Design, Information, and Accessibility: News in Pandemic Times

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ABSTRACT

Daily newspapers play a decisive role in informing citizens and involving them in society. The information they transmit must be clear and easily accessible. The design determines, to a great extent, the ease of access to information through page organization, content hierarchy, images, and color. To understand the importance of information about the pandemic in Portugal and how this relevance was manifested through design, we selected three key moments of the pandemic and analyzed the news published in the three Portuguese daily newspapers *Correio da Manhã*, *Jornal de Notícias*, and *Público*, regarding the number of pieces published, length, location on the page and use of iconography.

Keywords: Design, Daily newspapers, COVID-19 news, Information, Accessibility

INTRODUCTION

Due to the pandemic caused by the new Coronavirus (SARS-CoV 2), life as we knew it has changed. For two years now, the disease caused by this virus has been affecting us, changing habits, restricting movements and freedoms.

Information about the situation in each country and the world, guidelines, and conduct to be followed issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), and decisions that governments have taken are transmitted to the population by daily newspapers, which assume their social and ethical responsibility of informing.

The present work is framed in this scope. Seeking to scrutinize the news coverage and the graphic design treatment given to pieces related to the theme, observing three generalist daily newspapers with national coverage – *Público*, *Jornal de Notícias*, and *Correio da Manhã*.

The methodology used was quantitative and qualitative, which started by selecting the news to be included in the study by identifying three crucial moments of the pandemic in Portugal, with a transversal approach by the three newspapers. The three selected moments/news were: 1) registration of the first case in Portugal (03Mar2020); 2) one year of COVID in Portugal

(02Mar2021); 3) the announcement of new measures to fight the pandemic (17Nov2021).

Once the news pieces were selected, they were analyzed and decomposed according to form and content variables. This process allowed us to identify patterns in the informational and graphical approaches within the same newspaper and among different newspapers.

DESIGN NEWSPAPERS AND ACCESSIBILITY

In what concerns to publications, and according to Aiga, "design explores the overall layout structure – hierarchy, sequence, and pacing – as well as the particular page design of text and image in the editorial material of magazines and newspapers." Moreover, we can say, according to Lockwood (1992, p: V), that "newspapers are a visual form of communication, we somehow take for granted the separation of image and words. In print journalism, image and wordage indivisibly wed. The medium makes the narrative come alive in a special way - readers remember the message through the form."

This visual dimension leads us to Aicher's 'ocular economy' concept. The author states that reading is very fatiguing and that, when reading a newspaper, the reader will capture only a percentage of what the graphic spot offers him. Since "the eye is only tempted to read what catches his attention," that is, the reader only goes against the sense of economy when he comes across something that arouses his particular interest (Aicher cited by Aires, 2014, p. 15).

According to Costa (2011), the eye is not always totally distracted or uninterested, nor in a state of permanent active search. The gaze sweeps across the field of vision, the act of fixing attention being driven by a strong motivation or need or by the pleasure of looking (aesthetic motivation).

In this sense, design should promote the accessibility of information through the ordering and organization of messages based on content and form, using economy and simplicity, never neglecting the aesthetic aspects whose attractive and persuasive effects are crucial to the accessibility of information.

Lockwood (1992) and Aicher (2004) speak of form and shape, and both refer to the graphic elements used and their interconnection in this context. Aires (2014) states that the graphic elements establish a structure whose relationships and interconnections are visualized and immediately perceived, enabling an immediate and explicit supra reading of the first pages of newspapers. To this author statement, we would add that this relational phenomenon happens concerning the front pages and to all journalistic pieces and respective graphic options, enabling decoding of the message, not only explicit but also implicit.

When we talk about implicit messages, we are talking about an editorial philosophy that determines how the newspaper is seen and recognized by society. All the choices contribute, from the newspaper's format to its typography, grids, colors, and images, everything reveals their identity and positioning, which is currently extendable to digital media.

Accessibility

In contemporary society, inclusiveness is an indispensable value to any Design project. Regarding newspapers and news, inclusiveness means easy access to information and understanding. That is an ethical responsibility of communication, not excluding individuals with low literacy or total mastery of the issues addressed, being factors of exclusion the unclear, elaborate, or elitist discourses.

The role of the Design is to promote accessibility through the information organization, hierarchies, typography, and visual codes that must be appropriate and visually should reinforce the semantic aspects of the message.

According to Costa (2011), all static messages require time for perception from the human receiver; shorter for images, slower for a sequential message of a text, and the increase of the attention and effort progresses according to the amount of text and the difficulty of typographic reading. Thus, aesthetic enjoyment is mainly associated with images that we can read through their lines, shapes, and colors, where the eyes roam with total freedom, affirming themselves as surface messages. On the other hand, textual messages are linear messages; the eye has no freedom to roam, limited only to the reading process, which consists of a mental movement of abstraction and a mechanical eye movement. So, newspaper design must integrate this knowledge and think that according to Costa (2011), the pleasure of reading is not immediate, as it happens with images. In the case of literature, poetry, and fiction, it is an intellectual pleasure; in the case of daily news, it is a pleasure that results from obtaining helpful information.

