

## **Episode 7: “The quality of journalistic coverage of international conflicts”**

**[mix of introductory sounds]**

**Luís Pinto [host]:** Estados do Tempo (The States of the Times). Because the quality of journalistic coverage of international conflicts is a basic necessity.

**[music]**

**Luís Pinto:** Hello, and welcome to another edition of Estados do Tempo. This is the seventh episode of the podcast, produced this time by BIP, the Barometer for the Quality of Information. The conversation today is between Luís Loureiro...

**Luís Miguel Loureiro [moderator]:** Refugees emerge from conflicts, wars, and so on, which really marked the previous decade. Now it seems like the whole world is exploding around us, doesn't it? So, we hardly even talk about refugees anymore, or the refugee crises that may arise from what's happening. And then some refugees are discussed, and others are not. So some are made visible at the expense of others.

**Luís Pinto:** On the other side, we have Catarina Santos.

**Catarina Santos [guest]:** I should say I was still very young when I had the privilege, for instance, of beginning to follow the so-called refugee crisis, back in 2014, even before that whole wave reached Europe. I was fortunate to have supervisors who understood the urgency of the issue and who realised that, difficult as it is, in a newsroom, freeing someone to spend so much time on a story was important. They supported me in doing that.

**Luís Pinto:** Our moderator, Luís Miguel Loureiro, is a journalism professor at the University of Minho. He teaches courses on verification and investigative journalism and

is part of the BIP coordination team. He spent nearly 30 years in journalism, in both radio and television, including war reporting in Lebanon and numerous assignments on conflict situations. Catarina Santos has been a journalist for two decades. She is the only Portuguese reporter to have won the Prémios Gazeta twice in a row — the country's premier journalism award. After a stint at Observador, Catarina Santos currently works at Rádio Renascença, where she has developed a distinguished career in long-form reporting on international news, including the refugee crises resulting from wars over the past decades.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** We're here with Catarina Santos, a journalist. I think Catarina is the first non-academic guest we've had on Estados do Tempo — at least someone without a deeply academic background — in this seventh episode. The magic number: seven.

Hello, Catarina! Catarina, however, has some brushes with academia. You've even taught journalism recently at the University of Minho, exactly in the area where you've really stood out — starting with your Prémio Gazeta. I believe you were the first — and perhaps still the only — person to win two consecutive Prémios Gazeta, at least in the multimedia category?

**Catarina Santos:** I can't confirm if I'm still the only one. I really don't know.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** That's uncheckable at the moment. Catarina Santos has extensive experience as a journalist, even though it feels like we've only just met. Nearly two decades of experience, mainly at Rádio Renascença, where, I think, you seriously began your professional approach.

**Catarina Santos:** Yes.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** You're back at Rádio Renascença, but you also spent some time at Observador.

**Catarina Santos:** Yes.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** Over these 20 years, you've focused heavily on international news, world affairs, and I think you've been somewhat of a pioneer regarding what is now a fundamental concern for newsrooms: the need to return to international coverage. Catarina, I'd like to know, since this is one of the topics today, how you view the quality of international news coverage in Portugal, especially given that media outlets have largely disengaged from international reporting. Unfortunately, this isn't just a Portuguese phenomenon; the lack of quality international reporting has been studied elsewhere as well.

**Catarina Santos:** First of all, thank you very much for inviting me. It's a pleasure to be here. I think what happens in this area can't be separated from the circumstances of newsrooms today, right? There are far fewer resources to send journalists into the field. Covering international news solely through agency feeds or phone calls from the newsroom inevitably leads to poorer coverage. I'm certain this is a daily frustration for journalists in international desks, isn't it? The vast majority... well, it wouldn't be wrong to say they would prefer to go into the field more often. Being on the ground is where stories are best told, where one can achieve the delicate balance that complex scenarios — unlike our everyday environments — require. They demand original investigation and diverse sources. So, I'd say that today's coverage, apart from very honourable exceptions, particularly in Portugal, often falls short of what would be desirable. And this is also linked to other factors: the way people consume news, the attention they give it, and whether they even seek it out, right? It seems contradictory, doesn't it?

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** What's far away is outside my sphere of concern, isn't it?

**Catarina Santos:** Exactly. And also because... What used to happen when we read newspapers? There was curation, so information didn't just fall into our laps or feeds. We would turn a page and suddenly find ourselves very interested in a topic we hadn't even realised could capture our attention. A story could draw us into something we had never thought about before. Now, the way we consume information online is completely different, isn't it? Online, we don't even go directly to news sites anymore,

because then that same effect could happen. But what appears on our feeds gradually narrows our interests, right? So, one thing is always connected to the other.

