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Title

Political Communication and Mediatic Urgency: An Ethnographic Approach of Portuguese Parliamentary Journalists at Work

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Abstract

What kinds of relationships exist between Members of Parliament (MPs), journalists, and spin doctors in Parliament, and how do these relationships influence the performance and representation of politics? Drawing on an unprecedented ethnographic investigation on the Portuguese Parliament, this article suggests that these relations, marked by both closeness and conflict, structure a communication regime driven by social acceleration and mediatic urgency. It is also noteworthy that the media rhythm is intensified by the precariousness of journalism, the hyper-communication of the political parties, and the role of spin doctors in shaping the narratives of political communication. It is concluded that journalism, self-proclaimed an instrument of scrutiny of the political reality, is in practice an instrument of construction of that same reality, reproducing an idea of politics as a specialized practice, as opposed to its understanding as a potential dimension of human relations.

Keywords: acceleration, democracy, ethnography, parliament, parliamentary journalism, political journalism, political communication, spin doctors

Introduction: An Ethnographer in the Parliament

It was a seemingly quiet morning at the Portuguese Parliament. By ten o'clock, the deputies were entering the Assembly, some more hurried, heading to the Parliamentary Committee meetings, others at a slower pace, moving on to their party meetings. Journalists were also arriving at different paces, equipped with cameras, photographic machines, tripods, microphones, computers, and notepads. These materials were carefully placed on a treadmill, where a police officer did an x-ray analysis, while journalists headed to a small table at the entrance to get a red plasticized card that guaranteed access to the institution.

At this table, we waited for Mafalda, a parliamentary journalist for 25 years, whose working day we would follow. That morning, the journalist had a freer schedule, and it was with some surprise that we saw her arrive at a hurried pace. Mafalda tells us that her agenda has changed, but that we could talk throughout the day when she had a few breaks. We accepted the challenge and went together to the door of a Parliamentary Group, where we waited for an MP who informed journalists of his intention to make a public statement. While other journalists joined us, Mafalda comments that she had to

improvise some possible questions in the taxi, even without knowing the statement's subject. Minutes later the press officer comes out of the office: "Everyone ready?"

The journalists approach forming a half-moon around the MP, who rushed to relax the environment: "Sorry for this arrangement so early and in the nick of time. We don't learn. You've already realized that today you're going to have to put up with me all day [laughs]". The journalists also laugh, and the deputy makes the statement, directing criticism at the main opposition party, also appealing for it to assume a "constructive attitude on behalf of the country" in the Plenary Session that afternoon, enabling the different bills under discussion.

After a few questions, the deputy returns to the office. Mafalda sits on one of the aisle couches and turns on her laptop. Her colleagues do the same. She writes four paragraphs on the statement in ten minutes, sends it to a colleague and after a few more minutes the piece of news is already on the newspaper's website. We then proceed to the Assembly's bar, where Mafalda prepares the questions that she will ask, a short time later, when a deputy of the questioned party is available to answer. Half an hour later, we returned to the cabinets' area for the response statement: another news on the website. Meanwhile, the pace is starting to speed up, with MPs from other parties speaking informally to journalists in the corridors. The Plenary Session was scheduled for 3 p.m., but the debate in the Assembly had already begun.

This article is based on an ethnography of the Portuguese Parliament through which, for three years, we have observed, interviewed, and followed the work of MPs, advisers, journalists, press officers, spin doctors and parliamentary staff members. Seeking to go beyond institutional self-representations, and merely quantitative methodological approaches, the objective was to analyse political representation and political journalism *in practice* and *from within*, that is, from the dynamics of interaction, discourses and non-discursive practices, the relations and everyday performances (Crewe, 2021). The exploration of parliaments through ethnographic research is a recent development in scholarly discourse. Ethnography, functioning both as a research methodology and a form of knowledge, provides a unique approach grounded in intersubjective relationships with various actors in the field. It goes beyond merely "studying people," involving a collaborative process of learning "with people" through participatory research and knowledge generation.

In the context of the Portuguese Parliament, approximately two thousand people enter the institution daily. Each of them occupies a seat, plays a specific role, and carries

out a particular task. While some represent the citizens politically, others organize the space where this representation is enacted. Many of them work on the law-making processes, while others ensure the institution's communication with the outside world. In this article, we focus specifically on the role that journalists play in the mediatization of politics, a dimension that has received limited attention in ethnographic literature. Through an unprecedented observation of journalists' daily work, we highlight the dynamics of sociability, conflict, and camaraderie they establish with MPs. Concurrently, we examine the influence of press officers and spin doctors who mediate these relationships, delving into their management of mediatic urgency in times of social acceleration. Ultimately, our goal is to illustrate how the daily practices of political journalism contribute to shaping a distinct concept of politics within this institution.

