

Millenium, 2(Edição Especial Nº23)



EDUCAÇÃO E LITERACIA MEDIÁTICA: PERSPETIVAS DOS JORNALISTAS DA RÁDIO E TELEVISÃO DE PORTUGAL
MEDIA EDUCATION AND MEDIA LITERACY: PERSPECTIVES OF JOURNALISTS FROM RADIO AND TELEVISION OF PORTUGAL
EDUCACIÓN Y ALFABETIZACIÓN MEDIÁTICA: PERSPECTIVAS DE LOS PERIODISTAS DE RÁDIO E TELEVISÃO DE PORTUGAL

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RECEIVED: 11th May, 2026

REVIEWED: 11th June, 2026

ACCEPTED: 18th June, 2026

PUBLISHED: 14th June, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29352/mill0223e.47070>

RESUMO

Introdução: A investigação académica no âmbito da educomunicação, especificamente na dimensão relacionada com a educação para os media e o jornalismo, pode contribuir para questionar o papel que ambos desempenham no combate à desinformação.

Objetivo: Analisar o papel do jornalismo e da educação para os media na promoção do pensamento crítico e no combate à desinformação, no contexto português.

Métodos: Abordagem qualitativa, sustentada por um enquadramento teórico e baseada na realização de oito entrevistas semiestruturadas a profissionais da Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP), incluindo cinco jornalistas, dois repórteres de imagem e a provedora do ouvinte da RTP.

Resultados: A investigação evidencia que, quando o jornalismo abdica do escrutínio e adota estratégias imediatistas e sensacionalistas na abordagem de temas complexos, fragiliza a democracia e corrói a confiança dos cidadãos na profissão, fomentando a desinformação. Os entrevistados reforçam a importância do pensamento crítico num paradigma social e tecnológico marcado pela manipulação através dos media digitais.

Conclusão: O estudo destaca o papel central que o jornalismo deve assumir no processo de educação para os media, reforçando a sua responsabilidade na promoção do pensamento crítico e no apoio aos cidadãos para lidarem com um ambiente informacional cada vez mais complexo.

Palavras-chave: combate à desinformação; educação para os *media*; educomunicação; jornalismo

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Academic research in the field of educommunication, specifically in relation to media literacy and journalism, can help to examine the role that both play in combating disinformation.

Objective: To analyze the role of journalism and media education in promoting critical thinking and countering disinformation within the Portuguese context.

Methods: A qualitative approach, supported by a theoretical framework and based on eight semi-structured interviews conducted with professionals from Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP), including five journalists, two video reporters, and the RTP audience ombudsperson.

Results: The research shows that when journalism abandons scrutiny and adopts short-sighted, sensationalist strategies in addressing complex issues, it weakens democracy and erodes citizens' trust in the profession, thereby fueling misinformation. The interviewees emphasize the importance of critical thinking in a social and technological landscape marked by manipulation through digital media.

Conclusion: The study highlights the central role journalism must play in media education, reinforcing its responsibility to promote critical thinking and support citizens in navigating an increasingly complex information environment.

Keywords: countering disinformation; media education; educommunication, journalism

RESUMEN

Introducción: La investigación académica en el ámbito de la educomunicación, concretamente en lo que se refiere a la educación en los medios de comunicación y al periodismo, puede contribuir a cuestionar el papel que ambos desempeñan en la lucha contra la desinformación.

Objetivo: Analizar el papel del periodismo y de la educación mediática en la promoción del pensamiento crítico y en el combate a la desinformación, en el contexto portugués.

Métodos: Enfoque cualitativo, apoyado en un marco teórico y basado en ocho entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a profesionales de Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP), incluyendo cinco periodistas, dos reporteros de imagen y la defensora del oyente de la RTP.

Resultados: La investigación pone de manifiesto que, cuando el periodismo renuncia al escrutinio y adopta estrategias cortoplacistas y sensacionalistas a la hora de abordar temas complejos, debilita la democracia y socava la confianza de los ciudadanos en la profesión, fomentando la desinformación. Los entrevistados subrayan la importancia del pensamiento crítico en un paradigma social y tecnológico marcado por la manipulación a través de los medios digitales.

