

Episode 12: “Quality of journalism and the silly season”

[mix of introductory sounds]

Luís Pinto [host]: *Estados do Tempo* (The States of the Times). Because the quality of journalism in the silly season is a basic necessity.

[music]

Luís Pinto: Hello, and thanks for joining us for the 12th episode of *Estados do Tempo*. Summer is a time to recharge our batteries and also the time of the so-called silly season, with less pressure on current affairs journalism and, consequently, lighter subjects in the press. But could it also be a time for more in-depth journalism and more substantial pieces of work? That is the topic this month—quality of journalism and the silly season, which welcomes Tiago Ramalho.

Tiago Ramalho [guest]: It’s the hierarchy of news values that differs a little. We start paying more attention to a news value that, sometimes, I would say, ends up being pushed down the list, and you can see why, which is the unusual idea of “Man Bites Dog”.

Luís Pinto: This time, Madalena Oliveira is doing the honours.

Madalena Oliveira [moderator]: The click-based business model has certainly aggravated this expectation that, even over time, in a period of less intense serious events, journalism still needs to capture people’s attention.

Luís Pinto: Tiago Ramalho is a journalist at Público newspaper, in the Science section, where he writes about subjects such as space, food and health. He is a PhD student in

Communication Sciences at the University of Minho, researching pseudoscience. Madalena Oliveira is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Sciences at the University of Minho and regularly teaches semiotics, communication and languages, journalism, and journalism and sound. She researches sound culture and radio studies. She is an integrated member of the Communication and Society Research Centre, a research unit which she has directed since April 2022. She is also the director of the journal *Comunicação e Sociedade*.

Madalena Oliveira: In this edition of the *Estados do Tempo* podcast, we talk about the quality of information during a period which, in journalistic jargon, we usually call the silly season, coinciding with summer, a season more devoted to enjoying holidays and a time of year when political activity slows down. The silly season is when the intensity of information in the media is generally lower. With Tiago Ramalho, we'll talk about the challenges this period poses for journalism and the quality of information. Welcome, Tiago.

Tiago Ramalho: Good morning.

Madalena Oliveira: Could we say that the hottest months of the year are months of more moderate temperatures for journalism?

Tiago Ramalho: Yes, I'd say we could say that. I don't know whether it still makes sense for us to keep talking about the silly season, because, let's say, journalism continues to function. Things continue to happen, even in the political sphere, during the summer, which used to be months typically characterised by lighter news, when politics moved away from newspapers a little. Today, that's no longer the case. If we look at last year, in 2025, for example, the announcement of the end of FCT, the Foundation for Science and Technology, was on 31 July. So, I think that, just from that, you can already see that politics no longer stops as much, and neither do newspapers.

I think that's one point. And then there's the other point about whether it still makes sense for newspapers themselves to have specific content for the summer. Several newspapers still produce special summer editions, with content such as series or questionnaires for public

figures, etc., which always appear in August, sometimes in July. And, at least in my view, they have to do with the idea that readers are also resting, in rest mode, and want less politics, less hard news, and lighter things. I'm not sure that's really the case either.

Madalena Oliveira: The expression *silly season* originated in nineteenth-century British journalism, when summer represented a kind of information desert. I gather, from what you're telling me, that we can no longer really talk about an absence of news.

Tiago Ramalho: No, no. I did some research into what has happened over recent summers, and I would say that, even at the end of the twentieth century, summer wasn't exactly marked by a desert of news. One of the first things that came to mind was Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. That was also in August, if I'm not mistaken. It was in the summer. And so there is a whole series of events that continue... the world keeps turning in the summer, and there's no desert of news. What I do think happens, despite everything, is that there's less politics because Parliament goes on holiday. Many ministers go on holiday, although we still have, for example, internal administration, which remains very active, with the wildfires, for instance. But Parliament is on holiday, and that means there's less day-to-day political discussion, everyday discussion, less...

Madalena Oliveira: The judicial holidays too, school holidays.

Tiago Ramalho: Exactly, yes. Although then, with schools, there's the issue of exams, the issue of higher education, which end up marking the...

Madalena Oliveira: Education news.

Tiago Ramalho: Apart from August, there's always... in July and late August, early September, there's always a lot of activity and a lot of stress in education. But, in fact, fewer bills are being introduced, fewer draft resolutions, etc., and that means there's less politics. Which doesn't mean there's less news. I think the other sections have to contribute, too. And that's one area

where seasonality, this time of the silly season, can actually help. There are sections, such as the Science section, where I work and, therefore, know better. Or sections such as Economics, etc., which sometimes have less room for more developed pieces or for greater prominence on a front page and which end up having that opportunity during the summer months, when politics takes a little more of a rest.