It's both about how people consume news and the conditions that exist — or don't exist — in most news organisations, isn't it? To be able to send more people out into the field.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** That's a major problem. You've witnessed the recent evolution of this situation in newsrooms, haven't you? I think, basically, you've never seen newsrooms that were overstaffed.

**Catarina Santos:** No.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** You're from the era of the... how do you say? Swiss-army knife journalist.

**Catarina Santos:** Swiss-army knife, yes.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** A journalist who does everything.

**Catarina Santos:** Yes, I'm a multimedia journalist by definition — that's what I've been for many years — so I'm particularly Swiss-army knife. Which, let me tell you, is not necessarily a bad thing. The tools can't all be used at the same time. In other words, being a Swiss-army-knife journalist, in the sense of enjoying and mastering multiple tools, isn't a problem in itself. The problem arises if we have to use all those tools at the same time, right? Which would also be impossible for anyone holding a real Swiss army knife, wouldn't it? If we have to solve every problem with all those implements at once, it's going to end badly, isn't it?

And I've also never known a newsroom flush with cash, you know... Well, with the financial capacity to decide to send journalists more frequently to scenarios that warrant it.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** And there, of course, the further away, the worse it gets, right? The costs are enormous. Deploying a journalist on the ground today isn't the same as

doing so 20 or 30 years ago, when there were people in the newsroom to cover any gaps. Now, if a journalist falls short in the newsroom, they're already one less crucial piece in the machine. And so, there's a lot at stake here... In fact, everything suffers, doesn't it? Ultimately, it's journalism itself that suffers, I would say.

**Catarina Santos:** Yes, yes, yes, absolutely. It gives us much less leeway. Even for... Going back to the topic of public interest. It's more difficult for us to capture the public's attention and convince them that a certain reality has a story worth paying attention to if we're just reproducing telexes. They're not even telexes anymore, but... this is old-fashioned language, but... News agency *takes* which often depend on freelancers that these very agencies have stationed in particularly hard-to-access areas. So, it's not even the employees, often staff, of these companies who are on the ground. So, this whole chain means that the stories we tell aren't all that compelling, right? Because the stories we tell, if we go to the field, are, first of all, much more human, necessarily. And then they manage to... When they are stories... We relate to human stories, right? We need that. And when we describe an international event, no matter how relevant, only from agency news, facts, a successive chain of numbers, without putting a face to those numbers, people — even if, at first, they're interested — end up losing interest, right? That's just human; that's how we work.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** It makes sense to think, Catarina, about the situation in which journalism, especially international news, is in some way colonised by the major news agencies, which basically come from France, England, and the United States, and are present worldwide, have the means to be present everywhere, but we aren't, and so, because we aren't, we're left with the worldview they lend us, on the one hand. And on the other hand, there's an added risk: because there aren't people on the ground, even these agencies often receive information from local agents who aren't journalists.

**Catarina Santos:** That's a risk, of course, yes. I would say that when we don't have direct access to information, we're always dependent on someone else's criteria, right? And as much as there's a lot of work, obviously very valuable, done by the most reputable agencies, and the standards are journalistic — mostly correct — but it's not us, right? It

always makes a difference, doesn't it? That is, agencies should be a support to any newsroom's work, not the primary source from which we get our information about what's happening far away, right? And sometimes far away isn't that far, it doesn't even have to be that far. Because, again, putting a journalist on the ground has a cost, and today, that cost has to be calculated almost down to the cent, right? How many nights? How many nights, and how much is the flight, and how much is the food? In some places, how much is the fixer, right? The local producer, without whom a journalist can't often do their work, right? Otherwise, they can't do their job.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** They serve as translators, as... interpreters, also as a link to the communities, to realities, etc.

**Catarina Santos:** Yes, yes, and without whom, often, the journalist's own safety is at risk if they don't use these services. And so, all these factors make this dependence greater, and then the agencies themselves also face these same problems. They're machines, usually, the bigger ones, especially, are more robust machines, but they're still machines that are part of the media industry, right? And, apart from very rare exceptions, I would say the entire media industry worldwide has been struggling with this business model issue for many years, right? With adaptations, attempts at adaptation that still haven't managed to restore the economic conditions it had a few years ago.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** And those are conditions that guarantee journalistic independence, which is the big crux of the matter, right?