Conclusión: El estudio destaca el papel central que el periodismo debe asumir en el proceso de educación mediática, reforzando su responsabilidad en la promoción del pensamiento crítico y en el apoyo a los ciudadanos para afrontar un entorno informativo cada vez más complejo.

Palabras clave: lucha contra la desinformación; educación mediática; educomunicación; periodismo

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29352/mill0223e.47070>

INTRODUCTION

Well-executed journalism supports people in developing their ability to analyze, interpret, and question the information they receive from the media, rather than accepting it passively and uncritically. Moreover, at a time when false news and manipulation (of images, sounds, and contexts) circulate rapidly, understanding how journalism works (or how it should work) is fundamental to teaching people to identify reliable information.

For this reason, it is essential that journalism and journalists are part of the media education process, enabling citizens to learn how news is produced, which interests (economic, political, social, among others) may lie behind it, what news values guide the selection (or exclusion) of topics, and thus become more attentive consumers of information who are less vulnerable to manipulation.

This article investigates the relationship between media education and journalism, considering the potential of both to combat disinformation and media manipulation. Drawing on the framework proposed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), three types of information disorder can be distinguished: misinformation, which refers to false information shared without the intention to cause harm; disinformation, which consists of false information that is deliberately created and disseminated to cause harm; and malinformation, which involves genuine information that is used maliciously to harm individuals, groups, or institutions.

Based on the perspectives of the preview's authors, as well as Soares (2011), Lourenço (2013), and Alencar et al. (2022), we argue that the fight against disinformation begins in schools through the implementation of dialogic and participatory learning methods. In this way, it becomes possible to engage students in learning processes and to bring education closer to the educational challenges faced by new generations, particularly about the consumption, sharing, and production of information through information and communication technologies (ICT).

The qualitative research presented here complements the theoretical component of the study, focusing particularly on the paradigm of Portuguese journalism. The results obtained are concerning, as they reveal an immediate, sensationalist tendency in Portuguese journalism. Instead of providing an informative service that fosters a balanced, informed public opinion, journalism discredits its public service mission and spreads disinformation.

Thus, the confrontation between the literature and the qualitative research allows us to conclude that media education is indispensable in the informational and technological context of the 21st century, particularly because it stimulates citizens' critical thinking by providing them with tools to evaluate the information they consume.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In Portugal, the concept of media education is commonly used in pedagogical efforts to develop citizens' critical awareness, particularly in their relationship with the mass media. In other words, media education focuses on providing society with tools that enable access to, sharing of, and production of information through these channels, based on a critical stance towards the reception of media messages. This concept of media communication is encompassed within educommunication. Indeed, over time, semantic and conceptual differences have emerged that separate Portuguese academia from Latin American universities: Portugal privileges the term Media Education, while in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, Educommunication is more commonly used. Furthermore, in Portugal, the concept is closely associated with the field of Communication Sciences, whereas in Brazil, its roots are more strongly linked to pedagogy and an emancipatory, participatory perspective of communication (Pinto et al., 2011). Thus, based on this semantic and conceptual distinction, this article adopts the expression media education rather than educommunication, as it is the concept most used by professionals and academics in Portugal. However, before advancing to the need to analyze media education within the field of journalism — which is the central focus of the study presented in this academic work — it is first necessary to address the relevance of educommunication in the media context of the twenty-first century.

The connection between communication and education presupposes two fundamental premises. First, education depends on communication, insofar as the latter constitutes an essential pillar in the interaction between teachers and students; second, all communication, whether verbal or non-verbal, constitutes an educational act. On the other hand, educommunication necessarily depends on a dialogic model of interaction between teachers and students. In this way, it becomes possible to enhance the sharing of informational resources between both parties, not merely unilaterally from teacher to student, and to motivate students to participate actively in learning processes. The objective of this pedagogical disruption is to increase students' "possibilities for learning, awareness-raising and mobilization for action" (Soares, 2011, p. 17).

