Episode 11: "Columbus's egg: Information quality and the quality of democracy"

[mix of introductory sounds]

Luís Pinto [host]: *Estados do Tempo* (The States of the Times). Because information quality and the quality of democracy are basic necessities.

[music]

Luís Pinto: Hello, thank you for joining us for episode 11 of *Estados do Tempo*, a podcast by the BIP – Barometer for Information Quality and Communitas. Today's topic brings back a question that has grown more urgent in recent years, in a capitalist society where populism, fascism, and disinformation are on the rise: how do we preserve the quality of democracies, and how does this relate to information quality? This time, Luís Loureiro is guiding us.

Luís Loureiro [moderator]: We all have the sense that, in fact, questions of political economy are fundamental, but it is rare for people to be able to develop critical thinking, there it is, to develop thought, to develop critical thinking, from your perspective and in your book, is to develop thought, in the sense of following that old maxim of investigative journalism, which you also, certainly, applied, *follow the money*, follow the trail of the money. We never… we end up never being able to follow the trail of the money.

Luís Pinto: Our guest today is Rui Pereira.

Rui Pereira [guest]: Let's say that, today, the media are… corporate media are companies, owned by large companies, which, among other assets and investments, own governments.

Luís Pinto: Rui Pereira holds a PhD in Communication Sciences, specialising in the Sociology of Information and Communication, from the University of Minho. He is currently an associate professor at Lusófona University and an integrated member of CICANT, where his research interests include communication theory and political communication, developed particularly from critical paradigms of communication and political philosophy. He has authored several investigative journalism pieces, columns, and academic studies, as well as multiple scientific articles. He also works in education through the arts, as one of the main people behind Bando dos Gambozinos in Porto, which recently celebrated 50 years of activity.

Luís Miguel Loureiro is a journalism professor at the University of Minho. He teaches courses in fact-checking and investigative journalism. He is part of the BIP coordination team. His career as a journalist, spanning almost 30 years in radio and television, included war reporting in Lebanon and numerous conflict assignments.

Luís Loureiro: Right, so here we are for *Estados do Tempo*, episode 11. In this episode, we proposed a topic that boils down to the idea of Columbus's egg: what came first. In our case, we are going to deal with the dichotomy, the dialogue or the conflict between information quality and the quality of democracy. To address this subject, which is certainly not an easy subject to address in a format as short as a podcast, we invited Rui Pereira, associate professor at Lusófona University, Porto University Centre, researcher at CICANT, a research centre associated with communication, at Lusófona University, who, in the midst of an already very extensive career as a journalist, was essentially an investigative journalist at Expresso newspaper for two decades, not only at Expresso, he also worked at Diário as a journalist, so with a long career in journalism, winner of the award Gazeta Revelação at the beginning of his career as a journalist, author of several books… So, amid all of this, he published several books on investigative journalism, columns, communication and sociology, books which I recommend reading, also because many of them touch on, exactly, or several of them touch exactly on the subject that we are going to deal with today.

I would highlight Rui Pereira… thank you very much, good morning, or good afternoon, or good evening, depending on what time it is where you are, etc., etc., those things that we used to say on the radio. This will be listened to whenever people want, actually, and, therefore, I would highlight a work of yours, and allow me to address you informally, because we are, in fact, friends, as well as colleagues of long standing, fellow journalists, etc., the book *Pensar em*

Tempos de Não Pensamento: para uma Analítica do Brutal na Contemporaneidade (Thinking in Times of Non-Thinking: Towards an Analysis of the Brutal in Contemporaneity). Or in the present day, now I'm quoting from memory, I don't know whether it is contemporaneity or the present day.

Rui Pereira: Contemporaneity.

Luís Loureiro: Contemporaneity, exactly. It makes more sense, in fact, in terms of your thinking. Thinking in Times of Non-Thinking. Interestingly, I was even going to pick up on this here because you always, constantly, articulate this question of information, the question of the media, with our situation as beings who, at this point, are already hardly capable of thinking. In other words, leaving aside that idea of *homo sapiens* as a thinking being. I would like us to start here, because from here we will then articulate the idea of information quality versus the quality of democracy.