**Catarina Santos:** Yes, but in the end, that's always what we're talking about, right? Of course. It's always about that, even on the most individual level. A precarious journalist is necessarily less independent. And it's not because they don't have the right principles inside them, it's because they're subject to a series of other logics, necessarily, that is, starting with the fear of losing that position. The fear of... No matter how passionate they are about what they do, losing the ability to do it if they exercise all their freedom, right? Even to the point of not being able to cultivate themselves. A journalist who can't consume other things, right? Have time, outside the newsroom, to cultivate themselves,

read books, go to lectures, go to the theatre, to the cinema, open their mind... And to raise questions beyond their day-to-day scope is necessarily a worse, more constrained journalist. And so, our independence is at stake even there, right? Right from there, actually. Then it only increases when we start looking at scenarios where financial capacity is truly an obstacle.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** Now tell me a bit about... because looking at your experience, we can see that... Especially when we talked earlier about the awards, etc., they basically depend on the journalist's dedication, in this case, the person's, to going against this whole machine. Because, in reality, you had to leave, you had to go abroad, you had to travel, experience other realities, really know them, immerse yourself in them. That's what brought you award-winning journalism, meaning that's what contributes to the quality of the journalism you produced, right? Then, of course, the journalist must also have intrinsic qualities, to know how to handle things, to have what it takes to play that guitar, right? But there's also an important reflection here to be made: based on your own experience, how do you see the situation of journalists today, when we know that, indeed, there are good journalists in newsrooms, but people complain that there isn't... that there's little good journalism?

**Catarina Santos:** From my experience, what I can say is that I couldn't have done any of that without the privilege I had, at various moments, of being given time — not just to go to the field, but then to process the work with the necessary time... I couldn't have done any of that without my structure, the one I was part of, enabling it and understanding that it was important.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** But that has to be earned, first of all, by you...

**Catarina Santos:** Not only, I mean, it also depends a lot on how structures work. In my specific case, I should say I was still very young when I had the privilege, for instance, of beginning to follow the so-called refugee crisis, back in 2014, even before that whole wave reached Europe. I was fortunate to have supervisors who understood the urgency of the issue and who realised that, difficult as it is, in a newsroom, freeing someone to

spend so much time on a story was important. They supported me in doing that. So, in that case, I was very lucky...

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** That's rare already.

**Catarina Santos:** Yes, but that... let's see...

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** It still happens, let's say.

**Catarina Santos:** It still happens, it still happens. That's it. I never get tired of saying that, even being the biggest critic of many of the practices established in today's newsrooms, very good journalism is being done. It also depends, often, on the existence of newsroom structures that themselves try every day, as much as possible, to open these gaps, to create this space so that, amid everything, one can continue to do good journalism. So, it's often a mix, I imagine, of the journalist really wanting to do it and dedicating themselves fully to doing the best they can, but also having the structure, having someone around who understands the importance of it and gives space for it.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** Catarina, that experience with migrants, refugees... refugees come from conflicts, wars, etc., which indeed already marked the previous decade, now it seems like the whole world is exploding around us, right? So, we don't even talk about refugees anymore; we don't talk about refugee crises that may come because of what's happening, and then some refugees are highlighted while others aren't, so some are made visible at the expense of others. How do you currently see international news and journalists reporting on it, particularly the difficulties of reporting from the field and telling the truth, when we live in a reality where everything... around journalism is basically done to suppress the truth?

**Catarina Santos:** I still see many cases of journalists who try to row against that tide every day. And I think it depends a lot on the media we're working in. But I think it's a general concern of... I don't know, I don't want to misuse the words, but of those who are really journalists, right?

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** Journalists in newsrooms today have solid training on these world issues, they're aware of them... do you think they became aware because, for example, a little earlier we were in another conversation, and in that conversation, my generation grew up with the fall of the Berlin Wall, a world at peace, finally we could worry about our little world, our local problems... And so, we disconnected. There was a whole generation of journalists, many of whom are in newsroom leadership today, it's important to say that too, who disconnected from the context of international news and the importance of international news.

There were many journalistic projects in Portugal in recent decades built basically on national news, and when suddenly the world exploded around us, what do you observe about the newsroom around you? I know you're alert to these issues; those who became aware of the refugee crises over ten years ago are certainly alert, and can link them to each other, can interconnect them, which is another problem: people can't put the context together. How do you see your surroundings?

**Catarina Santos:** I think we grew up, as you said, our generation grew up... even in school, we grew up thinking that, well, now it's over, because we'd already gone through circumstances... the generation before us had gone through such extreme circumstances that it was still fresh in our memory and would never happen again... So yes, we had this illusion that, at least in our universe, we would be a bit freer from conflicts. And today, what I see happening — and I'm talking about the general media landscape in Portugal — is, in some cases, a continuity of concern to... to deliver things in depth, and sometimes this implies learning quickly. That is, I think, to arrive at a newsroom already trained for this would be great, but in most cases it doesn't exist, and that's not a problem. As long as the journalist has the conditions to learn, to research, to be informed... Sometimes it's not even bad that we don't fully master a subject... We just have to maintain curiosity, know how to look for sources, know who to ask, and be willing to step out of our little bubble and seek other perspectives on the same story. And sometimes it's even good because we'll ask better questions than if we already master a topic... sometimes, when we put a journalist from another section to cover an area, they end up producing something that goes beyond the usual questions. But at the same time... That's one side. On the other hand, I see the way current conflicts are