Soares (2014) adds that educommunication aims to strengthen young people's competencies for everyday expression, encompassing all forms of communication available to them. According to the Brazilian researcher, dialogic and participatory models in learning processes are essential for schools to keep pace with the challenges faced by new generations, by involving them in the processes that lead to knowledge construction. In the specific case of communication through the media, this should be studied within educational institutions, enabling its use as a learning resource that contributes to knowledge construction.

In line with this perspective, Lourenço (2013) argues that the incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICT) enables students to stimulate their critical thinking in their interactions with the media. "Education must stimulate the capacity for critical analysis of the media and their messages" (Lourenço, 2013, p. 65). The researcher maintains that it is essential for

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29352/mill0223e.47070>

young people to learn to critically deconstruct the media messages to which they are exposed, as these influence how their beliefs and values are socially consolidated. Additionally, she argues that the inclusion of ICT allows for the adoption of more engaging and effective pedagogical approaches, complementing the traditional methodological triangle (teacher, chalk, and blackboard) that characterized education until the twenty-first century.

This strategy may prove even more important in the current context, where a large proportion of the public is concerned about distinguishing between what is true and what is false. Rasmus Nielson, in the Digital News Report (2025), shows that even in the Nordic countries, which benefit from “robust, widely used and trusted news media, reasonably stable political institutions, and the rule of law, more than 40% of respondents express concern” (Nielsen, 2025, p. 38). In other contexts, such as the United States, these levels of concern are even higher. Data from the latest edition of the DNR also reveal who the public turns to for verification. News media continue to rank among the most trusted sources of information, alongside official government sources. Furthermore, those who are better informed tend to be more resilient to misinformation.

Lazer et al. (2018) argue that disinformation should be examined through an interdisciplinary framework encompassing communication studies, political science, psychology, sociology, computer science, and data science. The authors argue that the spread of disinformation is driven by the dynamics of social media, users’ cognitive biases, and political polarisation, advocating an interdisciplinary approach that combines media literacy, fact-checking, greater accountability on the part of digital platforms, and scientific research to mitigate its effects.

In this context, education can emerge as a crucial component of any response to the problem, particularly because an education that is committed to its time and that aims to elevate the human being to the condition of subject of their own history must therefore promote knowledge of the technical and symbolic processes through which we socially construct our system of beliefs and values (Lourenço, 2013, p. 65).

Accordingly, Lourenço (2013) further emphasizes the application of theoretical knowledge about the media, namely through pedagogical tasks that include the production of content via media channels (blogs, newspapers, school radios, among others), to stimulate students’ social participation and foster their autonomy in acquiring new knowledge.

Finally, given the proliferation of large quantities of information online, it has become imperative for education systems to keep pace with ongoing communicational and technological developments, with the aim of strengthening the fight against disinformation and promoting the use of the Internet for knowledge construction. Alencar et al. (2022) argue that educommunication in schools should encompass the development of critical information competencies, proposing a plan aimed at teacher training in this field and the implementation of dialogic and participatory methods in classrooms. Based on this pedagogical approach, the researchers propose exercises grounded in the seven levels of Critical Information Competence (CIC) conceptualized by Schneider (2019), with the objective of contributing, from within schools, to combating the impacts that disinformation has on social life, particularly when it is consumed uncritically by citizens, leading to manipulation.

In this regard, the perspectives of Alencar et al. (2022) help to elucidate the relevance of educommunication and journalism in schools within contemporary societies. This relevance is evident not only in relation to the teaching methods employed — which should stimulate students’ active participation in learning processes — but also in relation to the new informational challenges that digitalization has posed to contemporary societies. The increased democratization of access to, sharing of, and production of information afforded by digital ICT logically implies that citizens must develop more refined critical thinking skills, when compared to traditional media, to filter the information circulating online that contributes to knowledge construction.

