

# PUBLIC JOURNALISM AND EDUCATION FOR THE MEDIA:

suggestions based on a  
research project into the  
Portuguese regional press

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**ABSTRACT** The broad frame of the article is the relationship between the regional press, citizens and democratic politics. In that discussion we'll try reflecting on the limits and possibilities of public journalism, using the concepts of public sphere, civil society and life-world which seems to be useful theoretical tools to surpass the lack of theoretical consistence of civic journalism. In the second part of the article, we present some results from the "Citizens' Agenda" developed by a research network led by University of Beira Interior focusing on none regional newspapers spread throughout the Portuguese territory. This research focuses on identifying practices and news routines and frameworks. Additionally, we stand that the search of new methods to increasing the presence of ordinary citizens in journalism may be improved with the creation of media observatory directed to regional press.

**Keywords:** Regional press. Citizenship. Public sphere. Media literacy.

## INTRODUCTION

Portugal is characterized by a marked macrocephaly in which most of the population is concentrated around the major cities along the coast at the expense of peripheral towns from the hinterland. The identity of small and medium-sized towns in Portugal implies the need for symbolic production mechanisms that include strengthening the sense of belonging to those urban communities.

This article aims to analyze the relationship between the

regional press, citizens and democratic politics, trying to understand the actual nature of newspapers in local public spheres and to identify their potential for a more participated democracy.

In order to do that we first sketch a twofold theoretical approach: first on the theory of deliberative democracy; second, on the public journalism movement and goals. We stand that the long-term viability of a regional press more committed with civic participation implies the need of new practices and perspectives within information-gathering and reporting routines reflecting the change of the epistemic attitude of journalists towards social reality. Along this discussion, one reflects on the limits and possibilities of public journalism, using the concepts of public sphere, civil society and life-world which seems to be useful theoretical tools to surpass the lack of theoretical consistence of civic journalism.

In the second part of the article, we present some results from the “Citizens’ Agenda” ongoing empirical research and discuss them in an attempt to understand which trends and characteristics the local press has today in terms of its articulation to politics, to citizens and to models of democracy. The project was developed by a research network led by University of Beira Interior with the cooperation of several Universities, Portuguese Press Association and two major private media groups focusing on eight regional newspapers spread throughout the Portuguese territory. This research focuses on identifying practices and news routines and frameworks and seeks to identify the presence or absence of potential characteristics and sensitivities that can be channeled towards a deepening of its civic dimension.

Additionally, we stand that the search of new methods to increasing the presence of ordinary citizens in journalism may be improved with the creation of media observatory directed to regional press can play a key role in analyzing the performance of the media, promoting dialogue among readers, researchers and practitioners and generating active reception attitudes and helping to change some newsmaking routines.

### **1 The reality of public journalism**

The relationship between the citizen, the state and the public sphere is a basic theoretical consideration, and this can be traced back to the earlier days of the press. Authors such as Dahlberg (2001) and Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng and White (2010) established a correspondence between the media’s democratic potential and distinct models of democracy.

The civic or public journalism appeared around 1990, from the critical awareness shared by academics and journalists on the lack of audience interest in political information mediated by journalism, and on low rates of citizen involvement in democratic processes. According to Schudson, it was the best organized movement in the history of the American press (1998, p. 118). Its main goal was to connect the media more closely with its readers, and readers with public life (HAAS, 2007). The conceptualization of “public journalism” in academic literature has not been consistent because public journalism has previously been mostly defined by its practice and not by theoretical formulations (e.g. FRIEDLAND, 2002). The movement’s success was due, mostly, to the cooperation of organizations that sponsored civic experiences, establishing operating guidelines and preparing seminars, among many other activities that contributed to its consolidation. However, the suggestions of the public journalism would not appear associated with a theory of journalism logically developed, and historically endowed with internal consistency (HAAS, 2007, p. 68).

The public journalism is seen by its supporters as central driving force for democratic practices. Among its main features are: a) the need of systematically listen the stories and ideas of citizens, b) the importance of examining alternative ways of approaching stories from points of view that are considered important by the community, c) to choose those approaches in the presentation of the issues that offer greatest opportunity to stimulate citizens deliberation; d) to report on relevant problems in a way that increases public knowledge about possible solutions and the values engaged in alternative options e) to provide systematic attention to the quality of the communicative relationship with the public.

