

Episode 1: “Because Information Is a Basic Necessity”

[mix of introductory sounds]

Pedro Portela [host] Estados do Tempo (The Status of the Times). *Because Information Is a Basic Necessity*.

Hello, welcome to this inaugural episode of Estados do Tempo, a podcast from the Communitas and BIP – Barometer for Information Quality platforms. In this first episode, we'll have a conversation moderated by Luís Miguel Loureiro.

Luís Miguel Loureiro [moderator]: One of these is this podcast, it's a way of communicating with the public, not just scientific audiences, but also the general public, social audiences, let's call them that.

Pedro Portela: He is a lecturer in the Department of Communication Sciences at the University of Minho, a member of the Communication and Society Research Centre, and also a member of BIP. He will be moderating a conversation with Inês Mendes and Tiago Estêvão. Both completed their doctorates in the second half of October 2024. Their research reflects on how time and fear intertwine with the production and reception of information, revealing insights about the quality of contemporary journalism. Here is Inês Mendes:

Inês Mendes [guest]: I think it's a truly fundamental and essential issue.

Pedro Portela: About her, we can say that she studied the relationship between time and information. As for Tiago Estêvão:

Tiago Estêvão [guest]: It just so happened that I was studying the areas of moral panic at the time, so I was delving into... risk society, and all of that brought back memories and gave me the drive to move forward.

Pedro Portela: About Tiago, we can say that he studied the relationship between fear and information. We'll be spending most of this inaugural episode of Estados do Tempo with them, but first, let's hear what some 10th, 11th, and 12th-grade students have to say — students who spent the summer on the University of Minho campus — which also sets the tone for today's conversation.

Student 1: I usually watch the news in the evening, that's mostly it.

Student 2: I try to stay informed, but sometimes, with all the assignments, I end up doing even more research.

Student 3: I try to watch the news every day to see what's happening in the world, especially in today's unstable world, and I really like being aware of what's going on around me, because I know that's the first step to change and to start something new, something better.

Student 4: I also use Instagram a lot. When posts appear that I'm particularly interested in, I go to the website to find out more about them.

Student 5: The main thing is to have the actual facts about everything happening around us and to be able to have a critical mindset. And regardless of other people's opinions—which we should, of course, listen to and respect—we build our own opinions based on who we are.

Student 6: At school, they do provide that kind of information, but not in much detail. Still, I learned a lot about information security in school.

Pedro Portela: Let's move on to the conversation moderated by Luís Miguel Loureiro with Inês Mendes and Tiago Estêvão.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Here we are. Welcome to Estados do Tempo. From now on, Estados do Tempo is a joint podcast of two platforms from the Communication and Society Research Centre: BIP, the Barometer for Information Quality, and Communitas, a think tank that also reflects on time and temporality. Now, when it comes to the state — or states — of the times, it's worth noting that this has been a key concern, from the very beginning, for the team responsible for kicking things off in this podcast: the BIP team, behind the Barometer for Information Quality. So, what is BIP? BIP is a project

that is entirely new to the public, being launched this September across online platforms. However, BIP is, of course, an academic project that has been in preparation for several years. It's essential to discuss BIP's preparatory history first because it's essentially why we are the first to start this podcast, *Estados do Tempo*.

BIP was established a few years ago at the initiative of the leadership of the Communication and Society Research Centre. The project's main aim is to foster a dialogue between science and the public about how we perceive the quality of the information we receive. Now, information quality is a very complex matter, encompassing many dimensions as a context and concept. We naturally think first of the journalistic dimension, because that's what immediately enters our view, into our homes, etc. It completely invades our private space, but, in fact, other forms of information are equally important, sometimes even more so. In this sense, these various dimensions are what BIP aims to measure, in some way... It's a barometer, intended to measure through a set of methodologies developed over the years in which we were, let's say, silent—a preparatory silence, a working silence—before the public launch of the project. BIP, now publicly launched, is based on a set of methodologies that the public can consult in an e-book, available on the project's own website, the BIP site, and also via the CECS, the Communication and Society Research Centre's website. This e-book, “Avaliar a Qualidade da Informação: Referencial Teórico-Metodológico [Evaluating Information Quality: A Theoretical-Methodological Framework]”, allows scientists and non-scientists alike to understand exactly what we aim to do. And what we aim to do is a set of things. One of these is this podcast. It's also a way of communicating with the public — not just scientific audiences, but the general public, social audiences, let's call them that.

