men and women, Atkeson and Rapoport claim that women still have fewer political resources than men (Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003: 499). Their research also indicates that there is a significant difference between men and women when expressing their political attitudes in close-ended questions, and that difference has remained the same through the years – women tend to express fewer likes and dislikes than men and more frequently respond “don’t know” to questions about political parties, groups or candidates, which may mean a lack of positioning in terms of political expression among women.

We’ve examined the type of letters-writers that can be expected in a letters’ section in a press publication, according to the existing literature review. But what do the letters-writers look for? Which reasons and motivations lead to the activity of writing letters-to-the-editor? “It is difficult to assess the precise reasons why some readers decide to write letters to the paper. Even though the predominant motive is arguably the wish to participate in a debate by sharing one’s opinions, this can take many forms: expressing protest, outrage, criticism, providing or requesting clarification and information, or advocating a course of action. In some cases, particularly for regular wri-

ters, the motivation may be simply being one of prestige” (Pounds, 2006: 32). In fact, it may be possible that some readers may be motivated to write letters “because of the ego-boosting satisfaction of seeing their name in the paper” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 49).

In his PhD dissertation (1966), in the University of Michigan, John Klempner describes, more specifically, the reasons why people write letters-to-the-editor: “1. To make someone see the light; 2. To promote one’s self; 3. To right a wrong; 4. Having been asked; 5. Enjoyment of writing; 6. Feeling one had to write; 7. A sense of public duty; 8. To increase self-esteem; and 9. For therapeutic benefits” (*apud* Thornton, 1998: 6). Other studies arrived to similar conclusions – in general, they noticed that letters-writers use the section to participate in public discourse, to promote their views and causes, to complain about or praise the work of newspapers and sometimes “to vent some steam” (Reader, 2005: 2). Another relevant motivation for writing mentioned in some studies may be somehow affecting the thinking of other readers.

Singletary and Cowling noted that 34% of letters-writers aim to influence public opinion when they write letters to newspapers and 23% have the purpose to inform the public; other motivations mentioned by letters-writers include “expressing personal views to the public” (14%) and “letting off steam” (13%), but as well “fill gaps in media coverage”, “provoke people think about issues”, “to reflect public sentiment”, to “overcome loneliness” and to find “amusement” (Singletary & Cowling, 1979: 166-7). Thus, we can say that letters-writers feel that their texts may help to increase readership, emphasizing that the section is a democratic institution, a public forum where socially active citizens of the community express freely their ideas (Tarrant, 1957: 502).

Also Vacin noticed that letters-writers believe that “their letters might affect public opinion by helping the public informed on topics of interest” (Vacin, 1965: 465, 510). The same study shows that letters-writers have a conviction that they are affecting events and, although their goal for writing may be ego-centred in some instances, their motivation was found to be “logical and sensible”. In summary, when they write letters, readers intend to “shape policy, influence opinion, swing the course of events, defend interests, advance causes” (Hall et al., 1978: 121).

Among the existent empirical researches, one of the motivations most referred is “letting off steam” or “get off something off their chest” about topics in which they were greatly interested or about events they directly experienced (Tarrant, *ibidem*: 502). Some editors, in fact, believe that the letters’ section has a catharsis, therapeutic or safety valve function, in which individuals can deposit all their complaints and

frustrations. “One of the functions of the letters to the editor in a democratic society is that of the catharsis. A letter column gives the irate, the antagonist, the displeased, a chance to speak out and to be heard” (Grey & Brown, 1970: 454). However, claims Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, understanding the letters’ section merely as a place where individuals can register their anxieties is contrary to deliberative ideals that might be expected for the section. “(...) A catharsis theory of the letters section simply views it as a site for the relief of individualist gripes” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 83).

Method

In this paper, our main goal is to uncover letters’ writers’ perceptions about this section, identify their main motivations and expectations when writing letters to newspapers, as well as their understanding about the section, rules of selection and editing. Although the existent studies about letters-writers gives us relevant information about the motivations and the profile of American letters-writers, which may help to imagine the type of individuals who write letters to newspapers, they lack, for instance, a more accurate and qualitative research about the perception that letters-writers have about the section, particularly whether they consider it to be vital for public discussion, their understanding of the process of selecting and editing letters, as well as their understanding about newspapers in general, and their expectations when sending a text.