Research problems, goals and guiding questions

Organizational ethnographies have a long history in the social sciences, dating back over a century (Zickar & Carter, 2010). Under the influence of the Chicago School of Sociology and research dedicated to socio-labor transformations during the early 20th century, organizational ethnography experienced a promising inception but gradually lost prominence to prevailing quantitative and statistical methodologies within the field (Zickar & Carter, 2010, p. 311). In this context, Parliaments are a relatively recent and rare object of study in ethnographic literature (Abélès, 1992, 2000; Bignell, 2018; Busby, 2014; Crewe, 2005, 2015; Fenno, 1978; Rai & Johnson, 2014; Wodak, 2009). They constitute themselves as an *ethnographic object under construction* that only recently began to gain some analytical foundation (Crewe, 2021; Crewe & Müller, 2006). Much of the research in this field has primarily focused on the analysis of the work of MPs within the political field, while the contributions of journalists and press officers have often received comparatively less attention.

This article deepens our understanding of an ethnographic approach to institutions by analyzing the social frameworks that structure the daily functioning of the Portuguese Parliament. Specifically, we shed light on the daily work of journalists examining how in this institution socialization takes precedence over individuality and exploring how identity and professional practice are developed through various social interactions, some of which are public, while others remain more discreet. Our focus is to understand the

structure, organization, and perpetuation of this institution through the ideas, practices, processes, and relationships that shape daily life. We draw inspiration from grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1980), which emphasizes the close connection between theory, method, and empirical research. In this context, the research problems are developed through fieldwork and the questions it raises.

For three years, an in-depth exploration of Parliament's daily life involved closely observing the activities of its diverse participants. While MPs receive most of the academic attention, it became evident that the daily life of Parliament are shaped by a multitude of individuals who collectively influence the practice, representation, and performance of politics within this institution. Among them are the journalists who daily cover parliamentary work. This article looks specifically at the role of journalists and, as a result of fieldwork, also at the dynamics and significance of their relationship with MPs and spin doctors. The aim is to scrutinize the invisible work of these professionals, considering their importance in the performance of politics. To accomplish this, we needed to delve into the intricate role of media gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; White, 1950) by gaining access to their offices and inviting them to allow us to observe their work in the political arena.

In politics, relational dynamics are influenced by networks, performances, and relationships structured over time. An ethnographic analysis of parliamentary politics emphasizes these relationships and their symbolic meaning, rather than focusing solely on individual behaviours and their apparent motivation (Abélès, 2000, 2006; Busby, 2014; Crewe, 2006; Schumann, 2009; Weatherford, 1985; Wodak, 2009). Therefore, in the context of Portuguese Parliament, the interactions between politicians and journalists hold significant importance in comprehending this institutional landscape.

One of the central inquiries in this research revolves around effectively balancing the dynamics of closeness and scrutiny between journalists and MPs. In essence, it delves into the intricate interplay between interdependent relationships (Bourdieu, 1998) and the fulfillment of the media's 'democratic function.' This function, as defined by Aalberg and Curran (2013), involves the critical roles of monitoring power, informing citizens, and serving as a filter between 'those who govern' and 'those who are governed', as well as 'those who represent' and 'those who are represented'.

This article aims to shed light on how these complex relationships are skillfully managed and resolved, ultimately shaping and influencing the social order within this institution. The symbiotic and mutually constitutive relationship between the political and

media fields means that journalists, similar to politicians, are socially and symbolically connected through a professional practice grounded in mutual recognition, constant competition, and immediacy (Bourdieu, 1998). This practice, in shaping a distinct view of the political field based on the structure of the journalistic field, contributes, according to Bourdieu, to the production of a general effect of "depoliticization" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 6, 2004, pp. 73–74), or more precisely, "disenchantment with politics" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 6). This involves the cultivation of an "attention to the political 'microcosm' and to the facts and effects that can be attributed to it", which "tends to produce a break with the public" and shift focus away from the real consequences of the political positions on their lives and society at large (Bourdieu, 1998, p.5).

Relations between politicians and journalists, despite their particular characteristics, do not take place outside a historical context marked by a sense of mediatic urgency and social acceleration (Entschew, 2021; Rosa, 2013; Rosa & Scheurman, 2009). Immediacy became one of the hallmarks of journalism (Lewis et al., 2005; Swanson, 2003; Usher, 2018; Zeller & Hermida, 2015), where the online urgency was accompanied by the emergence of the 24-hour newscasts and the increase in the number of live broadcasts, to which debate and commentary programs are associated. Some of them, being based on a combination of information and entertainment – what several authors call *infotainment* (Brants, 1998; Carpini & Williams, 2005; Graber, 1994) or more specifically of *politainment* (Nieland, 2008; Riegert & Collins, 2015) –, have developed new communication techniques, processes and hybrid means of communication where representation seems as important as reality.