Although, it is difficult to make a systematic characterization of what it means “to make public journalism”, the experimentalism of the movement may be especially interesting in developing a comprehensive examination of journalism processes (STRELOW, 2010; BORGES and CORREIA, 2010).

## **2 A theoretical proposal for public journalism**

When we read about civic journalism one of the principal remarks to the movement concerns to the fact that, supporters gave only too vague and unclear theoretical notions of public journalism, for a movement whose primary goal was to promote civic participation in democratic processes (HAAS and STEINER, 2006, p. 239).

### According Glasser (2011):

[...] public journalism developed on the ground, in newsrooms large and small, as a loose confederation of mostly unexamined and at times contradictory claims and conventions; it was intentionally ad hoc and experimental, celebrated — and condemned — as an open invitation to reinvent the practice of journalism.

The strongest controversy of civic journalism history was centred on norms of autonomy and objectivity. As a reform movement that arose from the journalistic field, civic journalism is tied to the already existing norms. However, one finds that it would be beneficial to address the public nature of public journalism with a more consistent theoretical analysis. So, in our view, to rethink the relationships between communication and citizenship (central to the idea of civic journalism) demands a theoretical framework, based in three major concepts with a complex history; civil society, public sphere and life-world.

Civil Society can be defined as the so-called “third sector” in terms of “citizen engagement”, including every actor which participates in the political decision-making process voluntarily. The roots of the concept can be found in European political thought, for example, in the Tocqueville’s emphasis on the importance of voluntary associations in promoting democratic citizenship and in the deliberative democratic theory. The central core of Civil Society will, consequently, comprise a “network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres” (HABERMAS, 1996, p. 367).

The second concept, public sphere is an important frame of reference for understanding the role of journalism in society.

The present Habermasian conception of public sphere implies a network of communicative processes, inside and outside of the parliamentary complex and its deliberative bodies, that sustain the existence of dialogic arenas where occur the formation of democratic opinion (HABERMAS, 1996, p. 373–374).

It appears as a sphere of identification and detection of problems, whose influence should continue to reflect in the subsequent treatment of the issues that takes place within the system political (HABERMAS, 1996, p. 359). On one hand we have informal and autonomous activity of formation of public opinion carried by citizen’s movements, social movements, etc. On the other hand, we have the institutional and legislative process that culminates in decisions that concern to the development of concrete policies and legislative outputs.

Thus the identification of issues in the public sphere (civil rights, feminism) usually performs a similar route: a) the issues are raised by intellectuals and social activists in the periphery of the political system b) go on to the agenda of journals, associations, clubs, citizen forums, universities, professional organizations, etc. c) crystallize at the heart of social movements and subcultures, and knows a dramatization that captures media attention, d) reaches a wider audience, entering in the public agenda influencing policy-making and legislative (HABERMAS, 1994, p. 460-461 *apud* GOMES, 2008, p. 104).

Finally, generally forgotten in the approaches to journalism developed according Habermasian insights, life-world appears a key concept to understanding regional and communitarian press, because of the fundamental role developed in the formation and transformation of individual and collective identities. Habermas claims the life-world is “represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns” (1987, p. 124). The life-world includes the realm of cultural experiences and communicative interactions that are essentially knowable and inherently familiar. Couldry (2007), for instance, reiterate that ordinary persons are called into organizing themselves as publics when problems are recognised at the level of everyday life. Where, when and why interests arise and what is the role of journalism in surpassing the pre-political negotiations in social networks is very much an open question that needs to be addressed by empirical audience research.

Those concepts are fundamental to understand the ways and means by which local communities organize themselves. Transparent and accountable decision-making and good local governance needs a strong involvement of the civil society and the existence of public spheres; everyday life-world works as a fundamental instance through which the sense of membership and the construction of a pre-political notion of identity start. In order to understand the connection between media and life-world it is important to study media uses at the community level and to understand how the relevance of news is negotiated in social networks.

Despite the critical perspective that must accompany the reception of public journalism, we believe that is possible, especially in small and medium-sized cities, served by the regional press, to use of some of the suggestions tested by this particular forms of journalism. This does not mean to support an automatic transposition of Civic Journalism - itself a diverse and multifaceted phenomenon with varying degrees of success in their delivery - but the development and application of some of its features according to some potential existent in the regional press.

### **3 Citizen's agenda: the development of a Portuguese project on civic journalism**

The project "Citizens' Agenda: journalism and civic participation in the Portuguese media" emerged with the key objective of identifying , encouraging and testing journalistic practices that contribute to reinforce the commitment of citizens to the community and democratic deliberation in regional public sphere.

