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## ***European elections in the media: Portuguese coverage of the 2009 European elections***

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### **Summary**

In this paper, the co-relation between the Portuguese media, public opinion and electoral results is studied through the analysis of three of the major Portuguese daily newspapers and ‘assessment’ of their coverage of the 2009 European elections, following the approach of similar researches previously carried out. Therefore, it will eventually lead to similar conclusions, despite the fact that the ‘key event’ and country under analysis differ from those of previous studies. The methodology includes content and discourse analysis, in view of understanding whether or not there is a common pattern followed by the different newspapers when covering the European elections.

**Key words:** media coverage; European elections; public opinion; communication deficit

### **Resumo**

No presente artigo analisa-se a co-relação entre os *media* portuguesas, a opinião pública e os resultados eleitorais, através da análise de três dos mais importantes jornais nacionais diários e da ‘avaliação’ da cobertura que fizeram nas eleições

européias de 2009, seguindo a mesma abordagem de estudos semelhantes feitos anteriormente. Assim, acabamos por chegar a conclusões semelhantes às desses estudos, apesar de o ‘evento-chave’ e o país em análise serem diferentes. A metodologia utilizada inclui análise de discurso e de conteúdo, com vista a perceber se existe ou não um padrão comum utilizado pelos vários jornais na cobertura das eleições europeias.

**Palavras-chave:** cobertura mediática; eleições europeias; opinião pública; défice de comunicação

*“The central question [for political communication research] concerns how the media aid citizens in becoming informed voters.”*

(Holbert, 2005 *in* Shehata and Strömbäck, 2009)

For this year’s European elections, the European Parliament (EP) has chosen the motto “this time it’s different”. But is it really? Despite the new elements that will make these elections innovative and different in terms of the EU’s architectural framework, the main issue will probably be – as in previous elections – the fact that the citizens are not aware about the role of the European Parliament, let alone the novelties introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon that seem to have granted it more effective powers. The argument being that only the media can help reach a widespread audience of European citizens and thus foster participation at these elections, we will look at the media coverage given by some Portuguese newspapers to the EP elections in 2009. Although it is still early to carry an analysis of the current media coverage for the 2014 EP elections, this will give us a basis for future comparison between these two major democratic moments.

## **Introduction**

Eurobarometer polls continuously show that the European citizens identify the media as their main source of information about European issues, and a substantial percentage refers to daily newspapers as the first instance where they look for information (Sinnott, 1997; Maier & Ritterberger, 2008). Despite television being often referred as the most important source of information, the pertinence of analysing newspapers lies in their expectable potential to “offer the most detailed overview of issues”, since they are not subject to the same constraints imposed on television reporting, and are supposedly able to provide more background information and analysis (Bijsmans & Altides, 2007: 328).

The importance of the media for a communication policy of the EU is recognized in several official documents, namely the Plan D and the “White Paper on a European Communication Policy”, launched by the European Commission in 2006 as part of an effort to better communicate the EU to the citizens and avoid their increasing distancing and lack of interest in the Union. In a resolution by the European Parliament about “Media Literacy in a Digital World” (European Parliament, 2008) we can read that “the media make themselves felt in politics and the day-to-day life of society” and “media literacy is therefore central to political culture and active participation by Union citizens”, reinforcing the importance of understanding how the media cover European events such as the EP elections.

Previous studies have shown that all relevant actors in the process of political European communication recognise the need for improved information. In Michailidou’s research, the importance of quality coverage of EU in national media ranked first among a set of twenty-two aspects presented to EU officials as potential factors for improving EU’s legitimacy (Michailidou, 2008:9).

The data of Eurobarometer 70 – referring to the European Elections of 2009 – clearly reflect the gap between media mentions to the EP and the actual information they provide to citizens, as 44% of respondents affirmed to have

recently (at the time, 2008) read, heard or seen something about the EP, whereas only some 23% considered themselves to be ‘well-informed’ about the activities of the European Parliament, and 73% affirmed to be badly informed on the subject (European Parliament, 2009: 6).

In his analysis linking the level of knowledge with the public perceptions of the European Union, Richard Sinnott concludes that the main effect of low levels of knowledge on attitudes towards European politics is normally to increase indecision and ambivalence rather than opposition (Sinnott, 1997: 9). Applying this to the context of the European elections, we can thus make the argument that since the media do not provide electors with adequate knowledge about the EU, this may lead to indecision that can ultimately be reflected in a decision not to vote (thus contributing to increasing levels of abstention).