In the context of these changes, another research problem focuses on trying to understand how the increased media presence and the hyper-communication of politicians have shaped and intensified a sense of urgency and acceleration, and how this is experienced and managed by the different actors. This article aims to explore the impact of social acceleration on news production, media narratives, and political performance in a context marked by the by the precariousness, the individualization, the competition and the commercialization of the journalistic field (Andringa, 2014; Bourdieu, 1998; Morini, Carls, & Armano, 2014; Olausson, 2018; Wolton, 2011).

Another issue stemming from our fieldwork revolves around the increasing impact of advisors in shaping political and media narratives. Central to understanding the relationship between politicians and journalists is the role of spin doctors (Maltese, 1994; Street, 2001, p. 146). These professionals engage in daily activities focused on shaping

political influence within media narratives and the corresponding communication strategies. Their work primarily involves crafting discourses and narratives that align with specific political agendas. Furthermore, they play a vital role on the construction of a public identity of politicians tailored to communication needs - what, since the 50s, began to be called “packaging politics” (Packard, 2007; Riesman, 2001). Finally, spin doctors maintain daily interactions with journalists based on "interested complicity," a mutually beneficial exchange between politicians and journalists.

While the term "spin doctoring" emerged in the 1980s (Safire, 1984), its underlying objectives have a long history in democratic institutions, particularly in the context of mass media's transformation into digital and networked communication (Alfter, 2019; Cardoso, 2006, 2008; Castells, 2000, 2012). This article aims to understand how this work has been intensifying, professionalizing and specializing as it has accompanied the very technological and communicational transformations and their influence in the political field (Bernays, 1947; Packard, 2007; Riesman, 2001). The research concentrates on the effects of these changes on Portuguese democracy, exploring how they manifest and are handled in the daily life of the Portuguese parliament.

Following these analytical guidelines, this article seeks to answer the following guiding questions: What defines the interactions between politicians and journalists, and how do these interactions impact the representation of politics? What impact does the rapid pace of journalism and political communication have on the both fields, and how is media acceleration managed and reflected in daily practices? What are the roles of press officers and spin doctors in the daily workings of politics, and how do they mediate interactions between MPs and journalists? This article seeks to answer these questions by following the daily rhythm of the journalists working in Parliament and reflecting on practices, discourses and relations hitherto invisible in the field of parliamentary studies.

Research Method

Ethnographic research on parliaments is relatively recent in the literature, and conducting the first ethnography on the Portuguese Parliament posed a unique methodological challenge that broadened our theoretical horizons. Ethnography, as both a research methodology and type of knowledge, offers a distinct approach compared to methods such as surveys or interviews alone. It is rooted in intersubjective knowledge and rigorous analysis of practices, discourses, relationships, and processes that shape everyday life.

According to Ingold (2018), it is not about "studying people", but learning "with people", through participatory processes of research and knowledge production and with a permanent ethical commitment (Melhuus et al., 2012). It involves prolonged engagement with a specific group of people to discover how they act, think, and relate with ant to each other (Crewe, 2016).

Parliament, being an institution of power, benefits from ethnography as a methodology that allows the production of context-specific knowledge. This is achieved through extended interpersonal relationships with various social actors and guarantees a research process less influenced by institutional self-representations or by the coherence that individuals may attempt to convey in interviews, but which may differ in their everyday interactions. Between 2015 and 2018, we carried out an ethnography of the Portuguese Parliament, through which we observed, talked to, interviewed and/or followed the work of MPs, advisers, journalists, press officers, spin doctors and parliamentary staff members. This strategy involved constantly negotiating access to the institutions guaranteed by both the Parliament's services, the Parliamentary Groups, MPs and journalists whose work we sought to observe.¹

Participant observation was the central strategy of the research, implying a prolonged stay capable of guaranteeing the maintenance of intersubjective relationships with the different members of the institution (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; O'Reilly, 2005; Robben & Sluka, 2007). We carried out 366 participant observation sessions in spaces inside the institution and in contexts of interaction outside it. In these different spaces it was possible to observe the relationship between politicians, journalists and advisors that this article uncovers.

The observation contexts were very different, but there is one particular type that must be highlighted: ethnographic job shadowing (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007; McDonald, 2005). This specific form of observation involves continuous monitoring of individuals' daily activities, following in their footsteps and learning what they do and how. In this study, we shadowed eight journalists – two from radio, two from television, and four from daily newspapers – throughout their full workdays.

Interviews were conducted alongside this observation work. In most cases, the interviews were designed in a semi-structured format (Davies, 2002; Kvale, 2007;

¹ The identity of all the research participants has been protected. Following a tradition of ethnographic writing, we chose to assign subjects fictitious names instead of numerical codes.