turned into a spectacle, which worries me a lot. I see a way of mediatizing these conflicts that comes much closer to a kind of dangerous *infotainment*, with very serious consequences for the public and public perception. It worries me, it really worries me, because I think that, very often, we have to confront the amount of attention people are actually able to give to more difficult topics... and when, day after day, we trivialise the way we... the way we cover these issues in a sensationalist way, we're wasting that attention, even the little that exists. And so, that's a bit of it: on the one hand, I see newsrooms that still fight every day against the current, and on the other, the way international news is turned into spectacle, which I think has terrible consequences.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** I think you're also seeing, in the way these conflicts are turned into spectacle, how they're shaped into simple narratives — that is, the transformation of conflicts into dual sides, just good and bad, a kind of black-and-white thinking that essentially mirrors what we see in films.

**Catarina Santos:** Yes, yes, exactly.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** We all know, even from our own lives, that conflicts have many nuances. We know that when we separate from someone, for example, it may be partly their fault and partly ours, etc. So there's no pure good and bad in real life.

**Catarina Santos:** But that's the hardest narrative, right? We see it generally, right? The lack of patience, often even to consume, a topic in depth. And just take the example of the number of news items that aren't opened, right? People read the headline, and then there's a whole fuss about news headlines, only. And so many comments and inflamed reactions on social media. People haven't even bothered to open the news, right? So, this lack of patience for complexity, the search for simple answers, is a trait across many areas of society, which also naturally has to do with this information overload, the way we relate to it, and how constantly overwhelmed we are. And I'm not just talking about journalistic information; it's all the information surrounding us every day.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** And who's to blame for that, Catarina? Because... People will say, "Well, the journalists are to blame, right? They make the headlines, they do this or that". It's maybe important to put journalists' blame into perspective and eventually identify it where it really needs to be identified. In what we could call... I don't know, the machine, which is... I'll take a Pink Floyd image, right? *Welcome to the Machine*. Which is, indeed, a... a news-production machine, an industrial machine, in which journalists are involved, often just because they need a salary at the end of the month, right?

**Catarina Santos:** Yes. There's that, again, which brings us back to the business model issue, which has ceased to be profitable in the way it was for decades and decades, via advertising. That model broke. And... and as we continue to look for a business model, we're much more permeable, right? To a series of factors that shouldn't even be on the table when deciding what counts as news.

You asked who's to blame. I think... there's this side of how many media outlets are searching for a business model, right? And they continue searching and trying to recover... sustainability, which is fundamental for our independence. And on the other hand, there's also the urgent need for media literacy to be taught from the ground up. Because if we don't have demanding citizens, if we don't have citizens who won't accept this, right? Who won't accept going along with this completely passive way of receiving information? We won't have better journalism either. Because one thing... one thing depends on the other. We need demanding readers. We need readers who criticise, who don't accept being manipulated, who don't accept being used in this way. But if these citizens are just comfortably, apathetically scrolling their feeds, not caring about the manipulation being done to them, it's a cycle fueled by all these factors. So, I think media literacy, from pre-school onwards, and consistently, not with an occasional lecture in the academic path, is urgent. It's one of the most urgent things.

**Luís Miguel Loureiro:** Catarina Santos, thank you very much for coming to *Estados do Tempo* for this seventh episode. I said it was a magic number, I warned you, and I think I was right. *Estados do Tempo*, in this seventh episode, ends here. I just want to remind everyone that the bi-monthly BIP survey — the Barometer for the Quality of Information — is online, one of the two platforms promoted by *Estados do Tempo*. The survey asks:

How would you assess the quality of journalistic coverage of the ‘storm train’ that hit Portugal between 22 January and 8 February? So go to the BIP website, <https://b-info.pt/en/>, and give us your feedback on the quality of information. Thank you very much. The next episode will be the eighth, but the seventh was this one, and it was very good. Thank you very much.

**Catarina Santos:** Thank you.

**Luís Pinto:** That brings us to the end of the March 2026 episode of *Estados do Tempo*. Episode number seven. Today, with recording, editing, and post-production by Pedro Gaspar, moderation by Luís Loureiro, and guest Catarina Santos. Curated by Tiago Estêvão and presented by Luís Pinto. On behalf of the production team, thank you for listening and see you in the next episode of *Estados do Tempo*.

**[closing music]**