

Sociologists in the media: mapping out results within two Portuguese newspapers

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Resumo

Este artigo procura salientar algumas características da visibilidade da sociologia e dos sociólogos na agenda das edições online de dois jornais portugueses: o Público e o Correio da Manhã. A presença dos sociólogos no campo mediático não é obviamente a única forma de estudar o envolvimento do conhecimento sociológico na esfera pública, mas não deixa constituir uma vertente importante e significativa, uma vez que através dos media as perspetivas sociológicas chegam a vastas e heterogéneas audiências. De facto, os 237 textos jornalísticos selecionados nesta abordagem exploratória geraram mais de 900 mil acessos/leituras e suscitaram mais de 5 mil comentários dos leitores. Entre outros aspetos, a exploração dos dados ilustrará os temas sobre os quais se pronunciam os sociólogos, considerando quer a proeminência desses temas em ambos os jornais, quer a hierarquia construída pelo público (através no número de leituras e dos comentários).

Palavras-chave: media *online*, sociologia, sociólogos, público

Abstract

This paper seeks to map out some characteristics of the visibility of sociology and sociologists in the agenda of the online editions of two Portuguese newspapers, *Público* and *Correio da Manhã*. The presence of sociologists in the media field is not the only possibility to access the involvement of the sociological knowledge in the public sphere, but it is a powerful and meaningful one, given that through the media sociological views can reach a large and heterogeneous audience. In fact, the 237 journalistic texts selected in the present explanatory approach have generated more than 900,000 accesses/readings and over 5,000 comments posted by the public. Among other aspects, the data exploration will illustrate the issues which engage the sociological discourse, considering their preeminence in both newspapers and in the hierarchy constructed by the public.

Key Words: online media, sociology, sociologists, public

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Introduction

The starting point of our presentation is a central idea in the work of Burawoy, the idea that the core activity of Public Sociology is the dialogue between sociologists and their publics. The notion of publics is an open one, not only does it take into account different types of publics, but it also means that they can be “destroyed” or “created”. Forms of accessing the relationship with the publics are also diverse (Burawoy, 2007: 28, 36). For the present proposal, we will focus on the media field, as one of the possibilities to link sociologists and publics.

The growing criticism concerning media activity and the professional practice of journalism, namely on the ground of their subordination to the economic profit, to political interests, and others, has been weakening the social trust in featuring the media as the providers of the arena where public debate happens. In the US, the *Gallup* survey shows a continuous decline in the level of trust; in 2009 no more than 25% say they have a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence. European attitudes are a great deal more positive to media institutions. The majority of European citizens trust their national radio (66%) and TV (58%); they express less confidence in the writing press (48%) and in the internet (38%). In comparative terms, Portuguese attitudes are even more positive to the three kinds of media than the European (EU27) average, the difference is higher regarding the writing Press, 65% trust the traditional way of reporting news (Eurobarometer, 2007).

Those levels of trust in media institutions are therefore encouraging to the public sociological activity. As Burawoy (2007:57) acknowledges, alongside with other kinds of action, there is need to engage in “*collaborative relations between sociology and journalism, for journalists are public unto themselves as well as standing between us and a multitude of other publics*”.

Our paper presents an explorative analysis of the visibility of sociologists and sociology in the Portuguese writing Press, within two newspapers to be exact. We will be seeking to answer the following questions:

- *Are sociologists invited to speak as experts to comment on issues concerning the "turbulence" of the current time, including the economic crisis, unemployment, social inequality, protest movements, etc.?*
- *Or are they instead called to the media because of other criteria, in particular, due to events that attract media attention because they are disruptive, violent or simply because they are unusual?*
- *What type of issues reaches more attention from the readers? And which gets more comments from the public?*
- *Is the presence of the sociologist in the media varied, in terms of the identity of the authors and in terms of gender?*
- *Are there differences in media coverage between the two cases (two newspapers) we have studied?*

1. Method notes

For a first approach to the data, the observation of the journalistic texts firstly used the facilities of the *Google News*, restricted to the national plan. In a second moment, the search was conducted directly on the web sites of the two newspapers selected, *Público* and *Correio da Manhã*. We will specially focus on these two cases. The period of observation was fixed between January 2008 and July 2011.

The Newspapers, *Público* and *Correio da Manhã*, are both daily. *Público* belongs to the Portuguese mainstream quality press. Its editorial principles proclaim to be directed by “criteria of rigor and editorial creativity, without any ideological, political, or economic reliance”. Along with declaring independence from “political power and private powers”, the editorial rejects sensationalism and mercantile exploration of the information (ERC, 2008).