### **1. Media coverage of the 2009 European elections in Portugal**

When analysing three of the main national daily newspapers, contrary to some of the initial expectations, the most significant differences registered between the two ‘quality’ newspapers (Diário de Notícias and Público) and the ‘popular’ one (Correio da Manhã) are not related to content but mainly to structural differences. These include, for instance, the absence of a European correspondent in Correio da Manhã, or of some journalists who can be identified as being in charge of EU-related topics. We also see that the news stories are generally shorter than the articles in the quality newspapers, and are not usually placed under specific sections (such as ‘Portugal’ or ‘International’ sections, as in the case of Diário de Notícias, or ‘Politics’ and ‘World’ in Público).

The fact that we find no mention to Europe’s day in the online newspapers on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May seems to correspond to the notion that the electoral campaign in Portugal and its respective media coverage are emptied of the “ritual action” referred

by Horta (2008: 10) as a feature of a celebratory dimension that might be emphasised in key moments.

In fact, it seems logical that the official day of the European Union could provide a chance for the newspapers to shift attention towards a European dimension, conferring a more informative and attractive tone to the news that could convey the notion of a common sense of European belonging, giving more sense to the electoral act that would take place the following month.

That opportunity was evidently missed (or dismissed) by the Portuguese newspapers. Likewise, we find virtually no allusions (during the months preceding and following the election) to the thirty years of European elections celebrated in 2009.

The fact that the newspapers largely disregard these symbolic moments seems to indicate a low importance assigned to the EU by the editorial teams (Horta, 2008:6). Concurring with the same idea is the observation that where some information directly concerning the EP is actually provided, it is very often left for the last paragraph of the articles, therefore evidencing the secondary relevance attributed to the European dimension. This situation was mainly observed in the quality dailies, whose news are most of the time very similar because they are taken from the same source, the Portuguese news agency Lusa.

## **2. The tone of the news**

According to the established idea that the Portuguese media are independent and not affiliated to specific political parties or ideologies, no significant differences were found as to the more negative or positive content of the news, or to the greater presence of some actors to the detriment of others in the different newspapers. We can generally affirm that the news stories related to the EP elections are presented in a rather neutral tone in the journalistic pieces of all three newspapers, contrasting

with a more ‘opinionated’ trend of sections like opinion columns, comments or editorials (largely written by politicians). In these sections, the tone is overall pessimistic, critical of the campaign strategies and the perceived apathy of citizens, and frequently predictive of a high abstention rate in the country.

In this line, we can speak of a somewhat ‘alarmist’ tone of the news when the topic of abstention is brought into the discussion. Despite alerting to the imminent risk of record abstention levels, the media do not give adequate coverage to innovative initiatives of some parties aimed at an increased and more active involvement of the citizens.

Considering the analysis to perceive the existence of pro or anti-European stances in mediated discourses, it is particularly easy to identify patterns of positioning and diverging discourses. The two biggest parties (PS and PSD) seem to be generally Europhiles whenever the candidates actually refer to the EU, albeit in a rather vague – and sometimes even naïve – way (i.e. mentioning the shared European ideal, the crucial importance of belonging to the EU, etc.). These results seem to support the arguments advanced by some authors that ‘centre parties’ tend to converge on European matters, as “opinions on Europe tend to cut across traditional party cleavages” (Menon and Peet 2010: 3; Horta, 2008).

Among the five dominant political parties in the Portuguese scene, those placed more to the left appear to be the ones that keep a more concomitant critical stance towards the EU, or at least that is the way in which the media represented their positions.

Overall, there is a considerable lack of coherence between discourse and practice of all parties in that they defend the need for a balanced, responsible and useful debate, but do not act accordingly, as many of them constantly initiate and encourage polemics, embarking on personal exchanges of accusations. Another limitation to a coherent communication pattern is the fact that several small parties, with very low visibility, do not seize the few chances of media exposure to produce

a constructive discourse, instead making radical (and often unexplained) statements, which may seem newsworthy but hardly convincing to get the attention of readers to the theme of the elections.

### **3. A ‘de-mobilizing’ campaign**

Although some findings point to an increase in participation as a result of newspaper reading (Shehata and Strömbäck, 2009), it is also plausible to make the argument that several aspects of the media coverage may in fact lead to a ‘demobilization’ of citizens, together with the excessive focus on national issues that relates to the model of second-order elections. Among these we can emphasise the increasing fragmentation (Serrano, 2006) and ‘superficialisation’ of media contents, which according to Pierre Bourdieu hinders the diffusion of knowledge about society, therefore distancing the citizen from civic and political intervention (Bourdieu *in* Fonseca, 2001: 40).