Thus, the relationship between schools and the media, particularly journalism, is essential to media education. In Portugal, for example, several initiatives place the media — especially journalism professionals — in direct contact with the school community (educators, teachers, and students), with the aim of instilling a critical spirit when receiving messages conveyed by the media, as well as sharing tools that can promote a more critical stance. These include aspects such as journalistic writing, the use and cross-checking of information sources, and the ways in which fake news appropriates journalistic techniques to convey misleading messages, among others.

School newspapers have established themselves as an important instrument since the democratic revolution of April 1974, enabling students to exercise their right to freedom of expression and, by extension, freedom of the press. “Students, teachers and schools moved forward — we can even say forcefully — into school journalism (...) defending different sectors and ideas” (Gonçalves, 2008, p. 1956). In the 1990s, PÚBLICO na Escola was launched, a project that annually promotes the National School Newspapers Competition, involving several Portuguese schools from primary to secondary education (PÚBLICO, 2025). From 2013 onwards, the Informal Group on Media Literacy (GILM) initiated the 7 Days with the Media initiative, aimed at reflecting “on the media and the role they play in our lives and in society” (MILOBS, 2024). Among other activities, this initiative includes programs involving traditional and digital media, notably through practical exercises that provide students with foundational skills in news production, with the objective of stimulating civic participation through the media.

Finally, among other examples, RTP also plays an important role in promoting media education, in line with its public service duties towards Portuguese society. This is particularly evident through the creation and development of the digital platforms RTP Arquivo, RTP Ensina, and RTP Play. These platforms provide access to various formats and types of content, ranging from pedagogical materials for students to a wide range of entertainment and information options. In the specific case of RTP’s Coimbra

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regional office, it is common for the coordinator, Pedro Ribeiro, to be contacted by schools and universities that either wish to visit the station to better understand the work carried out by journalists at the Portuguese public broadcaster or request journalists to visit educational institutions to explain the work they perform. By responding to such requests, RTP contributes to bringing citizens closer to journalism, sharing with them the importance of the processes that precede the transmission of news information.

Thus, in this article, we set out to develop a study that explores the relationship between media education and journalism, considering the role both play in combating disinformation and promoting citizens' critical thinking. In pursuit of this objective, we interviewed RTP professionals working in journalism, including the audience ombudsperson, Ana Isabel Reis, on the core themes of this academic work.

2. METHODS

The literature review enabled a confrontation between the theoretical framework and the results obtained in the research that will subsequently be presented. In line with the perspectives of Boote and Beile (2005), we consider that "a researcher cannot perform significant research without first understanding the literature in the field" (Boote & Beile, 2005, p. 3). On the other hand, as noted by Hart (1998), we argue that the theoretical framework surrounding any topic to be investigated allows for a deeper understanding of "what has already been done on it, how it has been investigated and what the key issues are" (Hart, 1998, p. 1). Thus, within the scope of bibliographic data collection, the research used scientific databases and repositories, namely Google Scholar, the bibliographic portal Dialnet, the Institutional Repository of the University of Huelva, and the Research Output Repository of the University of São Paulo. The use of keywords was important for narrowing the search to the main concepts addressed in this research, such as "communication", "education", "educommunication", "disinformation", "fake news", and "journalism". In this way, time was saved, and the effectiveness of the bibliographic search increased.

This study adopts a qualitative methodology, based on eight semi-structured interviews conducted with journalists, video reporters, and the audience ombudsperson of RTP – Rádio e Televisão de Portugal. Within the scope of qualitative research, the selection of interviewees involved the conduct of preliminary interviews (Bell, 2008) with these professionals, making it possible to identify the different perspectives that could be incorporated into this study, with the aim of making it more plural and in-depth. Furthermore, interviewees were given "freedom to speak about what is of central importance to them" (Bell, 2008, p. 140), which implied that the pre-planned interview guide was adapted to each interviewee's responses. Therefore, the interviews followed a semi-structured model, with initial guiding questions previously defined around the central themes of this study: combating disinformation, promoting media education, and the role of journalism in these areas. Nevertheless, each conversation followed its own course, given the flexibility of the methodological model implemented.