In order to fulfil our purpose, we sent 38 open-ended email questionnaires to letters-writers, from which 21 responded. The questionnaires were sent either to more occasional writers, either to “regular” or “professional” letters-writers, that is to say, individuals we acknowledged to have written several letters-to-the-editor in Portuguese national press publications. From these 21 letters-writers, 18 are men, 3 are women, 10 are occasional writers and 11 are regular writers.

The questions asked to occasional letters-writers were the following: what is their main motivation or reason for writing? What expectations had they when sending the letter to the newspaper? Were they pleased with the treatment and editing that the newspaper gave to their letter? What is their perception of the letters’ section in newspapers in general, what does it stand for? The questions asked to regular writers were the same, but we decided to add more questions, in order to have a more consistent understanding of their letter-writer activity and perception about the sec-

tion, as their frequency of writing is rather high: in their opinion, what are the main criteria that are valued by the newspapers for selecting letters? Do they usually insist (with the newspaper, the editor-in-chief or ombudsmen) if their letters are not published? Do they feel excluded or marginalised if their letters are not published, in certain occasions?

These questionnaires cannot be seen as representing generalized opinions or characteristics of letters-writers. The intention of this paper was not exactly to test frequency, but rather to examine the perceptions of these writers, through their own words, about the activity of letter writing and about newspapers in general. Letters-writers discourses can give us precious and rich information about the meanings that some readers, those who are willing to participate in public debate, attribute to the space of letters-to-the-editor.

Discussion

In terms of motivations for writing letters-to-the-editor, none of the letters-writers inquired gave a sole reason, that is to say, an isolated motive for writing; letter-writing activity seems instead to result from a combination of factors. And what lies beneath writing a letter-to-the-editor, after all?

From the responses of readers, we managed to find several main reasons that may explain the activity of letter writing: *to write about issues of public interest*, that is to say, issues that letters-writers consider important for themselves and for the other readers as well (the motive most quoted); *to be heard and voice their opinion* or personal perspective about an issue; *to talk about an issue or event discussed in the media*, either fill gaps in the media coverage or use the event discussed in the media as a “peg” to write about a general problem or issue; *to write about an issue that was experienced or that affects them directly*, for personal or professional motives, in order to shed some light on particular subject; *to talk about an opinion article published in a newspaper*, either to express disagreement or approval; *for the pleasure of writing*; *to be read by other readers and journalists* and, also, *to see their names published in the newspaper*.

These quotes can better exemplify the motivation to write about issues of public interest:

"I pronounce myself when I believe that fundamental rights of people and groups are put into question, [when there are] geographical, economical and social inequalities, and political unfairness."

Letter-writer, male, 57 years old, Teacher

"I intend to give my civic contribution to issues that may interest and affect many people."

Letter-writer, male, 58 years old, HR Manager

"My main motivation for writing is to voice my opinion about issues that seem interesting to the community and try to contribute to a more developed, fair and self-conscious society."

Letter-writer, male, 64 years old, former Physics/Chemistry Teacher (retired)

It's very interesting to notice that, although writing a letter is a very personal matter of subjectivity expression, some letters-writers may feel compelled to share their thoughts in order to contribute to the enhancement of society in general, with a sense of public duty. "A recent study of the rhetoric of letters to the editor (Soulez, 2002) points to the fact that letters-writers usually start by stressing the representative dimension of their positions. Almost always, they claim to be speaking – not simply in their own name – but in the name of a wider constituency" (Dayan, 2005: 64).

Besides that, letter writing can also be mainly a question of self-expression, of having their voice heard, for instance, about a personal experience, or simply the materialization of the enjoyment of writing, as John Klemptner (1966) described as one of the nine reasons why people write letters-to-the-editor:

"[I write] to introduce opinions to the debate about issues that have not dogmatic truths, such as abortion, sex or euthanasia."

