

## Episode 5: “The demand for quality in advertising information for children”

[mix of introductory sounds]

**Pedro Portela [host]:** Estados do Tempo (The States of the Times). Because quality in advertising information for children is a basic necessity.

[music]

**Pedro Portela:** Hello, and welcome to episode five of Estados do Tempo. Today’s episode examines advertising aimed at children. As you know, this is an initiative by BIP and Communitas, two platforms of the Communication and Society Research Centre at the University of Minho. Moderating today’s conversation is Luís Miguel Loureiro.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro [moderator]:** I noted a recent news item I saw — that Mattel postponed, in the middle of last month, the launch of its first toy developed in partnership with OpenAI.

**Pedro Portela:** Luís Miguel Loureiro is a member of the Communication and Society Research Center and a lecturer in the Department of Communication Sciences at the University of Minho. He holds a PhD in Communication Sciences and, in effect, has become a kind of resident moderator of Estados do Tempo. Joining him today is Luísa Magalhães, from the Portuguese Catholic University.

**Luísa Magalhães [guest]:** Children’s engagement — the young audience’s engagement — with advertising micronarratives is absolutely remarkable and undeniably a sign of quality. If I listen to the same Nenuco advert 20 times in a row, it’s because it’s good.

**Pedro Portela:** We’ll leave a fuller introduction of today’s guest to our moderator, and now let’s listen to the conversation.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** So, we're here with Luísa Magalhães. She's joined *Estados do Tempo*, the podcast of the Barometer for Information Quality and *Communitas*, two platforms of the Communication and Society Research Centre. This is our fifth episode. Luísa completed her PhD in Communication Sciences in 2009 here at the University of Minho, and her undergraduate degree in Portuguese and English Studies in 1990, also here at Minho.

**Luísa Magalhães:** And a degree in International Relations in 1986, also at Minho.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** So three degrees at the same university — and in the same researcher. Luísa's academic work falls broadly within the arts and communication techniques. She's currently a professor at the Portuguese Catholic University, where she's been for nearly 20 years — 19, in fact. She currently works in the field of Social Sciences, which is her main area of research interest, with an emphasis — notably — on economics and management, focusing on media and communication; on political science, particularly organisational theory; on advertising and corporate communication; on the humanities, especially the arts, namely film, radio and television studies; and also within the social sciences with an emphasis on sociology, particularly social issues, as well as education and behavioural sciences. It's quite a journey — though we could summarise it. These are the formal academic areas, of course, but, Luísa, from the standpoint of scientific and academic interest, your path begins in semiotics, then moves into — or expands through — communication theory, and ultimately applies to what we're here to discuss today: advertising, and more specifically, advertising aimed at children. So we are talking about advertising that reaches the youngest members of the population — and, by its very nature, this is a form of advertising that immediately calls for specific, specialised study. In other words, it truly is a particular audience that advertising aimed at children is addressing. At the Barometer for the Quality of Information, our question of the month — which we were discussing and which, as Luísa was saying off air, could in itself amount to an entire treatise, or even a doctoral thesis — is: how would you assess the quality of the information conveyed by the adverts shown on Portuguese TV this Christmas? To avoid

turning this into a doctoral thesis, Luísa, I won't ask that question directly. But I would begin by asking whether such an assessment is in fact possible. In other words, do we have concrete data that would allow us to say whether advertising aimed at children — particularly at times of heightened pressure such as Christmas, when consumption intensifies, and when children effectively drive the purchasing decisions of those who actually buy the products, namely parents, close relatives, and friends — has evolved? Has this advertising improved over time? Has the quality of the advertising itself, and of the information it conveys, become better, as one might reasonably expect — especially given how much the ecosystem has diversified?