We'll be having a series of interventions here, interspersed with the *Communitas* platform. So, roughly every two months, we'll return to discuss issues of information quality. For this first episode, what did we decide to do? We decided to invite members of the BIP team—specifically, those who have most recently completed their doctorates. For someone not familiar with science, they might think, “Oh, they're inviting the juniors”. Not at all. Those who are newest, who have only just completed their doctorates, are often the ones who know their topics best. Why? Because their research is still fresh, and there simply isn't more in-depth follow-up research we can do yet—

partly because of one of the things we'll be discussing: time, and how it relates to doctoral study. We're talking about years and years spent investigating one problem. I have here two BIP colleagues, Inês Mendes and Tiago Estêvão, who spent years investigating distinct problems and defended their theses in the same week. It was fantastic. All of a sudden, the BIP team gained two new doctorates — experts in the areas they focused on throughout those years of research.

Inês focused essentially on time — time in journalism, *slow journalism*. She asked to what extent *slow journalism* is a response to the challenges of today's journalism, given that we're all very concerned with its current state. But Tiago also addressed questions related to the quality of journalism and public information, particularly concerning insecurity, fear, and terrorism, based on cases of information about terrorism. And so, these are the topics we'll focus on in today's conversation with them, whom I warmly welcome. Thank you for joining Estados do Tempo.

Inês, how do you view today the interplay between the concept of time that you studied and the various dimensions of information quality BIP wants to address?

Inês Mendes: I think... First of all, hello everyone. I believe this is a fundamentally structuring and essential issue, because it's through time that we leverage everything related to production routines, not only of journalistic information but also of public information and information across different social sectors. Without time, information quality degrades because it won't undergo the necessary phases and stages to ensure quality.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: As you can imagine, discussing time is always relevant. Discussing time is always current. In fact, it's no coincidence that this podcast is called Estados do Tempo (The States of the Times), right? The *States*... How do you assess the states of the times in communication, in journalism, and in the information that people receive?

Inês Mendes: It's a complicated state [laughs]. It really is a complicated state.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: It's like those 'states' (statuses) you see on social media... It's complicated.

Inês Mendes: It's complicated. It's difficult. No, it's very complex, because when we think about time — and right now we're talking about time and information quality — we usually focus on journalism production or information production, the production context. But when we consider temporal issues alongside information issues, we also need to think about the reception time, the time audiences have to process information. And right now, there's a severe lack of time. We live in a society with no time, don't we? We rush everywhere. The most common phrases we hear are: "I don't have time," "I need to hurry," "I need to be fast," "I have to go..."

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Time is money.

Inês Mendes: Time is money.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: So, not having time is not having money, right?

Inês Mendes: Exactly. And time is...

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Or the inability to generate money — to monetise time.

Inês Mendes: Yes, and it's also essential regarding the funding of journalistic institutions, right? The time pressure that journalists feel comes not only from deadlines but also from funding pressures, right? Because they must be fast and because they have to justify the investments, I realised in my own study that even newsrooms with more time, like those practising *slow journalism*...

Luís Miguel Loureiro: You studied the cases of Fumaça and Tortoise, right?

Inês Mendes: Tortoise, exactly. And, for example, in the case of Fumaça, the journalists I had the opportunity to interview made it clear that there is indeed time pressure, closely linked to funding issues, right? They have to justify the investments people make. In their case, they're funded in various ways, through audience contributions, journalism

grants, and they need to justify that investment. It also becomes really hard to go so long without publishing. They can spend months, even years, without releasing anything — and keeping people engaged, following their work and continuing to support them financially, is a real challenge. So, time operates horizontally in a newsroom and in any information production context, right? I think it's fair to say that. Because, in fact, time has a significant influence — not only on the production and reception of information, but also, naturally, on its funding.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Exactly. Well, it's almost a vicious circle. Inês Mendes completed her doctorate at the University of Minho, which is why she ended up here with us. Tiago Estêvão, on the other hand, was hired [laughs]. He's a great addition who comes from ISCTE — and we must thank ISCTE for that. We really do have a top player here. We've brought in a striker. Tiago Estêvão, you spent several years — because you come from down south, as we say here in Braga, or in the North. You came up from the south to work here in Braga, and, fortunately for the BIP team, you immediately wanted to join our work. That's because your research also relates to information quality, which is fundamental nowadays. And when I talk about fear and insecurity, people think of your research, of what you studied — terrorism and so on — and they remember the Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan attacks, big stories that filled the news ten years ago. But since then, we've had no shortage of cases provoking fear and insecurity: the pandemic, the wars. So, we're not short of material in the area you've been studying, right?