3. RESULTS

The eight interviews include journalists who perform different functions and tasks at RTP, and it was also possible to speak with Ana Isabel Reis, the audience ombudsperson at the Portuguese public radio and television broadcaster. The remaining seven interviews, comprising five radio and television journalists and two video reporters, yielded diverse perspectives on media education and media literacy, with implications for combating disinformation, the future of journalism, and the construction of a critical, balanced, and informed public opinion.

Thus, this chapter presents the key ideas expressed by the interviewees regarding media education and media literacy, and considers their relevance to combating disinformation and journalism. The results are organized around this tripartite relationship and are divided into three topics: media education, journalism, and combating disinformation. Subsequently, in the chapter dedicated to the discussion of results, a confrontation will take place between the ideas presented in the theoretical framework and the evidence derived from the results of this qualitative research.

3.1 Media Education

Regarding the relevance of media education for society, the interviewees' perspectives converge on the need to stimulate citizens' critical thinking, particularly among younger generations, in their interactions with media information. According to the interviewees, this stimulation should focus especially on the critical deconstruction and reflection of information circulating on digital platforms. Ana Isabel Reis, audience ombudsperson for the radio stations under RTP's responsibility, provides a personal example to illustrate the relevance that media education had during her school years:

When I was studying, there was a Journalism subject in the 10th and 11th grades. What did we do in that subject? (...) We were taught how to read newspapers, listen to the radio, and watch television, in the informational component and beyond (...). That subject encouraged students at the time to consume newspapers, radio,, and television, and to approach them with a certain critical sense. But, above all, to understand the importance they had for democracy, freedom of expression, and the formation of public opinion. There was an intention of media education here (Reis, Personal Communication, 2023).

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First, it should be noted that the RTP audience ombudsperson began working as a journalist in 1988 and, therefore, the experience she reports refers to the school context of the second half of the 1970s and the early 1980s. This was a period in which the monopoly over information was dominated by traditional media organizations (print press, radio, and television), a context in which information was more heavily filtered for citizens than in the current paradigm of digitalization and information disintermediation. However, even at that time, the stimulation of citizens' critical thinking through schools was recognized as an important tool for analyzing media information, with the aim of encouraging young people to form balanced, informed judgments. Miguel Bastos, a journalist at Antena 1 radio, presents a line of reasoning like that of the RTP audience ombudsperson. According to the journalist, decoding media messages is crucial for assessing the reliability of a given piece of information. "It is essential to educate children for the media as early as possible" (Bastos, Personal Communication, 2023), states the reporter, pointing out that it is necessary for them to understand the importance of the six fundamental questions for any journalistic work: Who? Did what? When? Where? How? And why? Furthermore, he also notes that citizens should consider the ownership of the channels that broadcast media messages, to assess the credibility of the outlets that disseminate the information they consume. In this regard, Rita Soares, also a journalist at Antena 1, adds that media education draws attention to crucial aspects to be considered when analysing news information, such as: "what is the date of that news item (...) who were the actors who were heard? Are they reliable? Do the numbers in that news item make sense?" (Soares, Personal Communication, 2023). In other words, these questions are important so that citizens can independently assess the quality of the information they consume, particularly when dealing with content circulating on online social media, since the journalist considers that information regulation on these platforms is weak, making them fertile ground for the spread of disinformation. Media education, therefore, emerges as a central element in the development of citizens' critical sense in their relationship with the media. Paula Costa, a journalist working for RTP's television news channels, argues that it consists of "giving them [citizens] tools to understand what is true, to build their thoughts, their ideas and the values they believe in" (Costa, Personal Communication, 2023). From the journalist's perspective, media education plays an important role in the emancipation of young people, providing them with tools to form their own judgments and resist attempts at media manipulation. Thus, according to the perspectives cited above, schools play a highly relevant role in promoting media education. This view is corroborated by the coordinator of RTP's Coimbra regional office (Central Portugal), Pedro Ribeiro. In the journalist's understanding, this pedagogical path should be traced from compulsory education onwards and extended to higher education. "In Journalism, Marketing and Communication courses it has to be a priority" (Ribeiro, Personal Communication, 2023), he states.