This is a project that mobilizes resources from the University of Beira Interior (UBI) and the Communication and Online Content Lab (LABCOM), supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), developed in partnership with the Portuguese Association Press (API), and two press groups that owns some important titles in regional press: Lena Communication Group and Controlinveste. It has also the support of several Universities such as Stanford and Santiago de Compostela.

In the case study which serves to support the project were included nine papers: *Grande Porto*, *Jornal da Bairrada*, *Jornal do Centro*, *Diário As Beiras*, *Ribatejo*, *Vidas Ribatejanas*, *Região de Leiria*, *Jornal do Fundão* and *O Algarve*. The selection of these journals was made accordingly the following criteria:

a) To ensure some geographic diversity, with newspapers from North, Center, South, Coast and Hinterland of Portugal;

b) To ensure the presence in the case study of influent newspapers at the level of their circulation and audience. Thus, among the selected journals are publications that occupy the top three positions in the respective districts, and even some audience leaders;

c) To provide flexible accessibility and contact with key actors in the study, including journalists and editors, having in mind the existence of a multidisciplinary and integrated approach that included the use of various methodologies, some of which require a demanding coordination with media across the country.

This project began with the establishment of contact with the media, followed by the selection of a representative sample of editions of newspapers, which were submitted to content analysis in order to characterize each one of the selected publications of regional press in an attempt to identify what may be call "the media agenda." The results of this analysis were complemented with interviews and in depth surveys, next to the newsroom of each medium, in order to understand some of the strategies used for the selection and news gathering.

In a second stage was carried out a longitudinal opinion study, in order to identify issues understood by the citizens and newspaper

readers as common interest issues. The goal was to create an agenda dictated by the problems, concerns and issues evaluated as relevant by citizens, creating which may be called the “citizen’s agenda”. Between the first and second moment of this study of opinion was developed an experimental phase in which newspapers included in their work issues and observations made by readers during the first survey. In the second phase of the longitudinal study one tried to check the public reaction to the impact of changes introduced by the newspapers. It was agreed that newspapers would try to develop a more detailed coverage to the issues selected by the public, reflecting in the agenda the issues identified by citizens as the most important in the community.

### **Content analysis**

In what concerns with representation of newspaper in the sample, it was decided to analyze six editions of weekly newspapers. We therefore analyzed a total of 54 issues (resulting in a total of 3.602 pieces). Thus, we managed to obtain a representative sample, with a sampling error of 1.63% and a degree of confidence associated with 95.

We explore briefly some more or less significant results:

In the analysis we find a clear predominance of three main areas, these being “Economy” with 13.3%, “Politics” with 15.9% and finally in a prominent set of news related to initiatives and events of cultural purposes with 19.5%.

The cultural field is assumed with a pronounced predominance. However that importance is translated into a strong preponderance of “agenda journalism” characterized precisely by descriptive information about the services and programs offered by local institutions. Crossing issues with formats used to address them, the “Culture” is represented mainly by informative formats (92.4%), including brief news (54.6 %), which emphasizes the perception that there is very dependent from a previous agenda that requires the minimum information (focus on questions as what?, who? and when?). In general, analyzing the journalistic formats for the treatment of the privileged subjects already listed, one saw the predominance of short informative news (1537, 48, 7%), closely followed by more developed news (1460; 46.3%), but with a small representation of analytical and interpretative formats. Given the data we can conclude that the analyzed pieces emphasize a narrative and descriptive style, characteristic of information, namely of short news instead of an analytical-interpretative and opinative style.

In what concerns to the used sources, we find that the issues of

“Culture”, “Economy” and “Associations” favored the unofficial sources. However this predominance of unofficial sources is relative. We found a partial explanation for those data if we consider that the subject that has more pieces represented in the analysis is “Culture”, which sources most relevant are not official (in the sense that are persons belonging to institutions and agencies of the cultural public sphere that have no connection with the State).

Additionally, data regarding the use of external and internal sources show that news content of newspapers analyzed were originated in sources of planned information rather than in journalists’ own initiative. This strategy can mean a less active journalistic practice from the point of view of research which contributes largely to a news production scheduled by external sources.