Letter-writer, male, 56 years old, Doctor

"I like to see my name referred in the press media, not along with a photo in the obituary page, but in small opinion articles that try to provoke some controversy and call for attention (...). [I also try to be] the voice of the ones that

don't write, because they lack the time or the talent to do it, and that agree with what I've been saying."

Letter-writer, male, 64 years old, former Bank Employee (retired)

"My motivation was to be heard by most people as possible about an issue – education in Portugal – about which I believe people are misinformed. As a teacher, I wanted to give an insider perspective (...). Against bad information, I wished to give information about what's going on, described by a person who is actually living it. I hoped to awaken some consciences and expected to cause some kind of identification or empathy with my words by the part of my colleagues."

Letter-writer, female, 48 years old, Teacher

"[I do it] simply for the pleasure of writing."

Letter-writer, male, 45 years old, Civil Servant

Another frequently referred reason for writing a letter-to-the-editor can be to talk about an issue or event discussed in the media. The letter-writer can use the "media agenda" as a start-up or a "peg" to discuss a more broad issue or problem, talking about issues from a different viewpoint from that of a journalist or press editor:

"Sometimes issues that are discussed in the media can be obviously a reason for writing, but not always (...). [It is important] to give a perspective of many issues 'in loco', without being a journalist, but simply as a citizen. The approach can be different from a professional, not better (sometimes it can be worse), but different for sure."

Letter-writer, male, 58 years old, HR Manager

Nevertheless, talking about events or issues covered by media can fulfil a larger purpose – to fill gaps in the media coverage, as Singletary and Cowling (1979) also found in their study about letters-writers:

"I write about issues that were not approached by the media or that have been insufficiently covered by the media (...). I'm frequently shocked by the major gaps in the Portuguese media when approaching fundamental problems wi-

thin the country.”

Letter-writer, male, 78 years old, former College Professor (retired)

“I write to talk about issues discussed in the media to which I’m sending the letter, that are important to me and to many people and that have been insufficiently approached, partially or one-sided.”

Letter-writer, male, 54 years old, College Professor

In terms of their expectations when sending a letter to the newspaper, the majority of letters-writers (13) said that their main hope or purpose is *to get published* in the newspaper or magazine.

“Naturally, I hoped that my letters were published.”

Letter-writer, male, 77 years old, Journalist

“I had the expectation of publication. I supposed some readers would agree with my letter, while others would also disagree.”

Letter-writer, male, 62 years old, Retired

It is interesting to note that the motivation to write a letter might differ from the expectation that the letter-writer has when sending a text. Although few writers also referred the pleasure of seeing their names in the paper as a reason for writing, their motive for writing goes far beyond from gaining prestige or acknowledgement, as they intend to talk about issues that might interest many people, participate in the public debate by sharing their opinions or promote their views; however, getting published is the expectation of most of letters-writers. We can infer, thus, that the publicity (in terms of visibility) of their writings is essential of the activity of letter writing.

However, some letters-writers also expect to simply *be read with interest* and to *influence the thinking of certain people and groups*. Other expectations include contribute to a better society; receive a comment from other reader; or to receive a response from the newspaper.

“I expect that my letters are, obviously, read and taken into consideration.”

Letter-writer, male, 83 years old, retired Military Commander

"I always hope that my letters are well received by the editorial staff."

Letter-writer, male, 80 years old, Retired

"There is always an expectation of what is written can influence at least the thinking of some and, even though more rarely, influence a certain group of people, although this may be difficult."

Letter-writer, female, 60 years old, Teacher

"The expectation is great, because when I write, I'm sure that the issue will interest the readers from that newspaper"

Letter-writer, male, 72 years old, former Company Manager

As we described previously, letters-to-the-editor are subjected to a certain amount of criteria in order to be published in the newspapers or magazines. Plus, for a matter of space, even the selected letters may be edited, that is to say, reduced in terms of length or re-arranged for a matter of clarity. Therefore, we could expect a general negative attitude from letters-writers, when they see their texts "transformed" by the press media.