Madalena Oliveira: Although the expression silly season sounds very good, at least from a phonetic point of view, it actually has a negative connotation. Literally, we would say that it is synonymous with a ridiculous or foolish season. To frame it as a time of year for journalism could be a way for journalists to criticise themselves, or an excuse to lower the quality threshold?

Tiago Ramalho: Yes. And I'll get to that straight away, with an example outside my field, to help a little. But I think it even discredits journalism itself. Because it seems... and I think it also contributes to a certain disconnection between readers and newspapers, which happens in the summer. Because of the holidays, because people perhaps have other things to do, and that's fine. But you also feel that, perhaps, newspapers make less effort during those months to provide things that interest people, to provide news, which is normally what interests people most in newspapers.

But, on the other hand, there really is... you lose a little of that idea of journalism as a discipline of verification and as a search for news. And one of the most obvious examples, for me, although it's a very specific area of journalism, is sports newspapers. Because the summer season is a silly season and, sometimes, a very ridiculous one because front pages, or first pages, are produced with things that are never verified as being accurate. And it's not that it's bad information, a bad source, or that the story has other dimensions. Just because it happens every day, and that contributes a little to discrediting journalism. And there's also a certain amount of carelessness, sometimes. So journalists sometimes go into holiday mode.

Madalena Oliveira: So does the scarcity of strong news mean that there is more room for rumours and disinformation?

Tiago Ramalho: Yes, yes, yes, I definitely think so. One of the examples I read when I was looking a little into this ridiculous, or silly, period was about Scotland and how sightings in Loch Ness, or sightings of monsters in Loch Ness, began to be reported and given a lot of prominence in Scottish newspapers, precisely during these silly seasons. In fact, I still found recent news stories about monster sightings in Loch Ness. I think it's regrettable that we still give space to things, to rumours, which end up creating disinformation and myths, and that, once again, I don't think contributes to the quality of journalism, to what readers should regard as journalism, which is, there you have it, having things verified with several sources, preferably, and which add something to us. And most of these things, which are rumours, really don't add much to us.

Madalena Oliveira: Several factors contribute to this: people are on holiday, political activity slows down, social activity, and perhaps even cultural activity. There are fewer people in newsrooms too. Do all these factors contribute to changing newsworthiness criteria?

Tiago Ramalho: Yes, I would say that...

Madalena Oliveira: ...or news values.

Tiago Ramalho: Right, that's it. I think the criteria remain the same, but they become a little broader. I think... It's the hierarchy of news values that differs a little: we start paying more attention to a news value that, sometimes, I would say, ends up being pushed down the list, and you can see why, which is the unusual, that idea of Man Bites Dog is the news. And I think there's more room for news values such as the unusual and much more, even for proximity, for Portuguese things, taking the opportunity to do reports on things that happen in the country; travelling along the *Nacional 2* road in search of the best restaurants, or in search of the best places to spend the holidays... these are things that always appear quite often during this period. I don't know whether they follow the same news values. I would say not, to begin with, that they don't follow the same news values that journalists have or that editorial teams have during the rest of the year. Between January and June, there is a kind of hierarchy that pauses in July and August, I'd say, and also a little at Christmas.

Madalena Oliveira: Do you feel there is a difference between media outlets, that is, is this silly season experienced differently in newspapers, on television... Is this a phenomenon, a reality of traditional media only, or is it something that is already being felt on digital platforms as well?

Tiago Ramalho: I think that, even so, you notice that difference between traditional and digital media, because digital media end up having a little... the overall tone ends up being more consistent throughout the year, while also having much more of this rush towards a certain amount of sensationalism, which is also characteristic of this time of year, if we want to put it that way. I'd say that in traditional media, especially on television—I don't want to be unfair, but I think especially on television, because of the type of resources needed to produce a report—there's much more of this issue of going around the country, doing reports about food, or the best places to visit. They're much more present. I also think it happens in newspapers, but it ends up... because they have a broader thematic scope, in most cases they end up giving space to other places... to other areas to appear. Still, things like the Proust questionnaires keep happening, and they're present year-round, but I don't think they add much in terms of news, in journalistic terms. But in newspapers, it gives other areas space—science journalism is one of them—which ends up with a little more space, although resources are also scarcer because people go on holiday anyway. But more space is given, more pages to do major pieces, instead of having one-page news stories, for example, or half a page. There are always two pages for a piece because there are fewer resources, and also because there is a willingness to give it more space.