O'Reilly, 2005), i.e. using a script with flexibility to adapt to the context; in other cases they were "non-directive", starting with a topic and building the dialog from there. A total of 83 interviews were carried out with MPs from all Parliamentary Groups, although for this article we will focus particularly on 18 interviews with journalists. The journalist sample included four television journalists, three radio reporters, eight daily newspaper correspondents, two weekly newspaper journalists, and one weekly news magazine reporter. Nine journalists specialized in parliamentary affairs, seven in political affairs (both within and outside Parliament), and two in economics. With the exception of two freelancers, all were employed by media organizations. Ten of them had over 20 years of experience working in or with Parliament, while eight had primarily started their work in the last decade. Additionally, 26 Parliamentary Group advisors (from all the Parliamentary Groups) and 5 lobbyists from PR/Communication Agencies were interviewed. All the interviews were fully transcribed and processed in MAXQDA. These were the main methods for collecting the data discussed in this article, although statistical, documentary and media analysis were also used in the research.

This multiple approach allowed us to comprehensively understand the daily functioning of Parliament, with a particular focus on the Portuguese parliamentary journalists at work. This research analyzes their practices, discourses, routines, strategies, narratives, relationships, processes, and interactions, including both formal and informal, face-to-face, and virtual interactions.

“Participating in politics in another way”: closeness and conflict in the Assembly’s corridors

Politics is a markedly plural, polysemic and relational concept, shaped by intricate social and communication dynamics. Embracing an ethnographic approach, the study of parliamentary politics prioritizes the role of interpersonal relationships over analyzing individual behaviors and superficial motivations. Thus, within the realm of politics, where actions are influenced by established networks and enduring relationships, interactions between politicians and journalists within the Portuguese Parliament prove pivotal in comprehending this institutional field. This was also the learning shared with us by Alexandre, a journalist for more than 30 years at the institution.

Alexandre remembers his early days in the Assembly as if it were today. He was just over twenty years old and when a vacancy arose to be a parliamentary journalist he

did not hesitate: “I had already been bitten by the *politics bug*. Coming here was very enticing, it was being able to participate in politics, but in another way.” His function was to provide cross-cutting coverage of the parliamentary affairs. Nonetheless, he reveals that the early days “were extremely difficult” because he was reporting what was happening, unlike colleagues who mainly reported what was going to happen. “I didn't realize where the news came from and how you could do that kind of work that was very risky...”, he confessed, and then explained that what differentiates the value of news is the ability to anticipate, not the reporting of facts. Thus, over the years, he realized that being a parliamentary journalist implied building a network of relations to get information. However, while these relations sustain the journalistic practice, they are equally a source of tension. As stated by Mariana, parliamentary journalist for two decades: “The relationship between deputies and journalists oscillates. We have our problems, but no one sulks, because we have known each other for many years, and we need each other”.

Relations between politicians and journalists are characterized by interdependence (Bourdieu, 1998). Parliamentarians rely on journalists to convey their positions and bolster their authority, while journalists depend on parliamentarians as sources of information. This dynamic is evident in the corridors of the Parliament, where deputies and journalists interact freely. Many journalists emphasize the importance of this proximity as it facilitates the 'cultivation of sources,' involving the development of relationships built on trust, information exchange, and loyalty to specific politicians. However, some journalists express concerns that personal connections with politicians could compromise their journalistic independence.

While these relationships are characterized by interdependence and closeness, they are not without tensions and conflicts. MPs continually strive for media access, both within and among Parliamentary Groups, which can sometimes strain their relationships with journalists. Concurrently, journalists engage in competition with each other, vying for top sources, exclusive information, breaking news, and the ability to predict forthcoming events.

The direct contact of journalists with the sources, having been an achievement of journalists (Correia, 2009, p. 113), guarantees a mutually beneficial context of sociability, as it gives rise to tensions that are difficult to regulate. An illustrative incident involved a journalist recording a private conversation in which a deputy was offering congratulations over the phone. Subsequently, this recorded clip was featured in a TV

report discussing the formation of the government, falsely implying that the 'congratulations' were directed towards a politician when, in fact, they were intended for a friend. This incident generated considerable discomfort and underscored the importance of self-regulation in their interactions.

This is a more obvious and public type of conflict, but there are also more subtle ones, such as those concerning the very elaboration of the news. Any MP wishes that the published news value his party's proposals, although they do not always succeed. As mentioned by Joana, a parliamentary journalist for three decades, "everyone disputes the leading role of good measures and is not accountable for the bad decisions." News does not always please the deputies, a fact that generates tension in relations between them and the journalists. In most cases that tension is overcome because the next day people continue needing each other. However, there are conflicts that can be long-lasting, such as that of Alexandre, who in the legislature we followed "was grounded" for a news piece he published. In the first phase, the politician in question stopped transmitting information to his media outlet, and in the second phase he began to pass it on to a colleague in his newsroom, with the aim of "sending the message". Time eventually settled the disagreement, not least because the deputy knew that he could not ignore the journalist for a long period. They still needed each other.