**Luísa Magalhães:** Well, thank you for the invitation. It's a real pleasure to be here, at the University and on this podcast, talking about a topic that I'm very passionate about. The question you raised could, in fact, be a whole doctoral thesis, and we're not going to do that. Instead, let's look at the foundations I feel I can actually speak to. The first of these foundations is the misconception that we're doing advertising directed at children. We're not. Advertising doesn't target children because advertising is a strategy to drive consumption, and children aren't direct consumers — they're second-hand consumers. What we're actually doing here is influencing adults' consumption, just like any other type of advertising, with the added factor that we have messengers — in England, they were called *pastors* back then, and they were very influential. Children are the ones demanding products — whether toys, food items, or other gadgets they see on TV — but the advertising itself is directed at adults, aiming to get them to buy. So the first key premise — which sometimes isn't immediately obvious or linear — is that when you see a doll advertised on television, it may not feel like you're being told, "Sir, Madam — parents of this boy or girl — buy this doll." But that is exactly what's happening. That's the first major point of discussion. The second point is that advertising has measurable elements — and, of course, it does — in various ways. By measuring these elements, we can assume that a campaign that scores highly across them is of high quality. Exactly. Conversely, if it fails to meet certain elements or criteria, it can be considered low quality.

On this basis, one of the most important points, in my opinion, in advertising production lies in the cinematic quality of the elements — the commercials, the ads that appear. It

is this cinematic quality that makes it possible, in 2025 — as has happened in Portugal — to broadcast on television adverts from '99, '98, 2000, 2001. From a cinematic standpoint, this means they are of extremely high quality. Otherwise, they wouldn't make it to air. Indeed, what defines quality in cinema isn't merely formal; the cinematic values — the narrative and audiovisual storytelling present in the early 2000s, and still present 25 years later — inherently possess narrative quality. This narrative quality is the same as we recognise in black-and-white films, in old films, in films of the last century, which, in fact, isn't so long ago. If you're asking me about quality in terms of the impact of the ads, what you're really asking is whether a particular advert achieves a level of quality such that it continues to be repeated from '98 right through to 2025 — implying that the toy still exists and, more importantly, that it still sells. This is the case with Carlota the Somersault Doll, Ritinha the Crawling and Walking Doll, Hot Wheels from Mattel, and Barbies: they continue to exist, they continue to sell, and what's interesting is that, in 2025, the same adverts are still broadcast. So, cinematic quality is certainly present. Narrative quality, too, initially, when looking at adult consumption of Nenuco dolls, Barbies, and all these toys, also remains. The reason they persist, however, is worth investigating.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** I'd like to know that too.

**Luísa Magalhães:** Let me explain: why do I buy a Barbie today to give to a little child who will probably really enjoy it... But it's me who decides to buy that Barbie for that child? Barbie is 50 years old — a doll that has been around for 50 years: slim, gangly, blonde, white... and even that has started to change. Interestingly, though, the more modern Barbies — the multicultural Barbies, the inclusive Barbies, the Barbies with disabilities, featuring things like wheelchairs, hearing aids, or prosthetic limbs — exist, but not in Portugal. They exist online, they appear in online advertising, but from the toy perspective, online ads don't have the same impact as TV advertising. And here's another important factor: why would I, as an adult, buy a Barbie to give to a child, assuming that the child will really enjoy it and be delighted to receive it? This is what I call the mirror effect: I understand that I, who wanted one and didn't have it, now can give. And that ability to give aligns with what the market offers... which creates a quality

in the transfer of meaning that still works and is worth studying. From the usage side... now I'll make a harsh point: in 2025, they're still advertising dead toys, just as they were advertised in the 1990s. And you might ask: what do I mean by dead toys?

A dead toy is opened on the day it's given — on Christmas Day, on a birthday. As I used to say, it goes around the track twice and ends up in the corner, and no one touches it ever again.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** It just gets put away straight away.