Correio da Manhã is a generalist newspaper with national expression. The editorial principles declare independence from the “powers and interests” and proclaim the practice of a “free journalism, guided by quality, therefore popular”. The editorial statute further states that the newspaper will “firmly support the family institution and the rights to life”, all in assuming his “appreciation for the Christian roots of the society”.

The former newspaper has the largest market share on the generalist daily press, that being the reason for choosing it; *Público* is the third in the market share of generalist daily press. Reasons for choosing this second title, are basically three: its reputation as representative of the “quality” press, which of course also means a more literate audience, as a national survey recently shows (Rebelo, 2008); its best position in the ranking of readers online, in fact higher than the number of readers of the print version (Gradim, 2006).

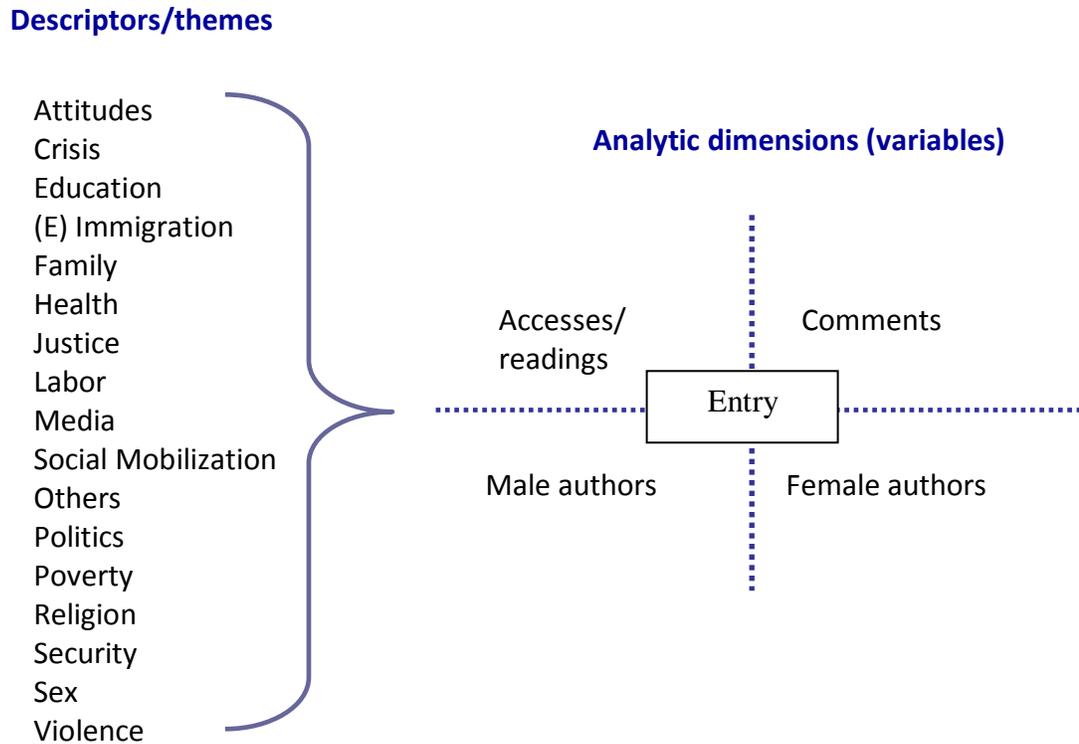
The website of both dailies delivers large multimedia resources. In both cases, the online editions do not correspond exactly to the print version. Some texts remain exclusively in the print edition, as well as some texts of the online version don't get to be published in the print edition.

Our research was conducted exclusively on the online version, not only to simplify the process of gathering data, but specially to be able to relate texts, number of readings and number of comments posted by the public.

The criteria for selecting the journalistic texts were as follows: i) the presence of the referents sociology and/or sociologist in any position of the article; ii) the identification of the author and his/her designation as sociologist. These criteria were cumulative. In short, we considered only the texts presenting declarations or comments attributed to sociologists, including interviews or opinion articles. Texts without explicit references to the Portuguese society were excluded.

In methodological terms, the article is the unit of analysis. Applying the selection criteria to the articles retrieved, we have a corpus of 237 journalistic pieces (164 from *Público* online and 73 from *Correio da Manhã* online).

Each article (that is, each entry) was then classified according to the main descriptor/theme. And for each we have also recorded the number of accesses/readings, the number of comments from the public; the number of male authors and the number of female authors. The following table summarizes the analytical procedures:

Figure 1. Analytical model

The descriptors/themes may be evaluated through a set of indicators build up on the bases of the analytical dimensions/variables, as table 1 shows. This analytical operation will permit to acknowledge the differences among the descriptors/themes in terms of their visibility, measured by the number of accesses/readings. Secondly, the indicators allow estimation of the impact of the themes among the readers, by exposing their visibility and the debates they raise. Finally, the indicators permit some insights on the authorial characterization of the sociological speech found in the news, namely their notoriety (measured by the frequency of their appearance) and gender diversity (measured by the masculinity ratio).