3.2 Journalism

The analysis of the Portuguese journalism paradigm was a central topic in the interviews. Criticism of the production of immediate and sensationalist information, to the detriment of the balance and rigor that should characterize journalistic work, is transversal to all interviewees. Joaquim Reis, a reporter at Antena 1 radio, begins by criticizing the Portuguese journalism paradigm and points to responsibilities within higher education programs in Social Communication and Journalism. "The university, in its pursuit of knowledge — the knowledge that explains the universe — must necessarily be a place of confrontation of ideas" (Reis, Personal Communication, 2023), states the journalist, suggesting that academic institutions do not sufficiently encourage debate and confrontation between different worldviews. From Joaquim Reis' perspective, Social Communication and Journalism courses must contribute to the discussion of different perspectives on the world, regardless of the ideological beliefs of those who teach them. In this sense, journalists cannot contribute to fostering citizens' critical thinking if, from the outset, they are unable to question their own ideological biases. In his view, journalists should report facts accurately and without prejudice, leaving interpretation and judgment to citizens. "I do not know who is innocent or who is guilty. I know, at a given moment, here and now, who is or is not a victim of a punch, but I did not see what happened before the punch" (Reis, Personal Communication, 2023), Joaquim Reis states.

Cláudio Calhau, a video reporter at RTP, adds that the decline in the quality of Portuguese journalism is also due to the management of private media organizations. Although he acknowledges that they are "often constrained by financial issues" (Calhau, Personal Communication, 2023), the reporter argues that, instead of adopting "educational" approaches, the media prioritize maximizing audiences at any cost, to the detriment of the quality of the information they convey. "We have an attitude of: 'if people want to see blood, then blood is what we will give them'", he remarks ironically.

Finally, some interviewees direct criticism at the Media Regulatory Authority (Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social – ERC). Paulo Oliveira, a video reporter, argues that due to immediacy and sensationalism, some newsrooms tend to relegate rigor in the information they disseminate, leading to errors and damaging the credibility of Portuguese journalism. These errors are often concealed from the public and should prompt the ERC to act by supervising and penalizing media outlets that distort journalism's ultimate objective: to inform. In this line of thought, the coordinator of RTP Coimbra, Pedro Ribeiro, considers that the ERC's role has not been sufficient to regulate journalistic information.

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3.3 Combating Disinformation

Ana Isabel Reis addresses the issue of disinformation, making it clear that it is not an exclusively digital phenomenon. “What exists now is an amplification and new ways of distributing and disseminating false information, which is much more global and accessible than it used to be. And also more difficult to control” (Reis, Personal Communication, 2023), she emphasizes. Therefore, the audience ombudsperson understands that the Internet has exacerbated the problems caused by disinformation, which “have always existed since the early days of the press” (Reis, Personal Communication, 2023).

In this sense, digitalization has contributed, on the one hand, to increasing the sophistication of methods used to disseminate false information. Ana Isabel Reis gives the example of the appropriation of journalistic formats to propagate false content on the Internet or to disseminate it in private groups, making it difficult to debunk. On the other hand, information published online has become globally accessible, without an effective prior gatekeeping process capable of interpreting and verifying the plausibility of narratives intended to be instilled in society.

According to Rita Soares, “social media are still a major means of spreading news that perhaps we cannot even call news” (Soares, Personal Communication, 2023). For this reason, the journalist argues that, given the lack of effective regulation of information proliferating on online social media, citizens must be equipped with tools that allow them to “filter” the content they are exposed to on digital platforms. In her view, pedagogy is an important route to strengthening the fight against online disinformation, particularly through the promotion of media education in educational institutions.