Media and COVID News

Citizens' knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic has originated from extensive news coverage. Studies have shown that people form their impressions of events from the media (Graber, 2004). They also state that citizens tend to adopt journalists' interpretations when they do not master the information; this gives the media a preponderant influence over public opinion and our sense of life (Donsbach, 1995; Graber, 2004).

When conveying information, the media do so by choosing content according to what they take as relevant to interest their audiences and transmitting it using the various technologies available, from traditional forms to online.

The agenda-setting hypothesis, postulating that the media can change the attitudes of the public with the choices of themes they present (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), there is a direct and causal relationship between the content of the agenda of the media and the consequent perception by the public regarding the thematic priorities and the issues conveyed by them. Thus, the behaviors derived from the impact of mass communication, particularly in the formation of public opinion (Jeffres, 1997; Norris, 2003; Graber, 2004; Lavine, 2010), largely result from what the media put on the agenda and how they approach it.

In their task of mediating social reality, the media provide a public opinion with frames, which are nothing more than a particular vision of the world, impregnated with ideas, shaping our way of seeing reality (Lakoff, 2007: 17).

The framing process occurs through the editorial selection of specific sources, angles, and images in detriment of others; that is, to a greater or lesser extent, an attempt is made to present a particular perspective of the events in question (Norris, Kern and Just, 2003). In this view, as Castells (2009) notes, in contemporaneity, the media have the scope to structure the system of meanings, which is the reference system for the performance of individuals.

METHODOLOGY

Our analysis focuses on a corpus composed of pieces extracted from the three major national newspapers with the largest circulation in Portugal – *Público, Jornal de Notícias*, and *Correio da Manhã* - trying to compare patterns from the news coverage in three distinct moments: the appearance of the first cases in Portugal, one year after the first detected case, and the implementation of health measures approximately 18 months after the first case.

The three national daily newspapers we have chosen have the largest circulation in Portugal. *Público* went on sale on March 5, 1990, launched by one of the most important national economic groups, SONAE. It is one of Portugal's leading quality papers with a Berliner format. Its sales have accompanied the decline of the sector, reaching today, according to APCT (2021), 17,572 copies of paid print circulation and 13,080 copies of paid digital circulation.

Jornal de Notícias, a national daily newspaper with a remarkable presence in the country's north, is the oldest of the three newspapers we analyzed. It was founded in 1888 in Oporto and nationalized in 1976, along with other newspapers. It was finally re-privatized in 1990 and is now owned by the *Lusomundo Group*. It has the Berliner format and, once considered a newspaper of widespread.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the newspapers *Correio da Manhã, Jornal de Notícias*, and *Público*, in their editions of 03 March 2020, 02 March 2021, and 17 November 2021, allowed us to collect 217 journalistic pieces on the COVID-19 issue, in the total of the three moments observed, as shown in chart 1. This fact alone could be a significant indicator. However, it is necessary to consider each newspaper's particularities to understand better how the information was conveyed to the public.

Despite presenting more journalistic pieces about COVID-19 than its competitors, the tabloid *Correio da Manhã* is also the one in which the pieces are small and very small. Therefore, with less journalistic depth, which is in line with the editorial matrix of each of these news organizations. This evidence becomes clearer in chart 2, observing the number of news published per page.

Regarding the occupation of the pieces on the page, as shown in graphic 3, we see that the *Correio da Manhã* has a very residual presence of pages with a single piece. However, there is an increase in the number of main pieces from the first to the third phase. In this newspaper, there is a predominance of pieces at the top of the page, in the most valuable half of the page. *Jornal de Notícias* makes the main pieces on the theme prevail in the upper part of
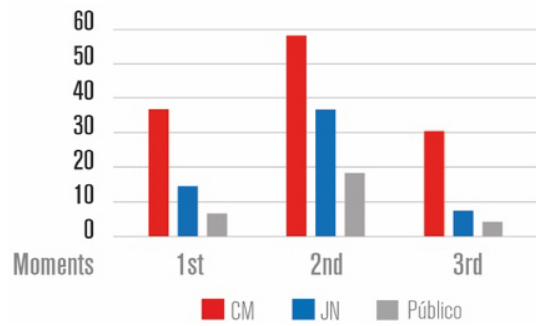
**Chart 1:** Number of journalistic pieces, per moment.
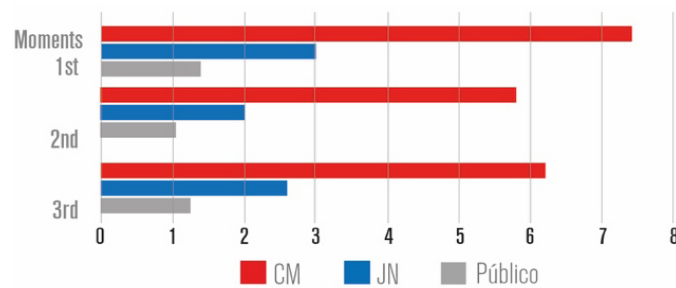
Chart 2: Number of journalistic pieces, per page and per moment.
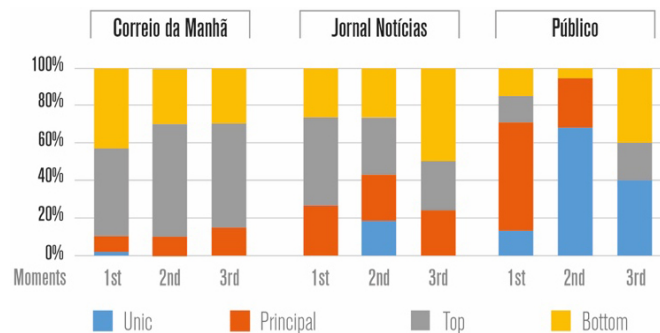
Chart 3: Journalistic pieces – location on the page.