Table 1. Considered Indicators

Designation	Abbreviation	Description	Interpretation
Index of visibility	[Iv]	<i>Quotient between the number of 'readings' and the number of 'entries'</i>	The higher the index value, the greater the visibility of the 'input'.
Index of participation	[Ip]	<i>Quotient between the number of 'comments' and the number of 'entries'</i>	To a higher index value, corresponds a higher level of participation.
Index of discussion	[Id]	<i>Quotient between the number of 'comments' and the number of 'readings'</i>	The higher the value, the greater the level of discussion raised by an 'entry'.
Index of authorial notoriety	[InAut]	<i>Quotient expressed as a percentage between the number of 'authors' (M/F), not repeated, and the number of 'entries'</i>	The higher the percentage, the greater the number of times that an author is mentioned. In the limit, and regardless of the number of 'entries' recorded in each descriptor, if these were all signed by the same author, the index would equal 100.
Ratio of authorial masculinity	[RMas]	<i>Quotient between the number of 'male authors' and 'female authors'</i>	The higher the value of the ratio, the greater the number of 'male authors' relation to 'women writers' (equivalent to an inequality in terms of authorial gender)

2. Sociologists in the news: general outlook

Considering both newspapers, in the first place, it's important to notice a relevant difference in the number of articles (entries) that fit the selection criteria: the daily *Público online* (n=164 entries) more than doubles the number of registrations gathered from *Correio da Manhã online* (n=73).

In the second place, taking into account the number of entries to each theme, the hierarchy order is also diverse: 'politics', 'crises' and 'attitudes' are, in that order the first three themes in *Público* while 'attitudes', 'politics' and 'justice' are the three top themes in *Correio da Manhã* (Table 2).

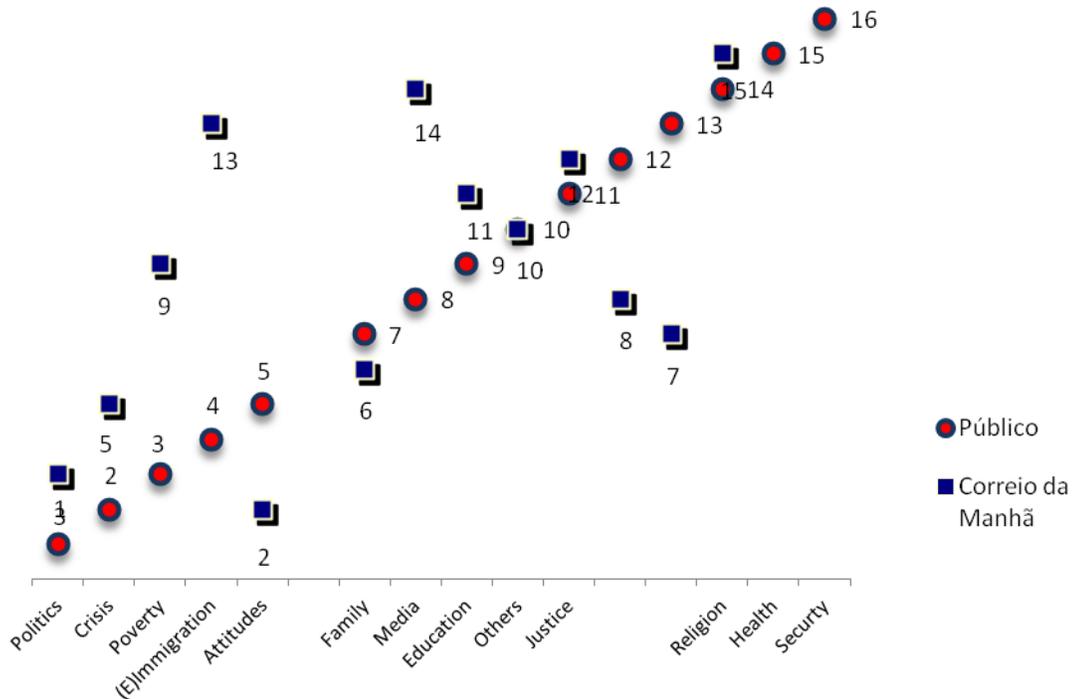
Table 2. Number of entries to each theme in decreasing order (both dailies)