Madalena Oliveira: The kind of subjects you're talking about, going around the country looking even for more unusual stories, can often also be confused with the concept of soft news. Is that one of the drawbacks of the silly season, that we have more space for less serious news, or can we say that these less serious news stories, if this concept even makes sense, contribute in some way to further eroding the credibility of journalism and journalists, which is already somewhat damaged?

Tiago Ramalho: Yes, I don't really like the distinction between hard news and soft news, but I think it's useful for us to situate ourselves, all the same. So, I'd say that newspapers already have space for this... newspapers, the media... already have space for this soft news throughout the year, and we always have this soft news. I think the important thing is that they are verified and that there is a kind of criterion for them to be there, because I think a report about someone in Vidigueira who's been making the same type of wine for 100 years can have space throughout the year anyway. It doesn't need to be something put out only in the summer because we have space to fill, and it immediately gets enormous prominence. But to answer directly, I think so. I think we end up having more soft news, less verification of those actual news stories, and there's also an option to write and publish because, there you have it, relationships become shorter. We have space to fill, both on television and in newspapers. And then, by having so much soft news, I think it ends up discrediting journalism. And also, something that is always very important throughout the year, particularly for newspapers, is what the headline is, what goes on the front page. It's important even for television, because the one o'clock news, most of the time... the big stories on the one o'clock news repeat what the headlines in that morning's newspapers are. And in the summer, sometimes, you feel that nothing is interesting... nothing that makes me want to read that newspaper, and that's a feeling we don't want readers to have because that discredits us, on the one hand. Still, it also means we lose our audience, which is important.

Madalena Oliveira: The click-based business model has certainly aggravated this expectation that, even during a period of less intense serious events, journalism still needs to capture people's attention. What strategies do newsrooms have to prepare for this summer period and, therefore, for a period of less intense news?

Tiago Ramalho: It doesn't necessarily have to be like that because—I'll go back to the example of the Foundation for Science and Technology—when there is news, when there is actually something happening, when we have things to offer readers, there is real interest and during that summer, last summer in this case, a lot was discussed, a lot was written... opinion pieces, journalistic articles, and they all had a huge readership. So, I'd say that if newspapers can be interesting, let's put it that way, in a very basic sense, people will come after them; people still want to read, in any case.

Madalena Oliveira: In fact, it would even be a time more conducive to reading with dedication, with time, with availability.

Tiago Ramalho: Yes, exactly. And when you can go back to that thing of reading the newspaper from cover to cover, which is something I only do at the weekend because, during the week, it's impossible. But, in fact, there are strategies, and I think one of the strategies has been to opt a little for this search for clicks, this active strategy of having more appealing headlines that encourage people to click. I'm not sure that brings excellent results. I think it can bring more clicks. What it doesn't bring is another metric that I think is increasingly important, and has been increasingly important for newspapers—for Público, at least, I know it has been; I don't know the others in as much depth—which is reading time... the average reading time within each article. And it's much more important to have 45 seconds or a minute of reading time than to have 10 seconds and 20,000 clicks. If nobody reads it, I don't know whether our service is being done very well, because at that point we're no longer doing a great service to the population. It's not a public service, even though we so often rightly say that journalism is.

So, the strategies have always been a little along those lines. Then there are other, more organisational strategies, which I think are useful, which involve preparing series, preparing a series of reports on something. A few years ago, a colleague of mine, who is now also in science journalism—Filipa Almeida Mendes—did a series of reports in the summer, which turned out really well, which involved doing a happiness course and showing what it was like, what was good about it, what was bad about it. Something in the first person, which is something we rarely do at Público, but, given that it was summer, we tried to explore that angle. And it went really well, and it made complete sense to publish it, perhaps, at that time. It ended up working as a testing ground. What I often think is that we can test things in the summer—it's just important that there is follow-up afterwards—and this type of reporting, in which you participate directly in the object of study, so to speak, ended up... not having any continuity. But it's a type of work that is prepared, that gives you five, six texts on Sunday, Saturday, whatever, and then what's missing is continuity. Because it's a style that clearly produced results; what's missing is seeing whether it works in other formats.

Madalena Oliveira: A type of work that slightly reconfigures the concept of current affairs, not so much the most immediate current affairs, but current affairs that remain relevant for a little longer and that even allow work to be done in advance—is that it?