**Luísa Magalhães:** It dies. That toy dies. This happens with battery-powered toys because parents can buy them relatively easily, but aren't so quick to buy batteries to keep them running. It also happens with more modern toys that use chargers and Bluetooth, because they require adult intervention to keep functioning. And if that attention isn't there, if the adult doesn't make the effort to stay involved in the child's play, the toys die and completely lose their purpose. Does this fall under the quality of the toy itself, or under the quality of the toy's advertising? Is that debatable? Can it be studied? Certainly. How does it actually function in practice? I have no idea. That's another question for research.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** So, we're still in a space of questioning rather than giving answers, rather than conducting an analysis we can objectify and say: "this is how it is". That's the question I raised for 2025: are we in a better position than we were 10, 15, 20 years ago? The answer to that is, in truth, still open.

**Luísa Magalhães:** We're better off, I would say, generally...

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** The fact that... the ecosystem has become more complex, that we've opened up to advertising... online advertising has its own issues, of course. It can, well, it reaches children through algorithms, through many devices that are no longer even under the kind of control we still have, for example, with television. What do I see, what don't I see? Isn't that itself a variable in the problem, Luísa?

**Luísa Magalhães:** Let's see. There's a colleague of ours in Finland, Minna Ruckenstein, who recently published a book called *The Feel of Algorithms* in 2024, 2025. What she does is analyse almost 10 years of algorithm development for television and, more recently, for internet systems and social networks. And she raises questions — because it's always far more urgent to raise questions than to find answers... finding answers closes doors. Once we have an answer, we stop questioning. That's not a communication principle. We are always in search of the good question, as Professor Moisés Martins said many years ago: what we want is the good question, not the good answer. Minna Ruckenstein argues that finding the “feel” of algorithms is key to understanding their success. And this applies to advertising, news, and even medical algorithms. Finding the positive feeling point — which conveys well-being and therefore leads to repetition — is the key to identifying the real value of a communicative object. In my view, this is where the quality of any message lies: the moment it reaches its receiver at the deepest emotional level, compelling them to repeat, to linger, to seek out... or, in the case of advertising, to purchase and pursue. In my opinion, this is the key to identifying any quality factor in any advertising content. It seems to me that distinguishing a good ad from a bad one can be read in this way, too. Consumption alone isn't, to me, a satisfactory measure; rather, it's what I advocated for in the 1990s as “micronarratives”. Children's engagement — the young audience's engagement — with advertising micronarratives is absolutely remarkable and undeniably a sign of quality. If I hear the same Nenuco ad twenty times in a row, it's because the ad is good. It's because the advert, from a cinematic point of view, a narrative point of view, a visual point of view, a sound point of view, and from the standpoint of its concept, is a good advert. I'm not sure if this fully answers the Barometer's quest for quality.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** In this regard, there's immediately the question of the character itself — Nenuco, Popota, whatever — those characters that appear in the advertising realm, especially at this time of year, but really throughout the year. They carry a set of characteristics that make them not just objects of consumption, but, above all, characters that are meant to establish — or are intended to establish — a relationship, a bond of affection and closeness with whoever will use these products.

**Luísa Magalhães:** And that's what defines the "game algorithm". That's what defines the capacity of each of these products. You have to distinguish between the advertised product and the product being sold, right? One thing is the doll in the box; another thing is the advert in which the doll comes to life. It might not seem like it, but that makes a huge difference. One anecdote I came across while studying toy advertising more closely has to do with the Peter Pan pirate ship from Playmobil. Remember that? [laughs] This was... a true story. I heard it happen. That happened.

A child asks for the Peter Pan pirate ship — a very expensive Playmobil set at the time, even before the euro, costing hundreds, thousands of escudos. It was advertised with an animated ship that would come into the child's room. And so it was transformed. There were some metamorphoses, more or less... today we might call them rather dodgy, but back then, they were fully projected into the imagination. The film's flaws were offset by the music and its jingle. And then also by the child actor's expression of awe, surprise, and joy in the advert. The anecdote is this: a little child asks for the pirate ship. The parents, bless them, make the great sacrifice and buy the pirate ship. When the child opens the box, they start screaming and shouting because it wasn't that pirate ship — the one from the advert — because that pirate ship didn't do anything. It didn't move, it didn't come through the window, nothing.