<i>Público</i>		<i>Correio da Manhã</i>	
<i>Descriptors/Themes</i>	<i>No. of Entries</i>	<i>Descriptors/Themes</i>	<i>No. of Entries</i>
Politics	24	Attitudes	15
Crisis	16	Politics	8
Attitudes	15	Justice	8
Social Mobilization	13	Violence	6
Poverty	11	Crisis	6
Labor	11	Religion	5
Family	10	Education	5
Others	10	Family	4
Justice	10	Sex	3
Education	9	Health	3
Media	8	Poverty	3
(E) Immigration	7	Others	3
Religion	7	(E)Immigration	2
Population	6	Media	1
Health	4	Security	1
Security	3	Total	73
Total	164		

Therefore, within the mainstream press (*Público*), sociologists appear especially in the news concerning ‘politics’, ‘crisis’ and ‘attitudes’. In the popular press (*Correio da Manhã*), the sociological views are more frequent in the articles related to ‘attitudes’, ‘politics’ and ‘justice’.

Data allow for another comparison: the ordination of descriptors/themes according to the number of ‘accesses/readings’. As Figure 1 shows, the ordination varies according to the newspaper. The audience of the first newspaper shows more interest in issues related to the political and socioeconomic situation (‘politics’, ‘crisis’ and ‘poverty’ are in the first three places). The audience of the second newspaper reveals more dispersion and the issues of ‘politics’, ‘crisis’ and ‘poverty’, appear in the 3rd, 5th, and 9th position, respectively. Only the themes ‘family’, ‘justice’ and ‘others’ are in similar positions in the ranking of readings of both newspapers.

Figure 2. Comparing themes in both newspapers (following the ordering of *Público*)



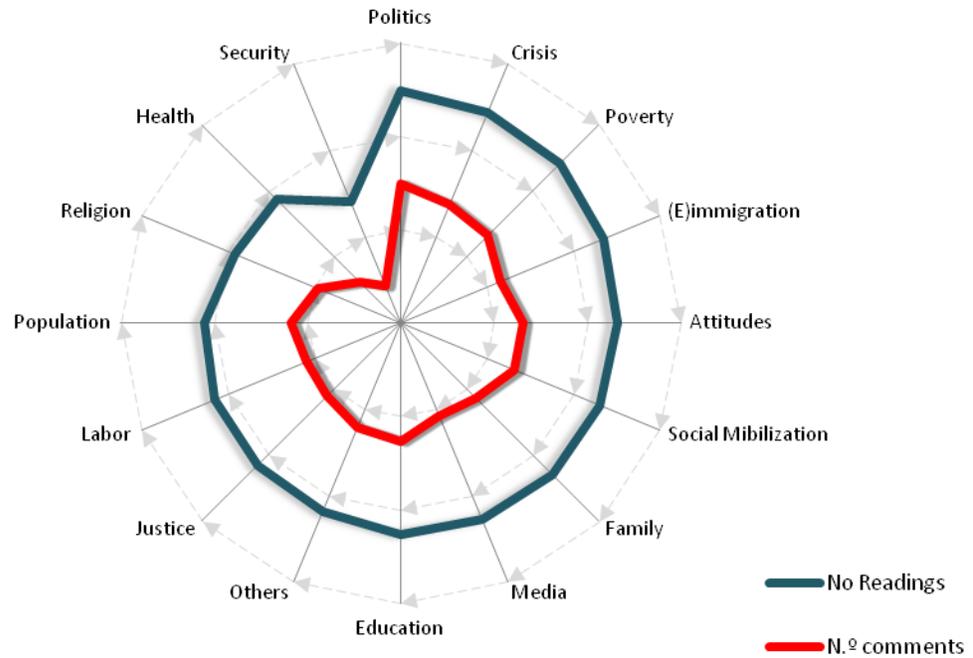
To conclude the comments on Figure 2, it's important to say that the pairing procedure only includes the descriptors found in both newspapers. Consequently, the theme 'social mobilization' (5th in the ranking of *Público*) was excluded, as well as the themes 'violence' and 'sex', which stand for the 1st and 4th position, respectively, in *Correio da Manhã* newspaper.