Tiago Ramalho: Yes, yes, and that's something that already happens beforehand, especially in smaller sections—again from personal experience, because the Science section is a small section, with an editor and two journalists. When someone goes on holiday, it's important to prepare in advance what we're going to have and what we can do so that we have things ready to go, as people say. Have things already set aside so they can be published at any time. We already do that throughout the year; I think it's more intense during the summer because more people are on holiday. Everyone has holidays between June and September, more or less between July and September, and that means there's a need to prepare more things. This type of reporting, which works very well, can fit in at any time of year. Perhaps in the summer, there is more space to ensure we have five or six consecutive Saturdays when that can be the newspaper's main report, when nothing is happening that requires a current affairs report. That, I think, is where summer has this advantage, because there isn't going to be a political change, apart from last year, probably. Still, there won't be a major political change that makes us want to do another kind of report, and that helps with planning. But otherwise, it's something that can be done throughout the year, I think...

Madalena Oliveira: As long as there are resources to do it...

Tiago Ramalho: Right. There's the issue of resources, and I think another important issue is that, normally, sources and people who sometimes want to give leads on possible news stories are also on holiday, which can limit certain areas a little.

Madalena Oliveira: And if we talk about the holidays of sources, we can also talk about the holidays of those who put pressure on journalists to make certain things news, can't we?

Tiago Ramalho: We can, yes. Although there, it depends a little. I think that, for example, in the context of governments and so on, not so much. I think that continues because, if journalists continue to do their job, they'll also have to continue doing theirs. In other areas, more connected, for example... those connected to universities, for example. Universities tend to stop for about a month. Not necessarily, but they are more closed off and often have little

communication with the outside world. That means, for example, that universities tend to be a little more distant in the summer. Then it's also part of the journalist's job to go and pester researchers, sometimes while they're on holiday, but pester them to talk about this report, that one, especially because scientific journals continue to work in the summer, so that's one example. Another thing I forgot to mention earlier was making forward-looking pieces and doing retrospectives. It's also often a period for that, especially when there isn't a football World Cup or European Championship. Now that there is football, it's a little easier to fill June and July, for example. But in other years, it becomes very important to do retrospectives: six months have passed since this decision, a year has passed, such-and-such has happened. That ends up being...

Madalena Oliveira: One of the problems that I think is identified in journalism today is perhaps its inability to compete with other media to be the first to provide information. Today, people no longer really learn first that something has happened through newspapers, radio, or television. Isn't what you're describing proof that another model of journalism is possible, a more explanatory model, less rushed by current affairs and which, therefore, can make more room for longer formats, as you say happens at this time of year?

Tiago Ramalho: I'd say that, in theory, yes; in theory, yes. I'm not sure we don't need to keep trying to be the first. I think there is more of a need to be the first to give a particular piece of news, not when everyone is going to give it, but when it's an exclusive, when it's... we're going to give this, and nobody else has it, or, if they do, they're very late, and we're going to give it first. We're going to make a headline out of this; we're going to focus on this issue that nobody else is paying attention to. I think that's where we have to focus, at least in my perception also, because that's what I see readers valuing most: what others don't have to offer. If it's a news story that everyone is going to cover—because it's a government announcement, or whatever—if we're not going to publish it in advance, if we're going to publish it when it is announced, at the same time as the others—we may lose those first five thousand clicks or 10,000 clicks from people who want to know what happened and where we only have two paragraphs to explain it. I'd say that, normally, it's more advantageous to have a slightly more explanatory text that can clarify what that means for people. That text ends up being a little more valuable. Perhaps it won't get as many clicks as the news story that... that has a notification on the mobile phone as soon as it's announced. Still, I think it ends up fulfilling what journalism should provide: to clarify, to inform, to contextualise, to give something more

than being a microphone stand—because if it's just to give the announcement, perhaps we're not giving that much.

That said, I also think it's important not to take an hour if the announcement was made at ten in the morning; we can give it by quarter past ten. I'd say that giving it at eleven... we've already lost. The others have already had time even to give more context, to explain it better. And I think there's also something important, and that perhaps we don't do as often, which is... You can do a shorter news story... and, in many newspapers, *Público*, for example, is one such case... writes a lot. The texts are always longer. So sometimes you can do a shorter news story giving the announcement and then do a more in-depth, explanatory piece explaining why this serves a purpose or what it means. Sometimes you can do both things.