Nevertheless, more than a half of the letters-writers inquired (11) were satisfied with the editing of the newspaper, when their letters were published. They appear to accept it as a requisite they must subject themselves whenever they sent a text with the purpose of publication.

"Letters-to-the-editor frequently must be reduced by a question of space. But this is a condition that has to be accepted by those who write them."

Letter-writer, male, 78 years old, former College Professor (retired)

"My colleagues (...) have always done a correct editing, although I have the habit of writing too much."

Letter-writer, male, 77 years old, Journalist

"I'm generally satisfied [with the editing]. But the newspapers which cut off more intensively readers' texts should give them more space, in order to avoid that the message is published in a completely distorted way."

Letter-writer, male, 72 years old, former Company Manager

The possibility of “distortion” of the original meaning of the letter is a question that worries some letters-writers. In fact, not all letters-writers are happy with the editing done by press media when publishing a letter-to-the-editor; some of them even seem angry when the newspaper cuts excerpts that the writer considered crucial to the correct understanding of the text.

“Of course, not always was I pleased [with the editing], especially when I saw my text distorted, due to the omission of important parts.”

Letter-writer, male, 83 years old, retired Military Commander

“In [he refers four Portuguese newspapers], I’m satisfied with the editing. In [he refers two Portuguese news magazines and a weekly newspaper], I’m always annoyed, because the meaning of my letters was transformed and misrepresented. I’m a perfectionist. I never put or choose a word by hazard. I say exactly what I want to say (...). Therefore, I always get irritated when they mess with my texts.”

Letter-writer, male, 49 years old, Lawyer

“[In one occasion] I wasn’t happy, because the editing took most of the letter’s strength. But I understand that [the editing] has to be done.”

Letter-writer, female, 60 years old, Teacher

“Not always was I pleased [with the editing]. Sometimes they distort the meaning of letters by cutting off a paragraph, for instance.”

Letter-writer, male, 45 years old, Civil Servant

“I was satisfied only a few times (...). I try to write rather short letters so, when they are edited in terms of parts I considered essential, I’m displeased.”

Letter-writer, female, 43 years old, Teacher

If these letters-writers chose to send a text to the newspaper, it is undoubtedly clear that they consider the letters’ section important. But how important is the section? How do these letters-writers understand the value of the section? What are the main characteristics of the section that makes it fundamental in press media? How do letters-writers describe it?

The great majority of letters-writers inquired give the most importance to the letters' section, in many ways: it is a *vehicle for participation*, sharing ideas and, mainly, make them visible to the other readers; it is a place where ideas flourish spontaneously, and *are not constrained by economic, political or institutional goals*; it is a part of the newspaper that has *readership value* and may interest to many people; it creates a *sense of "belonging" to the newspaper*, as it is a forum dedicated to all readers who want to participate; and it can be a place where *alternative approaches* of issues can appear. Also, many letters-writers describe the letters-section as "singular", in a sense that it is one of the only means by which some ideas and thoughts can be known by a larger audience.

"I consider it very important and I read it always. It is the only place possible where common and anonymous citizens can manifest themselves."

Letter-writer, female, 48 years old, Teacher

"It is a space with a special interest, because it shows a portion of the spontaneous, non-ordered, free thinking."

Letter-writer, male, 57 years old, Teacher

"The section is essential because it allows readers to interact with the editorial staff of the newspaper or magazine. It makes them feel they are also part of a project (...). In this space of letters-to-the editor, there is always someone who listens to us."

Letter-writer, male, 45 years old, Administrative Technician

However, although they consider the letters-section fundamental, to themselves and eventually to other readers, some letters-writers don't feel that the newspapers give the enough credit for such an important feature in the press. Therefore, they point out some obstacles that may take away the effectiveness of the section, due to the attitudes and behaviours of newspapers towards the letters' forum – for instance, the small amount of space that is dedicated to the section, which may show devaluation in comparison to other spaces in the press dedicated to opinion articles; or the selection and editing criteria. One letter-writer, on the other hand, believes that the space reserved to letters in many newspapers seems too much, as some texts selected have a poor quality.