2.1. Results from *Público* newspaper: themes, readings and public participation

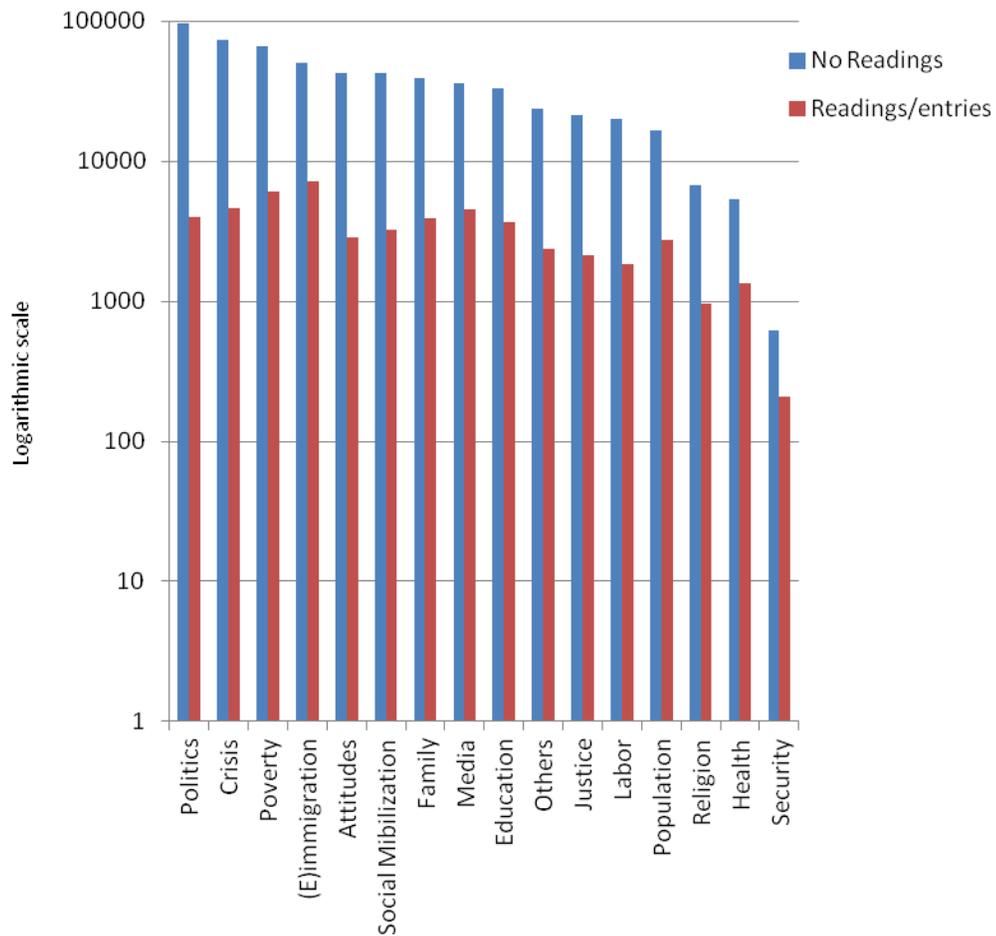
The number of 'readings' and 'comments' posted by the public reveal a high and consistent importance of the news focusing on 'politics', followed by the issues of 'crisis' and 'poverty'. The numbers of readings in these three topics represent 41% of all readings. In an opposite position there is the news about 'religion', 'health' and 'security' (2% of the totals of readings) (Figure 3, to be read in a clockwise direction).

The 'Readings' and 'comments' represented by the blue and red lines, respectively, are not exactly symmetric, which means that the dispositions to comment on an subject are of course more selective than the dispositions to simply read about it. This observation will be confirmed by further analysis of the indicators.

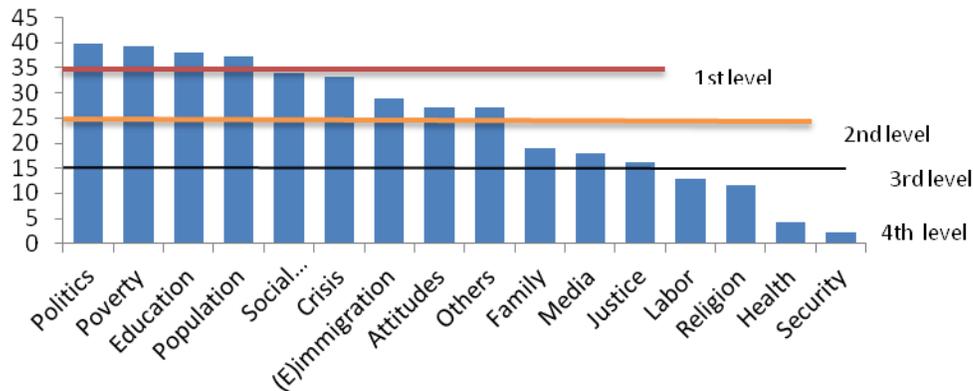
Figure 3. Number of ‘readings’ and ‘comments’ posted by the public in *Público*



The index of visibility [IV], the quotient between the number of ‘readings’ and the number of ‘entries’, shows that ‘(e)immigration’ and ‘poverty’ are the themes with the highest score in visibility; inversely, ‘security’ and ‘religion’ express the least visibility (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Number of ‘readings’ and index of visibility per theme (*Público*)

Considering the indicator of ‘participation’, which measures the relation between the number of ‘comments’ and the number of ‘entries’, it is interesting to notice that the themes with the highest level of participation are ‘politics’, ‘poverty’, ‘education’, ‘social mobilization’ and ‘crisis’ (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Indicator of participation, by levels (*Público*)

Finally, the index of discussion [Id], the quotient between the number of ‘comments’ and the number of ‘readings’, puts in evidence the themes of ‘population’ (Id=1,4), ‘religion’ [Id=1,2], ‘social mobilization’, and ‘security’ [Id=1,1], which are not the ones with more ‘entries’ ore with more ‘accesses/readings’.