the page, except in the third phase, where half of them appear in the lower part of the page. *Público* prefers highlighting main pieces on the page and pages with a single piece. In both "quality papers" we notice a slowing down of the highlighting in the third observation stage.

The flow of news in each of the three moments of observation does not reveal a pattern of fading or decreasing media interest in the COVID-19 issue but rather monitoring the theme according to its impact on each moment of society. There is an increase of pieces published in the third phase, compared to the second, due to the government's announcement of the impact of the sanitary measures decreed.
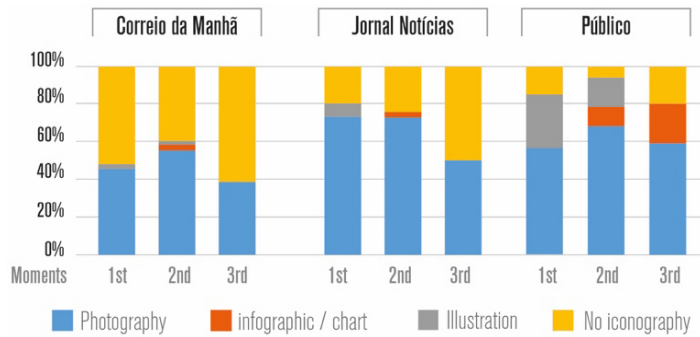
Chart 4: Percentage of iconography per newspaper and moment.

All newspapers use photos in their pieces, although the *Correio da Manhã*, which gives prevalence to short pieces, called "breves", is the one with the lowest percentage of image, as can be seen from chart 4. About the use of images, *Público* gives more emphasis to illustration, especially in the last two phases under study.

Regarding the covers, we found no iconography related to the theme COVID in *Correio da Manhã*. In the three moments in the study, the *Jornal de Notícias* presents large photographs on all its covers. From which we highlight the panel of images and calls for news covered inside the newspaper, with the theme "1 year of COVID" and where the organization, rhythm, and highlights are an example of the interaction that can exist between image and text, without neglecting the informative clarity and easy access to information. As far as *Público* is concerned, there is photography on the cover in the first moment; in the second, this newspaper has chosen illustration to highlight the most relevant aspects that happened during a pandemic year. An illustration where understanding is not immediate, but where the drawing, the stain, the color, and the typography contribute to building a narrative, where all the elements "speak" at one voice.

CONCLUSION

From the work done, we can conclude that the 217 compiled journalistic pieces reflect the interest in the COVID19 issue. We identified patterns of communicational continuity in each of the newspapers. Also a greater proximity of communicational and graphic patterns between *Jornal de Notícias* and *Público*. that are more distant from *Correio da Manhã*.

Correio da Manhã chooses to publish numerous news, with small and very small dimensions. A situation that compromises the depth of the news, and the complementarity between textual and iconographic information.

Comparing the number of news published by *Correio da Manhã* with those published by *Jornal de Notícias*, the decrease is significant, with an even more accentuated decrease to *Público*. This decrease is inversely proportional to the depth given to the news and the use of iconography.

The editorial options are reflected in the pages' structure and organization and the news's location on the page, with a regular and structured

organization at *Público* and *Jornal de Notícias*, without neglecting rhythms and the possibility of aesthetic fruition. In *Correio da Manhã*, the excessive number of small news and the use of some inappropriate visual codes convey the idea of organizational confusion and lack of rigor.

Thus, it can be seen that the information published in the *Público* and *Jornal de Notícias* newspapers, both for their editorial and graphic options, allow access to in-depth information clearly and efficiently, while the *Correio da Manhã* opts for more superficial information, not presenting the information as clearly and rigorously as would be desirable.

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