Everything that fits in the imagination is everything that cannot be measured. On the one hand, it is everything that leads to a certain action — whether an action of representation through imitation, through role redistribution during moments of play, or through the compulsion to purchase. In truth, there is no limit. There is no lock for which a specific key exists to understand the mechanism of imagination. But there are points where we know imagination is sensitive. And children's imagination is sensitive. At points that are mapped and visible. And those haven't changed all that much. I mean, the method of influence may have changed, but the medium... On the contrary, the medium may have changed, but the method is the same. It is wonder. It is fun. It is a surprise. It is playfulness. It is enjoyment. It is laughter. It is what, ultimately, inspires— I will say it again—inspires the adults. What happens with toys is that they transform moments of interaction between adults and children. Adults need the children's laughter. Adults need to feel that, in that moment, the child is returning, twofold or

threefold, the joy with which the toy was bought. That joy, the child does not possess. They cannot buy it themselves, can they?

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** It's the play... which is an idea that features in your scientific work. Also, the idea of playing.

**Luísa Magalhães:** Always.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** Luísa, you're talking about "living toys". I noted that expression. What we're seeing now... I mean, you mentioned earlier the interaction between human subjects and the toy itself. Toys have indeed started to introduce the idea of interactivity as well... This is not entirely new, but now we have artificial intelligence, which is a potential new frontier already being tested. There are, for example, you mentioned Mattel earlier — I noted a recent news item I saw — that Mattel postponed, in the middle of last month, the launch of its first toy developed in partnership with OpenAI. So, we are moving into what is being called the "era of smart toys," or is this, in fact, yet another challenge in terms of the information that needs to be provided to those who will be fascinated by the idea that the toy will basically replace, perhaps, the role of an educator, the role of a... of a parent who supervises, who guides, who holds the child's hand? What challenges are we facing here, and is it possible for us to anticipate anything at this moment, given... this great uncertainty that artificial intelligence presents for all of us?

**Luísa Magalhães:** Well, we are on the eve — we're in the midst of organising... the review of materials submitted for the tenth congress of the International Toy Research Association, ITRA, which is an association that has been studying toys, the evolution of toys, different possibilities for play, types of games, interactions, handling skills, etc., for 30 years. It's an association that engages with industries — so I'm talking about Tactic [Games], the famous Mattel, Fisher-Price, and also with industrial associations and academics. I've been a member of this association since 2005. The theme of the congress, which will take place from 5 to 7 August in Germany, is "The Zeitgeist of Toys and Games" — play's current state of times in children's toys and games.

One of the main topics we will discuss is exactly this: what are the design principles for new toys? Design that relates to the objective, material, and mechanical construction of toys, and therefore involves the industry; design that involves creativity, educators, academics, and those with a direct interest in understanding, at least, the playful processes of childhood. The issue you just raised is discussed across three or four different dimensions. I'm not categorising them in order, because they run in parallel, right?

We have the issue of artificial intelligence related to toy safety. This stems from a major case that occurred in Germany three or four years ago... just before the pandemic... actually, a bit earlier. A doll called Cayla was banned in Germany. Why? Because it was a doll that had, in its eyes, a mechanism that recorded. It had a camera. The doll was a camera.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** The doll could see.

**Luísa Magalhães:** The doll recorded — that's the worst part. Parents would give the little doll to the child going to daycare, and when they got home, they knew everything that had happened, because the doll had recorded it. With Bluetooth, parents could access their phones and see in real time what was happening at the daycare because the doll was essentially a video device.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** Privacy violation.