The analyzed indicators are not, therefore, entirely convergent, as we can see by the low level of correlation ($r= 0.38$) among ‘visibility’ ‘participation’ and ‘discussion’. This is, in fact, understandable, since the indicators measure different situations, different ways of evaluating the reception and public reaction to each theme.

4.1.1. Authorial expression (*Público*)

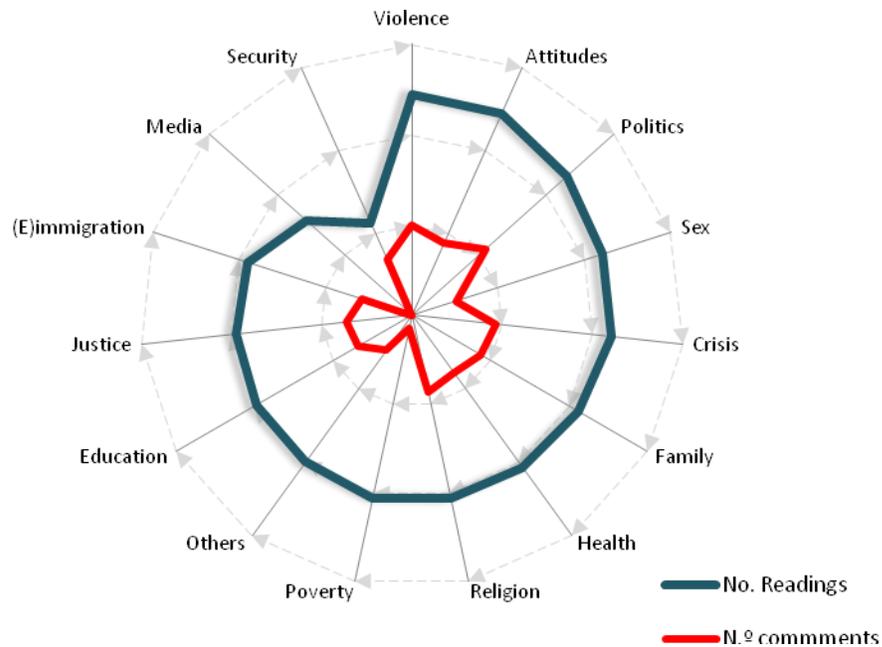
A second set of indicators was constructed with the aim to characterize the authorial prominence of the sociologists whose thoughts are reported in the news. In a global view (all entries considered) the index of authorial notoriety may be regarded as relatively low (20%), meaning that sociologists are diversely represented in the collaboration with journalism. However, a closer look shows that several themes are more likely to be commented by particular and recurring authors, this is specially the case of the descriptors ‘(e)immigration’, ‘justice’, ‘others’, ‘politics’ and ‘social mobilization’.

An additional remark regarding the authorial expression concerns the gender discrepancy, which, in fact, clearly shows: in several themes (7 to be exact) the differences are at the least 1 (female) to 4 (men). The news about ‘crisis’ exhibit the most significant gap (1 female to 11 men). Only in too descriptors the authorial notoriety of women is higher (‘family’) or similar (‘health’).