Looking closely to the “Politic”, it appears that the difference between the use of official sources (46.3%) and unofficial (53.7%) is lower than in other subjects. You can find explanations for these data in the proximity that exists between regional journalists and local elites that is translated into an agenda of regular contacts and informations. One could say that the source of much of the news about “Politic” in the regional context, come from “routine channels”.

Readers’ letters, is not privileged, and the letters section of the reader in most cases consists of only one page (and in many cases only a part of the page), allowing only the publication of a letter per page, and in some cases, two, and never more than three. One can thus conclude that the space for the publication of readers’ letters is reduced which raises doubts as to the number of letters received and the criteria used to select them. The directors were questioned about the number of letters received and the criteria that determine whether or not to publish those. The responses suggest that, despite the differences between newspapers, the volume of letters received is greater than the number that are published being the criteria of acceptance the reference to issues of public interest and the criteria to refuse, the use of defamatory and offensive languages and accusations. The shortage of reader’s letters will thus result from the absence of matters of public interest (or disinterest or apathy from the publics) and, secondly, from the fact that many letters received could be considered offensive. The study also proceeded to the analysis of the first pages of regional newspapers, on the assumption that the covers of newspapers define the main concerns of every publication and the editorial issues with stronger impact.

In this sense, “Politics” appears as the issue that stands out most

in the first 54 pages of reports analyzed, present in 80 (21%) of 382 news with calling to the first page. “Politics” is followed by “Economy” (65, 17%) “Police and Justice” (45, 12%) and “Urban Planning and Transports” (42; 11%). Focusing on further analysis, it is clear that within the theme of “Politics”, the issues relating to local government are those that stand out on the cover of newspapers, showing the importance of elites in regional publications. This trend cuts across all newspapers.

### Questionnaire to Journalists

At this stage of the study, the principal subject is the journalist as professional, particularly in order to understand its relationship with citizens in regional press, and to confront their professional self-portrait with the discursive and other strategic practices identified through content analysis.

An online survey was administered through an online tool developed in LABCOM to a target population of 45 journalists, unevenly distributed by the eight participating journals, resulting in a total of 34 questionnaires, which equals a response rate of about 75.6%. The survey covered all the journalists from the selected newspapers. The inquiry began by characterizing, briefly, the journalists interviewed, and then focused in analyzing the practice of news gathering as well as the criteria that contribute to this selection. It ended up trying to understand what is the role is perceived by the journalists in order to position himself as a promoter of the debate and citizen participation.

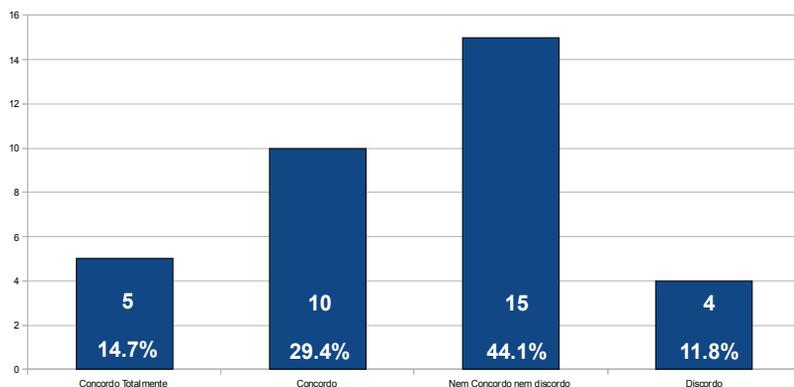
It was perceived that the use of the voice of ordinary citizens as sources quoted in news is considered a mechanism to give some visibility to those who have few opportunities to express themselves.

Table 1. To use citizens as sources

Importance levels	Give voice to those who have fewer chances of expressing themselves in public.		Give less warrants of credibility.		Add points of view that may be important.		Does not allow representativeness because ordinary citizens speak only in their own name.	
	nº	%	nº	%	nº	%	nº	%
1	10	29.4%	4	11.8%	18	52.9%	4	11.8%
2	16	47.1%	3	8.8%	10	29.4%	7	20.6%
3	5	14.7%	7	20.6%	2	5.9%	16	47.1%
4	3	8.8%	20	58.8%	4	11.8%	7	20.6%

When they were inquired on the pertinence of creating a citizens' agenda based on those issues evaluated as with highly priority by citizens, journalists showed some indifference to that possibility since that 44.1% of respondents do not agree, nor disagree with creation of this agenda. However, important enough, 14.7% of respondents strongly agree with this agenda driven by the problems of citizens, and 29.4% agree that indeed journalists must focus on dealing with a news agenda with issues that are reflected in people's lives.