Rui Pereira: Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, thank you very much, first of all, for the invitation, Luís. This is an important question because, let's put it this way, in the history of the media and in the history of the political system we know as democracy, and which I call liberal oligarchy, it is very much linked to the idea of transparency of information… information as, on the one hand, the dissemination of knowledge among people and of knowing, of being able to know, what the government is doing and, ultimately, to monitor what the government, that abstract entity, whatever the regime, is doing. So it would be the theory of the watchdog: journalism as the watchdog of the dominated in relation to the dominant. The problem is that, if this is reversed, if this relationship is reversed, the watchdog becomes the guard of the dominant against the dominated. Not because there are actually spying or police functions, although it can also do that, through digital means; we already know that the digital footprint is a form of controlling people, but, above all, because it is an instrument of dissemination, of propaganda.

In practice, today, corporate journalism has a counterweight; that is, there is a power above journalism. And here… we normally get very confused between – which is an apparently stupid question – who has more power, the media or politics. And this is a conversation that, in my view, is somewhat spoiled, because it is, evidently, politics, because only politics... Comparatively, it is like the relationship between the political and the legal, isn't it? I mean,

which one prevails? The political, not the legal. The political makes the law. Ultimately, the media exist within the limits that the political sphere allows them. And this is a relationship which, in everyday practice and in media studies […], sometimes appears a little mixed up, but which in the field of political philosophy there is no doubt about, nor in the philosophy of journalism and communication. It is obviously the political entity that allows media action.

Right, so, in that sense, what articulates the two? Ownership structures articulate the two. Let's say that, today, the media are… corporate media, aren't they? They are companies, owned by large companies, which, among other assets and investments, own governments. So, Guy Debord said more than 40 years ago that it is stupid to ask whether economic power or political power predominates in the relationship between them in our systems. Well, this is an integrated system, isn't it? The most frequent example is the revolving door. I am now a minister or a Secretary of State; I sign a predatory contract that puts the State at the service of some private entity to carry out a project, for example. Then I leave the government and become a director of the press organisation with which I signed the contract while I was a minister. The revolving-door system is, so to speak, the public expression of this covert action that incorporates the media and political power, with economic power as the common denominator. From this point on, let's say that two problems are solved: the quality of democracy and the quality of the media. And what is the solution? There is no quality.

Luís Loureiro: It is very interesting what you are referring to. We all have a sense that questions of political economy are fundamental. Still, it is rare for people to be able to develop critical thinking; there it is, to develop thought, to develop critical thinking, from your perspective and in your book, is to develop thought, in the sense of following that old maxim of investigative journalism, which you also, certainly, applied: *follow the money*, follow the trail of the money. We never… we end up never being able to follow the trail of the money.

Rui Pereira: Yes, and that is fundamental because it is precisely the... In Portugal… around 10 billion euros escape the tax authorities every year, which are invested offshore, which are transferred offshore. That money has to be declared. That money is never declared. But we can go… and here we have the problem of information quality: we can go after the Internal Administration Minister's water tank, with a €28,000 invoice, can't we? So, and this tells us everything about both the quality of democracy, in which there is a Secretary of State, in which there is a Minister of Finance, the Tax and Customs Authority, which is the only service in

Portugal that works, which lets 10 billion euros go offshore, isn't it? And we go looking for €28,000 in the Minister's water tank, in Odemira or wherever it is. So, this is the complete dysfunction, both of the political system and of the media system, isn't it?

So, now what happens here? People cannot have this interpretation because, let's put it this way, I'll quote Debord again, won't I? Debord said that, in the commentaries on the society of the spectacle, what happened is that, today, any possibility of logical thinking and strategic thinking has disappeared. Even from the point of view of politics. Even from the point of view of political domination. If we look at what is happening and we look at everyday life, and the news bulletins are good for this, we realise that this is navigation by sight. We don't yet have astronomical navigation, do we? So, by this route we wouldn't yet have discovered the Azores. We would still be sailing around the western coast of Africa during the Age of Discovery. So, the triumph of action without thought is the triumph of news without a why. Why do €10 billion go undeclared and nobody finds that strange? And everyone finds it very strange that the minister has a water tank, a pool, or whatever, worth €28,000, right? Although… I am not minimising this case, nor maximising it. I'm just saying that between 10 billion and 28,000 there is, yes, a certain difference, isn't there?