Tiago Estêvão: Yes. First of all, greetings to everyone here. That's right. It just so happened that, while I was doing my doctorate, the Charlie Hebdo attacks took place. Later came the Bataclan attacks in Paris, and, a few months after that, the events in Brussels. At that time, I was still studying — at master's level — issues related to moral panic, so I was already exploring that field, the risk society. All of this brought back earlier ideas and gave me a strong incentive to move forward. As I said, those terrorist attacks happened during that period, but my initial intention wasn't to study terrorism; it was to study fear. Years later, the pandemic emerged, and this thesis could have been entirely focused on pandemics, on COVID, instead of terrorism. More recently, we've had moments of fear around nuclear threats. So, all of these situations — the conflicts

we see today — could easily have been adapted to my research. But essentially, the primary focus was to study fear and to understand how the media — not just television, but also radio, the press, and digital platforms... and by digital platforms, I mean not the platforms themselves, but the media expressed in digital form — how they, through their framing and narrative construction, spread fear among the public. So, essentially, it was about trying to understand, using two case studies: the case study of the Paris attacks in October, and the attacks... the attacks of March 2015 and 2016 in Brussels. These attacks... were my research case studies. And that's how it went from there...

Luís Miguel Loureiro: But you, indeed, it was from those key insights that you identified while analysing these cases that you essentially engaged with journalism, public information, and the intersection between journalism, public information, and the public's perception of these issues, wasn't it? The question here is really: in doing so, what did you learn about the importance of public communication in shaping people's perceptions? To what extent do the media — whether news media, film, political communication, or even the communication of institutions themselves — influence our perceptions? And, ultimately, all of this is actually very relevant today, isn't it? It is relevant. I've already gathered that it probably is, but I'd like to hear your perspective.

Tiago Estêvão: Yes. What clearly emerged from all this is that the media have a massive influence on people's opinions. That was really the core of my thesis. My research question was to understand the media's role — whether it was significant or not — and, indeed, it turned out to be a major one. That's it. We can say that not only do the media play a significant role, but there are also several other actors, and it's interesting to understand their motivations. Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, anticipating future questions, but what is the motivation... The motivation for this alignment is that the media's framing in promoting fear serves a clear purpose. So, we can start from the assumption that...

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Sorry to interrupt you — Inês was talking earlier about the link between capitalism and time in information. Are you also referring to a link between capitalism and, say, audiences?

Tiago Estêvão: Exactly. That's precisely where I was going. There's intense competition among media outlets today — as there always has been, but now it's even fiercer. And it's a bit like what Inês was saying earlier. So, according to the media, there's less and less time to inform. Facts are checked less and less. Sources are often unreliable — and making them reliable isn't even the goal anymore. The speed with which information is delivered has become the very driving force of journalism today. Apart from these issues of competition, there's also... just a small aside. Fear has always been, academically speaking, supported by some... I'm just bringing this up briefly — I won't start quoting references. I won't... I won't be... I won't be that pedantic.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: We won't need to include a bibliography at the end of the programme [laughs].

Tiago Estêvão: But fear has always been seen as one of the main — if not the main — triggers of audience engagement. There are basically two. One of them is sex — anything involving sex sparks interest. And the other is fear. If I see someone being murdered on TV, or someone running away, whatever it may be... Whatever... As soon as visual media — especially television — realised how powerful fear could be as a tool, they made it their own. That's it. And, of course, that can have competitive reasons behind it. The more fear my channel manages to broadcast, the more people will watch — it's incredibly appealing. But there can also be political reasons, which we can discuss later. Because the media are, very often, taken over by the ruling classes. And fear is a way of controlling populations.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Exactly. Right. Fear. Fear and time. Both points in your studies lead to conclusions that make us think: well, scientifically, we already know this. We already know this. We already know how things work. So why do they still work like this? In other words, it really seems that there's... What's our role, as researchers, then? Is it to change things — by discovering, proving, and providing evidence that this is indeed how it works? That fear is monetised? That time is money. That information gets worse because it follows those criteria. That public information becomes poorer — that quality

is lost whenever we fall into those kinds of mechanisms. Yet those mechanisms keep running. So, what do you see as the key contribution of your work to society? Is it about changing this state of affairs? Do you intend to actually change this state of affairs? Or is our mission to raise awareness — to help people look at these things more critically — so that change can happen through citizenship? What do you think? Inês? [laughs] Caught you mid-thought.