Other authors relate the emphasis of media coverage on parties’ campaign strategies to a “voter cynicism about politics and even a tendency to be less likely to vote in an election” (Weaver, 1996: 45). In effect, we realise through the analysis of Portuguese newspapers that the coverage is mostly concerned with the candidates and parties’ campaign strategies, rather than with their ideological positions or political agenda. Although each party claims to contribute to the electoral debate with quality while condemning their opponents for making a campaign based on personal attack and negativism, these features are valid to characterize the type of campaign of all the visible parties, at least according to the information conveyed by the media.

The period of electoral campaign represents a moment with the “potential to inform and mobilise voters” to take part in the democratic process (Vreese et al, 2006: 185; Biliska, 2012: 15) with the media playing a crucial role in that context.



We may thus question, considering the ever decreasing turnouts at the European elections, if the European media – and the Portuguese press in particular – have been performing their function properly and matching the expectations of the readers.

On April 25<sup>th</sup>, *Diário de Notícias* published an article reporting that political groups guaranteed “debate and information” for the electoral campaigns, as they identified the lack of such elements as weaknesses linked to the distant relationship between the EU and the citizens. However, despite being seemingly aware of that problem, neither the parties nor the newspapers have actually provided the electors with information that might attract them to the polls, like showing how the European Parliament’s decisions affect their daily lives.

According to the results of Eurobarometer 71 (2009), the Portuguese people were mainly interested in having economic matters discussed during the campaign. Unemployment was pointed out as the major theme, followed by economic growth and purchasing power and inflation. These topics were frequently mentioned during the campaign for the EP elections, but there are little or no signs of a structured debate around them, nor is there much evidence of actual proposals by the different parties to tackle unemployment and promote economic growth. The absence of concrete proposals is noted in several comment and opinion columns in the newspapers.

#### **4. NATIONAL CONTENT OF THE NEWS**

It is generally acknowledged that national topics traditionally dominate the campaigns in most member states (Vreese et al, 2006; Martins, 2010a). In fact, that seems to have been the case since the very first elections back in 1979, according to the statement of Bino Olivi, who wrote that the “electoral campaign in the Spring of 1979 was, in each country of the Community, dominated by themes and debates

related to the internal dialectics, and its political results were evaluated according to criteria and motivations of each national polity” (Olivi, 1998: 257).

The findings of the case study about Portuguese press coverage appear to confirm this trend, since the majority of the news’ stories where the ‘European elections’ are mentioned turns out to be, in reality, mainly about national issues. The unequivocal emphasis placed upon national issues is certainly the one conclusion extracted from the newspapers’ content analysis that appears undisputable.

Indeed, the national dimension is always present in the candidates’ discourses and actions, whether implicitly or explicitly – and is consequently replicated in the media. A good example of this national bias, the discussion about the continuation of Durão Barroso as president of the European Commission is defined in terms of its importance to the ‘national interest’ (even though it refers to the functioning of the European institution where commissioners are not supposed to be representing their country, and that should therefore be treated as a truly European issue).

Several other episodes reported in the news demonstrate the second-order dimension of the European elections, which seem to be frequently manipulated by the various parties in the opposition, who try to present them as “the first round” of the national elections, thus calling for a “vote of protest” or punishment of the government. These discourses are reproduced in the different newspapers from a very early stage of the pre-campaign period (March and April), therefore exposing the readers to these ideas for a long period of time.

## **5. ‘Dramatization’ & personalization in the news**

Some scholars (Kriesi et al, 2007; Martins, 2010b) point out the ‘dramatization’ of news discourse as a feature of media news production, and the three Portuguese newspapers analysed seem to match that pattern. The authors

affirm that the “mass media follow certain news values such as negativity, conflict, drama and personalisation” contributing to the ‘spectacularization’ of political communication (Kriesi et al, 2007: 9), characteristics that are all present in the media outlets studied.

The disputes involving the use of aggressive verbs are very frequently embodied in the wider left-right debate that seems to dominate the majority of the news, which in turn are mainly superficial and limited to a reproduction of the discourses made by candidates (and other politicians) in the course of the electoral campaign. At this point, two questions may be raised: while on the one hand it is the parties’ responsibility to produce useful debates that may help the citizens be informed, it is, on the other hand, the ‘duty’ of the media to balance the amount of coverage given to inter-party disputes that do not provide any input to citizens’ knowledge about the EP elections and its related topics. Furthermore, since the logic appears to be that the parties and candidates involved in more political or personal controversies are those who benefit from a greater exposure in the media, the smaller parties are almost completely neglected.