Madalena Oliveira: We're talking about *Estados do Tempo* (the states of time) and the state of journalism, in fact. Could we say that the silly season, which is the subject of this edition of the podcast... could the silly season actually be an opportunity to do more in-depth journalism?

Tiago Ramalho: Yes, in many cases... not only more in-depth, but also an opportunity to give greater prominence. I think it's an opportunity to do more in-depth journalism because we end up having more time; there is, perhaps, less pressure from current affairs, and that means there can always be some journalists doing bigger things, series of pieces, for example. But I wouldn't say it's a unique opportunity. I think it's an opportunity for, perhaps, those pieces to have more prominence; perhaps for us to take timeless things that don't need to be linked to current affairs and give them prominence. That's something I think would be easy... we're talking about science, or if, instead of taking examples like these, we took scientific teams whose researchers are all precarious, and gave them space for that to be news and to be given prominence—which perhaps at other times would appear when we're discussing the single social benefit or when we're discussing labour reform and, therefore, the space disappears. The front-page space, I mean, the space for prominence, the online headline space, disappears. It gives us more space and more attention and, eventually, it may even allow there to be more... a sequence to that news story, to have others, a follow-up.

Madalena Oliveira: We are approaching the time limit for this edition, at a time that has become—and this observation is very appropriate—a time that has become so vertiginous, in

which haste and urgency are our permanent condition. We could also say that there is a growing understanding that journalism should be a slower practice. In Anglo-Saxon literature, the expression slow journalism is actually used, which also comes very close to the working philosophy of the Communication and Society Research Centre at this point, during this funding period, because we adopted slow communication as our motto, or as an inspiring concept. As we talk about the silly season, could we say that the silly season in journalism would be a period more favourable to this type of practice? And are there, in fact, conditions for doing more reflective journalism when, in reality, as was noted here more than once during this conversation, newsrooms are so depleted?

Tiago Ramalho: Yes, I think one of the difficulties in doing slow journalism, genuinely slower journalism, even during the silly season, ends up being that depletion of newsrooms because, even so, there you have it, people are on holiday and, while some will have the opportunity to do longer, perhaps and more in-depth pieces, others will have to... find news stories, let's say, to keep feeding the website. Because the truth is that, well, readers still go to the site three, four, five times a day, and it's important that it's not the same thing... that it's not the same news. And I can understand that.

On the other hand, looking at the examples we have of slow journalism, I don't know whether it can be applied on a large scale. I think because of the prestigious time... whether it's because of that, or because of a very strong desire to consume news, rather than information, to be able to see the headline, to be able to see something, to have something new to say at dinner. Something along those lines, it would be difficult to have all newsrooms with slow journalism, or to have slow journalism, on a very broad scale, in Portugal or Spain, or wherever.

However, I think there is room for each newsroom to have journalists more dedicated to investigative work, above all, more dedicated to going in depth on subjects. I think that does happen; there are fewer and fewer of them. I think those practices already exist in mainstream journalism, in traditional journalism. But, there you have it, paying an investigative journalist is expensive, and there are fewer and fewer of them in all newspapers.

Madalena Oliveira: Is the economic issue decisive?

Tiago Ramalho: The economic side of things ends up determining everything that is done in journalism, and that's what I wanted to add to this answer... that even the examples we have of slower journalism, in Portugal and in the rest of the world, in economic terms, most of them

are somewhat... they are precarious because they have many weaknesses; they often depend on volatile funding, on funds or calls, competitive funding. And that makes things a little more difficult for these projects, which I think will continue to have their place; they will always have at least some readers who allow them to stay alive, but I don't know whether we can have a huge number of projects like that. What I do think is that each newsroom, each media outlet, has to make room so that, not only in the summer, not only during low periods for journalism, journalists can do six- or seven-month reports. Sometimes, perhaps, they'll have to do that alongside other, faster work for that day or the following days, but they should have space to do six- or seven-month reports. That sometimes becomes difficult because... it becomes harder to plan when there are fewer resources.

Madalena Oliveira: Thank you very much, Tiago, for the opportunity to reflect, in these *Estados do Tempo*, on the state of journalism.

Tiago Ramalho: Thank you.

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Luís Pinto: That was Estados do Tempo – the BIP and Communitas Podcast. Pedro Gaspar handled the recording, editing, and post-production. Madalena Oliveira moderated, with our guest Tiago Ramalho on the other side. Tiago Estevão curated, Inês Mendes produced, and Luís Pinto presented. Thank you once again for listening, and see you at our next meeting.