In turn, Joaquim Reis argues that citizens are apathetic towards the information they consume, adopting an uncritical stance towards the content circulating on digital platforms. In the past, according to the Antena 1 reporter, when citizens wanted to form an opinion about something, they would read “a morning newspaper, an evening newspaper, a third newspaper (...) in addition to listening to the news on the radio and then watching television” (Reis, Personal Communication, 2023). Nowadays, people choose to watch “a video of one and a half minutes, two at most, and think they are informed” (Reis, Personal Communication, 2023). Consequently, citizens’ demand falls short of what is necessary, often ignoring basic questions such as who produced this content? What were their intentions? Why now? Did they speak to all the parties involved in this issue? These questions, presented by the reporter, are essential for assessing the informational value of any content and, consequently, for combating disinformation through critical emancipation.

4. DISCUSSION

The confrontation between the theoretical framework and the results of the research presented here shows that media education is an indispensable pedagogical instrument for combating disinformation effectively, and that Portuguese journalists from public radio and television perceive it in this way. By implementing robust pedagogical plans that promote media education, particularly within educational institutions, the aim is to stimulate citizens’ critical thinking in their interactions with information. Therefore, the objective is to contribute to the development of a critical, balanced, and informed public opinion within a social and technological environment contaminated by disinformation.

As noted by Soares (2011), communication plays an extraordinarily important role in education. Consequently, media education constitutes an example of this relationship,, which, to generate results, must be dialogic and participatory. On the other hand, as Lourenço (2013) warns, in a civilizational context in which information and communication technologies (ICT) play a central role in citizens’ lives, it makes little sense for them not to be incorporated into learning processes, both as an object of study and as a resource for the autonomous construction of knowledge.

RTP journalists are unanimous in their view of the relevance of media education, promoted through schools, for the development of young people’s critical thinking. The transmission of strategies commonly used by journalists, such as the six fundamental questions for verifying any piece of news information (Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?), is of extreme importance in a social and technological context marked by the proliferation of large quantities of (dis)information. In Portugal, several institutions invest in the promotion of media education, such as higher education institutions (universities and polytechnics) that create working groups and conduct research in this field, as well as organizations such as the Journalists’ Union, the Media and Journalism Literacy Association, and the GILM – Informal Group on Media Literacy, among others. In this way, they seek to contribute to a more informed, critical, and knowledgeable Portuguese society.

However, in a journalistic context marked by the production of immediate, sensationalist information that relegates critical reflection and rigor in the data conveyed to a secondary level, a fundamental question arises: can journalism contribute to the construction of a more informed, balanced, and knowledgeable society? Criticism of this model of information production, which characterizes the current paradigm of Portuguese journalism, is transversal to all interviewees, regardless of the justifications they present to explain this situation. The answer to this question is simple: yes, it can and it must, provided that the issues reported are addressed with the professionalism, ethics, and deontology expected of journalistic work. Otherwise, it falls to citizens themselves to conduct their own investigations to stay informed about the topics that interest them, resorting to methods that should be used by journalists. Thus, it seems indispensable to us that journalistic work supports citizens in developing balanced and well-grounded judgments.