"The letters' section has not been valued enough by newspapers (...) and not always is treated with the adequate attention and dignity by the editorial staffs and administrations of press media."

Letter-writer, female, 43 years old, Teacher

"[The letters' section] is frequently limited by the number of words or characters available."

Letter-writer, male, 56 years old, Doctor

"The majority of newspapers use the letters' section in an opportunistic way. Their main concern is to make the readers loyal to them. That's way they prefer to publish small excerpts of each letter to please many letters-writers, but sometimes these excerpts don't have any interest."

Letter-writer, male, 49 years old, Lawyer

"The sample [of letters published] may be insufficient, but it is ideologically and sociologically important. The problem consists in what is published and what remains unpublished."

Letter-writer, male, 64 years old, former Teacher (retired)

"I don't know if the space that many newspapers dedicate to letters-to-the editor is appropriate; sometimes, it seems too much, because the letters [selected] are really bad."

Letter-writer, male, 71 years old, former College Professor (retired)

As we mentioned previously, we decided to ask more specific questions to the regular or so-called professional letters-writers (11), in order to understand more effectively their relationship with the letters' section and the newspaper, as well as their perception about what makes a letter more likely to be selected to publication, in their opinions. In fact, their publication success can be high, as these letters-writers usually fit the editors' expectations and their texts match most of the selection criteria defined by the editorial staff and, more generally speaking, by the newsroom culture (Silva, 2007).

Most of the regular letters-writers inquired (8) referred the *letters' relevance in terms of theme* or subject as an important "rule" when selecting a reader's text. The

theme relevance can be defined by the fact that the letter talks about an issue that is already placed in the media agenda. In fact, Ericson, Baranek and Chan related the selection criteria of letters with news judgement: generally speaking, published letters talk about “hot topics” or events covered by the media, at that time (Ericson *et al.*, 1989: 339, 384). Nearly half of the regular letters-writers also mentioned *the size of the letter*, as well as the letters’ *style or eloquence* (in terms of language, quality of writing, and way of expressing ideas) as crucial factors when choosing a letter for publication. However, they all believe that the selection of letters doesn’t depend upon one criterion only, but it results from a combination of several criteria.

“In my view, [the main selection criteria] are the fact that the letter’s theme is up-to-date and has public interest.”

Letter-writer, male, 42 years old, Project designer

“I believe that [the main selection criterion] is the theme’s relevance in a particular time (...). Some times, the letter’s style is valued. The letter’s size is usually the main limitation.”

Letter-writer, male, 57 years old, Teacher

We can, thus, infer that the regular letters-writers inquired are well aware of the implicit and main rules that determine the selection of letters for publication; they know exactly how and what to write in order to get published.

In our case study about the letters’ section in a Portuguese newspaper, we made an in-depth interview with its ombudsmen to better understand his relationship with the readers and the section itself. The ombudsman said that letters-writers frequently sent their texts to him, assuming that he had the task of selecting letters for publication; on the other hand, some letters-writers also complained to the ombudsmen due to the fact that their letters were not published in the newspaper (Silva, 2007: 114). A previous ombudsman of the same newspaper also said that about a third of the readers who write to him have the purposes to complain about the non-publication of their letters (and the lack of a response of the newspaper) and to discuss the criteria of selection of letters (Wemans, 1999: 28).

The majority of regular letters-writers inquired (8) do not re-send their letters or contact the newspaper ombudsmen when their texts are not published. However,

some of them usually do it in order to increase the possibility of publication or, also, to understand the newspaper's criteria when excluding a certain letter.

"In [he refers a Portuguese newspaper], I've contacted the ombudsman, when a certain letter wasn't published, but mainly to know the criteria used for selecting letters (...). And I also re-sent an unpublished letter-to-the-editor a month later and it was published."