4.2. Results from *Correio da Manhã* newspaper: themes, readings and public participation

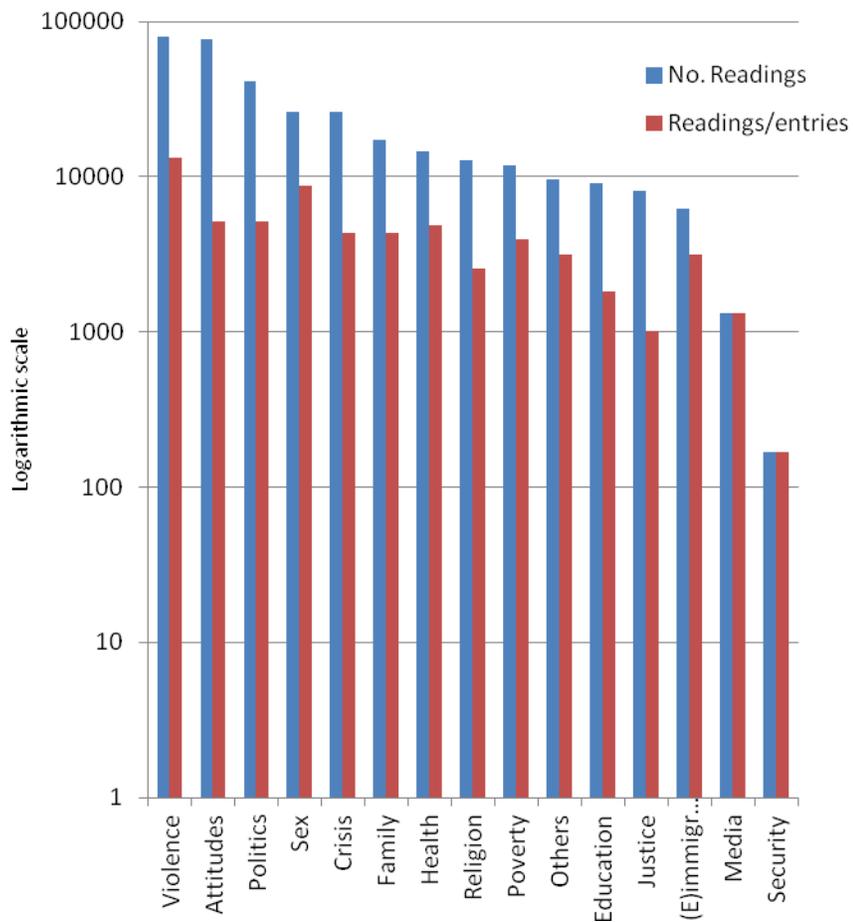
The results obtained from *Correio da Manhã* newspaper are in several aspects different from those gathered from *Público* newspaper. Looking at the number of ‘readings’ and number of ‘comments’ posted online by the public (Figure 6), the asymmetries are clearly stronger, which means that public reception to the news is less participative, and less enthusiastic in engaging in discussion as well. This can be confirmed by Figures 7 and 8.

Figure 6. Number of ‘readings’ and ‘comments’ posted by the public in *Correio da Manhã*

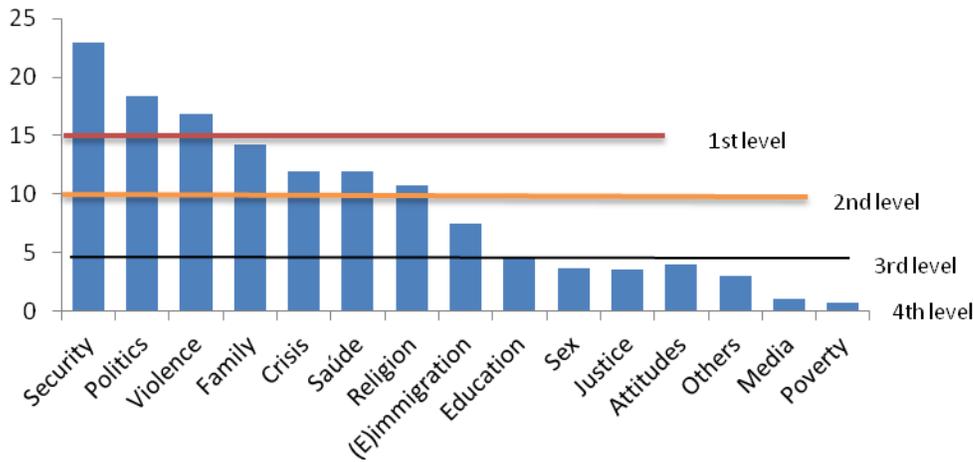


Another difference between the two newspapers concerns the position number of ‘readings’ within each theme. As evidenced by Figure 7, ‘violence’, ‘politics’ and ‘attitudes’ are the three most read topics; in an opposite position ‘(e)immigration’, ‘media’ and ‘security’ are the least read topics. In terms of visibility, the descriptors ‘violence’ and ‘sex’ are the best positioned, contrasting with the lowest levels of the themes ‘justice’ and ‘security’.

Figure 7. Number of ‘readings’ and index of visibility per theme (*Correio da Manhã*)



Finally, in regard to the participation levels, they are lower than the ones found in the other newspaper, and they are also focused on different themes. As Figure 8 illustrates, the first level of participation puts in evidence the themes ‘security’, ‘politics’ and ‘violence’.

Figure 8. Indicator of participation, by levels (*Correio da Manhã*)

The last observation seems to be in contradiction with what we have said about the low level of visibility concerning ‘security’. However, as we have stated before, the indicators measure different situations and they don’t necessarily converge. The case of the discussion involving ‘security’ is interesting. It was specially generated by the news reporting on the installation of CCTV video surveillance cameras in the streets of a particular town.