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Joaquim Reis, for example, argues that journalists should listen to the parties involved, confront different versions, and, finally, contextualize and report their on-the-ground experience to the public. This should be done without expressing personal opinions, by developing a balanced portrayal of events and situating news facts within a specific temporal framework. Therefore, it is also relevant to indicate pathways for complementary research, through which citizens may acquire new knowledge and, consequently, formulate their own judgments about reality, which is often complex and requires in-depth investigation. Finally, in line with Alencar et al.'s (2022) perspective, the interviewees' views converge once again in their analysis of the paradigm shift digitalization has brought to the field of communication. This is evident, first and foremost, in the democratization of access to, sharing of, and production of information through the Internet, which has disrupted the informational monopoly previously held by traditional media organizations. The possibility for anyone with an Internet-connected device to become an information producer, on the one hand, enhances freedom of expression and the debate of ideas through digital media, but also raises several challenges in terms of combating disinformation, given the regulatory insufficiency surrounding the information circulating on digital platforms, particularly on social media. This is the case, for example, with the proliferation of content that appears to be informative but, in reality, merely fosters the construction of false perceptions of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The article presented here aims to contribute to academic research in media education, guided by its pedagogical relevance in combating disinformation and its impacts on society. Through media education, it becomes possible to provide citizens with tools to face the informational and technological context of the twenty-first century, which, on the one hand, has democratized access to, sharing of, and production of information, and, on the other, has also contributed to the proliferation of disinformation. This phenomenon has a negative impact on society, as it is produced on a global scale, in multiple formats, and distributed online without any effective regulatory mechanism overseeing the published information.

Thus, based on the confrontation between the theoretical framework and the interviews, it can be concluded that media education is a key instrument for influencing new generations to develop news consumption habits grounded in critical thinking and the questioning of information conveyed by the media, both analog and digital. In this way, journalistic information-verification strategies help citizens in this process of critical analysis, providing them with tools to evaluate and cross-check information sources, distinguish content deliberately produced to manipulate emotions from balanced and rigorous journalistic content, among other added values that journalists can offer ordinary citizens in their relationship with information and communication technologies.

Disinformation is not an exclusively digital phenomenon, and there are several historical examples that demonstrate its potential to manipulate public opinion. Through such manipulation, social and political ideals are promoted, which, however atrocious they may be, rely on the complacency of misinformed citizens. For this reason, the lack of regulation of information conveyed on digital platforms is particularly concerning, requiring a civic response that upholds democracy and supports citizens in filtering the information to which they are exposed, assisting them in the search for reliable information, in critical reflection, and in the construction of balanced and well-founded judgments.

Therefore, the development of the Internet constitutes a more democratic instrument for access to and sharing of knowledge compared to the traditional media paradigm, implying greater civic responsibility in its use. The uncritical use of digital platforms, particularly social media, fuels the proliferation of facts disconnected from reality and media manipulation, making it essential for citizens to understand the dynamics and limitations of these platforms in acquiring new knowledge. Consequently, educational institutions must be at the forefront of combating disinformation, investing in programs that promote media education across compulsory education, adapting learning activities to students' ages, and addressing the challenges faced by new generations. From this perspective, the importance of dialogic and participatory models in classrooms arises, as they stimulate students' interest and active participation in learning processes.

To these considerations, specifically in the Portuguese case, is added the growing discrediting of journalism in society's eyes. This discrediting is caused by both external factors that are difficult to control, namely the appropriation of journalistic formats to spread falsehoods, and internal factors. The erosion of journalism's credibility, driven by the prevalence of immediate and sensationalist practices, corrodes the bond of trust between society and journalism and raises serious social problems that require independent reflection beyond corporatist perspectives.

In this sense, when it is no longer possible to distinguish between work carried out by a journalist — which should be guided by detachment, fairness, and rigor in the transmission of news facts — and the work of other information producers who are not required to comply with these three fundamental principles, citizens' trust in journalism erodes and its democratic contribution becomes questionable. Journalists are not mere mediators of information, but agents who assess, question, and confront the narratives intended to be instilled in society, exercising a power of social scrutiny fundamental to democracy. If they fail to do so, they hinder the fight against disinformation and relinquish an active role in promoting media education, thereby incurring high costs for the democratic system and for the development of an informed, balanced, and critically aware public opinion.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29352/mill0223e.47070>

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization, P.C. and M.M.; data curation, P.C. and M.M.; formal analysis, P.C. and M.M.; investigation, P.C.; methodology, P.C. and M.M.M.; supervision, M.M.; validation, P.C. and M.M.; visualization, P.C. and M.M.; writing – original draft, P.C.; writing – review & editing, P.C.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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