Table 2. Do you agree with a citizens' agenda based on issues evaluated as high priority by the citizens?

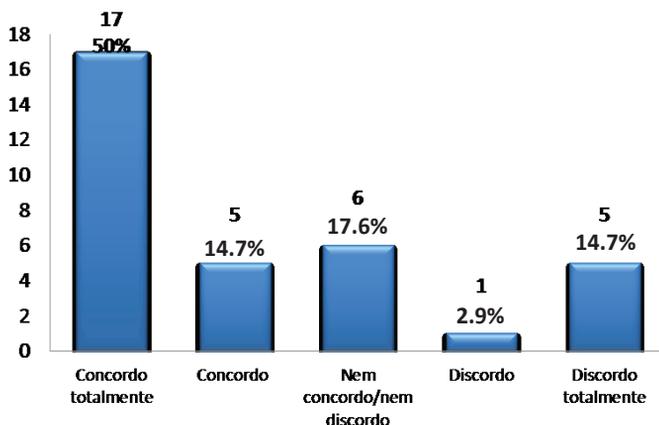


The idea of trying to mobilize citizens in public forums to discuss issues of priority for them, it is understood by most reporters as positive for the newspaper and the community. But if 50% of respondents strongly agree with this principle and 14.7% agree, one can not devalue the 17.6% of respondents who disagree (2.9%) or strongly disagree (14.7%) with this practice.

The use of forums, included in civic journalism practices is one of the most criticized strategies by opponents of this current, precisely because they considered that these practices represent the detachment of traditional conceptions of journalism such as objectivity and balance. However, against this more critical view, almost all the journalists who responded to the survey (91%) did not consider that these practices represent a departure from the journalistic objectivity and impartiality.

To the question “Do you agree that newspaper promote forums open to civil society to increase the search of solutions to the community problems?”, the journalists answered like this:

Table 3.



Asked about the most important aspects to democracy functioning, journalists indicate clearly the existence of informed citizens which can actively participate in public debate, as fundamental principle. This suggests some agreement with some claims of “public journalism”, including the requirement that the information is not sufficient for democracy, being necessary to promote the debate among citizens.

Table 4. The most important to democracy to function is...

Levels of importance	That citizens actively participate in public debate			That citizens could participate in decision making process		
	n°	%	%A	n°	%	%A
1	7	20.6%	20.6%	8	23.5%	23.5%
2	12	35.3%	55.9%	8	23.5%	47.1%
3	11	32.4%	88.2%	9	26.5%	73.5%
4	4	11.8%	100%	9	26.5%	100%

Levels of importance	That citizens would be enlightened			That citizens may choose among different political proposals		
	n°	%	%A	n°	%	%A
1	18	52.9%	52.9%	4	11.8%	11.8%
2	6	17.6%	70.6%	8	23.5%	35.3%
3	5	14.7%	85.3%	4	11.8%	47.1%
4	5	14.7%	100%	18	52.9%	100%

n° = number of piece; % = percentage; %A = cumulated percentage

However, when asked about the social functions of the press, journalists continue to understand that the main functions of journalism is to defend regional interests and to inform the public, answers that are, at least partially, part of the traditional canons of journalism. In what concerns the functions that represent a more active position in journalism practices, following the theories of public journalism, (in particular enable broad participation in decision making, to help solve problems, to stimulate debate within the region, to encourage public debate) are less considered by journalists.

Table 5. Local professionals' conceptions of regional journalism (Accumulated percentage of the four items scored higher by respondents)

<b>Main functions of regional journalism</b>	<b>%</b>
To defend regional general interests	58.8
To inform and elucidate citizens	85.3
To assure social and political pluralism	52.9
To allow for large participation in decision taking	41.2
To contribute to solve problems	61.8
To promote debate at regional level	44.1
To promote public or ideological debate	23.5
To expose problems and watch public administration	73.5

#### **4 Next step: a media lab**

The next step to furthering this research network will be launching a media laboratory for the study and implementation of experiments that can be a starting points for further discussion. The launch of this institution is being discussed with directors and editors of regional media and the network will cover secondary schools with scientific areas focusing on communication sciences, student unions and associations of civil society. Today observatories can and should be considered not only as a control area by the media public, but rather as a space for interaction between the media and the public. Such institutions must play a role in facilitating access to information, enhancing its quality and diversity. The existence of media observatories, therefore, appears linked to democratic communication, in the training of professionals and in the development of critical pedagogy next to the publics. Its role will be to promote the skills that enable journalists and the general public to become more sensitive to the social mechanisms of representation often hidden in the everyday life language, influencing how the difference and hierarchy are represented within the discourses, identifying and discussing codes, conventions, routines

and constraints, developing new practices and, finally, developing and experimenting new platforms for expression and communication. Thus, media education is also an education that should answer these questions: who serve the media? What is the logical that move them?