Letter-writer, male, 58 years old, HR Manager

"When the letter is not selected for publication I assume it lacked enough journalistic or time/context value. I don't re-send the same letter again; sometimes I rearrange it and send it again, but I never contacted the ombudsman."

Letter-writer, male, 64 years old, former Bank employee (retired)

"I usually re-send the letter, when the time is right"

Letter-writer, male, 42 years old, Project designer

Whenever their letters are not published, most of the regular-writers (9) surveyed don't feel excluded from the newspaper or from the public discussion. However, some of them express disappointment or would like to receive a response message from the newspaper. A letter-writer, in particular, assumed to feel excluded, when their texts fail to be selected to publication; another letter-writer has an ambivalent position.

"No [I don't feel excluded], because I write to many newspapers and I have a blog that is one of the most read and commented in [he refers a Portuguese weekly newspaper that allows users to have associate blogs]."

Letter-writer, male, 49 years old, Lawyer

"Not at all. Sometimes I get sad because I believe the subject would interest the newspaper's readers."

Letter-writer, male, 72 years old, former company manager

“No, but I like to receive a message [from the newspaper] saying that my letter was received – which is not frequent.”

Letter-writer, male, 64 years old, former Physics/Chemistry Teacher (retired)

“Sometimes I feel excluded, when I send so many texts about many issues and then I read in the same section letters from other readers talking about the exact same theme about which I wrote. This is, I believe, exclusion...”

Letter-writer, male, 58 years old, HR Manager

“Yes and no. There is an informal censorship.”

Letter-writer, male, 64 years old, former Teacher (retired)

Concluding remarks

This paper had the aim to provide an insight about the reasons why people decide to write a letter-to-the-editor and the way they view the correspondence section itself. Although the amount of letter-writers inquired cannot be considered representative of Portuguese letters-writers in general⁴, their answers may give us some important clues to examine the “other side” of the newspapers, that is to say, the readers that feel they want to participate in the public debate and voice their opinions, namely, their motivations and perceptions about the letters section and, also, the newspapers in general.

We can say that the expressed motivations for writing letters are rather coincident with the literature review on letters writers. They mainly intend to write about issues that they consider having interest to a larger public, express personal view points fill gaps or eventually correct misinformation in media coverage, alert to certain problems or situations, but also do it for more “ego-centred” reasons, as the simple pleasure of writing. Irrespective of their motivations, the letters-writers inquired seek visibility (and, sometimes, reciprocity, in terms of a response), as they want to be read by a larger audience and eventually influence public opinion.

However, the motivations for writing of the inquired letters-writers don't correspond, at all, to the cathartic or safety valve function that some editors may attribute

4. We indicated the gender, age and profession of the letters-writers inquired throughout the text, but only as means of identification, not as means of characterizing letters-writers in general.

to the letters section – by examining closely their words, it is possible to infer that their aim is not to “vent some steam” or “do therapy” within the letters section (Reader, 2005; Tarrant, 1957; Grey & Brown, 1970), but instead to talk about issues that might have both personal and more general interest.

The reasons for writing and the expectations of the letters-writers inquired are indeed coincident with their perception about the section – they view it as a unique space for free expression of ideas, thoughts and causes that has the possibility of reaching many people. But some of them also recognize the obstacles within the correspondence section, such as space limitation and some selection and editing criteria. Particularly, regular letters-writers are very conscious about the fact that the correspondence section is a construction, presided by specific rules, as the letter’s brevity, relevance or linguistic style.

Despite the development of other means of participating in print media, especially with the consolidation of their Internet websites that may introduce diverse forms of interactivity with the newspapers, letters-to-the-editor still remain as an essential forum for public debate. We can say that only a minority has real access to this space (particularly those who have enough cultural capital to participate). Yet, it is interesting to find out more about the perceptions of these types of readers, who are willing to have their say and subject themselves to editorial scrutiny, in order to publicize their ideas and thoughts – and, also, combine this examination with the close observation of newspapers’ attitudes, language and behaviours towards the correspondence section and its contributors.

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