Beyond textual content, images accompanying news reports can also lead to disagreements. We witnessed such an incident in the "Hall of Lost Steps," the press conference area, while following the work of Ruben, a press officer. Ruben questioned a journalist regarding footage from a political party event. The journalist had conducted a live broadcast at the venue before the event, capturing empty seats. A few hours later, when the final piece aired, he ended up using those images of the half-empty room, instead of new images with the audience already present. For Ruben that "was a swindle" because the images created an "imagery illusion", suggesting a false perception that the event had low attendance. The journalist claimed time constraints prevented reediting. Ruben warned of contacting the publication's director if it happened again, but the journalist dared him to make the call on the spot. Ruben smiled condescendingly and left. As he said to me a few minutes later: "Journalists cannot do everything they want, without consequences. They have a lot of power; they must be called to account!".

Apart from news content and framing, the management of statement confidentiality levels introduces tension into daily interactions. Statements can be *on the record*, with the deputy's identity revealed; *off the record*, where the journalist must keep

the interviewee's identity confidential; or *in background/not for attribution*, where the source remains unnamed, but indirect information may be used. Managing confidential statements between politicians and journalists tests their daily professional and often personal trust. Protecting sources and ensuring information integrity are vital for maintaining relations. However, they also pose sensitive points leading to daily tensions. Catarina, a parliamentary journalist for 15 years, considers publishing unidentified sources the riskiest part of journalism. Anonymity can lead sources to "discard responsibility," although they can be exposed, which rarely occurs because "in politics, the concepts of truth and lies are very relative." So, when accepting this risk, journalists must also accept responsibility.

One of the examples observed was that of a group of deputies who decided to transmit information with a journalist regarding State Budget negotiations. While uncertain if the measure would be accepted by the Government, they believed "it was essential to create public expectations" that could influence the decision-making process. Employing the journalist to deliver this information in a "news" format enhanced its credibility, benefiting from the journalist's perceived authority as an intermediary. In the end, the news was published, the measure was not approved, and the journalist's reputation came under scrutiny. In short, in the daily life of Parliament, trust and dissent relations oscillate, always marked by a rhythm of urgency, where the intensity of conflicts contrasts with the interdependence of daily relations. After all, as Alexandre summarizes: "Whoever wants to be a journalist has to learn to live with conflict and contradictions or choose another type of profession".

From Mediatic Urgency to "Ping-Pong" Journalism: The Construction of Politics in Times of Social Acceleration

On one of the days when we were following his work, Alexandre introduced us to Joana, a parliamentary journalist for three decades. We were at the Assembly's bar, and we asked her what had changed the most in her work since the early 1990s. She replied with some humour: "It was lunch, nowadays I can't even have lunch [laughs]. 20 years ago, we had lunch outside of here. I never had lunch again. It is not possible because [the Plenary Session] ends at 1 p.m., by hypothesis, and at 1:30 p.m. a statement is already scheduled to react; by 2 p.m. another statement; in the meantime, a parliamentary committee starts, then the committee ends and the parties come out here to speak into the

microphone live for the televisions, to say everything they had already said inside, it's a repetition, it's a massacre!" [laughs].

Joana lived first-hand the acceleration of communicational time. Over the years, the number of events to be reported has increased in inverse proportion to the time that journalists had available to report them. Although the evolution of the media, especially in the digital age, has the potential to release time resources, the acceleration of the communication produced by these media also leads to the opposite: a lack of time for the practice of journalism (Entschew, 2021). Media rhythm is both a cause and a consequence of accelerating social time (Rosa, 2013; Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009). This is seen in how journalism's pace affects communication within political parties, while parties' continuous communication strategies shape media coverage demand.

One of the examples that could be observed happened when we were following the work of Diana, a parliamentary radio journalist, while she was covering a Plenary debate. Sitting in the journalist's tribune, we noticed that the journalist, while reporting the debate, wrote a small synthesis that kept the liveblog updated on the website. It was a demanding work, but one that she considered indispensable because if she spoke only to those who listen to the radio, she could lose audience to a competing publication that, sitting next to her, was doing the written account of the events.

The requirement to report events in real time means that most journalists use a technique consisting of observing a certain event, publishing that information with a title in the least possible time, to which is added: "(in update)". The news is released online with the title "Breaking news", although the content of the news only contains one or two framing paragraphs, explaining who said what, where and in which context. The intention is to attract the reader and only then develop the news, which is then updated.

In the daily life of the Parliament, journalists seem to feel hostages of a professional practice based on immediacy, of the image in real time, of the "action/reaction" timing, of the short time and the simple, fast and efficient message. As Diana explained, in parliamentary journalism the entire flow of information to be transmitted "has to be fast and fresh", which in her perspective contradicts the possibility of a reflective analysis, of research and confrontation of sources.