Luís Loureiro: I would move on from here, then, from this question, these questions, these minutiae, the things that, basically, I mean… let's see, as a citizen, I am capable of understanding what €28,000 is, aren't I? As a citizen, I also haven't the slightest idea what 10 billion or 10 trillion is, or whatever, because, in fact, it confuses the head of any so-called normal person. And here there may eventually be one of the pitfalls, one of the traps, precisely, of contemporary communication, of contemporary information, which ends up leading us to understand only simple messages, catchphrases, and to understand all political communication through catchphrases, and not that which, in fact, affects our lives. It is a pitfall, on the one hand, that makes us fall into it, a trap that holds us, and then prevents us from actually seeing reality here. I would like to relate this, then, to the resurgence of fascism, a contemporary issue. Which you have also been analysing, but not from a merely ideological perspective, which is a perspective that I think is also interesting to bring here, in other words, a perspective from the communication hemisphere itself.

Rui Pereira: Yes, this is a very serious problem. Leaving aside the fact that the media, the media apparatus of any society, is a mechanism of secondary socialisation. We have mechanisms of

primary socialisation, the family, school, schooling, and that is why communication cannot be studied without studying education, without studying systems of instruction, isn't it? And culture, naturally. And, therefore, why is it that we suddenly start looking for fascism in some rather disconnected policies, in some politicians whom we call populists, because, since they don't plant bombs, we can't call them terrorists; we call them populists, but at the same time they progress, don't they? We criticise them, and they progress.

The Portuguese case of André Ventura is very typical, isn't it? André Ventura… there is a study by a young undergraduate at NOVA University, in our fields, communication sciences, the university where I began studying, NOVA, in Lisbon, which shows that André Ventura had, for example, more television interviews during a certain period than the two prime ministers together during that period, Montenegro and António Costa. Right, so what was the interest… now Chega has 60 MPs, but it had only one, and that was already the case when André Ventura was alone. What was the interest in listening to that solitary individual? Now it could be the man from JPP, elected in Funchal, who is there now, but you don't see this man giving interviews. Why did André Ventura give so many interviews, right? When he was there alone? Well, because there are two things: André Ventura works… he's good television, André Ventura gives you what we call a soundbite, doesn't he? The catchphrases you were talking about, precisely through which politics is now conducted, through catchphrases that follow one another, André Ventura always makes good television, doesn't he? It's like wrestling matches, isn't it? Why does this fit so well? Because our culture is a culture of the brutal, and that is why I invoked the idea of the brutal as a category of contemporaneity. What is the brutal? It is the triumph of action without thought; it is the triumph of impulses, of the euphoric impulse, of the dysphoric impulse and, ultimately, a functionality that becomes passionate and potentially violent. Why violent? Because, in scenarios of scarcity, species react with violence, and as dialogue, rationality, and the very conditions of life become scarcer, we have the whole broth for potentiating violence.

On the other hand, violence has long been, it's not something new, fit has long been, the greatest spectacle in the world. Just look at film and television productions, fiction, etc., etc… And they base all their success on conflict and violence. From this point onwards, societies constituted, created, instructed, and instituted based on violence identify patterns of violence much more easily than patterns of rationality, and this is where the category of the brutal comes from. Ventura's interviews, his interventions, are brutal things. I mean, all the treatment given to parliamentary action by that group of individuals, of citizens, if anyone knows a little about history, and I assume André Ventura knows it, the others don't, but André Ventura must know it… There are another one or two who perhaps… he knows perfectly well that when the group

of National Socialists was elected to Parliament, to the Reichstag, this was precisely what they did. But those, well, they appeared in uniform, etc., etc., etc. These don't, because times have changed today in such a way that our tendency is to look for fascism precisely where it is not. I always remember one of the last interviews with a great American writer, Norman Mailer, who, around the beginning of the twenty-first century – he died shortly afterwards – said something like: well, they're going to put up guards, barbed wire, watchtowers, etc., etc., etc., and I only know that they won't call it fascism, will they? And this is fascism, fascism as a category incorporated by each one of us, and this is where the importance lies… This has an equivalent in censorship in the media: the shift from the censorship office to self-censorship. When a journalist censors themselves, the newspaper no longer needs to go to the censorship commission because it already knows nothing bad is going to be there. In such a way that when fascism is incorporated in the form of intimate experience, through brutality and through violence, it is guaranteed that the system will operate by itself, won't it? So, looking for fascism where it is not is one of the fascist activities we devote ourselves to nowadays.

The case of Chega, or other similar cases across Europe that have had great electoral success… these are not successes of these groups; they are failures of the system we call democratic and that I call oligarchic and, now, in transition towards oligocracy, oligocratic systems. What does this mean? It means that instead of being a power that comes from a certain authority, from a certain tradition – oligarchy – it is a power that increasingly asserts itself through force, through *kratos*, the character of power exercised as force. You only need to know a little bit of etymology, don't you?