Inês Mendes: It's fine, no problem.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: It's always fine. I don't think the question is that difficult.

Inês Mendes: I think that, at this stage, scientifically speaking, our biggest goal — at least mine — is awareness. To raise awareness among audiences, academics and professionals. Because I think we're still immersed in a very fast-paced, immediate society. And, as human beings in general, we have this obsession with whatever is new, what's just happened, and what's happening now. So, I think changing that paradigm is extremely difficult. I think it's about awareness...

Luís Miguel Loureiro: At least, changing the paradigm only through scientific knowledge. Because science carries a bit of this myth, it revolves around the idea that scientific discoveries lead to changes and have an immediate effect on societies. We live a bit... but the social sciences operate under a different logic.

Inês Mendes: I think we need time [laughs].

Luís Miguel Loureiro: We need to understand ourselves first. And we need time.

Inês Mendes: We need time for those changes to happen. It's not something that can change overnight. Because if we live in this context of fast, constant information and are constantly bombarded with more, we end up struggling to consume it. We can't even get to the end of a story before it becomes obsolete, because there's always something new right after. That makes it difficult not only to change how information is produced

but also how it's received. So right now, I think the goal — at least in my case — is to help structure that awareness and to highlight that things can change. It may not seem like it, especially in the field of information. Some information does have to be fast — not just in journalism, but institutionally too. For example, during the pandemic, some information had to come out quickly — people needed to know. But we also need to be careful, because during the pandemic, information was released so quickly that an hour later, it would be contradicted. And that creates confusion, right? Then people no longer really know what information to trust... After all, what is true? What should I follow? So we need time to think — time not only for those producing information to reflect on it, but also for audiences to think critically about it. And I think it's important to understand that there are different ways of doing things, and one doesn't cancel out the other. It's about balance, right? There's a way to produce slow information, and there's information that has to be fast. I think it's a logic of complementarity that we can aspire to.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Tiago, listening to Inês, I was thinking about something. When we find ourselves under the dictatorship of time, in fact, in all areas of information, to what extent do we, as citizens — and this ties into awareness, or the lack of it — need to have this knowledge scientifically transferred to the public... To what extent are people aware that information delivered too quickly can also manipulate them in some way? So, even if it's not entirely false information... Here, we're obviously already entering the territory of disinformation, and so on. But, in fact, this voraciousness of information — creating climates of fear, of insecurity, producing the very effects that you studied... the creation of volatile information, of information that has no lasting value, of news that is immediately contradicted, and so on... In reality, it seems that the public ends up being like playthings of a process they don't control, right? Or perhaps, they are being controlled by it. What do you make of this? Does this idea make sense?

Tiago Estêvão: It makes sense. It makes a lot of sense. It really does. One of the things I found in my research was the increasing simplification of messages. Nowadays, both the messaging and the way it's received are simplified. It has to be quick, communicated quickly, and received in the same way. I think... the public... Television, nowadays... I'll

focus, for now, on television, although I have studied other media. Television ended up being the most paradigmatic case in my study because... well, what exactly did I study? I identified — yes, I identified frames, I managed to pinpoint which frames overrode others in a news story, and from there, I studied these same frames. For radio, there were few frames, or the frames were not very dynamic. For television, there was a lot of information. Television, today, and in the cases I studied, follows a logic of... of content captured on mobile phones. So, much of the information came from mobile phone footage, images, and... Many of the news items were based on social media content, captured via mobile phones.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Where the main criterion is basically the image. The image is the fundamental criterion. Is there an image or isn't there?

Tiago Estêvão: Often it's barely edited, sometimes not very... credible. Later on, it turns out that what's being shown isn't actually true, but by then it's already been broadcast. For example — though I won't identify anyone here, as I also interviewed journalists — one journalist I spoke with for my research told me that sometimes you just have to report the news. So, there's a special correspondent sent to where an attack has occurred... and the newsrooms have, or are required to, bring something new every day. So, there's a need...

Luís Miguel Loureiro: And even if it's just every day, right? When it's not every hour.