This reality is further exponentiated by the use of social media by MPs to communicate directly and without mediation. These platforms allow the production of continuous communication but also the segmentation of the audiences (Da Empoli, 2019). In parliamentary practice, the multiplication and specialization of communication forms

(generalist television, 24-hour news channels, parliamentary channel, written and online newspapers, radio, social media) ensure effectiveness to the shapeshifting work of politicians (Crewe, 2021, p. 100; Mineiro, 2022, p. 227), through which many of them base their communication on personalized, targeted messages that seek to gain immediate identification.

“Communicate a lot, always communicate”, stands as an unspoken norm in all Parliamentary Groups, echoing the prime rule of spin doctors: “What you do not communicate, did not happen”. Journalists know this and always have their cameras ready and microphones on, even if the purpose of some broadcasts is not always clear. Live television broadcasts serve as an example; journalists acknowledge their lack of substantial news but feel compelled to follow suit. These journalistic practices, as noted by Herreros (2004), not only form a technique but also an ideology. By implying that it is possible to grasp events "in real time", they create the illusion that such observation suffices for understanding the full extent of the facts. Focusing on the "visible", the "everyday", the "authentic", the "immediate", and the "real time", while contributing to the spectacularization of political field, does not always offer politically significant informational value.

This shared sentiment about the live broadcasts also extends to press conferences. In one of the moments that we accompanied Mafalda's day, with which this article began, a press officer interrupted us, informing that the parliamentary leader would make a statement. After a long day of work, all the journalists protested: “What are they going to say that they haven't said already?”. Reluctantly, they readied their equipment, but Mafalda predicted there would be no surprises. Her suspicions were confirmed. The deputy's statement echoed what had been discussed in the Plenary Meeting, with just two additional criticisms of an opposing party. Journalists were irritated despite having reported on the statement, which gave rise to a response from the opposing party the next morning. “It's a vicious circle”, says Mafalda, ensuring that no one can escape the demands of "intensive news production".

An everyday expression that sums up this communication environment well is *ping-pong journalism*, which we heard used by two journalists of the same media outlet whose work we followed. The "ping-pong strategy" involves a swift cycle: one journalist requests a statement from a MP and promptly shares it via WhatsApp with a colleague; the second journalist then seeks a direct response from an MP from a different party regarding the initial statement.; if the MP provides a comment, this information is relayed

back to the first journalist, potentially prompting further reactions or comments from additional sources. Once they have gathered enough statements, they publish the news. This approach reflects the need for a journalistic model centered on declaration, reaction, and counter-reaction due to the rapid pace of events. Notably, the news generated by this type of journalism relies less on in-depth scrutiny of the information and more on the cascade of reactions and counter-reactions it elicits. As one of these interveners reveals to us: “I am aware that we are often typing quickly and sometimes you can't confirm. But that is the thing: if we do not put it, it will come out somewhere else.”

In a context of intense competition for breaking news all stakeholders often succumb to this pressure, even though they recognize that it exposes journalism to the influence of political power. This situation is exacerbated by the inherent precariousness, individualization, competition, and commercialization of the journalistic field (Andringa, 2014; Bourdieu, 1998; Morini et al., 2014; Olausson, 2018). In this context, awareness of job insecurity, fast-paced work, and hierarchies further plays into the hands of spin doctors. As Nuno, a lobbyist for a communications agency, pointed out: “There are many manipulation tools. One of them is the ignorance of the newsrooms, of ultra-precarious journalists, who lack the time to question”. Thus, in his view, to influence a narrative in a newspaper “it is not always necessary to influence who is in charge, sometimes it is enough to know who, so overwhelmed, will not have time to study the information.” In this context of continuous communication, a group of professionals serves as mediators between politicians and journalists, even though their role is rarely questioned.

“Semantics conquers much of the political battle”: The Role of Spin Doctors in Parliament

Words matter, even more so in politics. They reflect reality as much as they construct it, being a symbolic instrument of representation of the world stemming from the recognition of the authority of those who pronounce them (Bourdieu, 1999). Within the daily workings of parliament, there exists a distinct group of people who have specialized in defining and modelling political communication. We will call these persons 'spin doctors'. As has been argued, spin doctoring involves the daily process of shaping political influence over media narratives and communication channels to advance a specific political agenda. It includes crafting tailored discourses, shaping politicians' public personas to align with communication needs, and maintaining mutually beneficial

relationships with journalists. The term 'spin doctor' only emerged in the 1980s, but these communication strategies and techniques have significantly evolved alongside the transformation of mass media into digital and networked communication (Alfter, 2019; Cardoso, 2006, 2008; Castells, 2000, 2012).

In the Portuguese Parliament, no party today refrains from establishing communication teams capable of utilizing various communication strategies and techniques to assert their messages. MPs have become more visible in the public sphere and have grown increasingly concerned about their communication strategy, media impact, and public perception, relying on communication experts for guidance. These advisors play pivotal roles in tasks like speechwriting, press conference planning, and liaising with journalists. They often manage MPs' social media accounts and craft op-eds for publication in newspapers.