4.2.1. Authorial expression (*Correio da Manhã*)

As regards to the authorial characterization, the index of authorial notoriety (15%) is lower than the one found in *Público* newspaper (20%). In global terms, this means larger diversity of the sociologist whose views appear in the news. However, authorial notoriety is clearly prominent when news draws on ‘politics’ (63%), ‘crisis’ (33%), ‘attitudes’ (20%) and ‘others’ (33%).

The second indicator of this characterization, concerning the gender of the authors, reveals significant gender inequalities: 5 out of 15 descriptors/themes do not mention female authors. In the other 10 descriptors the masculinity ratio is favorable to men, except for the themes ‘(e)immigration’, ‘media’ and ‘security’.

5. Discussing and concluding remarks

“Journalism needs to bring the ‘country to the mirror’”. This statement was the title of an article published by *Público* newspaper, quoting the information director of a private TV Channel (SIC). Connecting the idea to the critical situation of the country, the journalist also advocates changes in the news making, and argues for less dependence on the “usual sources” and more collaboration with specialists, namely (but not only) sociologists.

The aim of this exploratory research was, precisely, to bring some insights about the presence of the sociologist in the media. Having collected data merely from two newspapers, in the absence of comparisons with the protagonist of specialists from other sciences, the exercise of characterization is obviously limited. Nevertheless, some conclusion remarks may be pointed.

Within the period of observation (1st January 2008 – 14th July 2011), applying the selection criteria, we have treated 237 journalistic texts (69% published by *Público* newspaper; 31% published by *Correio da Manhã*). Those texts include articles containing statements of sociologists (for the most part) interviews to sociologists or articles written by sociologists (rarely, since for editorial reasons opinion articles tend to be exclusive of the printed version).

Sociologists are invited to comment on multiple issues (we have categorized 18 themes), issues that acquire different importance according to one or the other newspaper. As far as *Público* newspaper is concerned, the highest number of articles quoting sociologists focusses on ‘politics’, ‘crisis’ ‘attitudes’; however, other issues, like ‘social mobilization’, ‘poverty’, ‘labor’, ‘family’ ‘justice’, ‘education’ are also well represented.

If we look at the hierarchy made by the audience, when they chose to read an article (designated by index of visibility), the most visible themes became ‘politics’, ‘crisis’, ‘poverty’ and ‘(e)immigration’.

Those results show that, in fact, sociologists are collaborating with the journalism field; they present their views on central issues concerning the “turbulence” in the current

days. Some engage their expertise in the support of social mobilization, being themselves active in the critics to the mainstream political, economic and financial drives.

The data from *Correio da Manhã* also confirm that sociologists are mostly invited to comment on issues, like ‘attitudes’, ‘politics’ and ‘justice’. However, the themes with the highest score in visibility are ‘violence’, and ‘sex’.

Online journalism encourages the audience to act/react in several ways: to read or not to read an article, to assess an article, to post a comment, to post a comment on a comment. We have created indicators to approach those different situations (excluding the accounting for the votes). The selected 237 texts (‘entries’) have generated more than 900,000 accesses/readings and over 5,000 comments posted by the public. The visibility (relation between the number of readings and the number of ‘entries’), the participation (relation between the number of ‘comments’ and the number of entries), and the discussion (relation between the number of ‘comments’ and the number of ‘readings’) do not converge. Obviously, the dispositions to comment on subjects are more selective than simply reading about it, and they also probably reflect the actuality of the issues, the level of controversy involved and the proximity of the issues to particular social groups.

Within the texts selected, 183 sociologists were identified. For the most part they are invited to comment on subjects related to their research field. This means that sociologists are diversely represented in the collaboration with journalists, and they are invited by the media as experts. Certain themes reveal high levels of authorial notoriety. It’s specially the case of ‘politics’. Some of the authors with a higher level of notoriety have in fact a well-known media public expression, not only in the press, but also in the radio and TV.

Globally, but especially in certain themes, the authorial characterization indicates a male predominance, contradicting the gender composition of the Portuguese sociological community nowadays, but conforms to the gender composition of the former *cohorts* of Portuguese sociologists: “The 70’s and the 80’s were decades of clear male dominance” (Baptista and Machado, 2010: 13).

The results of mapping out some characteristics of the sociological presence in the newspaper agenda, allow us to conclude that Portuguese sociological community is engaged in the public discussions of issues that concern the “turbulence” nowadays,

assuming therefore their responsibility to society, beyond the academy and the research fields.

Acknowledgments

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