Luís Loureiro: Rui, could we say that, just as about 100 years ago capitalism began to experience, let's put it this way, its loss of disguise through the assumption of concrete, ideological fascism… what you were describing 100 years ago, with Nazi MPs in uniform in the Reichstag doing what today the far-right MPs in Portugal and in other countries do without uniforms, or without an apparent uniform… But, just as 100 years ago, 100 years later, can capitalism now do without its own, let's say, disguise as democracy?

Rui Pereira: It cannot continue that disguise, can it? We are in a situation… the capital system is in a relatively unprecedented situation, and this is greatly facilitated by technology, by the evolution of technology. Which makes it almost inevitable that the next generation will live materially worse than the previous one. And this is something new in the world of capital, at

least, well, in the global field of the dominant powers – that the next generation will live worse than the previous one is an unacceptable thing, and capitalism has always managed to live materially… it has always managed to avoid this and, now, it can't. It can't because, effectively, artificial intelligence will one day do without all of us; teachers, right? There's no point, there's no need for teachers. It is cheaper to have a little machine, isn't it? And it will dispense with, I don't know how many millions of people. Volkswagen is announcing redundancies of 100,000 people in Europe at the moment, I mean… So, from this point onwards, fascism as a resource… fascism is not a doctrine, fascism is not an ideology. It is not a doctrine; fascism is a resource of the capital system and ultimately of the industrial system itself, even from a more in-depth perspective, but it is a resource of domination of the capital system when it has no other, isn't it?

So, from the moment that people's protest becomes completely inconsequential… we see millions of demonstrators because of Palestine, so demonstrations for Palestine are banned. Still, we saw those millions of people in relation to the war in Iraq in 2003, the aggression against Iraq, millions of people – in London, they were the largest demonstrations after the demonstrations celebrating victory in the World War… when we see this happening and the inconsequence of this – of what is called public opinion, isn't it? Which is a hypostatisation; it is something that does not exist, that is endowed with substance, isn't it? When we see that public opinion is completely inconsequential, we realise that the relationship linking those represented and those representing them has been completely lost. This means that the oligarchy was left alone and that the only way it has of managing to dominate – and that is the fundamental problem of politics, how the few dominate the many – how the few manage to dominate the many will be through force; it will be through reducing them to force, and we called that fascism, didn't we? And that is, in substance, fascism, which is the loss of capitalism's mask, isn't it? That was how it was at the beginning of the twentieth century, and that is how it is at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Luís Loureiro: And, in that sense, could we also talk about the loss, let's say, of the character of the pressure cooker, of the pressure cooker metaphor of the media?

Rui Pereira: Yes, the media are… ultimately… At the beginning of the century, a very funny film premiered, which was V for Vendetta. And there, based on the story of Guy Fawkes and Guy Fawkes's conspiracy in seventeenth-century England… and there is a scene in that film in which

a family is watching the news and they laugh at what the news journalist is saying… we are very close to getting there, to watching the news and people laughing because it is a complete joke, complete lies, people already know. Now, in that sense, the media are no longer a pressure cooker; the media are part of the pressure in the cooker. And this is a huge contradiction. So, the media will also become, let's put it this way, agents of what I call the proliferation of inconsequence – that is, things have no consequences; we say things, and they have not the slightest consequence. News, just as it has no cause, has no why. Then they also have no consequences. Any minister says that they take full responsibility. Yes, and what does that mean? Taking responsibility? It means saying that they have taken responsibility; nothing happens. And this, when it is incorporated as an existential category, we move, transpose this abstract sphere of inconsequence into personal life, and we begin to see completely absurd behaviour in people, completely foolish behaviour. People who do things that will evidently have a disastrous consequence, but they continue doing them happily and, when they are confronted with the consequence, they are very surprised. This is an incorporation of the generalisation of inconsequence and, hence, reflection in life. It is, so to speak, the triumph of the brutal.