For Pedro, parliamentary leader, it is “inevitable that deputies place themselves in the hands of the communication advisors” since “all parliamentarians live in a permanent communication regime, [in which] those who communicate better win.” Because they are exposed to permanent public scrutiny, politicians recognize the importance of tailoring their messages for different audiences, adjusting their body language to the context, and carefully managing social media interactions. “xf?”, asks Pedro rhetorically. “With so many laws, budgets, draft resolutions, auscultation sessions, hearings, the work in our parties, someone has to guide and think about all these things in advance.” Pedro's opinion is seconded by Joel, a spin doctor, who possesses deep insights into the media landscape, newsroom dynamics, and the sensitivities of individual journalists and social media discourse. As he said: “Whenever a politician wants to communicate, we know what to say, how, where, depending on his goal”.

Spin doctors not only focus on discourse but also on the dramatic and scenic aspects of communication. They advise MPs on presentation, attire, body language, the best place to make a statement, what attitude to demonstrate, how to emphasize a certain argument, where to look during an interview or who they should have next to them. In Joel's words: “The image conveyed by the politician counts as much or more as what he is going to say.” And as Bernardo, spin doctor of one of the largest Portuguese parties, admits: “When you communicate, you don't just sell the idea – you have to sell the person as well if you want to sell the idea.”

At the same time, the construction of the parliamentarians' image never seems to dismiss what one of the spin doctors called the “narrative control”, since parliamentary

politics is a process both material and symbolic. From a material point of view, political conflict is won by those who accumulate the largest number of votes. But politics also have a symbolic component, since, to use Ruben's words: "From a political point of view, those who tell the best story win."

"Controlling the narrative" is a process of building a political discourse that is understandable to those outside and that imposes itself as a tacit narrative around which the actors position themselves. As Bernardo says: "A spin doctor tries to create a certain reality. Faced with a certain problem, the spin doctor tries to construct a reality directed at people who are outside the political field. It proposes an interpretation of the reality according to the political solution he wants to approve." How does this process materialize?

One of the strategies used concerns the modelling of the discursive techniques used to construct narratives to legitimize political proposals. For example, when, in a budget debate, a party made tax cuts a priority, spin doctors worked on building the narrative that the country is one of the countries with the highest tax burden in Europe. But, in the opposite direction, when at a different time it was considered that there would be no alternative to the specific tax increase, the narrative was that this increase would not affect the lowest income families, but only those with higher income levels, contributing to social justice.

The narratives dispute implies "telling the best story", but also choosing the right words to define reality. Depending on each party's perspective, a policy which the European Commission considers that the country should implement may be characterized as a "recommendation" or as an "imposition"; the reduction of the social expenditure budget may be designated as a "cut" or as an "adjustment"; the privatization of public companies may be classified as "liberalization" or as "structural reform"; a reduction of wages may be explained as a "cut" or as a "promotion of competitiveness"; the reduction in economic indicators may be exposed as a synonym for "recession" or as "negative growth"; State control over a company may be proposed as a "nationalization" or as "public and democratic control". MPs and spin doctors work daily in the construction of the languages that sustain their narratives; a semantics allowing them to frame and legitimize political choices. The story that is told about a reality contributes to building that same reality. As Ruben summarizes: "Semantics conquers much of the political battle".

Despite the growing influence of social media, one enduring technique to

evaluate the party's narrative's efficacy is the practice of "clipping," involving the thorough analysis of references to the party, and MPs in various media outlets. "Treating the information is the central part", Ruben tells us, clarifying that it is necessary to "see the number of things that are being said, what is passing through, see the news and understand where you can walk between the raindrops, drill and create media spaces." It is necessary to identify which themes should be directed to each format – to the online, the radio, the written press and to television. "How do you get journalists to look at us and not at others?", asks Ruben. To capture journalists' attention, Ruben suggests making proposals more appealing, tailoring messages to suit different media formats, and crafting compelling, affirmative narratives that set them apart from rivals. The message's success is measured by its ability to be comprehended, retained, and disseminated by both journalists and the public. The ultimate goal is to stand out in the crowded media arena and ensure the message's widespread dissemination.

Thus, parallel to the construction of political-media narratives, spin doctors need to have a direct relationship with the journalists who can expand them. One of the most effective ways to do this is through "information leakage" (Boot, 2019; Hess, 1984; Patz, 2018; Sampedro et al., 2018), in which restricted information is shared with some journalists, allowing them to have exclusive news. The purpose of this practice may to assert a particular politician, offer a favour to a journalist (expected to be returned in the future), promote a specific subject, denounce an opponent, or simply test public reactions to certain proposals.