Dramatization in the press is characterized by Sousa (2001: 79) in terms of a focus on the importance of the present time, the simplification that results from the need to produce a clear and easily accessible discourse, the need to make the discourse appealing and the construction of narratives where the action is centred around a nucleus composed by a few personalities.

The dramatization seems to be linked to the tendency towards a ‘personalisation’ of the news, in which the candidates – and some candidates in particular, such as the first in each electoral list – are given more space and coverage than the rest of their own party and their opponents. In fact, many titles referring to the five biggest parties (PS, PSD, PCP, CDS-PP and BE) do not even mention the name of the party but only the names of party leaders or members – whereas when

referring to smaller parties this does not happen, because their leaders are not likely to be associated to the party by the readers.

This tendency of personalisation appears to be particularly strong in the Portuguese newspapers, and can be clearly identified in the headlines – where there is almost always a reference to some political personality or a quote by a politician – as well as in the body of the news, which in many cases is mainly composed of an assemblage of selected quotes from candidates’ discourses and exchanges of accusations. The constant reporting of conflicts and controversies involving certain candidates – falling into the realm of ‘dramatization’ – also emphasises this personalisation. Needless to say, since these ‘dramatized’ news tend to dominate the journalistic production concerning the European elections, they leave little space for the publication of useful and instructive information.

### **Concluding remarks**

The most relevant conclusion taken from the analysis of the three newspapers is that a structured and consistent debate concerning European matters involving all the relevant actors (candidates, parties, civil society and citizens, and also European institutions) is clearly lacking in all the newspapers analysed, regardless of their status as ‘quality’ or ‘popular’ newspapers, and this may be likely to be the case for the entire Portuguese media.

Concerning the visibility in the news outlet, it is clear that national actors – namely candidates to the EP election and members of the government – are by far those who enjoy a greater level of exposure, and very often they make an instrumental use of the EP elections phenomenon in favour of party and domestic disputes. Seemingly, then, they are the first responsible for the absence (or marginal presence) of truly European topics in the national public sphere. Despite the argument of agenda setting power of the media, that appears to be countered by an

excessive dependency of the media on official and political sources, meaning that the press and the news discourse culminate in a reproduction of the topics defined by the politicians' agenda (Horta, 2008).

By doing so, the media fail to fulfil their function as a component of democratic systems, and their role in providing cues for citizens' perceptions of the EU (Vreese et al, 2006). In addition, the tendency to a 'spectacularization' of the news, reflected in the use of 'dramatic scripts' (Martins, 2010b), leads to a loss in terms of relevant content, as the media privilege the emphasis on conflict as opposed to in-depth explanations of the issues reported. In the same vein, the media tend to give more prominence to certain actors to the detriment of others, namely persons with rhetorical competence, the ability to practice politics 'front stage', charisma and prestige, according to the description of Kriesi et al (2007:45).

The use of these journalistic techniques, aimed at making the issue 'interesting' for the audience, seems to prevent Portuguese newspapers from taking an active position in countering abstention, which could simply consist of a more informative set of news about the EP elections. Although it is possible to identify several mentions to the European institutions in the Portuguese newspapers (especially the EP and the Commission), these are mostly marginal references and do not constitute the scope of the articles where they appear, and therefore do not account for a real Europeanization of the news produced.

Similarly, there are some signs of a horizontal Europeanization (although very incipient) especially during the election days and immediately after, with newspapers reporting about the process of European elections in other EU countries, election results and levels of abstention. On this note, it is interesting to verify how 'abstention' is codified in the media and political discourse in a very negative way, being referred to as a 'danger' or the 'main adversary' in the EP elections.

Finally, although there are no straightforward solutions that can be advanced to solve the weaknesses of the Portuguese media, it is evident that they need to

rethink the models of coverage of European themes and political events, in view of a more ‘balanced’ coverage that can be inclusive of all relevant actors and not just political parties and a few prominent national personalities.

Political parties, considering their privileged condition as channels of communication, should also revise their campaign strategies in order to make actions more coherent with discourse, with the claims for constructive debates and for an overall informative campaign for the European elections. This idea is backed by the argument of Simon Hix (1995: 533) that party leaders have the possibility to use the mass media and political power to “educate the public”, thus ultimately contributing to the reinforcement of the integration project through an enhanced mobilization and participation by the citizens.

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