Following suggestions of Buckingham, quoted by Smith and Rothberg (*apud* CHRISTOFOLETTI and MOTTA, 2008) argues that the implementation of regional observatories of the press is no longer confined to monitoring of journalism, also opening up spaces for learning and reflection on the media, focusing on issues such as production routines, discursive strategies, and the role assigned to the audiences. In this sense, our proposal is the creation of regional observatories of the press with the participation of regional media, educational institutions and public spheres of citizens. The lab will expand the network for the Universities of Salamanca and Santiago de Compostela in one logic of trans-disciplinary research.

An media regional laboratory will play a key role in analyzing the performance of the media and encourage dialogue among readers, researchers and professionals. This dialogue can articulate the practices of media criticism and media literacy with the notion of citizenship by electing regional press, civic associations and the public spheres of small and medium cities as privileged actors to develop spaces of citizenship around journalism projects

## 5 Conclusions

The route made throughout this paper identifies the insufficiency of approaches reduced either to the presentation of normative intentions disconnected from reality either to pure empirical analysis devoid of any concern with public ethics.

The merely normative approaches are at odds with the reality of the newspaper industry, which balances from commercial imperatives and organizational constraints to the social and cultural specificities of the profession. The purely empirical approaches ignore the close relationship with public life and reduce journalism to a set of practical recipes that answer the need of producing a profitable commodity. The public journalism brings the errors of both approaches. Or reduced to a series of vague proclamations about the need for relationship with citizens without regard to organizational and industry characteristics of the journalistic field, or merely reduced to experiments without an adequate theoretical framework that would allow the strict definition of objectives and methodologies for achieving them.

Despite the known limits of the approach taken by Habermas, the concepts he introduced has some viability to help us undo this conceptual knot. The concept of civil society is a productive concept because it allows to understand the associative nature of contemporary politics, that is to say the need for citizens to not become alienated from the process of deliberation and decision. The concept of public sphere refers to the communicative dimension of civil society and the need to establish communicative flows between its members and between itself and the institutionalized decision-making and deliberation instances. The concept of life-world refers to our everyday interactions, for our daily collectively construction of representations of reality, using the materials provided by history, tradition, culture and the media. The passage from everyday evidences to the most critical and strategic thought that feeds the public sphere is largely made possible by the media, which, in their task of providing information and encouraging discussion forums, make it possible more organized forms of political participation. The high mediatization afforded by selection and amplification of the issues discussed in public opinion affect the processes of deliberation and policy-making institutions.

Obviously, the public sphere today can not be thought as an ideal sphere of universality and participation as conceived in the eighteenth century. The public sphere requires increasing attention to the complex reality of the media which are not limited to a kind of idealistic mission to serve the common good. The route proposed in this work, including the project described here, allowed the identification of signs of tension and conflicting points of view.

The route proposed in this work helped identify signs of tension and conflicting views. In this sense, the privilege given to a news construction supported by a descriptive narrative style characteristic instead of an analytical-interpretive style, the minimization of readers' letters, easy way for citizens to express their problems and to engage in public dialogue, the privilege given to external sources, are faced with concepts shared by journalists of the need of creating a more pluralistic agenda focus on citizens as sources of news stories. If it is true that if the news making practices are still very far from the problems of communities and citizens, especially in what regards the establishment of a more plural and agenda focused on citizens as sources and voices of news stories, it is also true that its journalists and directors seem aware of this gap and of the need to find a way a that helps to surpass it.

Finally one conclude that this route requires a continuous

learning process not only to journalists but also to public and citizens in order to engage in a task perhaps never completed in its entirety. So, one has conceived the proposal of a regional observatory for media that become a space of relationship between civil society (schools, universities, associations), public sphere (newspapers, TV and regional radio on and off line, organized citizens) and local and regional public decision institutions.

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