**Luísa Magalhães:** Everything.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** Surveillance. Everything.

**Luísa Magalhães:** Everything. And then, do parents have the right — or not — to know what is happening in daycare? Do parents have — or not — the right to ensure the safety of their children? Can parents be free to use the money and financial resources they have to buy a doll like this and guarantee something? What applies to daycares also applies to homes with nannies and staff... and what applies to dolls applies to any other

type of device. Now, when this reached the toy world, the European world was shocked. In fact, Germany banned this doll. Today, it no longer exists and is not being sold.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** But isn't that a bit like Dolly the sheep? When cloning emerged in the 1990s... let's stop and think. Meanwhile, these issues have multiplied, appearing in different forms — sometimes already processed and acceptable. Could it be that we are now facing phenomena that trace boundaries which are still rigid for us, but which will be loosened precisely because of their consumption potential, their transformation into business, the industry, the industrialisation of these realities?

**Luísa Magalhães:** Essentially, we are talking about industrialising devices that solve fear and that alleviate fear, and which, allegedly, protect because they provide visibility. This is an informational premise: the more I know, the more aware I am, the better I can protect and defend myself. This is the basic connection to what, at heart, is the reason we speak of artificial intelligence. The term comes from intelligence, but intelligence itself has nothing to do with actual intelligence. That's another problem — another question. Regarding toys, returning to the issue of whether we have “alive” or “dead” toys, depending on how they are used: personally, I do not believe... I do not believe that, in any circumstance, there is any advantage in replacing humans in play contexts. I would have great difficulty imagining a football game played with robots, for example, or in replacing humans in competitive games. Similarly, I have immense difficulty in taking away a child's freedom to play. What we are essentially saying is that toys are necessary for play. I admit that. But I do not accept that the only way to play is with toys specifically designed for playing. Children play with anything. They play with stones, they play hopscotch, they play with sticks — they have always done this. The idea of play in Europe or America is very different from play in the Global South, to say nothing of other contexts. The “North” and the “South,” which are not geographical but sociological distinctions, both play. There is no doubt about that. Now, the notion that we could use artificial intelligence to subvert play processes — perhaps — but it is probably far more useful in casino games than in children's play. This leads to a broader discussion and problematisation of the concept of play itself. Talking specifically about children's play immediately makes me say that there is absolutely no risk that any computer or

algorithm could ever take away a child's ability to play. Play may be guided, it may be misled, it may even be subverted — but the principle of play is human. It is the playful principle. It has nothing to do with any mechanical aspect of it. Therefore, going back to the origin, to the very reason why a toy is a cultural object: the fact that any object can be transformed into a toy is significant and highlights a profound difficulty for artificial intelligence. Definitely.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** Luísa Magalhães, guest of episode number five of Estados do Tempo [The States of the Times]. Zeitgeist. Estados do Tempo is a podcast by Communitas and the Barometer for the Quality of Information, BIP. Both platforms are part of the Communication and Society Research Centre (CECS) at the University of Minho. Luísa Magalhães was our guest. We talked about information quality regarding toy advertising — not specifically at Christmas, but naturally in the context of Christmas, when we are perhaps a bit more open to these issues. This is also the reason behind our monthly question on the Barometer website, [b-info.pt](https://b-info.pt). The question appears right on the homepage, it's easy to access, and obviously, listeners of our podcast are invited to answer or attempt to answer it. The question is: how would you assess the quality of the information conveyed by the adverts shown on Portuguese TV this Christmas? Thank you very much.

Luísa, thank you very much for coming here to the University of Minho, a place you know so well. The pleasure is ours, of course. Thank you very much.

**Luísa Magalhães:** Thank you, thank you very much.

[music]

**Pedro Portela:** And with that, we conclude episode number five of Estados do Tempo. The conversation was moderated by Luís Miguel Loureiro, with special guest Luísa Magalhães. Technical support and recording were handled by Pedro Gaspar, editing by Pedro Portela. The curation of this episode was by Tiago Estêvão, and production in collaboration with BIP – the Barometer for the Quality of Information. That's all for now — see you soon in episode six.

[closing music]