Luís Loureiro: I would, let's say, square the circle here, if you allow me, in relation to this question of the media that you raise, that you invert as part of the pressure in the cooker, towards disinformation, in other words, we still have, today, a discourse about disinformation – or we have a dominant discourse about disinformation – that places, let's put it this way, only in one… if we divide the thing into hemispheres – I used the expression hemisphere earlier – if we divide the thing into hemispheres, the hemisphere of the media or traditional media or what are now called the legacy media, the media of heritage, let's put it that way… On that side, we have an almost immaculate discourse that no disinformation is produced through these media, which, potentially, deserves our reflection from the outset. On the other hand, placing the entire burden of disinformation on what individual initiatives, initiatives by obscure organisations, etc., etc., have on… through the internet and the qualifications that we keep giving to that internet, from the dark internet – the dark web – to other qualifications. Earlier, you mentioned V for Vendetta, and I thought of Anonymous, who use precisely that iconography.

Rui Pereira: Right, so, here we have a problem, which is the problem of academic thinking about the digital. Academic thinking about the digital went through two major moments: a euphoric moment in which, suddenly, it was thought that freedom had arrived, that we all had a say and

that this word was at the same level as all the other words that were said, wasn't it? Those are the 1990s, the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Then, a second moment, in which we realised that, apparently, we had unleashed a monster, didn't we? Suddenly, everyone had access to speech, and that is Umberto Eco's idea when he said that digital technology and social media had been the promotion of the tavern to the public sphere, didn't he? A euphoric perspective and a dysphoric perspective. But now this dysphoric perspective has acquired an instrumental rationale: it allows the burden of all disinformation, of all information disorder, as it is called, in a rather unfortunate term, information disorder, to be transferred to the digital sphere. That is, are individuals, are those obscure organisations, or are the individuals who are misinformed responsible for disinformation? This has a great deal to do with the so-called neoliberal system in which people are held responsible for the failure imposed on them, isn't it? It's your fault.

José Mário Branco said this a long time ago, on a remarkable record called FMI (IMF): it's your fault, isn't it? Well, this implies, on our part, as scholars in communication sciences, in my view, a major turnaround in research and in consideration… the assumption from which we investigate networks is that when the legacy media, the traditional media, set themselves up as judges of what is true and of the one truth, and go and carry out fact-checking systems in the digital sphere, this means that they are judges. In other words, they are the ones who determine what is true and what is not true, regardless of reality. It so happens that, nowadays, with this narrowing, with this growing pressure, with this oligocracy, the media system produces more disinformation or, at least, as much disinformation as the digital system and, furthermore, it produces it in an organised way and produces it without any possibility of being monitored. Who guards the guard, right? From the moment conventional media themselves become the guard, they become the ones who guard, namely, themselves. And anyone who has worked in the media – like you, me, and so many people who have worked in the media – knows very well how it works. So, nowadays, what happens is something absolutely paradoxical: it is only in the rubbish that we can find nourishment; it is precisely among the rubbish of the digital sphere that we can find some information that we certainly will not see in conventional media. And this returns us to the impoverished state of our existence: in which we call life something that is merely survival; they are the poor in the city who try to find something to eat in rubbish bins. And this is our condition today: we are trying to find some information in the rubbish bins of the digital media. Because in the waste-treatment plants, which are the conventional media, there is certainly no nourishment for us.

Luís Loureiro: Rui Pereira, we are more or less at the end of a poorly calculated half hour. I thank you enormously for your availability and for the quality of the conversation, which, in fact, leaves us with many avenues for reflection. I think it comes at just the right time; we will take this away to think about during the holidays. It is a good time to resist the grinding machine of the production of informational noise in which we are all immersed. And which is also, precisely, part of that machine that you portrayed, no longer as democracy, but as oligocracy, which is a designation that I think should, in fact, be imprinted on our thinking so that we can have the keys to resistance in a time that very much needs them. Thank you very much.

Rui Pereira: Thank you so much, Luís. Thank you so much to the University of Minho, which is also my university. That is where I did my PhD; that university is my university. A big hug.

Luís Loureiro: A big hug. *Estados do Tempo*, end of episode 11 with Rui Pereira, associate professor at Lusófona University in Porto, researcher, author, former journalist for 20 years, was our guest today. We reflected on the topic of information quality and/or the quality of democracy: Columbus's egg. Thank you very much for listening.

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Luís Pinto: That was the July 2026 episode of Estados do Tempo, produced by BIP – Barometer for Information Quality, at the University of Minho. This episode featured Luís Miguel Loureiro conducting the interview, and our guest was Rui Pereira. Pedro Gaspar handled the recording and post-production; Tiago Estêvão curated the episode; and Inês Mendes provided production support. Hosted by Luís Pinto. Thank you for listening, and see you in the next episode.

[closing music]