Finally, spin doctors also specialize in organizing increasingly professionalized congresses, conventions, and conferences. These moments recall the existence of parties, while bringing them out of the institutions (Faucher-King, 2005). These are events for the "photo opportunities", organized almost like parties (Stanyer, 2001). The party leaders interviewed mentioned, for example, that it is necessary to open conferences and congresses to the press and the public to generate a sense of greater transparency. However, they also admit that this public dimension of events feeds outward forms of discourse and underplays the internal debate among its members. Hence, the communication of these meetings is tailored more for external audiences than internal ones, as it is part of the process of *spectacularizing of politics*. This process involves creating a distinction between the professionals who produce the political phenomenon and those to whom the representation is directed, placing the latter in the role of spectators and/or extras in the representation.

Conclusion: What “politics” is political journalism talking about?

Every day, dozens of journalists strategically navigate the corridors of Parliament, each with a mission to depicting and scrutinizing political democracy and its protagonists. However, as Bourdieu points out (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 4), while scrutinizing them, journalists provide “vital symbolic support” to the political field. This support promotes an exclusive focus on the political microcosm, perpetuating a logic of autonomy and demarcation from the external world. Journalists offer the representative body a platform to showcase their symbolic status, which is substantiated by the dynamics of the political field, including its rules, routines, narratives, conflicts and interactions. Nonetheless, in return, the representative body also provides a crucial symbolic support to political journalism, since MPs present an image of themselves, their organizations, their languages, their practices, and relationships, which legitimizes the existence of specialized journalism focused on their institutional world. This symbiotic relationship legitimizes the autonomy of both the political field and political journalism.

This reciprocal influence emerges from the daily interactions between MPs, journalists, and spin doctors, characterized by both closeness and conflict. The urgency experienced in this environment is a consequence of the acceleration of social, political, and media time. As a result, MPs and journalists are both influenced by and contributors to this sense of mediatic urgency, whether consciously or tacitly, directly or indirectly, affecting each other's routines and rhythms. Aides and spin doctors, who mediate these interactions, assume that they are “in a kind of permanent campaign”, vying for control over semantics, engaging in narrative disputes, and competing for media space. Many politicians, especially those who occupy the most relevant positions of authority, rely on the advisors who write their speeches, prepare the scenario, manage their social media, and work their image before the outside. These interactions not only affect the construction of media time but also integrate a growing media dimension into political practice, representation, and performance.

In this context, our observations of daily parliamentary life led to the conclusion that while journalism's primary aim is to depict and scrutinize political reality, it often transforms into an instrument for constructing that very reality. Journalists hold an ambiguous position in the parliamentary field, wielding influence over events yet lacking full institutional legitimacy. Nonetheless, even if they do not consider themselves part of the parliamentary dispute, journalists play a pivotal role in perpetuating the political order

by contributing to the understanding of "politics" as a specialized practice *exclusively* confined within the realm of institutions. In contrast to the notion of politics as a potential characteristic of human relations transcending institutional boundaries (Mineiro, 2022), journalism tacitly reproduce the idea that politics represents an autonomous sphere of reality, requiring its portrayal as such and functioning as a specialized practice controlled by professionals who navigate conflicts within the institutional realm.

The type of journalism in Parliament, influenced by deputies and promoted by spin doctors, tends to focus on the conflict between actors rather than providing an objective reflection on politics. What it is about is to "lay the cards on the table", prioritizing tactics over substance, combating over debate, confronting over dialectics, and personalities over arguing, not because they consciously desire it, but because they too are an implicated part of that reality they are describing. Journalists seek to interpret the political positions that are taken stemming from the interests associated with the positions in the parliamentary field, ultimately contributing to a cynical vision of the world of politics, an arena supposedly handed over to the ambition of its individual protagonists, as opposed to another vision that would understand it as a reflection of cultural and social power relations.

In conclusion, political and parliamentary journalism, in shaping and perpetuating a particular perspective on the representation of politics, plays a role in structuring political reality as a means of social distinction. This occurs whenever it focuses on generating discourse, imagery, and narratives about the distinctiveness and autonomy of its institutional field, rather than its intersections with the external world. Political journalism reinforces the ideological underpinnings that conceive and structure politics primarily through the perspective and monopoly of its professionals (Bourdieu, 1981, 2010). However, and contrary to what Bourdieu (1998, p. 6) argues, this approach to politics did not contribute to what he calls a "general effect of depoliticization". If we understand politics as a potential dimension of human relations, established both inside and outside its formal institutions, we could hardly see any form of depoliticization in the practice of journalism. Conversely, the form of journalism described here primarily contributes to what we understand to be the *institutionalization of politics*. It engages in the symbolic and daily construction of a specific and ideological perception of politics as a specialized practice and a form of social distinction, predominantly confined within institutional boundaries and structurally linked to processes of differentiation and social inequality and power. This perspective represents just one way of understanding it.

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