Tiago Estêvão: Every hour. Often, we have three-hour news bulletins, and I have that documented — three hours talking about a single attack. So, you need to find content for that. And a lot of that content is accurate and credible, but other parts later turn out not to be plausible. I'd like to pick up, if you allow me, a bit on the question you asked Inês, which was... I see the change and the future of all this, in relation to my area of study, in two fundamental ways. Two... or three ways. The first relates to training within the media. Ok? That means making them more aware, less sensationalist. I know it's very complicated, and one of the points I focused on was whether it's possible to make television or prevent fear from being used by the media. To stop it from being a tool of the media? No, it's not possible. It's far too appealing, just like sex, which I mentioned

earlier, because it's a theme that audiences respond to very strongly. So it always ends up being very attractive. So, at least, it's about working with the media and the journalists I interviewed... all of them admitted that there were behaviours on their part that could be improved. So, it's about addressing those behaviours, making newsrooms...

Luís Miguel Loureiro: More aware.

Tiago Estêvão: ...more aware and ethical, let's call it that, and it's a bit along those lines, regarding the newsrooms themselves and journalism in general. When it comes to covering terrorism — and I don't want to go too far into that — there is actually a UN guide that deals specifically with how journalists should report on terrorism. And I might give a small example here, which is quite emblematic for me. I don't want to name the newsroom, but I do... I do... I have data showing that over almost 400 hours — 400 hours, yes — I have a discourse, mainly... from the journalistic community, a discourse that mostly frames terrorism as being rooted in... Islam.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Islam.

Tiago Estêvão: Islam.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Exactly.

Tiago Estêvão: And what's interesting, given this direct association by journalists, is how rarely anyone from the Muslim community is brought in to counter these kinds of narratives. And it's striking — I did this analysis — and across all those hours of news coverage, we only have two minutes in which someone appears...

Luís Miguel Loureiro: In 400 hours, almost 400 hours.

Tiago Estêvão: We have around two minutes of...

Luís Miguel Loureiro: ...of airtime given to the Muslim communities.

Tiago Estêvão: ...of airtime given to Sheikh [...] to speak about something for which the community was often being implicated. So, what's needed here is to make journalism and journalists more ethical — to make their worldview less simplistic and more open. In other words, we need a broader range of voices to be heard. Then, beyond the figure of the journalist, there's also the role of academia. Because academia should invest in studying the media. There are already many people doing that. But research on terrorism — and I was also involved in some of it — often tends to have a rather... I'd call it an uncritical view of terrorism. There are, of course, critical studies on terrorism — and they do valuable and praiseworthy work — but more encouragement is needed.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: It's important to say, right from the start, that for those working in the social sciences or in the language sciences, even the term terrorism itself should be questioned. In other words, we should begin with a radical question — and by radical, I mean going to the root of the problem. And that root often lies in the very act of qualifying something as terrorism. And so, it's precisely that kind of critique that I think you're referring to.

Tiago Estêvão: That's exactly it.

Luís Miguel Loureiro: Well then, Tiago Estêvão, Inês Mendes, our time has flown by. Before I hand over to Pedro Portela, who, as always, will close this episode of Estados do Tempo, I'd just like to draw our listeners' attention — our inaugural audience — and thank you all for being with us for a little while today. I also hope you'll stay tuned to our work, to the work of BIP — the Barometer for the Quality of Information. You'll have gathered by now that there are many important issues we'll be addressing here, and with great care. These are cross-cutting issues, obviously — they affect all of social life — and I think that's something important not only for academics, but for everyone. So, let me take this opportunity to thank you for your attention and inform you that a question is now available on the BIP website, b-info.pt — I think that will be the address, since we're recording this before the website actually goes live (it's important to

mention that people are on holiday, and they deserve them!). But there will be a question available — one that's, shall we say, seasonal, like fruit in season: How do you assess the journalistic coverage of the wildfires in Portugal — that is, the news coverage broadcast since July this year? It's a simple question, and we'd be grateful for your participation in the survey. We'll have new questions every month, or at least every couple of months, and we'll discuss them here on Estados do Tempo. Many thanks to both of you — congratulations on your research — and let's see if we can improve the Estados do Tempo (The States of the Times). Thank you.

[music]

Pedro Portela: And that concludes the first episode of this podcast, Estados do Tempo—a podcast presented, edited, and post-produced by Pedro Portela, from the Communitas platform. It also featured sound recording by Luís Pinto, who captured today's conversation with our three guests. Luís Pinto is a member of the Communication and Society Research Centre. Curation was by Tiago Estêvão from the BIP, and moderation was by Luís Miguel Loureiro, also from the BIP. In addition to Tiago and Luís Loureiro, we had Inês Mendes, a member of the Communication and Society Research Centre and the BIP, as a guest. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the interviews were conducted by students who took part in the University of Minho's Summer Campus. Thank you, and see you in the next Estados do Tempo.

[closing music]

Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado